

Branded a renegade and forced into an alliance with his enemy, can  
Kurtac save both himself and the child he's sworn to rescue?

# Lisanne Norman

## BETWEEN DARKNESS AND LIGHT

*A Sholan Alliance Novel*



Sholan Alliance #7

# Between Darkness and Light

Lisanne Norman



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Detailed maps for Kij'ik Outpost and several of the ships used in The Sholan Alliance Series are available at Lisanne's web site:

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Between Darkness and Light

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**BETWEEN DARKNESS AND LIGHT (#7)**

## Between Darkness and Light

This book is for my editor and friend, Sheila Gilbert, and her sister, also my friend and copy editor, Marsha Jones. I could never have gotten here without the belief and trust in me that you two have shown. I feel very privileged to know both of you. You've helped me in so many ways that I can't begin to list them. I'd also like to make a sadly posthumous thanks for the wonderful help I received from Mike Gilbert who did all the interior artwork for me in my novels. He not only helped me personally by drawing my aliens for me so I could write about them more easily, but he helped to design some of them, notably the TeLaxaudin. Without his contributions, they could not have come so alive for me, and thus for you, the reader. I will miss him and his wonderful sense of *joi de vivre*.

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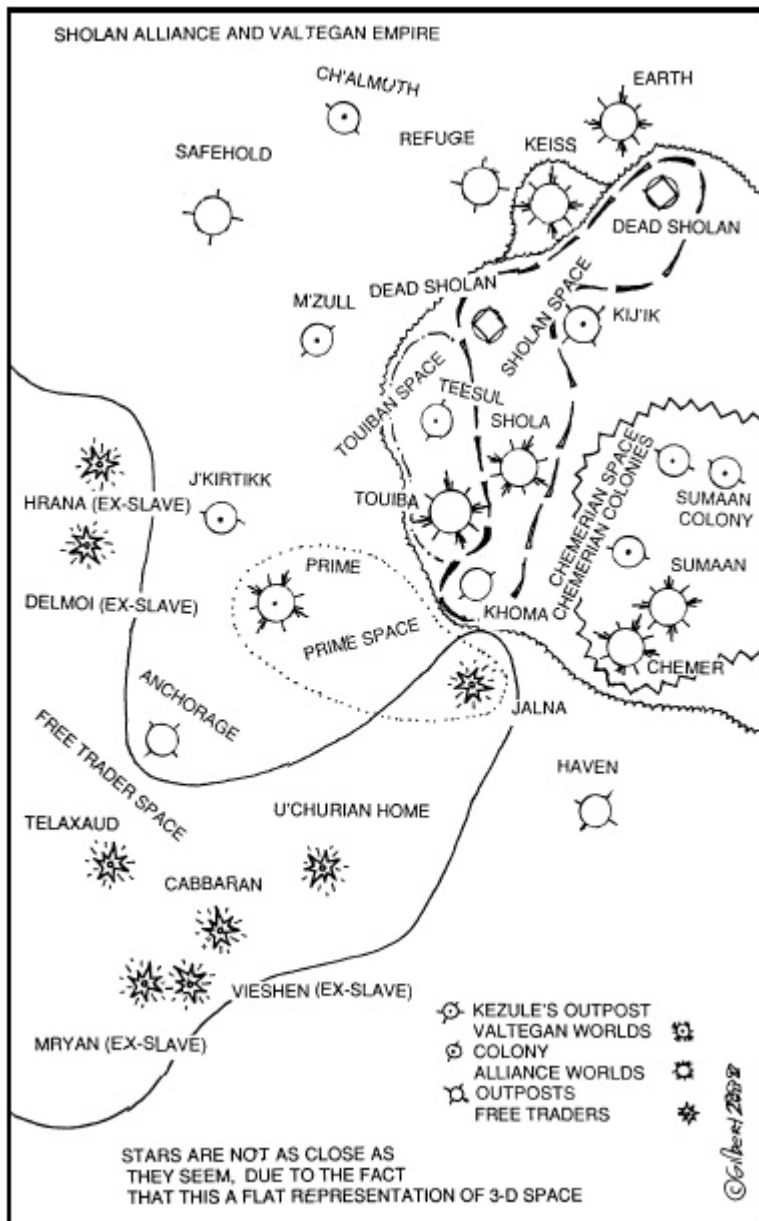
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The Sholan Alliance Fan Club can be found at <http://www.sholan-alliance.org> and at <http://pub101.ezboard.com/bthebrotherhoodofvartra>

## Between Darkness and Light

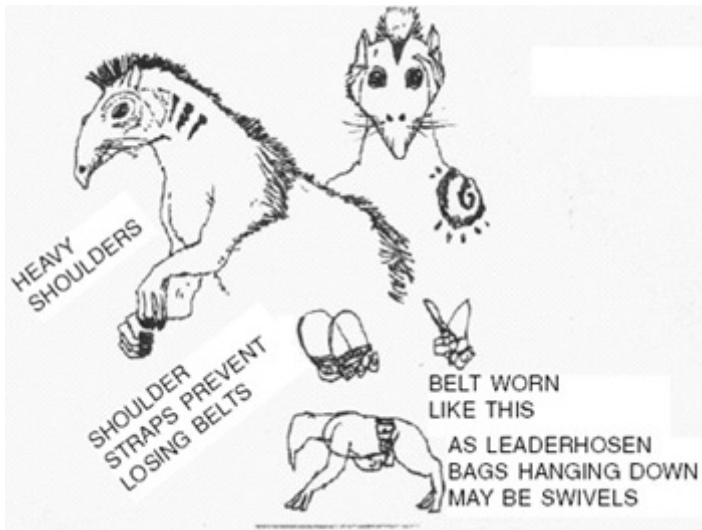




## TOUIBAN



## CABBARAN



## PRIME ENCOUNTER SUIT



## Introduction

Once again, you, the reader, and I, the writer, meet so I can give you a little more insight into this novel. It is a unique opportunity for me to talk directly to you, and I value it immensely. So, what was behind the scenes as I wrote this novel?

Music often inspires me and this time, my inspiration came from several songs which I love that refused to leave my mind because they seemed so appropriate that they could almost have been written with my novel in mind. Two belong to one of my favorite bands, KISS, and are on their *Psycho Circus* album— the tracks "Within," and "Dreamin'." Both are about the senses—

"I wanna see from within  
I wanna be where I've been"

of— seeing without sigh,  
of— touching without feeling  
of— seeing from within;  
and of

"Dreamin', Between the Darkness and the Light,  
— there's a fine line between the truth  
And how we want it to be."

Both these songs seemed to replicate Kusac's mental state as time passes on Kij'ik Outpost.

"Poison," by Alice Cooper, is slightly different, it speaks of the singer's obsession with a woman whose kiss and touch is poison to him.

Liking rock music as I do, I can't believe I'd never heard any of his work till recently. Listen to the three tracks if you get the chance and you'll know why I found them a haunting echo of Kusac's situation.

With this book, the focus of the story is firmly with Kusac, Kezule's unwilling "guest" on the Outpost, Kij'ik. I'm often asked where I get my

ideas, or pots from. The answer is actually quite simple because each book is part of a series. I look at the unresolved issues I left to carry on into this novel, then go from there. In this case it pivoted around Kusac's last night as a captive on the *Kz'adul* and the fact that he'd been scent marked by the female who'd visited him in secret. There's also his belief that his son, Shaidan, whom he met very briefly at the end of the last novel, was at least part Prime, if not Zayshul's son too. It's therefore no surprise that on his first night on board Kij'ik, he discovers the Doctor's scent is having a strange, almost hypnotic effect on him.

Originally intending to return to the Outpost alone to carry out Kezule's demands in order to have his vulnerable young son, Shaidan, returned to him, at the last moment he discovered his crew, determined to accompany him, waiting for him in his ship. His quest to recover his son and find out what part Zayshul played in the cub's genesis, is now complicated by their presence. He cannot admit to them that Shaidan is his son— a son he isn't even sure he can accept because of his Prime inheritance— so he must walk a knife edge, balancing his need to cooperate fully with Kezule against the quite natural suspicions of his crew that he is becoming the General's pawn. And Banner, his Second in command, is there because Father Lijou of the Brotherhood has set him to watch Kusac for any signs of disloyalty to his people, with orders to act in the most extreme way to stop him if necessary.

This, then, is the darkness he knows and feels surrounding him. Like the memories of the torture he suffered on his last mission, the only way through - to the light - is to keep his crew in ignorance and for himself to come to terms with what exists between him and Zayshul, and discover if his worst fears are founded and she is, indeed, the mother of his son, Shaidan. While all this is happening, he's also trying to get to know the ten year old son he's never met before.

Life will never be simple because much of it involves our relationships with those around us, even more so for Kusac living with some 70 people on half of a floor of a nine floor Outpost 550 feet by 290 ft by 290 feet. Darkness, therefore, reflects this and deals with Kusac's relationships with the key people now in his life, people who, apart from his crew and his unknown son, are led by his sworn enemy.

## Between Darkness and Light

Kezule wanted Kusac to come to the Outpost for two reasons, firstly to train his small colony in military skills, and secondly because he is a member of Sholan Alien Relations. Kezule knows only too well that the Prime's plan of grafting a Warrior culture into their own Intellectual one will never work, therefore who better to help him weld his people into a viable community than Kusac whose knowledge of alien cultures will give him a unique insight into their situation. He holds Shaidan because they are old enemies, and because the cub is his means to force Kusac into helping him. This, then, is the explosive situation at the beginning of *Between Darkness and Light*.

I hope you enjoy reading this novel as much as I have enjoyed writing it for you.

## Prologue

In DARK NADIR, we discovered that while they were reluctant guests on the Prime ship the *Kz'adul*, the Prime known as Dr Chy'qui stole samples from Kaid, Rezac, Taynar, Kate and Carrie to use them to create hybrid Sholan/Human fetuses for use by a rogue Prime group called the Directorate. Dr K'hedduk, leader of the Directorate, planned to accelerate the growth of the fetuses in tanks and use the resulting telepathic cubs as a weapon to overthrow the Prime Emperor, take control of the Prime world, and then restore the ancient Valtegan Empire. This included re-conquering all the lost slave worlds, including Shola.

Amongst the eight cubs was one who, unknown to K'hedduk, was special. It was Kusac's son, Shaidan. Kusac, finally freed from Chy'qui's experiments which destroyed his Telepathic Talent, was recuperating in the sick bay of the *Kz'adul*. The night before he was due to be returned to his own people, a female, sent by Chi'qui to obtain a breeding sample from him, visited his bed, exuding the personal scent of the one Prime he trusted— Doctor Zayshul. Drugged and then raped, she marked him with Zayshul's scent, a scent indiscernible to Sholans, but only too noticeable to Primes. This scent set Kusac apart, distinguished him as Zayshul's lover, one she had found so desirable that she had marked him as such for all Primes to know. Chy'qui hoped that if his plan to assassinate the young Prime Prince failed, on Kusac's return to Shola, he would denounce Doctor Zayshul for her rape of him, thus ending all chance of a Prime and Sholan Alliance against the M'zullians. Because of his shame at the pleasure he felt when pairing with one whom he considered the enemy of his people, Kusac kept the incident to himself.

In STRONGHOLD RISING, the cubs have been birthed by Dr K'hedduk from their accelerated growth tube at the age and maturity of ten year old Sholans. K'hedduk approached General Kezule, now living on the Prime homeworld of K'oish'ik, hoping to recruit him to their cause, not only as their military leader, but also as replacement Emperor. Kezule, snatched from Shola's far past as the Cataclysm was about to strike, is the last pure-blooded descendant of the Valtegan Emperor's family. In him are fused the best of the Warrior and Intellectual castes. He has what the Intellectual Primes and their ruling family lack— the Warrior strengths of leadership.

Kezule wants none of this and manages to foil K'hedduk's plan, destroying the Directorate members— save for K'hedduk— and their laboratory while rescuing the hybrid Sholan cubs.

Knowing he remains a rallying point for dissidents, Kezule leaves K'oish'ik against the Emperor's wishes, heading for a forgotten Outpost, taking his family, a small group of Prime civilians, and the Sholan cubs whose existence he's kept secret with him. From the first time he saw him, Kezule recognized Shaidan's heritage and planned to use him to exact revenge on Carrie and Kusac for plucking him from his own time and bringing him forward to theirs. He has also discovered that Kusac was scent marked, if not by Zayshul, then by someone who somehow used her unique scent.

He has realized that his dream of setting up a small colony capable of defending itself, and blending the three castes back into one, cannot be completed without the help of Kusac, the one person against whom he has pledged revenge. A fully trained Alien Relations Telepath and a Warrior among his own people, Kusac has the skills Kezule needs— and he has the means to lure Kusac to his side and keep him there— Doctor Zayshul and Shaidan.

Because of the scent marker, Zayshul's scent on a cryptic message requesting a rendezvous will draw Kusac like a magnet. Add the child Shaidan's scent, and the Sholan would fear that against all reason, he had sired a son on Zayshul.

The message for Kusac is delivered to Stronghold and when Kusac sees it, he alone realizes its full intent and that Zayshul, not Kezule, has written it. Because of the political situation with the Primes who are searching for the missing Kezule, and despite the fact Rhyaz, Lijou, and his own father, Konis, acknowledge the message may be a revenge trap of Kezule's, Kusac is asked to secretly take the mission. This will entail stealing the only spaceship capable of making the rendezvous in time— the *Couana*, a ship belonging to an Alliance race called the Touibans.

In doing this, Kusac will be branded a renegade and traitor by the authorities, and the Brotherhood will have to disown him. His crew they

can protect, but not him. As a final insult, Rhyaz tells him that to protect his very pregnant wife, he must create a row between himself and Kaid so serious that when he disappears, his Triad mate will not wish to follow him, nor fight to prove he isn't guilty of treason.

Angrily, Kusac agrees, because he cannot ignore the siren-song of Zayshul's scent, and the fear of having fathered a cub with her. He must discover the truth of their night together that has been haunting him since his return to Shola.

The ensuing row with Kaid leaves him heartbroken. He has he alienated Kaid, and now the Cabbarans and TeLaxaudin have restored his Telepathic Talent, going on the mission means that his chance of reforming his lost Leska Link to Carrie when she gives birth to her cub, is gone, perhaps forever.

At the rendezvous, he is shocked when faced with the five Sholan cubs that Kezule is freely returning to him. He's then taken to meet Shaidan where his newly returned Talent tells him his worst fear is confirmed—the cub is son, and Zayshul is the mother—and Kezule knows it. If he wants to see his son again, he has no option but to agree to return to Kezule after he has taken the other cubs to Haven.

When he returns to his own ship with the cubs, he realizes that they are hybrids, and his Talent tells him exactly who their parents are, namely Kaid, Rezac, Taynar, Carrie and Kate. He knows unless he keeps this information to himself, the cubs could end up at Stronghold rather than with their parents because their very existence would create a political breach with the Prime world, one that Shola cannot risk because of the threat of imminent war facing the Alliance. Neither can he admit to anyone the existence of the son that Kezule is holding hostage, nor that he must return to Kezule.

Berthed at Haven is a ship belonging to him, a gift from the Primes in reparation for the loss of his Telepathic Talent due to Chy'qui's experiments on him. Instead of leaving the *Couana* at Haven and returning quietly with his crew to Stronghold in it as planned, Kusac slips off the ship alone to meet L'Seuli. He tells him about the cubs, ensuring they will



be sent to his estate, and discharges a small task Lijou asked him to complete while there. He then makes his way to the *Venture*, planning to take off alone and head for his new rendezvous with Kezule.

His crew, however, have been alerted by his distracted behavior to the fact that all is not as it seems, and are waiting on the *Venture* for him, demanding to know what he is planning. As they argue, news of Shola being put on a full war alert comes through the ship's intercom connection to Haven.

Now Kusac has to tell them about the existence of the remaining cub and the deal Kezule has forced him to accept, but not why. They all realize if they tell the Brotherhood about Shaidan, they will not be allowed to go, and all are agreed that rescuing him from Kezule is a priority. Kusac warns them that by accompanying him, they will also face the now very real accusation of treason. Against his wishes, they decide to go and he is forced into the situation where he must hide the knowledge that Shaidan is in fact his own son. If they knew that, then they would also discover that Shaidan's mother was Zayshul, and his shame over the night he shared with her on the *Kz'adul* would be exposed.

Now read on...

# Chapter 1

## The Venture II, Zhal-S'Asha 29th day (October)

A MESSAGE beacon at the rendezvous point, responding only to Kusac's voice, had redirected them to new coordinates where the destroyer *N'zishok* was waiting for them.

Captain Zaykkuh instructed them to dock the *Venture II* in the ship's landing bay.

As they made their approach, Kusac looked around at his crew of four. "This time, we really could be walking into a trap," he said. "I'm prepared to risk myself, but no one else. You can drop me off and go back to Haven." He still wasn't sure whether or not he was glad of their company.

"We made our own decision to join you," said Jayza.

"There's no way I'm leaving one of our cubs with aliens like them," growled Dzaou.

He stared fixedly at the tan-pelted male, frowning and swiveling his ears forward. "I'm still in charge, Dzaou, remember that. I want no unauthorized rescue attempts. You'll not put either the cub's, or our lives at risk."

"Kezule's request could be genuine enough," said Banner, looking briefly away from his console at Kusac. "He seemed pretty reasonable, wasn't at all what I expected."

"Never forget Kezule is a Valtegan," Kusac responded. "He's not a Prime. After his escape, he beat his Sholan female companion almost to death then raped her. Don't be fooled by his apparently civilized behavior toward us."

"Keeza agreed to go into his prison cell with him," said Banner. "She was working undercover. He needed to pair with her to save her life."

"After he'd bitten her to inject a poison that made her protect him while he hibernated to heal!" he said harshly. "Kezule's dangerous; Valtegens are stronger and faster than us. To them we're inferiors, not even worth considering as people."

"How do we tell Primes from Valtegens?" asked Jayza, breaking the small silence that had fallen after Kusak's outburst.

"All the females, and all lighter colored males are Primes," he answered, moderating his tone. "The only other Valtegens are the M'zullian half-breed warriors like those we have on Shola. Be especially careful with them, they could still have a psychosis about our species."

"Approaching their landing bay now," said Banner as the entrance to the *N'zishok* loomed large in the main view screen.

"Take us in," he said as they returned their attention to their work.

\* \* \*

Wearing his black priest's robe over his uniform tunic as a way of setting himself apart from his crew, Kusak began to lead the way down the *Venture II's* ramp, cautiously feeling the way ahead with his mind. This time there were no psi dampers in the docking bay. He sensed some twenty people nearby, mostly in small groups of two or three. Just as he focused on the largest, a group of six, his torc began to vibrate gently, automatically warning him that his mental touch was too strong and he was risking discovery. Instantly, he drew back.

The coldness of the deck beneath his bare feet made him shiver, reminding him this time of his return as a Valtegan hostage at Haven so many months before. Dismissing the memory as irrelevant, he put his small kit bag on the ground and watched the welcoming party cross the landing bay toward them. Peripherally, he was aware that only one other vehicle was in the bay and that the other Primes present were involved in refueling and servicing it.

"I've sealed the *Venture* as you ordered, Captain," murmured Banner, coming to stand at his right. "No one but us can get in."

He nodded, studying the group of four green-clad soldiers who came to a stop in front of them. The lead two, dressed in black fatigues with gold details, were Primes. All carried side arms.

"I thought you said there was only one Valtegan here," muttered Dzaou.

"M'zullians, like those we have on Shola," reminded Banner quietly.

"Captain Aldatan," said the lead male, taking a step away from his people. "Welcome to the *N'zishok*. I'm Lieutenant M'zynal, current head of security, and this is Lieutenant Shartoh."

He studied the young male in front of him, aware of his hackles beginning to prickle as he smelled the other's scent. The same height as himself, just over six feet tall, the Prime's flesh was pale green with a slightly sand-colored tint to it. The round, hairless skull was topped by a ridge that began just above the brows. Large eyes, almost bulbous, regarded him unblinkingly. Under a nose with small vertical slits for nostrils, the wide, almost V-shaped mouth held scores of tiny, pointed teeth.

M'zynal indicated the male on his left. "I'm afraid I must ask you to hand over your weapons before we can escort you to your quarters. You won't be needing them while you're with us."

He'd anticipated this. The la'quo pellet gun, broken down into its innocent-looking component parts, was stowed in various locations throughout his bag. He was confident that neither it, nor the pellets concealed inside a jar of tooth cleaning paste, would be discovered. The spray he'd left lying in a drawer of personal items in his cabin, hoping by its very anonymity it would pass any search.

"We're prisoners, then," he said, reaching for the gun that he carried in plain view on his weapons' belt.

Lieutenant M'zynal looked slightly shocked, his bifurcated tongue flicking out briefly. "Not to my knowledge, Captain. On the contrary, we've been told to treat you with all courtesy. Even we don't normally go armed on the *N'zishok*."

His companion gestured two of the M'zullian guards forward to take their weapons.

"Knives, too," Shartoh said as he watched them hand over their firearms. "You understand, I'm sure, that we'll have to search you and your luggage once we reach your quarters."

Dzaou let out an exclamation of rage, silenced only when Kusac raised his hand warningly. "Our knives aren't considered weapons," he said, his voice deceptively soft. "They're eating utensils and the badge of our graduation from the Brotherhood itself. We won't remove them."

Shartoh hesitated, looking to M'zynal for instructions.

"Will you give me your oath they'll not be used as weapons?" the young Prime asked.

Kusac stepped forward, holding his palm up in front of the startled Lieutenant's face, and tensed his fingers. Five claws, each nearly two inches long, almost as sharp on the inner curve as they were pointed at the tip, slid out from their sheathings in his fingers.

Startled, the Prime nevertheless held his ground.

"You think we need knives, Lieutenant M'zynal?" he asked, a faint purr underlying the words. The claws retracted, his fingers relaxed and were once again a hand. "No more than you do."

"You may keep your knives," M'zynal said, his voice betraying only a slight quiver. "As you rightly reminded me, we both have formidable enough natural weapons. However, we'll still need to search you and your belongings once we reach your quarters." He indicated the elevator at the far end of the landing bay. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you where you'll be staying for the next few days until we reach our base."

\* \* \*

Gradually lowering his mental shields and increasing his sensitivity, he allowed himself to passively absorb the thoughts of those around him as they followed M'zynal. During their journey here, as well as erasing Banner's memory of his masquerade as L'Seuli at Haven, he'd managed to relearn how to gauge the amount of mental filtering necessary to cut out most of the white noise and concentrate only on the minds he wanted. There was little he could glean, though, as he hadn't yet remastered the skills required to read alien minds, and all the Primes and Valtegens had strong natural mental barriers.

"Your weapons will be returned to you when you leave us," said M'zynal. "While you're with us on the *N'zishok*, and at Kij'ik, our base, your access to certain areas will be prohibited for security reasons. However, you're free to come and go as you wish throughout the rest of our facilities. Unless, of course, we're actually working together."

He could feel Dzaou's smoldering resentment and turned his head to glance at Banner. Before he could say anything, his Second flicked an ear in affirmation and fell back to take hold of their gunner by the arm. Briefly Kusak wondered what psi gift the other had that was now allowing Banner to second-guess his concerns.

"What kind of work?" he asked as they entered the elevator.

"Training," said M'zynal. "And comparative anthropology."

"What makes you think I know anything about either?" he asked as they began to move upward.

M'zynal's round yellow eyes regarded him unblinkingly. "We know you're a member of Sholan Alien Relations and that you were involved in training the twenty warriors we sent to you," he said quietly. "Don't underestimate us, Captain. We're not like the Valtegens you met on Keiss, nor those you have on Shola. You know very little about either the General's time or the Prime culture."

He was the one who looked away, uncomfortably aware that the young Prime was right.

"Where is Kezule?" he asked abruptly. "And the Sholan cub?"

"The General and his wife have had to return to our base, but he asked me to tell you that he's looking forward to meeting you in a week's time."

He cursed softly. This he hadn't anticipated. "And the cub?"

M'zynal looked at him oddly and he felt the other's curiosity that he should be so interested in a hatchling. "With the General. He keeps him with him at all times. Shartoh will show you round once we've got you settled. The cabins are standard Prime ones with the low formfitting sleeping mats. It's only for three days, though. Once we reach Kij'ik, you'll find the beds there are the regular kind."

"I take it you don't like the low mats," Kusac said, glancing back at him. He knew all about the communal sleeping arrangements and mats on the *Kz'adul* and began to wonder if this young officer was indeed a Prime despite his lighter coloring.

"They don't suit everyone," M'zynal said as the elevator stopped.

They followed him down the corridor till he came to an open door. "This is yours and the two next door are your crew's cabins. You all have your own showers and toilet facilities, and the Officers' lounge is at the end of the corridor on your right."

He looked in, coming face-to-face with another Prime officer. With an exclamation of surprise, he stepped backward into M'zynal.

"This is Noolgoi," continued the Lieutenant, a trace of pain in his voice as he put a steady hand under Kusac's elbow.

"I can manage!" Kusac snapped, pulling away from him and turning back to the room. The other male had exited and backed off down the corridor by a few feet, looking as rattled as he felt. He could smell the faint scent of apprehension from him and realized Noolgoi had got as much of a shock as he had.

More cautiously this time, he looked inside. It was a standard single occupancy cabin with a desk and chair, a couple of easy chairs and a table. Beyond it he could see the open doors to the bedroom and the bathing room. It seemed spacious enough.

"Will the doors be locked?" demanded Dzaou before Banner could prevent him.

"Ah, thank you for reminding me." M'zynal dug deep in his uniform jacket pocket and pulled out a small packet. "Your keys, Captain," he said, holding them out to Kusac. "There's one for each of you. The General assumed you'll want to lock your quarters when you're not in them."

Gesturing to Banner to take the key cards, he stepped inside.

"Noolgoi will show you the Officers' mess and recreation lounge on this deck once you've settled into your cabins. If you'll allow us to do the search now, Shartoh can take you on a tour of the ship before our evening meal," said M'zynal. "You can join us in the Officers mess or eat in your rooms if you prefer, just call Noolgoi on the desk unit and let him know your choice."

## **TeLaxaudin home world, Ghioass, same day**

"He wakes," he heard Naacha say quietly.

"About time," a deeper voice replied. Sokarr's.

Annuur stirred, feeling a deep ache in every bone and joint. At the edges of his mind, he sensed the presence of his three sept companions, felt their concern for him. Naacha, the mystic, his mind calm as always, his concern masked with his customary gruffness even there; Lweeu, mate and life-giver to them all, her youthfulness betrayed by the constant sea of half-formed fears and worries that she tried to keep to herself; and finally, Sokarr, their nurturer...

His eyes flew open and he lifted his head sharply to look at Sokarr, trying not to groan out loud at the pain it caused. His last coherent memory



before being thrown from his navigation couch against the far bulkhead had been of watching one of the ceiling struts falling toward Sokarr and Lweeu and being unable to warn them.

"I thought you were dead," he said lamely, realizing even as he spoke that the Camarilla must have retrieved them. Only on their home world or here— though his surroundings looked like the med level on Anchorage, he knew it wasn't— was Unity possible without the neural nets.

"I was," said Sokarr, leaning forward to touch noses briefly. The wave of affection that surrounded him was unrestrained. "Your injuries were greater. Four of our mystics were needed, as well as the TeLaxaudin physicians, to heal all the broken bones and damaged organs in your body. My own were slight by comparison."

Four? Since their mystic had joined them, he'd never known an occasion when Naacha hadn't been able to handle healings— even a simple death— on his own. He was one of the most powerful.

"He understates, as usual," said Naacha gruffly from the end of his bed. "An hour more, maybe two, and I could have done nothing. He'd have stayed dead."

As sparing as Naacha was with words, Annuur knew better than to discount him when he did speak. Lowering his head, he looked at Lweeu, knowing she was always a good barometer for the mood of the sept as a whole. Her eyes sparkled too brightly and between her mobile ears, her short crest of stiff hair was constantly moving. She was very distressed. He hadn't realized he'd been so close to death. It had obviously been a near thing for both himself and Sokarr.

Clenching his teeth together, Annuur pushed himself slowly upright, trying to ignore the swirling of the room. Finally he was sitting on his haunches. "We achieved the Camarilla's goal and survived," he said faintly, reaching out an unsteady forelimb to Lweeu. "Without risking our U'Churian family."

Gratefully she took hold of his hand, making soft chattering noises of comfort.

Naacha grunted, dropping back down onto all fours. "Camarilla don't interfere lightly. More trouble ahead."

"This was a major intervention," agreed Sokarr, looking across Annuur's bed to the window beyond. "They will need us again."

Annuur followed his gaze. In the distance, the shapes of five *Watcher* ships could be clearly seen, the sixth shrouded behind a covered armature.

"All will need to be processed," said Lweeu, following his gaze. "Captain Tirak is not pleased at what we did."

"Tirak's awake?" asked Annuur, surprised.

"They could not stay in the ship while it was being repaired," said Lweeu.

"What's he said?"

"Nothing, yet. He waits for you," replied Naacha, trotting round to the side of the bed and rearing up on his haunches again.

"Someone has a sense of humor to allow the rest of our family to be wakened during this time," Annuur murmured, glancing at Naacha. He found himself unable to look away from the swirling blue tattoos on the other's cheeks until he felt a hand touch the underside of his jaw and raise it.

Naacha's eyes held his as firmly as his hand held his chin. "Glad am I you are still with us, Phratry Leader," the mystic said quietly before releasing him.

Surprise and pleasure washed through Annuur in equal measures. He knew that Naacha had chosen to join their sept out of the many that had courted him, but he hadn't known till now that their taciturn mystic cared so much for them.

"So am I," he said with heartfelt sincerity, beginning to sway slightly as his aching body started to tremble with the effort of remaining seated.

Naacha leaned against him, offering him support just as the door opened. The TeLaxaudin Azwokkuss, his bronze spindly limbs partially concealed by the colored strips of drapery that fell from his waist and neck, stood there. A faint thrumming filled the air before he began to speak.

"Your Captain have I brought," he said.

"Azwokkuss said you were awake," began the black-furred U'Churian coming into the room. He stopped dead, mouth falling open in shock. "Sokarr! But... You were dead! We left your body in the..." He ground to a halt.

"Azwokkuss definitely has a sense of humor," Annuur murmured very quietly as Naacha helped him to lie down.

"The cold, it must have been the cold," Tirak said, starting forward again. "It put you into suspended animation." He stopped at the foot of Annuur's bed, eyes wide, ears disappearing into his mane of black hair.

"You haven't a mark on you," he said in a voice so quiet they had to strain to hear him. Leaning down, he grasped the end of the bed for support. "I don't understand. It's only been five days, how could you possibly have healed so quickly?"

"Our mystics can do many things beyond navigating or planet-forming worlds," said Annuur tiredly, settling himself on his side against the soft bedding. He knew that waking Tirak and bringing him to them had been a small act of revenge from Azwokkuss and the Reformer faction of the Camarilla for making them have to intervene in such a drastic fashion. "Don't forget we saved your people many generations back when a solar flare would have almost destroyed them."

"Where are we?" Tirak asked abruptly, straightening up. "We're not on Anchorage, are we?"

"We're on the TeLaxaudin world," said Sokarr, dropping down onto all fours to go fetch a nearby chair and push it over for the Captain. "They brought us here to heal us."

Seeing the small Cabbaran struggling with the chair, Tirak went over to take it from him, then returned with it to the end of the bed, where Annuur's head was, and sat down.

"The jump point," he said slowly. "As we entered it, Sheeowl said it was different. I don't remember anything after that until I woke here five days ago."

"Yes," agreed Annuur. "It was a TeLaxaudin one, sent to fetch us here."

"Sent?"

"It's more than a jump point," said Sokarr. "It transports people and things."

"Did you send for help? How could you? We were running silent to avoid the M'zullians picking us up."

"They could see what was happening and came to help us," said Annuur.

"It was they who slowed you, when you were spinning out of control," Tirak said thoughtfully. "Why didn't they take you then, and why take us all? I assume the other three ships are here too."

"All six are here, Captain," said Sokarr, unable to prevent himself glancing out of the window at the ships sitting on the landing pad.

Tirak looked, remaining silent for some time.

"A drink, please," said Annuur quietly to Sokarr. His throat was dry with talking.

Lweeu beat Sokarr to his night table. Annuur's mobile upper lip curled gently in a smile when the older male deferred good-naturedly to her. Many had doubted his wisdom in choosing one as young as Lweeu, not yet out of her first century, as their mate. Her talent as an engineer had been a factor in choosing her, but Annuur had to admit he'd been drawn to her by her youth and personality. His sept had accepted his choice because

it was his right as their patriarch to choose their mate, but little incidents such as this confirmed that he'd chosen wisely.

While she held the glass, he raised his head to sip the drink through the flattened straw. It had a strange tang to it and he glanced quizzically at her.

"Azwokkuss said to give you this when you woke," she said. "It'll help the pain."

Already a welcome numbness was beginning to creep through his limbs.

"A night's rest and you should be fine," reassured Sokarr. "The damage was deep and they wanted to monitor the restructuring process. Stronger analgesics would have interfered with that."

"The solar flare wasn't the only time you interfered in our past, Annuur," said Tirak suddenly. "You stayed very quiet when we discovered that there was a genetic link between us and the Sholans. When did your people interbreed us?"

Annuur waved the glass away and lowered his head to the bed again, closing his eyes. Azwokkuss couldn't have anticipated this. The TeLaxaudin wouldn't be that vindictive. How was he supposed to answer him?

"We were not involved with your species before the flare, Captain Tirak," he said at length.

Tirak regarded him steadily. "Your people turned up very conveniently in time to repair the genetic damage done to those on Home and our nearest moon. How did you know there was an inhabited planet in our system? How could you have the knowledge to help us if you'd never been to our world before?"

Annuur hadn't expected Tirak's questions to take this direction. He'd assumed he'd focus on the why's of their attack on the M'zullian destroyer and the TeLaxaudin part in it.

"And what the hell were you doing attacking the M'zullians and risking our lives and the Alliance to do it?" Tirak continued angrily after a moment's silence, almost as if he'd been following Annuur's thoughts.

He was too exhausted to lie. "Thousands of years ago, the TeLaxaudin lost a matter transformer in hyperspace," he began.

"Annuur, you cannot tell our Captain!" exclaimed Lweeu, her mobile nose twitching in distress.

He ignored her interruption, aware through Unity that Sokarr was already reassuring her that the Captain wouldn't leave here remembering anything of this conversation. "They searched for it for many years before giving up, assuming that it was gone forever. When we heard of the destruction of the two hunter worlds, we knew that somehow the M'zullians had found it and turned it into a weapon. It had to be..."

"Hunter worlds?" interrupted Tirak.

"Sholans," Annuur corrected himself tiredly. "The transformer had to be located and destroyed. It wasn't until the M'zullians used it on the J'kirtikkians that we knew exactly where it was. We had an opportunity to destroy it, and we took it."

"You've known all along what killed the Sholan worlds and you didn't tell the Alliance about it? You were prepared to let the J'kirtikkians die and risk everyone and everything just to get it yourselves? Dammit, Annuur, you're no better than the Chemerians!" the U'Churian growled angrily, his thick mane of black hair beginning to rise around his shoulders. "If we'd known, we could have captured it..."

Annuur lifted his head to look Tirak in the eyes. "Our common enemy is now halved, Captain, at no loss of life to ourselves, and the weapon is destroyed with no chance of them making another. Had we told the Alliance about it, they would have demanded to have one of their own, just as you were about to do. It was never designed to be used as a weapon, Captain, nor should it be."

"Leaving that aside, when did you intend to tell me this? We're family! There should be no secrets between us! Now I find out you're working with the TeLaxaudin, that when we'd barely come down from the tree canopies, you interbred us with the Sholans! How can there ever be trust between us again?"

"Enough!" roared Naacha. "Be silent, Child!"

Shocked by the outburst from the usually silent Cabbaran, Tirak glanced over at him.

As the silence lengthened, Annuur looked up at Tirak again. Their exchange had used up most of the little energy he had remaining and his awareness of the others in his sept had faded. He saw what he expected. Tirak's eyes were wide and staring, fixed, he knew, on the swirling tattoos on Naacha's face. As he watched, the Captain began to sway gently.

"Sokarr, support him before he falls off the chair," he said. "Lweeu, fetch Azwokkuss!"

### **Ghioass, Zhal-S'Asha 30th day (October)**

Shvosi acknowledged Azwokkuss' mental message with a sigh. It meant the Camarilla was due to convene shortly to make a decision on Annuur's so-called seditious behavior. As his Operator, her testimony for or against him would hold much weight.

*I'll meet you in the refectory in ten minutes,* she sent.

*Take transporter and be here now.*

*I prefer to walk,* she replied dryly. Sometimes her TeLaxaudin colleague's reliance on technology irritated her, as it did now.

*We are products of our own worlds,* responded Azwokkuss with a chuckle.

*Apologies, Skepp Lord,* she sent, instantly contrite. *Thought was private, not meant for you to hear.*

*Understood. I get your food?*

*Please*, she said, getting up from her meditation cushion.

Leaving her small indoor conservatory, she scurried round her living quarters to find her note reader. Rearing up onto her haunches, she scabbled through a pile of papers on her desk with her spatulate four-fingered hands until she found it.

Securing the device in a pouch on the body harness she wore, she dropped down onto all fours again and headed for the door.

It was a balmy day outside, with the sun shining in a lightly cloud-flecked sky. Linking into Unity, she searched for the weather report—no rain was scheduled until nightfall. Satisfied, she trotted out of the Cabbaran enclave and headed for the moving sidewalk that would take her to the main TeLaxaudin center.

Ghioass, the TeLaxaudin home world, and primary home of the Camarilla, was a strange mixture of contrasts. Here, where she lived, the environment reflected the Cabbaran world, one of lush vegetation surrounding the adobe dwellings. Each one had been grown from the raw soil by its owner using only their natural psi talents. Their personal individuality was reflected in the shapes of the buildings and no two were alike. Her people were terraformers, capable of reshaping a world and all its growing things. They could do naturally what the TeLaxaudin had once used their matter transformers for.

Three species lived here, much the same way as they did on the Cabbaran home world, which provided a second, lesser chamber for the Camarilla. The TeLaxaudin population was not large, and was controlled, an easy task when each TeLaxaudin was born male in gender and didn't develop into a female till halfway through their lives. They were one of the oldest species in this galaxy, and had developed a highly technological life style.

Reed slim and just over three feet tall, the TeLaxaudin were fragile in build. Their body shape and size had placed certain restrictions on them. Recognizing this, millennia ago, they had interfered in the evolution of a



larger, more powerful species, one whom they could train to help them. The U'Churians were therefore the second inhabitants of this world. The numbers of these, their Children, were far less than those of the TeLaxaudin themselves. Again, their population was restricted so that it remained at a stable number.

The six foot tall U'Churians lived either in villages adjacent to the TeLaxaudin cities and commuted, or in appropriately sized accommodations provided by their smaller employers. When not working, they were free to come and go as they pleased, and had their own entertainment outlets— shops, restaurants, theaters and so on, in the cities. To Shvosi's way of thinking, too many of the TeLaxaudin considered them as invisible servants, there to perform a function and no more. They weren't even granted citizenship on Ghioass. This attitude was part of the reason for the current split in the ranks of the Camarilla.

The third species, and the only other member of the Camarilla, was her own, the Cabbarans. Four-legged, when they sat up on their haunches, they were almost four feet tall. They were vegetarians, with forward facing eyes set in a long face that ended in a snout with an almost prehensile upper lip. A narrow stiff crest of dark hair ran the length of the skull and down the neck, spreading out in a ruff across the shoulders and again over the flanks. On her shoulders, Shvosi's sandy body fur had been shaved to display the intricately colored tattoos that showed her Family and her rank as a Phratry leader, and her cheeks bore the spiraling blue tattoos that marked her as one of her people's mystics.

She was passing out of her sector now and into the more modern area of the TeLaxaudin city. Buildings here were also designed to be aesthetically pleasing to the TeLaxaudin's more insectoid senses. Their usual low-lying buildings were dwarfed here and there by slim organic shaped towers that spiraled high above them. Transparent, brightly colored surfaces and shimmering force fields, blended with metal and polished stone, all glittered in the sunlight. A movement to her left drew her attention and she saw that the TeLaxaudin were reshaping one of the civic buildings, adding another level and a tower. As she looked, the outline blurred and the roof split into four sections that suddenly reared up to become the new walls.

From one of them, a sloping roof started to form, rapidly advancing toward where the beginnings of a whorled tower was taking shape.

She stopped for a moment to watch properly, rising up on her haunches to get a better view. Reshaping of buildings didn't happen that often, but when it did, whether by her people or theirs, it never failed to entrance her and fill her with a sense of wonder. Gradually the blurring decreased and the outline became more pronounced until, minutes later, the basic reshaping had been completed. This was only the first level of changes, there was more still to be done as the design was strengthened and refined.

Remembering her meeting with Azwokkuss, she dropped down to the ground again and hurried toward the moving walkway.

\* \* \*

She arrived at the Council chamber refectory panting slightly, and hurriedly threaded her way between the other diners and through the ornamental greenery and water features till she saw Azwokkuss at their usual table.

"Apologies," she said, flopping down onto the cushions at her side of the low eating table. "Were reshaping the Assembly House for summer. I had to watch."

The TeLaxaudin nodded, his eyes glowing as the lenses spun and adjusted themselves to close vision. His mandibles clicked gently and he began to hum. "Never can you resist watching," he said. "I know this."

As she composed herself more comfortably, a bronze-colored arm as thin as a twig pushed a plate of assorted salad toward her, followed by a divided dish filled with other delicacies.

Her long snout began to quiver as the delicate scent of the rare mushrooms and the bittersweet vegetables wafted up to her.

"Azwokkuss, is real treat," she said, top lip curling back in a smile. Her colleague had chosen all her favorite foods. "Thank you." She reached into the dish for a slice of mushroom. "Is too expensive."

The TeLaxaudin watched her eat it daintily and with obvious pleasure before reaching into his own bowl for one of the fried insects he enjoyed. He peeled it carefully, dropping its chitinous covering into the side bowl he'd been provided with for that purpose.

"We eat well now, enjoy now, as no knowing how Council meeting will go yet. Potentialities being read at moment." One elegant hand waved toward his right where a group of TeLaxaudin sat deep in discussion. "Hkairass and Isolationists plot already."

She sighed. "How long before he starts change? Then we get few years peace at least!"

Azwokkuss' humming had an unmistakable chuckle to it. "Irreverent female! Gender change not matter of humor, very serious."

"Maybe motherhood makes him tolerable, sweetens disposition," she retorted, eyes twinkling as she helped herself to the salad.

Mandibles trembling, Azwokkuss laughed in his own peculiar way. "Maybe," he agreed. "But sadly more like him to take his place."

"Are more of us, and every time he fights us in Council, more commit to our view," she said. "Today important, Annuur will talk of debt we owe Child race, that their trust of us abused by likes of Hkairass."

The oval bronze head bobbed in agreement. "I know. Keep fine speech for him in Camarilla Council meeting."

Her short ears drooped a little. "I find difficult to deal with Hkairass in Council. He intimidates me," she admitted.

"Does it purposely," Azwokkuss replied, reaching out to push her bowl of delicacies closer. "You young, depends on it. At home, you rule one hundred of your people. Are you not Phratry Leader, equal to him? Let him not do this, then he will stop."

Shvosi smiled and took a handful of sliced red peppery vegetables. "Easy to say. Today he wears the reds and yellows of determination, as well as exuding the scents to match."

"Gives too much away. I wear blues and lilacs of tranquillity for me, not to show others. Say to Hkairass you sit on him if upset you," he advised, nibbling the last of his food.

She looked at him in shock.

"It squash him if you sit on him," he elaborated, mandibles quivering in amusement. "Think it in mind when he at full flow. Flat TeLaxaudin no menace to you."

She laughed.

"You not alone today. I there in Unity with you, also Kuvaa, and Khassiss moves nearer our beliefs every time it comes up. Female TeLaxaudin opinions carry great weight with us as are older, more experienced. Also others of our belief will vote our way." He picked up his bowl of fruit-flavored water and gently lapped at it.

"I know," she began as through Unity they all heard the call to gather in the Council chamber.

*Skepp Lord Hkairass has a matter to Speak on that needs urgent discussion before the session involving Phratry Leader Annuur.*

Hurriedly, she snatched the last of her delicacies up and stuffed them into her mouth, chewing furiously.

"You choke," he warned. "Got time. No can begin till all there."

"Being late won't help," she mumbled, swallowing her food down then picking up her own drink and lapping furiously at it.

"How is...?"

"Annuur fine," he said. "Took Tirak to him yesterday." The mandibles quivered again. "Payment for causing so much trouble to us in Camarilla."

She laughed as she shuffled back from the table then dropped down onto her hoof-tipped forelimbs. "Was evil! Explanations would be demanded."

"Yes," agreed Azwokkuss cheerfully as he got to his feet. "Was point. Tirak will forget when all Children are processed anyway. Annuur will not, maybe teach him circumspection."

She was still chuckling at the thought as they made their way into the arboretum that was the Camarilla's Council chamber.

When they were all gathered and settled on the various cushions and low seats, Khassiss made her way up the pathway to the Speaker's dais.

"We meet to discuss matters pertaining to Annuur's case before he accounts for himself," she said. "Hkairass asks to Speak first." The female TeLaxaudin moved to one side, settling herself down on a low seat to arbitrate in the proceedings.

Hkairass stalked down the path, draperies moving constantly round him, leaving a not so subtle trail of determination scent behind him. He was making sure the whole Camarilla knew his mind on this matter, even though they were already aware of it through Unity.

He faced them all, and mandibles clicking, his humming a sharp, almost dissonant sound, began to speak.

"Latest actions of Annuur only highlight..." he began "Phratry Leader Annuur," interrupted Kuvaa, rising up on her haunches. "Do not disrespect him, Hkairass. He is Leader of one hundred Phratrys, a Camarilla member *in the field*." She emphasized the last three words.

"His rank is known, Phratry Leader Kuvaa," said Khassiss, "Our thanks for reminder."

From the convulsive movements of his mandibles, it was obvious the look Hkairass shot Kuvaa was one of pure dislike.

"Latest actions of *Phratry Leader Annuur* only highlight dangers of contact with younger races," he continued. "Phratry Leader Annuur put concerns for Children before orders from Camarilla. Actions endangered us all."

"That matter waits till Phratry Leader Annuur is with us," interrupted Khassiss firmly.

"He should be fetched now to answer this," said a younger TeLaxaudin from the floor.

"Soon, Zaimiss," said Khassiss. "This discussion first. Keep to topic, Skepp Lord Hkairass."

"Isolationists do not support any intervention in affairs of younger races," said Hkairass. "If no intervention, no need of agents in the field, then disasters like this not happen."

Azwokkuss unfolded himself and rose to his feet. "If no intervention, tell us what use is Camarilla?" he asked, then sat down.

"To protect ourselves," said Hkairass, looking round the hundred or so people gathered in the hall. "We are Oldest, have seen many younger species rise and fall in our time. None advanced to any degree worth discussing. All fell because of war or stagnation. We survived, have wisdom, knowledge, Unity, a harmonious existence. No need to interfere in their self-destruction. No benefit to us doing that, only expenditure of people and energy. We say withdraw from younger races' conflicts, open gateway and move our world far beyond them."

A shocked murmur of voices spread throughout the Council chamber. It was Khassiss who voiced what was in all their minds.

"Is only theory this is possible. Energy required even attempting it would destroy our sun."

"Calculations have been checked many times by us," said Hkairass, turning to look at her. "Is more than theory, is reality."

"Those calculations done only for extreme solution in time of dire emergency," said Azwokkuss, shocked at his suggestion. "No such emergency faces us now."

"The potentialities show the probability of a sand-dweller reunification with disastrous consequences we keep being told," said Hkairass. "We offer alternate solution to interference. One where no agents in field to risk our discovery by going native and favoring others before Camarilla."

"Going native!" exclaimed Kuvaa, getting up again. "Who has gone native, as you put it?"

"Obvious it is Phratry Leader Annuur," said Hkairass. "No TeLaxaudin ever swayed by another species into betraying us."

Shvosi had been listening to Hkairass with growing anger. This second insult was enough. "Why speak of betrayal?" she demanded, leaping upright, her snout quivering in indignation. "Our Phratry Leader has not betrayed anyone! You and Isolationists betray other species constantly, particularly our Children!"

"I deny we have responsibility for any but ourselves," retorted the TeLaxaudin, eyes swirling and mandibles clicking angrily against each other.

Aizshuss stood. "We have responsibility for our Children. You have. Does your Skepp not make use of them as employees like everyone here? Do you not rely on them for things physically beyond us?"

"We saved them from extinction hundreds of millennia ago. They owe us!" he retorted.

"They owe us for breeding Sholan stock into them? They owe us for bringing those living here from their world to serve us? For isolating them from their kind? Strange debt!" said Aizshuss biting, sitting down.

"We recompense them!"

"Have you spoken with Children, Hkairass?" asked Kuvaa silkily. "Or are they beneath noticing by Isolationists?"

"They not our equals," said Zaimiss, getting up. "Are mere workers. You do not notice insects that pollinate flowers, why notice them?"

"Without insects, no crops," snarled Shvosi, rising again. "You made Children, but we saved them from solar flare when Isolationists in majority and too busy causing friction in Camarilla for disaster to be noticed! I say Children give more to us than you!"

"Phratry Leader Shvosi!" rebuked Khassiss. "Insults not allowed here."

Shvosi dipped her head in contrition to the female TeLaxaudin, but remained unrepentant. She turned to look at the whole gathering, throwing her forelimbs wide in appeal. "See what Isolationists do? They divide us! They offer nothing but criticisms of any but their own kind, and mad schemes to destroy the sun and us in attempt to move Ghioass!"

Hkairass looked at Khassiss for support but none was forthcoming. "Skepp Lady," he appealed.

She stirred and looked up at him. "Sadly, Phratry Leader Shvosi is correct. Cannot remember your last positive input to Camarilla sessions, Hkairass."

*Watch Isolationists all crawl to bushes now, Azwokkuss sent to Shvosi.*

"What of Reformers?" Hkairass countered. "Always they apologize for agents' misdemeanors. Reality is agents go native. Working with other species corrupts them, makes them put others before us! The younger species drag us down to their level by contamination!"

"You discredit agents and younger species," said Azwokkuss. "Forget they *live* in situations we only see through watching potentialities. They actually influence and change situations so best possible future can evolve. Forget historically that we protect younger species!"

"Camarilla started to protect us!" said Shumass, standing briefly.

"Was it?" asked Aizshuss gently. "I ask Unity to provide the answer from our records."

"Do it," ordered Khassiss. "We will hold this discussion for answer."



Hkairass began to hum angrily.

"Will have you removed if continue," Khassiss warned him.

He stopped abruptly and folded himself into a sitting position on the floor, obviously in a huff at her censure.

*Unity records the first meeting of Camarilla held because of concern at destruction of three younger worlds in war over misunderstanding. Conflict avoidable if neutral party had arbitrated. Decision made unilaterally to see this not happen again.*

Khassiss stood and addressed the gathering. "Unity cannot lie. Is clear what original purpose of Camarilla was— to protect younger species from themselves."

"Hkairass has had his say," said Azwokkuss, standing up. "I wish to Speak now."

Khassiss looked at Hkairass. "Step down, Skepp Lord," she said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Hkairass rose to his feet and stalked back to his place. As he passed Azwokkuss, he pointedly ignored him.

"I Speak for the younger races and our agents," said Azwokkuss when he was standing on the Speaker's dais. "Have two choices before us. We ignore them and isolate ourselves— I not advocate trying to move Ghioass through gateway to another part of galaxy. Erecting a stronger energy nimbus than currently used is enough to conceal this world. Other choice is admit we belong to same space as younger races and work to avert disasters affecting us all— like current one involving possible reunification of remaining three sand-dweller worlds."

"Are risks," said Htomshu, one of the moderate TeLaxaudin females, getting to her feet. "Discovery of what we are and do not wanted by any of us. Are vulnerable if attacked. Have technology to defend ourselves, but not physical form." She sat down again.

Azwokkuss nodded. "True. But we have our Children. We have the Prime sand-dwellers. They will come to our aid. When they come, the hunters and their Alliance will come. We have allies among younger races. By aiding them, they do not weaken us, we strengthen each other. One day, they will sit with us in Camarilla, enrich us with their talents as Cabbarans do. This what Reformists believe."

Kuvaa rose up to speak. "Also believe time to admit debt we owe them, especially Children here. We rely on them, trust them with our lives and property, yet they have no status. Cannot vote at elections of Assembly, cannot sit on Assembly, yet Assembly decisions on Ghioass affect them as much as us."

"Decision on citizenship of Children not ours to make," said Khassiss. "Must be made by Assembly who govern Ghioass."

"Recommendation from us would carry enormous weight. Guarantee success," observed Aizshuss. "I Speak for it."

"Is insanity to suggest it!" said Hkairass, angrily getting up.

"Sit down, Skepp Lord. Your views made clear already," ordered Khassiss. "Two issues to vote on, then. Hkairass Spoke for Isolationists, for using sun's energy to open gateway and move Ghioass. Because so serious matter, I ask those in agreement, please stand."

There was silence as everyone looked at each other, waiting to see who would stand with Hkairass. Hesitantly, only Zaimiss got to his feet.

*Two for the motion, said Unity. No abstentions.*

"Let Unity record only two for motion and that it failed. Next issue is recommendation that Children be granted citizenship by Assembly. Again, those in agreement, please stand."

This time, throughout the chamber, people began to slowly get to their feet. In the main, it was the Cabbarans, but there was a good smattering of TeLaxaudin, too.

*Majority of five, Unity informed them. No abstentions.*

"Let Unity record this motion is passed by a majority of five," said Khassiss, "and let Unity now inform the Assembly of our decision."

*The Assembly has been informed.*

With a sigh of relief, Shvosi dropped down to her cushion. *We won*, she sent to Azwokkuss and Kuvaa.

*Forty-five remain to be convinced*, replied Kuvaa.

*Is more than a beginning this time*, sent Azwokkuss. *You did well, Shvosi. The next session will not be so bad now you've countered Hkairass successfully once.*

"We will suspend this session for an hour then reconvene to examine Phratry Leader Annuur," said Khassiss.

"You can relax for a while," said Kuvaa, patting her on the shoulder. "The vote surprised me, Azwokkuss."

The TeLaxaudin hummed gently. "Time is right for change. Hkairass' mad suggestion frightened many— me included," he said frankly. "It only served to aid us."

\* \* \*

When Annuur next woke, it was midafternoon. On the floor at the side of his bed, Naacha lay curled up on one of the formfitting heated pads developed for the Primes. Naacha stirred, beginning to sit up on his haunches. Immediately, Annuur felt Unity return and knew that the mystic had stayed by his side during the last day, refusing to move, while the other two took it in turns to keep guard outside his door.

*Why? What would I need guarding from here?* he sent.

*From Camarilla interference before you're fully healed.*

Reaching out along the mental network of his sept, he found access beyond blocked by Naacha. Reluctantly his navigator let the protective barrier drop and Annuur was once more part of the Unity of the Camarilla.

Unity was maintained by a combination of the Cabbaran mystics and the technology of the TeLaxaudin. It was a mental communication and data network that allowed the two species to work together at the speed of thought, and to extend their reach far beyond what was physically possible. For Cabbarans like Annuur, it enhanced their natural abilities, allowing them the skills of their mystics. For the TeLaxaudin, it gave them through technology a form of the abilities they lacked.

His first priority was to update himself on the current situation with the Alliance and the M'zullians, but he'd no sooner begun than he sensed Shvosi.

*Greetings, she sent. Pleased I am at your recovery. You have accessed the records of the Camarilla's decision to retrieve you?*

*Am doing it now. My thanks for Speaking for us. How much of our engagement with the M'zullian destroyer was seen?*

*All. I was unable to stop them realizing you didn't take the Children with you. Hkairass was determined to make political use of what he saw as your disobedience of the Camarilla's orders. Azwokkuss Spoke for you, though, and his word as Speaker for the mission carried weight in your favor. But all are concerned at you separating from the Children. Your report is expected in an hour. You will be returned to Anchorage in two.*

*They aren't giving me long.*

He could feel her shrug in his mind's eye. *They knew you'd waken now, they know what you will say, and what their reply will be.*

*Then why bother to even see me!* he grumbled. Sometimes, like now, the ability of the Camarilla to see all the probable futures of events annoyed him, but that was a product of being outside Unity. When he'd worked within the Camarilla like Shvosi, he'd...

*Been just as irritated by it, Shvosi supplied dryly. That's why you chose to leave and work in the field, so you could really influence events.*

He couldn't deny the truth of that, he admitted, his update now complete. *What of our U'Churian family? Have their memories been erased? And those of the crews on the other Watcher ships?*

*Yes. Only you and your sept will be aware of what happened. I will see you in an hour, Phratry Leader Annuur.* With that, she was gone.

\* \* \*

"Your decision brought us to the attention of all *Watchers!*" snapped Hkairass. "Energy expended twice to bring ships here! It cost us dearly! Were only just able to keep remote viewer on J'kirtikk to monitor situation. Had further action been required, we could have done nothing!"

Annuur leaned his forelimbs on the lectern in front of him. "Didn't expect to be hit. Intelligence on M'zullian sand-dwellers' fleet tracking systems wrong, more advanced are they," he repeated yet again. He was getting tired of the TeLaxaudin's attempts to make a political advantage out of the debacle at J'kirtikk. "I get faulty Intelligence, not much I can do."

"What is point you are making, Hkairass?" demanded Skepp Lord Aizshuss, unfolding himself from his cushion. "If had gone according to Annuur's plan, modified shields would have hidden him. Only his Child crew would have known it was them, which they'd have known anyway if he'd taken the whole ship and not only his lower section."

"My point is his actions drained energy, left us vulnerable. Nimbus hiding Ghioass had to be dropped. We should learn from this— mess— he created, and pull back to this world, hide it completely from other species to ensure our own survival! And they have all still to be returned to Anchorage at even more energy cost! We are reaping the harvest we sowed when we helped the hunters break the sand-dwellers' Empire! Neither species will ever attain our level of evolution, never join us in the Camarilla— they continue to fight endlessly among themselves. They are a wasted effort, a lost cause!"

"Enough," said Phratry Leader Kuvaa, rising up to her haunches. "Doubtless this was said about us long ago— maybe even by you, Hkairass. Our continued existence is not assured if the sand-dwellers reunite, we all know this. They will enslave not only every species in the hunters' Alliance, but venture beyond, till their technology will eventually find and destroy even us."

A movement to his right drew Annuur's eyes— Khassis, one of the very few female TeLaxaudin on the Camarilla, had risen, her scent sharp with righteous anger.

"Kuvaa is right. Intervention was needed, and regretfully we must accept that allowing the J'kirtikkian sand-dwellers to perish has halved our problem. Annuur does what few of us have the courage to do," she said, looking round the assembly, fixing her dual-lensed eyes on them one by one. "He risks his life for us, as do his crew and all Camarilla trainees and operatives in the field. He nearly died, one of his sept did. Forget not that if the whole ship had gone, we'd have had more lives to save at the expenditure of more energy than was used. And to what purpose? Nothing would have been altered. I support Annuur's actions— and his accusation that some among our Skepps are too ready to spend our Children's lives. Let us not forget what we owe them. We restructured them millennia ago to be our interface with the less advanced species. They pursue matters we cannot, provide the strengths we lack. We have obligations to them, Hkairass, as has already been debated."

There was a chorus of approval from the Cabbarans present, enhanced by the deep humming from dozens of TeLaxaudin throats.

*At last they begin to understand, Annuur sent to Kuvaa. This was discussed earlier?*

*Yes, check with Unity for an update. Now the Elder Khassiss is on our side, it is a real beginning.*

As the noise died down, Azwokkuss stood, his draperies emitting a calming scent. "I spoke for Camarilla for this mission, therefore I claim last word," he said. "What has happened will not be undone because our

objective was achieved. Phratry Leader Annuur and his crew discharged our orders to the letter. His decision to leave the Children of his Phratry behind in light of our miscalculation of the sand-dwellers defensive capabilities cost us less than it would had he taken them with him. I Speak for ending this inquiry and losing no more time before sending them back to Anchorage. Is their ship repaired yet, Shvosi?"

"It is, Skepp Lord," she said, answering him formally. "All that remains is for the nanobots to be recalled and the barriers around *Watcher 6* to be removed. The translocator's energy levels are already at maximum again and the nimbus due to be restored in three hours. Where and when shall they be returned?"

"To the jump point at Anchorage two days ago," said Azwokkuss.

"This has cost us dearly, Azwokkuss," warned Hkairass. "Returning them back in time will deplete us to unacceptably low levels. We have not yet recovered fully what was expended to bring them here."

Azwokkuss stared at him till he subsided back to his cushion, then turned his attention back to the Cabbaran Captain.

"Place us in hyperspace near the Anchorage exit, then we emerge through the Alliance's own jump point," said Annuur. "If we use the temporal one, they will be suspicious."

"It shall be done, Phratry Leader," said Shvosi, joining him at the lectern.

Annuur stepped back and as Shvosi operated the controls, with a wrenching sensation, he found himself with his crew on the cargo deck of *Watcher 6*.

Around them they could hear the faint scuttling of millions of nanobots being recalled. Turning to look, he saw them pouring from the very walls of the *Watcher*, flowing like silver liquid down the loading ramp and onto the landing pad outside.

"I hate it when they do that," Sokarr was grumbling as he trotted through the tide of 'bots to the grav shaft down to the navigation level. "It isn't that far to walk."

The sound of the elevator coming down from the upper deck made Annuur turn his head to see two U'Churians dressed in the tunics of engineers descending. When it halted, they inclined their heads briefly in salute before stepping off it.

"The Rryuk family is back at their posts, Phratry Leader Annuur," said the one wearing a badge of rank on his shoulder. "All is as it was when they arrived. They will wake as soon as our gate releases you into hyperspace."

Annuur twitched his ears in assent, feeling suddenly disoriented as he watched them follow the last of the 'bots down the ramp. Already Unity was fading, isolating him from his family and leaving his mind echoing with the farewells of his friends. A weight on his side made him jump slightly until he realized it was Lweeu leaning against him, silently offering her comfort.

"They showed us the images they'd taken before starting work," she said with a slight shudder. "They made good repairs. It looks as it did before, even down to the scratches on the deck where Sheeowl and Manesh dropped the tool chest when loading it."

Gratefully, Annuur nuzzled her, his prehensile top lip curling back so he could lick her muzzle. "We should join Sokarr and Naacha," he said as the ramp began to rise. "We've much to be grateful for, even if it means the Camarilla will use us again."

## **Two days earlier**

"Picking up the Anchorage beacon now, Captain," they heard Manesh say over the comm. Her voice sounded subdued.

"Disengage hyperdrive," said Tirak. "Annuur, I need the coordinates for docking at Anchorage."

"Routing to nav now, Captain," Annuur said, glancing briefly at Naacha as the hologrid in their navigation chamber finalized the triangulation on Anchorage then showed their emergence point in its simulation of normal space.



"Captain, what caused the M'zullian destroyer to explode like that?" they heard Sheeowl ask.

"I've no idea, but at least we've got visuals of it," Tirak replied. "The scientists can work it out, I've no doubt, just thank Kathan it did. A weapon that can dissolve ships like that..." He left the rest unsaid.

Lweeu, lying on the couch next to him, lifted her head from the cradle to look at him, her long muzzle creasing in worry.

Lifting his hand fractionally, he signaled a negative, making sure their link to the bridge was closed before answering her.

"Edited, like their memories," he whispered as they felt the ship begin to decelerate. "They will only see the destruction of J'kirtikk and the final explosion of the ship."

Through the transparent walls of their chamber, space seemed to shrink in around them, subtly changing color.

"All of them? Surely they'll suspect the recorders have been tampered with."

"It has been done carefully. Nothing has been left to chance, Lweeu."

Outside, space appeared to lurch, then expand violently before turning black. Tiny points of starlight began to twinkle in the distance.

From the bridge, a new voice rang out over the ship's comm. "Anchorage to *Watcher* Patrol. Well come home. You're cleared for immediate docking."

"*Watcher 6* to Anchorage. Glad to be back," said Tirak somberly. "It's been a long trip."

## **Shola, Aldatan Estate, Zhal-S'Asha 30th day (October)**

"I understand, Ambassador Rhasoh," said Konis patiently for the fifth time. "Believe me, I do understand. My own son was betrothed when he

formed a Leska Link with a Human female. We have to accept it as Vartra's will and let the younglings make the best of it they can."

"They're not the problem," growled Gaerat, his hair still ruffled up in anger. "They're besotted! What do I do about his betrothed?"

"The betrothal will automatically be annulled, of course," said Konis.

"Your son, Khyan, must have the option of life-bonding to his Leska. He is gene-altered now, infertile with the rest of our species except those of the En'Shalla Clan."

Gaerat opened his mouth only to hesitate as the full meaning of the Clan Lord's words penetrated his anger. "They won't let him leave the damned College or even speak to us," he said in a more moderate voice.

"You can reach him mentally, though. What's his opinion on this?"

"He's barely sixteen! What does he know about anything! Had it been my daughter, it would have been another matter. Even at sixteen she was more mature than those officially adult at twice her age! But Khyan— he's still a kitling."

Out of sight of the screen, Konis drummed his claw tips on his desk. This problem was not going to go away. His aide, Falma, had disturbed him and his family at breakfast to brief him on the incident. It was no small matter when the only son of the Sholan Ambassador to Britain had become Leska-bonded to a Human, and by doing so, had inherited a position of importance in one of the oldest Colleges in England. It was a position that prevented the youngling leaving the premises for any length of time until he'd been fully trained in the arcane arts of a group of ancient lawgivers known as Druids.

"I'll speak to Khyan myself," Konis said at length. "And his Regent. There may be some room for maneuvering, but if they refuse to let him leave, there's little we can do."

"Do? There's plenty I can do! I have a unit of troopers and four Warriors here at the Legation! I can send them to fetch him home, that's what *I* can do!"

"And start an interspecies incident when the situation on Earth is still so fragile?" said Konis gently. "I think you know better than that, Gaerat. Leave the matter with me and I'll see what I can do."

\* \* \*

It was with relief he closed the call and picked up the mug that his life-mate Rhyasha had placed beside him. He took a sip, discovering to his surprise it was coffee.

"I thought you needed something mildly stimulating," she said, smoothing flat the hair between his ears. "I know Gaerat. He's got five daughters, three from their first family and two from their second. Khyan is their youngest, and the son he's always yearned for. He'll take his loss hard."

"Other parents have heavier burdens to carry," said Konis, reaching up to take hold of her hand. "We've no idea how or where our son Kusac is. With the Alliance preparing for war, Gaerat should be thankful his family is safe on Earth with him." Even as he spoke, he felt her retreating mentally from him and her hand begin to withdraw from his.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I forgot we agreed not to mention it. How are the twins?"

"Fine. Beginning to get around quite well on their fours, and keeping their nurse even busier. You should call the College now, and get it over with, then you can come and see them before you leave for the Palace."

He watched her retreating figure, glad that because of the early birth of the twins she'd been spared the worst of the public condemnation of their oldest son. Kusac's mission for the Brotherhood had been so secret that it had entailed stealing the Touiban delegation's ship and disrupting all communications in the spaceport for several hours and being branded a traitor in the process. What hurt more than him being called a traitor was the knowledge that Kusac had completed the mission to meet with General Kezule and returned to Haven, only to unaccountably leave again to rejoin his mortal enemy.

\* \* \*

"I understand his father's concern, Clan Lord Aldatan," said Euan, "but the College law is most explicit in this matter. Once a successor has been chosen, he cannot relinquish his post until the appointed time. Believe me, I wish it were otherwise."

*I expect you do*, thought Konis, instinctively disliking the Human from the first.

"For his family's sake," Euan added.

"And when is this appointed time?"

Euan looked down briefly at his desk. "In something over a hundred years, so I am told." His voice was bland now, no trace of the earlier sympathy.

"When he— or she— dies," said Konis automatically.

"Actually, no, strangely enough. They tell me that both he and the girl will still be alive. Not that I believe this. We don't live as long as you Sholans."

For the first time in weeks, Konis felt his heart lighten a little. "She'll still be alive?" He leaned closer to the comm screen. "How do you know this?"

Again the bland voice. "Something to do with an astrological prediction based on their birth dates. The position of the planets in our solar system and yours at the moment of their birth. I know it sounds far-fetched, but..."

"Divination?" he interrupted. If it were true, it meant that a Human Leska had their life extended to nearer the Sholan norm of one hundred and twenty.

"Yes. Our College practices many of the arcane crafts. That is just one of them."

Konis relaxed, pulling his thoughts back to the issue at hand. "If you'll grant his family visiting rights once a month, then we'll agree to this— cultural exchange, as you call it."

Euan nodded slowly. "I think I can persuade the council to agree when the alternative is explained to them."

"And we're agreed that Khyan should continue his own Telepath studies twice a week on a comm link to his tutor?"

"Again, agreed."

"What about the young female? What's her name by the way?"

Euan hesitated. "She's called Nimue."

He was lying, Konis knew it immediately. But why lie about something so trivial? He let it pass for now. "When can we expect your representative?"

"If your people call for him tomorrow, he'll be ready. You have the facilities to transport his cryogenic unit, haven't you? I wouldn't want anything to happen to..." Again he hesitated, glancing down at his desk. "Conner."

"Of course," said Konis dryly, aware that Euan was again lying— or was he? There was something about the name that didn't quite ring true. "A shuttle will call for him tomorrow at ten hours in your morning."

"I'll look forward to it," smiled Euan as he cut the connection.

*And that's the first time he's spoken honestly,* thought Konis as he sat back thoughtfully in his chair. If he was any judge of character, there was bad blood between Euan and this Conner. His wrist comm buzzed.

"Master Konis, I've found the reference you asked for," said Falma. "A merlin is a bird, a small hawk used by some Earth Humans long ago, mainly by their females, for hunting. It's a bird of prey."

"Is it indeed? And the Druids?"

"Still looking," said his aide. "They're said to have died out around the time of their first century, slaughtered by invaders of Britain called the Romans. There seems to be very little known about them."

"Keep looking, Falma," said Konis, getting to his feet. "We're leaving for the Palace in an hour. I'll meet you at the garage by the aircar."

## Chapter 2

### **Governor's Palace, Shola, later the same day, Zhal-S'Asha 30th day (October)**

"SINCE Commander Rhyaz hasn't seen fit to join us, I'll begin without him," said Commander Raiban, glancing round the oval table at the assembled military and civilian heads of the Sholan High Command. "As President, I've called this meeting because of the M'zullian situation," she began. "We face a situation where war with them is imminent, therefore I propose calling a State of Emergency..."

"Not without us here," said Rhyaz quietly, entering the room, followed by the Touiban, Sumaan, Cabbaran, U'Churian, and Keissian Human Ambassadors. "This is not a Sholan matter, Commander. It affects all of us, not least the Touibans whose two worlds are as near as Shola to M'zull."

"This is a meeting of the Sholan High Command, Rhyaz, not the Alliance," began Raiban with ill-concealed anger.

"So, Commander Raiban, you think Shola should act independently in this matter?" asked Rhyaz as he and the others took their seats round the large conference table.

"Of course I don't, but there are Sholan issues that must be addressed first. No insult was intended, Ambassadors," she said, glancing at the new arrivals. "Once these matters are dealt with, then an Alliance meeting will be called. I'm sure you appreciate the need for us to settle our own, domestic business first— in private."

"I don't think they do, Commander," said Governor Nesul, relaxing back in his chair. "I asked Commander Rhyaz to bring the Ambassadors here today. If you think we need to declare a State of Emergency on Shola, then I think our allies are entitled to know why. Hell, *I'd* like to know why, when I'm reliably informed there's as yet no threat to any of us!"

"In a time of war, it's the military that makes the decision to call a State of Emergency," said Commander Chuz.

"But we aren't at war, Chuz," said Konis softly.

"War is imminent and inevitable," replied Raiban. "We've agreed to help the Primes against the M'zullians, that alone will bring us into conflict with them even if they don't locate us first. I'm not wanting to alert the population of Shola and Khoma to that probability yet, only to bring all our own resources together under one, combined leadership. And that *is* a Sholan matter."

"Ah," said Rhyaz quietly, leaning an elbow on the table and propping his chin in his palm. "You want the Brotherhood under your control."

"I refuse to discuss this matter outside Sholan High Command," said Raiban firmly.

"The disposition of the Brotherhood is a matter that is concerning us greatly too," said Touesut. "We have a right to be present when such matters that affect us so deeply are being debated."

"So have we," nodded Shaqee, the U'Churian Ambassador.

"We are here for the TeLaxaudin as well as ourselves," said Mrocca, the Cabbaran, her prehensile lip curling back to show her long white front teeth. "Tell them, Commander Rhyaz. It is time they were knowing what is happening under their noses that they do not see."

"They have a right to be here, Raiban," said Rhyaz, sitting forward, "because members of their species are in the Brotherhood."

"Alien Brothers?" said General Rilgho disbelievingly. "You expect us to believe you have alien Brothers?"

The door opened again to admit Alex, dressed in the Human Brotherhood black fatigues edged with purple. She nodded to Konis and Governor

Nesul as she took her place beside her Leska, her presence there not lost on the Sholan military.

"Yes, we have alien Brothers— and Sisters," said Rhyaz quietly. "Like Alex, my Leska. You've all known for some time about our Human members."

"But the others," said Naika, his short hair rising in angry spikes. "I don't believe you! You lot up in the Dzahai Mountains are too damned secretive to allow any aliens into your halls!"

"Captain Tirak told me of the beauty of the statue of Vartra in your temple," said Shaqee, examining her claws thoughtfully. "Said he liked the idea of the God holding the bowl of hot coals. He said it's unique, that the other statues don't hold anything. Also that he liked the Goddess' shrine with all the green growing plants."

The loud snap of Raiban's stylus breaking filled the silence. "I will not tolerate aliens in Stronghold," said Raiban, her voice brittle with anger.

"I wasn't aware our charter as a Guild depended on your allowing us anything, Commander," said Rhyaz calmly, taking the crystal Alex handed him.

"You'll find Stronghold much reduced these days, Rhyaz, should you and your people come to call on us as you once threatened my wife you would," said Lijou. "Apart from my priests and the juniors that is."

"Explain yourself," said Raiban harshly as Rhyaz activated the comm recessed into the table in front of him and inserted the crystal into the reader slot.

"Surely you noticed that rather than pay your exorbitant charges, our people have been withdrawn from the Forces." Rhyaz punched a command into the comm before looking up at her. "Stronghold is no longer entirely based on Shola. We have risen beyond the surface of our world, and as well as our mandate to protect Shola, which you have done your best to prevent, we now have other contracts to fulfill."



"You threatened to march on Stronghold?" asked Rilgho, turning on the President. "You fool! If I'd known that, I'd have interfered sooner in your petty games against them! I warned you what the outcome would be, Raiban!"

"Be silent!" she hissed. "This is treason, Rhyaz!"

"No, Commander Raiban," said Governor Nesul quietly. "It isn't. He did it with my knowledge and permission. When the yearly budget allocations were made, I had a separate contract drawn up between Shola and the Brotherhood. It restates the Brotherhood's Charter and stipulates that they are an independent force and must always remain so. Never again can they be manipulated by private political interests on Shola. It's on the statute books now."

"You forced us into this, Raiban," said Konis. "You refused to let them have the funding they needed. As the government, we had no choice but to make them independent. Now be silent and hear what they have to say."

A holographic image of a fleet hovering over an alien planet began to form in the center of the table. Raiban, face frozen in a silent snarl of anger, sat back, defeated for now.

"With our alien allies," said Rhyaz, "we have formed a small unit of ships to patrol the borders of Prime and M'zullian space. Called *Watchers*, their crews are made up of our own Brothers and Sisters as well as their U'Churian, Cabbaran, and Sumaan colleagues, and they do just that, watch. When, several days ago, a fleet was seen gathering around M'zull, we were alerted and followed them to their destination at J'kirtikk. We received this transmission yesterday. If you watch, I think you'll see how our two colonies were destroyed."

\* \* \*

When the images stopped playing, the silence continued for several minutes until Rhyaz broke it.

"As you can see, what appears to be the ship controlling the weapon they used to destroy J'kirtikk is itself destroyed. Current intelligence," Rhyaz

said, giving Raiban a long look, "tells us that the M'zullians are now landing unopposed on J'kirtikk. Vessels have been seen leaving orbit towing large cargo containers, presumably heading back to M'zull. We believe they are looting the planet for weapons and other resources. They're too busy to worry about us for the time being, even if they were aware of our existence, which we've every reason to believe they aren't."

"War is imminent," Raiban repeated pedantically. "With or without that weapon. We must prepare for it now. We don't know that this was their only one."

"Assuredly," Rhyaz agreed. "And I have some proposals to put before you."

"You? What do you know about warfare?" demanded Raiban, sitting upright again. "Until a few months ago you were merely one of the Brotherhood, not even its Leader!"

"Guild Master," corrected Lijou softly. "But I have led them for nigh on eleven years now, Raiban. One of the reasons Rhyaz was chosen as Warrior Master was because of his tactical skills."

"Tactics in the classroom is one thing," began Raiban disparagingly.

"If I remember correctly, he led the Brotherhood in the Desert War against the Tribes," interrupted Rilgho, reaching into a pocket for a packet of stim twigs. "Did a damned fine job containing the situation before we arrived. And after," he added hastily, lest he be misunderstood.

Rhyaz inclined his head in recognition of the compliment, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly as he did.

"Say your piece and have done with it," snapped Raiban.

"Martial Law isn't necessary at this juncture," said Rhyaz. "But we must implement the evacuation of key personnel from Khoma, Teesul, and Touiba, as they are the worlds most at risk." Leaning forward, he pressed his comm again and a holocube of Alliance and Prime space began to form in the center of the table.

"As you can see from the chart, we need to extend our combined fleets around those worlds and make our first stand there. We can effectively block the M'zullians and prevent them from penetrating further into Alliance space. Because of the *Watcher* patrols, each of our main allies is aware of the situation and has come here today with authorization from their home world to do just that. Better to fight them there and have room to retreat if necessary than to wait till they threaten us one by one."

"Makes sense," said Rilgho. "Combine now and get used to working together before any crisis develops."

"What about the Primes?" demanded Chuz. "The M'zullians are their people. What part are they playing in all this?"

"As I see it, we have two options. Either we keep the Primes out, or we involve them. If we involve them, our best option is to get them to talk to the M'zullians, point out that we represent a stronger force and it's in their interests to make a treaty with us. If we keep the Primes out, we have no option but to go for a preemptive strike. Hit the M'zullians hard before they know we exist."

"We've no way of knowing the M'zullians will talk to the Primes," said Nesul. "What if they see them as inferiors, the way the Warriors we've been training here see Prince Zsurtul?"

"They may respond to the Prime Emperor," said Lijou. "The alternative is a protracted war."

"What's the problem with that?" demanded Raiban. "We outnumber them and our technology is more advanced!"

"Is it? We've nothing like that ship-eating device!" said Rhilgo.

"And they're more aggressive," reminded Rhyaz quietly. "We might beat them in space, but then we'll have to land on their world and fight it out on their territory. It's a war we cannot win by traditional methods. Remember Keiss and the psychotic hatred of the Valtegans there. They made suicide

attacks rather than surrender to us. Only genocide will stop the M'zullians, make no mistake about that. Or an armed peace settlement."

"I notice the Chemerians are absent," said General Naika, reaching for the jug of water on the table and pouring himself a glass. "What plans have you for those two-faced tree climbers, Rhyaz? Don't trust 'em as far as I could spit one! Wouldn't put it past them to make their own approach to the M'zullians."

"You won't like my suggestion, General," said Rhyaz.

Naika's mouth opened wide in a toothy grin. "Spit it out, Commander," he said with a rumble of amusement. "I think I like it already!"

"Because of the business over Kate's and Taynar's attempted abduction by Ambassador Taira, the Alliance has forced the Chemerians into opening up their borders to us. However, we're not allowed closer than Tuushu Trading Station. We need agents on their home world, and their two colonies. Ideally we need an excuse to get a military presence there as well. And I believe the Clan Lord has one for us."

"I have," said Konis. "There has been an incident on my son's and my wife's estates over the last few days. A private aircar, carrying three Jalnian merchants with a shipment for our visitors Kzizysus the TeLaxaudin, and his colleague Shrulo, the Cabbaran, crashed outside the gatehouse. The passengers were badly injured and were taken to the infirmary on my son's estate. The wreckage was lifted to the landing pad there for examination to find out why it had crashed. Turns out that unknown to them, they were carrying a compound based on la'quo. It leaked onto the land outside the gatehouse and infected the wild jeggets there, making them even more feral before finally killing them."

"Get to the point, Konis," said Rilgho testily.

"I'm trying to, General," said Konis patiently. "Because of his interest in our wild life Physician Kzizysus was involved in the investigations into the jegget deaths. Once we discovered the nature of the poison, Kaid placed the investigation in the TeLaxaudin's hands as they and the

Cabbarans are immune to the plant. As you may remember, the Valtegan plant mutated on Jalna, creating a poison in the soil there that infects nearly all plant and animal life on that world. It nearly killed our agents on Jalna by almost literally starving them to death."

"So why were the Jalnian merchants carrying it in the first place?" demanded Raiban. "And why have I been told nothing about this?"

"Kaid's only just finished the investigation," said Konis, passing a data crystal over to Governor Nesul. "Here are his findings, Nesul. The craft, which had been rigged to crash, was hired to the Jalnians by a Chemerian merchant who has since conveniently disappeared off the face of Shola. It's well known that several of my son's people have pet jeggets and that they're the only other telepathic species on Shola. Kaid believes this was an attempt by the Chemerians to poison our jegget population in the hope that it would infect our telepaths, too."

Raiban snorted her disgust. "Pretty far-fetched idea if you ask me!"

"I don't think so, Commander, and neither did the Public Prosecutor of the Protectorate when the evidence was put before him," said Konis. "Such a pollution of our soil would have been disastrous, as would losing the wild jeggets, and the compound had been tailored to appeal to them specifically. All the evidence points to the Chemerians being behind this. We know they kept their discovery of Jalna secret from us, and we know they tried to kidnap two of our gene-altered telepaths— a Leska pair, no less. They knew about the poison in the soil on Jalna and kept that from us, too. Add all that to the facts about the aircar and you have a very strong case against them."

"I agree," nodded Rhyaz. "One strong enough, I think, to be brought before the Alliance High Command with a request that there should be a permanent Alliance military presence on the Chemerians' worlds for all our protection. They're targeting us today, but who will be next?" he asked, looking round at each of those present. "And in this time of crisis, we need to be sure that they aren't privy to our war council in case they decide to approach the M'zullians themselves."

"These are serious allegations, Konis," said Nesul, turning the crystal over in his hand. "You're accusing them of actively working against us, of risking breaking up the Alliance."

"Aye, it's serious, Nesul," agreed Naika. "Serious enough to demote the Chemerians down to Associate Alliance members and warrant that military presence! I think we should all have a copy of Kaid's findings, Konis."

"Already done. You'll find full documentation waiting at your offices and embassies when this meeting adjourns," said Konis.

"I'll see about posting agents there. We should insist on establishing embassies to start with, then..." began Raiban, in an effort to take charge of the meeting again.

"I don't think so, Raiban," interrupted Nesul. "The Chemerians will see that as an aggressive act on our part. As their accusers, I think we should appear to remain neutral. We need non-Sholan agents on the Chemerian worlds. As for embassies, yes, but we could have ours on Tuushu, their trading station. Apart from anything else, we'll pick up more of what's really happening there. Then we're agreed, are we?" he asked. "We approach the Primes about offering a peace treaty to the M'zullians, call an Alliance High Command meeting as soon as possible to discuss the dispositions of our fleets, make a decision over this new Chemerian treachery, and make provisions to help the Touibans evacuate key personnel from their two worlds to Shola."

"Nesul, may I remind you that I called this meeting?" demanded Raiban, leaning forward angrily. "It's up to me to outline what actions we'll be taking!"

"Shut up, Raiban," snapped Naika. "Your promotion's gone to your head! All you wanted to do was call a State of Emergency when we've got far more important issues to deal with! How come you knew nothing about all this? You're supposed to be Head of Intelligence!"

"I knew nothing because no information about this poisoned aircar was sent to me from the En'Shalla estate!" snarled Raiban, ears twitching spasmodically and her short hair rising in anger.

"But you should have been aware of the potential problems posed by the Chemerians," said Chuz.

"There's nothing to be gained by apportioning blame for a situation that was only resolved this morning," said Konis diplomatically. "Governor Nesul has asked us for our votes on these matters. What do you all say?"

There were murmurs of assent from round the table.

"Commander Raiban?" prompted Konis.

"Yes!"

### **Kij'ik Outpost, Zhal-Rojae 5th day, Month of approaching snow (November)**

Today, the General was angry. Shaidan sighed softly to himself as he padded his usual six feet behind him. He knew what Kezule's rages were like and knew that at times like this it was in everyone's best interests to keep out of the way— an impossibility for him now that the General demanded his presen him. Following him through the sick bay to the lab, he stayed by the main data processor near the door, crouching down on his haunches to wait.

"They're here," said Kezule, striding over to the workbench where his wife sat, nodding briefly to Giyarishis the TeLaxaudin. "But they left the female behind! How can we learn about their culture without any females?" he demanded angrily.

"Did you ask them to bring her?" Zayshul asked, looking up from her monitor screen at him.

"No," he muttered, picking up a reader pad and glancing at the data on it. "They don't know our scanners are that accurate. Officially we only know about Kusac and the male who came with him last time." He slung the pad down, making it clatter on the work surface.

"Would you take a female with you into similar circumstances?" she asked calmly, rescuing her reader. "I think not. You're being unreasonable, Kezule. What have you done with them?"

He glared at her, but recognized the sense in what she said. "M'zynal is showing them to their quarters, then Shartoh will take them on a tour of the Officers' Level. Don't worry, Zayshul, your Sholan is safe," he said with a touch of sarcasm. "I don't intend to harm him."

Giyarishis began to hum. "Females you wanting? I get, maybe."

"What?" demanded Kezule, turning to look at the small being perched on the flat topped stool beside his wife. "You can get Sholan females? How?" he demanded.

The TeLaxaudin's mandibles clicked and he lifted a delicate hand to brush against them. A burst of untranslatable static was all that came from the speaker.

Kezule opened his mouth to speak but stopped when Zayshul laid a hand on his arm, squeezing it gently.

"There's no point," she said. "His reply is untranslatable. The language barrier is greater than you'd think."

"Get me female Sholans," Kezule said. "Get the Human mate of Kusac if you can!"

"Humans no get," said the translator as the scent from the TeLaxaudin's perfumed draperies grew stronger and sharper. "Female Sholans take time. Maybe can, maybe not. Wait must you. Better get Ch'almuthians." The TeLaxaudin stretched out his lower limbs and climbed down from his stool, stalking over to the other side of the room to check on another piece of apparatus.

Kezule had been around Giyarishis long enough now to know that the strong scent he'd left behind denoted displeasure. He turned back to Zayshul. "Dammit! Why does he keep doing that to me?"



"Don't have him bring Sholan females to us, Kezule," she said. "If you're not careful, you'll have Kusac's people tracking us down."

"I know what I'm doing, Zayshul," he said, a touch of coldness replacing the anger in his voice.

Sighing, she turned back to her work. "Shaidan, wait in the sick bay with the duty nurse, please. Why are you inviting them to join us for the evening meal, Kezule?" she asked.

This time, he managed to hide his surprise. Incidents like this were happening more frequently these days, reinforcing his suspicions about her possible mental abilities. "I may have forced them to return to us, but I know from my dealings with them that I can't force them to cooperate. They might, if they believe they're guests."

"Not Kusac," she said quietly. "Not when you're holding his son hostage like this. Let the child go, Kezule..."

"I've told you before not to discuss this in front of him!" he hissed angrily, glancing at the cub now standing out of earshot in the other room. "The harder you push me, the more determined I am to keep him!"

"Each other you are needing," said Giyarishis' translator, making them both jump and turn round to face him. "Not antagonize. Need skills he has."

Kezule stared at the TeLaxaudin, annoyed by the other's ability to sneak up on him. "I'm showing great restraint, Giyarishis. In my time, for what Kusac and his mate did to me, I would have had their hides flayed off their bodies, then fed what still lived to hatchlings!"

"Already got revenge you did. On his daughter and sister. Tortured her mate. Forget not this. He not. He want do same you. No good either you each skinless is."

Kezule hissed angrily, as much at Zayshul's nervous laugh as at the TeLaxaudin's words. "How the hell do you know what he thinks?" he

demanded, then stopped abruptly, remembering their visit to the TeLaxaudin at the City of Light and how the ones there had paralyzed them both without any discernible means to do so. He needed to deal carefully with these powerful and unpredictable allies.

"I took no revenge on them, or pleasure in forcing the male to do my bidding with the slave collar, Giyarishis," he said quietly. "He was brave, a worthy opponent, but not one I had a quarrel with. Circumstances forced me to do it in my efforts to escape. It's Kusac and his wife I want revenge on. Zayshul, you'll be at the meal and you'll wear one of those court dresses. The rest will take care of itself!" He turned on his heel and left, gesturing to Shaidan to follow as he strode past him.

## Same day

M'zynal had been right. By the time they'd docked at Kij'ik and been taken to their new crew quarters, they'd been glad to see regular beds, even though the mattresses were still the same. The tour of the Outpost had been educational. Even though barely half of it was in use, Kusac had quickly realized that Kij'ik, like Haven, had been part of the Valtegan Empire's early warning network, only many times larger than Haven. He was sure this had been one of the major command posts. At the end of the tour, they were taken past the main elevator security post to the level below, one even more heavily guarded, Kusac noticed as they emerged. They were escorted through a series of locked iris doors to a comfortable lounge where they were left to await the arrival of the General and his staff. Unable to settle down, they ignored the sofas and chairs and remained standing.

"See the screen?" he heard Dzaou say quietly to Khadui. "I noticed one in every room we saw, and in all the public areas. They certainly liked to keep an eye on everyone!"

But it was Banner who voiced what was in both their minds.

"Kusac, was it me or was the first scout ship of Kezule's somewhat old-fashioned by comparison, just like here?" his Second asked quietly as a couple of Prime stewards went back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room, obviously preparing it for the evening meal.

"It was old," he agreed, keeping his voice equally low and turning his back on the other three crew members. "A recovered vessel left over from the Fall. Just as this is an outpost from their old Empire, part of the network Haven and our other three bases once belonged to."

"What else have you discovered?" Banner asked, giving him a long look.

"There's a TeLaxaudin here," he replied, aware that he was risking revealing what Banner had already guessed about his returning Talent. "I can smell him." *And no dampers anywhere*, he thought to himself.

"Can you find out any more?" Banner asked after a small silence.

"Prime minds are almost as closed as those of the Valtegans we met on Keiss, but they're just as capable of noticing me, Banner, were I able to read them. Kezule specified I bring no telepaths with me because he hates them. Our best chance for information is Doctor Zayshul. Your job is to continue keeping a watch on Dzaou," he said. "His xenophobia and paranoia worry me."

"I will, and I've had a word with him. He's not stupid, Kusac, not when a cub's life is at stake."

"He'd better not be. I'll kill him before I'll let him endanger that kitling." He had to fight to keep the emotion out of his voice.

"Why does Kezule really want you here, Kusac?" his Second asked after a moment or two.

"That's my concern," he said shortly. "We play it the way Kezule wants for now."

"Isn't this something of a turnaround for you?"

"You said it yourself, Banner. There's a life at stake here," he replied, turning away. "A young Sholan life." If he said it often enough, he might be able to forget the other half of Shaidan's parentage.

The door into the lounge hissed quietly open and Kezule, followed by Doctor Zayshul and a younger male entered.

"Welcome to Kij'ik, Captain Aldatan," Kezule said in almost perfect Sholan. "This is my aide, M'kou, and I believe you've all met my wife, Zayshul. I trust your accommodations here are acceptable?"

"Very comfortable, for a prison," he said, trying not to stare past Kezule at the Doctor. He'd only ever seen her in a uniform and it came as something of a shock to see her wearing a long, elegant dress of some soft silvery gray material. Even as he realized he was staring at her, he pulled his attention back to the General and the other Prime officers who were now joining them.

Kezule's eye ridges raised slightly. "Hardly a prison," he said. "Do introduce me to your crew."

"Banner, my Second," he said shortly, trying to ignore the barrage of scents he could now smell as he indicated the only other black-pelted male present. "Khadui, my comms officer."

The older male inclined his gray head. "General," he murmured.

"Jayza, my engineering officer, and Dzaou, weapons."

Jayza, his greeting barely audible, flicked his ears back into his brown hair, moving unconsciously closer to Khadui. Dzaou said nothing but the tan-colored hair and fur around his head and shoulders began to rise in a display of aggression.

Banner was at his side instantly, rumbling his own anger. "We're here to do a job, Brother Dzaou," he said quietly in the Highland language of Stronghold, hand closing on the offender's shoulder. "Keep your personal feelings to yourself."

Kezule raised a brow curiously at Kusac. "He should be beyond the impetuosity of youth at his age," he murmured.

Kusac shot him a startled look.

"I've made it my business to study your species since we last met. Keep him in line, Kusac. Discipline on Kij'ik is military, and everyone is subject to it, with no exceptions."

"I'll discipline my own people if I need to, Kezule."

"I said no exceptions. Those are my rules. If you don't like them, you're free to leave," said Kezule with deceptive mildness, turning away from him as he took his wife by the arm. "I'll have the *N'zishok* return you to the rendezvous any time you want. Now enough of this. Let's go through to the dining room."

Fuming, Kusac followed him into the dining room, heading for the far end of the table. He wanted to be as far away from Kezule— and Zayshul— as possible. The General knew damned well he couldn't walk out and leave his son behind.

"No," said Kezule, taking his seat at the head, Zayshul on his right. "Sit beside us, Kusac. Next to my wife."

He hesitated, catching the Doctor's eyes briefly for the first time. There was a slightly haunted look in them. She wanted his company as little as he wanted hers. Walking slowly back along the length of the table, he reluctantly took the seat beside her.

"Where's the cub, Kezule?" he asked abruptly. "Before I agree to cooperate, I insist on examining him and making sure he's well and unharmed."

"I don't abuse children in any way Kusac," said Kezule, a hiss of anger in his voice. "On Shola, I had your daughter in my grasp and did nothing to her, remember that! As for the cub, you'll do me the courtesy of leaving business until after we've eaten."

His anger flared again, but he forced it back. As Kezule's unwilling guest he had no option but to accept his host's decision.

\* \* \*

Surprisingly, two of Kezule's officers were female and one, Zhalmo, was seated immediately to Kusac's left. Surrounded by the scents of Zhalmo and the Doctor, he found it difficult to keep his mind on the light conversation in which Kezule was determined to engage him. It confused the hell out of him to find himself drawn to them both. The food was good, but he had little appetite to enjoy it. Offered wine, he refused it, sticking to the jug of water nearby. His senses were disturbed enough by the closeness of the two females without alcohol.

At first, even his enhanced sense of smell couldn't tell the two females' scents apart. The difference, when he found it, was subtle, one he couldn't put his finger on, but he knew it was there. At the far end of the table, where the other female officer sat, he could see that Banner and the rest were coping well. Thankfully, Dzaou was confining himself to growled, monosyllabic answers.

Eventually, the interminable meal was over and they rose to follow the General back out into the small lounge. When Zayshul stood up and turned round, he found himself staring at her exposed back. The dappled iridescent patterns on her skin fascinated him, and he found the desire to reach out and touch them overwhelming.

Zayshul swung round in confusion, bumping into him and almost losing her balance. Instinctively, he grabbed hold of her waist, steadying her. Realizing he was touching bare flesh, he let go of her as if stung.

"Apologies," he murmured automatically as she spun away from him with a smothered exclamation of shock.

As he watched her push her way through the other young officers into the lounge, he stood there trying to make sense of the signals he'd picked up from her. For one brief moment, she'd leaned into his touch, almost welcoming it. Suddenly aware of being watched, he turned round. As he did, Zhalmo moved forward and took hold of his arm. Beyond her, he could see M'kou regarding him thoughtfully.

"You knew the General's wife on the *Kz'adul*, didn't you?" she said, deftly turning him back toward the door and drawing him with her into the

lounge. "I heard about your dreadful experiences. Nothing like that could have happened on a military ship."

He made a polite sound, his attention divided between concern for Zayshul, and M'kou's continued interest in him.

"I hadn't realized how soft your body covering is," said Zhalmo, her hand stroking the exposed area of his wrist.

"Pelt," he said absently, looking around the knots of males for Zayshul as they came to a stop near the center of the room. Her scent was still strong in the air but he couldn't see her.

He was barely aware of Zhalmo removing her hand, but when he felt her touch his neck, she had his undivided attention. Grasping her wrist, he pulled her hand away.

"Never touch a Sholan there," he said, ears flattening in embarrassment. "It's taboo, forbidden— unless you're a family member or a lover."

"Or a doctor," said Zhalmo, looking past him as she freed her hand from his.

He froze, the sound of low male laughter making him turn round. In front of him, the young Primes had parted, leaving him facing Kezule, and Zayshul.

"It seems our females find you attractive, Kusac," said Kezule, mouth widening in a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Think yourself lucky. You'll not lack for company during your stay with us."

The General stood beside the sofa on which Zayshul, her face a pale green unmoving mask, was sitting. The patches of iridescent color round her eyes looked livid by comparison.

"For us, touching a female's lower back, not her neck, is an act of intimacy," Kezule continued, resting his hand on his wife's neck. "I find the differences between our people interesting. As I'm sure my wife does." The look on the General's face was Challenging in any species.

Kezule knew about him and Zayshul! He fought to keep his ears upright, thanking Vartra that at least the instinctive flicking of his tail was concealed within his robe. Between Zayshul and the cub, Kezule had him trapped like a jегget in a snare—and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

"Where's the cub?" he heard Dzaou demand in the silence that followed. "Our Captain said you'd get no cooperation from us until we saw him."

"Ah, the cub," said Kezule. "Thank you for reminding me. Dzaou, isn't it? M'kou, bring Shaidan in, if you please. He's waiting in the corridor. You'll be pleased to know, Kusac, that he's been quite an asset to my staff."

Heart racing, Kusac watched M'kou go to the doorway and gesture to someone outside. There was a faint scuffling sound, as of someone getting to their feet, then his son appeared.

Looking neither to left nor right, Shaidan walked across the room to the General. Dressed in a white tunic, amid the uniformed Primes, he appeared even younger and more vulnerable than before.

Aware of his crew gathering behind him, Kusac glanced at Zayshul. Ever since they'd touched, his need to know more about her relationship to his son had been growing. Flesh to flesh contact carried potent messages and he'd sensed her deep concern for him and the cub. But her face betrayed nothing, and she refused to meet his eyes. Was Shaidan her son too? How had the Directorate gotten hold of him? Despite the risk, while everyone was watching Shaidan, gently he reached for her mind. Instantly, his torc began to vibrate warningly before suddenly blocking all but his passive abilities.

Shaidan's reaction as he stopped beside Kezule was immediate—his head raised fractionally, ears widening and swiveling toward his father.

Kusac's heart missed a beat as he saw that the metal psychic damper collar round his son's neck was missing. If it hadn't been for the torc's intervention...



Kezule's hand went from Zayshul's neck to the cub's shoulder. "What is it?" the Valtegan demanded, bending down to the child's level. "Did you sense something?"

"No, General," Shaidan said quietly after a moment's hesitation. "It was a stray thought, nothing more."

Zayshul closed her eyes briefly, the knuckles on her hands whitening as she clenched them in her lap.

Vartra's bones! His son was a fully awakened telepath and Kezule was using him to read them! He tried to suppress his automatic snarl of rage but failed and it came out strangled.

Kezule glanced at him but appeared to be satisfied with Shaidan's answer. "Tell your people to sit down, Kusac," he said, straightening up. "I won't have the child intimidated by them. You may speak to him, but no one else."

"Do it," Kusac said, half turning to Banner.

"*You* won't have him intimidated?" echoed Dzaou, stepping impulsively forward. "Then why do you keep him...?"

Kusac immediately backhanded Dzaou, sending him reeling into the others. "Contain him, Banner," he ordered, not bothering to look round. There was a muffled curse from Dzaou, followed by the sound of his crew moving back.

In the ensuing silence, Kezule stepped away from the sofa, propelling the cub with him toward Kusac.

"You remember Captain Aldatan," Kezule said to Shaidan. "He'll be with us for the next few months."

All his passive senses working overtime, Kusac took a step forward, reaching out to touch his son, but M'kou stepped between them, barring his way.

"Sorry, Captain. He's a telepath. The touch of strangers distresses him."

His snarl of fury couldn't be contained this time. "I know more about Sholan telepaths than you," he said, unable to stop his hair from rising. "My touch won't disturb him!"

Kezule watched him, a faintly amused expression on his face.

Still snarling softly, he took a step backward. Too much was at stake for his anger to lose him the chance of speaking to his son. With an effort, he slowed his breathing and forced his hair to settle down around his shoulders.

"It's all right, M'kou," said Kezule, his voice relaxed, almost lazy. "Kusac needs to examine the child to be sure he's being well treated. Lift your head, Shaidan."

M'kou stood aside, letting him see his son again. Seemingly unconcerned by the drama being played out around him, Shaidan raised his head.

Kusac stared at him, taking in every detail of his son's appearance. It was like coming face-to-face with a younger version of himself, and he prayed none of his crew noticed the resemblance. Shaidan's ears were set low, just like his own, only they were a little wider. His face still had the roundness of childhood, but already the high cheekbones were beginning to show. Above them, the amber eyes looked disinterestedly through, not at him, as if he didn't exist.

He felt light-headed, heard the blood pounding in his ears. How could Shaidan not realize that his father stood before him? If he could feel the pull of blood calling to blood, surely his son could?

"Undress yourself," Kezule ordered, letting the child go.

Obediently Shaidan began to unfasten his wraparound tunic.

"No," Kusac said sharply. "There's no need to humiliate him like this."

"On the contrary, I want you and your crew to be sure he's not been mistreated. Turn round, Shaidan," Kezule said, taking the tunic. "Let the Captain see you have no injuries."

Beneath the robe, Shaidan's short pelt was smooth with a hint of dark brown under the dense black guard hairs. The long hair that reached well below the cub's shoulders was more blue than black, just as his own was.

He noticed details he'd been too shocked to take in at their first meeting, like the shorter and slightly thinner tail, and the shape of his son's legs—they were straighter, like his daughter's. He sucked in a breath—they were the telltale physical signs of a hybrid.

"No questions to ask him, Kusac?" said Kezule, his tone faintly mocking as Shaidan finished turning round, his head dropping once more to look at the floor.

He heard the Valtegan's words but paid them little attention. The other cubs had been hybrids. Was it possible that Shaidan wasn't half Valtegan? Was this some elaborate hoax of Kezule's? He remembered Kaid saying the Primes conditioned their half M'zullian warriors by using synthesized Sholan scents. Had Shaidan been given a false scent? There was only one way to be sure, by touching his son and taking in his scent properly—flesh to flesh messages couldn't lie.

Moving closer, he crouched down on his haunches so their heads were level.

"I heard you were hurt when you were taken from the medical facility," Kusac said quietly. "What happened, Shaidan?"

When Shaidan remained silent, Kezule put his hand back on the cub's shoulder and shook him gently. "Answer the Captain."

"A guard was shot. He shot me then fell on me," Shaidan said in halting Sholan, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor at his feet. "I am healed now."

Heart beating, Kusac reached out and took hold of him by the arm, his other hand gently feeling over his son's ribs. Fear rushed through him as Shaidan's scent suddenly filled his nostrils, banishing any illusions he'd

had about him being half Human. Underlying his son's Sholan scent was Zayshul's.

Hard on its heels came the pull of their shared blood. Shaidan started and raised his head, their eyes meeting briefly before the cub hurriedly looked back down at the ground. Elation filled him, bringing back the light-headedness: Shaidan had recognized the connection between them.

The desire to sweep his son into his arms and hold him close filled him, but he knew he had to content himself with examining Shaidan's side. His sensitive fingertips hesitated on a small hairless patch and a tiny scar over his ribs on the right side.

"His lung was punctured," said Kezule. "My wife had to insert a drain there. Likely his ribs are still a little tender."

Kusac nodded and reluctantly let Shaidan go. "Thank you for saving him," he said, though the words stuck in his throat. "Are they treating you well?" he asked Shaidan, not knowing what else to say, just needing to hear his son's voice again.

"I have value to the General," Shaidan said in flawless Valtegan. "He treats me well. I am a vassal of the Prime Empire and my duty is to serve it by serving him."

"Who told you that?" Kusac glared up at Kezule, his vision narrowing sharply into huntersight as the blood once more pounded in his ears. His lips pulled back from his teeth in a silent snarl of rage as he instinctively tensed, ready to leap to his feet.

"What have you done to him, Kezule?" From behind, he was barely aware of the echoing rumbles of anger from his crew.

Before he could move, clawed hands closed firmly on his shoulders, forcing him down onto his knees and holding him there. Pain flared briefly from the torc, shocking him back to normality, making him aware of the sounds of angry voices and scuffling from behind.

"Hold fast!" he called out to his crew, submitting with an effort to the pressure on his shoulders and remaining still, knowing that the situation had suddenly become explosive. Everything depended on him keeping his head.

He waited patiently until all was silent again, his eyes never leaving General Kezule.

"I've done nothing to him," said the General with a slight smile. "Blame the Directorate, Kusac. Why would I give you back five children and harm only this one?"

Zayshul stood up abruptly, pulling Shaidan toward her and snatching the cub's robe from Kezule's hand. "Enough!" she hissed angrily. "Have done with this, Kezule! You've made your point! The Directorate programmed them to think they were slaves, Kusac. Kezule hasn't harmed any of them, I give you my word." With that, she pushed her way past Kusac and her husband, hustling Shaidan from the room.

Kezule said nothing, merely turned to watch her as she left. "You'll have to excuse my wife," he said, looking back at Kusac. "She recently gave birth and I'm sure you know how very emotional that makes females."

Another wave of light-headedness passed through him and the room began to darken and sway. He had his answer, and the truth was inescapable this time. Zayshul *was* the mother of his son.

"You can let the Captain and his crew go now, M'kou," Kezule added as an afterthought.

Without M'kou's steadying hand, Kusac wouldn't have made it to his feet. As soon as he was upright, he pulled himself free.

"I suggest we discuss the details of your training program now," said Kezule. "Take the Captain to the briefing room, M'kou, I'll be along shortly. I have something to attend to first. Your crew are welcome to stay here with mine or return to their quarters, Captain Aldatan."

"We'll go back," said Banner, his voice strained. "I think we've all had enough for the first day."

"As you wish," said Kezule, turning to leave. "You're free to change your minds, of course. You're not prisoners here."

\* \* \*

Still shaking, Zayshul stopped between the two air locks that led to their quarters and helped Shaidan into his robe. She knew now why the Sholan Captain thought she'd been the one who'd gone to his bed that night on the *Kz'adul*. Her scent mark, bound to Kusac's own, was there for everyone to smell! Chy'qui must have ordered N'koshoh to do it, and somehow provided the damned female with a sample of *her* scent, time-locked so it couldn't be sensed until Kusac was back on his own world. N'koshoh hadn't just been killed to keep her silent, she'd been killed so that Kusac would do exactly what he had done— blame her, Zayshul, for raping him! It had been Chy'qui's revenge against her for foiling his plans to keep Kusac.

Suddenly remembering that Shaidan wasn't wearing his telepathic damper collar, she pushed thoughts of Chy'qui and Kusac aside and took hold of his hand. Punching the access code into the security lock, she waited impatiently for it to begin to open. When the iris had expanded enough to let her step through, she did.

The suite had originally been the Outpost Commander's, but in Kezule's time, females were feral and kept under heavy security in breeding chambers. A great many modifications had been made to make the rooms suitable for them. The small open dining area, immediately inside the entrance, had been sectioned off to form a bedroom for Shaidan. The central recreation area had become her bedroom and the nursery, with Kezule's own bedroom and office beyond them.

The guard outside the suite, one of Kezule's own sons, nodded to her as she opened the door and ushered the cub inside. Automatically she went to the nursery bedroom where her egg lay in its incubator. After the intensity of the last few hours, she needed to reassure herself all was well with it at least.

Only another week now, she thought, checking the egg for any signs of cracks. A presence intruded on her thoughts and startled, she turned round to see Shaidan had followed her.

"Why didn't you go into the lounge?" she asked, looking down at him, wishing he could show some independent will of his own.

"You didn't tell me to, Seniormost," he said quietly, blinking up at her.

She sighed. "We're alone here, Shaidan. You know I prefer you to call me Aunt."

"Yes, Aunt," he said dutifully.

Taking him by the shoulder, she shoed him from the bedroom, closing the door behind them.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, heading through the main formal dining room to what was now a small family kitchen with a table for four. "A snack before bed would be good." She pressed the touch pads on the food dispenser for a plate of egg-flavored protein followed by a drink of kheffa. "Go and sit at the table. I'll bring it over to you."

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"Do you know who our visitors are?" she asked him as he shoveled the food hungrily into his mouth.

"Yes, Aunt," he mumbled round it.

"Shaidan, I've told you before, I want you to speak freely with me. Tell me more than just what I ask you. Make some conversation with me."

He looked up, amber eyes narrowing slightly. Once more she felt the gentle touch of his mind, felt his need to be reassured that she meant what she'd said. "They're Sholans, Aunt."

"They're your people. Did my husband tell you who Kusac is?"

Confused, he stopped eating to look at her.

"Captain Aldatan," she prompted.

"The General said he's my father." His attention shifted to his cup as he picked it up in both hands and took a large drink.

"Aren't you pleased to meet him?"

"I don't know him, Aunt," he said, putting the cup back down to grab his fork again.

"Do you understand what a father is?"

"No."

"He sired you, was one of two people who gave you life. They're called parents."

"I was given life by the Prime Empire. I was bred to serve it," he said automatically, his attention still on his food.

"There's a connection between you and him, Shaidan. One of blood. He cares for you, that's why he's here. If it hadn't been for the Directorate, you would live with him and his wife, be brought up in their home, not with us," she persevered. How could he have any concept of what a father was when he'd never known either his parents or a family? "When my child hatches, it will live with us, grow up in our home."

"She'll be your vassal?" He put his fork down on the empty plate and looked up at her again. "Your egg is too small to hold a vassal like me. I'm of more value to the General."

By the God-Kings! He thought their child would be a vassal! She opened her mouth to explain, then remembered she couldn't because she'd given her word to Kezule. Then she realized what else he'd said. "She?"

"It's a female," he said. "Like Gaylla."



"You can tell?" she asked, surprised at his sensitivity.

He nodded. "You know she is too. I can feel her if I'm in the nursery."

With difficulty, she pulled her thoughts back to what they'd been talking about before. "You have value because you are Shaidan, not because you're a vassal. No one person can replace another, child. The person you have most value to is Captain Aldatan, because he's your father."

He nodded, smothering a yawn. "May I sleep now, Aunt?"

"Yes," she sighed, abandoning the conversation, aware that his lack of knowledge meant she'd get no further tonight. "When you're with the Captain, speak your own language, Shaidan. I know you've been taught it, I loaded the sleep tape myself," she said, getting to her feet.

She followed him through the dining room to his bedroom door, picking his collar up from the long dining table as they went. The child was obviously tired, he could shower in the morning.

His room was small, containing only a bed, a chest of drawers, and a chair. She'd tried to make it more like a child's room by adding a few toys, despite Kezule's disapproval, but they lay in the chair untouched. The Directorate's programming had gone too deep for her to be able to touch any normal childlike qualities in him.

Taking off his tunic and handing it to her, Shaidan waited for her to fasten the collar round his neck before clambering into his bed.

Leaning forward she gave him a gentle hug. "Good night, Shaidan."

"Good night, Aunt," he yawned, sliding down under the covers and closing his eyes.

As she put out the light and closed his door, she made up her mind to have words with Kezule about using the tape on Prime social customs on Shaidan. They might know very little about Sholan families, but Shaidan could learn about theirs. If he agreed, she could load it tonight.

Heading for their bedroom, she began rehearsing the arguments in her mind. It kept her from thinking about Kusac and how the scent marker—her scent marker!—had changed his own scent. She'd suspected it when he'd come for the cubs, but sitting next to him at dinner, she'd known it for sure. Even Kezule's daughter had noticed and been affected by it. It marked him apart as a good lover, a potential mate, and was a signal no female could ignore, herself especially.

Resolutely, as she began to undress, she pulled her thoughts back to Shaidan and the sleep tape she wanted to use on him. Would it do more harm than good if he learned what he was missing by not being part of his own family? Maybe, but anything that got him closer to being normalized had to be better than leaving him as Kezule wanted.

She hadn't realized how like his father Shaidan was until she'd seen them standing together. Thoughtfully, she went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Kusac looked so different now that he was recovered. It was hard to see the gentle, drugged patient she'd treated on the *Kz'adul* in the angry Warrior leader of tonight.

Chy'qui's secondary plot against her and the treaty would have worked if Kusac had told his people what he believed had happened to him on the *Kz'adul*. Why hadn't he? Idly she wondered if he'd found the experience pleasant. It certainly couldn't have been wholly unpleasant from the way he'd spoken to her at Haven. Or had he kept silent because she'd tried to warn him that he'd been drugged and those who'd held him captive wanted to destroy the treaty?

Whatever the reason, the marker had to be turned off now, Kezule must see this. It was one thing allowing Kusac to think she'd visited his bed, another for the whole ship to assume she'd mated with the Sholan Captain and scent-marked him. Especially when Kezule's own daughter was playing up to him the way she had after dinner!

As she stepped into the shower and turned the water on, she remembered something else from their last meeting. Kusac had asked her if she was Shaidan's mother. Kezule's plan to blackmail Kusac into returning by using Shaidan had distressed her so much that she'd forgotten that until

now. Kusac knew that the other cubs were hybrids, so what could have made him think Shaidan was any different? It was something she needed to look into tomorrow.

\* \* \*

The briefing room was more austere than he expected. To the left of the door was a darkened screen with a desk in front of it, and to his right, a long oval conference table with seating for sixteen. It was to the table M'kou directed him.

"May I get you a drink, Captain Aldatan? We have alcohol but I noticed you avoided it at dinner. Perhaps you'd prefer one of our hot herbal drinks."

Shaking his head, Kusac pulled one of the dining armchairs out and sat down. The seat was hard, despite the padding, not at all suitable for a species with a tail. He stood up, unbelting his robe before resuming his seat and curling his tail up beside him. The simple task of avoiding discomfort gave him something to do, stopped him from thinking. He was still trying to come to terms with the shock of having a half-Valtegan son.

Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on the table. A tight band of pain was beginning to form round his forehead. Cradling his chin on one hand, he closed his eyes.

"Try this, Captain," said M'kou quietly. A warm, slightly spicy smell drifted up to his nostrils. "It's louz. It'll help the headache."

Opening his eyes, he looked up at the Lieutenant's bent head, noticing now what had been nagging him from the first. "You've got a crest," he said. "Like Kezule, not a ridge like the Primes. You're half Prime, half..." He stopped, headache forgotten. "You're mature at ten. That's the same age as Shaidan and the other cubs."

"Very astute, Captain," said Kezule as the door closed behind him. "M'kou is indeed one of my sons. I have another thirteen with me, and two daughters. However, they're older than your son by two years. And your

next question is— how, isn't it?" He crossed the room and took the seat opposite Kusac. "A cup of kheffa please, M'kou. I would take your louz, Kusac. It's good for shock and you still look pale around the nose and eyes. Finding out you have a son you knew nothing about isn't easy."

Was there a trace of sympathy in the General's tone? Mechanically, Kusac reached for the cup M'kou held out and took a sip. It was pleasant, and its warmth as it hit his stomach did make him feel better, helped to clear his head of the pain and clarify his thoughts.

"How?" he asked as M'kou brought the General his drink. "The cubs are hybrids, half Human, half Sholan. How were they conceived?" He was surprised at how calm his voice sounded. "It's only been five months. How can they be ten years old?"

"You can stay, M'kou," said Kezule, aware his son was about to leave. "Growth tanks, Kusac. Since the Fall of our Empire, the Primes have been unable to carry their young full term. I'm not a doctor, but as I understand it, they're removed before the shell develops and put in one of the tanks. Growth can be accelerated, and it was with my offspring. On the *Kz'adul*, the telepaths in your crew were harvested by Chy'qui for the Directorate because they wanted Sholan hybrid telepaths. I was also harvested, but by Prime Medical Research, to provide sons and daughters for their new Warrior caste. M'kou is one of those children."

He tried to distance himself emotionally from what he was hearing. "They wanted to use the cubs in the coup against your Emperor."

"They were fairly central," Kezule agreed.

"Why did you rescue them? You've no liking for our people," he asked, even though he was sure of the answer.

"I wanted one of the cubs," said Kezule, raising his cup and taking another mouthful. "Your son."

"Why's Shaidan different from the others?" he blurted out unthinkingly.

Kezule put the cup down carefully in its saucer, then smiled, showing dozens of small, pointed teeth. "You tell me, Kusac."

He had to fight to suppress his instinctive shudder. "You know what I mean," he said, shying away from the obvious answer. He'd no wish to discuss Zayshul's part in this with her husband, even though he was blameless. "He behaves like a slave and barely speaks our language."

"My wife told you. The Directorate programmed them with sleep tapes. Zayshul was able to undo it for the others."

"I want my son deprogrammed too."

"No. He'll remain as he is until your work here is finished. He's my guarantee that you'll cooperate with me."

"Dammit, Kezule, you've no right to make my son suffer for..."

"Shaidan isn't suffering," Kezule interrupted. "I don't take revenge on children."

"Haven't you caused my family enough pain?" said Kusac, staring at him. "You held my daughter and sister captive, you tortured my bond-brother..."

"I did what I had to," Kezule interrupted again, this time more sharply. "I wanted to return to my own time. You had no right to drag me to the future! Your people nearly killed me with their beatings—they humiliated me, forced responsibility for a worthless Sholan female onto me, made me do things I'd never even have considered in my own time!"

Kusac gave a derisive snort. "You were never in any danger. You were worth far more to them alive than dead and you knew that!"

Kezule's hand crashed down on the table, making the cups jump in their saucers and spill their sweetened contents over the polished surface.

"Enough!" he roared. "I don't need to justify my actions to you!"

Kusac didn't flinch. He knew Kezule had no intention of harming him.

"You start training my people tomorrow," the General said in a milder tone. "As I said, I have fourteen sons and two daughters. You met one of them earlier." He grinned again, and this time, his eyes echoed his amusement. "I noticed she found you attractive. I also have fourteen M'zullian warriors and forty-four civilians, many of them females. Most of them have had some basic training. Take care with the M'zullians, Kusac, they're more aggressive than the ones you've been working with on Shola. Keep them occupied during training, but see their skill level falls well beneath that of the rest. We'll have trouble otherwise, as they seek to improve their status by killing anyone whose level of competence they consider they've surpassed."

"That's all you want?" He couldn't believe it was that simple.

"Not all," said Kezule, picking up his cup and drinking the remainder. "Your ship has data banks. I want information about your people and your culture. Trying to breed a Warrior caste and graft it into the Prime culture won't work. They're dying out as a species. The M'zullians and J'kirtikkians are no better. You have effective warriors yet you're all one caste. If my species is to survive, the castes need to return to what they used to be, they need to be reintegrated into one again and for that, I need your expertise."

Kusac had listened to him in mounting anger. "You're mad. Do you really think I'm going to help you save your species after what you've done to my family, and when you're keeping my son away from me?"

"Am I mad?" Kezule replaced his cup and lounged back in his seat. "Perhaps. When you're not working, Shaidan will be brought to you for at least two hours each day. You'll be left alone, undisturbed by me and my soldiers, apart from one guard outside your room. I'm not asking you to betray your species, Kusac, merely to help mine. The information I want is freely available to our people on Shola. As you once said to me, I can take the information I want. For now, I'm asking you for it— and your help."

The news that Kezule was allowing him access to his son took his breath away, until he thought it through. It made sense. Why anger him any more

than was necessary? Was Kezule actually genuine in what he said he wanted to do?

"Deprogram Shaidan and give him to me and you have my word you'll get my full cooperation," he said quietly. He couldn't afford to let his crew know Shaidan was his son, not least because of Banner's position as a Special Operative for Lijou.

"No," said Kezule with finality. "He's your incentive, and my insurance. If you don't like what I'm offering, you're free to leave at any time, but Shaidan remains here."

A coldness crept through him then. He'd tried, offered Kezule one last chance to play this straight and he'd been turned down— as he'd expected. This was the second time the General had held a cub of his hostage. He intended to see it would never happen again. Whatever it took, he'd do it to save Shaidan from Kezule, even if it involved sabotage and murder.

"The *Venture's* only a scout ship, not a First Contact vessel. She doesn't carry that level of information," he said quietly, taking another sip of his drink.

"Then give me what you have and let me judge its usefulness for myself. As for the rest, you have the knowledge of your own society, and as a member of your Alien Relations, you understand other species and their cultures. You will help me by observing my people and telling me what needs changing."

Kusac looked away. He didn't like telling Kezule anything about the Sholans but unless he played along, he'd get nowhere. "Our culture grew out of the ruins of our Cataclysm, after we overthrew your people, Kezule. Just as you discovered you can't graft on a Warrior culture, neither can you graft on a Sholan one. Your new society needs to evolve to fit the nature and needs of your own kind. We had two years of darkness and rain when the sun was obscured by the debris caused by the asteroid from our moon hitting our planet. When it was over, those who survived formed Guilds to ensure no skills were lost. Our Warriors evolved to protect the weakest in our society, the telepaths. You want your Warriors as soldiers, to fight wars."

"What about your organization?" asked Kezule, pointing at his robes. "Zayshul told me you belong to a religious order. Where do you fit into these Guilds?"

"We're Warrior priests. We were among the first to come down from the mountains after the Cataclysm," he admitted reluctantly.

"Priests who fight. An interesting concept. More wholesome than the Enforcers."

Kusac looked up sharply, eye ridges meeting in a frown, ears tilting back. "You still have Enforcers? I was told the Primes had none."

Kezule eyed him thoughtfully. "Of course, you met one on the *Kz'adul*, didn't you? J'koshuk, your jailer, was an Enforcer. They're still agents of the Emperor, but their red robes are rarely seen outside his council chamber. Likely the Primes said there were none to put your people's fears to rest. They still track down heretics, look for sedition, but mainly among the Courtiers. A secret police force, if you will. There are no Enforcers among the people here, Kusac. I have as little love for them as you. It seems I chose better than I knew when I chose you to help me. Your Order rebuilt Shola, now you can help me rebuild my people. I want to know how your society works, what place Warriors have in it— how they're chosen and trained. I want that training for my people."

"It's not that easy, Kezule," said Kusac, unable to shake off the chill that went down his spine. "As I said, what worked for us may not suit your people."

"You'll find a way, Kusac. Play it straight with me and you'll continue to see your son every day. If not..." He left the rest unsaid as he got to his feet. "You can take me to your ship now for the data."

He remained seated; there was no easy way for him to say this to the male he considered his greatest enemy. "Kezule, my crew are unaware that Shaidan's my son, or that the other cubs were hybrids," he said stiffly.

"Oh?"



The politely curious look on the General's face made him furious. Against his neck, his torc began to vibrate gently again, warning him that his anger was making him lose control of his Talent. He resented having to admit this vulnerability to Kezule. "It would... complicate matters if they know I'm spending time with him each day. They'll want to know why."

"In that case, I'll send someone to bring you to Shaidan each day. Your secret's safe with me, Kusac," Kezule said with a slight smile.

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Banner was waiting for him in his quarters when he returned.

"I don't want to talk right now, Banner," he said, heading past his Second for the bedroom. "We've an early start tomorrow morning. I want everyone in here for a briefing at third hour."

"We need to talk now, Kusac," said Banner, getting to his feet. "What happened to you back there? You nearly lost it. I appreciate Kezule's taunting you, but the whole situation almost blew up in our faces."

"Blame Dzaou," he said, stopping at the door. "His outburst started to escalate the situation. You said you'd spoken to him. Did you?"

"Of course I did, but Dzaou's outburst doesn't explain your reaction. You've got to distance yourself from the situation, Kusac. You're taking it too personally. Dzaou's saying Shaidan's your cub. Of course, none of us believes him, but your reaction didn't help." He stopped briefly. "Is this because of Kashini?" he asked carefully.

The torc's block on his mental abilities had gone now and Kusac could sense Banner weighing him. Since they'd left Haven, the relationship between them had changed. As the only Special Operative left, his Second had assumed Chima's job even though the original mission was over. Banner was watching him for any signs of instability, or collusion with Kezule, and had orders to stop that happening at any cost, including his life if necessary. It was a very thin tightrope he was walking, and it wasn't going to get any easier.

His headache had returned and suddenly he felt utterly exhausted. Briefly he wished that Kaid and Carrie were there, but they belonged to the past and a life that no longer existed for him.

"J'koshuk had me behaving like Shaidan— never looking him in the face unless he ordered me to, telling him how grateful I was to him and the Primes for letting me live..." He stopped abruptly, hoping Banner would think he was being overwhelmed by memories. "It goes against the grain to see a cub conditioned like that."

"None of us can afford to let it get personal, Kusac," Banner said quietly, putting a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "Remember, Kezule didn't condition Shaidan. He didn't harm any of the cubs. In fact he made a point of taking in Gaylla to save her life. Nor did he harm your daughter when he had her. I'd bet my life that Shaidan isn't in any danger from him. Forget you're a father. If you don't, then Kezule will have a hold over you."

Kusac nodded, forcing himself not to flinch away from his Second. Thank Vartra that Banner didn't know how close to the truth he was.

"Is it just training that Kezule wants from us?"

"I'll brief you and everyone in here tomorrow at third hour, Banner," he said, putting his hand up to rub his aching head as he turned to go into his room. "I really must get some sleep."

"The others are waiting for me. I need to tell them something," his Second insisted. "Especially after you hit Dzaou. That didn't go down too well."

"Tell them what you want, I'm going to bed," he growled, stepping into his bedroom and closing the door, angry that Banner expected him to justify his actions.

## **Zhal-Rojae 7th day (November)**

Giyarishis the TeLaxaudin had made his quarters in the science area of the fourth level. Here, on the topmost floor of the asteroid, under the

reinforced arched roof, were the enclosed work areas for hydroponics, the protein vats, the labs that served them, and the empty barns and "field" where herd beasts had been housed then released for Valtegan officers to hunt. Kezule found him overseeing the six civilians who had been designated to help him tend the rapidly growing crops— crops which Giyarishis had already established before they'd reached Kij'ik, just as he'd reestablished the field area and the pool.

"They do well," said Giyarishis' translator as he gestured delicately toward the trays of foot high vegetation. "Soon ready for all to be eating."

Kezule eyed the exotic grasses and vegetables dubiously. They ranged from broad-leafed plantains to fleshy water-retaining succulents, and all were unknown to him. Once more he wondered whether the TeLaxaudin had a ship hidden somewhere in the asteroid belt or if he'd been dropped off with his cargo of plants to restock this area. Scans had found no signs of any other craft, and when asked, Giyarishis' translator conveniently spat untranslatable static at them.

Despite Giyarishis' assurance that the plants were not only edible by his species, but also tasted reasonably pleasant, he'd had Zayshul test them in the labs on the Command level. Not only had they proved to be safe, but they held most of the vitamins and minerals their species needed, and could be tolerated equally well by the Sholans.

"Enough feeding," Giyarishis said to his helpers. "Stasis on again. Not growing while off." Dark eyes swirling as his secondary lenses adjusted to near sight, he turned to Kezule. "We go talk," he said before stalking jerkily toward the exit air lock and the control room beyond.

\* \* \*

"You wanting what?" the TeLaxaudin asked as he folded up his thin frame on the soft floor cushions in his office. "Male has seen offspring?"

"He did. The scent you put on the Sholan child worked well," Kezule said, lowering himself onto the sofa opposite him. "Kusac thinks my wife is Shaidan's mother. I came to congratulate you."

"Not do. There already."

Startled, Kezule leaned toward him. "What? But you told me you'd done it!"

"Said only done." Giyarishis made a negative gesture with his hand.

"How?" He was confused. If not because of Giyarishis, then why was Shaidan carrying a variant of Zayshul's scent?

"Scent mark contaminate male's breeding sample. Both should not do same time. No matter. You want, you have. What now?"

He frowned. Was it his imagination or were too many people around him capable of knowing what was in his mind? What Giyarishis said was true. The means didn't really concern him. Only the fact that the scent had brought Kusac to him, and had made the Sholan believe that Zayshul was Shaidan's mother was important. He dismissed the matter from his mind for now.

"I came to ask you if you could alter the adult Sholan's scent mark. Not now, but when I'm finished with him."

"Bound to him it is. Only female can change. Wife must do."

"No," he said unequivocally. "The scent was artificial, put there by another female, not her. You communicate with scents far more than we do. Surely it can be undone the same way."

"Too difficult. Easy do natural way."

"I said no. It's likely the scent was created by the TeLaxaudin on the *Kz'adul* anyway. If he could do it, you can undo it. You find a way. There's no rush," he added, getting to his feet hurriedly as he began to smell the harsh scent he knew denoted TeLaxaudin anger.

The TeLaxaudin was beginning to hum. "Why undo?" the translator demanded.

"I don't want him permanently fixated on my wife," he said, backing toward the door. He had no desire to find out what the TeLaxaudin could do if really angry. "It's used by the females to identify desirable partners. It attracts them."

"She do. Either way, same method deliver. Hunter-male coupled once with your species, will do it again. Unlikely want clinical interference."

"What he wants doesn't matter! I don't want his obsession reinforced or her taking that risk," he said hurriedly as the door slid open behind him. "I have to go now. I'll see you in the Command level labs later."

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Giyarishis sat looking at the closed door thoughtfully for a few minutes then got to his feet and headed for his desk. Leaping up onto the pile of slightly firmer cushions, he took a small device from the belt he wore round his waist. Clipping it onto the side of the communications unit, he switched it on. Moments later, using his secret system, he was through to his contact in the Camarilla.

"Phratry Leader Kuvaa," he said, dipping his head slightly and making a gesture of greeting to his Cabbaran colleague.

"Giyarishis," said Kuvaa, her long nose wrinkling in concern. "All is well? No signs of our Children's presence preparing the Outpost for the sand-dwellers has been discovered, has it?"

"None, Phratry Leader. The sand-dweller's curiosity about us is contained as the Camarilla planned. It is about another matter I contact you."

"Proceed, then."

"The Hunter has arrived and believes his son is shared with the sand-dweller female."

"As was predicted," said Kuvaa.

"The cub's ability is as powerful as we anticipated. I am watching his development but seldom he is allowed to use it. Sand-dweller gene traits not yet noticeable."

"Watch the sire more," said Kuvaa sharply. "He is the weapon. No time has there been for him to train properly. You must find the opportunity to take him aside, assess him, if necessary guide him. You altered DNA test results of cub so sand-dwellers know nothing of his true heritage?"

"Was done," he confirmed. "All believe hunter-cub is only Human/Hunter hybrid. Genetic material of Doctor mixed for now dead Prime female scent marker. Was bound into Hunter sire's sample when she mated with him on *Kz'adul*. When his mate's egg fertilized, sand-dweller genes present too. Cub is product of all three species. Regrettably he also carries la'quo defect. Two instabilities. That is why I also watch him."

"Conceded, but focus on his sire for now. Cub is merely the bridge, sire is the weapon."

He dipped his head in affirmation, keeping to himself his thoughts that the cub was equally important. "The sand-dweller just requested me to prepare means to remove scent mark from Hunter when he is done with him so mating imperative removed."

"Is progress," said Kuvaa, obviously impressed. "He becomes aware of needs of those once he considered his enemy."

"Wishes removal to be done medically. Not willing to have his mate do it. I have said not possible."

"Tell sand-dweller only way is with female of his species naturally carrying chemical marker," Kuvaa said. "The Doctor, his mate."

"When you wish me to give sand-dweller last of his ancient racial memories?"

"Soon. When it does most good, diverts him from other courses back onto ours. You will know when. Is there anything you need?"

"Yes, Phratry Leader. Need birth tanks for sand-dwellers. Soon will want to breed."

"Sand-dweller has the means to alter the females of his kind to birth own eggs now. Kouansishus gave it to him."

"Will want tanks," insisted Giyarishis. "And wants female Sholans."

"No more Sholans," said Kuvaa unequivocally. "Will give hunters more reasons to be defensive. They and the sand-dwellers must learn to need each other, learn trust, make alliance, or we are all lost."

Giyarishis made a skeptical noise. "How, when such enmity exists and is fostered by presence and heritage of cub?"

"We have seen the potentialities, what can be. All is part of the wyrd. With your help, we will guide it to what must be. Tanks we will deliver in two days. Look for them in usual place, Giyarishis." With that, the Camarilla Phratry Leader cut the connection and left Giyarishis no more reassured than he had been before.

## **Zhal-Rojae 7th day (November)**

Unable to sleep, Kusac had risen early and after mapping out a training program for Kezule's people, he made his way along the main corridor to the exercise hall. Though cooler than the rest of the Outpost, it was still warmer than the average Sholan home in winter. It was a large room, with a square, roped area for a fighting ring on one side and piles of mats on the other. The floor was covered with some absorbent material that cushioned his bare feet as he walked past the office and across to the benches on the far side. Primes, like the Humans, protected their feet from the ground. Coming to a stop by the benches, he bounced experimentally on the spot, finding the surface gave slightly like the sprung wooden floors in the gymnasiums back home. On a surface like this, even the Primes could work barefoot.

Throwing down the towel he carried and unfastening his belt, he began to slow his mind as he undressed. The night had brought him little rest. He

hoped the exercises would bring him some calm before the day really began.

Absorbed in the intricate patterns of kicks and punches, the first he was aware of her presence was when the torc gave him a sharp jolt, almost like an electric shock. He was beginning to resent the torc; at times it was almost as if it had an intelligence of its own. Spinning round, he crouched down, ready to defend himself if need be. At the entrance stood the female Lieutenant who'd sat beside him the night before.

"Very impressive, Captain," Zhalmo said. "Almost like a dance. I hadn't realized combat training could be so graceful. Will you be teaching it to us?"

He relaxed, straightening up until he was standing again, watching her as she walked across the hall toward him. She was dressed for exercise in a skintight blue body covering similar to those he'd seen the Human females on his estate wearing to the gym. It went well with her green skin tones.

"Perhaps," he said, reaching for the towel to rub his sweat-dampened pelt. "I thought your General said we were free to come and go as we wanted in the public areas on this level."

"You are," she said, stopping opposite him. "I've not been sent to keep an eye on you. I always exercise first thing in the morning. I have to if I want to keep pace with my brothers. They've got so many advantages over us females," she said with a wry twist to her wide mouth. Her vertical nostrils flared slightly as she took in his scent. "There's no need to leave because of me. I won't disturb you. I didn't know furred mammals sweated."

"Some do," he said, stepping back to pick up his tunic. "I was nearly finished anyway."

"Probably an evolutionary change as you move farther away from your four-legged, plains hunter ancestry. I hope you don't eventually lose the fur like the Humans did."

He glanced up at her as he gathered his belongings. "You're remarkably well informed," he said drily.



"Basic cultural exchange information between the Alliance and us," she said, stepping closer to him to place her small carry bag and towel on the bench. "I'd like to learn more." Her voice was low and suggestive, her scent growing stronger.

Kusac neatly sidestepped her, looking up at the timepiece on the wall above the door. "That's why we're here, Zhalmo," he said. "To teach you. I have to go now. I want to eat before I brief my crew in just under an hour."

"Another day," she shrugged, her large eyes blinking slowly. "There's plenty of time. You'll find a liaison with me will keep the civilian females from bothering you— and be more satisfying."

His jaw dropped open in shock and he began to back away from her toward the showers. "The General," he began.

"Won't mind," she interrupted. "In our first weeks here, because there are so many more of us females, there was no end of bickering until the unattached popular males— like yourself— had been chosen by a partner— or two."

Vartra help him, but he was actually finding himself considering her suggestion! "I think you overrate me," he said firmly.

She laughed, a sound of genuine amusement. "I think not, but you'll find out for yourself. Enjoy your shower."

## Chapter 3

THE mess was a large hall capable of seating at least a hundred people, but apart from a few Primes clustered round two tables near the serving counter, it was deserted. As it was his first public appearance, he'd anticipated some curiosity. All heads lifted to look at him as, with a confidence that was feigned, he strode between the empty tables toward the counter.

Food was plentiful, but fairly bland. His enhanced sense of smell identified it as either textured generic vegetable or synthetic meat protein enhanced with artificial flavors. To drink he was offered water or kheffa, the mildly stimulating herbal beverage Kezule had drunk the night before. He chose the latter.

His composure still a little shaken by his conversation with Zhalmo, he took his tray and headed for an empty table some distance from the group of fifteen Primes. Their scents, both male and female, were making him twitchy, even more so when he realized the females were continuing to watch him. He could feel their curiosity lapping at the edges of his mind. For most of them, he was the first adult Sholan they'd ever seen.

Angrily, he stared them down, aware of a brief gentle vibration from his torc as he watched them look away. His awareness of them faded and once again he realized the torc was warning him he needed to be more vigilant about his mental shielding.

While he ate, he thought over the times his torc had acted independently, warning him of danger and providing the necessary mental protection. What had the TeLaxaudin and Annuur done to it? How could a piece of metal be so responsive to his mental state? When Toueesut, Speaker of the Touiban swarm on his estate, had inserted a device into it that picked up and transmitted high level harmonics, he'd understood the technology behind it, in the broad sense at least, but this had him baffled. He was positive he hadn't become slack despite the months he'd been without his Talent. Was he more sensitive than he'd been? Was that why the torc was expecting him to react sooner than he would have normally?

He almost took it off to inspect the inner surface but he resisted the temptation, knowing he'd find nothing. If there had been a difference, he'd have noticed it long before now when he removed it to shower. Whatever had been done to it was subtle, if it was the torc and not a response conditioned into him by someone on board the Cabbaran's shuttle after they'd operated on him to restore his Talent.

Suddenly aware of Banner and the others' presence, he realized the torc had relaxed its control again. He looked up at the entrance moments before they entered. While Jayza, Khadui, and Dzaou headed for the food, Banner came directly to him.

"Figured you'd be in here when you weren't in your room," his Second said, sitting down opposite him. "You aren't trying to avoid me, are you, Kusac?" he demanded outright.

"Of course not," he said, surprised that the other would think that. "I slept badly and went for a workout in the gym before coming here."

"I was concerned after our conversation last night. Is there anything I should know before you brief us? You aren't making it easy for me to keep the others in line if I obviously don't know what's going on."

"There's nothing I need to keep from any of you. I'll brief you all in my quarters when we've eaten," he said reassuringly, though fully intending to keep some facts to himself. "What about your meal? Aren't you eating?"

"Khadui is getting it," Banner said, eyeing his plate. "Is it as bad as it looks?"

"Just about," Kusac confirmed, a brief smile flicking across his face as he pushed his empty plate aside. "We'll definitely have to show them how to synthesize coffee."

\* \* \*

His briefing focused on the training Kezule wanted for his people, separating them into three units of civilians, one of his sons and daughters, and one of the fourteen Warriors.

"I hate to seem unsympathetic," said Dzaou, "but with the M'zullians on the move and war possibly in the offing, our job is to get the cub and get home, not spend months here helping save their green asses by teaching them to protect themselves."

"You were told from the start that this wasn't a quick rescue and get out mission," said Kusac, staring unblinkingly at the older male. "I gave my word to help Kezule in return for the cub. We'll not be the ones to break the bargain. You've Challenged me once already, Dzaou. Any time you want to do it again, let me know, but I'll tolerate no more outbursts like the one last night. I don't care how badly you suffered at the hands of the Chemerians, it's time you got over it."

Dzaou half rose from his seat, rumbling his anger.

"Sit down!" said Kusac, pitching his voice in the command mode he'd been taught in AlRel. "For the benefit of the rest of you, Dzaou is from the past. He's with us today thanks to early cryo technology. He was held in an internment camp by the Chemerians during the Chemerian wars two hundred and fifty years ago. No guesses as to why they left him in cryo that long," he added sarcastically, staring at Khadui, Challenging the other Sleeper to call him a liar.

"Now you're really flipped, Kusac," began Dzaou.

"Be silent!" Though his voice was still quiet, his tone of command once more reduced Dzaou to silence. "You're endangering us all by your refusal to take orders from me, and by your xenophobic attitude. The others deserve to know about your past. There's more than one way to fight captivity. You at least were one of many, I wasn't. If you carry on as you are, you can count yourself lucky if Kezule gets to you before I do!"

"The Captain's right, Dzaou," said Khadui unexpectedly. "Kezule runs this place on Valtegan military rules— they're pasted on the back of the doors of our quarters. Even though it might amuse Kezule to see you flouting Kusac's authority, the General can't afford to let you flout his."

Dzaou looked away, growling softly and muttering under his breath.

Kusac's hand snaked across the table and grabbed hold of the older male's, gripping it painfully. "Are you issuing a Challenge?" he asked softly. "Because if you are, it won't be to First Blood. You'll have to kill me."

"No," Dzaou snarled, trying to jerk free, aware of the others' startled exclamations. "But only because of the cub. When this is over, Kusac, don't worry, I'll Challenge you to the Death Rite! Just when did you intend to tell us you've given the Primes the run of our ship?"

Kusac hid his own surprise as he released Dzaou and sat back in his seat. How the hell had he found out about his trip down to the landing bay with Kezule?

"Our ship? It's mine, Dzaou, and built by the Primes, remember? They haven't got the run of it. I took Kezule there last night because he needed some information from my database. The Primes even programmed the *Venture II* with the help of our Embassy. There's nothing sensitive for them to find— unless you downloaded anything from Haven before I boarded?" He glanced over to Banner who shook his head.

"I only checked the nav station data," his Second said. "We didn't communicate with the Haven comm system at all."

"And I followed procedure before we left the *Venture*. All nav information, apart from the encoded route to Haven, which Kezule knows anyway, was deleted. All he wanted was what little there was of Sholan culture in the recreation files, and there was damned little of that, as we know!" he said wryly. The journey had been tedious for the others as the *Venture* had little in the way of entertainment programs on board. "All that's on it is some Storyteller and news vids, plus our half-finished Sholan knowledge base."

"Why does he want that?" asked Jayza.

Kusac hesitated only briefly. He'd hoped to keep this to himself for now. "He wants me to help him turn this mixed group of Primes into a new culture, one without castes. One like ours."

There was silence while they each absorbed what he'd said.

"It makes sense," said Khadui. "Someone from Kezule's culture would see the Primes as a dead end."

"So I was wrong," admitted Dzaou grudgingly, still massaging his wrist and hand. "Maybe helping Kezule is worthwhile. We don't need another group of Warrior Valtegens out after our blood. If this place is one of the major outposts, it'll be armed to the teeth."

"But it can't move far and he has no ancillary fighters," said Kusac. "My bet is the Valtegens stripped it bare before abandoning it."

"Then where did he get the other ship?" asked Khadui.

"At a guess, from a forgotten battle fleet probably stranded not too far from here," said Banner. "Rezac said when they rebelled during the Cataclysm, the Sholan Telepaths who were pets of Admirals in the Valtegan fleet made the crews turn their ships on themselves."

"We should still keep an eye on them," said Khadui. "Gather what information we can without getting caught."

"No," said Kusac unequivocally. "We play it straight," he said, looking at each of them in turn. "No more sneaking around the base spying on them, Dzaou."

"But..."

"You heard the Captain," said Banner quietly. "We play it straight. Kezule asked specifically for him, because he knows he's with AIReI. His speciality is understanding alien cultures."

"Just so. Our main job for now is training. Kezule wants the fourteen M'zullians kept busy without teaching them much more than they already know. His group are far more volatile than ours were. They've already managed to kill five of their own during training because they were seen as too weak or a threat to the advancement of one of the others. Even more

than the Primes, we have to show a united front to them. It's imperative they know we're their superiors in combat skills, otherwise they'll turn on us."

"Great," muttered Khadui. "Always liked a Challenge, but this is a doozy!"

"I've another surprise for you," he continued. "The slightly darker Primes? Look more closely at them and you'll see the males have crests like Kezule. They're his fourteen sons— and two daughters— all grown in a lab by their medical research department in an effort to fast-breed a Warrior Caste. Except Kezule doesn't want to do that. As I said, he wants castes abolished and Warriors chosen for ability, not bred. That way, he hopes to have a more balanced society."

"He'll need more than the seventy-four he has here," said Banner.

"Not a problem. He's prepared to visit Ch'almuth, the fourth world, to increase the population here. Jayza, I want you to search through their cultural databases. Get recordings of anything that might be useful to us in trying to work out how their current society is constructed, and anything on their far past. I'll speak to Doctor Zayshul to get authorization for you. Meanwhile, we've work to do," he said, getting up and walking over to the desk unit to pick up two of the Prime readers lying there.

"I want two groups, one in each gym. Banner, you'll be with me and Jayza," he said, handing Banner one of the units. "Khadui, you're in charge, with Dzaou to assist you." He handed the older Sholan the other. "I've mapped out the program we're following. It's been compiled based on what Kezule wants us to do. The M'zullians we treat as we did the ones on Shola— keep them occupied with team activities and hard training. Kezule's sixteen we stretch. The rest need very basic training as they're civilians. Kezule's running eight-hour shifts and rotating personnel fortnightly for now until they've rerouted power from the nonessential areas of the Outpost to the sections we're using. It also lets us get our own regime of training established with each group."

A siren sounded, repeating itself three times before stopping. "Time to go. That's the signal for shift change. We're meeting the first group in the port side gym where we'll split them into two classes. Kezule says they've found some training equipment on sublevel three. When his people have had time to unpack it for us, they'll bring it up to the gyms."

"How long is our working day?" asked Jayza as they got to their feet and made for the door.

"Four hours before second meal and three after it. We have an hour to eat at their twelfth hour, then finish at seventeen hundred. The rest of the day is ours. Third meal is at eighteen hundred hours."

"Our quarters aren't as spacious," said Dzaou, looking round Kusac's suite. "No food dispenser either."

"You're not an officer," said Banner, hustling him through the doorway.

"These are all officers' quarters," he said, following them out and locking the door with his key card. "In case you hadn't noticed, we're berthed on the Officers' level with the Prime officers, for our safety, Kezule said."

"Kezule says too much if you ask me," he heard Dzaou mutter quietly.

\* \* \*

M'kou was waiting in the corridor outside for him. "Captain, we found thirty-six neuro-tagged suits and weapons for combat training. I had them taken to your office in the gymnasium. The General thought they'd add some reality to your training sessions."

Kusac nodded. "I'm sure we'll find a use for them."

"I also came to tell you..."

The rest of what M'kou was saying was lost as the siren went off again. This time the single tone lasted for twenty seconds before stopping.



"The comm system is working again," M'kou said with satisfaction. "That was the signal for everyone to report to the main assembly hall. The General asked me to bring you and your crew."

"Why?" asked Dzaou.

Kezule's aide hesitated momentarily. "There was a fight in the mess half an hour ago when one of the M'zullian Warriors attacked a civilian male. He's being disciplined and the General wants everyone to witness it as a warning that fighting will not be tolerated. He wanted to be sure you attended too."

It was a reminder that they were subject to the same discipline. As they followed M'kou down the corridor then filed into the assembly hall with the rest of the Primes, Dzaou's pelt began to rise.

"Public punishments are barbaric," he muttered.

"Every military body has them," said Banner. "Even us." He glanced at Kusac. "Kaid was subjected to one when Ghezu expelled him."

Unbidden, Kaid's memories of the event filled his mind as if they were his own. "That was psychological," he murmured, more than a little shaken.

"This is physical as well," said M'kou quietly as they stood at the back of the hall. "The General must maintain a harsh discipline over the M'zullians. It's the second time we've had trouble from them. But it's not barbaric. The soldier, Chazukk, won't actually be harmed."

"What do you do with him?" asked Khadui.

"He'll be confined in the punishment booth while a variant of a sleep tape is played. Since his crime was fighting over a female, likely the General will order that a tape of a male being savaged by females in one of the old style harems be used."

The crowd was hushed. He studied the faces, looking for Zayshul, checking for her scent amid the myriad ones present.

"Won't the General be here?" he asked as he counted up the number of military uniforms in the crowd. It came to under half.

"For this, yes. It's the first public punishment."

To one side of them, a door opened and a M'zullian, wearing wrist restraints was brought in. He seemed unconcerned, glancing round at the assembled people with a look of indifference on his face.

Behind him, flanked by two of his Prime officers, came General Kezule. Kusac saw with relief that Shaidan wasn't with him. He noticed the booth now, dominating the left-hand side of the wall opposite them. About seven feet tall, it was made of some transparent material.

Kezule stopped in front of the gathering, waiting until the prisoner had been shackled to the rear wall of the booth by his neck, wrists, ankles, and waist and the guards had stepped back, one to either side.

"We're only a small community," began Kezule, speaking in Sholan, "but even one as small as we presently are needs rules by which to live. You all know what they are, they're posted on the doors of your quarters and in all public places. Some of you civilians might think them harsh. They're not. We're predominantly a military group, living on an outpost in one of the most hostile environments known— space. Lack of discipline out here can cost lives. The rules exist for your protection. Break them and you will be punished accordingly. This is the second incident over a female. There will be no more." He stopped and swept his gaze over the gathering.

"Females have the right to choose their mates. No male will gainsay that right by any means, including violence. You're all aware of sleep tapes and have used them to acquire skills. You may not know they can be used for punishment as they were in my time." He gestured to the officer next to him. "Let them see the holo."

Behind Kezule, high up on the wall, a large area began to change color, become lighter. As the images began to form, at first Kuzac didn't recognize them. Then he realized it was the breeding room at Khezy'ipik, deep in the heart of the Ghuulgul desert on Shola.

"I don't think anyone here is unaware that in my time, females of our species were considered feral and kept locked in secure quarters. Unless they were heavily sedated, it was suicidal for any male to approach them," continued Kezule, his voice taking on a cold edge. "Then the ultimate penalty for breaking the military code of discipline was to be thrown in with them. This tape will be used for Chazukk's punishment."

He heard what Kezule said, but his attention was wholly focused on the screen, not the General. Briefly, he glanced at the nearest female, comparing those in the holo to her. About one-third broader and taller than their slightly-built modern counterparts, the ancient females were fearsome indeed. There were eight of them. Most wore nothing but a piece of cloth wrapped around their waists, some were even naked. A door opened and a Valtegan male was thrown in.

While one part of his mind dispassionately watched the females attack the male just as Carrie's Earth felines would have taunted and played with their prey before finally killing it, the other was taking in other physical details, noting how the dappled markings on their spines spread outward at the small of the back toward their hips. He'd seen the same markings on Zayshul's back at dinner the night before but this was his first glimpse of a nearly naked Valtegan or Prime female. When she'd come to him on the *Kz'adul*, she'd turned off the light as soon as she'd entered his room; he had no idea what she looked like undressed.

The images on the screen vanished abruptly, bringing him back to the reality of the hall and the scent of fear he could have cut with a knife.

"Punishment tapes are not passive," said Kezule. "You will experience the pain firsthand—the slashing claws, the teeth—everything, except the final death of the male." The General's voice was hard now. "And it will be repeated again and again until the duration of your punishment is over. It was said in my time that three hours of this would either kill you or drive you insane. Chazukk has been sentenced to one hour. You can ask him later if he enjoyed the experience."

Gesturing to the officers behind him to continue, Kezule left. A low buzz of conversation broke out from those around them as the two approached

the prisoner and opened a case which one of them carried. Everyone was shocked by what they'd seen, particularly the females.

"A portable projector," M'kou offered as Kusac watched a broad circular band taken from the case and fitted over the soldier's head. "It's normally used as a training aid."

When the officer stepped back, he could see that the small visor covered Chazukk's eyes. Pulling an ID tag from the pocket of his fatigues, he passed it through a reader set in the frame of the booth, waiting until the faint glow of a force field established itself before he and his companion left. The guards remained.

In the booth, the prisoner had begun to move his head, trying to shake it to dislodge the device. Then, with a cry of terror, his arms and legs began to jerk as he pulled futilely against the restraints.

Sickened, Kusac looked away. It reminded him too much of the pain he'd suffered wearing J'koshuk's punishment collar.

"He's a M'zullian, Captain," said M'kou. "Dominating them physically is our only control over them, and Chazukk is their leader. Would you rather the General had him physically punished? When this is over, within an hour, two at most, he'll be back on duty. The pain won't last."

"And how long will his nightmares last?" Dzaou asked, an underlying growl to his otherwise inflectionless voice.

"They're not like us," said M'kou, still looking at Kusac. "They were bred to fight and kill, not to think. You can't appeal to their more civilized side: they don't have one, just as their sires didn't."

"What were you bred for?" he asked softly.

The large yellow eyes didn't blink as M'kou returned his gaze steadily. "To lead, Captain, like our sire."

A siren broke the tension as it blared out two short notes then stopped. "We're free to leave," said M'kou quietly as the prisoner's cries became high-pitched shrieks of pain and anguish.

\* \* \*

They had to file past the booth as they left. The force field did little to keep the stench of fear, and worse, contained. Like everyone else, he averted his eyes as he passed.

"It's barbaric!" Dzaou hissed, rounding on Kusac once they were outside. "Punishment is one thing, degrading and humiliating him in public like that is another!"

"That's the point of the punishment," said Khadui. "He'll not find it easy to lead them after this."

"Those we taught at the Warrior Guild must be very different from the ones here," said Jayza soberly. "We can't judge without knowing all the facts. Maybe they behave differently among their own kind."

"Banner, take over. I need to speak to Kezule. I'll join you in the gym later," Kusac said abruptly.

"What're you doing?" demanded Dzaou.

"My job," he replied grimly, heading down the corridor for the elevator down to the Command level. He was stopped at the security office and had to wait impatiently until they'd contacted the Security chief, M'zynal, to authorize his visit.

\* \* \*

"What is it, Kusac?" asked Kezule, not bothering to look up from the papers he was reading as the Sholan was escorted into the General's office. "I'm rather busy at the moment."

"You wanted my advice," he said, glancing round for Shaidan but not finding him. "I've come to give it to you."

"Already? You've barely been here a day." Kezule continued scanning the document he was holding.

He turned to leave. "Why bring me here and hold my cub hostage for my cooperation if you don't want to listen to my advice?"

Kezule sighed and handed the piece of paper to the officer standing beside him. "This looks fine. Implement it now," he said.

The officer saluted and left.

"Very well, Kusac, I'm listening," said Kezule, turning to look at him.

"You can't run this Outpost as an exclusively military base. You're terrifying your civilian population."

"They'll get used to it," said Kezule, pulling out his chair and sitting down at the desk.

"Will they? They're Primes, Kezule. Pacifists incapable of fighting. You're their only experience of the military," he said, coming farther into the room. "My bet is they didn't sign up for a life in basic camp, but for something that was more intellectually challenging. They'll only be happy playing soldiers for a time, then they'll become dissatisfied and scared, want to go home, and that'll infect your Warriors. Your leadership will be seen as weak, able to be physically challenged— and you know where that'll lead."

"Go on. You've caught my interest."

"Separate the two groups. Run the civilian side as a community with a stake in its own future. Have them elect their own ruling council and make up their own set of laws. All of the females apart from two are civilians. You need them to create the next generation. Keep them happy and they'll build a community, it's what females do— bear young, nurture them, make friends, communicate with each other. You're a General, you know how to deploy troops; let the females do what they do best. Make it their mission."

"Zayshul said something similar," Kezule said, watching him thoughtfully. "What guidelines should I give them?"

"How many are there?"

"About forty. We're seventy-four in all. I brought the M'zullians only because I can control them, the Primes can't. They weren't any part of my original plan."

"Tell them to choose about ten of their number for a ruling council and let them take it from there. I suggest you let your troops know they have to obey the civilian laws too. Have your military people got separate quarters from the civilians?"

The General nodded. "They're on the port side. You're quartered there next to most of my officers for your own safety, as I said. The M'zullians are under surveillance on the starboard side. Don't turn your back on them, Kusac, even I don't trust them. They've enough intelligence to be dangerous. I don't know why your people had no trouble from the twenty on Shola."

He shrugged, a very Human gesture. "We were living on the Warrior Guild estate, among several hundred other students who looked to us as their superiors. It breeds an atmosphere of learning. We also gave them challenging leisure activities, team games and such, building a need for interdependence in them."

"My own training emphasized individual attainment," Kezule murmured, his eyes taking on a distant look for a moment. "Thank you. And, Kusac, I appreciate you taking your job seriously."

"You're letting me see my son," he said, turning to leave.

"Kusac, we could make this process much quicker if you'd allow us to do a mental scan of your mind and have sleep tapes made. It would give a few of my officers your knowledge and experience of different alien cultures."

"No," he said shortly. "I'm not letting your medics near me. They did too much damage the last time."

"You forget Doctor Zayshul saved your life," Kezule said gently. "It's not an invasive procedure. They just connect you to a scanner."

"Forget it, Kezule. Don't you trust me?" His voice held a hint of sarcasm.

"About as far as you trust me, Kusac," Kezule replied. "You should consider it, for your son's sake."

"I should have expected you to try and renege on our deal," he said slowly, turning to face the General again. A scan was impossible. They'd realize almost immediately that he had his Talent back.

"I'm not," said Kezule. "M'kou will come for you after your afternoon session. I can't force you to have a scan, Kusac. An unwilling subject would be useless. Just consider it."

"You've had my answer," he said, turning back to the door. "Don't bother mentioning it to me again."

\* \* \*

"Captain," said M'kou as Kusac joined him just before the end of the day. "I'm to take you down to the Command level. Shaidan's waiting for you in one of the small offices with Doctor Zayshul. The General thought that today you might like to eat your evening meal with him."

"With Kezule and Doctor Zayshul?" he asked as they stopped beside the guard at the elevator.

"No, only Shaidan, Captain. The General promised you that time alone together," M'kou reminded him as the elevator door opened and they stepped inside.

He said nothing, suddenly aware of the tension in his stomach. "What's Shaidan like?" he asked abruptly. "Is there a child under all that programming?"



M'kou looked at him in surprise. "I can't answer that, Captain," he said. "I've only known Gaylla."

Kusac looked at him. "Gaylla?"

"A little gray-colored cub that the Directorate was going to have killed because she was slower than the others," said M'kou as the doors opened again. "The General asked for her, pretending that he wanted her as a pet. She was delivered to us several days before we raided the Directorate to rescue the others." M'kou gestured to his left. "This way, Captain."

"Asked for her? How could he ask them for her?"

"The conspirators took the General forcibly to their headquarters in an attempt to recruit him to their cause. That's where he met all the cubs for the first time, how he knew they existed."

Kezule must have known then who Shaidan was, yet he'd asked for Gaylla. That did surprise him. "What did he do with her?"

"Nothing, Captain. Doctor Zayshul deprogrammed her first." He glanced sideways at Kusac as they came to a halt outside a door. "She and the Doctor were very fond of each other, Captain. Gaylla followed her everywhere. Doctor Zayshul was most upset when she had to leave with you."

He remembered the way Gaylla and Zayshul had hugged each other when it had come time to leave. "And Shaidan? How does she treat him?"

"Like a mother, Captain," he replied before opening the door.

\* \* \*

"You must remember to use your own language when speaking to your father," Zayshul was telling Shaidan. "Do you remember what we talked about earlier? About families and parents?"

"Yes, Doctor," Shaidan said as he continued to laboriously copy the Sholan writing he'd been given.

"You may answer any questions the Captain asks you," said Kezule from where he stood by the door.

Shaidan looked up at the General, wondering if he was being told he could choose not to answer, but the Valtegan's back was turned to him so he couldn't read his expression. He bent his head back to his writing, wishing he didn't have to meet the Captain. If not for him, he'd be helping the General in his office, or following him around the Outpost as he visited all the workstations. That was far more useful than copying Sholan writing.

The door chimed then slid open. He didn't need to look up to know who it was, he could smell their scents immediately.

"Good evening, Kusac," the General said. "I've set this room aside for you and Shaidan to use. It has a meal dispenser as you can see. M'kou will come back for him in two hours. Please don't leave the room, this level is off-limits to you and your crew. If you need anything, ask the guard on duty outside and he'll attend to it for you. Zayshul, it's time to leave."

Shaidan watched the Doctor getting up out of the corner of his eye.

"Remember what I told you, Shaidan," she said quietly, leaning over him. "Answer the Captain's questions properly."

"I'd like Doctor Zayshul to stay for a few minutes," Shaidan heard the Captain say.

"Another time, Captain. I promised you two hours alone with your son. You wouldn't want me to break my word on your first visit, would you? Zayshul, now, please."

As the door closed behind them, suddenly he felt very alone. Without moving his head, he glanced up through his eyelashes at the newcomer. Dark-furred and dressed from head to foot in a long, purple-edged black robe, the Sholan Captain was an imposing presence in the small room.

Gripping his stylus more tightly, Shaidan concentrated on his writing again.

The Captain came round to his side of the desk and pulled back the chair beside him, the one the Doctor had been using, and sat down.

"Hello, Shaidan." His voice was low and pleasant.

He ignored the Captain because an answer wasn't required.

"Has the General told you who I am?" the Captain asked after several minutes' silence.

"You're Captain Aldatan, my father," he replied grudgingly.

"That's right. And do you know why I'm here?"

"No."

"So we can get to know each other."

The silence grew again and Shaidan began to hope that he might decide to leave. Suddenly the stylus was plucked out of his hand. Startled, he looked up.

"I want to talk to you, Shaidan," the Captain said quietly, putting the stylus on the desk out of his reach. "What're you doing?"

"Learning to write Sholan."

"What are you copying?" The Captain picked up his reader and looked at it.

"An article about Shola from your database."

"Annual rainfall. Not very interesting, is it? I'm sure it can wait until later." The reader joined the stylus. "This meeting isn't easy for either of us, Shaidan," continued the Captain, reaching out to turn his chair around

so they were facing each other. "But it will get easier if we both make an effort. I see you're wearing a psi-damping collar. Does the General take it off so you can practice?"

"I know how to use my Talent. I don't need to practice."

"Who taught you?"

"I've always known." He wished he didn't have to answer such pointless questions but the General and the Doctor had said he must.

There was a short silence before the Captain spoke again. "Do you get a chance to use it often?"

"I use it when the General tells me to do so."

"When does he do that? Who does he ask you to read?"

Shaidan lifted his face and looked him square in the eyes. "When he pleases, and it's been to read you."

The Captain reacted only with the barest of nods, as if he was expecting that answer. "And what do you read from me?"

"Very little. Your mind is quieter than anyone's, except for the TeLaxaudin."

Once more the Captain nodded then sat back in his chair. "It came as a shock to me to discover I had a son I knew nothing about," he said quietly. "I expect it was as much of a shock for you."

Shaidan said nothing as he tried to suppress a flash of anger. The Captain was nervous, Shaidan could smell it in his scent, even though it was very faint. He felt a grudging respect for him. Most Primes wouldn't have been able to control their scent so well.

*He's Sholan like you, Shaidan, the General had said. Learn about him, learn how to read his body language, his expressions, the tone of voice he*

*uses. Learn what it is to be Sholan, because when you understand a species, you know their strengths and weaknesses.*

He looked at the Captain properly this time, taking in the black robe with its wide sleeves, the black-furred hands lying on his lap just below the belt with its many pouches, and the black-handled dagger over the left hip. Looking higher, he saw the long dark hair framing an oval face from which eyes as amber as his own regarded him steadily.

"I've come to take you home with me when I leave, Shaidan. You have two sisters. The older one is called Kashini, and the younger was born as I left Shola. I don't yet know her name. You'll meet them when I take you home. Meanwhile, as I said, we have to get to know each other, form a bond."

"I belong here, with the General!" he blurted out. "Not with you! I have value to him!"

"You have value to me. *We* belong together. You're my son. There's a bond of blood between us," said the Captain, leaning forward and taking hold of his hands. "You know there is, I saw you recognize it last night."

He snatched his hands away, overwhelmed by the unfamiliar emotions rushing through him. "I belong to the General, not you! I'm his vassal, I have value to him! You can't take me away from here, he won't let you!" He was afraid, and finding it difficult to breathe all of a sudden. Anger at this strange alien male whose arrival had turned his life upside down surged through him. "You're not my father! I don't have one! You mean nothing to me!"

The Captain leaned forward, grasping him by the shoulders this time, making him feel trapped. "You're not a slave, Shaidan! Sholans are a free people, no one owns them!" The hands tightened their grip and the Captain's glowing eyes seemed to grow larger. "The General brought me here because of you. Don't tell me you can't feel we're connected because I know you can. What you feel is blood calling to blood. Your mind might try to deny it, but your body— your instincts— know we're related."

Reaching up, he tried to pull the Captain's hands away. He knew he was telling the truth, but he didn't want to believe it. The Captain's touch made it worse, heightened the need to be held by him, to surrender.

"Let me go," he said, his voice tight with emotions he didn't understand. He scrabbled at the Captain's hands, feeling his own claws bite through the skin and draw blood. The metallic scent of it filled his nostrils, intensifying his feelings, making his eyes fill with tears. "Let me go!"

"Be still," ordered the Captain, keeping a tight grip on him.

The voice vibrated through him and he recognized what it was even as he obeyed.

The grip loosened and the Captain removed one hand to wipe his tears away with his thumb. "What you're feeling is the call of our shared blood, Shaidan. It links father to son, family to Clan. It's what we are."

"No!" he shrieked, wrenching himself loose and overbalancing the chair in his urgency to escape the pull he felt toward this male. "I don't want to be linked to you! You're not my father! You're a vassal like me! I saw you yesterday when M'kou made you kneel in front of the General!"

"Shaidan," began the Captain, getting up to help him.

Scrambling to his feet, he turned and fled, the door opening automatically as soon as he got to within three feet of it.

The soldier on guard outside turned around instantly and made a grab for him, but he dodged past him easily and began running down the corridor, fleeing them all as if his life depended on it.

\* \* \*

Rubbing the scratches on his hand, Kusac made his way more slowly to the door, aware that his first meeting with his son had been a resounding failure. He'd been too anxious, spoken of leaving here too soon, but despite his son's half Prime parentage, it had been impossible for him to ignore the call of their shared blood.

"They're looking for him now, Captain," said the guard as he stepped into the corridor. "If you wait inside, he'll be brought back to you shortly."

He shook his head. "Leave him be. He obviously doesn't want to see me today. There's nothing to be gained by forcing him. I'll try again tomorrow."

"I'll take you back to the elevator then, Captain."

He nodded, silently cursing Kezule for orchestrating the circumstances of their meeting the night before so that Shaidan could see the power the General had over him and his crew. He was in an even more impossible situation now— that of trying to convince Shaidan that they weren't Kezule's vassals.

As he reached out to hit the control pad to summon the elevator, he realized his hand was trembling. The meeting had shaken him. Now he understood why Kaid hadn't been anxious to meet his own father for the first time. He'd no idea how to treat a kitling of Shaidan's age, let alone a son he'd never met before: a son whose mother was the wife of an implacable alien enemy.

\* \* \*

Dodging past the startled guard, Shaidan began to run, heading as far away from the office beside the Command Center and the Captain as he could get. When he ran out of breath, he stopped, sinking down onto the floor on his haunches, and sobbed. Why had the Sholan Captain and his crew come here? Until yesterday, he'd been content, known where his place was in the order of life around him. Now that security and order had been taken from him, overturned by someone claiming to be his father and wanting to take him away from the only family he'd known.

Reason and common sense began to return. The General needed and wanted him, why else would he have kept him? He wouldn't let the Sholan Captain take him away. If he worked hard, performed every task to the best of his ability, he could make himself indispensable. No matter what

he said, the Sholan Captain was only a vassal like himself. His tears began to slow as he rubbed his hands across his face.

The smell of blood— his father's blood— filled his nostrils again, bringing back the flood of emotions that had terrified him. Something deep inside him did recognize their relationship, the pull of their shared blood, and ached to acknowledge that link. His tears began to fall again.

"You can't run away from what's inside of you, little one," said a soft Sholan voice as a hand gently touched his shoulder.

With a whimper of fear, he tried to pull away and press himself against the wall. Blinking his tears back, he stared up, not at the Captain as he'd feared, but at a stranger.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, attempting to keep his voice steady. "The Command level is forbidden to Sholans. It's only for the Seniormost."

"I got lost. Besides, you're here," the adult male said, mouth dropping open in a slight smile.

"I belong to the General," he said defiantly. "I'm his vassal. I help him, have value to him."

"Who told you that? The General?" The stranger reached out to touch his cheeks, wiping the tears away with gentle fingertips.

Shaidan opened his mouth to say yes, then stopped, realizing that the General had never actually said that. "No one told me, I just knew I was."

"Don't you think that strange, Shaidan?" he asked, squatting down on his haunches beside the child. "You belong to no one but yourself, cub." He reached out and tapped Shaidan's forehead. "In here, where it really matters. You owe the General gratitude, yes, for taking you from the Directorate, and for bringing your father here, but nothing more."

"Your Captain says I belong to him because he's my father."



"That's a different kind of belonging, one of family, of sharing the same blood ties."

Shaidan surreptitiously hid his hands behind his back, hoping that the stranger couldn't smell the blood on them. "How can he be my father? I was birthed from a tank like the others. We all were."

"Where are the others now, Shaidan?"

"The Captain took them."

"He took them to those who could return them to their own parents. You know he did. Which means you all have parents, even you. And, yes, Captain Aldatan is your father."

"Then why didn't he come to the Directorate and rescue us?" he demanded. "Why was it the General who came?"

"Because your father didn't know you existed until the General told him about you."

"He must have known! How could he not?"

"Didn't the Doctor or the General tell you why?"

"They tell me what I need to know," he answered automatically.

"Is that you or a Prime vassal talking, Shaidan? They may tell you what you need to know, but do they tell you what you want to know? Like how General Kezule knew who your father was and sent for him to take the others to their parents, and why the General kept only you."

"Curiosity is unacceptable in a vassal." His words were slow this time as he wondered how this stranger knew his thoughts as they had only just begun to form in his mind.

"But you are curious, aren't you? About your father and how you came into being without his knowledge," the stranger pointed out as he stood up.

Shaidan stared up at the tan-pelted male in the gray tunic, wondering why it was so easy to talk to him.

"We have to go now, little one," the stranger said, holding out his hand, palm uppermost to him. "They're looking for you. It's time to go back to them."

"The General will be angry with me," he said, shivering as he pulled his hands out from behind his back and accepted the stranger's.

"Most definitely, but what about your father?"

"I clawed his hand," he admitted as they began to walk back the way he'd come. "Made it bleed." He risked a question, and a sidelong look. "Would you be angry?"

The stranger laughed, squeezing Shaidan's hand reassuringly. "My cubs are long since grown up, but in the circumstances, I think not. It's a father's and mother's responsibility and duty to try to understand their cubs. You must learn to ask questions, Shaidan. If you don't feel confident enough yet to ask, then at least think them. No one can be angry with you for doing that. Some of the answers you already have if you look for them. There's more of your father in you than you know."

"I'm a mind reader. I can hear other people's thoughts. So can others."

"Can you hear them when you wear your collar?"

"No," he admitted.

"So your thoughts are your own. Learn to be yourself, little one, rather than what other people want you to be. You have the first of many choices before you now. Do you want to be a vassal, a slave with no family, belonging to the General and living here, alone, with none of your own kind? Or do you want to be Shaidan Aldatan, firstborn son of one of the oldest and most powerful telepath families on Shola?"

"My father's a telepath?"

Stopping at an intersection of corridors, the stranger smiled down at him, letting his hand go to ruffle the hair between his ears. "Ask the Doctor, Shaidan, or your father. I must go now, before they see me. There's an emergency stairway around here somewhere. Remember what I've told you," he said, running his thumb along Shaidan's jaw in an intimate caress as he turned to leave. "And give your father a second chance. This isn't easy for either of you."

"Wait! Do I have a mother? Do you know her, too?" he asked, suddenly anxious to know.

The stranger hesitated briefly. "There isn't an easy answer to that, Shaidan. All I can say is that when the time is right, you'll know who she is." Then he was gone.

As Shaidan watched him disappear down the side corridor, he heard the sound of booted feet approaching rapidly and his world suddenly began to close in around him again.

\* \* \*

The General was furious. Though light, the blow that he delivered to the side of Shaidan's head lifted him off his feet and would have sent him crashing into the wall had M'kou not stepped in the way, using his own body to catch the cub.

"How dare you leave the Captain like that and make a liar out of me!" Kezule hissed. "I gave my word that you'd spend two hours each day with him. You'll go back instantly and stay there for the designated time, today and every day! Do you understand?"

M'kou helped Shaidan regain his footing.

"Do you understand?" thundered Kezule, taking a step toward him, crest fully raised in anger.

"I'm sure he understands, General," said M'kou as the sobbing cub clung to him. "I'll take him up to Captain Aldatan's quarters for you."

"Do that," Kezule hissed, turning away from them. "Post a guard outside, and you collect him at the end of two hours. May the God-Kings help you if you try to leave early again! You disappoint me, Shaidan. I'd thought you better trained than that. Take him to the Doctor afterward, M'kou, I don't want to set eyes on him again today!"

Instead of taking the cub straight to the elevator up to the main level, M'kou took him to his own quarters first. Better ten minutes spent calming Shaidan down and cleaning him up than risking the Sholan Captain's wrath, to say nothing of Doctor Zayshul's should they meet her going past the sick bay.

\* \* \*

When he answered his door, Kusac was surprised to find M'kou standing outside with a very subdued Shaidan.

"The General asked me to return Shaidan to you, Captain," said M'kou, his hand resting familiarly on Shaidan's shoulder. "There's a guard outside your door to ensure your privacy. I'll be back to collect him in two hours." He hesitated before continuing. "He has been punished for running away from you, Captain."

Kusac's eyes narrowed as he reached out to tilt up his son's face. He noticed the swelling on the cheekbone. All thought of who Shaidan's mother was vanished instantly.

"Tell Kezule that if he ever lays his hands on my son again, he'll have me to answer to!" he snarled, hair and pelt rising in anger till it stood out like a mane. M'kou released Shaidan and hurriedly stepped back.

"I don't think..."

"Tell him!" he roared, stepping past his cub into the corridor so he was almost nose to nose with the General's aide.

This time M'kou stood his ground. "I'll tell him, of course, Captain, but the corridor is surely not the place for this discussion. Shaidan was told to remain with you and he disobeyed that order."

"He's only a cub, dammit! A child, not one of your damned soldiers! If he needs punishing, *I'll* do it, not Kezule, or he'll get damned little cooperation from me and my crew!"

M'kou glanced across the corridor to where the other Sholans' rooms were. "As I said, I'll tell him, Captain. May I suggest we close this matter now before your crew becomes aware of it?"

With another snarl of rage, Kusac returned to his room and sealed the door.

"Follow me," he said curtly to Shaidan, as he headed across the living area to the bathing room door. Opening the cabinet above the wash basin, he pulled out his personal medikit and began searching through it. He was furious because he hadn't been there to prevent Kezule hitting his son, the more so because he was powerless to stop it from happening again.

"Put the stool under the main light and sit on it," he ordered, taking a tube of ointment out and putting the kit back.

He turned round as Shaidan, trying not to tremble, was sitting down. Fear-scent filled the small room, and when he saw the way his son's tail was flicking spasmodically, his anger with the General evaporated instantly.

"I'm not angry with you, Shaidan," he said quietly, squatting down beside him. "You only did what any frightened kitling would do— you ran away. I'm angry with the General for hitting you."

Shaidan said nothing but the nervous twitching of his tail began to lessen slightly.

"We didn't get off to a very good start, did we?" He risked reaching out to touch his son's arm. "Let me put this bruise ointment on your cheek then we can start again."

His son remained silent, head bent, looking at where his hands lay on his lap.

Kusac sighed inwardly. This was going to be no easy task. "Lift your head up, please," he said, letting him go to unscrew the lid on the tube.

The cub complied, a startled look in his eyes as he smelled the pungent aroma of herbs and spices.

Forcing himself to laugh gently, he pressed a small amount of the paste out onto his fingers. "Smells strange, doesn't it? Like one of the spicy meals the desert tribes cook back home, but it works wonders on bruises. By tomorrow, it should be almost gone." He recapped the tube and set it on the floor beside him.

Resting one hand on the edge of the stool, he leaned forward to reach his son's cheek. Shaidan flinched away from him briefly, then stopped, obviously gritting his teeth in anticipation of more pain.

"I won't hurt you," he said, his fingertips applying the ointment gently. "Did you know we're all trained medics in the Brotherhood? Treating my own cuts and bruises was one of the first things I learned to do." The bump was large, but the skin was thankfully unbroken.

When he'd finished, so strong was the urge to pick his son up and hold him close that he had to force himself to stand up and put the tube back in his medikit. It was too soon for that, they were still almost total strangers.

"Has the General, or anyone else, ever hit you before?" he asked, trying to keep his tone casual as he closed the cupboard door and turned to face Shaidan again.

"No, Captain, never."

He felt the band of tension round his chest begin to ease and held his hand out to his son. "Let's go back to the main room. I was having third meal when you arrived. Shall we see if there's anything on the food dispenser menu you fancy?"

The small hand took his hesitantly as Shaidan got to his feet. "The stool..."

"Can stay where it is for now," he said, leading him out of the bathing room.

They stopped in front of the dispenser. "Choose what you'd like to eat," he said, pointing to the menu on the side.

Shaidan looked at it, then back to him, tail beginning to flick anxiously again. "I never choose. I eat what I'm given," he said quietly.

A chill swept over him as he realized that Shaidan was exactly where he'd been when he'd been released to his own people by the Primes at Haven. He was incapable of thinking for himself.

"Go and sit at the table," he said gently. "I'll bring your food over to you."

While the unit began to synthesize the vegetable protein into a thinly disguised meat casserole, he moved over to the breakfast bar and began unbuckling his weapons belt. Wearing his robe might set him apart from everyone else on the Outpost, but it wouldn't help him gain his son's confidence right now.

Throwing it over one of the tall chairs, he refastened his belt over his black tunic and, grabbing a spare drinking bowl, returned to get Shaidan's food. Putting the dishes in front of the cub, he sat down in his own chair, picking up his discarded fork. His meal would be stone cold by now, but he didn't care as he watched his son finally begin to relax. His reading of him had been right. Faced with something familiar, Shaidan was finally beginning to respond— only a little, but it was a start.

He searched his mind for a topic of conversation and remembered what M'kou had said earlier about the cubs.

"Tell me about Gaylla and the others," he said.

"What do you want to know?"

"What was it like before the General came for you?"

"Studying and lots of medical tests."

"What kind of tests?" he asked, pouring water into his son's drinking bowl and pushing it across the table to him.

The cub shrugged as he shoveled food into his mouth. "They took blood and did tests with things attached to our heads, making us use our mind powers."

"Who did?"

"Dr. K'hedduk," Shaidan replied, an involuntary shudder running through him as he said the name.

"You didn't like him. Did you feel his mind?"

Shaidan stopped eating to look up at him, a curious expression on his face. "Once I did," he said. "When I was birthed from the tank, before they put the collar on me. It was cold and hard, like the minds of the M'zullians here. Not like yours or the Primes."

"Mine?" he said with a jolt of fear. "You've felt my mind? When?"

Shaidan's face screwed up as if in pain. "The General asked me... to find you... this morning... tell what I read..."

His blood ran cold, both at his son's attempts to speak and from worry that Kezule had discovered his secret. "Can you tell me what you told him?" he asked quietly.

Shaidan looked away and picked up his drinking bowl. "You didn't like your breakfast."

Relief flooded through him. "Is that all?"

The cub took a drink and put the bowl carefully back on the table before replying. "I have felt you thinking about me," he admitted.



He let that pass. "Do you get asked to do this often?"

Shaidan replied by shaking his head.

He gestured at his son's plate. "Don't let your meal get cold," he said. "Believe me, it tastes quite disgusting."

"I know," said Shaidan, picking up his fork.

### **Zhal-Rojae 8th day, Month of snow (November)**

Shaidan had been aware of the hatchling within the egg beginning to wake since breakfast. Since no one had asked him, he'd held his peace— it wasn't his place to volunteer information. Such an act was beyond what was acceptable for a vassal like himself.

What had begun as a tension deep within his mind was increasing rapidly now to the point where, despite his collar, he was feeling acutely uncomfortable and distressed. He knew it was the hatchling's distress, not his own, but so acute had it become, he couldn't understand why no one else was aware of it.

He followed the General into the mess area, waiting the obligatory six paces behind him while he surveyed the off-duty personnel. Everyone was unsettled today, and they'd spent the morning visiting each work area for half an hour in an effort to reduce the tension.

A sudden movement from the group of Sholans caught his eye just as his mind was filled with a shriek of distress and a feeling of claustrophobia. He staggered back, bumping into the doorframe, clutching his head as the shriek sounded again. Confused and frightened, he began to whimper and cry.

Loud, angry voices sounded above him, then he was firmly grasped and picked up. Sholan scent— his father's— surrounded him as he felt himself being carried out of the mess and down the corridor. Gradually, the screams in his head began to fade. Aware of his surroundings again, he

realized the angry voices were his father and the General arguing heatedly over him.

"I'm taking him to the sick bay," Kusac was saying. "He's ill, dammit!"

Suddenly they were jerked to a standstill. "There's nothing wrong with the child, Kusac! You've no need to grab him in this way!"

"You're not a medic. I am and I know that telepathic kitlings of his age often throw sudden fevers caused by their awakening Talent. I want Doctor Zayshul to check him out!" snarled Kusac, pulling free of Kezule's grip and continuing on down the corridor.

"The labs and sick bay are out of bounds for you!" hissed Kezule, running to keep up with him. "I'll take him!"

"Like hell you will!"

Shaidan, the hatchling's cries now dulled to a faint echo, relaxed back against his father's chest, taking comfort from the arms that held him firmly, yet gently. It was a new experience, and not unpleasant. Tentatively, he closed his hand over his father's arm, grateful for the peace he'd brought him.

They were approaching the sick bay— he could smell the scent of the disinfectant they used.

"General! The Doctor needs you in your quarters!" said M'kou urgently, rushing out to greet them. "The alarm for the incubator..." The aide ground to a halt. In the distance, an alarm was suddenly silenced. "Your wife's in surgery on the Command level. She can't leave her patient."

"Escort Kusac to the medic on duty," snapped Kezule, pushing past him and running off toward the elevator.

Kusac slowed down and Shaidan lifted his head to look around.

"Incubator?" asked his father. "The General has a child?"

"An egg," confirmed M'kou, escorting them to the central nurses' stations. "The incubator alarm went off. I'm sure it's nothing but a blown fuse. What's wrong with Shaidan?"

"He collapsed in the mess. He's picking up something— at a guess I'd say the egg's hatching," said Kusac, his tone grim as he shifted his hold on his son.

"Are you sensing something?" M'kou asked Shaidan as Kusac sat him down on the edge of the counter.

He nodded, discovering his head ached.

"What can you sense?" M'kou sounded worried.

"She can't get out, the shell's too hard," Shaidan said, swaying slightly as the room seemed to spin about him. "She can't breathe."

M'kou's face took on a look of panic as he paled, obviously torn between running after the General and following his orders to remain with them.

"My son needs psi suppressant drugs," ordered Kusac, leaning across the console and grasping hold of the medic on duty. "Go to the General, M'kou," he said over his shoulder. "We'll be here when you return."

M'kou turned and ran.

The room was fading in and out as Shaidan found himself gasping for breath. "The Doctor... she knows... and she's afraid," he mumbled.

Strong hands took hold of his head, one on either side, holding him firmly, thumbs pressing against his temples.

"Shaidan, look at me," he heard his father saying, but he kept his eyes tightly shut.

"Shaidan!" The voice demanded obedience and he forced his eyelids open. "You're not the hatchling, Shaidan. Your life is separate from hers. Pull your mind back from her."

"I can't," he whimpered, looking into his father's amber eyes. "I don't know how!"

"Put up a shield between you and her."

"I can't."

With a hiss of impatience, Kusac glanced over his shoulder. "Hurry up with the drug!" he called out to the medic as she disappeared off to a treatment room. "I want you to imagine you are surrounded by a golden light," he said, lowering his voice. "It's all around you, whichever way you look. Can you see it?"

Shaidan tried to concentrate but his breath was coming in short gasps and his father's face was beginning to fade.

"A golden light, Shaidan," the Captain said, tilting his head up until their eyes locked again.

"A golden light," he repeated after a moment's hesitation. The room was beginning to recede again until all that remained were his father's glowing amber eyes.

\* \* \*

Kusac was well aware what Shaidan was experiencing because he felt it, too. As he tilted his cub's head up, he felt the metal collar round his son's neck. Vartra's Bones! His son could pick up the hatching egg despite the psi damper? He pushed his shock aside, concentrating on pitching his voice in a command tone and forcing his son to focus on his eyes. He had to do something now and initiating a light trance would only take him moments.

Dropping his hand inside the collar, he found his fingers automatically going to the point where the control circuits were embedded. Instinctively, as he reached for them with his mind, blocking the current so the device could no longer operate, he widened his mental shields to include Shaidan. That done, he reached for his son's mind, giving him the knowledge of

how to erect a mental shield, then withdrew. Relinquishing control of the collar, he retreated again behind his own shields, praying that while in the trance, Shaidan hadn't been aware of him using his own psi abilities.

"Can you see the golden glow?" he asked, breaking eye contact.

"Yes," said Shaidan, beginning to blink.

"Good. Now change it slowly until it becomes a bright blue. Can you do that?"

"Yes," the cub said after a moment. "Bright blue."

"Now imagine that blue glow wrapped around you, like a second skin. Nothing can get past it, no thoughts, not even those of the hatchling. All those sensations will fade until you can't feel them."

Shaidan nodded distractedly. "I can shield now, Captain."

"Then use your shield to distance yourself," said Kusac, holding onto the edges of the counter, feeling suddenly drained.

"Captain, here's the medication you asked for."

Gratefully, Kusac took the hypo from the medic. "I'm going to give you a shot, Shaidan. I know you said you can shield, but while you're wearing that collar, you shouldn't be picking up anything at all." He placed the nozzle against his son's neck and pressed the trigger.

\* \* \*

Kezule was standing by the incubator, unsure what to do when M'kou burst into the room.

"Take the cover off!" his son said, striding across to his side. "It needs air when it hatches."

Kezule unlatched it, taking the clear lid off and setting it down on a nearby table. Exposed, the egg lay motionless in its padded cradle, light glinting off the multicolored surface.

"It'll need food. They're starving when they hatch. And dangerous," Kezule said.

"I'll get some minced raw meat," M'kou said, heading for the food dispenser in the kitchen.

"General," he said when he returned. "Shaidan— he said the shell is too hard, you'll need to break it or the hatchling will die."

"What?" Kezule stared at him. "Break the shell? What if it's too soon? It would die!"

"It's not too soon," said M'kou.

Kezule glanced automatically toward the incubator. "We can't break the shell," he said, frowning.

Thrusting the plate at the General, M'kou pushed past him. The egg had begun to move slightly from side to side. He reached into the incubator.

"What're you doing?" demanded Zayshul suddenly from behind them.

Before either of them could react, M'kou had picked her egg up in both hands and tapped its side gently against the metal brackets that had supported it for the past three months.

Zayshul hissed in shock, reaching out to stop him, but M'kou neatly sidestepped her.

"I do know what I'm doing, Doctor," he reassured her, examining the egg closely. "Get me a towel or something to put inside the bottom of the incubator."

Automatically she went over to a drawer unit, glancing back uncertainly at M'kou.

"Put it down, M'kou," Kezule said, his voice taking on an edge. "I told you not to break the shell!"

"Then your child will die," M'kou said, ignoring the General as he held the egg against his chest and began to tap his claw tip on the faint crack line he'd created. "It needs air or it will suffocate."

"Leave it alone. If it's too weak to break the shell, then so be it." Kezule's voice was emotionless. He looked at Zayshul as she scabbled frantically in a drawer. "What was so important in sick bay?" he demanded. "You should have come here immediately the alarm sounded!"

"One of the engineers was badly injured. I had to operate on his hand. I left him with Ghidd'ah as soon as I could."

M'kou glanced briefly at him before giving the egg another, harder tap. "You don't want my sister to die— Father," he said quietly and deliberately as Zayshul ran back with a towel.

Shocked at being addressed so familiarly, Kezule could only stand and watch as Zayshul removed the egg cradle and placed the towel in the base of the incubator.

"In La'shol's name, I hope you know what you're doing," whispered Zayshul as she saw the tiny hole in the egg when M'kou placed it on the towel.

"I checked the databases before we left K'oish'ik, Doctor. You were both too busy to think of everything before we left," the young Prime said, moving aside as the egg started to rock gently. "This is an accepted medical procedure with Royal hatchings. I'd put the plate of meat in now," he added.

Kezule walked slowly round to the other side of the incubator. He knew that in a few minutes his life would change forever yet again. When he saw a tiny clawed finger thrust itself through the hole, then curl over the edge of the shell, he felt a brief moment of dizziness. He'd watched several hatchings, but never one of his own.

With a faint cracking sound, the shell around the finger collapsed inward. Then one small hand appeared, and another. The shell fragmented, exposing a tightly-curved green shape that slowly began to move. Large,

luminous yellow eyes blinked up at him then the wide mouth opened, tongue flicking out as it emitted a hoarse cry.

Intense hunger filled his mind. Opposite him, Zayshul gasped and reached down for their infant.

His hand instantly stopped hers. "It'll bite," he said warningly. "To the bone and beyond. I've seen a dozen of these..."

"I don't want to know," she interrupted, pulling her hand free. "This is our daughter, not some half-feral creature from your past!" She reached down and picked up the smallest piece of bloody meat then offered it to the hatchling.

The tongue flicked out briefly again, then, leaning forward unsteadily, the small female let her tongue touch Zayshul's hand, then the meat. She overbalanced, falling forward with cries of distress. Instantly Zayshul's other hand caught her and popped the piece of meat into the open mouth.

The cries stopped instantly as the infant began to chew with obvious pleasure.

Zayshul offered her a second piece of meat. This time, her hand was grasped for support before the hatchling's head lowered to pick it up.

"Be careful," said Kezule quietly.

Raising a face wreathed in smiles, Zayshul asked, "Of what? She knows me, Kezule! She knows I'm her mother. Our daughter won't harm me."

The words echoed inside his head. A daughter. In his time, at best she'd have been condemned to a life in someone else's harem, at worst, she'd have been killed as a surplus breeding female. Only sons had any value. Strangely, he was glad they'd had a daughter. The thought of watching another Zayshul grow to maturity and beyond in freedom pleased him. He had sons in plenty, both with him and back on the home world, he didn't need another.



Tentatively, he reached inside the incubator and ran a finger across the hatchling's back. She shivered slightly but otherwise ignored him, intent on stuffing her belly with food.

Feelings of pride began to fill him. "She's small for a female," he said lamely, taking his hand out.

"They double their size in the first two days," ventured M'kou, getting a blanket from the nearby crib. "She doesn't look much smaller than those I saw in the files."

"So you think your sister is fine?"

M'kou's expression of surprise made Kezule smile.

"She owes her life to you," said Zayshul, reaching down to pick up the nearly satiated infant and wrap her in the small blanket M'kou held out to her. "Thank you, M'kou. I can't thank you enough."

"I think she's beautiful," said M'kou, watching Zayshul cradle her daughter.

"She's like her mother," said Kezule, seeing the resemblance between them in the subtle shades of translucent blue and purple on his daughter's face.

"Just as M'kou is the son most like you," said Zayshul, stroking her infant's cheek as its eyelids began to droop.

Startled, Kezule glanced at his son, who looked away in embarrassment. "Really?"

"Of course he is!" said Zayshul, looking up at them. "Why do you continue to pretend you aren't related? I know how proud of them you are. Today, with the hatching of our daughter, Mayza, would be a good day to start acknowledging your other children."

"They don't need me to do that, they're fully grown," he murmured, trying to find somewhere to look where he wouldn't meet either Zayshul's or M'kou's gaze.

"Of course they do! They're proud to be your offspring, no matter how old they are."

He had to look at M'kou then.

"We'd never presume so much, General," he murmured, unwilling to raise his head.

Every one of his eighty tank-grown sons was different. One of the best combatants in his training unit before he'd been chosen as his aide, M'kou was indeed a son to be proud of. Their time together had been short, but in that time, his loyalty, attention to every detail, and willingness to do any task asked of him, no matter how trivial seeming, was second to none. It was something he'd never recognized till now.

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed. "M'kou, would you please inform your brothers and sisters about Mayza's hatching, then inform the rest of the station? We will arrange a private Naming Day Ceremony within the next three days. I expect them to be with us as family."

"He invites them, M'kou," Zayshul said, stopping her gentle crooning to her sleeping child. "Say he invites them as family."

"Yes, Doctor," said M'kou, a slight smile on his face as he beat a hasty retreat before the General, his father, embarrassed him any further.

\* \* \*

Up in his quarters on the hydroponics level, Giyarishis' head bobbed gently in a satisfied nod as he disengaged himself from Unity. Since the original dose of memory enhancing chemicals, the sand-dweller male was adapting as the Camarilla had planned. It was vital he developed a sense of family unity. Without that, none of the vital and more abstract loyalties to the community he was building could evolve.

\* \* \*

As he laid the sleeping kitling down on one of the beds, Kusac looked up at the nurse hovering nearby.

"When you see Doctor Zayshul next, tell her we must discuss matters of the cub's health as soon as possible," he said, pulling the cover over his son.

"I'll tell her, Captain."

Reluctantly, he left, knowing Shaidan would sleep for several hours. So Kezule and Zayshul had their own child now, had they? Then how could she be Shaidan's mother? Until now, he'd allowed himself to be diverted by Shaidan from his need to know the truth. No longer.

## Chapter 4

WHEN Kezule decided to change something, the changes happened fast. Within days, the military look of the Outpost had altered. Certain areas remained utilitarian and austere; others, like the mess and a newly opened up rec room, acquired ornaments and pictures on the walls—cushions even appeared in some of the easy chairs. All had been donated by the civilian Primes. They changed too, the females in particular, casting off the gray coveralls unless they were working to dress in brighter colors and different styles of clothing.

The General and his wife were seldom to be seen, so Kusac's desire to meet with Zayshul was constantly frustrated. He had to be content with discussing his son's possible needs as a young telepath with Ghidd'ah, her second in charge. His meetings with Shaidan went on as before, though his son was quieter, if it were possible, since the hatching of the egg. The atmosphere between them grew more and more strained. Kusac decided to teach him about Shola using his portable comp unit from the *Venture II*. At first resistant to the idea, gradually Shaidan thawed, absorbing all Kusac could show him. For his part, he learned that though Shaidan's programming prevented his son from asking questions, if left to operate the comp himself, he'd search for what he wanted to know.

After the first fortnight, the training sessions began to fall into a familiar pattern. With Kezule's sixteen officer offspring, Kusac and his crew found themselves quickly outclassed by their sheer physical speed and strength. He placed the emphasis of their training instead on problem solving and working together as a team to complete their given task. For this, he requested the use of the unused field areas on the hydroponics level. There, with the help of the land and an irrigation stream, he and his crew were able to divide the area in two and create a variety of challenging scenarios.

For the fourteen half-M'zullians, he had to adopt a totally different approach, but one which also emphasized the need for mutual cooperation and teamwork. He based their training on assault courses set up either in one of the remaining two unused gyms, where they took turns at defending and attacking a flag post, or in the hydroponics level fields. This he

coupled with maintenance courses in looking after their weapons and the shuttles on the *N'zishok*.

The civilian groups, by far the largest units, were much easier to work with. Kezule had assigned them to him exclusively for blocks of four weeks so each group could complete their basic training and discipline before going back to their normal duties in the labs, sick bay, and other nonmilitary areas.

During the days, after meal breaks, he would scan the corridors between the gym and the mess, hoping for a sight of Zayshul. He continued to visit the sick bay every few days, only to be given the same answer each time—the needs of her young daughter were such that she was off duty for the foreseeable future.

### **Zhal-Rojae 22nd day (November)**

Kezule walked slowly round the thirty growth tubes neatly stacked to one side of the disused temple on the Command level. His people had just finished bringing them up from the main landing bay where a TeLaxaudin vessel had deposited them less than two hours ago. It had arrived without warning, landed and unloaded the cargo automatically, then just as abruptly, had left.

"Are they in full working order, Giyarishis?" he asked.

The translator spat some static, then said, "Yes."

"And the controls for them came as well?"

"Are in room next this one."

Kezule stopped and regarded the small, almost insectoid-looking alien. "The ship was automated, you say?"

"Pilot only. No translator, no talk you." The alien turned away from the General, his draperies exuding a scent of anticipation. "I go. Get installed

now," Giyarishis said as he stalked out of the room on his spindly bronze legs.

"Give him what help he needs," Kezule said to the civilian engineers standing waiting for his orders as he turned to leave the room. Nothing the TeLaxaudin did surprised him these days, but at least the arrival of the tanks meant those of his people who wanted to breed could now do so.

His daughter's hatching had made many of the females broody, but despite his wife's assurances as a doctor that they could all carry their own young safely, they refused to even consider it without the growth tanks to which they'd become accustomed. Now they could really start to build a community.

### **Zhal-Rojae 23rd day (November)**

As usual, Kusac left the hydroponics level just before the end of the last session of the day. Banner waited a moment or two before ambling over to Khadui.

"Wind the class up for me, I got to go visit the head."

He followed Kusac's scent down the stairs to the Officers' level and was heading toward the main elevator to the Command level when, rounding a corner, he stopped dead as he saw Kusac join M'kou and Shaidan. Staying out of sight, he strained his ears forward trying to catch what they were saying. He could hear very little, only the odd word before the elevator door opened and closed, then silence.

"The Command elevator is out of bounds," said a quiet voice from behind him.

He spun round, finding himself face-to-face with one of the Prime females. The one-piece coverall was gray, denoting that she was a civilian.

"I'm looking for the rest rooms," he said. "Must have taken a wrong turn."

"I'll show you," she said, reaching out to grasp his arm.

As she led him down the corridor opposite, past the side of the sick bay, he was aware of the pressure of her hand on his arm changing, becoming lighter as her fingers stroked at his pelt.

"We have a recreation room, Banner," she said. "I have your name right, don't I? You're the only other black Sholan. You should come there tonight. We have entertainments. Books, games to play, and some of the males are starting to synthesize alcoholic drinks. We also have an ale brewed from the plants in hydroponics. It must be lonely for you all, so far from home and with so few of your own kind here."

"I'm Banner," he agreed, resisting the urge to pull his arm away. "We're all used to working away from home for long periods."

"The General wants us to mingle with you, get to know you, make your time with us pleasant," she said, glancing sideways at him, her large green eyes blinking slowly. "We can't do that if you remain in your quarters when off duty. We're quite harmless, you know, not like the M'zullian Warriors. I worked with Doctor Zayshul on the *Kz'adul* in the labs. I'm a civilian, as you would call it. My name's Ghidd'ah."

"Pleased to meet you," he said, absorbing the information that she'd worked with the Doctor. Maybe she could be a useful contact. "Perhaps you're right. I'll see if I can bring our people to the rec room later tonight."

"Good," she smiled, stopping beside a door labeled in both Valtegan and Sholan script. "See, we are trying to make you welcome. This is the M'zullians' area but they're all on duty just now. The rec room is on the corridor outside your quarters and is the second door on your right when heading for the main elevator. I'll see you later, then. Say, in two hours?"

He nodded and carefully retrieved his arm. "Make it three," he said. He wanted to speak to Kusac first.

\* \* \*

When Banner got back to the hydro level, he found the other three waiting for him.

"We need to talk," said Khadui.

"Very well," he said. He'd been expecting trouble for several days. "I suggest we get our meals and take them back to our communal lounge. Agreed?"

Fifteen minutes later, the already small living area seemed to have shrunk as they sat round the dining table.

"Spit it out then, Khadui," Banner said, using his fork to spear a couple of chunks of synthesized meat. "What's bothering you?"

"We want to know what Kusac's doing to get the cub back. Whenever we see Shaidan, he's trailing after General Kezule. All we seem to do is train the Primes."

"Kusac's told you, so have I, that training them is part of what he's here to do," Banner replied, choosing some of the vegetables this time.

"What we're here to do," corrected Dzaou.

"No," said Banner. "Don't forget we insisted on accompanying him. Kezule only wanted Kusac because of his AIReI skills."

Khadui gave a small growl of exasperation. "Same difference. *Do* you know what he's doing, Banner?"

"I know," he said calmly, putting his fork down to dip his chunk of bread into the gravy. "And when you need to be told, you will be."

Dzaou snorted his disbelief. "That's crap and you know it. You're as much in the dark as we are!"

"You think the Captain's going to confide in you with your attitude, Dzaou?" he asked, using the bread to help scoop up a forkful of vegetables. "You only follow his orders when it suits you as it is."

"He's no longer our Captain," said Dzaou. "This isn't a real mission, it's his own crusade."



Banner glanced up at him as he put his fork down and reached for his hot herbal drink. "You think rescuing a Sholan cub isn't something we should all be working together on? The only reason it isn't a mission is because Stronghold knew nothing about it before we left."

"I've no problem with Kusac as Captain," said Jayza, the youngest member of the group, speaking for the first time.

Banner acknowledged his comment with a barely perceptible twitch of his ear.

"Shut up, Jayza. That's not what I meant, Banner, and you know it," said Dzaou angrily. "Our original mission was to get what Kezule had by any means possible and bring it back! That means this cub, too!"

"That's what Kusac is doing," said Banner, picking up his fork again. "The means he's using are those Kezule has asked for, namely training his people and helping him set them up as a viable community. Why risk all our lives in a firefight when it isn't necessary? It isn't as if Kezule is refusing to give us the cub."

"He's got a point," agreed Khadui. "No need to escalate the situation if Kezule's being reasonable. And Kusac is keeping Banner briefed as to what's happening."

"I don't believe he is," said Dzaou. "I think Banner's lying to protect him because they were lovers!"

"And I think you're seeing monsters in shadows," said Jayza, reaching out to pick up his drinking bowl.

"I said shut up!" snarled Dzaou, knocking over the drink as he rounded on Jayza.

In the shocked silence that followed, Banner pushed his chair back and went over to the small sink to fetch a cloth. Returning to the table, he began to mop up the spill as Jayza and Khadui began to hurriedly lift plates and bowls for him.

"I stand by what I said," growled Dzaou belligerently, lifting his crockery. "Prove that you're not lying! Tell us what he does every day after lessons for two hours!"

"Are you by any chance Challenging me, Dzaou?" Banner asked, his voice deceptively mild as he threw the soggy cloth back toward the sink and sat down. "Because I suggest you think again. Challenges are illegal in the Brotherhood in this time. Kusac and I merely shared a cabin on the *Couana*."

Dzaou leaned back in his chair and laughed. "I don't need to Challenge you, Banner! You can't answer me because you don't know, do you?"

He quickly weighed his options. A scuffle, especially in their cramped surroundings, was to no one's benefit. Add in the possibility that the ancient vid comms might still be active and Prime Security could be watching them...

"On the contrary. The Captain goes down to the Command level to work with General Kezule and Shaidan. It's a way of exposing the cub to our influence without it being too great a shock to him."

"Makes sense," said Khadui as Dzaou began to curse quietly.

"Dzaou, for your insubordination, you'll copy out all the Litanies and the Creed, in full, in your Prime reader for tomorrow," he said. "Dismissed."

"What?" Dzaou looked at him in shock.

"You heard me, Brother Dzaou," he said, his tone sharp and uncompromising as he got to his feet. "Get going. Khadui, escort him back to his quarters."

"Yes, Lieutenant," said Khadui, rising.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Jayza awkwardly when they'd left.

"Would you mind going down to the *Venture* and bringing some of the coffee up here? I could really do with a cup of it right now."

"How about I get five mugs as well?" grinned the young male.

"Fantastic idea! I hate those Prime bowls. They've got no handles and you end up burning your hands if you want a drink that's halfway warm," he said, starting to stack the plates. "I'll take these back to the mess while you're gone."

Jayza hesitated at the door. "Banner, I don't go along with Dzaou's crazy notions. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, Jayza. We have to hang on here together for now, and not let Dzaou, or anyone, divide us."

\* \* \*

As Kusac opened the door to his quarters, a familiar aroma, and scent, filled his nostrils. "Coffee, Banner?" he asked as he entered. "And our mugs."

"I sent Jayza down to the *Venture* to get some this afternoon," said Banner from his perch on one of the high chairs at the meal bar as he filled a mug for Kusac. "I also saw M'kou about programming it into their dispensers. It'll be available tomorrow," he said. "You don't seem surprised to see me."

"The locks are easy to open," he said, unfastening his belt and taking off his robe. "What's wrong?" he asked as he refastened the belt over his tunic and joined his Second at the bar.

"Nothing much," Banner said, pushing a mug over to him. "Just wanted to talk over a few things with you."

He took a drink, savoring the taste. "Ten minutes," he said. "I'm really tired tonight. So what's up?"

"Dzaou's talking up trouble again."

"He was wrong for this job from the start."

"He's certainly lost none of his xenophobia," Banner agreed. "But he's got Khadui round to his way of thinking. It was he who brought up the topic of Shaidan, not Dzaou."

Kusac grunted. "Tell me what happened."

"We went back to my quarters to have third meal because Khadui wanted to talk. He wants to know what you're doing to get Shaidan back. I told him that you'd already briefed us and I had briefed them as well. That's when Dzaou started making his allegations."

"Same ones as usual?" he asked, taking another drink from the mug.

"Same, only this time he claimed that you were keeping us all, me especially, in the dark." Banner stopped to take a drink.

He reached for a spoon and began concentrating on stirring his coffee. He didn't like the way this conversation was going. "And?" he asked when Banner didn't continue.

"I said you were keeping me up to date, and he accused me of lying. Which, of course, I was."

The words hung there, pregnant with meaning.

When he didn't answer, Banner continued. "I asked him if he was trying to Challenge me. He said no, but demanded proof, which I don't have because you aren't keeping me briefed, Kusac." There was no rancor in his tone, just a quiet acceptance of reality.

"So what did you say?" he asked quietly.

"I made it up, spun him a tale about how your meetings after classes are with Kezule and Shaidan so that the cub gets used to Sholan company slowly. Khadui was convinced, but not Dzaou, so I sent him to his quarters to copy out the Creed and the Litanies in full for tomorrow."

He looked up at Banner, a slight smile playing round the corners of his mouth. "You didn't, did you?"

Banner nodded. "I had to. I don't like being left out on a limb, Kusac. Either you trust me or you don't, but at least have the courage to tell me which to my face."

"It's not a matter of trust," he said. "The teaching that we're doing is transparent—you all have copies of the training program. The rest is AlRel work, most of which is a matter of instinct and decisions made on the run when a situation crops up. Work for which none of you are trained."

"I accept that, but a debriefing on what you've been doing every few days would allow me to deal with situations like today's from a position of knowledge. I don't like lies, Kusac, and the rest of the crew want to feel we're doing something concrete about Shaidan. The longer we're here, the more he's under the influence of Kezule and the Primes. They want to know he's also being exposed to us."

He sighed. It had been foolish of him to think he could keep his visits to the Command level secret. "He is. What you said wasn't far from the truth. I spend the time with Shaidan, teaching him what it is to be Sholan."

"Why couldn't you tell me that?"

"Because I didn't want grief from the rest of you on who was more suited to work with him. It's nonnegotiable. It must be me."

"No one would have argued with you, Kusac. You've got the training and you're the only one of us who's a father."

"Dzaou would have argued."

"No one would have listened to him," said Banner dismissively. "Look, I've been thinking this over. Especially because of Dzaou, we need something to pull us together, something external to ourselves to focus on. Would Kezule let us set up a shrine to Vartra here?"

"A shrine?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes. Normally on a mission like this we have the familiarity of our religious observances to fall back on, but we don't here. I think it would help. And I know just the person to organize the shrine. Jayza. After I'd sent Khadui to take Dzaou back to his quarters, the lad told me he didn't believe anything Dzaou said. You've at least one loyal crew member there, Kusac."

"Two, actually," he said quietly, well aware of just how much trust Banner had put in him when he'd lied to the rest of the crew. "Jayza's already working on the Prime cultural databases in the evenings for me. Wouldn't that be giving him too much to do?"

"I'm pretty sure Jayza would see it as a privilege to be asked to organize it. There's not a lot for us to do here in the evenings except train and keep each other company—which allows Dzaou the opportunity to gripe—or go to the rec room."

"Just before I came back this evening, I was talking to Kezule about the need for his people to start up a religion to replace their Emperor worship. I'll call M'kou about that tonight before I have a shower. I know there're two temples on this level, one at each side of the Outpost. Most religions use fire in one way or another, so likely they'll have the necessary braziers and fuel." It might even bring him some peace to get involved once more in the familiar rituals and prayers.

Banner drained his mug and got down from his chair. "And I'll go tell Jayza and Khadui what we're planning, then drop into this rec room. You know what surprises me most about Dzaou's rant today, Kusac? Khadui believing it. I'd have thought someone as mature as him wouldn't have been taken in by such a hot-head. I'd have thought it would appeal to Jayza."

"Khadui and Dzaou go back a long way," said Kusac, finishing his drink and putting his mug back on the bar.

"I don't see how they can, not when Dzaou's from the past." He stopped and stared at Kusac, his mouth dropping open in surprise. "Ah. I see. I should have worked that one out for myself."

Kusac said nothing, just tilted his ears back slightly.

"I'll see you in the morning, Kusac," Banner said.

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"A shrine, Captain?" said M'kou, glancing to one side of his comm screen.  
"A moment, please. The General's in his office. I'll ask him."

He came back a few minutes later. "General Kezule says that there's no problem. You can use the temple near your quarters. And, yes, the fittings for the braziers are still there. We also have some stocks of incense and candles which we're prepared to share with you. Who'll be in charge of setting up your shrine? You?"

"No. Brother Jayza," he said.

"I'll see that one of our people meets him outside the gym after lessons tomorrow. They can take him to the temple and show him where everything is stored and how it works. If you send me a list of anything else you might need tonight, I'll see it's there for him tomorrow."

"Thank you, M'kou."

## **Zhal-Rojae 30th day (November)**

Banner's plan to allay the Primes' suspicions of him and the rest of the crew was bearing moderate fruit. With his and Jayza's regular appearances in the rec room, Kezule's officers had finally relaxed in their company, almost to the same level as the civilians. Dzaou and Khadui they still regarded with some suspicion, but given the former's attitude, that was not surprising.

Now he could risk scouting round the one area of their level, apart from the elevators, that was guarded during the outpost day— the engineering substation. During their first few weeks, work on rerouting engineering and power had still been ongoing, and occasional blackouts, accompanied by klaxon warnings to report immediately to the nearest public area where

emergency life support was located, had not been uncommon. The situation had settled down lately, though, and his empathic Gift told him both crew and civilians were definitely more at ease.

The Outpost was a huge rectangular box set inside the hollowed out asteroid. As far as Banner could make out, there were nine levels in all. He'd identified only four of them for certain so far, as he'd found no subtle way yet to ask the questions he needed answered. Those four were the main landing bay where the *Venture* and Kezule's ship, the *N'zishok*, were berthed, the Command Level immediately above that, the Officers level where they were, and above them, the hydroponics level. When they'd arrived, he'd seen the muzzle of some giant gun sticking out beneath the landing platform so he presumed there was an access deck for that, but how many more there were, he'd no idea.

He'd made it his business during their first few days on board to blunder round their level, constantly getting lost until he'd painstakingly managed to construct a reasonable map of it. The next day, M'kou had come up to him and handed him several copies of the Outpost's official map. "To stop you getting lost so often, Lieutenant Banner," he'd said with gentle irony.

It had been as accurate as his own, but he knew that like the other unused rooms— fully one third of the level— the engineering substation had not been shown.

"There's one for each of you," M'kou had said. "You're free to move about the level any time of the day or night, but the elevators will be guarded and your access to other levels restricted unless you have the appropriate clearance to go there. Each corridor junction has an air lock which will normally be open unless there is an emergency, in which case a klaxon will sound and a message will be broadcast telling you what to do. There are five lateral corridors, numerically named starting with the main one joining the two main elevators which is called Corridor One. Each of these corridors has a public room in it." He pointed to the Valtegan temple on the map. "That's the one nearest to you. There's also the gyms, temples, and the mess. Those rooms have emergency life-support systems in the event of a breakdown of power or a hull breach. Each corridor will be immediately isolated and you will have exactly one minute to make your way to the public room nearest you or be trapped where you are."



M'kou had looked up at him then. "Air locks to the unused rooms are locked, Lieutenant, because we are not providing life support to them. The side corridors, running from port to starboard," he had continued, pointing to the map again, "are named alphabetically starting with Corridor A, the one immediately on your right when you come out of the main elevator by the Admin office. Please also stay away from Corridors 4 B, 4 C, and 5. The M'zullians are berthed there, on the starboard side, well away from the rest of us. The General cannot vouch for your safety if you go straying into their area."

He'd thanked the young Prime Officer and taken the maps to Kusac, who'd handed them out to the others, getting him to repeat M'kou's pep talk, then adding one of his own which amounted to keeping their noses out of anything that didn't concern the job for which they'd come here.

What he was about to do went directly against Kusac's orders, but he wanted some leverage he could apply against Kezule if necessary. Kusac might be prepared to play Kezule's game, but as far as Banner was concerned, anyone who used coercion to get what they wanted could just as easily break their word if it suited them.

Knowing the Primes would conduct at least one major security check on them and their possessions, he'd removed all the extra little devices and aids they kept concealed within their uniforms. For the first few weeks, after any visit to the *Venture*, they'd been searched physically and electronically, but as their presence on the Outpost became more accepted, Security had relaxed a little. On a particularly rushed day, he'd been able to smuggle them off their craft.

As far as he could make out, the engineering room was manned and operational during the day, but at night, they locked it down, probably continuing to monitor it remotely from the main command center.

The room was located in Corridor 2D, opposite the Prime Temple and next to the main assembly hall, both of which rooms should be empty at this hour of the night. The partitions between the rooms were fairly thin and he'd heard both Jayza and Dzaou settling down for the night some time ago, and Kusac rarely left his rooms in the evenings. Putting his map

away in his desk drawer, he reached for the bottle of spirits beside him and took a quick mouthful. He grimaced at the taste. If he was stopped, he could pretend he was drunk and had got lost. Getting to his feet, he turned off the light.

Opening the door manually, he checked the small corridor outside their rooms, glancing at Kusac's door opposite. As he expected, it was deserted and all corridor lighting had been reduced to station night. Turning right, he headed down Corridor 3 toward the junction with B, the main one running from port to starboard. At this time, the air lock to the elevator up to hydroponics would be locked rather than open and guarded. Taking a left into B, he skirted the outside of the gym, bearing left at the iris junction into Corridor 2. He hesitated, checking the air but the scents there were several hours old. Just beyond the gym was the entrance to the head and the showers where he planned to conceal himself.

Turning his attention to the door opposite, he watched and waited, straining his ears for any noise. Apart from the almost subliminal continuous sound of the air recycling system, it was silent. Lifting the edge of his tunic, he teased a fine piece of rigid metal from the hem then darted quickly across to the other doorway.

There were two locking mechanisms, one an electronic keypad, the other activated by a conventional metal key. The difficult part would be getting the electronic lock open without tripping any alarms there might be if he got the code wrong. Since they'd arrived at Kij'ik, he'd made a point of being near any of the Primes when they opened locked doors. So far he'd identified five codes, each used in different areas. Very few rooms on this level were locked to them beyond individual personal quarters. The temple and gyms were always open, as was the main rec area and the mess. Only the two briefing rooms with their tactical data screens and terminals, the food stores, and admin were locked when not in use— and this room.

Ears pricked for the slightest sound, he took a deep breath and ran the most likely sequence of Valtegan symbols over in his mind before keying them in. The red eye continued to glare balefully at him and he steeled himself for the sound of a klaxon. Nothing happened, all remained quiet. There was the possibility it was a silent alarm, though, one that only went

off in Security. Those kind usually had a short delay on them to allow the user to correct his mistake. He'd been so sure it was the right code—it was the one the Primes used to open the briefing rooms. Heart beating, he ran through the sequence mentally again, realizing he'd left out the final symbol. Hurriedly pressing it, he was relieved to see the light change to green. A moment's work with his piece of wire and the door clicked open.

The room was in darkness, but the flickering lights from the two control consoles created more than enough illumination for him. Five minutes later, he slipped back out into the corridor.

### **Three weeks later: Recreation lounge, Zhal-Kuushoi 18th day, Month of Winter (December)**

"Have you heard anything I've said in the last half hour, Kusac?" asked Banner, covering Kusac's hand with his own in an effort to get his attention.

"Of course I have," Kusac said, becoming aware again of the sound of laughter and conversation around him in the recreation room. He waited a moment before carefully removing his hand. "You were telling me how your visit to their new temple went."

"Thinking of home?" asked Banner sympathetically.

"Yes," he replied, because it was better than the truth.

"It's coming up to Kashini's first birthday, isn't it?"

He closed his eyes as a feeling akin to pain swept through him. How could he have forgotten his daughter's first birthday? "It was on the seventh," he said quietly. Was he losing all touch with his old life these days?

"I'm sorry you missed it," said Banner sympathetically. "You'll have a lot of catching up to do when we finally leave here."

He waved his hand dismissively, shutting his distress away. "Tell me again what you were saying."

"I was telling you that they've asked if they can join us at our midwinter celebrations."

He raised an eye ridge and picked up his glass for the first time, draining the small shot of spirits. "What do the others say?"

Banner shrugged. "Dzaou, predictably, was the only one to object. I think we should let them. It isn't as if there will be any dancing."

"We don't even have drums," he murmured, fleeting images of the previous year's festival passing through his mind. How would she see such a celebration? What would impress a Prime female, he wondered, then dismissed the thought in horror.

"Khadui's already working on several ideas for that. When did you start going native?"

The question jerked his attention back to Banner. "What?"

"The beaded bracelet," his Second said, pointing to his right wrist. "It's what several of the Prime females are wearing."

He looked down at the broad band tied on round his wrist, seeing as if for the first time the animalistic shapes on it picked out in different colors of beads. "Shaidan gave it to me. He's been taught to make them for their festival."

"He gave it to you three days ago. Why are you still wearing it? Dzaou and Khadui are complaining about it."

"That's their problem," Kusac responded curtly, pulling his sleeve over his wrist. "Why should I upset Shaidan to please them?"

"Why should it upset Shaidan if you stop wearing it?" Banner asked reasonably, taking a sip from his glass. "I think you're getting too involved with this kitling, thinking like a father. He isn't your son, Kusac."

"He needs someone to be involved with him if he's ever going to adjust to being Sholan," he said, getting to his feet and going over to the bar. He closed his eyes briefly, wondering how much longer he'd be able to hide his son's true identity from Banner and the others.

Taking the two fresh drinks back to the table, he put one in front of his Second before sitting down.

"Kezule is using the cub against you, Kusac. He knows your vulnerabilities, can't you see that? Let one of us teach him, distance yourself while you can."

"No," he replied sharply. "It has to be me. No one else can teach him what he needs to know."

"Because you were a telepath?" Banner asked quietly, leaning closer. "Every time you're with him, you risk both of them finding out you've got a device that gives you some of your Talent back. If that happens, we lose our advantage, maybe even our freedom."

"No," he said, looking up as he picked up his glass. "This is my mission. I didn't ask anyone to come with me. I play it my way."

"You may be fooling yourself, Kusac, but no one else. Kezule is running this show from start to finish! How much longer does he intend to keep us here?"

"I've told you before, you can leave any time," he replied, taking a sip of his drink, aware of the scent of two female Primes approaching their table. "But I notice you've been finding the company here interesting enough to stay."

Banner frowned. "What the hell do you mean by that?" he asked as the two females stopped beside them.

He looked up, acknowledging their presence with a nod. "Do introduce me to your friends," he said pointedly, looking back at Banner.

Banner's ears twitched back fractionally in annoyance before righting themselves. "Lorish and Kiosh," he said, trying to keep his tone light. "Our Captain, Kusac Aldatan."

"Nice to meet you, Captain," said Kiosh, taking an empty seat. "We've come to ask you to help with our celebration ceremony since you're the only serving priest among our people— and yours."

"Excuse me?" he asked, startled for the second time that evening. "Who told you that? We're all priests."

"We know that, the General told us," said Lorish, taking the other chair. "But you're the only one who wears the priest's robes, and you were working for your temple before you came here, so Banner told us."

"That makes you the natural choice," added Kiosh, smiling.

"I know nothing about your religions," he said, not wanting to get drawn into this. "I'll be of little help to you."

"On the contrary," said Lorish, reaching out to catch his hand where it lay on the table. "Seeing you willing to take part would be most helpful. It would encourage all our people to come. What we're doing would be considered revolutionary on our world where the Emperor is still worshiped as a God."

Carefully, he removed his hand, picking up his glass as he did to hide the fact that her touch was disturbing him.

"I know. I discussed the matter with Kezule several weeks ago," he murmured, sitting back a little way from them so their scent was less strong. "We'll all come, of course, but I really can't get involved in the actual ceremony."

"It's nothing that would offend your gods," Kiosh reassured him. "Gifts are brought and we would like you to be one of the bearers, nothing more."

"You don't have much involvement with the civilian side of our lives," said Lorish. "This is the first time you've come to the rec room. Taking part would show everyone that you, the Warriors' teacher, see value in the spiritual side of our lives."

"That will be obvious on the twenty-sixth at our midwinter celebration," he said before taking a sip of his drink.

"But it'll make more impact at our ceremony," said Kiosh quietly. "Doctor Zayshul suggested we ask you. She'll explain what you need to know tomorrow."

He turned his head to look at her, aware of the underlying tone of conspiracy in her voice. "Doctor Zayshul will be there?" he asked as casually as he could. "I've been trying to speak to her for some time now."

"She'll be there," said Kiosh. "At 13:00 hours in the temple."

He finished his drink and put the glass down on the table. "I'll be there," he said, getting to his feet. "But I can't promise I'll be involved in your ceremony. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll leave you in the company of my Second. A headache has been plaguing me all day."

"Would you like me to bring something from the sick bay to your quarters? I know the Doctor has listed the medications you can use."

"Sleep is all I need," he replied, seeing Banner's eye ridges meet as he picked up his Second's concern. "Good night."

Banner had watched the interchange between the two females and Kusac with interest. He, Khadui, and Jayza had spent enough time in the rec room over the last few weeks to be reasonably relaxed in Prime company now. The females were interested in all the Sholans, but particularly in Kusac. With him, they seem to instantly adopt an intimacy that he knew wasn't warranted: him alone they were anxious to touch as freely as if they, too, were Sholans.

"Your Captain doesn't relax easily, does he?" said Kiosh as if she'd been following at least part of his thoughts. "How did you manage to persuade him to come here tonight?"

"I did nothing special," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I said I was coming, that's all. Tell me, what's his attraction?" He made his tone light, widening his eyes ingenuously. "You females seem to like being around him."

Kiosh looked at Lorish then back at him.

"He's a leader," said Lorish with a grin, blinking her large eyes slowly. "We don't see him often as Kiosh said, nothing more."

"There's more than that, I'm sure," he said, idly swirling the remainder of his drink round in his glass. "You all fuss over him given half a chance."

"We fuss over all of you," said Kiosh, leaning forward to stroke his cheek briefly. "You feel so soft with all that fur."

With his empathic senses, he could pick up a mixture of uncertainty and concern from them now, despite Kiosh's bravado in touching him. "Let me guess," he joked, pursuing the point. "You have a wager to see who'll be the first to seduce one of us."

Their body language gave them away instantly, even if their emotions hadn't.

Lorish giggled nervously. "What a strange thing to think," she said.

"Not really," he said, mouth widening in a smile like theirs. "It's what our females would do if the situation were reversed."

"That's dreadful," Kiosh laughed. "All right, you've guessed our secret!"

"Kiosh!"

"What's wrong with telling him that?" said Kiosh defensively. "He said they'd do the same." She turned back to look at him. "Your Captain's more distant than any of you, except for the one called Dzaou. He's just rude."

"Ah," he said, raising his glass to his lips and taking another sip. They were telling him part of the truth at least. "So he's more of a challenge."



"It makes him more attractive," agreed Kiosh. "Not that we're blind to your charms, of course."

"Of course," he agreed. "Tell me more about this ceremony of yours."

## **Hydroponics level: Zhal-Kuushoi 19th day (December)**

Kusac was watching a group of three M'zullians work their way toward one of four on the newly configured assault course when Banner touched him on the arm.

"General's here," Banner said in a low voice.

"I know," he acknowledged, continuing to watch the M'zullians as the attackers dodged the hail of electronic shots from the four defenders.

"He wants you."

Kusac sighed. "Take over," he said, handing him the reader. "Keep an eye on Chazukk. He's still trying to edge Zarkil away from the rest of his unit so he'll get picked off."

He turned and headed over to the low fence where the General waited, Shaidan standing his usual six steps behind.

"How would you and your crew like some time planetside?" Kezule asked when he joined him. "I think it's time my people put into practice what they've been learning."

Surprised, Kusac glanced back at the M'zullians. "You'll need more than us to control them," he said. "They're far more volatile than the ones we trained on Shola."

"I intend to include some of my officers as well. I believe you Sholans enjoy a wager now and then. I've a fancy to have a little one with you."

"I'm not here to make bets with you, Kezule," said Kusac, suddenly impatient. "I want to get this job finished and take my son home."

"We've still a way to go yet, Captain, you might as well enjoy what entertainment you can find here," drawled Kezule, giving him a long look. "I'm aware of how intriguing our females find you and your crew. So far you've ignored them, but you're at liberty to accept any invitations."

Kusac bristled, disliking the implications, feeling his hair starting to rise. With an effort, he forced it down again.

"Perhaps you'll find what I've planned more to your taste, then. We've been surveying a planet in the adjacent solar system. It's uninhabited by higher life-forms as yet, but it does have some interesting herd beasts. I believe it's the one my contemporaries used to keep the Outpost stocked with fresh food. I'm proposing a hunting trip lasting three days to capture livestock and fresh meat. My officers will be commanding groups of M'zullians and civilians. You can lead your own crew, Captain."

"Hankering after the smell of blood and raw flesh, Kezule?" asked Kusac, raising an eye ridge in mock surprise. "And here was me thinking you'd given all that up. I'm surprised you're suggesting we hunt on our own. Aren't you afraid we'll disappear?"

"Not in the least," said Kezule, ignoring the gibe. "I know what you want and it will remain here, secure on Kij'ik. As to the wager, I'll bet any group of my people against yours for the larger total of kills and live captures."

"What're the stakes?" he asked. "Since you're not paying us, it can't be money."

Kezule turned to Shaidan. "Go and find the TeLaxaudin and see if he needs any help," he ordered. "I'll meet you in his office when I'm finished."

Shaidan ducked his head in a sketchy bow and ran off. Kezule turned back to Kusac. "I'll wager what you want most, not for two hours, but for two nights."

Kusac stared at him. "In return for what?" he asked slowly. This offer was totally unexpected. Kezule obviously assumed he'd want Shaidan to stay with him for the extra time, but did he? His relationship with his son

wasn't going smoothly. The kitling still resented having to come to him each evening, despite his interest in the information he could access through the comm unit. More exposure to him would not improve the situation.

"What you've refused to give me. My wife and the TeLaxaudin want to do a brain scan and run some tests on you to make a series of learning tapes. When they're done, I'd like you to take a sleep tape yourself about our culture so you can compare it to your own and really start working on the main purpose of your visit here."

His anger flared and he opened his mouth to refuse when an image of acceptance flashed into his mind's eye. It had happened to him before and in the past he'd trusted it. "I can ask for anything?" he said, suddenly confident that if he lost, with the torc's help, he could withstand any brain scan.

"Within reason," said Kezule. "I will not deprogram Shaidan for that time."

"I accept," he said. "If you allow me some time alone with your wife."

Shock and surprise crossed Kezule's face. Obviously it had never occurred to him he'd be interested in anything other than Shaidan.

"Out of the question," began Kezule, skin darkening and crest beginning to rise in anger.

"I'm asking for a few hours to talk to her," he interrupted. "Nothing more. I need some answers about my time on the *Kz'adul* and only she can give them to me." He tilted his head to one side, mouth widening in a humorless grin. "You aren't jealous, are you, Kezule? I hear you don't restrict yourself to your wife, that you've two other females as well. Even if I did want her company overnight, she surely has the same right to choose a lover as you do. Our females have. More accurately, they allow us the same rights as they take!"

"Out of the question!" repeated Kezule with a hiss of anger.

Kusac shrugged and turned to rejoin Banner. "Then there's no bet." If he'd judged Kezule right, the General would change his mind.

Kezule's hand clamped round his arm like a vise, jerking Kusac back to face him. "You can speak to her alone for an hour, no more!" he hissed, claws digging into Kusac's arm.

"Unacceptable," said Kusac, reaching up his other hand to pry himself free of Kezule's grip. The claws tightened, resisting him. He felt a brief tingle from his torc, then a rush of light-headedness before a feeling of displacement came over him. As if he was standing outside his body, he watched himself force the General's hand away from his arm with a strength that made Kezule wince—a strength that until that moment, he'd never possessed. Suddenly he was back, looking out at the General from behind his own eyes with a clear knowledge of how Naacha, the Cabbaran mystic, had taught him to reach deep within himself to enhance his strength.

"Don't ever do that to me again, Kezule," he said gently, watching the Valtegan flex his bruised fingers. "I'm not your prisoner. You need my cooperation. I want three hours with Zayshul. Alone."

"Two, dammit! You can have two hours, no more," Kezule snarled, tongue flicking out as he spoke. "Tell your trainees there's a briefing about the trip in the assembly hall at 19:00 hours— and be there yourself."

Watching the General's back as he stalked off toward the hydroponics lab, Kusac was quietly pleased. He'd expected only one hour. Now all that remained was to win the bet.

\* \* \*

"What was all that about?" asked Banner as he rejoined his Second.

"Later," he said briefly, as he focused his thoughts on Naacha. Bit by bit, what had happened after Annuur and Kzizysus had operated on him to restore his Talent was coming back to him. He remembered how the Cabbaran had made him angry to prove to him that the neural damage

caused by the pain collar during his captivity on the *Kz'adul* was cured. He'd been determined to leave the shuttle, and had headed for the air lock. Tirak, the U'Churian, had tried to stop him but he hadn't listened and had attempted to force his way out, but the door had been trapped. The electric shock he'd suffered only enraged him further and Tirak had to shoot him with a trunk dart.

The effects had only lasted a few minutes, long enough for him to calm down and for Tirak to haul him off to the small mess area for first meal. Now he remembered that after they'd eaten, Naacha had come for him, taken him to their labs, and started to train him in how to use his newly returned psi abilities. Except that as well as relearning to use those he'd had, Naacha had taught him more. He forced the memory further, but the details were vague and his mind began to wander. Obviously Naacha had locked the memories away until they were needed, as some were now.

Just as he was about to give up, one more memory surfaced. His abilities then had been rogue, uncontrollable most of the time, with disastrous results. The image of a wrecked laboratory began to form in his mind's eye, containers exploding spontaneously, sending shards of glass everywhere as equipment fell off tables or was hurled into the air.

*"Naacha! Stop him you must!"* he'd heard Annuur's translator say.  
*"Control his powers he cannot yet!"*

He'd felt the sharp sting of another trunk dart, and remembered how afraid he'd been. Involuntarily, his hand went up to his torc, holding it away from his neck as he remembered how it had vibrated then. There had been a second trunk dart, then the room had finally begun to blur before everything went dark.

"What's wrong?" he heard Banner ask sharply.

"Nothing," he said, returning to the present with a jolt. "Just a memory."

"I thought those were done."

He looked at his friend, seeing the worried expression on the other's face. "They are. This was something else."

"You've been distant ever since we met Kezule the first time, Kusac," said Banner quietly. "Before then, I shared your room and bed, helped you relive the memories so you could heal. Now I don't know you. You tell me nothing that you don't tell the rest of our crew. You've got your own agenda and I need to know what it is."

"I tell you what you need to know." He couldn't afford to let Banner get close again.

"It's not enough!"

"Dzaou's complaining again," he said caustically, trying to shake off the mood of unreality that now seemed to possess him most of the time.

"No, it's me this time. Every evening one of Kezule's lackeys comes for you to take you to see Shaidan for two hours and when you return, you shut yourself in your room for another hour. You'll tell me nothing about what goes on during that time. You're losing touch with our people, Kusac. You know I'm on this mission to see you don't become unstable and act in a way that endangers our species, yet you purposely isolate yourself from me and the others while apparently turning to Kezule. I want to know what's going on now!"

"And you're forgetting this isn't a mission sanctioned by the Brotherhood," said Kusac, watching the trainees. "I intended to come here on my own. You broke into my ship and were waiting for me when I boarded her."

"Dammit, Kusac!" Banner's voice was low and intense. "What the hell am I— or the others— supposed to think when you behave like this?"

Kusac turned his head to look at Banner. "Do you think I'm unstable?"

Banner hesitated. "No, you're too controlled— that's the problem."

He laughed. "You should hear yourself. I told you at the time, I'll do this my way. I don't intend to discuss my plans with anyone, and if I did, this is neither the time nor place. You know we have to show a strong, united front to the M'zullians."

"Kusac..."

He grasped Banner by the shoulder, the gesture seeming more innocent than the actual force of his grip. "Do I have to tell you what I told Dzaou? You chose to come with me. I still outrank you, and I'm in charge, whether you're a Special Operative or not. If you don't like it, you have two options. One, you leave and take the others with you. Kezule has said he'll take any of you who want to leave back to Haven. Two, you take me down as Lijou ordered you to do if you had doubts over my sanity or loyalty." He grinned a Human smile, watching Banner wince as he displayed his teeth to full advantage. "If you do that, see how long any of you will last without me, considering Kezule only wants me here."

"Neither of those is an option," said Banner calmly, obviously controlling his ears and tail.

Kusac released him. "Then get off my back. You wouldn't do this to any other superior officer. Your mission is over, Banner," he said with finality. "You know it is. This one is mine, and your presence here just complicates matters for me. I have no intention of betraying Shola, you can be assured of that."

A siren sounded, signaling the end of the exercise period, forcing them to turn their attention back to the M'zullians.

Kusac stepped forward and called them over. "There's a muster in the assembly hall at 19:00 hours tonight," he said, speaking to them in Valtegan. "Apparently the General feels there's a need for livestock to be kept here so he's arranging a three-day hunting trip to a nearby uninhabited planet. It'll mean more work for everyone. Livestock need feeding and their quarters need to be cleaned out every day. However, I'm sure the General has good reasons to want to bring the beasts here. To hunt them, you'll need to put into practice the skills you've been learning from us. Remember, the planet's surface will be a hostile environment. The animals there are unused to a higher life-form so will be more likely to attack you. You'll get the rest of your instructions at the briefing. Dismissed."

"A hunting expedition," said Khadui, coming over as the damp and muddy M'zullians saluted before heading off back to the elevator down to the showers on the Officers level. "I don't suppose we're included, are we? I could do with seeing a sky above my head and feeling the wind in my face."

"We're included. In fact, we're to hunt as a unit. Kezule's Challenged us to make more kills and round up more live specimens than his best group," he replied.

"Shouldn't be a problem if our numbers are equal," said Khadui. "Only Kezule has ever spent any time in a wilderness. The rest have never even been outside their City of Light unless it was on a starship."

"We've another advantage," Kusac reminded them. "We're mammals. Our scent is less likely to scare the wildlife than a reptile's. When Kezule was taken from Chezy to be handed over to Raiban, his scent threw the riding beasts into a panic."

"Anything in it for us?" asked Dzaou, wiping his muddy hands off on his thighs.

"Apart from the satisfaction of showing off our superiority as hunters?" asked Kusac, turning away from them. "No. But I'm sure we'll be able to cook and eat some of that fresh meat while we're down there."

\* \* \*

As the other three went for showers in the nearby hydroponics workers' block, Banner accompanied Kusac to the elevator.

"I know my Valtegan's nowhere near as good as yours, but I didn't recognize some of your inflections," his Second said quietly in the Highland language they used among themselves when they didn't want to be overheard. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were planting Voice subliminals."

"Linguistic variations between their different worlds," he said blandly. "Subliminals are used by the Telepath Guild, not Voice commands, that's a high level AIRel skill."



"But you have access to Kaid's memories because of your three-way Link, and I'm sure you've used it on Dzaou before."

He stopped dead and rounded on Banner. "Why do you keep pushing me? Would you be happier if I was unstable? You're supposed to support me, not make me account for every breath I take!"

"And you're supposed to keep me informed! After lecturing me on the importance of showing the M'zullians a united front, you suddenly seem to be planting subliminals to destabilize Kezule's control over them! What the hell are you up to? I no longer know what to think about you!"

"Obviously, if you think I want the M'zullians rebelling against Kezule!" he snarled. "I know what I'm doing, Banner, just keep your nose out of it!" With that, he headed angrily for the emergency staircase down to the level below. What he was doing with the M'zullians was subtle, might not even work; he didn't need Banner scrutinizing it.

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Still annoyed by his interchange with Banner, he took second meal in his own quarters in an effort to calm himself down before his visit to the Primes' temple in the afternoon.

It was identical to the one allocated to them on the starboard side of the Outpost. As he opened the door, he saw that as in theirs, the larger than life-size statue of the long dead Emperor which had dominated the far end had been replaced by a table to act as an altar. More tables were laid out nearby, covered in brightly colored decorations.

Gathered round one, he saw a group of six female Primes. He recognized several scents from the night before, one of them Zhalmo's, Kezule's daughter. Aware of his pulse beginning to quicken, he checked for Zayshul's scent, knowing she had to be there. As the group turned to greet him, he saw her in their midst.

"I said he would come," said Lorish, speaking in Sholan.

Closing the door behind him and clasping his hands inside the long sleeves of his robe, he began walking toward them. He felt conspicuous in this large echoing room.

"Djanas," he said, inclining his head as he approached, consciously attempting to slow his heartbeat. He could see the altar table clearly now. On it was a small statue of their fertility Goddess, La'shol. The altar decorations were homemade, but the cloth on which they sat was of almost transparent pale blue material, intricately embroidered with various animalistic glyphs and symbols in a deep green thread. Symbols mirrored on the beaded bracelet Shaidan had made for him.

"Doctor Zayshul," he said formally, stopping in front of her. "Nice to see you." He could see she was nervous, her eyes darting from him to the door and back again.

"Captain," she said. "Thank you for coming. The General hoped you'd agree to take a minor part in our celebrations since you're the only ordained priest we have here."

"The absence of a priest of your own faith doesn't invalidate your service," he said, forcing his attention away from her to the homemade altar. "It's what's in our hearts and minds that matters to our Gods." As he spoke, he felt he was hearing his voice as if from a great distance, as if what he said held a deeper meaning, one of which he wasn't yet aware. He could smell her scent now, laced with anxiety— and perfume. That was why he'd failed to recognize it. "I can't promise to be involved, but if you tell me what it entails, maybe I can help you," he murmured, trying not to inhale too obviously. He found the perfume pleasant, even though it almost masked her own natural scent.

"Our ceremony is held to persuade the Goddess La'shol to return to us after the winter by offering her compliments and gifts," she said, turning round to indicate the table. "The gifts are placed here for the duration of the ceremony, then each of us takes one away with them and places it in their home as an offering to Her. Normally a gift would be offered by the Emperor and then his chief priest as the male principles. We'd like you to bring a gift as the priest, especially as your deity is male."

"I don't know that..." he began.

"You would do it as a Sholan, representing only your own God," interrupted Kiosh, taking hold of his arm. "It wouldn't involve any worship."

"And we'd like you to help with the decorations," said Lorish, moving between him and Zayshul. "They're easy to make. We only use paper. We'll tell you about our Goddess while we make them."

"I'll help with the decorations, of course," he said as the two drew him inexorably toward a table strewn with colored paper, scissors, and rulers. Inwardly, though he began to breathe more easily, he was angry that he was obviously not going to get to speak to her alone. At least the scents of these two were overlaying hers, removing the tension he felt when he was in her company.

\* \* \*

"That's good," said Zhalmo examining the folded paper flower he'd made. "You have a knack for doing this. Do you do something similar for your own festivals?"

"We weave garlands from branches of certain trees and leaves," he said as Zhalmo collected the pile of paper flowers then got up to take them over to the altar.

Picking up another piece of colored paper, he was concentrating on folding it when he sensed her sit down beside him.

"Let me show you how to do a different one," Zayshul said, reaching out and twitching the half-finished piece from his hands. She leaned closer and began to refold it.

"I've been trying to speak to you for weeks," he said quietly.

She glanced up at him. "I'm usually in the lab or sick bay." Her voice was equally quiet.

"They told me you weren't." A low level growl underscored his words.

"I assumed you were avoiding me because of..." She fell silent as Zhalmo returned.

"I know you have a daughter," he said in a normal voice.

"Congratulations. When will we see her?" He tried not to think of the hatchling as a possible hostage for his son's return. That was Kezule's way, not his. He couldn't inflict that fear and pain on Zayshul.

"At the ceremony," said Zayshul. "Before we bring the other children out."

"Other children?" His voice betrayed his shock.

"Giyarishis has breeding tanks here," said Zhalmo, pulling up another chair beside them. "We brought nine children to the age of five years old. We've too much work ahead of us to raise very young hatchlings, but at that age, their parents can enjoy their youth and still work— as can the children shortly. Have you decided to take part in our ceremony then, Captain?"

He felt Zayshul's leg press against him briefly before moving away again. Was she trying to let him know he should come? If he did, maybe there was the chance they'd get a few moments together alone.

"Yes," he heard himself say as Zayshul handed him the finished paper sculpture. "I'll come and take part." It was difficult to focus on anything else but her when she was so close.

"Good!" said Zhalmo, putting a friendly hand on his shoulder. "It'll do a lot to lighten your image among our people. They see you as too stern and distant."

Zayshul stood up abruptly. "We have enough flowers now," she said. "I think we can let the Captain go."

He stood, confused by her sudden change of mood. "What do I do tomorrow?"

"You all come here after the midday meal," she said. "We'll have a suitable gift ready for you to place before our Goddess. M'kou will sit with you and tell you when to come up to the altar to place it there. When you've done that, you stand beside Kezule and wait till the end of the ceremony. Tables will already be set up for the meal in here afterward."

Jealousy? Had he really sensed jealousy from Zayshul? He remembered to nod his head.

"Come dressed as you are, in your priest's robe," said Zhalmo, getting up and moving her chair back so that he could leave. "We'll see you tomorrow, Captain."

As he started to leave, Zayshul reached out and caught hold of his arm.

"Wait," she said, letting him go as he turned round. Reaching up to her ear, she took out a tiny jeweled stud. "You should wear this," she said, holding it out to him on her hand. "It's the color of our Goddess."

He looked at the transparent green stone. "I can't," he said. "I've never worn any ear ornaments."

"That's easily remedied," she said, smiling too brightly as she reached out to take hold of his neck and leaned toward him.

Surprised, he remained still as her cheek touched his. Her breath in his ear almost made him flick it away, but before he could guess what she meant to do, she'd taken hold of its lower edge in her teeth and bitten down sharply.

Caught unaware, he let out an exclamation of shock and pain and grasped her by the shoulders, trying to push her away.

"Every Tuesday at 16:00, I'm alone in the lab," she whispered. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," she said in a more normal voice. "Now you can wear the stud." She reached up to thread the earring through the tiny hole she'd made in his lower ear.

Forcing himself to remain still, he clenched his teeth against the pain while she threaded it through the tiny wound then fitted the back stop on the other side. "You shouldn't have done that," he whispered angrily.

"It was the only way I could think of to speak to you privately," she replied almost inaudibly. Stepping back, she eyed him critically. "It looks nice against your pelt, but if you take it out after tomorrow, your ear will heal as if the hole had never been there."

Still annoyed, he reached up to touch the earring. Bringing his fingers away, he looked at them but there was only the slightest trace of blood.

"Do Sholans wear ear ornaments?" asked Zhalmo. "It does look nice against your black fur."

"One of the females I saw at Haven wore them," said Zayshul.

"Males seldom do," muttered Kusak as he turned again to leave. Her automatic assumption that he wouldn't object to the mutilation of his ear, plus the wasted afternoon, had left him feeling disgruntled and angry.

\* \* \*

Back in his quarters, he stood in front of the mirror in his bathing room and examined the ornament. A quarter of an inch across, the green gemstone glittered brightly against the short pelt of his inner ear. It was impossible to miss, and alien. Reaching up for it, he fiddled with the backstop, wincing as his fingers touched the slightly swollen flesh surrounding the peg. He wanted to remove it, but it would be a public insult, not only to Zayshul, but to all the Primes there, and he couldn't afford that. Releasing it, he flicked what fur he could over the stone in an attempt to hide it and turned away from the mirror, heading back to his living room for a coffee. If Dzaou and Khadui were complaining about the bracelet Shaidan had made him, this would cause even more trouble. What the hell was Zayshul thinking of, putting him in this position? But it had allowed her to tell him when she was alone in the sick bay.

As he slumped into an easy chair and sipped his drink, his resentment moved from her to Dzaou and the others. If not for their attitude, he'd have none of these problems. They shouldn't even be here. Neither should he and Shaidan. After the ceremony, he'd go to Kezule and demand their release. No, not after the ceremony, after he'd seen Zayshul, be it by winning the bet at the hunt or afterward.

He could smell her scent again— not the perfume she'd been wearing, her natural scent— and feel the pressure of her cheek next to his before the sharp bite of her tooth in his ear had startled him. Then, briefly, he'd held her in his arms. It had cost him dearly to let her go, but over her shoulder, he'd seen Kezule's daughter watching him like some Sholan bird of prey, hovering ready to swoop down on him as if he was a hapless jegget or chiddoe. He knew for sure that they were being purposely kept apart.

The chime on his door sounded. Sighing, he automatically looked at his wrist unit. It would be M'kou with Shaidan.

"Enter," he said, a decision suddenly crystallizing in his mind. Perhaps he could defuse his crew's reaction to the earring.

M'kou was indeed standing in the doorway with Shaidan.

"Don't go, M'kou," he said, putting his mug down on the small table beside his chair. "I want to take Shaidan to the mess to eat with my crew. Doubtless you'll want to accompany us. It's time Shaidan mixed with others of our kind."

"As you wish, Captain," said Kezule's aide.

He got to his feet, frowning as he approached his son. "He's wearing ear studs," he said, trying not to let his voice betray his anger. "Who did this?" he demanded.

"The General had it done," said M'kou. "It's for tomorrow."

"He had no right to have my son mutilated like this!" he said, glaring at the young Prime as his vision began to narrow to huntersight.

"Hardly that, Captain," said M'kou quietly. "It's no different from what you've had done, save that he wears two studs and you only have one. I checked the database you gave us from the *Venture*. Sholan males do wear them, and Shaidan gave his consent."

He gave a snort of disgust. "He'll say and do what you want, you know that."

"Not when he's told to speak freely," said M'kou. "And he doesn't know how to lie. Shall we go?" Clapping his hand on Shaidan's shoulder, he drew the kitling back into the corridor, waiting for Kusac.

There was no option but to follow and just brazen it out with his crew. Rumbling his discontent and anger, he followed them.

\* \* \*

In Shaidan's presence, he had to shut his Talent down completely—despite his son's collar, the risk of discovery was too great—so he was spared hearing Dzaou's outburst and Banner's obvious instant put-down as soon as they entered the mess.

"Hello, Shaidan," said his Second as they found seats at their table. "Nice to see you. Are you joining us for third meal?"

Shaidan glanced uncertainly at M'kou.

"You may answer Lieutenant Banner's question," the Prime said.

As he sat beside Shaidan, Kusac began to curse silently. He'd forgotten how alike they looked. He had to prevent his crew from noticing the resemblance between them, and that meant using his Talent. Carefully, he reached inside himself, changing his mental shields, letting them reflect back a sense of discomfort if he was looked at for any length of time. The speed at which he achieved this, and with a minimal use of energy, rattled him. It had never been that easy before.

"Yes," said Shaidan.



"What would you like to eat? I'll get Dzaou to fetch it for you," continued Banner.

"No need, thank you," said M'kou. "One of the servers will come over."

"I see you and the Captain are wearing Prime jewelry," said Khadui, his tone one of forced joviality as he pushed his empty plate aside. "Is it for the festival tomorrow?"

"Yes," said Kusac abruptly, answering for Shaidan. "Members of AlRel frequently get asked to participate in local customs. Where possible, we accommodate our hosts."

"And here was me thinking you'd gone native," muttered Dzaou.

"They're very nice," said Banner, frowning at Dzaou. "It's for the Goddess of Fertility, isn't it? La'shol."

"Yes," said Shaidan as M'kou prompted him again.

"There's little difference between La'shol and our Green Goddess if you want to build bridges between cultures," said Kusac, seeing with relief a Prime approaching carrying a tray and three meals.

"I see your food has arrived," said Banner. "I know Dzaou and Khadui have things to attend to, but Jayza and I will stay with you." He looked pointedly at the two older Sholans.

Khadui got to his feet. "Dzaou, we've got those drums to finish," he said.

Dzaou hesitated then rose to follow the other as the server placed the plates in front of M'kou, Kusac, and Shaidan. M'kou nodded his thanks and began eating.

"Two new people is a little less overwhelming, isn't it, Shaidan?" said Banner, mouth dropping in a grin. "Are you just eating with us, or are you on a longer visit?" He glanced across at Kusac. "I'll bet you've not had the chance to play any games yet. If you like, we could go to the gym after you've eaten and play tag or hard ball."

Kusac was aware of the flicker of interest almost immediately. "I'd hoped we could do that," he said. "Then a shower afterward."

"Captain," said M'kou, fork suspended in midair.

"It's time he mixed with more than just me. I'll make sure he's not late."

M'kou sighed and put his fork down on his plate. "The General said if you asked to take him to mix with your crew, you could, but he can shower when he gets back to his quarters."

"Showering with friends is a Sholan custom," said Kusac firmly. "You aren't furred, you wouldn't understand. You can come too, if you must," he added, watching Banner raise his eye ridges in surprise.

"The Doctor helps me shower," said Shaidan quietly.

Kusac looked at his son. This was the first time he'd ever offered his opinion.

"Only Sholans really know how to wash each other," grinned Jayza, taking a drink from his mug of coffee. "There's an art to getting your pelt properly lathered, especially in the recycled water they have here."

"It's pure," said M'kou, beginning to eat again. "The General told me they used to collect ice from asteroids then melt and purify it for the tanks. We've barely used what's in the main storage tank, let alone needed to touch the recycled water."

"It's better than what we used on our ships," reminded Banner. "At least we don't have to put up with the antiparasite chemicals in it every three days!"

Shaidan looked up from his food at them.

"There are various small insects that like living in the pelts of long-haired beings like us," he explained. "They bite you and make you itch abominably. On Sholan ships, they put chemicals in the shower water to kill them off. Brushing helps too."

"Don't worry, Shaidan," Banner laughed gently at Shaidan's horrified look. "We're all free of them and until we go planetside, we don't have to worry. When we do, there's medication on the *Venture* that we can use to kill them off."

"I must admit I was wondering about that," said M'kou as he finished his food.

He began to relax, knowing that bringing Shaidan here had been the right decision. Ten minutes with these two and the shell of indifference that his son affected had been cracked twice. They'd achieved more than he had since they'd arrived— mainly due to Banner.

\* \* \*

The game, though short, had gone quite well. At first Shaidan had been reluctant to join in, but with encouragement, and seeing the way Jayza and Banner joked and fooled around with each other, he'd allowed himself to participate, if not with enthusiasm, then with genuine effort.

The shower had gone well, too. He'd washed Shaidan, giving the kitling a chance to watch the other two adults clowning around with the soap. He'd even managed an involuntary chuckle or two himself at their antics.

Pelt mostly dry, Shaidan, wrapped in a dry towel, had gone off with M'kou, leaving him drained as he finally let his mental shields return to normal.

"He's a nice cub," said Jayza, rubbing his hair. "Someone will be glad to get him back. Do they know who his parents are?"

"They're dead," he said, getting up from the bench to finish drying himself. "He'll come home with me."

"The authorities might decide otherwise," said Banner. "Don't build your hopes up, Kusac."

"I'm not," he said, suddenly needing his own company again as his torso began to tingle warningly. He flung his towel over his shoulder and picked up his robe, turning to go. "I'm going to turn in early."

"You can't go out unclothed, Kusac," said Banner, reaching out to stop him from leaving.

Jayza laughed. "Better not. You'll have all the females following you. They flock round you enough as it is."

"What?" He stopped dead, not believing what he'd heard.

"You mean you haven't noticed? They don't make half as much fuss over us as they do around you."

"It's because he's the Captain, that's all," said Banner lightly, letting him go. "You'd better put your robe on, unless you want me to help dry you first."

"I'm dry, thank you," he said mechanically, taking the towel off his shoulder and putting on his robe. Why would Prime females be more interested in him than in the others? Did it have something to do with why Zayshul had come to him that night? Had the doctor, Chy'qui, changed him in some way? He dismissed the thought almost immediately. He'd gone through so many tests after his return to his own people that any changes would have been instantly spotted. But a niggling doubt still remained at the back of his mind.

## Chapter 5

### **Prime Midwinter Celebration: Zhal-Kuushoi 20th day (December)**

TABLES had been set up at the end of the temple nearest the door, ready for the meal that was to follow the religious service. The seats were placed in a semicircular fashion facing the altar. Most were taken, although a few people, obviously civilians, were still milling around. M'kou led them to a row on the left, near the front, telling Kusac he needed to sit on the outside so when it came time for him to come forward, he could get out easily.

"Here's the gift for you to take," said M'kou, handing him a small package. "Just place it on the altar, then go round to your right and stand facing the congregation until the ceremony is over."

He nodded briefly, taking the package. "I remember." The scent of anticipation and excitement that filled the room was almost overpowering.

Three loud bangs on the floor created an instant flurry of activity as those still standing quickly found seats before the ceremony began. He let his attention drift while the story of their Goddess and Her place as the symbol of fertility was told by Shezhul, Kezule's other daughter. Kusac's thoughts turned to home and their own midwinter festival, and inevitably to Carrie and his daughter, but they seemed no more than a distant memory: as unreal as the place he found himself in now.

An elbow dug him sharply in the ribs. "Kusac!" whispered Banner. "It's their daughter! Look how big she is!"

Looking, he saw Zayshul standing to one side, holding a diminutive Prime child by the hand— a child that was almost as tall as Shaidan yet could be no more than seven weeks old.

"Captain, we're ready for you now," said M'kou, standing beside him.

A hand grasped him by the arm as he began to rise. Surprised, he looked up at Khadui.

"Do you realize what you're doing?" asked the older male harshly. "You're taking part in their fertility festival, standing there as a male principle! You're condoning what Kezule's doing with the cub! Look at Shaidan! Look at what he's wearing!"

Banner pulled Khadui's hand away before he could. "Leave it!" his Second snarled, letting his hair rise in a show of anger. "This isn't the time or place!"

"It never is! He spends more time off-duty with them than with us!"

"You forget yourself," Kusac said coldly, moving away from him. "I'll see you later, Khadui, on a charge of insubordination." He was furious. First Dzaou, and now Khadui was threatening what he'd worked so hard to achieve. The last thing he needed was Kezule becoming concerned over his ability to control his crew.

As he accompanied M'kou, the Prime spoke quietly to him. "Captain, if I may advise you in the interests of peace between our people, do something soon, before the General needs to act."

He said nothing, having just seen Shaidan step out from behind Zayshul and walk over to him, wearing an outfit that matched the Prime child's—an outfit he recognized as similar to the ones Rezac and Zashou had worn as pets at the court of Kezule's Emperor. As if in a trance, he automatically put the gift on the altar, thanking Vartra that the others knew nothing of this.

"Captain," repeated M'kou.

"I heard you!" he said sharply, staring at the short kilt his son wore, and the beaded chest decoration that hung round his neck. Jewel-bright colors glistened in the artificial light, showing off the swirling anthropomorphic shapes picked out in brilliant hues of blue, turquoise, red, and yellow. In his son's ears, the green stones were very visible, as visible as the inch wide metal band that surrounded his throat. On either side of his face, a lock of hair had been plaited into a single, fine braid.

As Shaidan reached him, his son held out his hand. Surprised, Kusac took it— Shaidan had never shown a desire for physical contact before, it had been he who'd always had to initiate it.

The small fingers fluttered briefly in his as his son moved to stand by his side. Round his own neck, his torc tingled, drawing him back to some sense of reality as he hurriedly allowed his features to blur. Shaidan tensed, reminding him that despite the psi damping collar he wore, his son could still receive telepathically— and they were touching.

Swearing silently, he knew he was caught between giving their relationship away and betraying himself to his son, but Shaidan remained silent.

Shezhul, acting as a priestess, droned on, but he heard none of it as he stared across to the other side of the altar where Zayshul now stood with Kezule, their daughter between them. His mind was filled with the buzz of those in the room, distracting him as he studied the Prime child.

Like Shaidan, round her neck she wore a beaded collar that reached midway down her chest. Unlike his, hers was shaped like an upright ovoid— an egg. He'd seen the same design tattooed on Prince Zsurtul's chest. Like the Prince's, flames came from the two halves. Suddenly, with relief, he realized the two children wore royal fertility symbols, not the costumes of slaves. Even so, he was as displeased as his crew to see Shaidan openly dressed like the Prime child.

Finally it was over, and Shaidan's hand began to pull free of his. He tightened his grip fractionally.

"Wait a moment," he said. "I hadn't realized their hatchlings grew so fast. What's she called? You never did tell me."

"Mayza," Shaidan said, letting his hand relax again in his father's grasp.

"And is she replacing you in importance to the General?"

"Not yet," the cub admitted. "She's too young and small to help him."

"She's almost as big as you. When you're with the General, where is she?"

"In the nursery, with the other children bred like me. And the guards," he added.

"There're nine of them," said Kezule as he strolled over. "Though strictly speaking, they're young adults of nearly five years. My people began breeding several weeks ago. We need the children if we're to survive. Shaidan, go with Zhalmo and get changed into your tunic."

Shaidan tugged his hand free and left with Zhalmo. Beyond him, he was aware of Zayshul leading her daughter over.

"Don't even think of it," said Kezule harshly, turning round to watch them. "My daughter stays with us on the Command level. She has three guards on her quarters at all times."

"I couldn't hold a child hostage, Kezule," he said softly. "Unlike you."

"Maybe that's the difference between us, though Shaidan isn't exactly a hostage."

"Let us go, Kezule," he said abruptly. "You've got what you want. Your people are forming a community. It's working, and so is the training. There's not much more we can teach them."

"Soon, Kusac. Soon. No more of this talk in front of my wife, if you please."

Mayza was Zayshul in miniature, right down to the iridescent skin tones. She looked, unlike Kezule's other offspring, a purebred Prime. Kezule bent down and picked her up, settling her so she was sitting on his arm while supported against his chest. There was no extra fat on her, as Sholan cubs had; she was as lean as her parents. Her large green eyes regarded Kusac thoughtfully for a moment then she leaned against her father's chest, losing interest in him.



"Purebred and in line to the throne," Kusac murmured, wondering how he knew. "A true Warrior Intellectual like you. That's why you married Zayshul."

"Yes," said Kezule. "Though I intend my daughter's royal heritage to be forgotten. There's no place for Emperors here. Food is waiting on the tables, Kusac. You and your crew are invited to join us. Afterward, I'd like a few words in private with you."

\* \* \*

"He's wearing an earring," Kezule hissed in a low voice to Zayshul, handing Mayza to M'kou to be taken to change out of her finery.

"And you used me in a bet yesterday with Kusac!" she retorted, picking up some spiced vegetable protein balls and putting them on a plate for her daughter.

"I did no such thing!"

"Don't lie to me, Kezule. I know you did," she said coldly.

"I expected him to ask for extra time with Shaidan; instead he wanted to speak to you. You had no cause to go putting one of your earrings in his ear! You've drawn attention to the two of you!"

She turned her head to look at him. "You keep calling him my Sholan, and everyone can smell my scent marker on him, so why shouldn't I? Your two palace females are no secret, so why shouldn't I give my supposed lover a token of affection?"

He clamped his hand over her wrist as she reached for more food. "If he wins the bet, you'll stick to what I told you to tell him, do you understand? If I find out he's learned the truth from you, you'll regret it, and so will he."

"What will you do, Kezule?" she asked, shaking herself free. "You need him, and me, too much!"

"For a start, his chances of taking Shaidan home will diminish rapidly," he hissed. "You'll play the part of the dutiful wife or *your* Sholan may find himself spending longer on this Outpost than either of you can imagine—and you won't be allowed near him."

She stared at him, eyes blazing briefly before she forced herself to relax. "You're preventing me from speaking to him anyway."

"Just play the part we agreed on, Zayshul. This isn't about him or the cub, it's about our people, recreating what was best in our kind before we lost our way and became an evolutionary dead end," he said tiredly. "When Kusac's done what I've asked, I'll deprogram Shaidan and they can go home. Meanwhile, I have Giyarishis looking for a way to turn off the scent marker."

"You swear?" she asked in a low voice.

"I swear."

### **Later the same evening**

"Teach them Brotherhood skills? Are you out of your mind?" demanded Banner later that evening when they were alone in Kusac's quarters. "We've done enough. He should give us Shaidan and let us go."

"Kezule has insisted on it. That's why I wanted to talk to you. I know there're some things we can safely teach them."

"Like what? If we do, we lose our advantage over them," exclaimed his Second, flinging himself down on the sofa and glowering across at Kusac.

"Survival skills for one. Kezule knows a fair bit since he managed to survive on Shola," he said dryly. "We'd be teaching little that he can't teach them himself. And it's only the best of them we'd be teaching."

"I suppose so," Banner said grudgingly. "But how much longer does he intend to hold us here? He has his community and the training program now."

Kusac examined his claw tips. "He'll let us leave when we've turned the best of them into a team capable of doing covert missions, like landing on Ch'almuth and infiltrating the local population. He wants to take their measure then recruit some of those with the missing genetic makeup of their Worker caste to bring back here."

"Anything else?" Banner asked sardonically.

"Yes. Tomorrow we start teaching his officers how to train the new children."

Banner stared at him for almost a full minute before replying. "The longer we stay here, the more of them there are and the fewer our options become. I can't see that teaching them these skills, helping this nascent colony survive, is in Shola's best interests," he said slowly.

"What threat to Shola is Kezule? If he'd wanted to move against us, why stop the attempted assassination and coup? With his one hundred warriors, he could have easily taken control of the Prime world. Instead, he's out here, in the middle of nowhere, rebuilding his people."

"They nearly destroyed us in his time, Kusac. They did reduce us to slavery. And here we are, 1500 years later, facing the same threat again. By helping Kezule, who knows what we're storing up for future generations? There're three planets of aggressive Valtegons out there!"

"We only face the M'zullians, not the J'kirtikkians or Ch'almuthians," he countered. "Kezule's had enough fighting, he wants more out of life now that he's seen what it can hold."

"I think it's you who's changed," his Second said quietly, getting to his feet. "You who's given up fighting. I'll tell the others, but they won't like it, and neither do I."

"Tell them they'll follow orders, or be put on charges," he said, avoiding Banner's gaze. "There's a brig here, and plenty of manual labour to be done." He looked up, eyes and voice suddenly cold. "Or they can Challenge me."

Banner nodded slowly. "Be careful, Kusac, or one day someone will take you up on that."

After Banner left, he leaned back in the chair, sighing and closing his eyes, hands clenching on the arm rests. He knew he was pushing them too hard, but what option did he have? He needed more time to work on the M'zullians with the subliminals he was using. All he'd managed to achieve was their own probable survival if the worst came to the worst and they rebelled against Kezule. Maybe this hunt planetside tomorrow, followed by their own midwinter gathering, would help release the tension they were all experiencing.

In his pocket, something hard dug into his hip. Easing himself to one side, he reached in to draw it out. It was the gift from the festival— a small statuette of La'shol.

### **The Hunt, Zhal-Kuushoi 23rd day (December)**

Crouched, belly flat to the grass, hands clenched into paws, he lay still, watching the small herd of grazing beasts upwind of him. He could feel their total lack of awareness of his presence as they chewed contentedly on the lush grass at the edge of the river. The sun on his bare back and shoulders was warm, and beneath his feet, the soil felt slightly moist. He breathed deeply, savoring the smells of damp soil and sun-warmed grass a moment longer before beginning to move forward, emitting the three high-pitched yips that were his signal to the others.

He wanted the buck, the leader of the herd— not to kill, but to take back to the Outpost. It was stronger and larger than the other two already in the cages at their base camp, caught by Kezule's people. He edged forward, pausing every few paces to be sure he'd not been spotted, his sensitive nose separating out the buck's scent from among the others. As he drew closer still, and the scent filled his nostrils, he felt his heart begin to race and his breathing become rapid and more shallow. Peripheral vision disappeared as he began to enter the hunter/kill trance, all his senses focusing only on his prey. It was good for once to consciously let go of everything, including his telepathic senses, and become only an instinctive hunter.

The rest of his crew were waiting for him to move first, cutting the buck off from the herd before they came in for the kill on their own chosen targets. They had scored more than enough live captures of does over the last two days— all but one achieved cleanly, unlike Kezule's people, and even then the injury had been slight. For the remainder of today and tomorrow, they hunted for meat.

Closer and closer he inched, stopping once for as long as five minutes when something startled the herd, until he was only twenty feet from them. He waited, muscles bunched until the moment was right and he felt the buck settle down to graze again.

Springing forward, he launched himself into the open grassland, paws barely touching the ground as he closed on his prey. Suddenly, the stag lifted its head, brayed a warning, and sprang for the safety of its herd.

Noise and dust surrounded him, penetrating his trance, telling him something was very wrong. A dark shape loomed toward him, braking too late to avoid crashing into him. The herd was stampeding. Panic and fear filled his mind as they collided, pulling him back to the here and now.

He staggered, time seeming to slow while he tried to pick up his pace again and swerve from side to side to avoid the terrified does. Every sense stretched to the limit, at the back of his mind he sensed the quiet satisfaction of one of his own crew and realized the stampede was no accident— it had been timed to catch him in the open.

Momentarily distracted, he didn't see the doe hurtling toward him until it was too late. This time the collision sent him stumbling into the path of three more. Their eyes glazed with terror, they were incapable of changing direction.

A blur of black, followed by a deafening roar of anger sent them swerving aside at the last moment. As one, the herd wheeled, following them. Still staggering, Kusac managed to regain his stride and match pace with the Sholan now running beside him.

Neither word nor look was exchanged between them, but as one, they continued pursuing the buck, gradually gaining ground until only a few feet separated them. Kusac was tiring, and his shoulder hurt from the blows caused by his collisions with the does. He knew he had to fetch the stag down now or lose him. Shortening his stride, he drove his powerful hind legs back, kicking off from the ground, and leaped. He landed, hands outstretched across the buck's neck, half on it, half on the ground, his mouth searching for the beast's throat.

The force of his attack made it stumble sideways, slowing it down until it skidded on the plains grass. His jaws shut on the soft fur, feeling the pulsing veins just beneath the surface. Using it as a guide, he shifted his grip slightly then clamped his jaws closed around its windpipe.

It squealed, raising its head in an effort to dislodge him as it finally slid to a halt and reared up in terror, razor-sharp hooves pawing at his chest. He twisted himself to one side as he was dragged upward, feet scrabbling at the earth for a hold before the stag dropped down again. His claws finally found a purchase in the grass and he flung his weight against it, attempting to overbalance it and force it to the ground.

A hoof struck his already injured shoulder, sending agony pulsing through it, but the beast staggered and fell. Landing on top of it, his whole side numb with pain, there was little he could do save pin it down with his body weight as the snorting beast continued to struggle, attempting to get to its feet again.

Suddenly, the fight left it and it lay there gasping for breath. He collapsed, jaws still clenched tightly round its throat.

"Got it, Kusac," he heard Banner say.

He'd only enough strength remaining to raise his head and see that Banner had already hobbled the buck's hind legs and was grabbing the front ones ready to do the same to them. Letting go, he rolled off his catch, groaning as his injured shoulder hit the ground. He sat up, spitting small clumps of fur out of his mouth before carefully flexing his shoulder then checking the buck's throat.

"Just bruised," said Banner, leaning over to look as he finished knotting the rope. "You didn't break its skin. Considering the circumstances, it was a clean capture." He sat back on his haunches and stared at him. "That was no accident, you know that, don't you?"

"I know," he said, carefully probing the swelling on top of his shoulder joint. "I can't prove it, though. He'll be full of apologies when he joins us."

"You'll have to deal with him soon."

"I can't, unless he openly Challenges me, and he's not ready to do that yet," Kusac said, satisfied his injury was no more than a grazed bruise.

Banner got up and came over to him, squatting down beside him to check the injury for himself. "We need to get back to the shuttle and treat that or you'll be too stiff to move by this evening."

"It's nothing," he said, getting onto his feet. "I can hardly feel it." The initial pain had worn off now to a dull ache that he could ignore.

"Stay here with the buck," said Banner as he stood up. "The herd is far enough away from us now for me to bring the shuttle here."

"That's not necessary," he began.

Banner reached out to touch his arm. "I'm bringing the shuttle here," he said firmly then turned and began walking away.

Sighing, Kusac squatted back down beside the captured buck, checking that the ropes binding it weren't too tight. The terrified beast lay on its side panting, eyes wide and staring, mouth rimmed with froth. Banner was right. He'd have to deal with Dzaou soon.

\* \* \*

Dzaou was the first to reach them, full of apologies as Kusac had predicted. He shrugged them and him aside as they stowed the carcasses in the large container at the midsection of the shuttle. The buck, now sedated, they placed in an animal cage before releasing its bonds.

It was nearing dusk by the time they got back to the collection of tents and shuttles that was their camp and handed their live catch over to M'kou.

"I think this puts you in the lead, Captain," M'kou said, counting the carcasses as they were taken out to the main shuttle for cold storage. "We've not had as much success with live captures, I'm afraid."

"It's your scent," Khadui said. "Reptiles are always predators, mammals aren't."

"They're certainly less traumatized by your presence," agreed M'kou, stepping away from the terrified beast as Khadui and Jayza pushed the cage past him. "There's food ready for you all in the mess tent, Captain."

\* \* \*

"I'm surprised General Kezule brought the M'zullians," said Jayza as they lounged round the central campfire later that evening.

"Couldn't afford to leave them behind. He had them in three groups," said Banner, leaning forward to flick a burning lump of wood back into the fire with the stick he'd been whittling. "He led one. They were hunting for meat, not live beasts."

"He needs to keep them Challenged," said Kusac, sipping the ale they'd been issued as it was their last night. "If they're learning new skills, they won't Challenge their officers."

"I wonder what they've done with the ones on Shola," said Jayza.

Dzaou snorted. "Sent 'em back, if they've any sense!"

Khadui sat up suddenly. "I wonder if bringing them was a wise idea," he said quietly, flicking an ear toward the other side of the fire. "I smell trouble." As he spoke, voices were suddenly raised, one of them female.

"Where's the General?" asked Jayza, sitting up and looking round. "I don't see him."



"In his tent," said Kusac, pushing himself up onto his haunches. "Be ready, I think this may turn nasty." He rested his hand casually on the butt of the stun gun on his belt.

It was Zharmo, Kezule's daughter, and a M'zullian. He could smell their scents even through the woodsmoke. There was something different about the M'zullian's scent, more than just the anger. He glanced around, realizing that the M'zullians were all in one area, near the couple who were still arguing. Civilians nearby were getting to their feet and edging surreptitiously away.

Counting heads, he only found five. That meant nine more to be accounted for. Then he recognized what was different about them.

"Pull back now," he snapped. Slowly, keeping his body profile low, he moved across the log, eyes scanning the M'zullians the whole time. Seconds later, they'd left the circle of firelight and were hiding in the dark, concealed behind bushes and long grass.

"What's up?" asked Khadui quietly.

"They've been eating raw meat," said Banner before he could answer.

"Most of those here are civilians," Kusac said, pulling his side arm out. "With their aggression levels raised, the M'zullians will challenge Kezule now for leadership."

"So what?" countered Dzaou. "Without him..."

"The M'zullians will be in charge and there'll be carnage. That puts Shaidan at risk," he snapped. "We need Kezule alive and in command. He's in his tent with M'kou. That's where we're going. Take point, Banner. Move out."

\* \* \*

Raised voices could be plainly heard well before they saw the silhouettes against the walls of the tent. They crept closer until they could see the entrance.

"Find the Sholans! We need them and their skills," he heard the leader say. It was Chazukk, the main M'zullian troublemaker. "Bring them outside with us. You'll order your people to surrender to us, General, or we'll start killing them."

Arms bound behind them, Kezule and M'kou were dragged outside in Chazukk's wake.

They followed, keeping to the dense shadows of the tents as Kezule and M'kou were taken to the central campfire.

"Where are the Sholans?" Chazukk was demanding of one of the male civilians.

"I don't know. They were here until a few minutes ago." The male pointed across to the wooden log on which Kusac had been sitting.

There was the sound of a blow. "Where did they go?"

The answer was slow in coming. "I didn't see them leave."

He watched as Chazukk, using only one hand, lifted the male bodily into the air by the neck. He'd seen this before and knew what was coming. Now was not the time to be hiding behind mental shields—he needed all his senses working unhindered if they were to survive. Reaching mentally for his torc, he turned off the mechanism and let down his barriers, wincing as the full strength of the M'zullians' hatred and anger hit him.

Banner glanced briefly at him, reassuring himself that his leader was handling the situation. Satisfied, he looked away.

"Then you're of no use to me," said Chazukk, tightening his claws round his victim's neck. A strangled shrieking split the air as blood sprayed out from the punctured throat, then silence fell. Chazukk threw the body aside and lunged forward for another captive, this time a female.

He tore his attention away from them and began searching for the other M'zullians. Two guarding Kezule and M'kou, Chazukk and his henchman,

four more in the circle of firelight, and the other six round the outside of the group of captives. All accounted for.

He knew the female would tell Chazukk where they'd gone, in fact he counted on it. The M'zullian would probably send five after them, leaving only the six guards and Chazukk to deal with.

"They went that way!" she shrieked as Chazukk pulled her close and placed his hand round her throat. "They just disappeared into the darkness!"

Chazukk pushed her back into the group of captives. "Follow them. Bring them back alive if possible," he ordered.

Using hand signals, he ordered Banner to take Dzaou and Khadui and follow them. Nodding, they exchanged their guns for knives and melted into the night. Signaling to Jayza, he told him to work his way around to the far side of the captives and start taking the guards out. With a flick of his ears, the youth vanished instantly.

Backing out into the dark again, Kusac slowly circled the tents until he had made his way to the rear of the group. The first guard, rifle held ready, was dividing his attention between Chazukk and the captives in front of him. He'd be an easy target, hidden as he was from Chazukk's direct line of sight as the prisoners came forward one at a time to throw any weapons they carried on the ground.

On fours, belly close to the ground, he crept closer. He could feel the M'zullian guard's thoughts— they weren't complicated. High on the raw meat and blood, he wanted only one thing— a female. The damned General kept them away from the females, but that was all about to change. Once they'd shut the males in the animal cages, there would be drink and pleasure enough for all. Let Chazukk be their leader, he didn't care so long as his immediate lusts were slaked.

Silent as a shadow, Kusac rose to his full height. With one arm circling the guard's throat to stifle any sound, he thrust the knife in his other hand deep

into the neck, just below the ear. As the body went limp in his grasp, he grabbed the rifle, catching it before it could fall.

The male in front started and turned his head, seeing him. As his eyes widened in shock, Kusac thrust the rifle against his chest till he grabbed it then backed off into the darkness taking the body with him.

As he was dumping the third body, Jayza joined him.

"You killed them?" the youth asked quietly. "I only knocked them out and bound them with strips of their own uniforms."

He grunted, concentrating on wiping his knife clean on the dead guard's fatigues. "Head back the way you came and position yourself to take out M'kou's guard. I'll take Kezule's. It'll be the signal for the prisoners I've armed to take Chazukk."

Before they could reach their positions behind Kezule and M'kou, the situation had changed. Chazukk had forced Kezule to his knees, pulling his head back and holding a knife to his exposed throat. Without a second thought, Kusac sent his own knife spinning through the air to hit Chazukk then dived for the guard standing to one side of the kneeling General.

He'd forgotten about the M'zullian Warrior's superior speed and strength and his advantage of surprise was almost instantly lost. Teeth closed on his forearm, biting down deep as he struggled against the other's grip, trying vainly to get his hands round his throat. With a grunt of pain, he pulled his other arm free and punched out at the M'zullian's face—missing as the jaws suddenly released him.

Twisting violently under him, the M'zullian had just broken free when a single shot whined out and the guard went limp, landing on top of him.

Willing hands pulled the corpse aside and helped him to his feet. A female—Zhalmo—was at his side, reaching for his injured arm.

"I can see to it," he snapped, pushing her aside. Looking past the people crowded around them, he saw Kezule on his feet, rubbing his wrists where

the rope had cut into them. Beyond him, M'kou was doing the same. The General looked at Kusac, acknowledging him with a brief nod before turning to his people and issuing a string of orders. As one, the warriors among them grabbed weapons and ran from the circle of light, disappearing into the edges of the woodland.

His arm had begun to throb when Jayza came over to him. "You're bleeding," the young male said quietly. "I wouldn't leave it too long before dressing that wound, Captain. Nice throw, by the way."

"Nice shot," he replied automatically.

Jayza grinned. "Thanks. The General looks to be back in control again."

After checking to see that his son M'kou was uninjured, Kezule bent to pull Kusac's knife free from Chazukk's forehead. Wiping it clean, he came over to them. "Were you two responsible for taking out the other guards?" he asked, holding the knife out to him, hilt first.

Taking it, Kusac nodded, regretting it instantly as his senses began to swim.

"All dead, I assume," Kezule said, eyes narrowing as he looked at him.

"No, I left two alive just outside the circle of firelight," said Jayza.

Kezule nodded, keeping his attention on Kusac. "I'd like them brought here, Jayza. The civilians will help you."

M'kou waited till Jayza was out of earshot. "You're wounded, Captain."

He lifted his forearm to look at it for the first time. It was swollen but the blood had begun to coagulate, matting his pelt. "It's just a bite."

"It's poisoned," said the General, taking hold of him firmly by the upper arm. "Come with me. I insist on treating it myself."

The feeling of dizziness was increasing, and in something of a daze, he let himself be led to the General's tent.

"Sit down," ordered Kezule, leaving him standing by a small desk.

"If you carry analgesics on you, I'd take them now, Captain," M'kou said, lending him a helping hand as he sat down on the folding chair.

"M'kou, fetch me some field dressings and the Sholan antidote from the shuttle," said Kezule, busying himself by a mobile food-dispensing unit.

Resting his injured arm on the table, he fumbled in the pouch strapped to the left side of his belt, aware that the room had suddenly become bleached of color: everything was in shades of gray. Blinking furiously, he felt his torc begin to tingle against his throat. His fingers closed on one of the small injector units and he pulled it free, only to drop it on the floor as Kezule turned and came toward him carrying a bowl of steaming liquid.

Setting it down on the desk beside him, Kezule bent to pick the injector up, examining it carefully.

"Where do you inject it?" he asked.

Reaching out to take it from him, he found he could barely move. "Injury," he said, speaking with difficulty. His tongue felt like a lump of rubber in his mouth and he wondered vaguely what kind of poison was in the bite that it could act so quickly.

Kezule placed the nozzle just above the highest puncture wound and pressed the trigger mechanism. The relief was instant and the throbbing in his arm began to subside.

Putting the empty cartridge down beside him, Kezule left him there to return with a larger bowl and a sealed pack. Ripping the pack open with his teeth, the Valtegan took out a lump of sterile material and dipped it in the smaller bowl before lifting Kusac's arm and holding it over the larger one.

Kezule swabbed the punctures carefully, washing away all the congealed blood. "You saved my life back there. Why?"

"We made a deal," he said, wincing as the hot liquid sluiced over his arm. "I don't want to be the one to break it."

Kezule remained silent until he was done cleaning Kusac's pelt. "The herbs in the water will help counteract the poison," he said, drying the wound and surrounding fur off with more of the sterile material. "M'kou is fetching the antidote for you. The poison doesn't kill Sholans, but it will make you very ill."

He looked up at the General, blinking to try and clear his vision. The Valtegan looked very odd when seen in shades of gray.

"We developed an antidote for your people," said Kezule drily. "I would hardly go to all this bother then poison you myself, would I?"

"You tell me," mumbled Kusac, aware of M'kou's return.

A cup and a tablet were held out to him. "Take this, Captain," said M'kou quietly. "It'll work quickly. You'll feel much better in about an hour."

He took the pill in his good hand and put it in his mouth, picking up the cup as Kezule began smearing something onto each puncture wound. He flinched, spilling some of the water. Hurriedly he gulped the rest down, but Kezule had done probing the wounds and was now bandaging his arm. In the distance, they could hear raised voices.

"Stay here for now, Kusac. I need to attend to the remaining M'zullians. M'kou will come back for you shortly," said Kezule as he tied the bandage securely. "Settle him down, then join me, M'kou." With that, the General left.

"It'll pass quickly, Captain," M'kou reassured him as on unsteady feet he was led over to the two camp beds at the far end of the tent.

"Do you all have poison, or is it a Warrior thing?" he mumbled as the young Prime helped him to lie down on the bed.

"All males have it, but it's more powerful in Warriors. Our historians believe it first developed as a defense against other predators, then against each other. To use it is considered shameful though, and was even in the General's time. Just rest, Captain. I'll tell your Second where you are."

\* \* \*

He came to with a shudder that shook his whole body. Sitting up, he checked his wrist unit. Half an hour had passed; he must have dozed off. Then he realized the effects of the poison had indeed gone.

Swinging his legs off the bed, he stood up, then staggered and had to sit down for a few minutes before trying again, this time more slowly. He'd forgotten that his system was still suffering from the shock caused by the injury, never mind the poison.

He made his way carefully out of the tent, aware of the unnatural silence when it was suddenly shattered by the sharp whine of an energy pistol. Moments later, he heard it again. Speeding up, he reached the clearing in time to see Kezule, standing behind a bound and kneeling M'zullian, put his pistol to the male's head and shoot him. The body crumpled, falling bonelessly to one side, just like the other nine that lay dead in a line in front of the General. He leaned against the tree for support, surprised that he could smell and feel the fear, but no blood. Then he remembered that energy weapons seared flesh.

Kezule holstered his gun and turned to face his people. "M'kou, have their bodies thrown outside the electronic perimeter for the carrion eaters. They don't deserve a burial," he ordered, his gaze sweeping over the others. "The rest of you, get some sleep. We break camp at dawn. Good night."

He stopped in front of Kusac. "Up so soon, Captain? You have remarkable recuperative powers. And don't worry, I did consult the civilians before executing the M'zullians," he added humorlessly.

"I'm sure you did," he replied. "Their execution is a salutary lesson for all."



"I never ask anyone to do anything I am not prepared to do myself," said Kezule. "Contrary to what you might think, I don't enjoy killing. It's not what I was bred for, despite my Warrior blood. As I've said before, the M'zullians have been a liability from the first. It was only a matter of time before they turned on us."

"You did what needed to be done. I won't miss them."

Kezule's eyes narrowed as he stared at Kusac, then he nodded, reaching out to put his hand briefly on the Sholan's uninjured shoulder. "Get some sleep, Kusac. The poison isn't fatal as I said, but it has given your system a beating."

"I'll see to him, General," said Banner's voice from behind them.

\* \* \*

"I heard you got bitten," Banner said as they walked back to their tent. "Jayza said that Kezule treated you himself."

"Didn't want me dying on him," he said tiredly.

"Dying?"

He caught Banner's concerned tone. "M'zullians have a poisoned bite. All warriors have, but theirs is worst. Kezule had an antidote made for us."

"Thoughtful of him. I should check your wound, though."

"It's fine," he said, pulling his injured arm across his chest protectively. "So am I. The antidote worked. It doesn't kill us, only makes us sick."

"We should find out more about this bite and the antidote. It might be needed back home on Shola."

"I'll speak to Doctor Zayshul when we get back," he said, pulling the tent flap aside and ducking his head as he entered.

"You had the perfect chance to let Kezule die, why didn't you take it?" hissed Dzaou, getting up from his camp bed.

"Shut up, Dzaou," he said, accepting Banner's help to sit down on his bed. "What makes you think we'd be better off with Kezule dead? I have a deal with him. He dies, so does that. You think we'd have survived for long under the M'zullians? Forget it! They would have culled every Warrior on the Outpost, us included!"

"I know that!" Dzaou said dismissively. "Yes, you were right to order us to take out the M'zullians, but saving Kezule from them is another matter!"

"We need him alive, Dzaou. And you need me alive, too, remember that," he said, his anger flaring as his hair and pelt rose. "You can't replace me, none of you can, you're not AIReI trained. That's what he wants from me. Before you pull another stunt like the one with the herd this afternoon, just remember those M'zullians he executed," he snarled, lying down on the bed and turning his back pointedly on Dzaou. "Otherwise you might be next!"

## **En'Shalla Estate, Shola, Zhal-Kuushoi 24th day (December)**

For the fourth time that afternoon, Carrie began to play the message crystal Kusac had left on the *Couana* for her. In the eight weeks since Lijou had given it and the two silver bracelets for Kashini and Layeesha to her, she'd listened to it so many times that she knew every word and gesture by heart. Recently, the certainty that there was some kind of hidden meaning for her in the message had steadily grown, but she was damned if she could find it.

Grief over Kusac's falling-out with Kaid, and the means by which he'd chosen to leave Shola— by stealing the Touibans' ship, the *Couana*, had finally dulled. The tears had dried up, but had left in their stead a determination that she must find him and prove his innocence— and tell him she'd borne twins, the second child his son, Dhaykin.

On the comm screen, Kusac's image appeared. Dressed in his black priest's robes, he sat at the comm desk in one of the cabins on the *Couana*.

"Hello, Carrie. If you're listening to this, then you'll also have the birthing bracelets I had made for Kashini and the new daughter I share with you and Kaid." Face creasing as if in pain, he looked away from the recorder for a moment, putting down the knife he was toying with before continuing. "I know my place was with you when you had the cub, but it wasn't to be. There are issues I need to resolve in my own mind, just as your twin Elise did, before I can return. If the past few months have been difficult for me, I can't imagine what they've been like for you."

He stopped again, this time picking up a glass of water for a drink.

"When you came into my life, you brought a brightness and joy I'd never known before." He smiled, his whole face lightening as it lost its hard, brittle look. "I remember when our minds first touched, out in the woods on Keiss when we searched for Vanna and the other five of my crew who were hiding in the cave. It scared me, Carrie. I was afraid of what they'd do to us when they found out. We were only children in our parents' eyes, not old enough to know what was best for us. I was afraid they'd try to hide our Link. Or worse, the authorities would keep us apart, sacrifice us because of the political implications of our existence. But you know all that. Thanks to Ghyan's help, none of that happened."

Again a small pause. "I wish you'd known me when I was younger. Ghyan and I were always up to something. We'd run away from lessons in the summer to go sailing, hunting for coves and safe havens to moor in. We must have driven our parents mad."

This time, when he stopped, his face clouded over again, eye ridges meeting. "I wish I could tell you when I'll be back, but I don't know when that will be. The time I spent as J'koshuk's prisoner left too many scars for me to easily forget. It left a darkness on my soul that I need to somehow try and remove first. I wish our children didn't have to bear the consequences because they're the truly innocent ones. It's not their fault that we, their parents, were used as we were on the *Kz'adul*."

His hand reached out toward her, almost touching the recorder's lens so that Carrie felt he was actually reaching out to her.

"I love you, Carrie, and always will, whatever happens to me, whatever the future brings to light, please believe this."

The message over, the screen went blank.

From across the corridor, the sound of furniture scraping on the floor brought her back to the here and now. T'Chebbi's and Kaid's cub was due any day, and for the last week, her friend had been running Kaid ragged changing the nursery furniture around in her suite. It sounded like he was still at it even though T'Chebbi was downstairs in the communal bathing room getting a massage from Sashti. Mentally, Carrie reached out for her Leska, trying to discern his mood. Tired, hot, and frustrated, he needed a break as much as she did. Maybe this time he'd be more approachable on the subject of Kusac.

Getting up from the desk, she removed the message crystal from its reader slot and put it back into the small box lying beside her comm.

\* \* \*

Kaid looked up as she entered. "I felt your touch. This cub can't come too soon, Carrie," he said with a sigh, sitting down on the chest he was in the process of moving. "She wants the crib back beside the balcony, of all places!"

"She had it there twice last week and decided both times she didn't like it," said Carrie, coming into the room and perching on the arm of an easy chair that now sat isolated in the center of the room.

"I know. She's run through every permutation of the furniture imaginable at least three times. You were never this bad."

"You didn't have much furniture to start with, we had to buy more," she said, looking round the light, airy room. "Your minimalist look was completely destroyed by the arrival of the sofa and the cribs."

"A small price to pay for being blessed with the twins," he said, mouth widening slightly in a slow smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, Tallinu. I just thought you must be tired and could do with a break, that's all," she said, looking out of the window at the snow-covered trees outside. "You know, I think she's right. Beside the balcony is a good place for the crib."

"I should finish this, but what the hell— yes. Let's go down to the kitchen and get some coffee," he said, getting up and going over to join her. "I've not had enough time with you since T'Chebbi began her nesting urge."

"It's understandable," she said as he leaned down to kiss her. "You're getting better at these senseless random acts of affection," she murmured, stroking his face.

"You make it easy," he said, resting his forehead against hers for a moment before helping her to her feet.

\* \* \*

"Something's bothering you, Dzinae," he said when they were halfway through their coffee. "I can feel it."

"Not bothering me, exactly. I want to talk to you about Kusac's message," she said, deciding to meet him head on.

Kaid immediately sat back in his chair, his face taking on an impenetrable look as the mental link they shared began to recede.

"Before you say no, just hear me out," she began.

"I don't need to. I know what you think, and you know how I feel. There's nothing left to say," he said, keeping his tone carefully neutral.

"But I *need* to talk to you about it, Tallinu. Since Kusac left, I've respected your feelings. It's time you respected mine."

He said nothing, just continued to look at her.

"I'm convinced that there's a hidden meaning in the message he left me. Something he didn't want anyone but me to discover."

"Then you don't need me to look at it. You're clutching at straws, Carrie. There's no message hidden there."

"I need a fresh perspective on it, Tallinu."

"No, you don't. You want me to believe what you do," he said, his tone hardening. "Face up to reality, Carrie. Kusac left because his mind and his nervous system were badly damaged by his captivity on the *Kz'adul*. He's not completely sane, no matter what Kzizysus and Annuur did to try and cure him. He's gone missing for the same reason the freed Valtegan captives did in Rezac's time: to return to his jailers. He'll turn up at the Prime world eventually."

"He's been missing for nearly nine weeks now, Tallinu. No one's seen him, not even the *Watchers*."

"He'll turn up eventually," Kaid repeated.

"What if he can't? Or he's afraid to because the Forces and the Brotherhood are looking for him for disrupting the spaceport and taking the *Couana*?" She couldn't bring herself to name the charges he faced.

"He wasn't afraid enough to stay away from Haven when he went there to get the *Venture*. If he wants to get in touch with you, he will. What he did was unforgivable, Carrie," he said, his voice becoming tense. "He came out to my home and started a row with me over you only days before the cub was due! You were so distraught I thought you were going to go into labor there and then. What he accused me of is best never mentioned again! And to cap it all, several days later, just as you've given birth to the twins, he disrupts all communications, sensors, and tracking equipment at the spaceport and steals the Touibans' ship, once again leaving you distraught, and himself facing treason charges."

She winced in real pain. "You said it yourself; he isn't well. The message crystal could be his way of getting in touch with us, of asking for help."

"He could have got that help at Haven! Instead he headed out again into deep space! He's the one who purposely cut himself off from us all, Carrie."

"That's just what I'm saying. His behavior doesn't make sense, Tallinu. Please watch the message again." She tried hard to keep the pleading tone out of her voice.

"I've watched it once, that's enough. Granted he apologized to you, but there was no apology for me in it. As far as I'm concerned, the matter's closed, Carrie."

"Dammit, why do you have to be so bloody obstinate?" she demanded angrily. "Why can't you see that this whole business stinks? He was pleased we were moving to your home because we'd be closer to him at Stronghold! Why did he suddenly change his mind and start a fight with you about it?"

"No," he said harshly, getting up. "He's done it before. At the Warriors' Guild, he picked a fight with me in front of the M'zullian students."

"And almost immediately collapsed with a brain fever! He wasn't himself then either; he was ill!" she said, anger giving way to exasperation.

"He's still ill, we agree on that, but he doesn't want to be helped. I told you, until he apologizes to me, I'll have nothing to do with him, and I don't want to talk about this again! I've got the nursery furniture to finish moving. I'll see you later."

As he turned to go, Carrie's wrist comm buzzed.

"Yes?" she asked, answering it as Kaid hesitated to see what it was about.

"The Rryuk Matriarch is at the Gatehouse, Clan Leader, demanding to see you and Giyesh. What do you want me to do?" asked Ni'Zulhu.

Carrie threw an anxious glance at Kaid. "Escort her here, of course. Give us fifteen minutes at least, Ni'Zulhu."

"You get Zhala to arrange food and drinks, I'll get Nyan to fetch a couple of youths from the village to finish moving the furniture," said Kaid, their argument immediately forgotten. "I'll also call Giyesh and Jeran, then tell T'Chebbi."

She nodded and, getting up, headed into the inner kitchen where Zhala, their cook, reigned. She'd heard the Matriarch was on Shola at the Governor's Palace, but hadn't expected her to come here. The impromptu visit worried her and she hoped that there wouldn't be trouble for Giyesh and Jeran, and the cub they'd managed to have despite their species' differences. It was because of their love for each other that the young U'Churian female had been expelled from her family in the first place.

Zhala, with the help of one of the younglings from the village, was busy at the central wooden table, packing a savory filling between the sides of an extremely large, green-skinned fish.

"Zhala, the Leader of the Rryuk family is paying us an unexpected visit. Can you organize some appropriate drinks and snacks for us, please?" She stepped closer to see the fish better.

"That's a Valtegan fish, isn't it? One of the new imports from K'oish'ik, their home world."

"Yes, Liege. Did you forget Prince Zsurtul arrives today? I'll have to call Mistress Rhyasha's cook to find out what the U'Churians like," she said. "We haven't got anything for them in the kitchen data banks yet."

"Oh, my God!" said Carrie, putting her hand to her forehead and closing her eyes in distress. "I'd completely forgotten about him! When does he arrive?"

Zhala looked at the wall clock. "In an hour, Liege."

"Nothing's ready for him, and the Matriarch will be here in about ten minutes!" She suddenly turned pale and grabbed at the back of the nearest chair for support. "T'Chebbi's gone into labor!"



"Has she?" asked the other female, mouth opening in a smile. "Master Kaid will be pleased, and yourself no doubt."

"But we've got guests coming!" moaned Carrie, panicking. "What on Earth am I going to do with them? Kaid *must* be with T'Chebbi and I promised I would be, too!"

"Sister T'Chebbi could be hours yet, Liege, you should know that," she said, finishing her task and walking over to the sink to clean her hands under the faucet. "Don't you fret. Zhaddi, pull the chair out for our Liege."

"Kaid says the pains are so close it won't be very long," said Carrie, sitting down gratefully. Through Kaid, she was aware of how much pain T'Chebbi was in. "The backache she had this morning must have been them starting!"

"Zhaddi, go to my office and call up Liegena Kitra, and her husband, Dzaka. Tell them T'Chebbi's gone into labor and they're needed here as we've got guests arriving in ten minutes," Zhala ordered, coming back to the table and picking up the prepared fish. "Then call Ruth, tell her what's happened and ask her to send over anyone she can spare. I need at least two people to lend a hand here."

The youngling nodded and, easing his way past Carrie, headed out the back door to Zhala's tiny office.

"You go to Master Kaid and T'Chebbi, Liege. Kitra and Dzaka can entertain the Matriarch and the Prince."

"I can't leave them alone with her, she wants to see Giyesh as well. They haven't the authority to deal with the Rryuk Family, let alone the experience," said Carrie worriedly. If the Matriarch started demanding that Giyesh return with her to Home, it would need delicate handling, especially because Giyesh had only given birth a week before and was still prone to be very overemotional.

"Then call Mistress Rhyasha," said Zhala calmly, opening the oven door and loading the fish into it. "As I understand it, Giyesh is officially a

member of her Clan not yours, therefore it's her place to deal with the Matriarch."

"You're right," she said, relief flooding through her as she got to her feet. "I'll call Rhyasha." She stopped at the door and turned back to Zhala. "Thank you for your common sense, Zhala."

Zhala smiled at her, tilting her ears back. "When Clan Leader Rhyasha asked me to come here and be your cook, it wasn't just because of my cooking skills, Liege," she said, a purr of amusement in her voice. "I'll see that Liegena Kitra manages until Mistress Rhyasha arrives, don't you fret."

\* \* \*

Two hours later, leaving an exhausted but happy T'Chebbi nursing her newborn daughter in the infirmary, Carrie and Kaid headed back to the villa.

Nyan met them at the door, taking their coats and scarves.

"How's it going?" Carrie asked quietly.

Nyan gave a slight smile. "I believe all is going well, Liege," he said. "They brought the cub and as soon as the Matriarch saw him, she was all smiles."

"What's she like?" asked Kaid.

"Imposing," was all Nyan would say as he disappeared with their coats.

*Rhyasha is the most daunting person I've ever met, sent Kaid as he accompanied her to the main lounge. I don't care who it is, no one will best her.*

*Except Konis, replied Carrie with a faint smile. I hope you're right.*

"Here's my bond-daughter now, Syppesh," said Rhyasha, as Kaid opened the door. "Carrie, my love, you must meet Syppesh Rryuk, Matriarch of the Rryuk Family. Her daughter is Giyesh's mother."

"An honor to meet you, Syppesh," said Carrie, moving over to greet the elderly Matriarch sitting on the sofa beside Rhyasha.

Imposing she certainly was. Black-pelted as all U'Churians, her mane of dark hair surrounded her face in a series of formal waves. On the exposed forehead, she wore a narrow circlet of blue, decorated in red and gold, colors echoed in her long, heavily embroidered gown. Silver hoop earrings, two in each ear, caught the light. As she stretched her hand out to touch Carrie's, she saw that Syppesh wore two rings on each hand.

"And this is Kaid Tallinu, my bond-son, Third to my son and bond-daughter."

Kaid inclined his head, taking the Matriarch's hand as Carrie moved aside to sit down next to Giyesh. She glanced round but could see no sign of the Prime Prince.

*Zhala had Nyan take him to the kitchen when he arrived. He's sitting by the stove chatting to her, filling himself with some of her fruit pastries, sent Rhyasha.*

"An honor, Matriarch Syppesh," Kaid murmured.

"You're the one Tirak spoke of," said Syppesh, holding onto his hand as she studied his face. "The one who held everyone together on the *Kz'adul*." Her voice was deep and rich, the Sholan betraying only a trace of an accent.

"Not exactly," he said as she let him go. "We worked together."

She grunted. "Modest. I like that in a male. I came here to meet you all and find out why my granddaughter preferred a Sholan over one of her own kind."

"And did you find out why?" he asked, raising an eye ridge.

*Tallinu!* sent Carrie, fighting to hide her smile.

"I hear you've just become a father for the second time in three months," she said abruptly. "Must be catching. Something in the air on this estate, or the food, no doubt, since my granddaughter was similarly affected."

"Cubs increase our Clan, Syppesh," he replied, joining Carrie on the sofa. "They're a blessing to everyone. I cherish all my children. You've met my son, Dzaka, I believe."

Syppesh turned briefly to look at Dzaka.

"I've assured Syppesh that accidents like the one that resulted in Giyesh's pregnancy are rare," said Rhyasha smoothly. "Very few females have the strength of ability to help a female from another species, even one as closely related as ours, become pregnant the way Zashou helped Giyesh."

"Absolutely," Carrie agreed. "Zashou was only able to do it because she'd been affected by the la'quo on Jalna."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Syppesh, looking over at Giyesh as she sat beside Jeran cuddling her tiny cub. "But I still have the matter of her future to decide. My daughter is naturally most concerned. She, of course, wants Giyesh and her child to return with me."

*Damn! I'd hoped this would have been resolved by now,* Carrie sent to Kaid.

*Hush, cub,* interrupted Rhyasha. *It will be. Syppesh has agreed to spend tonight with me because of the weather. More snow storms are forecast. It isn't safe for her to travel.*

Sensing that Giyesh was about to object, Carrie put her hand warningly on the other's arm. "Giyesh lives here, Syppesh," she said. "She's bonded to Jeran and has become a member of our Clan."

"I understand she's chosen him as her first mate, but..."

"Not first," interrupted Carrie. "They life-bonded, and a marriage under Sholan law is legally binding throughout the Alliance worlds."

Syppesh narrowed her eyes as she looked at Carrie. "She's a member of your Family?"

"Not just her, but their child," said Carrie. "We don't accept people into our Clans lightly, Syppesh. When we do, it's forever."

"As I told you myself, Syppesh," said Rhyasha gently. "Are you satisfied?"

Syppesh stood up suddenly, surprising them all. "I'm satisfied. My business here is done. Your husband and you will be welcome any time you wish to visit your birth Family, Giyesh. I'll tell your mother that you will not be returning because you are well settled with your new one. See that you repay their commitment with the duty that you were so reluctant to give us. I'd not thought to find such strong Family loyalty to one of our people from two other species."

"Yes, Grandmother," stammered Giyesh, obviously taken aback by the Matriarch's sudden decision.

*I told you all would be well, sent Rhyasha, her mental tone full of gentle humor. We spoke before Giyesh and Jeran arrived. All she wanted was to be sure her granddaughter was happy and that our Clan system was as close as their Families are. You didn't disappoint me, Carrie.*

"Jeran, you can embrace me," ordered the doughty female.

Ears back and tail tip flicking nervously, Jeran got up and approached the Matriarch. Happily for him, it was she who took him by the shoulders and held him close to her ample bosom before releasing him as Rhyasha rose to her feet.

"You take care of that great granddaughter of mine, Jeran Khesrey," she said sternly. "And make sure I get regular updates on her. Giyesh is not the most communicative of my grandchildren."

"Yes, absolutely, your— Liege," he stammered, as taken aback as his mate.

"Shall we go, Rhyasha? I have to admit to being worn out by the journey here from your capital."

"Certainly, Syppesh," Rhyasha said. "I'll take you in my aircar. Your pilot can follow us in yours. Good night, children," she said, escorting Syppesh to the door. "My congratulations to you and T'Chebbi, Kaid. What are you calling your daughter, and is T'Chebbi well? The birth was very quick."

"Rishu," said Kaid, getting up. "T'Chebbi's fine, but exhausted, obviously. Vanna said she'd been in labor since this morning but hadn't realized it because she'd thought it was just her back paining her."

"That's not uncommon among our females," nodded Syppesh as Rhyasha opened the lounge door.

Giyesh's cub began to whimper gently. "We better leave too," she said, getting up as the door closed behind Rhyasha and her grandmother. "Shayal's hungry. Thank you for speaking up for us, Carrie."

"I did nothing much," said Carrie as she and Kaid walked them to the door. "Rhyasha and your grandmother had worked it out before you arrived."

"You still spoke up for us," said Jeran. "And it was you and Kaid who suggested a way for us to join Rhyasha's Clan." His eye ridges creased in a frown. "Will it matter that you told her we were members of your Clan when we're actually members of the Aldatan Clan?"

"We're part of the Aldatan Clan, too," Carrie reassured them as they went out into the hallway and waited for Nyan to bring them their coats.

When they'd left, Carrie leaned tiredly against Kaid. "I suppose we'd better head for the kitchen and Zsurtul now," she sighed. "I wonder what brought him here. He wouldn't tell me, said he needed to speak to me in person."

"From the way today's gone so far, it won't be something minor, we can bet on that," said Kaid, wrapping an arm round her shoulders.

\* \* \*

"They want me to go home now that the twenty M'zullians have left," said Zsurtul when they were settled once more in the lounge. "I don't want to go home, Carrie. I can't stay at the Warrior Clan estate, and if I go to the Embassy, they'll send me home."

"Why don't you want to go home?" Kaid asked, studying the worried young Prime carefully.

"I don't like the Palace, or the City of Light. It's all protocol and I get no freedom. Let me stay here, please."

"There's another reason. You aren't telling us everything," said Carrie, sensing that this was not the whole truth.

The Prince gave a slight smile. "I should have known I couldn't hide it from you," he said, looking down at his hands. "I didn't want to tell you because I didn't think you'd believe me."

"You won't know till you try us," said Carrie reasonably.

He regarded her, an earnest look on his face. "I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about going home," he said simply. "I get them from time to time."

"Nothing you can put your finger on," murmured Carrie, almost to herself. She was well aware of that feeling, she'd had it too many times herself. "Well, you're staying here for tonight anyway, Zsurtul. We know what it's like to want to avoid duty, but we all have to face up to it at some point. We'll talk about it again tomorrow. It's been a long day."

"Zhala told me," he said. "T'Chebbi has a hatchling— I mean a cub— a daughter, with you, Kaid," he said, looking up at the Sholan male. "I don't understand, though. I thought you and Carrie... and then there's you and Kusac..." Looking from Kaid to Carrie, he ground to a halt.

"We were all three mentally Linked, Zsurtul," said Carrie tiredly. "Until the *Kz'adul* took us on board. We're a legal family unit."

"Then T'Chebbi is your Mistress?" he asked Kaid.

"Not quite," said Kaid, uncomfortably. "You could call her my Consortia, a position with legal status to allow us to share cubs because I'm life-bonded to Carrie. I have a legal responsibility to care for her and our daughter for at least the next three years."

Carrie stood up. "I think it's time we went in for third meal," she said. "Zhala's anxious about the food getting cold."

\* \* \*

By the time they'd eaten, it was late. Carrie showed the young Prime to his room before she headed for the nursery to join Kaid.

Kashini was fast asleep, but the nurse had just laid the twins in their cot for the night.

Kaid was leaning over the high side, gently stroking his daughter's face with one hand while Dhaykin clasped his tiny hand round the other. As she joined him, the cubs blinked up at her, purring sleepily.

"I never tire of looking at them," he said, smiling at her.

"Kashini's anxious to meet her new sister, Liege," said Yashui as she stacked damp night clothes into a basket for the laundry. "Is she like her mother or yourself, Master Kaid? And what have you called her?"

"Like her mother," said Kaid, moving aside so Carrie could say her good nights. "Same long tabby-gray pelt. She's called Rishu."

"She'll be a beauty then," said Yashui with satisfaction. "When will Sister T'Chebbi be coming home?"

"Tomorrow," said Kaid as Carrie turned to leave. "She'll be home for midwinter festival. Rishu will be in her room with her for the first two weeks then the cub will join her sisters and brother here. You'll have Rishu's nurse to help you, of course."



Yashui flicked her ears in acknowledgment. "I'll need the help," she said candidly.

"I thought you told me Kashini had calmed down since I brought the twins home."

"She has, and she loves them dearly, but she's still a berran herself and needs more attention than I can give her right now."

"I have her with me as much as possible," murmured Carrie, feeling a pang of guilt that she had to leave her firstborn in the nursery when she attended to the estate business.

"No one's saying you don't, Clan Leader," said Yashui hurriedly. "You spend more time with your cubs than many a mother on the estates I know of— Master Kaid, too. You have to look after us all, not just your berrans."

"Carrie knows what you mean, Yashui," said Kaid gently, taking Carrie by the elbow and steering her out of the nursery. "Good night."

\* \* \*

As he closed the door, Kaid turned to Carrie. "Will you join me in my room tonight?" he asked, touching her cheek gently with his fingertips.

She shook her head. "I'm going down to the Shrine to speak to Ghyan about Kusac's message."

Kaid stiffened, letting his hand fall to her shoulder. "I've told you, you're clutching at straws."

"You may be able to sit and wait for Kusac to contact us, but I can't," she said quietly. "I need to find out why he left Shola, because I don't believe the reason we've been given."

"It's been snowing for the past four hours," said Kaid. "I don't suppose that's going to stop you, though."

"A little snow never hurt anyone. You go to bed, Kaid," she said gently. "I know how tired you are, but don't ask me to leave this. I can't."

Unspoken words hung between them until Kaid turned aside. "You haven't called me Kaid since we became lovers," he said quietly. "Good night, Carrie."

She watched him walk off to his room, feeling the hurt she'd caused him, and well aware that he also knew how much his refusal to look at the message had hurt her. Her heart as heavy as his, she made her way downstairs.

\* \* \*

"There's nothing obvious, Carrie," said Ghyan after they'd watched the recording several times. "No hand signals, no phrases that stick out." He rubbed his hands tiredly across his face. "You say that Father Lijou didn't bring the crystal when he brought the bracelets?"

"No. He said he'd kept it, hoping to spare me any more distress," she said, reaching into her pocket for her lighter and tobacco tin, taking out a cigarette she'd rolled earlier. "You don't mind me smoking, do you?"

He shook his head, passing her the ashtray Brynne used when he visited.

"But I knew there was a message, I could feel it in the bracelets. Lijou admitted it and sent it over the next day with one of the Brothers from Stronghold." She flicked the lighter lid open and lit her cigarette, inhaling deeply. The rush of nicotine made her briefly dizzy.

"Kusac is considered a criminal, you know. Raiban has a couple of warrants out for his arrest. Perhaps the delay was because they wanted to be sure there was no hidden message. If that's the case, then I think you can assume there isn't one."

"Not one they could find," said Carrie. "But something about it isn't quite right."

Ghyan handed the crystal back to her. "I've copied it, so you keep the original," he said. "I'll look at it again tomorrow, Carrie, but if there is such a message, it's more likely to be one you can solve, not me."

"Then why did he mention you in the message?" she asked, placing the crystal back in its box. "Does it strike you as the kind of thing he would do in a letter?"

"As Telepaths, Kusac and I tended to communicate mentally," he said gently.

"Do you think he's guilty, Ghyan?" she asked abruptly. "Do you think his mind was so damaged that he had to return to the Primes at any price?"

"I don't know, Carrie. He ran away from Shola to join the Forces, that's how he met you. Certainly he's had difficult issues to deal with, as he said. Not least was the fact that he felt he'd lost everything that defined him as a person— his Talent, his Link to you, Kaid and Kashini. Coming to terms with that was a hard enough battle, but just when he'd redefined himself, found somewhere he fitted into the world he'd been so cruelly cut off from, then a partial cure is found and everything is turned upside down again."

"It wasn't a partial cure, it was a full one, though he didn't want it commonly known. It was delayed because the drugs Kzizysus used reacted badly with a la'quo residue still in his system from when we went back in time to the Fire Margins. It affected his memories of his captivity, sort of scrambled them. We were told his Talent wouldn't return fully until he'd relived and sorted through his memories of that time."

"I hadn't been aware of that." Ghyan reached out to take her free hand in his. "Carrie, you have to prepare yourself for the fact that he may have left Shola because he was afraid that once you'd given birth to Kaid's daughter, you and he would form a Link again. That may have been the last thing he wanted. He's changed a great deal since the Primes returned him to us at Haven. He's no longer the person any of us used to know."

Withdrawing her hand, she stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray, heart sinking. Getting up, she retrieved her coat from the back of her chair. "Does that mean you're not going to help me?" she asked, her voice taking on a brittle edge. First Kaid, now Ghyan. Was no one willing to look below the surface of Kusac's actions?

"I didn't say that, Carrie. Leave it with me for the next few days and I'll see what I can come up with."

Relief flooded through her. "Thank you, Ghyan. You've no idea what it means to have someone willing to talk to me about it."

"Kaid still won't discuss Kusac with you?" he asked, ears twitching in concern. "I did wonder when I saw you'd started smoking again. What was their row about, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I can't tell you, Ghyan," she said, putting her coat on. "You'll have to ask Kaid. All I can say is that it's a matter of honor to him."

"Even more important for him to talk about it, then. See if you can persuade him to visit me or the Shrine and I'll try talking to him myself."

"Thank you, Ghyan," she said.

There was a discreet knock and the door opened. One of the Brothers serving in the Shrine stood there.

"T'Chai, would you escort Clan Leader Carrie back to the villa, please?" Ghyan said to him. "Good night, Carrie. You have my word that I'll help if I can."

**Litany of Preparation**

*I am in the hands of Vartra.*

*I submit and gain flexibility.*

*Opening my mind to possibilities*

*I repeat my goal to myself*

*so I am not diverted.*

*Reversals will not deter me.*

*I will succeed.*

— Anonymous,  
from the Brotherhood's  
*Book of Pathways*

## Chapter 6

### Same day, Kij'ik Outpost

"WHAT happened?" demanded Zayshul, heading up the ramp as soon as she saw Kezule and the Sholans emerging from the main shuttle. "Who got hurt? Was it you?"

Kezule frowned but continued on walking down the ramp. "No. We had a little trouble," he began.

"Where's Kusac?" she interrupted, impatient now that she knew he was all right. The feeling of danger had been so strong, it had to be Kusac if it wasn't him.

"Zayshul!" said Kezule, grasping her by the arm as he turned to look for Kusac. "You're being ridiculous!" he hissed. "He's fine— see, here he comes now."

She stiffened, then as Banner turned to speak to someone behind him, Zayshul saw Kusac standing there. The white bandage on his right forearm showed up starkly against his pelt and the cuff of his short black tunic.

"What happened?" she repeated, allowing herself to relax now that she could see he was relatively unhurt.

"The M'zullians," Kezule replied in a low voice as he pulled her with him off the ramp and onto the deck. "I miscalculated. They kept a kill to themselves and ate it raw then turned on us. Kusac somehow anticipated it and had his people hiding in the bushes. He got bitten saving my life. They won't bother us again, I executed the survivors."

"Bitten?" She stopped dead and looked back at Kusac, seeing Banner steady him as he stumbled. "The antidote? You gave him the antidote, didn't you?" She could feel the blood draining from her face as she spoke. "Did it work?"

"Of course I did," he said, irritated, tugging her onward with him. "And, yes, it worked well. He was back on his feet in half an hour. At least your drug has been field tested on the Sholans, Zayshul."

With an effort, she pulled her attention off Kusac to concentrate on him. "And you? You're sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, I told you," he said shortly, steering her toward the elevator.

"I'm glad you're safe. I must check Kusac's wounds later today. He doesn't look too well. I need to be sure he doesn't need a second dose of the antidote."

"His system has been poisoned, of course he's not all right! He needs to rest, but he's in no danger. I made sure by treating him myself."

She gave him a startled look as they approached the elevator. "You did?"

"Naturally I did. He's my responsibility, Zayshul. I took him and his crew with me on the hunt. You worry too much about him and Shaidan."

"I need to," she replied sharply. "You want his help so I have to ensure he and Shaidan remain healthy."

"Your interest is only professional, isn't it?" he asked as they came to a stop in front of the elevator doors.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded, pressing the call button. "Of course it is!" The last thing she needed was him getting more paranoid about her and Kusac.

"Nothing," he said evasively. "His dressings will be fine until tomorrow. The hunt went well, by the way. We've three bucks and thirty does as well as fifty carcasses. We can start the meat vat production properly now."

"Good," said Zayshul. "It'll put a stop to the vitamin and mineral deficiencies I've found in several of our people as well as in the Sholans. None of us are designed to eat so much vegetable protein."

The elevator was empty when the doors opened.

"You haven't asked who won the bet," said Kezule as they entered.

"It's irrelevant to me. Neither of you had the right to involve me in the first place," she replied coldly. She'd been angry about that bet from the start, which was why she'd told Kusac when and where he could find her in the sick bay.

She could feel his relief at her answer but he said nothing more until the doors opened on the Command level.

"Kusac won. He can have his two hours with you tomorrow when you change his dressing."

"And if he asks me about Shaidan?"

He sighed. "Tell him the truth about Shaidan, but nothing else."

She stepped out of the elevator and turned to look at him. "What if I don't want to spend two hours with him, Kezule? You had no right to promise him my time. And for what? A scan that's not really necessary. I told you, Shaidan and the other cubs were taught how to use their telepathic abilities by a sleep tape made from a scan of Kusac's brain done by Chy'qui on the *Kz'adul*. Scan Shaidan and you'll have what you need."

"I can't force you to stay and talk to him, Zayshul. As for the scan, you know as well as I do that the records from the Directorate show they edited Kusac's scan to give the cubs only the knowledge of how to use their telepathy. Shaidan knows nothing about alien cultures, the Brotherhood training program, or even anything about Sholan culture. We need a scan from Kusac. If you went, you could try persuading him to allow one."

She could feel he was torn between not wanting her to go in case Kusac asked awkward questions and she was tempted to tell the whole truth, and the hope that if she did, she could persuade him to allow the scan.

"I'll think about it," she said. "But you can forget the scan. He'll never allow that. I've work to attend to in the main lab. I'll see you later."



Kezule followed her, trying to fathom why she was so angry over the bet. Given her concern over the Sholan, plus her gift to him of the earring—which he was still wearing—he'd been sure she was being as affected by the fake scent marker as Kusac was. Yet now she seemed unwilling to meet with him. Perhaps he was worrying needlessly. The scent marker wasn't truly hers, after all.

What did concern him more right now was that she'd known there had been an accident. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that whether she knew it or not, she had some level of telepathic ability. As she went into the lab, he continued down the corridor to their suite. Because of Shaidan, he'd had psi dampers installed. In the wall safe there were several miniature personal units. He intended to wear one from now on. Then he'd collect Shaidan from the nursery where the Prime children were.

\* \* \*

Hidden among the shrubbery in the Outpost's pool area on the hydroponics level, Giyarishis sat lost in a deep trance. Thanks to the nodes inserted regularly all over Kij'ik, he'd established a form of Unity. He could see the Hunter, still groggy from the sand-dweller poison, being helped to his quarters. The General, he knew, was heading for his own living rooms to fetch a psi damper, and the female sand-dweller was on her way to the labs. His vision was not one of corporeal bodies, but one of swirling shapes, inhabited by points of light darting and weaving their way to intersect with each other while leaving bright trails, like ribbons, of different colors behind them.

For each trail, there were several ghost images, some paralleling the originals, some shooting off at tangents, even some colliding and exploding, turning all around them dark. Potentialities. What must be danced among what could be. Only one set could become reality, and he had to see that the course the Camarilla had decided upon came to pass when the critical moments came. Thanks to his colleagues back home, the first such moment had come and gone successfully. His task was to ensure the appropriate response.

\* \* \*

Kezule strode into the lab, Shaidan scurrying behind him to keep up. "Zayshul, the search team has found the ship I was looking for," he said. "I need to leave the Outpost for a couple of days. M'kou will stay here to run the place in my absence. I'm leaving immediately." He was exuding an aura of suppressed anticipation.

"What?" she said, turning around in disbelief. "You can't! It's the Sholan midwinter celebration in two days. You must be here for that. It would be a terrible insult to them if you're not, especially when Kusac agreed to take a role in ours."

"It can't be helped. We need to bring the *Zan'droshi* here and I'm the only one who knows how to handle it. It was my ship before the Emperor retired me. It's got its own peculiarities— if it even starts after all this time. If not, we need the *N'zishok* to tow it. I fully intend to be back in time for the Sholan celebration."

"At least Shaidan will be here."

"Shaidan's coming with me," said Kezule, turning to go.

"Is that wise? A derelict warship isn't a safe place for any child, and you gave your word to Kusac he could see his son every day."

"He didn't see him while we were on the hunt. You can explain it to him, he'll listen to you."

"Kezule! It's unfair of you to leave me to do this!"

"He's a Warrior, Zayshul. He'll understand I couldn't leave Shaidan. If the positions were reversed, I assure you, he'd do the same. I have to go now if I hope to be back in two days," he said, heading for the door.

"Taking Shaidan will only slow you down," she called out, rising. "You know how dependent on us he is because of the programming. Leave him here, Kezule!"

He hesitated. She was right. He'd need all his attention and time for the *Zan'droshi*. "I'll leave him with M'kou."

"You'll need a bag packed."

"M'kou's seeing to that now," he said over his shoulder.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis' mandibles twitched slightly in quiet satisfaction. There had been no need for him to intervene with the sand-dweller. Now it was the Hunter's turn.

\* \* \*

Raised voices made her look up from the blood samples she was testing to see a black-pelted Sholan standing at the door arguing with M'kou and a guard. She frowned. It didn't feel like Kusac.

"Doctor Zayshul!" called a Sholan voice. "They're trying to prevent me seeing you!" Not Kusac, Banner, his Second in command.

"M'kou, what d'you think you're doing?" she demanded, leaving her desk. "You've no business keeping anyone out of the sick bay. What is it, Banner?"

"This isn't the sick bay, Doctor, it's the lab area," said M'kou, standing aside to let Banner enter. "The General's orders are that lab areas are out of bounds to all except authorized personnel."

"Don't muddy the waters, M'kou. There's a big difference between the labs here in the sick bay and those on the Command level. What's the problem, Banner?"

"They wouldn't fetch you to look at the Captain," he said. "He's in a great deal of pain and is refusing to let me check his arm. It looks badly swollen to me."

"Where is he?" she demanded, glaring angrily at M'kou.

"In a treatment room with Jayza."

"The Captain's health is one of my primary concerns, M'kou," she said, her voice deceptively mild as she pushed past him. "Don't ever prevent me from treating him again."

"I wasn't, Doctor," he said, gesturing the guard back to his post then following in her wake as she and Banner headed up the corridor to the treatment rooms. "I was trying to persuade the Brother to let me tell you myself."

"Next time, don't be so officious," she said, going past the first one and stopping at the door of the next. "Does it matter who tells me?"

The room was fairly spartan, its fittings being comprised of what little the ancient Primes had left behind that was usable, and what the *N'zishok's* facilities could spare. Kusak sat on a chair beside a treatment bed with Jayza standing over him. They were arguing heatedly.

Zayshul came to a sudden halt. "Enough!" she said, raising her voice. "You can leave now," she said firmly to Jayza, who looked up at her in surprise.

"I was only trying to keep him..." began the Sholan youth, edging cautiously past her.

"I said leave!" Aware of M'kou and Banner behind her, she turned on them. "And so can you! This is my sick bay, not a public brawling place! If I ever catch any of you shouting or brawling in here again, I'll put you on charges! And if you think the General will take kindly to..." She stopped, finding herself talking to an empty room.

With a quiet sigh of relief, she checked that they'd closed the door then turned to Kusak. He was leaning on the treatment bed now, pushing himself up onto his feet with an obvious effort.

"Where d'you think you're going?" she demanded, pushing him back onto the chair and reaching for a pair of scissors which she slipped into the top pocket of her gray one piece suit.

"Lot of fuss over nothing," he grumbled, sitting down heavily, arm still resting on the bed. "I hate sick bays. No need for me to be here."

"Banner disagrees. He says you're in a lot of pain and that your arm's swollen," she said, collecting a treatment tray from the sterile unit opposite and putting it on the bed beside him. Reaching up, she keyed her authorization into the drug cupboard and opening it, collected several ampoules for the hypo.

"My arm's fine," he said, letting his head drop down against the shoulder of his injured arm.

Zayshul had not missed the strain in his voice. She leaned down, studying his face. His ears were tilted back at half height, there were furrows of pain between his closed eyes, and the normally dark skin of his eyelids and nose was pale gray. Instinctively, she reached out to touch his forehead, noticing that his hair and pelt were dull and lackluster. He looked as ill as he had the day she'd first seen him on the *Kz'adul*.

"You're in a bad way, aren't you?" she said quietly, continuing to stroke his forehead.

The furrows lessened slightly and she jumped, pulling her hand away quickly as she heard a low vibrating noise.

"Don't stop," he said, eyes flickering half open. "It's the first thing that's helped today."

The vibrating noise lessened as she stared at him. "It's you making that noise," she said. "What is it?"

The noise stopped as his eyes drooped closed again. "You hiss, we purr," he said tiredly. "Except ours is a sound of pleasure and helps us heal."

Zayshul reached out to stroke him, marveling at the softness of his hair and pelt as the low vibration of his purr began again. She could almost feel his tension easing as his ears folded down to invisibility in his long hair and his breathing slowed perceptibly. Stroking him was relaxing her, too.

"I need to check your arm, Kusac," she said after a minute or two.

"You can now," he said very quietly. "I'm prepared for it."

"You can control your pain threshold?" She'd read nothing to suggest the Sholans had biofeedback abilities like the Valtegan Warrior caste.

"To a degree, if the pain isn't too intense. We recite Litanies—prayers—to focus on instead of the pain. Do it now, Zayshul, before it wears off."

She let her hand slide over his cheek and jawline in an encouraging caress. "When did you last take something for the pain?"

"What time is it now?"

She glanced at the clock on the wall. "16:00."

"Three hours ago."

"The blue compound from your medikit?"

"Yes."

"I can give you a shot of something stronger."

"Afterward." The tension was beginning to creep back into his voice.

"Was the bite on the outside or inside of your arm?" she asked, pulling open a nearby drawer to take out a waterproof backed pad to put on the treatment bed. Carefully she positioned his arm on it then drew her scissors out of her pocket.

"Outside."

The bandage was almost too tight for her to work the scissors underneath. She had to force it, making Kusac flinch. As she cut it and gradually peeled it back, an unpleasant aroma became noticeable.

Underneath, the actual dressing was stained with patches of an unhealthy dark green.

Zayshul sucked in a breath and Kusac lifted his head to look. "It's infected," she said, gently tugging at one edge. "It's stuck to your pelt. I'm going to have to get it off."

Pushing her hand aside, he took hold of the edge of the dressing with his free hand and yanked it sharply. His yelp of pain was quickly stifled.

Zayshul took the soiled dressing from him, dumping it in the disposal unit where it was instantly incinerated.

"I could have soaked it off," she said, turning back to examine his arm.

Kusac, his head sunk back onto his shoulder, said nothing.

The arm was swollen, and already, several of the wounds were beginning to ooze more of the dark green substance that was not what she'd expected. A Warrior's bite didn't usually have this effect. In fact, with the antidote, it shouldn't have become infected at all. She'd have to run tests on it afterward to see why.

"I'm going to have to clean the wounds, let the infected matter out," she said, moving closer to him so she could work more comfortably on his arm. "It isn't going to be pleasant, I'm afraid."

"I know," he said, tilting his head to watch her as she loaded the hypo. "It wasn't the poison in his teeth that caused this, it was the fact he'd eaten raw meat," he said, as if he'd been following her train of thought. "Alien germs, plain and simple germs. Our bite has this effect on other species if not treated."

She hid her surprise. "You're probably right. The first shot's a local anesthetic," she said, placing the hypo about midway down his forearm. He hissed with pain as she pressed the trigger. "You'll feel the effects almost instantly," she said, ejecting the empty cartridge and reaching for another. "This one's a longer lasting analgesic," she said, stepping between his legs so she could reach the exposed side of his neck. "You'll probably feel groggy in a few minutes, but don't worry, it won't knock you out."

He managed a faint chuckle. "It had better not. If I slide off this chair, we'll both end up on the floor."

She smiled briefly at him. If he could laugh, then the drug was beginning to work.

\* \* \*

At last, she was finished and each of the ten infected punctures was clean. Pulling off the soiled protective gloves and tossing them onto the tray, she reached for a fresh dressing pack.

"Sorry it took so long," she said, "but the good news is that the swelling's right down and the wounds look completely clean."

"I'm fine," he said, his voice a little slurred. "I've been enjoying myself."

Surprised, she turned her head to look at him and realized she was neatly trapped between his legs. Turning back, she opened the dressing and placing it over his arm, began to bind the bandage round it, acutely aware now of the warmth of his legs against hers, and his pleasantly musky scent. Altered as it was by the scent marker—hers— she had no option but to respond to his presence. She began to panic, feeling her skin begin to flush as her blood pressure started to rise, then she remembered that the side effect of the combined drugs made the patient extremely compliant.

"Let me go, Kusac," she said more calmly than she felt. "I need to fetch you a course of anti-infection drugs and some more analgesics."



Obligingly he moved, sitting up as she finished fastening the bandage before reaching into the drug cupboard again.

She handed him a pack of half a dozen tablets. "Take one each morning and night from tomorrow," she said, reaching for the hypo again. "I'll give you a booster shot now to last you till then. You can take another analgesic in six hours, but not before."

After she'd given him the shot, he stopped her from moving away. "You're Shaidan's mother," he said quietly. "How? Did it happen that night on the *Kz'adul*?"

Panic surged through her. She thought he'd forgotten about that. "I'm not his mother, Kusac."

His hand tightened around hers. "We're alone, Zayshul. Kezule's off station. You can tell me the truth now."

"I'm not his mother," she insisted.

"Stop lying to me! Your scent's bound with mine to him! I only want to know how it could possibly happen when that implant made me sterile!"

His anger surrounded her and as she tried to pull away from him, he rose suddenly to his feet, eyes blazing, grasping her arms with both hands.

"It wasn't me, it was Chy'qui's doing," she said, the words tumbling over each other in fear. "I told you the truth. You weren't sterile, the implant hadn't been on long enough, and it hadn't taken properly. He harvested you and the other telepaths on the *Kz'adul* and started to grow the fertilized eggs. Shaidan is your and Carrie's child, not mine! Carrie's his mother."

He began to growl, deep and low, his hair rising around his face and across the back of his neck until he seemed twice as large. "You're lying again! Why can't you tell me the truth? Has Kezule frightened you into lying for him? He told me you were Shaidan's mother!"

"He can't have, he knows I'm not! I'm telling you the truth! Shaidan was grown in a tank like the other cubs! I can prove it to you if you'll let me!"

"How? You're lying to me now, how can I trust what you tell me?"

"I can do a blood test. I have Shaidan's blood and tissue samples in the lab here. Let me fetch one and I can run it through the test on the unit over there. It'll show you his DNA and prove who his parents are. I brought the files on your people from the *Kz'adul* with me because of the cubs."

Kusac hesitated. "Fetch it." What she'd said about the implant and it not affecting his fertility had just begun to sink in. If Carrie had another child by him, it was now possible that their Leska Link could be reestablished.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis' trance was suddenly broken, his link to the realm of potentialities abruptly severed by a surge of energy the like of which he'd never encountered. Somehow, the Hunter had created a null zone around himself and the female that the Camarilla's technology was powerless to penetrate. Worse, the Hunter had forced the female to step off the path they wanted her to take. Only his physical presence could prevent Kusac finding out his son's true genetic heritage. This had not been anticipated—why not? How could they have missed such a possibility? How had the Hunter managed to access such power so early? He was barely even aware of his full potential.

Humming in anxiety, the TeLaxaudin rose to his feet and stalked through the foliage to the exit as fast as he could manage.

\* \* \*

Anger had burned off the effects of the analgesics and his arm had begun to hurt once more. Not the awful tight pain of earlier, thankfully, but it was bad enough. Impatiently he paced the length of the treatment room while Zayshul sat watching the monitor screen. Banner and M'kou had

already complained about the length of time they were taking. They couldn't hold them outside for much longer without making them suspicious, and neither he nor Zayshul wanted that. To cap it all, his torc was throbbing against his neck, something it had never done before. Reaching up with his good arm, he eased it away from his throat.

"I don't understand," said Zayshul suddenly. "This is wrong, it has to be. There must be a fault in the unit!"

"What?" he demanded, going over to where she sat at the small workstation. "Show me."

She pointed. "There. It does show a match with your and Carrie's DNA, but..."

"But what?"

"There's something wrong with either the sample or the unit, Kusac," she said, turning her head to look at him. "It says my DNA is also present and that's impossible."

He looked from the screen to her, seeing her impersonally for the first time since he'd reached Kij'ik. She was frowning, creasing the rainbow-colored skin that surrounded her large green eyes. Beneath the small nose, her wide mouth started to open, revealing the tiny, needle sharp teeth of her kind.

"There has to be an error, Kusac."

Her scent, which he'd been trying to avoid since the analgesics had worn off, surrounded him. Suddenly light-headed, he clutched the back of her chair for support. The proof was staring him in the face. Though not half Prime, his son was indisputably part Zayshul's.

"There's no mistake," he said thickly as the torc's throbbing peaked. Bonelessly, he collapsed unconscious to the floor.

\* \* \*

The sound of him falling brought Banner and M'kou instantly into the room. Zayshul had just enough time to erase the test and its results.

"What happened?" demanded Banner, kneeling down beside Kusac's limp body.

"He's fine," Zayshul reassured them, getting to her feet. "He fainted because he got up too suddenly, that's all. He needs to rest. I'd like him to stay here overnight for observation."

"I'll get a floater," said M'kou, striding out.

"I'll stay with him," said Banner.

"There's no need," said Zayshul. "The infection in the wound is gone now. His arm will be back to normal by tomorrow, and so will he. All he needs is rest." Beyond him, through the open door, she could see Giyarishis hovering. "Everything's fine, Giyarishis," she said, raising her voice. "The Captain fainted, that's all. His wound was badly infected. He's fine."

"Is good. I go, work do," the translator said as the TeLaxaudin backed away.

\* \* \*

Hurrying back to the hydroponics level, Giyarishis mentally reviewed the situation. He'd been unable to prevent the Hunter learning the truth, but his collapse gave the Camarilla time to reassess this unexpected development. The translator against his waist began to vibrate gently, warning him of an incoming transmission from the Camarilla.

"Skepp Lord Khassiss," he said, dipping his head in deep reverence to the female elder. That she should contact him personally only highlighted the seriousness of the matter.

"Where is the Hunter now?"

"In the infirmary, Skepp Lord. He passed out. I cannot tell if he learned the truth."

"The potentialities have changed. We can assume with safety that he knows. All depends now on the strength of the bond the scent marker has created. We are working on it, so must you. Walk in the Hunter's dreams, hers too if need be. A union between them is imperative. You have an isolator; use it if necessary. We expended much energy on removing the sand-dweller and providing more resources for him. This must happen before he returns."

"Yes, Skepp Lord."

\* \* \*

M'kou was of two minds about Banner's request to stay in the sick bay with the Captain. Every Prime on the base was well aware of the situation regarding Doctor Zayshul's scent marker on Captain Aldatan—his father had briefed them all before the Sholans had arrived. Several of the females chose not to believe it, but no one would dare to break the silence imposed on them. After what he'd seen at the Directorate headquarters, he personally believed K'hedduk and his rebels capable of anything. However, the fact remained that whether or not the scent marker had been placed by Doctor Zayshul, both she and the Sholan Captain were responding to each other as if it were genuine.

The General had kept them apart for this reason, but now he was away and the decision rested with M'Kou. If Banner remained, it would prevent the Doctor from being alone with Kusac again. Letting her treat him alone in the first place had been a risk, but the Captain had been so obviously ill, he'd assessed the risks as nil. And there was the fact the Sholan had won the bet and was entitled to spend two hours with Dr Zayshul. However, when he'd fainted and they'd finally got access to the treatment room, the place had reeked of sexual tension, both Prime and Sholan. He was surprised that Banner hadn't reacted to it. Perhaps insisting he stayed with the Captain *was* his reaction.

By the time they had Kusac settled in a bed in the sick bay, he'd decided.

"Stay with him, Lieutenant Banner," he said. "With you here, your crew can't complain about his treatment."

"It really isn't necessary," said Zayshul, switching on the various monitors.

"If you're keeping him overnight, then I'm staying," said Banner firmly, settling himself on the low padded chair that sat against the cubicle wall.

## **Vartra's Realm, same day**

Freed from the surface of Shola, Vartra had chosen to make his home, if such it could be called, at the Shrine on the renamed Haven Stronghold outpost. The sight of his catafalque in the temple at Dzahai Stronghold still unsettled him, reminding him of the mortality he'd been denied by the intervention of the Camarilla.

Not that he was restricted to Shola, or even Haven now, he could travel to wherever there was one of his visionary priests. Or one of his own descendants, like Kusac and his son, Shaidan. The Camarilla were monitoring them carefully and his interference would not be allowed— if it was discovered. They weren't omnipotent, despite all their abilities and technology. He'd done as much as he could for Shaidan for the time being.

Now he sat in the Shrine on one of the prayer mats near the back in the deep shadows, wrapped in the black robes of his Order, the hood pulled low over his face in case someone caught sight of him. He'd just been to visit the younglings who'd been sent to live with Tanjo. One there, Dhyshac by name, had surprised him once before by being able to see him. When he'd had the chance to talk to the lad and discovered whose blood he carried, it was no longer surprising.

\* \* \*

"You're back," said Dhyshac, following him into the deserted cryo resus room. "Who are you? You're not one of the Brothers who lives here, and no new Sleepers have been awakened."

Vartra sat down on one of the seats facing the lecture screen. "Who do you think I am?" he asked, surveying the cub dressed in the purple-bordered black tunic of the Brotherhood.

"I don't know," said Dhyshac, coming closer. "I can't feel your mind and that's unusual."

"Have you told anyone about me?"

"No," he said, perching on the edge of a chair three seats away. "Only Brothers on active duty wear gray, and I don't think you're on active duty. You look a little like the small statue that Brother Tanjo keeps in his office."

Vartra laughed. "Very observant. You're like your father, you know. Sharp as a knife, and as brave. Not everyone would question a Brother he thought was on active duty."

Dhyshac cocked his head to one side, looking curiously at him. "You know my father? They won't tell us anything about our families. Not even Tanjo."

"You get on well with Tanjo?"

"Yes. He's patient even with Gaylla, which few people are," Dhyshac said candidly. "Shaidan always used to look out for her, but they kept him so I do it now."

Vartra nodded. "Shaidan's a remarkable cub," he said. "In many ways."

"You've met Shaidan? But how could you?"

Vartra stood up. "I get around, Dhyshac. I have to go now, but we'll meet again, I promise you that."

"Don't go! Tell me who my father is!" exclaimed the youngling, leaping to his feet, tail twitching anxiously from side to side.

"Tell Tanjo I said to take you to the Shrine. It's time you followed in your father's footsteps," he said, turning away.

"But who are you? How can I tell him that if I don't know your name?"

Vartra stopped and, reaching into one of the pouches on his utility belt, took out a coin which he flipped over to Dhyshac. "Give him that, tell him it's yours. He'll know what it is, and what to do."

\* \* \*

Tanjo turned the coin over in his hand once more before handing it back to the cub by the chain he'd threaded through it. "Put it on and come with me," he said, getting to his feet. "We must see Sister Jiosha at the Shrine."

"I don't understand, Brother Tanjo," said Dhyshac, looping the chain round his neck as he followed the Brother out of the office and along the short corridor to the shuttle bay. "Who was he? Why do I need to go to the Shrine?"

Tanjo stopped and waited for the youngling, putting his arm round his shoulders before drawing him on. "Your father is Kaid Tallinu, one the Brotherhood. He's one of Vartra's favored," he said quietly. "He's a visionary. The God speaks to him." He took a deep breath, tightening his hand round the cub's shoulder. "Just as He's spoken to you. You met Vartra, Dhyshac, and He has a purpose for you, that's why He's given you His coin. That's why we must see the priestess at the Shrine."

\* \* \*

Tanjo had brought him here and had Sister Jiosha and Commander L'Seuli hear him swear the Creed, making him one of the youngest Brotherhood members in the Order's history. Then they'd left, taking the new young Brother for a celebration. Tomorrow, he'd start an intensive program of education and training under Tanjo, something that the retired tutor was looking forward to. It would give him a purpose in life that he needed, and a way to more usefully make the reparation he felt he owed Kaid. What better way than by educating his son?

\* \* \*



Hearing a footfall, Vartra looked up, surprised, wondering who was disturbing the quiet of the Shrine during third meal. It was Commander L'Seuli himself. He watched the young male approach the statue on its stone plinth, stopping at the brazier to cross his forearms over his chest and bow before taking a piece of incense to crumble in the flames.

Curious, he lifted his head slightly and watched.

\* \* \*

L'Seuli brushed his hands together over the flames to rid them of the last crumbs of the incense then stepped closer to the statue. His mind was troubled because he had disobeyed Master Rhyaz's orders regarding the En'Shalla cubs. The Warrior Master wanted them put in cryo as their existence was a political nightmare. Were they discovered, it could shatter the treaty with the Prime world.

When the orders had come, the thought of the five cubs lying in the chill embrace of cryo had given him and his mate Jiosha nightmares. On her insistence, he'd reinterpreted them to mean that there was no urgency to placing them there. Now one of them, Kaid's son by Kate Harvey, had been singled out by Vartra. Although for him it did confirm his decision had been right, it created more problems— namely confessing to Master Rhyaz and Father Lijou. He'd let his compassion risk the future of the Alliance. They would not be pleased.

Sighing, he reached out to touch the half life-size statue of the God, leaning against its coolness. Not for the first time, he wished he were a telepath so he could make them appreciate the many reasons why he and Jiosha felt that the cubs shouldn't be put in cryo and instead should be given to their parents.

*Not just compassion, the knowledge that when Kaid and Carrie find out about them— and they will— they will have become two implacable enemies to Stronghold.*

Startled, L'Seuli looked round the dimly lit Shrine. "Who's there?" he demanded. "Show yourself!"

Vartra laughed gently, getting to his feet and walking toward him. *I think not. Last time we met, you were far from comfortable in my presence. Tell them what I said, L'Seuli. Say Kuushoi spoke to Carrie while she was in cryo on the Profit. Ask if they really want the cubs in Her realm during winter?*

Slowly L'Seuli began to back away from the statue. "I'll tell them," he whispered, ears flattening to his skull. A flicker of movement caught his eye then he thought he saw the faint outline of a robed and hooded figure coming toward him. He tried to dismiss it as a trick of light caused by the flickering brazier, but when he felt a hand touch his shoulder, he let out a low whimper of fear.

Smiling to himself, Vartra touched him briefly on the shoulder as they passed. *Don't doubt yourself, L'Seuli. Rhyaz chose you for the very qualities you used when you decided to keep the cubs awake. I've given you what you wished for, by the way.*

Unable to move, L'Seuli remained frozen to the spot for fully five minutes before he realized that Vartra had left. Going over everything the God had said, he made his way shakily out into the corridor. Jiosha, her mind full of the questions she was trying to ask, was waiting for him with the two Brothers who were acting as priests.

"What happened? They tried to open the door but it was shut fast."

"Not here," he said, taking hold of her arm. "I need to talk to you in our quarters."

\* \* \*

By the time they had reached their rooms, he'd regained most of his composure.

"What happened, L'Seuli?" she asked, turning to him as soon as he'd shut the door behind them. "Something upset you badly." She reached out to touch his face only to instantly pull back as their minds met and began to merge.

"Dear God," she whispered, staring at him in shock as one phrase echoed in both their minds.

*Leska Link*, she sent. *We're Leska Linking!*

*I know*, he replied, reaching out to pull her into his arms.

## **Kij'ik Outpost, later that day**

Kusac solved the problem by waking from a troubled sleep some two hours later and insisting on returning to his own quarters. Zayshul was equally determined to examine him first.

He submitted to the short exam, answering her questions briefly and tersely.

"Kusac, we need to talk properly," she said finally, putting the small handheld scanner away. "Before Kezule returns tomorrow."

"I agree," he said. "When and where?"

"Tonight, up in the hydroponics level. There's a pool there that only I use at night."

He roused a little, looking at her for the first time. "A pool? I've never heard of one up there."

"You wouldn't. Kezule's not let it be widely known there is one. It's not just a pool, it represents the place we believe life started on our world. It has an almost religious significance for us. You'd call it an oasis. It's opposite the field area you use."

"Why meet there?"

"The pool's in the midst of a small indoor forest. If we're disturbed, you can hide in the bushes. I'll be there at 23:00. The guards are used to me going there alone late at night. There's a back staircase you can use. When

you're in the pool room, head down the path toward the bridge to the central island. I'll wait there for you."

He nodded. "I know about the staircase. I'll be there," he said, getting up.

"Kusac, I swear I knew nothing about the DNA," she said, reaching out to touch him.

"Later," he said, avoiding her as he made for the door. He wanted to leave here, escape from her presence now before the anger that was surging through his body and mind like a living thing exploded.

He'd been cynically used by her and her husband from the start. First with Zayshul's lies about visiting him on the *Kz'adul*, then when Kezule had used Zayshul's and Shaidan's scents on the message to lure him here. Finally, not content with blackmailing him to return for Shaidan, both of them had lied about Shaidan's parentage.

Banner was waiting for him in the corridor. "That was quick," he observed. "With Kezule and half his people away, I canceled the classes for tomorrow. I suggest you take it easy in your room, sleep if you can."

"I'm not tired," he snapped, heading out of the sick bay at a brisk pace. "I'm going for a walk. I'll sleep when I'm ready." Round his neck, his torc had begun to throb again.

"Hyper alert," said Banner, keeping pace with him, his ears flicking in understanding. "Then a walk's probably a good idea to tire yourself out. I'll come with you."

"I don't need or want you with me," he said harshly, pushing open the exit door with such force it swung back and hit the wall. "Go talk to the Prime females in the rec room if you want something to do, just leave me alone!"

A hand caught hold of his good arm, pulling him to a stop. Angrily he rounded on his Second.

"I only wanted to give you these," Banner said, holding out a small bottle of pills. "Analgesics from the Doctor. The instructions are on the label. I'm not going to force my company on you, Kusac. You do what you want. You know where I am if you need me."

Feeling deflated, he watched Banner walk off toward the rec room, then turned and headed in the opposite direction with no clear idea of where he was going. Round his neck, the torc's throbbing began to recede.

His footsteps took him past the temple. He hesitated at the door, then making a decision, pushed it open and went in. A start had been made on decorating the far end of the hall, round the altar, with the greenery they'd brought back with them from their hunting trip. A large pile still lay on the floor. Just in front and to either side of it, the braziers burned with a steady, low flame.

The altar itself was bare apart from a blue glass container they'd been loaned in which a votive candle burned. The *Venture* had only been at Haven for a few days before they'd left so there had been no image of the God on board as was traditional on Brotherhood craft.

He stopped beside the altar, breathing in the smell of the resin from the evergreen wood. The trees might be alien, but they smelled enough like those at home on Shola so that he could feel some of the tension begin to ebb away. On impulse, he bent down to search through the greenery for a couple of long, thin twigs. Finding them, he began to weave them together into a bow shape, the familiar task giving him some sense of reality in the insane world he found himself inhabiting. Finished, he placed it behind the blue candle holder.

A noise from behind caught his attention and he swung around, eyes searching the dimly lit room, but the temple was empty. Remaining motionless, he waited. The noise came again and this time, he could pinpoint it to the door of the small office a few yards away.

Slowly and quietly, he made his way over, reaching out cautiously with his mind to see if anyone was there. He recognized the mental signature instantly—Dzaou. What the hell was he doing in the office?

Pushing the door open, he walked in.

Dzaou stood with his back to him, leaning over the large wooden desk that faced the door. He froze, then visibly forced himself to relax as he looked around.

"Captain," Dzaou said. "I didn't realize you were up and about. I'm checking on the incense and candles for our midwinter festival." Turning round to face him, he leaned against the desk and held up a pale yellow candle. "Scented, with something smelling of fruit blossom. Not exactly the nung flower, but quite pleasant. Do you think it'll do?"

The body language and his emotions all screamed that the older male was trying to conceal something on the desk.

"Not like you to spend time on temple duty," Kusac said, walking closer. He stopped a few feet in front of Dzaou. "Jayza tells me that apart from working on the drums, you rarely visit."

Dzaou flicked his ears briefly to the side in the equivalent of a shrug. "Religious observances when not at Stronghold were always a matter of personal preference in my time. I don't remember seeing you here."

"I'm here first thing each day to conduct the basic rituals observed when on a religious posting," he said, moving slowly round to Dzaou's left. "The other three usually join me."

"Their choice. Did you want something, Captain?" asked Dzaou, turning to lean back across the desk and pick up the candles lying there.

"I heard a noise and came to see who was here."

"Well, now you know it's me," said Dzaou, palming something.

Kusac's hand flashed out, pinning Dzaou's to the desk before he could conceal what he held.

"What's that, Dzaou?" he asked in a deceptively mild tone. "You aren't taking candles from here, are you?"

Dzaou snarled up at him, trying to pull his hand away and failing. "Yes, I'm taking a candle. I prefer to meditate in my own quarters."

"Why don't I believe you? What are you planning this time?" His tone sharpened as he forced Dzaou's hand up to reveal the candle.

"Keep it then, if one candle is so important to you!" Dzaou exclaimed as it was taken from him. "And I resent the inference that I'm planning something!" He jerked himself free and, rearranging his jacket, turned to leave.

Why would Dzaou want a candle, he wondered as he placed it back on the desk. Why was he so anxious to leave? Then he sensed what it was: Dzaou was concealing something else on his person, something more important that mustn't be found. His body language, and the uniform jacket with its multitude of pockets, shouted it out loud and clear.

"What else have you stolen, Dzaou?" he demanded, reaching out to prevent him from leaving. "Give it to me right now."

With a snort of derision, Dzaou turned back. "That poisoned bite's made you paranoid, Captain," he said with heavy sarcasm. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His anger flared again, and as it did, the torc began to pulse uncomfortably. "Don't mess with me, Dzaou! I want it, and I want it now!"

"You seem to delight in picking on me!" Dzaou snarled, again attempting to pull free. "If you did your job and spent that effort on getting Shaidan from the General, we'd be off this lump of rock and back home by now!" Enraged at still being held, he lashed out at Kusac's injured forearm.

The pain surged through him, making him see red, but the older male hadn't reckoned with his heightened pain threshold, courtesy of J'koshuk. Moments later, he had Dzaou pinned across the desk by the throat and was searching through his pockets. He found it, several small bags filled with a fine, gray powder. Dumping the last one on the desk, he tore a hole in it

and stuck his fingers in, bringing a small pinch of it up to his nose to smell.

"Fertilizer! What the hell are you doing with fertilizer?" he demanded, searching through his memories for alternative uses for it.

"None of your Goddamn business," wheezed Dzaou, unable to move because of the forearm pressing across his throat and collarbone.

He must have gotten it from the hydroponics level. Nitrogen compounds like this were volatile. "Were you planning another surprise for me for the festival in two days' time?" Sprinkled on the incense, it would ignite instantly when he crumbled it into the brazier flame. It wouldn't necessarily harm him, but it would embarrass him in front of the Primes.

"It's no crime to have it," Dzaou said. "Go on, hand me over to the Primes, then. You're so damned alien now you don't know what it is to be a loyal Sholan!"

Anger flowed through him, bringing in its wake the surge of energy that fueled it and he had to fight hard to keep his temper under control. Dzaou plainly had no intention of telling him.

"Tell me now, or by Vartra, I'll rip it from your mind!" he snarled.

"Don't make me laugh!" coughed Dzaou, struggling futilely beneath his grip.

He reached, forcing his way ruthlessly into Dzaou's mind, ignoring the pulsing of his torc as he pushed past even the Brotherhood defenses until he'd found what he wanted.

The simplicity of Dzaou's plan was a revelation. Next time he worked on maintenance classes in the landing bay, he planned to secret some liquid fuel in a series of small containers and smuggle them back to his rooms. Mixed with the nitrogen-based fertilizer, and a suitable primer, he would have several explosive devices which, if planted carefully throughout the



Outpost, he thought he could use to blackmail Kezule into handing Shaidan over and letting them all leave.

The sound of low whimpers of pain and the continuous pulse of the torc drew his attention back to Dzaou. Now that he knew he had the full use of his psi abilities back, Dzaou was a liability. Tempting as it was to even consider putting the erstwhile Sleeper out of his misery once and for all, he knew it was impractical.

This time, it was easier to enter his mind. A small adjustment here, one there, and Dzaou would forget not only his plans to make explosives and force Kezule's hand, but that they'd even met in the office. The final thing he did was put him to sleep.

Releasing Dzaou, he stood up and, grasping hold of his unconscious body, pulled him upright, hissing in pain as his injured arm took the strain. Supporting him with an arm around his waist, he carried him round to the other side of the desk and sat him in the chair, arranging him so that when he woke, he'd think he'd fallen asleep there. He'd sleep for perhaps half an hour then wake with a very sore head. All told, Dzaou had got off very lightly.

The four small bags of fertilizer Kusac shoved inside his tunic, positioning them above his belt for support, making sure the punctured one wouldn't leak. Picking up the candles that had been knocked to the floor, he did a final check of the desk, wiping the surface with his hand to make sure there were no telltale signs of the gray powder.

He stopped at the door, reaching out cautiously with his mind to check that there was no one in the temple. It was still deserted. Easing the door open, he slipped out. Dzaou's plan had merit, but it was too dangerous to be left in the hands of someone as undisciplined and unpredictable as he was. The way Kezule had manipulated and lied to him rankled deeply. He could no longer trust the General, or his promise to let Shaidan and them leave. Dzaou's plan couldn't succeed because the General would never give in to blackmail, but it gave him another option. He had the means to destroy the Outpost.

\* \* \*

"Without Kezule, you'll not destroy the Valtegans," said a soft voice to one side of him as he closed the office door. "Who are you to be judge and executioner of so many innocent souls?"

Kusac froze, recognizing the voice immediately.

"And what of your son?" the voice continued. "What crime has he committed to have his very short life ended so soon?"

"He's part Prime!" he hissed, turning to face the shadowy, robed figure as the hair on his head rose.

"You're now half Human, so is Kashini. Would you kill her too?"

"She's not an abomination that should never have been conceived!" How could He mention her in the same breath as Shaidan? "I loved her mother— she was my Leska!" Memories flooded his mind, painful ones.

"Was. Loved. Are you discarding my gifts to you?"

"That life is long past, Vartra," he said, struggling to shut his memories away again. "You fought the Valtegans. Why are you defending them now?"

"I'm not. They're Primes, and your son is also Carrie's."

"Don't split hairs with me, Vartra! How could that happen? How could he have two mothers?" he demanded, staring at the anonymous cowed head.

"Does it matter? The cub is not responsible for the circumstances of his birth. You knew he was part Prime from the first yet you didn't turn away from him. Why does it matter so much now? Is it because he was the result of your rape?"

He took a step back, all the anger suddenly washed from him in the shock of what the God had said. "I was willing," he muttered. "It was no rape, but she did use and betray me."

"So the truth is unpalatable," said Vartra, raising His head till His eyes shone in the blackness within His hood. "Once again you'd rather destroy yourself, and your son, as well as Shola's hope, to avoid facing the consequences!"

The words hit him like a whiplash, making him flinch backward again but a hand snaked out, catching hold of him by the front of his tunic. Vartra's eyes glowed hot with anger.

"That's not true," he began.

"You're a fool, Kusac Aldatan! You've forgotten what you learned on the *Couana*! She's not the one using you! The first she knew of Shaidan was when Kezule told her! As for Kezule, when he could have had your son in his claws, he took Gaylla to prevent her being killed! Yes, he's used you, but for what ends? Not to conquer, not to torture, but to rebuild his people to what they should be! I warned Kaid and I'll warn you once more! You and the Liege of Hell must work together or more than Shola will fall!"

He was flung backward with such force he hit the rear wall. Staggering, he fell to the ground, banging his head. Eyes streaming and gasping for breath, he looked up to see Vartra suddenly looming over him.

"Once I may have been long distant kin of yours, Kusac, but never forget who I am now! We're all someone's tools, accept it and learn to *live* with it!"

When he'd staggered to his feet again, he was alone. Light-headed with pain and shock, using the wall for support, he made his way out of the temple and headed back to his room.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis was not happy. Once again, the Hunter had somehow managed to block his ability to sense him and his actions, and once again it had been accompanied by the strange surge of power. He wondered if it could be the torc malfunctioning but dismissed that as unlikely. After all, it had been adapted not only by Phratry Leader Annuur, but by the Touibans.

They were a species who, if they continued to progress as they were, would one day achieve a level of technical competence worthy of the Camarilla's attention. He decided to wait to inform the Camarilla until their next contact. There was no rush, after all. A second meeting between the Hunter and the sand-dweller female had been arranged and the scent marker would take care of the rest.

In a more positive frame of mind, he left the pool area and headed back down the elevator to the science labs on the Command level. There was still work to finish on the new batch of Prime embryos before they could be placed into the growth tanks.

### **Shola, Dzahai Stronghold, same day**

"Slowly, I said!" snapped Physician Muushoi as he guided the cryo unit into its recess in the resuscitation room floor.

Kholgou glanced across the dark metal surface at Maikoi and grimaced. The Physician had been in a bad mood from the moment they'd arrived with the unit, and everyone knew why. Noni was here, and Muushoi didn't get on with her.

At a signal from Maikoi, once more he reduced the cradle's lift, nudging the unit a fraction away from the edge of the recess. Finally, with a dull thud, it settled into its base.

"You can take the cradle off it now," Muushoi said, standing up and holding out an imperious hand to Chaddo for the comp pad the elderly Brother carried.

Chaddo passed it over. "Delivered into your tender care, one elderly male Human, by the name of Conner Lllwellen," he said. "And may Vartra have mercy on him," he added in an undertone.

Muushoi shot him an angry glance as he scribbled his signature with the stylus, but he held his peace. They were Brotherhood, and he wasn't. The traditional fear and respect of the Brothers that he'd been brought up with didn't die easily. He thrust the comp pad back at Chaddo.

Maikoi coughed to cover his laugh as he unscrewed the cradle's fastening at his side of the unit.

Pressing back the safety cover over the controls, Muushoi retracted the radiation and impact-proof shielding, exposing the elderly male within the cryo unit.

The cradle now detached, Kholgou leaned on the lid, wiping off the condensation that had already misted its surface. "Who is he?"

"That's classified," snapped Muushoi. "Don't lean on it!"

"Some Talented person from Earth, so I heard," said Chaddo as he turned to leave. "From the British Isles. Apparently one of their best."

"We didn't get many telepaths from there. Why send him here by cryo? Is he sick? He doesn't look it." Kholgou wiped the condensation away again, managing to make out long gray hair and a face covered by a neat gray beard.

"He's not sick," said the Physician. "Don't you go starting rumors! Now if you don't mind, I've got work to do, even if you don't!"

Reluctantly Kholgou moved aside. "Are you waking him now?" he asked. "Or keeping him in cryo?" This frozen Human intrigued him. Was he the Human equivalent of a rogue Telepath? Was that why he was here, to be trained? Retrained, he corrected himself, if Chaddo was right, and Chaddo wasn't usually wrong.

"That's classified," his friend Maikoi said at exactly the same moment as Physician Muushoi did. Laughing, they followed Chaddo outside as the physician began initiating the resus cycle.

"C'mon, Chaddo," said Kholgou, draping his arm round the porter's shoulders. "You must have some idea of who he is and why he's been sent here."

"If I did, what makes you think I'd be telling the likes of you two?" asked Chaddo, his eyes lighting up with humor.

"I'll buy you an ale in the Seniors' mess," offered Kholgou. "How secret can it be? His arrival was hardly clandestine."

"You'll be briefed soon enough," said Chaddo urbanely as they left the infirmary.

"Then why not tell us now?" said Maikoi. "We just want to be the first to know."

"So you can wind up the other Brothers here, I know. Nothing changes," sighed Chaddo. He stopped, bobbing his head to the young Human female coming toward them. "Good day, Sister Alex."

"Hi, Chaddo. Our visitor's arrived safely?" she asked, stopping beside them and nodding to the others who murmured their own greetings to the Guild Master's young Leska.

"He's arrived safely, Sister, but as to whether he remains safe is up to the tender care lavished on him by Physician Muushoi."

Alex laughed, pushing her blonde hair back behind her ears. "He's in that kind of mood, is he? Thanks for the warning."

"Alex, who is he?" demanded Kholgou, letting Chaddo go. "Chaddo won't tell us. You're from the same country, surely you know something about him, don't you?"

"If you young people will excuse me, like our esteemed physician, I have work to do," murmured Chaddo, taking the opportunity to make good his escape.

"You old fraud!" said Alex, grinning widely. "It's no secret who he is, you know that! He's winding you up, Kholgou!"

The sandy-colored male's mouth dropped open in a grin. "I thought as much," he said. "So tell us, Alex! Stop dragging your news out!"

"His name's Conner and he was the leader of an ancient sect of mystics back in England. Apparently he chose a Sholan as his successor— Khyan Rhasho, the son of our Sholan Ambassador to Britain. Our Ambassador was none too pleased, so Conner's been sent here to us as a kind of Cultural Exchange, Rhyaz said. Clan Lord Konis Aldatan arranged it, and arranged to have him sent here to us."

"But why in cryo?" asked Maikoi.

Kholgou watched Alex's eyes glaze over slightly as she communicated mentally with Master Rhyaz. "When the old leader retires, their custom is to put him in cryo in case his advice is ever needed in the future. They kept him in cryo because on Earth, at his college, they don't own the technology to wake him safely."

"Excuse me?" asked Maikoi. "Then why put him into cryo in the first place?"

Alex shrugged. "I know, it doesn't make sense to me either. But apparently Master Konis thought the journey would be less of a strain on him if he remained asleep. So, do I get that drink you promised Chaddo for telling you who he is?" she asked, linking her arm through Kholgou's.

"But of course," he said, smiling down at her. The Warrior Leader's Leska was popular among the seniors, perhaps in part because although she was friendly to all, she gave her time and company to very few. "I'd be honored to escort you to the mess. We're off duty now if you are."

"Give me five minutes to check on Conner. Rhyaz has asked me to be there when he awakens. With us coming from the same country, he hopes it'll be less of a shock to him when he finds out he's on Shola."

"We'll wait for you here," he said as she let him go and headed into the infirmary.

"Is this wise?" asked Maikoi quietly. "She is his Leska, after all."

"You worry too much. She's also a person in her own right," said Kholgou. "Master Rhyaz knows her thoughts from moment to moment, as she does his. Yes, she's beautiful, who wouldn't be attracted to her? But there's a big difference between being a friendly admirer and making advances to her. Besides," he grinned, poking his friend in the ribs, "everyone knows she has eyes for no one but Master Rhyaz since they became Linked mentally!"

"I just don't want you to go getting yourself in too deep. I know how you like to flirt."

Kholgou laughed. "Forget it, my friend! I have a Human lover back on the estate! I'm not looking for another, even one as tempting as her! Our Leader's Leska is safe with me, though I admit I will enjoy flirting with her."

The door swung open and Alex came out. "Okay, I have about three hours until I need to return," she said. "Rhyaz is busy right now, so if you've the time, we can get lunch there too and maybe I'll Challenge you both to a game of darts."

"Sounds good to me," said Kholgou, taking her arm again and leading her off toward the Seniors' mess. "What about you, Maikoi?"

"Darts, you say?" he asked, looking more cheerful. "That's the game you and Kai invented, isn't it?"

"Not invented," said Alex, looking over her shoulder at him. "Imported."

\* \* \*

Consciousness returned slowly, forcing him to leave behind the soft, warm cocoon of sleep. In its wake came remembrance. Conner's eyes flew open and with a start, his hands clutched involuntarily at the light quilt that covered him.

"Hello," she said, flicking her pale blonde hair over one shoulder. "They asked me to stay with you till you woke. How're you feeling? You've had everyone very concerned, you know."



He found his voice. "Nimue? Where am I?" he asked, confused. "Why did they wake me? What's happened?"

"Everything's fine," she reassured him. "My name's Alex. Your Regent Euan sent you to us in exchange for the young man you appointed as your successor."

Conner struggled to sit up, shocked to discover how weak he felt.

"When we woke you, you went down almost immediately with a twenty-four hour fever," said Alex, reaching out to pick up a small control unit. Underneath him, he felt his pillows begin to rise until he was sitting up. The girl held the unit out to him. "Press that button to lie down, and the other to sit up," she said.

Releasing the cover, he took the unit from her, clutching it tightly. "Where is here?" he asked, his eyes drawn toward the window beside him. Outside, he could see the snow-covered rooftops of what he assumed was the rest of the building and beyond it, a mountainside. The sky above was a bright, almost impossible, blue.

"Where is here?" he repeated, looking back to her as he took in the rest of his surroundings.

She hesitated. "May I call you Conner?" she asked.

Conner. It had been many, many years since he'd heard anyone call him by his birth name. He nodded.

"I'm a telepath, Conner, and from what I'm picking up from you, I feel you'd rather be told the truth than have me try to wrap it up more comfortably for you."

"You're perceptive for one so young," he said. "I take it your news is bad."

"Depends on your point of view," she smiled. "Coming here for me was freedom. You chose a youth called Khyan Rhasho as your successor, so you've met at least one Sholan. You're on Shola, Conner. It was arranged

between the Head of our Alien Relations and your Regent as a cultural exchange. You for Khyan."

"And Khyan? How is he?" he asked, feeling a pang of loss as he thought of the love and life he'd left behind.

"He's fine. The Regent tried to prevent him from contacting anyone outside the college, but a compromise was reached."

Conner began to smile. "A compromise? I wish I'd been there to hear that exchange," he murmured. "Euan doesn't like to be bested. I told him he'd not be able to have things all his own way during the Regency."

"You can talk to Master Aldatan and ask him about it as soon as you're up and about," said Alex, matching his smile. "I take it you and Euan didn't see eye to eye."

"You could say that," Conner agreed, looking out the window again. "Shola. I'm on an alien world," he said quietly as if he hardly believed it.

*You said you're a telepath, child. How many on this world are?* he sent to her.

*Not many, but it is an accepted and highly respected profession here, unlike on Earth,* she replied.

*How do they teach the skills?*

*Through the Telepath Guild, or here.* "The Leaders of Stronghold would like to welcome you. Do you feel ready to meet them?" she asked.

He reached out to put the control unit for the bed on the night table. "I'd be happy to meet them, child," he said. "But first, tell me what kind of place this is. Is it a college of some kind?"

"You're in Dzahai Stronghold," she said. "It's both a college and a temple where elite warrior priests with mental skills are trained. They're the protectors of the people of Shola, particularly the Telepaths."

Moments later, the door opened to admit two robed Sholans.

"Welcome to Stronghold, Master Conner," said the first, a dark-pelted male dressed in a flowing black robe, as he approached the bedside. The visitor held out his hand, palm uppermost. "I'm Father Lijou, the spiritual Leader here."

Instinctively, Conner reached his own hand out, his fingertips just brushing the other's as he took in the long dark hair worn swept back from a face framed by two white streaks.

"And this is Guild Master Rhyaz, Leader of the Warrior side of our establishment," continued the priest.

"It's an honor to meet you, Conner," said Rhyaz, holding his hand out in greeting.

The look that Alex and Rhyaz exchanged didn't go unnoticed by Conner. "Pleased to meet you," he murmured as the two males brought chairs from the side of the room over to his bed and sat down.

"Your partner has been explaining my situation to me," he said, looking at Rhyaz, who raised an eye ridge in surprise at him before smiling.

"Khyan told us that you had a mind as sharp as a knife," he said, a purr of amusement underlying his voice.

"You've spoken to him?" asked Conner. "I'm afraid I had no chance to meet him before it was time for me to... leave. It's against tradition for the outgoing leader to meet the new one."

"Not us, Konis Aldatan," said Lijou. "Head of Alien Relations. Khyan is coping well."

"When can I get up and see this world of yours for myself?"

"Today, if you feel strong enough," Lijou replied. "Our physician has asked us to tell you that he's started treating you for the stiffness in your

joints that you've been experiencing, but that it will take some time to have its full effect. Until then, though you may feel better, you must take it easy."

Conner's eyes were drawn to the window again. "It's winter here," he said. "How long was I asleep?"

"Not long," said Lijou. "Less than two of your months. You've arrived at a good time, though. We hold our midwinter festival in two days. I'm told that you'll find our religion not too dissimilar from your own."

Conner nodded, suddenly feeling exhausted.

Lijou stood up. "We'll leave you to rest. There's a buzzer on the control unit that Alex gave you. Press it if you need anything."

"He needs food and rest," said a sharp voice from the doorway. "You males have got no idea of how to look after someone who's been through what he has!"

"We're just leaving, Noni," said Lijou, putting his chair back as Rhyaz and Alex got up too.

"Three of you! No wonder he's exhausted!"

Curiosity overcame his tiredness and he turned his head to look at the newcomer. The elderly Sholan was as striking to look at as her voice had suggested. What she lacked in size, she made up for in presence as she stood there, dressed in a long, dark blue robe, leaning on her walking stick. Snow-white hair, bound in a single long plait, framed her iron-gray face, a face that right down to the angle of her ears was glaring thunderously at his visitors.

"Master Lijou, you've got a call waiting for you in your office. And, Rhyaz, take that young Leska of yours to the refectory and feed her! She's looking peaky again and she's still got a lot of growing to do."

"Yes, Noni," said Rhyaz with a grin. "Conner, may I introduce you to Noni, our Healer? She rules this infirmary with a rod of iron."

"I can introduce myself, thank you, Rhyaz," she said gruffly as they filed out past her. "As for you," she said, pointing at him, "I got a nice bowl of..."

"Not chicken broth, I hope," he murmured. "You've no idea how I hate being treated like an invalid."

"Stew," she said, moving aside for a nurse carrying a tray. "Broth has its place, but you need building up." She stood and watched the nurse put the tray on the table at the end of his bed then pulled it up till it was across his lap. "You eat that then get some sleep," she said, her voice gentler now. "I'll come see you later and we'll talk then about you getting up."

Left alone, he ate his stew slowly then lay back on his pillows, looking out at the blue sky and the snow-covered mountain. It wasn't the company that had tired him, it was the realization that after composing himself for an eternity of sleep, he was now faced with having to continue living— with the loss of the woman he'd loved as fresh as if it had just happened. And for him, it had just happened. No sooner had Khyan arrived than he'd had to enter the cryo chamber, leaving Nimue to be the youth's teacher and lover. He sighed, knowing there was a rightness in the ritual of Choosing and of the sleep afterward. Khyan was her age, not an old man like him.

Sending him to Shola was Euan's revenge on him for Choosing a new high priest that he couldn't control. His only comfort was the promise his Gods had given him, that never again would the high priest live alone until the last few years of his term of office. Khyan and Nimue would remain together for the rest of their lives, as would those Chosen after them. His sacrifice meant their happiness. Now he must learn to forget her, as she had begun to forget him the moment she'd taken the ritual drink during the Choosing.

Resolutely he turned his thoughts away from the young couple at the college in Old Sarum. He must embrace this new life, look for the purpose behind it. Euan might think it had been his decision to send him to Shola, but Conner knew he'd been sent here for a greater reason. He let his mind drift, wondering what kind of world this was, wondering what kind of Gods and Entities inhabited it. Presently, sleep claimed him.

## Chapter 7

### **K'oish'ik, Prime home world, same day**

K'HEDDUK glanced at the two red-robed Enforcers working their way slowly down the length of the kitchen staff toward him. Once a week, without warning, they came to scan the food in the storerooms, preparation and cooking areas for any traces of poisons. Today, the Head Inquisitor himself had come. He grunted in satisfaction that his message had got through.

The chef came out of the cold store and thrust a small dish of imported chocolate flakes at him. "Here, and see it's all used on her Highness' dessert or I'll have your hide for a floor scrubber! It's too expensive to waste on the likes of you. It's not my job to keep up with all her food fads. The sooner she drops that egg of hers, the better!"

Mumbling assurances, he headed out of the stifling heat back to the coolness of the side room where he was preparing the latest bizarre concoction of fruit, meats and cream— to be topped with the latest delicacy from the Human worlds of the Sholan Alliance— for the pregnant Empress Zsh'eungee.

He took his time, knowing that his dishes were the Empress' favorites, not just because of their taste, but their presentation as well. He had no intention of rushing just because High Inquisitor M'zzik was here.

"You're a person of many talents, K'hedduk," said a quiet voice from the doorway. "I'm sure the Empress will enjoy your latest culinary creation."

He looked up at the Inquisitor, not missing the priest's slight emphasis on the word Empress.

"Of course," he said. He stood back from the table as M'zzik's assistant priest ran the scanner over the nearly completed dish and the remaining ingredients.

"Clear, Inquisitor," he murmured.

M'zzik waved him aside. "Keep watch in the doorway, Lufsu," he ordered. "We must not be disturbed."

The priest bowed and moved back into the corridor.

Moving closer, M'zzik lowered his voice. "Your claim has been checked against the central records, K'hedduk."

"And?"

The priest dipped his fingers in the bowl of chocolate flakes. Lifting them toward his mouth, he examined the dark confection before his bifurcated tongue flicked out to lick off the delicate flakes. "Unimpeachable," he murmured.

"I know that," K'hedduk almost snapped, irritated by the priest's procrastination. "What's your decision?" All depended on whether or not the Inquisitor would support him.

M'zzik frowned slightly, obviously displeased at the other's tone. "Questions must be answered first," he said, his voice hardening.

"Then ask them."

"You look and behave nothing like the M'zullians we've seen. Why, K'hedduk? And how did you manage to reach here undetected?"

K'hedduk grinned toothily, a grin not echoed in his eyes. "The Fall caused us to all breed where we could, Inquisitor. On M'zull, the Emperor's nephew had a few drones from the Intellectual caste. We cloned them, ensuring they were fertile. Not having breeding tanks like you, it took us longer to replenish our ruling class, and the Emperor's line, in order to control the Warriors that abounded on our world. As for how I got here," he shrugged disparagingly. "That's irrelevant. I'm here and I'm asking for your support to retake the Throne of Light."

"For your brother," said M'zzik.

"For my brother," he agreed, mouth stretching in a smile. "Do I have your support? Your self-styled royal family isn't even directly descended from the great Emperor Q'emgo'h, *may his memory be revered for all time*, whereas my family is."

"General Kezule has a better claim. His blood is undiluted by drones or workers. Why should we support you? You've attempted a coup to put him on the throne already. It failed."

"Because he betrayed me and my followers! There are no longer any pure lines left, M'zzik, you know that."

"High Inquisitor M'zzik," interrupted the priest quietly, but K'hedduk didn't miss the firming of the jaw nor the tightening of the skin over the bone around the eyes.

"High Inquisitor M'zzik," K'hedduk agreed, inclining his head in acknowledgment of the other's status while suppressing his annoyance. Though his claim to royal lineage had been accepted, he wasn't yet in a position of power. That would change soon. "The General's left K'oish'ik. As a member of the Emperor's Privy Council, you know he wanted nothing to do with the Court, and less to do with ruling."

M'zzik nodded. "That was a disappointment," he murmured. "To have served an Emperor such as him would have indeed been a privilege."

"Had he wanted to reunite our worlds, retake our Empire. He didn't. We do," said K'hedduk, curbing his impatience. "Will you support me?"

"There's his offspring to be considered," temporized the Inquisitor, folding his arms inside the wide sleeves of his robe. "It could be argued even they have a better claim than your family."

"Artificially tank-grown and created from common stock," said K'hedduk dismissively. "We have no tanks, all our births are natural, and our females are unaltered and still kept in harems. We haven't allowed alien influences to dictate our evolution."



M'zzik's eyes flashed angrily. "Be careful, K'hedduk. Those decisions were made by the Regent and the Council that ruled after the Fall and the death of Emperor Q'emgo'h. You need our Intellectuals, K'hedduk," said the Inquisitor. "I believe your planet doesn't have enough officers to control those Warriors of yours. In the past, M'zull was always a training world and staging post for the Empire's military machine. Why should we believe this coup will do any better?"

"We *have* an Intellectual caste," hissed K'hedduk, letting his anger show. "Yes, we had— and still have— a large population of Warriors, but we do have the officers to control them! Reestablishing the Empire is to be desired. We exist to rule the lesser species, not have them walking all over us, dictating alliances and trade routes! Especially the damned Sholans who caused the collapse of our Empire!"

"That, we are agreed on," said M'zzik. "But my Order is not prepared to back you unless we have assurances that you'll win this time. You face a greater challenge than before. We now have Kezule's offspring guarding the Palace and the City."

"Oh, I'll win," said K'hedduk, his smile genuine this time. "Kezule's kid commandos will not be the problem you anticipate. Why do you think I soil my hands by working in the kitchens?"

"Ah," said M'zzik softly as understanding dawned. "That's why you need our cooperation. But what of the TeLaxaudin? They could have many devices that would foil your plan to take over the City."

"They can be killed as easily as anyone. We'll take the technology from them afterward," said K'hedduk offhandedly. "An alliance with us would strengthen your position, Inquisitor M'zzik. The Emperor would ensure you remained Head of the Enforcers. You'd have our faithful to guide as well as rooting out heresy from among the Primes unwilling to worship their rightful Emperor."

"Emperor M'iok'kul intends to make his capital here?"

"Where else but on the egg from which we all hatched? The City of Light is our physical and spiritual home, Inquisitor. Yes, we M'zullians need to

expand. Our population is large, but it will revitalize K'oish'ik. I've been outside this City. Believe me, I know what it's like beyond these walls. Your world is dying. You need breeding females— and males— for the Warrior caste. We have them, and we have Workers too."

M'zzik raised an eye ridge. "I thought you had no Worker caste."

"The caste isn't pure, it has been combined with the Warriors," admitted K'hedduk.

"Prone to be unstable and argumentative," said the priest thoughtfully. "Would they be better than what we have?"

"Your work force spends more time discussing the job than doing it!" said K'hedduk scathingly. "When our two worlds are combined, then we can move on Ch'almuth. From them we'll get our strong work force, and breeding stock, one without Warrior traits, one that's malleable to our needs."

"Our intelligence shows Ch'almuth to be unchanged— a peaceful agricultural world as it always was. The higher castes they had have mingled, diffused among the general population."

"I know more about Ch'almuth than you think. There are always throwbacks. We intend to find them and start a breeding program to re-create the Worker caste. We need each other if this is to succeed, M'zzik," he said, dropping the other's title deliberately. "I have the Warriors, you the Intellectuals and Ch'almuth the Workers. I command the modified males who will take the City for us. Once I'm ready to move, I'll contact M'zull. When my people arrive from my home world, my Warriors will protect us while we prepare to move against the Sholans and their allies. Now, do I have your support or not?"

"We'll give you our support, K'hedduk. Conditionally."

He knew M'zzik would make conditions, but those would be easily overcome when the time was right. Enforcers bred among themselves for one thing only, and it wasn't fighting. Their background of Warrior and

Intellectual ancestry was secondary to those quirks in their natures that ensured their fanaticism and dedication to finding sedition against the Emperor. They would be as powerless as the Intellectuals when faced with defending themselves.

"When do you plan to make your move?" the Inquisitor continued.

"Soon. Once she drops her egg," he said. "I'll let you know what help I need in a few days' time when I've finalized my plans. You'd better go, we've talked long enough. I don't want the people here getting suspicious about me."

M'zzik frowned again, then turned away abruptly. "Be careful, K'hedduk. Our Order is used to respect, even from the royal family. Remember you are only a pastry chef right now, even if you are the Emperor's younger brother." He left in a swirl of crimson robes.

At his sides, K'hedduk's hands clenched in rage. M'zzik would pay for that insult. There would be a reckoning between him and the Head Inquisitor, and it couldn't come soon enough.

### **City of Light, Sholan Ambassador's lodgings, same day**

"The City is a mass of ancient tunnels, Ambassador," said Vaygan as he and his companion brushed the remaining dust from their pelts and took the seats that Ambassador Fingoh had indicated. "We've been crawling around them now for weeks. Most have been badly damaged by earthquakes— full of rubble, some even walled off. Finally we found one that had been split open, forming a fissure in the rock that led all the way to the outside."

"Did you find out why they won't let us leave the City of Light?"

"Maybe," said Shamgar cautiously, glancing at Vaygan. "You have to appreciate, Ambassador, that we could only travel at night."

"What did you see?" asked Fingoh, sitting back in his chair and regarding the two Brotherhood operatives carefully.

"Nothing but wild open countryside for many miles," said Vaygan. "Then the ruins began."

"Ruins?"

"Yes, ruins," nodded Shamgar. "At first we didn't realize what they were because they were so eroded, but as we got closer to the town, we realized we were walking through the foundations of buildings that had been destroyed long ago— many generations at least. Then, when we came to the outskirts, we saw vagrants living in the larger ruins."

"They'd created a shantytown from the few remaining walls still standing, Ambassador. You've seen the vids of Jalna's spacers' row, haven't you? Like that but with no complete buildings," said Vaygan.

"Shantytowns," repeated Fingoh, his tone one of disbelief as he unconsciously looked around him at the luxuriousness of his ambassadorial suite. A thick blue carpet covered the floor, its opulent pattern of swirling contoured shapes echoed in rich blues and golds embroidered on the chairs and sofas, even the drapes that covered the high windows opening out into the western palace courtyard.

Shamgar flicked his ears in assent. "What we saw of the town wasn't much better. The buildings were mainly old ones refurbished by their tenants to keep them from falling down. There were no land vehicles, the streets were too narrow for that. The people we saw were poorly dressed and looked dispirited. We skirted round the town limits and found a foundry. Its glow lit up the night sky and we could smell the stink of it from miles away."

"Could this town have been a penitentiary of some kind? I can't believe that they would use their own people like that," said Fingoh.

"Not a penitentiary, Ambassador. There were no guards or enclosure around it," said Vaygan. "At the foundry, we watched workers unloading hoppers of raw materials from huge containers similar to those we use to transport ore from the asteroid mines to our off-world smelting plants. There were few signs that the plant was even semiautomated. It's my bet

they ship the ore in, refine it there, then send the ingots to mills for shaping and tooling."

Fingoh got to his feet and began to pace. "I can't believe that these gentle, cultured people could treat their citizens like that!" he said. "There has to be a reason for it! What else did you see? What about cities? This could have been no more than a rundown area. You were away for five days. Surely you found a cave or somewhere to hide where it was possible to at least look out on the landscape during the day?"

Vaygan glanced at Shamgar before answering. "The City of Light is on a hilltop, Ambassador. We were in the lowlands before the first night was half done. But yes, we were able to see the surrounding countryside by daylight as well as night. There were no other settlements as far as the eye could see, and I'd gauge that to be about a hundred miles. This world is very lightly populated. It's my opinion that's why they insisted we stayed outside their lunar orbit when we arrived here and let them fetch us by shuttle. Their population is declining rapidly."

"While we were scouting the town, we saw very few children, Ambassador," said Shamgar. "Those who had them seemed better dressed and fed than the others. Perhaps the weapons they used during the civil war that followed their Fall caused genetic damage." He stopped when Vaygan's tail flicked warningly against his leg.

"We did see groups of young males reminiscent of the packs back home in Ranz and the east side of Shanagi," said Vaygan. "They were built very differently from any other Prime we've seen— large, muscular, their heads tattooed with violent images— and seemed very aggressive. We saw three of them walking through the town, behaving as if they owned it. Anyone who didn't get out of their way, they thrust aside. They finally disappeared into one of the inns. We thought they might be overseers of the foundry."

Fingoh walked slowly back to the semicircle of seats. "Thank you, Brothers," he said quietly, sitting down again. "You've done well and given me much to think about. Make your report for Stronghold in the usual manner and I'll see it's sent with my diplomatic mail."

The two Brothers rose to their feet and saluted him, forearms crossed over their chests, heads slightly bowed.

"Good night, Ambassador," murmured Shamgar as they turned to leave.

Outside in the corridor, they nodded to their two comrades on guard duty and headed for their own quarters next door.

"Why did you prevent me telling him about the building with the breeding tanks?" Shamgar asked quietly as he went to their small kitchen to get a drink.

"That information should only go to Haven Stronghold," said Vaygan, following him. "Commander L'Seuli will pass it on to Master Rhyaz. If it needs to go further, that's up to them, not us."

Shamgar filled his bowl-shaped cup under the faucet then turned to lean against the counter and survey his gray-pelted companion. "What are you keeping from me, Vaygan?"

"Nothing. I know nothing more than you do, Shamgar. Master Rhyaz asked me to look for anything strange to do with their young and report it only to him, that's all. And those tanks full of tiny Primes definitely rank as strange in my book."

"So they breed their work force artificially," said Shamgar, sipping his water. "How do the Primes here in the city reproduce? I haven't seen one pregnant female, have you?"

"Apart from the Empress, you mean? No, not one," the other said thoughtfully. "It's the chief topic of conversation in the inns surrounding the main courtyard. Maybe you're right and they have suffered mutations since the Cataclysm. They certainly seem more obsessed with the Empress' state of health than I'd have thought normal."

"I heard she'd lost several before this one. I'm surprised she allowed her only son to visit Shola and train with the Warrior Guild, let alone stay there after the M'zullians were sent home."

Vaygan's mouth dropped in a deep grin as he walked across to the cooler unit and opened the door. "With her egg due in about a month, she's probably happy not to have to put up with sibling rivalry. There'll be quite an age gap between them— ten years for them is like thirty for us. How did your older brother react when you came along as firstborn of the second family?"

Shamgar laughed. "Point taken. He was none too pleased! He said at her age our mother was making a spectacle of herself! Prince Zsurtul's probably better off where he is for now, at least he won't get roped into diaper-changing duty! What have the others left in the way of food for us?"

"There's a cold stew that smells like it's fish," said Vaygan, sniffing at the container that he'd pulled out. "And a bowl of cold cooked veg— the one that looks like white flower heads. Should be all right when it's heated up. They've left plenty of bread, too."

"Sounds good to me. Five days without a hot meal is too long. You heat the food and I'll put some coffee on to brew," he said, throwing the rest of the water down the sink and putting the mug to one side.

"Make it strong," said Vaygan, pulling out the second bowl and shutting the door with a flick of his tail. "We're off duty now and I could do with something stimulating."

\* \* \*

Fingoh was dictating into a message crystal bound for Governor Nesul back home on Shola. "Empress Zsh'eungee asks me to convey her gratitude to Clan Leaders Carrie and Kaid for allowing her son, Prince Zsurtul, to remain at their house as a guest for the next few months. She says she will be sending them a personal message shortly. Talks with Prime Counselor Shyadd are proceeding slowly. He claims there is a great deal of danger involved in contacting M'zull because of the M'zullians' Warrior ancestry. It is likely to be counterproductive, he says, as they will instantly see the Primes as inferior and therefore a legitimate target." Fingoh paused to pick up his glass of wine and take a sip.

"Since communications will be held from a distance," he continued, "I said scent is not an issue but he claims that their different coloring will also give their ancestry away. My suggestions that they use a tinted cream to disguise themselves brought claims that it was beneath the dignity of their Royal Highnesses, and that of their officers, to paint their faces like entertainers. I reminded him that brides wear blue face paint out of respect for their fertility Goddess La'shol and that perhaps under that guise they could do the same. I also suggested that the Emperor could wear a face mask, claiming it to be a new ritual— or an old one revamped for the occasion— that way avoiding all need for concealing their lighter skin tones. Counselor Shyadd said that both suggestions had merit and the Emperor would consider them carefully, but it still left them with the problem of eventually communicating face-to-face with the M'zullians. That, we both agreed, could be overcome by having them deal only with one of Kezule's sons as they are slightly darker in coloring."

This time when he stopped, he switched off the recording device. Picking up his glass again, he leaned back in his chair and sighed. The Brothers' news had him deeply worried. There was much about the Prime culture in the City he'd come to admire, but what they'd told him about outside was totally unacceptable. He knew that each government department— run by separate Directors— was totally independent. It appeared that all that mattered to the bureaucrats of the City was results, not the welfare of their people. It was possible that very few people knew what went on outside. Certainly no one but the Directors ever left the City confines, and that rarely.

He sighed again and sipped his wine. He didn't want to think about it any more tonight. It was late and he had a feeling his dreams would not be pleasant ones as it was. His communique could be finished tomorrow— he needed to wait till then for the Brothers' official report anyway.

Draining his glass, he put it down on the table in front of him and got to his feet. A virtual slave population with gangs of aggressive males roaming the towns was a recipe for disaster. As he headed for his bedroom, he wondered briefly where the aggressive males had come from and made a mental note to mention it to the Brothers in the morning, and in his dispatches.



## **Kij'ik Outpost, later that evening**

By the time Kusac had got back to his rooms, enough blood had soaked through from the dressing to discolor his bandage. The pain it was causing him had risen to a level where even he couldn't cope with it. Reaching into one of his belt pouches, he sat down on the sofa and took out the pills Zayshul had given him. He didn't care that he was supposed to wait till last thing at night, he needed them now. The tablet melted almost instantly on his tongue. Exhausted, he curled up on the sofa, mind spinning as he tried to make sense of what he'd discovered so far.

The shock of having his worst fears about Shaidan confirmed, to say nothing of his meeting with an angry God, was beginning to wear off, leaving him feeling numb. Had Vartra been right? Was he really so willing to conceal his night with Zayshul that he'd destroy not only himself but her and their son along with everyone else on the Outpost? Suddenly he felt the weight of the bags inside his tunic and remembered he was still carrying the nitrate compound.

He sat up, tugging the front seal on his tunic open so he could reach them. The bags spilled out onto his lap. One by one, he put them on the table. Mixed with fuel and placed in the right location, there was enough to destroy Kij'ik. The memory of Vartra's eyes glowing with anger filled his mind and he shivered. Grabbing the bags, he got up and headed into his bedroom, looking round for a hiding place for them. It would be just his luck to be found, quite innocently, with them in his possession.

Opening his wardrobe, he knelt down and put them in the bottom of his empty kit bag, letting the soft sides fold back over them. They'd be safely concealed there until he could find a way to dispose of them.

Returning to the lounge, he collapsed onto the sofa again. The drug had begun to make him feel drowsy and relaxed. He wanted to sleep, but had a nagging feeling there was something else he had to do. Then he remembered. He was to meet Zayshul. Checking his wrist comm, he saw there were still six hours left. He programmed in an alarm to wake him for his meeting with her, then propping his aching arm on a cushion, he closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

The insistent chime finally roused him. Still half asleep, he fell off the sofa and staggered to the door.

"Open," he said.

The door slid back to reveal M'kou and Shaidan.

"Knowing you were ill, I brought Shaidan to you, Captain Aldatan," said the young Prime.

Kusac gazed myopically at them, then rubbed his eyes. He hadn't expected this. "I thought Kezule had taken him with him as usual," he said, taken aback by their presence.

"Not this time, Captain. If you would excuse us?"

He stared blankly at M'kou.

"You're blocking the door, Captain," said M'kou patiently as Shaidan glanced uncertainly up at him.

He moved aside, watching his son step past him into his lounge.

"I'll be back in two hours, Captain Aldatan. M'zynal, head of security, is outside if you should need anything."

He nodded automatically, stepping away from the door so it slid closed, never taking his eyes off his cub. How could he even have thought of destroying the Outpost and ending his son's life? A cold sweat began to film his hands, and rubbing them hastily against the sides of his tunic, he reached out to catch Shaidan by the shoulder, turning him round so they faced each other.

The cub looked up at him with a slightly puzzled expression on his face, ears tilting back apprehensively.

Kusac studied him, looking for any sign of Zayshul in his features, but found none. The face was his own as it had been twenty years ago: his Sholan bloodlines were all that showed.

Kneeling down, he reached out with his other hand, cupping it round Shaidan's face, stroking the soft pelt. When they were this close, there was no doubt in his mind about his true feelings for his son.

"Why do you keep me at a distance, Shaidan?" he asked quietly. "I've done everything I can to get close to you. Are you still upset that I wasn't the one to rescue you from the Directorate? I came as soon as I got Kezule's message. When he returned the other cubs and held you here, I came back for you— it's only because of you I'm still here. What more can I do to prove that I care?"

As he spoke, instinctively he reached out with his mind, making the torc vibrate warningly. Ignoring it, he let his hand drop to his son's shoulder. If only Shaidan could experience how he felt about him...

The torc's vibration increased sharply, making him shake his head in pain and reach out mentally in an attempt to shut the torc off. Then he felt his son's mind touch his for the first time.

Shaidan's eyes widened, his mouth dropping down into an open O of surprise.

His son's touch was light, barely there at all, but in that brief moment of contact, with a sickening lurch, he found himself suddenly displaced from his body. It was as if he was standing beside himself, a passive observer of his own actions. Just as the mental contact was severed, he saw his son make an involuntary move toward him.

With yet another lurch, he was back in his own body again, sweeping Shaidan into his arms and holding him close. His tongue flicked out, caressing the youngling's cheek as, nose buried against his neck, he drank in his son's scent, giving in to the paternal feelings he'd suppressed for so long.

"Korraï." He whispered the term of endearment, afraid that saying it aloud would dispel what he half-believed to be a dream. "My son." Holding him like this broke down all the barriers with which he'd surrounded himself.

He could no longer hold back the love he felt. "I wish we'd known each other from the first!"

The small body pressed against his had instinctively stiffened. "You're crushing me," said Shaidan quietly.

Immediately he loosened his grip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You held me like this when I felt the egg hatching," Shaidan said. "When you argued with the General."

"I was afraid for you," he whispered, rubbing his cheek gently against his son's neck. "You were linking to the hatchling, experiencing her trauma. I was afraid you'd suffocate, too."

He felt a small hand slowly slide its way across his shoulder until it rested, hesitantly, on his neck. "The General was angry."

"Kezule doesn't frighten me, particularly when my son needs my help," he murmured, feeling something tight inside his heart begin to loosen. "You may have value to the General, Shaidan, but I love you. I'm here only because of you. Nothing else could have brought me back to Kezule."

"Nothing?"

The question, so out of character, made him pull back in surprise and search his son's face. What had he guessed or been told? Gently, he put his hands on either side of Shaidan's face, smoothing back the hair he'd ruffled with his fierce embrace.

"Nothing," he repeated, reaching out mentally to make sure his son understood that he told the truth. Once again, the torc began to vibrate so hard it hurt. This time, he let his attempted contact fade. "I came here because I was sent a message by Kezule. On it was the scent of a cub that I recognized was mine— your scent, Shaidan. As far as I knew, I had no son. I had to come here and find out more. I had to find you and bring you home."

As the cub's eyes stared unflinchingly into his face, he felt once again the fleeting touch of his son's mind, then it was gone and Shaidan looked away.

Kusac shut his eyes, giving in to the torc's demands that he stop using his Talent. What had possessed him to risk everything? Vartra help him, but in using his Talent he realized he'd either won or lost his son in that moment, and he didn't know which. Shaidan's conditioning might be so strong that he'd tell the General. Would this nightmare never end? He started, opening his eyes again as Shaidan touched his injured arm.

"You're bleeding."

"It's nothing," he said, not even looking. "Doctor Zayshul tended it earlier today. It's healing now."

Shaidan frowned, obviously concentrating. "Did it hurt?" he blurted out suddenly.

Another question? "Yes, it hurt at the time, and when I had it dressed," he said with a faint grin.

Again the look of concentration. "Why?" The word was strangled, as if saying it had cost his son dear.

"Why did I save Kezule?" he hazarded.

Shaidan nodded his head vigorously until he put his hand out to stop him. Dear God, his son was trying again to break the programming!

"Because I had no reason to let him get killed." He stood up, reaching down to gather Shaidan up into his arms. "Enough questions for now. We should eat. We could both do with some food," he added as a wave of light-headedness passed through him and he staggered slightly at his son's unaccustomed weight.

Shaidan flung his arms round his father's neck, clinging tightly, his ears flattening to the side in fear.

"I won't drop you," Kusac said reassuringly. "You can sense people even with the collar on, can't you?" he asked quietly as he walked over to the food dispenser.

"I'm not allowed to talk about..." began Shaidan.

"Never mind," he said gently, reaching up to stroke his son's head. "Let's eat."

\* \* \*

Suddenly he found it easy to talk to his son. It was as if a dam had been released. Shaidan sat opposite him at the meal counter, face alert, eyes wide in anticipation, his ears pricked forward so as to miss nothing.

He told him about the world they'd visited for the hunt, and the joy he'd felt to have soil beneath his feet and a sky above his head once again. Then he spoke of Shola and its impossibly blue-on-blue skies and seas. Every now and then, he'd stop to see if Shaidan wanted to ask a question, suggesting the cub nod his head if he wanted to know more. Shaidan did.

The meal over, he led the way to the sofa, inviting his son with a gesture to sit beside him. When Shaidan chose instead to curl up against him, all was well with his world. Nothing else existed for him right now.

All too soon, the door chimed. It was M'kou and M'zynal come to take Shaidan back to the Command level. Left alone, the mood of contentment remained as he returned to the sofa and sat down. Surrounded by his son's scent, all doubts about Shaidan's parentage left him. It mattered not at all that his son's genesis was due to Zayshul, all that mattered was that Shaidan existed and was his.

His mind drifted as he planned a future for them. There was so much he wanted to show him. Shaidan had never seen a sunrise or sunset, never felt the wind on his face lifting his hair and pelt as he chased his first chiddoe— or rhakla, he amended mentally, remembering Shaidan's size and age. Fathers loved and treasured their daughters, but a son was to be cherished because even in these advanced times, their lives were fragile,

still in the lap of the Gods as young males were more vulnerable to childhood diseases.

Sleep claimed him again, but this time it was full of whispers too faint to be heard and fractured erotic images that might have been memories.

The buzzer on his wrist comm drew him back to a grateful wakefulness and the realization it was time for his meeting with Zayshul up on the hydroponics level.

\* \* \*

Camarilla-manufactured devices that Giyarishis had placed throughout the Outpost warned him that the Hunter was on the move. Time to connect to the Unity-net, and time to use the Isolator. It was imperative that the male made his way unhindered to the pool where the sand-dweller female waited.

Sinking into the requisite trance, he checked the potentialities, making sure none of the inhabitants would be injured or aware of what was happening.

Throughout Kij'ik, the lights glowed brightly, quickly reaching the frequency that rendered everyone— but Kusac— instantly asleep. The Hunter, with the modifications Kzizysus and Annuur had made to his brain, was exempt, as was the sand-dweller female, alone in the pool room. The Isolator's effects wouldn't be long-lived, just long enough for the Hunter to reach his objective.

\* \* \*

As he left his rooms, the brief flare in the corridor lighting made him hesitate. There had been the occasional blackout during their first few weeks here while Kezule's crew had rerouted power from unused sectors to the two engineering stations they'd chosen as their main ops. As far as he was aware, there was no such work going on now. Undecided, he stood in the open doorway for several minutes, waiting for a comm message to explain the power surge. When none came, he sealed his door and headed

along the corridor toward the main emergency stairwell to the hydroponics level.

The corridors he passed were as empty as the one he was in, and for a wonder, there was no one from Security on the air lock. It struck him then that he'd not worked out an explanation to account for his presence there, nor could he think of one right now. He'd no idea how long his luck would last, but he was grateful for it. Half expecting the door to be sealed, he tried it, sighing with relief when it opened.

\* \* \*

The metal flooring of the stairwell sucked the heat from his feet as he stepped out of the inhabited area. His toes clenching involuntarily, he hurried toward the stairs. Red safety lights bathed the area in an eerie glow, staining the metal floor and walls the color of freshly spilled blood. He shivered again, feeling the hackles on his neck rise as if in prescience of some disaster past or yet to come. His vision dimmed till all around him he could see the shadows of armed troops rushing past, hear the subdued babble of their voices, overlaid by the harsh, barked orders of their officers.

He staggered, instinctively grabbing for the handrail at the foot of the stairs to prevent himself from being swept away in the tide of bodies. Steadying himself, he took the steps three at a time, wanting only to put distance between himself and these ghosts of the past, trying to ignore the fact that the sound of his claws hitting the metal echoed the pounding of his heart.

\* \* \*

In the Sholan temple, *something* rose from its seated position within the shadows and expanded to life-size. Vartra was angry. Kusac must be stopped from meeting with the Prime female, otherwise the Camarilla would draw him deeper into their web of deceit. One pace he took, then a jagged shaft of energy split the darkness in front of him. Cursing, he watched as blue and silver light poured through the rent, pushing the edges apart. Damn the Camarilla!



The low humming vibrated deep in his bones, setting his teeth on edge as he watched the portal form, preparing himself mentally for what would follow. Running was useless, there was nothing he could do to prevent himself from being transported to where they were. This time, he'd be damned if he'd wait for them to take him. This time, he'd go to them.

As the tear widened, becoming a gateway, he stilled his mind, attempting to banish his anger. When it was Sholan-sized, he stepped into it. Energy roiled around him, buffeting him from all sides, causing him to gasp for breath and fight to hold onto his senses.

This time, he emerged conscious, but only barely. Rising from his fours to his feet, he looked around, narrowing his gaze so the pinpoint of light that surrounded him didn't dazzle his eyes. With a shock, he suddenly realized he could identify the distinctive scent he always smelled as TeLaxaudin. But there was another species out there this time, one he'd not sensed, or met, before.

Automatically, he reached out into the silence with his mind, searching for an individual with whom he could communicate. No sooner had he touched one than he was mentally repulsed and surrounded by a field that damped his psychic abilities, but not before he'd sensed the network that linked all the Camarilla together.

His anger burned cold now. "I've work to do. You've no right to drag me from my realm just for your personal whims."

*We have every right, he heard a voice say in his mind. Your interference in this matter will not be allowed.*

He stiffened, ears swiveling down and to the side in the beginnings of a show of his anger. "I have a geas to fulfill, as you reminded me last time. He is my blood heir. I have every right to guide Kusac."

*You have no rights here. There is more at stake than you know. The Hunter must fulfill his destiny.*

Vartra made a sound of disgust. "Destiny is flexible. You stole mine, used it for your own purposes. And he has a name! Kusak Aldatan!"

*We serve the interests of the many, not the few. All prosper because we Watch.*

He forced himself to laugh. "You do more than that, you meddle in others' lives!"

*We do not meddle.* The tone was dismissive.

"My pardon," he said sarcastically, sketching a mock obeisance. "I forgot. You get others to do the meddling for you while you cower safely here, behind your shields."

Another mental voice very different from the one he usually heard, spoke suddenly in his mind. *A few of us choose to work outside the safety of the Camarilla. Our bodies are not shaped for danger, we need the services of others.*

"How many souls like mine have you stolen?" he demanded, mind racing as he realized that one of the other beings might be speaking to him now. "Who else have you trapped between life and death?"

*Your spirit would have stayed in the twilight realm without our interference because of the geas placed on you. We merely provided you the opportunity to serve your species rather than just your family.*

"You made me your messenger!" he snarled, reaching out with his hands to touch the limits of his prison as he tried to focus on the darkness beyond. "Release me now! I have work to do!" He could feel the force field, curved like the shell of an egg, beneath his fingers.

*There is nothing for you to do but let events take their allotted course,* said the first voice.

Anger burned fiercely in him again. "Allotted? *You* made this situation! There's nothing natural about his obsession with the Prime Doctor! No

good will come of it!" He pounded his hands against the solid wall of nothingness.

*You will remain here until it is done*, said the voice, unperturbed.

He snarled again, letting his hands splay out over the invisible surface. "Damn you!" he muttered, more to himself than to them as he leaned slowly against it. "Damn you!" They understood nothing about Sholans! Once Kusac knew what had been done to him— and he would find out— then he wouldn't rest until there had been a reckoning, and not just him, all his family, for as many generations as it took.

A slight movement in the darkness at the edge of his vision caught his attention.

*You value family ties above all else*, said the new voice. *We have given the Hunter those ties to the cub and the sand-dweller female. It will make him work to form an alliance with the male for their sake.*

"You think so? What of the General? How will he react to his wife having an affair with Kusac, his sworn enemy?" he demanded.

*The concept of wife is new to him. Already he turns to his other females.*

"You don't care what it costs the people involved, do you? You hounded me to enhance the Telepaths, then to add Human genes to stabilize them, now this! When will you stop playing Gods with my people?"

The silence lasted so long that a doubt began to grow in his mind. Had the appearance of the Human female in his time not actually been due to the Camarilla? Maybe they weren't as omnipotent as they'd have him believe.

He lifted his head, straining both his ears and his mental senses to try and hear them.

*You will say nothing, do nothing, that could endanger what must be*, said the original voice eventually.

"I will do everything in my power to help him!" Vartra retorted.

Pain gripped him in claws of fire, squeezing him till he could barely draw breath. Blood roared in his ears but through it all he could hear the voice repeating like a litany,

*You will say nothing, do nothing, that could endanger what must be.*

\* \* \*

He came to, not in the temple on the Outpost, nor in the one at Haven—not even at Stronghold, but on the grass at the edge of a small stream.

Groaning, he sat up—and saw Her sitting opposite him, feet dangling in the water, shaping a clump of mud from the bank in Her hands into a ball. He looked into eyes as green and distant as the forest behind Her.

"Ghyakulla!" He sucked in a breath of shock, knowing She'd brought him here from the Void when the Camarilla, finally finished with him, had cast him out. It had been some time since the Green Goddess, Mother of all things living and growing on Shola, had called him to Her presence.

Her ball completed, She threw it into the stream beside him, laughing gently as the water splashed over his face.

He blinked, rubbing it from his eyes as Her thoughts filled his mind.

*Drink from the stream, be refreshed, then return from whence you came. There is much you can still accomplish.*

By the time he could see again, She'd gone. Only Her footprints in the mud at the side of the stream remained.

Leaning forward, he lapped at the water, drinking his fill, feeling the strength and energy returning to his limbs, quieting nerves still tender from the Camarilla's torture.

As he sat up, the landscape around him faded, becoming a mist which gradually swirled and eddied until it coalesced into the Outpost temple on Kij'ik. He was back, but he knew instantly he was too late. Trying to get up, he found his limbs refused to respond, they were leaden weights that anchored him to the floor. Once again, the Camarilla had conditioned him so he had no option but to obey.

Tears of anger and frustration burned his eyes but he brushed them away with his forearm. There was no time for that; if Ghyakulla said there was much he could still do, then he had to find out what it was.

\* \* \*

At the end of the covered walkway that led out into the hydroponics level, Kusac opened the air lock iris and looked carefully through. The lighting levels had been reduced to station night. Only the safety lanes, outlined by small pinpoints of light, were visible. Closing the door behind him, he began to pad silently down the pathway. Ahead, to his right, he saw a glimmer of light shining through the empty security office. The TeLaxaudin was still awake.

Keeping to the deep shadows where possible, he dropped down to his fours and crept silently past the office toward the buildings opposite the empty fields. At the end of the herb plot, he slowed, checking down the main side corridor for any of the crew working in the waste recycling plant, but the irises were closed.

At last he reached the narrow corridor opposite the lower field that Zayshul said led to the pool. The herd beasts' barn was down there and sniffing the air, he searched amid the animals' scents for hers. He found it easily, and automatically sending out soothing thoughts to the cattle, followed her scent down past the vet's office to where the entrance stood. There was a moment of panic until he saw she'd left the security lock off for him.

He'd dreaded— and longed for— this moment, he realized, remembering the erotic dreams from which his alarm had awakened him. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the access panel and waited for the door to slide open.

Stepping inside, he found himself in a world more alien than the one they'd visited on the hunt. Semitropical plants and shrubs surrounded him, forming a border to the winding paved path that stretched ahead. It led, he assumed, to the actual swimming pool. As he locked the door from the inside, he remembered Zayshul had said it was far more than just a pool, that it had a religious purpose for her people. Its very existence was a reminder of just how alien the Primes were.

The air was warm and redolent with the smell of vegetation and damp earth, making him think of the Taykui forest. Between one step and the next, he stopped as thoughts of home filled his mind. What in Vartra's name was he doing here? He'd been torn by guilt over the one sexual encounter they'd had on the *Kz'adul*, had hidden it from everyone even though he'd been an unwitting participant. But there was an electricity between them, a strange attraction that he found almost impossible to resist. If they were alone together, it would happen again, he knew it would, and this time, he'd have no excuse. How could he live with himself, let alone face his family? What if there was another child? Was that why Zayshul had lured him here? He'd been insane to even consider her invitation, let alone agree to it!

He forced his panic back, reminding himself that he was here because she'd promised to answer all his questions truthfully. If he could just keep his distance from her... then her scent shouldn't affect him, but he needed her answers. Just as he'd had to come to terms with what J'koshuk had done to him, so, too, did he need to know what part Zayshul had played in the genesis of his son. Then, perhaps, he could also lay that part of his past to rest.

His mind made up, he began to head along the path.

*There's an island in the center, she'd said. Meet me there. Security's used to me going to the pool late at night. If you're careful not to be seen, we shouldn't be disturbed.*

The heat and humidity were beginning to make him uncomfortable and light-headed. Reaching for the neck of his tunic, he pressed the seal, pulling the front open by several inches.

He could smell the water now as the path began to widen out, leading him toward the poolside. A narrow wooden bridge spanned the water in front of him, leading onto a small vegetation-covered island. The air was even more humid here, carrying an underlying smell of minerals. It was obviously a mineral spa. Walking onto the bridge, he stepped into the open, stopping for a moment to take in the undeniable beauty and complexity of the place.

To either side, and beyond a second wooden bridge, where the trees and shrubs met the water, small, partially concealed artificial beaches had been constructed. It was a feat of engineering as well as landscaping, and completely out of character here in the heart of an ancient Valtegan military outpost.

Still following her scent, he crossed the bridge and rejoined the path on the other side. It meandered through more thick shrubbery, this time in full bloom. Rounding the first bend, he found himself facing a small clearing with a narrow grass-covered path off to his left. At the far side stood a couple of low benches, a long table, and a pile of mats. Beyond them, the path continued.

Her scent drew him on, through the picnic area and toward the clearing he could see beyond. As it grew stronger, once more he began to doubt the wisdom of agreeing to this meeting. At the end of the paved area, he hesitated briefly, then hearing the sounds of someone moving in the water, stepped hastily back into the cover of the bushes. Zayshul's head came into view as she reached up to grasp hold of the safety rail of a small ladder and began to climb out of the pool.

Naked, she stepped out onto the grassy area, reaching for the towel she'd left over the handrail. He caught a flash of iridescent markings on her flank then it was hidden as she rubbed the towel briefly over her upper body before wrapping it round her waist and beginning to walk toward the mats and him.

He retreated further into the bushes, praying she hadn't seen him, embarrassed at watching her without her knowledge.

She stopped some ten feet from him, bending down to pick up a blue robe from her pile of cushions. Turning her back on him, she began to put it on.

Her scent called to him, teasing his nostrils, evoking memories he'd tried to forget, memories that he now remembered had haunted his dreams before coming here. Memories of cool, faintly textured skin, of a firm body pressed close to his, and a tongue and hands so versatile that...

He shook his head, trying to dispel the images— and found himself standing behind her, taking hold of her robe. Intending only to help her, his palm accidentally brushed against the bare skin of her neck. Where they touched, it was as if a river of fire flowed between them. Instantly, his every sensation was intensified. He'd have pulled back, as he had at dinner that first night on Kij'ik, but he found it impossible. His mind was wide open as her emotions surged through him, and her confusion at this strange attraction between them exactly matched his own.

While part of his mind recoiled in terror, the rest betrayed him by welcoming it. He forced himself to concentrate on the back of her head and neck, trying not to notice her scent but instead to focus on how different she was. The fact that her neck was long and slim, qualities guaranteed to excite any red-blooded Sholan male, didn't help.

His vision began to blur, and he remembered the Prime analgesics he'd taken. They were what was destroying his self-control, muddling his feelings for her. She was green-skinned and utterly hairless, how could there possibly be anything about her to attract him? But there was a more primitive, reptilian, part of him that couldn't— wouldn't— let her go, that wanted her again, and that compulsion was every bit as strong as his Leska Link to Carrie had been.

He closed his eyes briefly, not wanting to think of the life he'd had to leave behind, aware that his hand, still resting intimately on Zayshul's neck, had begun to caress her. As if in a dream, he found himself leaning forward, touching his cheek to hers, drinking in the aromatic smell of her skin.

\* \* \*



At first startled by his sudden appearance, she began to tremble, doubting her ability to carry through her plan to release him from the scent marker. It was one thing to intellectualize about becoming intimate with him, quite another to find him standing behind her, feel the heat of his body, and his scent, laced with hers, radiating his desire for her.

Trying to keep the tremor out of her voice, she said, "You're early. I didn't expect you so soon."

He began to purr softly, his cool nose nuzzling against the edge of her jawline. She caught herself leaning against him, matching her body to his, and tried to pull away, but his hands grasped her by the shoulders, preventing her.

"We were going to talk, Kusac," she said, trying to buy time. Dear Goddess, but she was responding to him physically as if he were one of her kind and the scent marker really was hers! How could that be possible? She'd miscalculated—he was too different, she didn't have the courage for this!

\* \* \*

"We'll talk later," he heard himself whisper as he moved closer. Talk wasn't what either of them wanted, he knew that even if he knew nothing else. His hands slid over her shoulders, pushing her robe down till she clutched at it, stopping him.

"Kusac, we must talk," she insisted, making a token effort to free herself from his grasp.

"Later," he growled, his tongue rasping across her cheek. Her skin tasted of almonds, a taste that brought back even more images of that night. Primal instincts took over as his eyesight narrowed, becoming huntersight as he continued to lap at her skin.

Her scent altered, becoming stronger, deeper. He recognized it instantly. Suddenly light-headed, he forced her round to face him, ignoring her halfhearted attempt to pull away.

"I'm afraid," she began.

"No need for fear," he interrupted, his voice hoarse as he cupped one hand around her neck and with the other, teased the robe from her grasp so it fell to the ground. "It isn't as if we haven't done this before, Zayshul."

As his lips touched hers, another wave of vertigo swept through him. Images of J'koshuk's sadistic smile, mouth full of tiny pointed teeth filled Kusac's mind, making him pull back in shock. For a moment, reality tried to return: this was a dream, it had to be. He was really lying asleep on the sofa in his quarters— the alternative was unthinkable.

Her hands grasped his face, pulling him close again. "Hush," she said, the ridges round her eyes meeting in concern. "That time's over." Her tongue flicked out, caressing first his cheek, then the inside of his ear, as her fingers slid sensuously through his hair.

Shuddering with pleasure, he felt the fire kindling deep in his belly, spreading outward as his muscles clenched. His hands reached for her waist, tugging the towel she wore free.

"What have you done to me?" he whispered, not expecting an answer. "Why do I feel like this?"

He searched her face, seeing not that she was Valtegan, only that her skin had flushed to a darker tone, highlighting the rainbow iridescence round her green eyes. Her pheromone-laden scent surrounded him now, as it had on the *Kz'adul*, its aromatic smell deepening yet again as her body responded to him. His hands tightened on her hips as his groin muscles clenched violently, betraying his need for her. With a low moan, part distress, part pleasure, his genitals descended. Pulling her close, he pressed her body tightly against his in a vain attempt to stop himself swelling any further. His mouth covered hers in a bruising kiss. Her scent and taste were intoxicating, like a drug, and he couldn't get enough. Somewhere at the back of his mind, the memory of being drugged by her the last time stirred, but her tongue was teasing his and her hands were reaching between them for the buckle on his belt. The last time wasn't important, all

that mattered was this moment and his urgent need to lose himself deep within her.

He released her, pulling back just far enough to remove his belt. As he let it drop behind him, she was already parting his tunic and urging him to remove it. While he did, she slid her hands across his hips, her nonretractile claws plowing furrows through his pelt as she began to knead the powerful muscles across his hips, finally reaching the root of his tail.

His body tensed instantly, teeth closing on the side of her neck as his hands instinctively went to the small of her back. Beneath them, he felt her skin suddenly grow hot, as if she were burning up with a fever.

With small, gentle hissing sounds of pleasure, she sagged in his grasp, her sudden weight pulling them both down. Staggering, he managed to land on his knees on the adjacent cushions.

He laid her down, seeing for the first time the iridescent markings that flowed from the small of her back across her hips before sweeping down to outline her belly. He leaned over her, his fingers lightly tracing the path before his tongue and teeth followed.

Her hands clenched in his hair as her body trembled beneath him, anticipating his every touch and nip. He could feel it all, accepting it, never questioning how or why, driven on by the need to explore her body as she'd once explored his, all the while trying to ignore the intensifying needs of his own body.

Finally she could stand no more and pulled him sharply upward, her teeth nipping feverishly at his neck and shoulders, one hand reaching for him while the other raked paths of fire across his back.

As her hand closed over his naked flesh, he began to swell again, his fight to hold back his secondary erection instantly lost. A brief wave of panic flooded through him, then he remembered she could easily accommodate him, unlike Carrie. The thought of his wife was like a douche of cold water, threatening him with reality until Zayshul's teasing hands abruptly banished it again. Once more her scent enveloped him, and he was again

transported back to that night on the *Kz'adul*. This time, though, he was not the passive one.

His whole body throbbing with his need, he pushed her hand away and grasped her by the hips. Forcing himself to enter her slowly, he moaned softly as her heat surrounded him. She reached back to caress him, but it was too much. Pushing her hand aside, he withdrew slowly, utterly lost in their shared sensations. When her hands clutched his hips and her mouth fastened on the side of his neck, he allowed her to pull him back again. As their bodies began to move rhythmically together, he forgot all else.

Her nips, at first gentle, became bites as her claws raked the length of his back. He winced even as his body began to spasm, sending wave after wave of pleasure through him, the sensations heightened by what he was experiencing from her. Unthinkingly, his mind reached out for hers just as Zayshul's teeth bit down hard on his neck and she arched herself up against him in an almost feral flurry of limbs, claws, and teeth.

As he fought to protect himself, his senses began to spin in a sickening upward spiral as if he was being dragged from his own body. Gasping, he sucked in lungfuls of air, desperately fighting against it and trying to break free. He could feel her every sensation, smell every nuance of her scent and his own—the potential to merge with her mind, to form a link, was his for the taking. Shocked, with a nauseating jolt, he pulled back mentally, retreating from her behind every barrier he could erect. She was Talented and she didn't know it! Enough presence of mind remained for him to scabble for her arms, pinioning her to the ground with his weight as his body finally exploded into hers.

When the fight had left Zayshul, and she lay quiescent and panting beneath him, he relaxed his grip on her, finally able to give in to his own exhaustion and shock. Sanity had returned now. He rolled to one side, lying there, body satiated but his mind numb at the thought of what he'd done and what had so nearly happened. If their minds had linked and she'd discovered he had his Talent back...

A feather-soft touch against his cheek made him turn his head in time to catch sight of her forked tongue flicking out to caress him, its tips just

grazing his lips. Lifting his head, he looked down at her, both fascinated and repelled by what he saw.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly, sitting up.

"No. What have you done to me, Zayshul? Have you any idea the effect being near you has on me? Your scent... the taste of your skin... It makes me forget everything but you!"

She looked away from him, reaching for her robe, pulling it around her shoulders and across her lap. "You've been scent-marked," she said, her voice sounding suddenly remote. "With my scent. The males can inject one of two poisons with their bite, we can release a chemical internally when we're coupling which scent-marks the males. But I didn't do it, Kusac. It was a female called N'koshoh. She, not I, came to you on the *Kz'adul*."

He sat up angrily, ignoring the ache in his injured arm and the discomfort of the shoulder she'd gnawed. "Don't start lying to me again, Zayshul! You promised me the truth! You've already admitted it was you! Do you think I'm stupid? How could another female use your scent?"

"I'm telling you the truth, Kusac. I couldn't tell you at the time or it would have threatened our treaty with your people. And until your first night here, at the dinner Kezule held, I didn't know that you'd been scent-marked."

He made an impatient gesture. "Just tell me what it does."

"Scent-marking binds the female's scent to the male, identifies him as a desirable lover," she said quietly, looking down at her hands. "All my people can smell my scent bound to yours, Kusac. They believe we're lovers. Chy'qui wanted to breed tame hybrid Sholans for the Directorate to use in their plan to reunite the old Valtegan Empire..."

"I don't want to hear this, Zayshul," he interrupted, starting to get up. "I should have known better than to trust you."

"You wanted answers, Kusac," she said, reaching out to catch his arm. "I'm trying to give them to you. Listen to me, please."

He hesitated. It was why he'd come. "I'm listening," he said coldly, settling back down on the cushions.

"As you know, Chy'qui took breeding samples from all your telepaths, except you because he'd hoped to keep your presence on the *Kz'adul* secret and transport you down to our world. When Prince Zsurtul found out about you, you were put in my charge and Chy'qui was ordered to stay away from you. He needed a breeding sample so he sent N'koshoh to you to get it. Somehow he managed to mask her smell with mine so you'd trust her. When you and she coupled, she scent-marked you with my scent."

He looked disbelievingly at her. "Why? Why the hell would anyone go to those lengths?"

"To put the blame for your rape onto me," she said quietly. "You'd trusted me, and when you remembered what had happened and accused me to your people, it would destroy the Treaty. What better way to get rid of me and ruin the Treaty at the same time?"

"Nice try," he said dryly. "You almost had me believing you. Just one thing. Chy'qui had me programmed to kill the Prince at the hostage handover, remember? I wasn't expected to survive that."

"It must have been his backup plan, because that's how he created Shaidan and the others!" she said agitatedly. "I arranged for us to meet tonight so I could turn off the scent marker because somehow, it has reacted differently on your system. It's created a far stronger attraction between us than is normal. I'm a doctor, Kusac! I wouldn't risk marking you with something alien to your system after having to treat Jo for poisoning because of M'ezozakk's bite!"

He barely heard her last comment because several things had suddenly becoming clear. Even he'd recognized on some level that there was something compulsive in his behavior toward her.

"I don't believe you, Zayshul," he said, trying to keep his temper. Did she really think he was that much of a fool? "I think there's a much simpler explanation. You're Shaidan's mother. I think I became your personal experiment, that you came to me that night either out of curiosity, or to get the breeding sample. Perhaps you didn't intend to mark me, but you did, and when you realized you had, I became an embarrassment. That's why Kezule used your and Shaidan's scents to bring me here, and why he's kept us apart!"

"No, Kusac, you're wrong," she said, shaking her head. "Kezule has been keeping us apart because he didn't want you to know the truth."

"I'm not interested in your idea of the truth! My son is the only one of the cubs with any Prime genes, let alone yours, so you must have given him life somehow! What I want to know now is how K'hedduk got hold of him!"

She reached out to touch him imploringly. "He's your and Carrie's son," she said, tears flooding her eyes when he pulled away from her. "Even in the labs on K'oish'ik I couldn't have created him! Our species are just too different! I don't know how my genes came to be bound with his, but Shaidan is one of the eight hybrid cubs Chi'qui created for the Directorate, you must believe me! Even if it were otherwise, how could you think I'd let K'hedduk have him? Do you really think I could be that heartless?"

"I've heard enough of your lies, Zayshul," he said coldly, getting to his feet. "Of all the Primes, I trusted only you, and now I find out that even you've used and betrayed me."

"If you really believe I'm Shaidan's mother, why did you come here tonight? Aren't you afraid I might do it again? If you were still a telepath, you'd know I was telling the truth!" she cried, then realized what she'd said. "I'm sorry," she said, tears flowing down her cheeks. "I didn't mean it that way!"

He hesitated. Had they not paired, he probably would have tried to read her. For the first time, he wondered why his ever vigilant torc hadn't warned him about her Talent and the risk he'd just faced of forming a

mental link with her. Perhaps there was more to the whole business than met the eye. He had to admit there was some justification for believing what she'd said about K'hedduk taking his son with the other embryos. From what little he'd seen and picked up about the way she treated Shaidan, she wouldn't have willingly let the Directorate have him.

"Perhaps you didn't intend for Shaidan to be conceived," he said awkwardly, picking up his tunic. "I agreed to meet you because I knew you wouldn't be foolish enough to let it happen a second time. And I accept that K'hedduk took Shaidan with the other growth tubes."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't thank me," he said harshly, pushing his injured arm into the sleeve of his tunic. "I'm still angry about your other lies."

"Wait! You can't go like that," she said, struggling to get up without dropping her robe. "My scent... yours... everyone will know what we've been doing."

With a snarl of anger, he threw his tunic down and strode over to the edge of the pool. Diving in, the warm water enveloped him, making him grunt in discomfort as it stung his wounded arm and the scratches and bites he hadn't realized till now she'd inflicted on him. At least now he knew the attraction he'd felt for her hadn't been his, it had been due to the scent marker. A small voice in his mind reminded him that she'd wanted to remove it at the first opportunity, but he pushed this thought aside, refusing to acknowledge it. She'd stolen his free will, tarnished what he felt for his life-mates, and somehow, whether or not she'd planned it, caused him to sire a son with her. He kicked out for the surface, trying to envisage the water finally washing him clean of her taint.

When he surfaced, she was standing beside the ladder waiting. Pulling himself up the steps, he took the towel she was holding out to him.

"I assume the attraction to you will be gone now," he said, beginning to rub himself down. "As will what has been causing the other Prime females to be interested in me."



"Yes," she said quietly. "What can I say or do to make you believe it wasn't me, Kusac?"

"Nothing," he said shortly, blotting the worst of the water from his hair. "I thank you for removing the marker, but that's it. I want nothing more to do with you, Zayshul, except on a professional level." He threw the towel at her and headed back to the cushions for his tunic.

As he bent to pick it up, both their scents, heavy with pheromones, rose from the cushions to greet him. With shaking hands, he snatched his tunic and belt up, keeping his thoughts firmly locked behind the strongest mental shields he could erect. Without looking back, he hurried from the clearing onto the path that led off the island.

**Litany to Banish Fear**

*Fear is my adversary,  
It brings the death of reason,  
It clouds my senses and slows my actions.  
I will face my fear,  
I will embrace it,  
Absorb it and conquer it.  
I will use it against itself  
To strengthen my resolve  
And enhance my Gifts.  
Fear is my adversary,  
But it is not my enemy,  
For where it once was, is my strength.*

— Attributed to Sister Zylisha,  
from the Brotherhood's  
*Book of Pathways*

## Chapter 8

ZAYSHUL watched him leave, tears still slowly rolling down her pale cheeks. She'd tried to act honorably toward him—the risk she'd taken in meeting him here was considerable, even with Kezule off-station. She rubbed her hands across her face then took off her robe, folding it over the topmost handrail of the ladder. At least she'd done the right thing and turned off the scent marker, even if he hated her for doing it.

The water surrounded her, warming and caressing her naked skin the way her body had surrounded Kusac's when they coupled. She treaded water, reliving the sensations until it suddenly occurred to her to wonder how she knew what he'd been experiencing. Shivering, she sank under the water, trying to dismiss the notion as her overactive imagination. A rogue part of her mind acknowledged to herself that the late N'koshoh hadn't been wrong on one level when she'd scent-marked Kusac. His skills as a lover were beyond anything she'd encountered—the silky feel of his long fur against her skin, the way he seemed to know from moment to moment what would please her—all marked him apart from the Prime males she'd known.

She surfaced, realizing from the first she'd sensed his innate sensuality. Knowing he had an alien wife, she'd been curious about him—a curiosity admittedly enhanced by the scent marker. Tears sprang to her eyes again as she remembered his accusations of betrayal. It hurt that he should turn away from her in anger and disgust. She wanted—needed—his belief in her innocence, but had no idea how she was going to achieve it.

\* \* \*

"My message you get. Too late is now for talking," a voice out of the darkness accosted Kusac. It was the TeLaxaudin, Giyarishis.

"I was in the shower," he said lamely, slowing down as his eyes picked out the faint form of the alien from the darkness at the end of the corridor. "I got lost in the dark," he added.

"Tomorrow we talk. Come, Sholan. Go down elevator your level." One thin hand beckoned him forward before Giyarishis turned back toward his office and the elevator beyond.

He followed the TeLaxaudin, thankful only that Giyarishis hadn't asked more and had inadvertently provided him with an alibi for being on this level at that time of night.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis left him at the junction of his corridor and stalked off without another word. Though he could see no curious Primes or Sholans about, Kusak padded quickly along the dimly lit passageway toward his quarters. The first thing he saw was the message-waiting light on the vid com blinking at him.

He stood under the shower, saturating himself and his tunic until he was sure it no longer held her scent, then he stripped it off and let it fall to the cubicle floor. Never before had he paired with anyone out of pure lust: always there had been some gentler feeling for his partner. But he felt nothing for Zayshul, nor she for him he was sure— and he'd debased himself, and her, by meeting her in the full knowledge of what he wanted to happen. It mattered not at all that he'd been drawn to her by the scent marker, nor that she was willing, he'd still gone. They had merely used each other to satisfy their own personal needs. Angrily, he reached for the soap and his washing brush.

Three times he scrubbed himself all over, but he couldn't wash away his guilt— he felt soiled inside and out on a level he couldn't clean. The chemicals in the soap, designed to prevent vermin infesting his pelt, stung his injured arm as well as the scratches and bites she'd inflicted on him in her passion. He winced, feeling it was at least a form of penance for what he'd done. As he scrubbed, he tried to forget how she'd obsessed his thoughts and dreams, how he'd searched daily for her scent whenever he entered a public area. Instead he kept telling himself that the nightmare was over and that he could finally get on with his life and build a meaningful relationship with his son. Unless someone was purposely looking for Prime DNA in Shaidan's blood, they wouldn't find it, masked

as it was by the unique hybridized Sholan/Human genetic codes. If he could accept Shaidan as his son, so could everyone else, Carrie and Kaid included.

At the thought of them, his hand seemed to lose its grip and he dropped the brush. Bending to pick it up, he saw with shock that there was a tinge of pink in the water pooling round his feet. Now the chemicals really began to bite and sting as he realized he'd rubbed himself raw in several places.

Turning the water pressure higher, he sucked in his breath as the needles of water pounded against his body, beating the chemicals out of his pelt. He suffered it for several minutes, but finally it became too painful even for him and he had to turn the shower off.

Drying was as much of a problem as his roughened skin couldn't take even the gentle abrasion of the towel. Still dripping, he padded into his bedroom, dabbing gently at himself until he found his toweling robe in one of the drawers. Wrapping it around him, he tied the belt loosely and lay down on top of his bed, purposely turning his mind away from all thoughts but those of his son.

For the first time, he was in no rush to leave Kij'ik. While they were here, he had time to put his energies into building on the tenuous relationship he and Shaidan were beginning to form. He wanted no outside interference, and that would be impossible at home under not only the watchful eyes of the rest of his family, but the distraction to Shaidan of meeting his sisters and triad parents for the first time.

The other cubs would be settled on his estate by now. Shaidan would fit in as well as they no doubt did. Everyone would assume the cub had the same background as the others— there was no need to tell anyone the true story. Let her think Shaidan was just one of the hybrids created by the Directorate. After all, one of the other five was her cub, and another was Kaid's. If he locked his knowledge of Shaidan's true parentage deep in his subconscious, no one need ever know the truth. All it would take was ensuring he never thought of Zayshul and Shaidan in the same breath.

Then, gradually, even the memories of what had happened tonight would fade.

He winced as he rolled over and reached for the covers to pull across himself. The bandage round his injured forearm was soaking wet and uncomfortable but he was too tired to do anything about it even if he'd had the necessary dressings. Closing his eyes, he began planning a future on Shola for himself and Shaidan, one that included no repercussions between himself and his family over the way he'd had to leave.

\* \* \*

Vartra watched with satisfaction, just a little tinged with concern, as Kusac began to build a wall of dreams around himself. At least he was moving away from the Camarilla's web of deceit. Even if his view of reality was idealistic, Kusac felt no sense of shared parenthood with the Prime female, and therefore no responsibility toward her. He began to relax, turning his mind to other matters though still keeping a portion of it on Kusac and his son.

### **Zhal-Kuushoi 25th day (December)**

The insistent buzzing of his wrist comm finally roused Kusac from sleep; until he began to sit up, it refused to be silenced. He'd spent the night tossing and turning and now tiredness clung to him like ice in his pelt in winter. Banner's face looked back at him from the tiny screen.

"It's third hour, Captain," said Banner formally. "We're in the mess now. Had you forgotten we're meeting in the temple in an hour to start decorating it for the festival tomorrow?"

"Ah," he said. "Be there in ten minutes."

Banner acknowledged him with a flick of an ear then the comm went dead.

He had forgotten, he realized, as he pushed himself stiffly out of bed. Grimacing, he pulled his still damp robe off and staggered over to the drawers for his black one.

Dousing his face in a basin of cold water helped him wake up. He felt like death warmed over— served him right for falling asleep while his pelt was still soaking wet, he thought wryly as he pulled his brush through his long hair. Despite what he tried, it rose, crackling with static, around his face like a full U'Churian mane. Sighing, he gave up and put the brush down on the shelf. As he did, the glint of the jewel in his ear caught his eye. Reaching up for it, he hesitated briefly, then resolutely removed it, leaving it lying on the shelf. That belonged to her and the night before— it had no place in tomorrow's celebrations.

\* \* \*

Banner kept nudging him throughout the meal, drawing his attention back to the ongoing conversation about the preparations for the festival.

"You decide, Jayza," Kusac said finally as the discussion moved to the choice of candles they should use. He couldn't keep his mind on the matter at all— his thoughts kept drifting off in irrelevant and unimportant directions. "You've been running the temple for us, your decisions should count for more than mine in this. I have no preferences."

"But Captain, as Priest, you represent both Vartra the Consort, and the son of Ghyakulla and Vartra. You should be the one to decide," objected the young male.

"You decide," he said, pushing his chair back and getting to his feet. "I have the service to write, and deliver, since it won't be the usual traditional festival with dancing and hunting." Damn Jayza for reminding him he represented the fertility aspect of the God at this festival— instead of meditating on this responsibility, he'd been pairing with the Prime doctor.

\* \* \*

"I thought you'd written the service already," said Banner quietly when he caught up with him as he headed along the corridor to the temple.

"I made a start," he said, "but I didn't anticipate getting injured before finishing it."

Banner looked sideways at him from under lowered brows. "I made some notes, too. Perhaps I can help you while the other three finish weaving the rest of the greenery we brought from the hunt into garlands. Jayza brought some clay back from the hunt and has made it into pretty good little statuettes of Vartra and Ghyakulla so at least we can represent Them properly tomorrow."

"That's good," he said, nodding briefly, unable to speak any further.

\* \* \*

They'd no sooner got settled into the Priest's office when one of M'zynal's young security officers arrived to remind him that he had an appointment with Giyarishis.

"Can't it wait?" asked Banner. "We've only just started working on the sermon for tomorrow."

"I'd better go," he said, pushing his notes over to his Second. He'd completely forgotten about his meeting with the TeLaxaudin the night before. It would be extremely embarrassing if Giyarishis came down to get him and mentioned they'd met up on the hydroponics level late the night before. "Check this over for me."

\* \* \*

Giyarishis was waiting for Kusac in his office.

"I hope this won't take long," he said. "We're finishing our preparations for tomorrow's festival. Why do you want to see me?"

"Not take long. I do for Kzizysus. We go next door to medical room."

Marshaling his thoughts, he followed Giyarishis into the room next door. He had a few questions of his own he'd like answered.

A slim, bronze hand pointed to the low examination couch. "Sit. Torc works well?"



"I have some questions I'd like to ask first," he began.

"Answers you have later," said the TeLaxaudin. "This first."

\* \* \*

The scent Giyarishis had emitted had quickly rendered the Hunter unconscious. He'd then been able to administer the drug needed to keep him like that for two hours. That achieved, he placed a sleep tape headset over his eyes, connected his Camarilla-made scanner to it and began to monitor the Hunter's brain while running him through a series of virtual scenarios to test his psychic abilities.

What happened concerned him. The Hunter had initially tried to resist the dream scenarios— his willpower now was stronger than they'd anticipated, given his state of mind when Kzizysus had conducted the operation on him. But even that didn't account for the periods when he was effectively invisible to the monitoring devices he'd placed throughout the outpost. He couldn't put it down to a malfunction of the torc because it was performing as expected.

As they'd hoped, the Hunter's abilities were spreading to enhance all his senses— not just his sense of smell. A body scan had shown several tiny anomalous nodules— too small to cause concern, and certainly benign in nature, they would cause no danger to his well-being. As for the cuts and grazes on his body which the sand-dweller female had left, and those where he'd washed himself too vigorously, they could be ignored.

Reaching for the final recording, one prepared by medics within the Camarilla itself, he inserted it in the headset with many misgivings. His colleagues wanted the Hunter's training completed now, giving him access to the portions locked away by Naacha because he'd been too unstable at the time to control his expanding abilities. They had all hoped he would come to realize by himself how to unlock the memories, but that had not happened. Now it was time to give him the final clues and stimuli so he remembered everything.

While the tape was playing, he took the time to dress the Hunter's injured arm. It was healing nicely, and as fast as they'd expected. It might be a good idea to fetch some of the pool water before restoring the power to the elevators and doors because then he could genuinely claim the chemicals in the Primes' Holy Pool had aided the healing process.

As he made his way there, he was still troubled by the whole procedure, afraid that in awakening the Hunter fully, they'd unleashed a wild element, one they couldn't control, that could cause the end of civilization as they knew it rather than making him the savior they hoped he would be.

\* \* \*

"What do you mean there's been a power failure on the hydroponics level?" Zayshul demanded of M'zynal when he finally arrived at his security office by the Command Level's main elevator. "I want to talk to Giyarishis now!" She banged her hand on the counter between herself and M'zynal as he edged round behind it.

"I'm afraid you can't, Doctor," said M'zynal apologetically. "The engineers are working on it, but for now, we have no contact with that level at all. It's effectively sealed off."

"Who's up there, and how long have they been trapped?" she demanded in frustration.

"Apart from the regular staff there, the TeLaxaudin and Captain Aldatan, and they've only been cut off for an hour. They're in absolutely no danger, of course," he reassured her. "Nor are we. It's a temporary, localized fault."

She stared at him openmouthed for a moment, then looked from him to M'kou. "What about the stairs? Aren't those doors on a different circuit so this can't happen?"

"They are, but their power is down, too. We aren't operating under normal circumstances, Doctor," said M'kou patiently.

"We've had a crew working on sublevel five engineering deck all night rerouting the last of the main relays to the bridge and our new substations on this and the Officers' level. Obviously something was either faulty or damaged after so long in disuse. They'll locate the problem shortly and all will be back to normal, Doctor. We still have access between this level, the Officers', and the main flight deck," M'zynal explained.

"But none to hydroponics!"

"Not at the moment," said M'kou soothingly.

"Actually, there is a way in," said M'zynal, leaning forward to punch some keys on his console. "Look at the screen behind you."

Zayshul turned round to see a cutaway plan of the asteroid exterior and the interior for the hydroponics level.

"Surrounding that deck on the outer surface of the asteroid, there are twenty concealed laser bays— all connected by maintenance tunnels. At least eight of them correspond to ground level for that deck."

"There's no need to go cutting through rock fused when they hollowed out the asteroid," said M'kou firmly when Zayshul looked at him. "At worst, we can dismantle the locks on one of the stairwells— if we can't get them out in the next two hours. There's air, water, and food in there, Doctor, enough for them to survive for far longer than we can. They are in no danger. Now, if you'll excuse us, we can get back to monitoring the engineers. I have informed Lieutenant Banner of the situation."

Exasperated, Zayshul stalked back to her lab. This had wasted the time she'd set aside to confront Giyarishis and demand to know how her scent could have been imposed on N'koshoh, and how her DNA had become part of Shaidan's. She was absolutely convinced Kzizysus had had something to do with it.

She had a patient due in ten minutes, and as it was the first of the females willing to carry her egg to full term, it was vital that she saw her in person to allay any fears she might have.

\* \* \*

The sound of a commotion outside woke Kusac. Pushing himself up groggily on one elbow, he could see the TeLaxaudin at the door talking to M'zynal, one of Kezule's commandos.

"Captain wakes," he heard the TeLaxaudin's translator intone in its flat, mechanical voice. "Arm heals well— used pool water on it to aid healing."

"What's happening?" Kusac asked, smothering a yawn as he sat up. He frowned, looking at the TeLaxaudin standing dwarfed between the two Prime guards who were glancing concernedly in his direction. "Have I been asleep?"

"Fall asleep during examination," confirmed Giyarishis. "Sleep through power failure. Long wait till now."

He looked back at M'zynal for confirmation.

"No one was in any danger, Captain. It was only the power for the doors and elevator to this level," said the Security chief reassuringly.

With a grunt, he pushed himself off the low couch and got to his feet. Feeling the dressing on his arm binding slightly, he looked down at it, surprised to see that it had been replaced.

"I change dressing while you sleep," confirmed the TeLaxaudin, shooing him out the door. "Used special mineral water to help healing. Now go, too much delay this cause. Things I have to do."

"Your people were informed of the power failure, Captain. They're still in the temple with your Second," said M'zynal as they left the office and headed for the elevator.

Automatically mumbling his thanks, he got into the elevator with the two Primes. When it halted, he headed for the Sholan temple, glad to be away from the TeLaxaudin. For some reason he couldn't pinpoint, the alien made him uneasy. The fact he'd fallen asleep in the examination room confused the hell out of him. He couldn't remember why the TeLaxaudin

had needed to see him, but then a lot of things had become blurred since the hunt— probably because of a residue of poison still in his system.

As he pushed open the temple door, he tried to clear everything from his mind except for thoughts of the following day's festival. His actions the night before may have let himself and the God down, but he could ensure that he gave Him all He was due from now on.

### **Later, the communal Sholan lounge**

"Masks?" said Kusac incredulously. "There will be no masks. You know they're only worn by the dancers, not the priests."

"I thought that would get your attention," said Banner, mouth dropping open in a grin as he sat down. "You've been miles away all day."

"No masks and no dancing," he repeated firmly. "We have no need to scare Winter's demons away out here, and since we have no females with us, no need of dancing to impress them and win a mating contract with one." Memories of the last midwinter festival at home flitted through his mind. He'd danced for Carrie that year. He shut the memories firmly away.

"It is a fertility festival, Kusac. We need to pay at least lip service to that. Jayza says some of the civilian Primes heard them practicing and came to listen. Seems they have a tradition of drumming, too. As for us having no females, there's a large number of Prime ones here only too interested in us. You can't expect the crew to stay celibate in the face of such invitations after so long away from our own kind."

He opened his mouth to forbid it, then, remembering the night before, promptly shut it again. He, of all people, had no right to prevent the others from liaisons with willing females, even if they were Primes.

"Perhaps after the religious side of the festival is over, you could allow the Primes who can drum to join us, then those who want to dance to the music can do so."

It was a reasonable solution, one he had no rational justification for refusing. Reluctantly he nodded. "Keep the music secular," he said. "None of the traditional sexually-charged beats. I don't want this getting out of hand."

Banner nodded. "That goes without saying. I spoke to the kitchen staff about the food we'll need. They were twitchy when I requested a freshly killed animal carcass for roasting for the meal afterward and insisted on checking it with M'kou, but he authorized it immediately."

He nodded, only half-listening to what the other was saying.

"You're tired," said Banner. "Why not leave the service with me, I'll finish tidying it up for you."

Sensing Banner about to reach out to touch his hand to attract his attention, Kusac was hard pressed not to move it away first. When the touch came, it was light and fleeting, as befitted a nontelepath touching one of the Talented.

"It's finished. I already sent copies to each of the terminals in our quarters. I've reworked it, constructing it like a Storyteller's reading so we all take turns presenting the story of Ghyakulla, Kuushoi, and Vartra. That way it involves us all."

Banner raised an eye ridge. "Unusual way to do it," he murmured, "but it should please the likes of Dzaou who's had very little to do with the temple so far."

He said nothing, merely lifted his drink and took a sip. Only he knew he'd done it that way because his conscience couldn't face representing the God alone after what he'd done the night before.

The door chime sounded, making them look at each other in surprise.

"Enter," Banner called out.

The door slid open to reveal M'zynal. "Captain Aldatan," he said, "the General has returned and requests that you join him in his quarters for the evening meal."

Had she told him? Was this a subtle way of separating him from his crew to confront him? Should he refuse the invitation? Thoughts tumbled one over the other in his mind until reason took hold. It was well known Kezule had brought two of the Royal Court females with him and had been seen more often in their company than in Zayshul's. Primes bonded only for pleasure, moving on to their next lover when the mood took them, though some did choose to remain together for longer periods. Although Kezule's and Zayshul's marriage was a dynastic one, he didn't think the General hypocritical enough to object to her doing covertly what he did openly. The only fly in that logic was that Kusac was the "lover" in question. If Kezule did know, and object, better that they had it out in private than publicly.

"I'll make sure all the preparations for tomorrow are completed," said Banner. "There's very little left to do anyway."

He nodded and got to his feet. "I'll call you later."

\* \* \*

For the last few hours, he'd been aware on some level of a sense of suppressed excitement in the air. As the elevator descended to the Command level, it became more pronounced. It had to be due to more than just Kezule's return.

As they left the elevator, he forced himself to take note of his surroundings. As on their deck, the Security office was the first room on his left, but this one was far larger. Almost immediately, M'zynal indicated they should take a left through an open air lock. The carpeted corridor was narrower than the main one, its featureless walls the same uniform pale gray as those on their level. Even M'zynal's heavy boots made no sound on the flooring. Another air lock, then a left turn into a corridor that was obviously residential. They were nearing the air lock at the end before M'zynal stopped outside a door and pressed the buzzer.

M'kou answered the door. "Captain Aldatan," he said, gesturing him in. "The General is expecting you."

He entered the hallway, looking at the opening on his right where M'kou was pointing. "In there, Captain."

He stood on the threshold, seeing nothing but his son sitting on the floor with Zayshul's daughter piecing together a large jigsaw.

"General Kezule will join you in a few minutes," said M'kou quietly.

The voice startled him, and when he glanced back at where the young Prime had been, he was already disappearing through another doorway. Turning back, his eyes met Zayshul's this time, and he didn't need to be a Telepath to be aware of her immediate flash of fear. It was suppressed almost instantly.

"My husband told me you were joining us," she said. "I didn't expect you quite so soon."

"M'zynal brought me," he said, still hesitating in the doorway. "I didn't realize it was to be a family meal."

"I forget my manners," she said, standing up. "Please, come in."

Faint creases in the rainbow-hued skin surrounding her eyes betrayed her tension— she was no more happy with the situation than he was.

"Thank you," he murmured, moving past the children to take a seat in the chair next to her sofa.

The presence of the two children wasn't lost on him— it was a reminder of his and his son's vulnerability, and of the fact that though he might be the father of Zayshul's first child, he, Kezule, was her husband and the father of Mayza.



Acutely uncomfortable, he sat there watching them, trying not to let his imagination run away with itself. As smells of food began to permeate the room, he ventured a question. "Where is Kezule?"

"In the kitchen, supervising the cook," she said. "The meal shouldn't be long now."

"You have your own cook?" he asked, filling the awkward silence again. She was wearing a perfume tonight, the one that almost masked her own scent.

"Of course not, we borrowed one of the mess ones. Shaidan, your father's here. Don't you want to come and talk to him?"

There was a small silence. "Mayza needs my help," the cub said in perfect, inflectionless Prime Valtegan.

It was a tone he'd come to learn was as close as his son could get to showing he didn't want to do what he'd been asked. He didn't have time to respond before Kezule arrived to escort them to the formal dining area in the next room.

\* \* \*

The General was the only one who was relaxed, with a seemingly endless flow of small talk about how the animals were settling into the large barn on the hydroponics level, and how the synthesized food Giyarishis and Zayshul had developed in advance for them seemed to meet with the creatures' approval.

Zayshul busied herself helping their daughter coordinate her cutlery and mouth while Shaidan kept his head bent toward his plate.

"I thought we'd try a Sholan recipe," said Kezule as the main dish was brought through. "Chiozo chose a recipe from the data you gave us and braved Giyarishis' stronghold in hydroponics to request some suitable fruits. I had a taste earlier in the kitchen. I think you'll like it."

He couldn't stop the quizzical flick of his ears even though he knew it would mean nothing to Kezule.

"Why? As a courtesy to you," Kezule said, filling the wine-glasses in front of them. "After all, it isn't every day my life is saved by someone from a species considered an enemy in my own time."

Surprised, he murmured something he hoped was appropriate as he lifted his fork to try the food. It was good, by far the best meal he'd had since leaving Shola. The fruit gave the stew a piquant flavor like none he'd tasted before, but it enhanced the meat and was a welcome change from the bland food they were usually served. This time, he did drink the wine, but sparingly.

Dessert was a small selection of real diced and segmented fresh fruit rather than the synthesized sludge from the mess hall.

"Giyarishis says production has reached the level where we can serve fresh fruit in the mess every other day," Zayshul said, spooning pieces of fruit onto a small plate for her daughter to eat with her fingers. "Your people won't be needing so many supplements now, Captain."

"Variety of diet is always welcome," he agreed, still very much on edge. Kezule did nothing without reason and he couldn't fathom the reason behind this very cozy family meal.

"It surprises me that as a priest you have no vows of chastity and asceticism as ours did," said Kezule, finishing his dessert.

"There's time enough for that when you're in the grave," he said, quoting a Human saying. "How can you understand the day-to-day problems of others if you deny yourself the pleasures of life?" He put his spoon back in the empty dish.

"Very true," said Kezule, pushing his chair back from the table and picking up his wineglass. "Shall we leave Zayshul and the children to finish? I'd like a private word with you before they join us."

He got to his feet, feeling his heart begin to race. This was it, then.

"Don't forget your wine," reminded Kezule, his tone still affable.

As he followed Kezule into the lounge, he braced himself, wondering if the evening of pleasantries had been just a means of softening him up for what was to follow. When he started to sit down on the nearest sofa, Kezule gestured to the one opposite where he was headed.

"Sit beside me, I've something I want to show you," the Valtegan said, sitting down and picking up a small remote from the table in front of him. He pointed it at the wall in front of them.

A rectangular area darkened, then resolved into a screen showing a monstrous battle ship sitting in space, its hull partially illuminated by high intensity lighting. It only took him a moment or two to realize he was looking at a ship moored outside Kij'ik.

"That's the *Zan'droshi*," said Kezule. "My last command before the Emperor retired me to guard his hatchery on your world." His voice held more than a slight trace of pride.

Even after fifteen hundred years floating in space, its hull scarred by battle and pitted by the many particles of dust that had bombarded it, it was still impressive.

"You told our people you were only a passenger on it," he said automatically, looking at the Valtegan.

"Did I? It must have been one of the lies that I mixed in with the truth," he said lazily, putting down the remote. "No one tells the complete truth under questioning, Kusac, as I'm sure you know from experience."

He looked away, saying nothing, but remembering how he'd broken under J'koshuk's questioning on the *Kz'adul*.

"Your people were good, Kusac, but not as good as our Enforcers," said Kezule quietly. "They're bred to have an appetite for cruelty. You're lucky to have survived."

He shrugged, saying nothing, waiting for the Valtegan to continue.

"Part of my reason for choosing this Outpost was that I knew my ship was in this neighborhood. I've had my people looking for it since we arrived here. Two days ago they found it."

"Why bring it here?"

"For salvage purposes. One of the first things I located on it was the data bank. It has been successfully downloaded to our computing facilities here. There's extensive information not only on my culture of fifteen hundred years ago, but also about our earlier past. I want you and Zayshul to work together on it to try and find anything relevant to the type of society I am trying to create here. There's a library facility on your level that we'll open up for you to use."

Work with Zayshul? Too stunned to reply at first, he barely heard the rest of what Kezule said.

"I don't need any help," he said when he finally found his voice again. "She's a doctor, not a sociologist."

"She's female, and a Prime," said Kezule. "And you told me to let the females do what they do best, build societies. That's why I need her involved."

Why, after keeping them apart for so long, was he now throwing them together like this in a working environment?

"I also think it's time Shaidan spent the odd night with you," the General continued. "So once a week, you and he can stay overnight in quarters on this level. The first night will be the night after tomorrow, when your festival is over, if that's acceptable."

"What do you want in return?" he demanded automatically.

Kezule's crest raised slightly. "Very astute," he murmured. "I want the *Zan'droshi* stripped bare of anything useful in six weeks. After that time,

the remains will be nudged into a decaying orbit round the gas giant. While it's here, it draws attention to us. I want it gone as soon as possible."

"You could take your time if you put it in an orbit deeper in the asteroid field."

"Too dangerous," said Kezule, reaching into his uniform jacket pocket and drawing out a slim golden case. Opening it, he took out a thin, dark green cylinder about three inches long and proceeded to put it in his mouth and light it with an igniter he took from another pocket.

Kusac's nose wrinkled in anticipation of the smell but it was actually fairly inoffensive. "I didn't know Valtegans smoked. Something you found on the *Zan'droshi*?"

Kezule opened the case again and held it out to him. "Yes. I found these in the Officers' mess. My favorite brand, too. Would you like to try one? I thought your people didn't smoke but chewed twigs from a specific tree instead. This is made from only leaves."

He shook his head. "No thanks. We don't smoke."

"The Humans do," said Kezule, putting the case and igniter away. "Having a Human wife, I'd have thought you'd have tried it."

"No," he said shortly, not wanting to discuss his past life. "If you compute the orbits of the asteroids correctly, there should be no problem with moving the *Zan'droshi* deeper into the field."

"Most of the orbits closer to the planet are too erratic to predict accurately. I won't risk my people attempting it."

He shrugged and went back to studying the image on the screen. "Helping to salvage a warship wasn't part of our deal, Kezule."

"The deal was to stay for as long as I needed you," Kezule reminded him quietly, tapping ash off the end of his cheroot into a small dish on the table in front of them. "Your people have the skills mine lack when it comes to

choosing what is necessary to take off the *Zan'droshi*. I can't always be with them, I have duties here as well."

He turned to look at the General. "What will be next, Kezule? How many more times will you say only we have the skills to help you? We've already been here for over two months. I want to take my son home, my crew want to go home."

"I've never put a time limit on how long I wanted you to stay," said Kezule, lazily blowing smoke into the air while regarding him consideringly. Suddenly, he sat up and stubbed out the remains of his smoke.

"The *Zan'droshi* has ancillary craft— in repairable condition— on one of the flight decks, among other things," he said crisply. "As well as taking off what we need to supplement our sick bays and living quarters, I want them and their ammunition in working order. Before you say it," he said warningly, "yes, this is a peaceful settlement, but we may need to defend ourselves one day, and I aim to ensure we have the means to do so. Once that's been completed, I plan to visit Ch'almuth and see if I can recruit some of their people. When you've helped them settle in, then you have my word you and your son can leave here."

"You expect me to believe that after getting those fighters off the *Zan'droshi*, you don't plan to use them on the Ch'almuthians?" he said, putting all the scorn he felt into his words.

"Don't take me for an idiot, Kusac," Kezule snapped back. "I want willing settlers, not a captive population! I have no intention of taking anyone from there by force. I want the fighters for the reason I said, in case I need to defend this Outpost."

"Who are you expecting to attack you? The Primes?"

"I'm not expecting anyone, I'm just covering my options. You could be going home in as little as three months, Kusac. Think of that rather than trying to give me motives I don't have."

Three months? For the first time, he thought about what waited for him on Shola—a trial for treason, not just because of stealing the *Couana* for the original mission, but because he'd returned from it then immediately taken off again to return to Kezule's hideout. It wouldn't matter that Father Lijou and his own father had urged him to take the initial covert mission, unless the political climate at home had improved with the Primes, they couldn't admit to having sent him. And as for returning for his son, that would cut no ice with the authorities. He'd be disowned by both his birth family and the Brotherhood, and he'd face either imprisonment, or worse, mental readjustment. Surprisingly, his future here was more assured than on Shola. Maybe he should make a new life for himself and Shaidan here, on Kij'ik, where no one would probe into his son's heritage. Maybe he should be content with what he had now rather than risk an uncertain future for them both.

The thought shocked him. "Agreed," he said harshly.

Kezule nodded, a slight smile touching the corners of his wide mouth. "I have some matters to attend to on the bridge," he said, getting to his feet. "I promised you two hours alone with my wife, you can have them now. I keep my word, Kusac." With that, he left.

He heard the outer door open then close and knew he was alone with Zayshul and both children.

"He trusts you now," said Zayshul as she ushered Shaidan and her daughter in. "He wouldn't have invited you here, or left you alone with us if he didn't."

He opened his mouth to answer but she shook her head slightly and gestured to the ubiquitous comm screen unit in the corner of the room.

"Shaidan, get the drawing things out from the cupboard, please, and take them to the kitchen. Mayza wants to draw for a while before bed," she said.

"Yes, Aunt," the cub said obediently, going to a set of cupboards behind the sofa opposite Kusac.

"Aunt?" Kusac asked as he got to his feet.

"What would you have him call me?" Her tone was slightly acerbic. "Doctor Zayshul? He only calls me that in public."

"No, of course not," he mumbled, taken aback by her forthrightness.

The kitchen was through the dining area, and was a small, family room with a circular dining table and four chairs plus the usual facilities for cooking and cleaning up after a meal. Next to the sink stood a food and drink dispenser.

"The communication units were originally used as monitors by Security," she said quietly as the two youngsters settled at the table with small drawing screens and styluses. She took two drinking vessels from a cupboard and programmed two drinks into the dispenser. "Not that I think Kezule uses them for that," she added hurriedly as she waited for them to be delivered. "He only uses them for entertainment channels and public announcements, but it's safer not to speak frankly in front of them."

Reaching into the dispenser, she took out a bowl of kheffa and handed it to him.

He took it from her carefully, making sure their fingers didn't touch. Still sensitive to her presence, he didn't want to make the situation worse.

"About last night," she began hesitantly.

"It didn't happen, and it must never happen again," he said firmly, in a voice as quiet as hers while refusing to meet her gaze. His burning need for her had lessened, thank Vartra, but he still felt an attraction to her.

"Agreed," she said after a moment. "You asked for this time with me, so what do I tell Kezule we talked about? What reason did you give him?"

He looked at her then. "Shaidan," he said. "I told him I wanted to know about him and the other cubs. Tell me how Kezule found them."



Opening his mind, he let his shields drop and absorbed everything she said about the discovery and rescue of the cubs, including the death of two of them. He listened emotionlessly, betraying nothing.

"He's not a cruel man, Kusac," she said at last. "He's obviously a product of his own time and culture, but he's motivated by honor and duty. It sickened him to see the cubs in the Directorate's hands. He could have asked for any of them, and even though he knew Shaidan was your son, he asked for Gaylla to save her life."

"Keeping Shaidan to make me return and help him wasn't honorable," he growled, putting his empty drinking vessel in the sink. "And you went along with it."

He felt her mental presence flare until it touched the edges of his mind. Instantly his shielding returned, blocking her out, but not before he'd felt the mixture of anger and anguish she was feeling.

"I had no option," she said quietly. "There must have been times when you have overruled your wife."

Memories tried to surface but ruthlessly, he suppressed them. That part of his life belonged to the past, had no relevance to him now.

She moved closer, her hand touching his arm in an intimate gesture. "I was against this plan, Kusac, please believe that."

Her touch shocked him by sending thrills of anticipated pleasure through him. He jerked his arm away. "Don't touch me!" he hissed in a low voice. "We have to work together, but I want no intimacy with you! You mean nothing to me— you're a colleague, nothing more!" He moved abruptly away from her toward the table and took the empty seat next to his son.

The impact of her scent might have diminished, but her touch evoked memories of their shared intimacy the night before. Telepaths couldn't hide from the messages that flesh-to-flesh contact brought, and his body wanted hers again.

He tried to concentrate on his son, using the cub's scent and touch to override hers, but he was only partially successful. The awareness her touch had awakened in him was reluctant to become dormant again.

\* \* \*

Zayshul was in an equal state of turmoil and confusion, wondering if she had, indeed, managed to turn off the scent marker. Until she'd touched him, she'd assumed she had, now she wasn't so sure anymore. She busied herself washing the drinking vessels and putting them back under the dispenser for fresh kheffa. Then she joined Kusac at the table, pushing his hot drink toward him as she took the last empty chair.

Eventually the two hours were over and M'kou came to escort him back to the Officers level. As the distance between him and Zayshul increased, the beast she'd awakened with her touch finally went back to sleep, and he sighed with relief.

\* \* \*

M'kou left the Sholan on his level and rode the elevator back down to his own, heading for the bridge where he knew his father waited.

The General was sitting to one side at the Security post while the evening watch were on duty at the Captain's and Tactical stations. As he approached, he could see his father had been switching between only two screens— the exterior of the *Zan'droshi*, and his lounge.

"Thank you, M'kou," Kezule said, switching off the screens and getting to his feet. "I'm through here for tonight."

"Will you be going back to your quarters now? I could make a hot drink to ease your tiredness."

Kezule smiled briefly and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Thank you, but no. I think I will spend a few hours with Shishu and her charming companion. I need— uncomplicated company tonight. There are times

when I don't think I'll ever get used to sentient wives, and tonight is one of them."

Nodding, M'kou thought of his own mate, Lazaik, glad he didn't have the problems his father had. Lazaik had scent-marked him, and he didn't care if the longing he felt for her was enhanced by the marker or not, because he knew that it worked the same way for her. On that level at least, he could feel some sympathy for the Doctor and the Sholan Captain, as well as for his father.

"Would you like me to inform Doctor Zayshul?" he offered quietly.

"Please," said Kezule, the weary look on his face vanishing for an instant. "But do it..." He hesitated.

"I know how to tell her," said M'kou.

Kezule gripped his son's shoulder affectionately and nodded. "Maybe you could ask her friend from the lab to call in on her," he suggested. "Females like each other's company in stressful times, and tonight has been stressful for both of us."

"I'll tell Ghidd'ah," M'kou reassured him.

"Would you also make sure all Captain Aldatan's requirements for tomorrow will be met?" said Kezule as he began to leave.

"Already done, General. Shall I call you tomorrow morning at the usual time?"

"Please."

As he watched his father leave, M'kou sighed, wondering again why the otherwise competent and sensible Doctor had scent-marked the Sholan Captain in the first place, then hurriedly banished the thought as he had before. No one really believed the story that it had been done by the Directorate, but on the *Kz'adul*, she had been free to scent-mark whomever she chose.

Lazaik had tried to explain the appeal of the Sholan males to him but he couldn't really see it from a female viewpoint.

*"If the males have that effect on you, La'shol help us when we meet their females,"* he'd said, but she'd just laughed at him.

## **Midwinter Festival, Zhal-Kuushoi 26th day (December)**

The recounting of Ghyakulla's search for Her lost child through Winter's domain had gone more smoothly than he'd feared it would, given how little time they'd had to practice it. All through it, he'd felt as if he was an automaton, merely playing the part he'd designated for himself—the words were only words, with none of the sentiment behind them that they'd held for him in the past. Now there was only the final ritual to conduct. Rousing himself, he looked over to Khadui and Dzaou and flicked an ear in an affirmative. The two Sholans began to beat their drums, a low, rhythmic beat that matched that of a Sholan heart exactly.

"To open our celebrations, we offer the traditional gifts to Vartra," said Kusac. "Fire, incense, salt, and water. Let the torch be brought so that the fires of truth and clear thought can be once more lit in our hearts."

Jayza came forward carrying a blazing torch which he handed to Kusac. Taking the torch, he stepped toward the right-hand brazier and lit it first. The flames leaped upward, crackling and dancing as if they were alive. Moving to the other brazier, he once more turned on the gas and ignited it. A second time the flames leaped high before settling down. Would that he could kindle the light of truth so easily in his own life.

Handing the torch back to Jayza, Kusac returned to his place in front of the altar and its small statuettes.

"These flames shall signify the return of the sun to our land. Let the incense be brought to sweeten the air and aid our meditation."

It was Shaidan who stepped forward this time, bearing a small container in his hands. As he approached Kusac, he lifted the lid, presenting him with the open box.

From it, Kusac took a handful of the resinous granules and stepping toward the first brazier, threw some into the heart of the flames. They flared up brightly, spitting and crackling as a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke began to billow upward. Clear thought— he no longer knew what that meant these days when everything around him seemed to be steeped in a sea of fog. He repeated his actions with the second brazier.

Shaidan closed the box and hesitating only briefly, went to stand beside Jayza.

"The perfumed air shall remind us of the blossoms of spring." Spring— he thought longingly of spring on his estate, with the riot of colorful blossoms everywhere. Then he remembered what he was doing and pushed the painful memories aside.

"Let the water that sustains all life be brought that I may add my gift of salt to it," he said, taking a pouch from his pocket and holding it aloft.

Banner stepped forward, carrying the bowl of water into which he poured the contents of the pouch. Taking his Brotherhood knife from his belt, he held it in both hands and proceeded to slowly stir the contents of the bowl with it.

"Let the water of life and the salt of the earth be conjoined and purified," he said. Removing the knife, he wiped it carefully on the empty pouch then returned it to its sheath and the pouch to his robe pocket before taking the bowl from Banner.

As his Second stepped back beside Jayza, Kusac turned to the statuettes of Vartra and Ghyakulla and bowing, placed the bowl in front of them. He remained there a moment with his back to the gathering.

*If Ghyakulla can search for You, then surely both She and You understand why I am here, why I must do whatever it takes to get my son back.*

The drumbeat began to quicken, Khadui and Dzaou using both hands now as the hypnotic sound rose in volume until it reached a crescendo which fragmented into separate rhythms before suddenly stopping.

In the profound silence that followed, Kusak spoke once more. "As we have revered Your Mother, Ghyakulla, by recounting the story of Her search for You in Winter's domain, we now ask You to bless us who are here today, and bless this celebration which we hold in honor of Your recovery and Your birth." He bowed once more before turning back to the assembled Sholans and Primes. Reaching out, he took Shaidan by the hand, drawing him to his side. "Let the feast begin," he said simply, then led the way to the tables at the other end of the hall.

\* \* \*

Unlike the Prime festival, theirs was a meal set at tables. Out of courtesy, he'd had to place the General and Doctor Zayshul on his left while Banner and the others of his crew were on his right. Giyarishis had surprised everyone by asking to join them at the meal even though he could eat little of their food beyond some of the vegetables.

Many of the Primes had elected to join them, interested not only to see how the Sholans celebrated their own turn of the year, but because it was a change from the normal daily routine. The food was of course, Sholan-style, with several large joints of roasted meat as well as the obligatory dishes of stews and a variety of vegetables from either the hydroponics lab of Giyarishis or from the planet they'd gone to for their hunt.

For once, even the abrasive Dzaou was disposed to be relatively pleasant to the Primes as well as to Kusak himself. There was plenty of lively conversation— aided by copious amounts of ale brewed by the 'ponics level— as the two religions were compared and contrasted.

He said little, preferring instead to watch his son, who sat with Zayshul and her daughter, and listen to everyone else. While part of his mind noted that the integration of the Primes' military group with the civilians was complete, with both parties completely at their ease with each other, the rest of his mind had retreated until the sound of their conversation resembled the chuckling of water running over small stones.

Reaching for his drink, he noticed Khadui and Jayza excuse themselves from the table and head off to the drums, several Primes following in their

wake with their own percussive instruments. Moments later, Dzaou left. After a few tentative practice patterns of beats, they began playing again—a light, foot-tapping rhythm that seemed to appeal to both species.

Zayshul had been as quiet as he'd been throughout the meal, speaking only to the children or occasionally to the Prime female seated opposite her. On a distant level, he'd been aware of her glancing in his direction every now and then, but he'd not responded.

Beside her, Kezule was relaxed and expansive, asking first Jayza, then occasionally himself, many questions about their religion. His answers had been automatic, requiring little thought.

The music changed, becoming more complex as the drummers gained confidence. He found he could relax into it, let it flow over and through him till he began to find a measure of peace.

A hand touched his, making him jump in surprise, pulling him back to the real world.

"I think Dzaou's planning something," said Banner, leaning close to him so he couldn't be overheard.

"What?" he asked, lifting the drinking vessel to his lips.

"I don't know, but he's been trying too hard to be pleasant for my liking."

He looked at his Second, raising a quizzical eye ridge. "What could he do?"

Banner's hand suddenly tightened on his. "He's made a mask!" he hissed.

He looked through the crowd of Primes wandering round or standing chatting in small knots over to where Dzaou was emerging from the temple office, face covered by a mask decorated in paint, feathers, and bits of fur from the herd animals. It looked familiar, and frowning, Kusac tried to place the design.

"We can't do anything about it unless we want to cause an incident," snarled the frustrated Banner, watching as Dzaou strode through the fascinated crowd to the drummers and took a small drum from Jayza.

Aware of Kezule walking toward him, he continued to watch as Dzaou began to beat out one of the traditional charged dance rhythms, swaying his body arrogantly in time to the new beat. Then he remembered.

"He's invoking L'Shoh, the Liege of Hell," he said quietly. "The mask is an ancient design, it hasn't been used for decades."

"Invoking L'Shoh?" echoed Banner as the Sholan drummers faltered and stopped, looking over to Kusac for guidance.

"As God of Justice," he replied through numbed lips. "It's a warning that none can escape the God."

"You have to stop him!" hissed Banner, keeping his voice as low as possible before the General rejoined them.

"Very entertaining," said Kezule, sitting back down on his seat to watch Dzaou. "I hadn't expected a masked dancer. You should have told me and I could have made more resources available to you."

"We don't normally dance, or drum, if away from home as we are now," said Banner, filling the silence.

One of the Prime drummers picked up Dzaou's beat and joined him, quickly followed by the others. Khadui and Jayza were still looking at him when Dzaou increased the tempo until he was swirling and stamping in the area in front of the drummers.

He unfroze, and managed, by slight finger and ear movements as he reached for his ale again, to signal to Khadui and Jayza that they were to play this one piece only.

"It has a very primitive appeal," said Kezule, watching as several Primes began to sway to the music, too. "Like a heartbeat, only faster."



"It's a fertility dance," said Banner, never taking his eyes off Dzaou. "At home we have a traditional hunt in the morning and only the successful hunters are permitted to dance."

"And the dance...?"

"Is done to attract mates," Kusac said stiffly. "Or to honor existing ones. The Masks are worn to frighten off Winter's Dzinaes— the spirits that cause the ice and snowstorms."

"Intriguing," said Kezule, glancing from the group of mainly Prime females who were swaying in time to the music to Kusac. "It seems to have an hypnotic effect on both dancers and watchers."

"That's why it's only done on our own estates," said Banner, his tone roughened by the growl of anger he couldn't release.

"I'd like to see the mask when he's finished."

The drumming had reached its height and was now beginning to slow and gradually fade.

"He's only doing the one dance," said Banner, getting to his feet. "I'll fetch it from him now."

As Banner strode over to Dzaou and took him off to one side, Kezule concentrated on lighting one of his thin smokes then glanced up at Kusac. "Do I detect a slight difference of opinion between you two and the others in your crew over the dancing and the mask? Has it, perhaps, some other significance?"

"Not at all," he replied, turning back to the table while straining all his senses to make out what Banner was saying to Dzaou.

"It was an impromptu gesture by Dzaou, nothing more."

*"The General wants to see your mask,"* Banner was saying, his tone low and furious, the growl no longer concealed. *"You've made your point, just*

*remember judgment cuts both ways. I'll have words with you later about this."*

Dzaou laughed humorlessly and, taking the mask off, handed it to Banner. *"Give it to him. He can keep it."*

*"And the drum. We don't need to heighten any sexual tensions between us and the Prime females."*

Dzaou shrugged and handed him the drum.

*"Be thankful I did stop you! Had you worked out how you were going to tactfully reject any interest you'd generated from one of them?"*

*"You worry too much,"* Dzaou said, pushing Banner aside and heading for the farthest table.

There was more to the mask than representing justice, Kusac was sure of it. He began to search through the memories he'd inherited from Kaid, trying to figure it out. There was no connection he knew of with either the worship of Ghyakulla or Vartra, or even with Kuushoi, Winter's Queen and L'Shoh's consort, and he'd never been interested in following the Lord of Hell. Every instinct was telling him that Dzaou had done it only to cause mischief, but how?

It wasn't until Banner had returned and handed the mask to Kezule that it came to him—and then it was too late. The mask did stand for the aspects of the God he'd mentioned— truth, judgment, and justice— but it also stood for more. Up until a hundred years or so ago, sending a mask of this design meant the recipient was being told in no uncertain terms that his crimes would be brought to light and judged by the God Himself if necessary.

*"It's very well made,"* said Kezule, turning it round to inspect it from both sides. *"Thank Dzaou for the gift of it. Which Dzinæ does it represent?"*

*"It's the face of the God L'Shoh who sits in judgment over the dead and living,"* said Shaidan, drawing the attention of all three adults to him.

Was his son a powerful enough Telepath to pick up that much detail from his mind, he thought, and dismissed the idea instantly when he saw the gleam of the metal collar round the cub's neck. His next was how else could Shaidan possibly know this?

"Ah," said Kezule, laying the mask on the table in front of him. "Then Dzaou must see me as like this L'Shoh, the leader and judge of our community here."

"Doubtless," agreed Banner, resuming his seat. "I'm sure that was his meaning."

The drummers began playing again, but their music was as before, devoid of any overt sexual overtones.

"Shaidan, I thought you were playing a board game with M'kou," said Kezule. "I think you should return to it. You are being allowed to stay up for longer than my daughter as a privilege."

"M'kou gave me leave to go to the rest room."

"Then go and come back."

"Yes, General," the cub murmured and began to hurry toward the door at the far end.

"It's important for him to see our people mixing amicably, don't you think, Kusac?" said Kezule.

"Yes," he said automatically, wondering if L'Shoh could possibly hold any sway out here so far from Shola, and wondering if perhaps Dzaou had intended the mask for him, not Kezule.

"In the past, when our females still lived among us, they had dances," continued Kezule, his tone a reminiscent one as he watched the way his people were responding to the music. "It was something our people enjoyed. Seems that some of them still do."

"Then bring it back," said Banner, reaching for the nearest jug of ale on the table and refilling his drinking vessel. "Teach them the old dances."

Kezule looked faintly offended as he leaned forward to put out his smoke in an ashtray. "Not me, I'm a warrior, not a dancer."

"So are we, yet we dance, too," said Banner.

"We can take a scan of your memories if you prefer," said Zayshul, breaking her silence.

The TeLaxaudin began to hum gently. "Is good. Give to your sons and daughters I will," he said. "Memories not lost."

Kezule nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps I will."

"Tomorrow," said Giyarishis, bringing out a small bottle and uncapping it. "You taste. New drink we brew." He reached for the General's vessel and emptied a generous measure into it, then pushed it back toward Kezule.

Kezule eyed the amber liquid before picking the bowl up to sniff it. "Spirits?"

Giyarishis bobbed his head, the dual lenses in his large eyes swirling as he adjusted his focus. "Distilled drinking alcohol made from fruits in lab. Drink. You like, more I make."

The smell of the new drink had drawn his attention and he watched as Kezule's forked tongue flicked into the liquid. A surprised look crossed the General's face. "This is good," he said before taking a drink. He held his bowl out to Kusac. "You try it."

Giyarishis blocked the gesture with his hand. "No, for you. I pour more for Sholan Captain. Another bottle have I."

Curious, he drained the last of the ale in his glass and pushed it over to the TeLaxaudin.

The fragrant liquid was slightly viscous, resembling the after dinner liqueurs back home, but the taste was light and fruity. He passed it to Banner.

"Very nice."

Banner hesitated then offered it to Zayshul first. She smiled her thanks and tried a mouthful.

"It's lovely," she said, taking a second sip before handing it back to Banner. "Please make some more of that for us. What do you call it?"

Giyarishis' mandibles vibrated gently and he hummed before the translator spoke. "Fruit drink."

"We can't call it that," said Zayshul. "Something that good needs a name."

"You name, I only create," said the TeLaxaudin.

"Did you only distill a small sample?" asked Kezule, putting his empty bowl down.

"More in lab. Enough for tonight I make. You send for it."

"I'll go," said Ghidd'ah, getting up.

"Take helper of mine. Knows location in lab," said Giyarishis.

Ghidd'ah nodded and began to look around for one of Giyarishis' helpers.

"We have folk dances," said Banner. "Why don't we show your people how to do one or two of the simpler ones?"

"By all means," said Kezule. "You don't mind if I just watch, I assume?"

Banner grinned, mouth widening and showing his teeth as the Primes did. "Not at all," he said, getting up. "Kusac?"

"Take Zayshul, I'm sure she'll enjoy it," said Kezule.

Hiding his surprise, he glanced across at Zayshul as he got to his feet.  
"Doctor?"

Flustered, she looked at Kezule before pushing back her chair and rising.

"I take it you don't dance," said Banner, breaking the awkward silence between them as they walked over to the drummers.

"No, we have music at state occasions, but not dancing like Dzaou did," she replied. "I don't know that I could do..."

"Don't worry," Kusac said. "His dance was a special festival one, not a folk one."

They'd reached the drummers now and as they waited for them to finish, Banner spotted Dzaou and gestured him over.

"We're going to teach them a couple of folk dances," Banner said. "And since you started this all off, you can help."

Dzaou frowned. "I don't think..."

"I do. You're helping," said Banner firmly.

Kusac stood awkwardly beside Zayshul during this exchange, each of them too aware of the other's presence for comfort.

"Why's he throwing us together like this?" he asked her in a low voice as he watched Banner organize the rest of his crew. "What does he hope to achieve?"

"I don't know," she said equally quietly. "Kusac, there's something I have to tell you. I don't think the marker's been turned off."

He felt sick to the pit of his stomach and the room seemed briefly to dim around him. With an effort, he forced himself to relax.

"He's playing with us, watching to see what will happen because of the marker," he said, his voice taking on a hard edge though it remained quiet.

She glanced at him. "I don't think so. I think he's genuinely relaxing the restrictions he placed on you because you saved his life."

His laugh sounded hollow even to him. He kept his eyes fixed on Banner and the others as they quickly taught the simple beat of the first dance to the Prime drummers, then began to organize those who were interested into partners. After a couple of false starts, it was decided Jayza had better remain to keep the beat.

"This is as embarrassing for me as for you," she said, anger creeping into her voice. "There's no reason for what I did to have failed!"

"Leave it, Zayshul," he said, suddenly exhausted by it all as Banner gestured them over to join their respective lines of males and females. With the scent marker still in place, any thought of him leaving Kij'ik was academic now.

\* \* \*

From his now deserted table, Kezule watched them walk through the moves of the dance while sipping the liqueur. "For all our differences, Giyarishis, the Sholans and Primes are very similar."

"Very. Working together good for all."

"Maybe. I want that scent marker on them removed now."

"Not possible unless female who put there removes it."

"Not acceptable, I've told you. It was put there by someone else so it can be removed the same way. Unless you're trying to tell me Zayshul's been lying to me all along?" He stared at the small TeLaxaudin unblinkingly.

"Not lie. I not there, not know what happen. I test his blood. Marker different on him. Not normal."

"In what way?"

"Maybe impossible even her undo."

"Then test him— and her— again! Your priority is that, not developing new drinks!" Kezule's tone was incandescent with repressed rage. "It's affecting them both and I won't have it happening any longer!"

Giyarishis' mandibles clicked together audibly and his humming grew higher, passing out of Kezule's audible range. "Forget not I am TeLaxaudin! Much your people owe us already. We ask little in return!"

The small alien's anger was visible as he rose up on the pile of cushions balanced on his seat.

"I won't be threatened either," hissed Kezule, leaning forward. "You've as much as admitted your people caused this problem, so I am within my rights to demand you correct it!"

Giyarishis began to settle down slowly again, the humming growing less until it ceased. "Not do, but I try. Four weeks, maybe five till I know. No guarantee will work. Need female to administer. No other way to do it or Sholan Captain will know and demand explanation."

Kezule leaned even closer. "And just how do I persuade one of the females to mate with the Sholan?" he demanded. "And what of Zayshul? How do we remove his scent from hers?"

"Your problem, not mine," was the terse reply. "When gone from male, she likely lose too."

He sat back in his seat wondering how in the names of all the Emperors he was going to not only persuade one of the females to seduce the Sholan Captain, but have him accept her! Having said that, from what he and M'kou had observed of the females' reactions to Kusac, they wouldn't be the problem; he would. After all he'd suffered on the *Kz'adul*, would he want to be that intimate with a Prime again?



A burst of laughter drew his gaze back to the dancers. He leaned back in his seat, watching as his people, led by four Sholans, attempted to master the simple dance steps. After tonight, how could any of the Sholans—apart from the one called Dzaou— fail to see his people as individuals with hopes and dreams, just as they had? In this, he was pleased. He remembered the need for warfare and expanding the Empire had been bred into the males, it had never been theirs by nature. It had been the females who'd tampered with their nature, bred those families with aggressive tendencies until... He stopped, wondering where the memory had come from, feeling his pulse rate fall and a sheen of cold sweat begin to cover his face. What was stirring these long dormant memories in him? He glanced, half-afraid, at the TeLaxaudin.

"Is hot here," Giyarishis agreed, and reaching for his belt, drew a scented square of spiderweb thin cloth from a pouch there, holding it out to him. "Keep, I have more."

Kezule reached out for it, noticing his hand was shaking. The scent on it was fresh and pleasant, with a faint hint of sharpness that was instantly refreshing even before he used it to press against his face. He wondered if there was anything the TeLaxaudin couldn't treat with scents.

Giyarishis rose once more, his body folding at unexpected angles as he prepared himself to hop down onto the floor. "I go now. Too hot. Tomorrow work I start for you."

\* \* \*

Shaidan had taken his time going to the toilets in the gymnasium opposite the temple. He rarely had the opportunity to be alone, except when he was in bed at night. He wasn't actually disobeying the General by taking just a little longer than was necessary...

A low laugh made him spin round.

"You're learning," said the Sholan, crouching down beside him.

"Learning what?" he asked politely.

"Learning to think for yourself, and to search your memories like I told you to do."

"I don't understand you," said Shaidan.

"You're not hurrying back," the male grinned, smiling at him with his brown eyes as well as his mouth. "You're taking just a little bit of time for yourself, aren't you? That's good."

"I better go," he mumbled suddenly. "They'll miss me." But he made no move to leave.

"No they won't, they're busy talking right now. You have a few minutes yet."

"What did you mean about memories? I didn't remember anything."

"Didn't you? How do you know about the mask?" The male lifted a quizzical eye ridge.

"I don't know," Shaidan said, frowning. "I just looked at it and I knew."

"And how do you find out new things?"

"They teach me, or I look it up on a comm."

"How did you learn to speak your own language, Shaidan," he asked gently.

"The Doctor gave us all a sleep tape..." He stopped, realizing what the other meant. "You mean I knew about the mask because of sleep tapes?"

The male reached out and tousled the hair between the cub's ears. "You came into this world knowing a lot of things, didn't you, Shaidan? Now it's time for you to think about that and what you know how to do. Look through those memories. All you know came from somewhere, didn't it? It won't be easy, but you can do it, just as you are managing to think for yourself, one small step at a time. Now tell me, when the Doctor takes your torc off, have you ever felt her mind?"

Shaidan looked puzzled. "How do you mean?"

"You've touched the minds of your brothers and sisters, and your father. Try touching and listening to hers the same way."

The noise of the door opening behind him made him turn his head briefly. When he turned back, the male was gone.

"There you are, Shaidan," said M'kou. "I was worried you'd got lost on this level. Come on, we've our game to finish."

He hesitated, wondering about the mysterious Sholan.

"Come on, hatchling," said M'kou, putting a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Cub," he said automatically, turning to go into the temple with him. "Not hatchling, cub."

"You're quite right," said M'kou, smiling. "It would be a strange egg indeed that hatched you."

\* \* \*

Up in his quarters, Giyarishis settled down on his cushions. Events were proceeding well. Kuvaa, his handler in the Camarilla, had told him to give the sand-dweller the last of the memories of his kind when it would divert him from other matters. His preoccupation with removing his wife's scent marker had been in danger of becoming an obsession. Now, however, he would have other matters on his mind, matters that would take him closer to achieving what they all wanted—the return of his species to one caste, and the prevention of the reunification of the old Valtegan Empire.

## **Zhal-Kuushoi 27th day (December)**

The next morning, after they'd eaten, he gathered his crew in their private lounge off Banner's room and told them about Kezule's need for their help for the next two to three months.

Surprisingly, he was greeted by silence instead of the objections he'd expected.

"Well, at least it's progress," said Jayza at last. "We've got a time scale now."

"Progress? You call another three months progress?" exclaimed Dzaou.

"Yes," grinned Jayza. "And I like the irony of us crawling over the wreck of one of the ships that tried to subdue our world."

"You have a point," said Khadui thoughtfully. "Banner, what do you say?"

Banner stirred. "I think we finish the job we came here to do— take Shaidan home to his people, under Kusac's leadership. This is the first time we've actually been given a deadline."

"It is not," began Dzaou.

"Shut up, Dzaou," said Jayza. "You've never had anything positive to say about anything."

"Enough, both of you," said Banner sharply. "Dzaou, Jayza has a point. Your constant negative attitude is not appreciated, nor is it helpful."

Dzaou's ears flattened briefly, and he forced his mouth open in a smile. "Then why the fuss over my mask and dance last night? The General liked it well enough."

"Because you were told there'd be no traditional festival dances last night," Kusac said, looking ostentatiously at the wall clock. "We'll have to wind this briefing up now. You're expected at Security by the main elevator in five minutes. Banner will assess the state of the *Zan'droshi* and tell you what items need salvaging. He'll then brief everyone on this shift. Prime vacuum suits can be adapted to fit you, but if there's a problem, Banner will issue you with one of the four on the *Venture*. Dzaou, your mess detail for last night's exhibition starts an hour before third meal. Don't miss it!"

"Where will you be if we need you?" asked Jayza.

"I'll be going over what's survived of their database and comp library with Doctor Zayshul," he said. "Believe me, I'd rather be with you."

Banner stopped in the doorway, letting the other three go on ahead of him. "It's been a couple of weeks since you last came to our weekly training sessions."

"I work out every morning, you know that."

"It's not enough. You need to spar against a partner as well, and the crew needs to see you there."

"I'll be there. Just keep Dzaou out of my way," he said curtly, getting to his feet. "And remind them, they're to smuggle nothing off the *Zan'droshi*, no matter what it is."

## **Kij'ik Outpost, landing bay**

The suit was cumbersome to put on, and the leg pieces had to be virtually remade for him, but Banner was curious to know what it was like to wear a Prime encounter suit— especially the helmet.

"You won't be able to use all the controls," warned M'zynal, adjusting the inside of the helmet for him. "We've adapted it as best we can for you. Remember, your environmental controls and power are triggered by the keypad we rigged up for your left forearm."

"I won't forget," Banner said, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. Refitting the suit for him had taken three hours and he was anxious to get started.

Bending his head forward, he let M'zynal put the helmet on him and fasten the seal. When he raised his head, his senses were overwhelmed by the amount he could see. Feeling decidedly nauseous, he shut his eyes.

"Press once on the mouthpiece to turn off the infravision," said M'zynal's voice in his ears. "Twice to turn off the tactical display."

Turning his head blindly within the roomy helmet, he searched for the narrow mouthpiece, only to find himself held firmly by the shoulders.

"Turn your head, Lieutenant Banner, not your neck and shoulders," reminded the Security chief.

He cursed himself softly for having forgotten that and tried again. Immediately, he found the thin tube they'd installed for him to make up for his lack of a forked tongue. Once, then twice, he pressed it before cautiously opening first one eye, then the other. He could see clearly this time.

"That worked fine," he said.

"Good. Now try turning on the infravision."

He pressed the mouthpiece once and instantly M'zynal's face, and those of the people around him, were reduced to colored shapes ranging through various densities of reds, oranges, and blues.

Turning his head, then his body, he experimented to find out how wide his field of vision was: it was impressive when compared with the Sholan suits he was used to.

"I'm trying tactical now," he said, triggering the suit's HUD display. There was a built-in motion detector at one corner of his vision, plus ranging and targeting grids.

"Experiment," said M'zynal. "Three presses will lock on your target and four will give you distance and speed. The keypad on your arm controls heat, cooling, and air mix, in that order."

"Got it," he said, turning off the infravision and leaving the HUD on. He watched M'zynal don his own helmet then gesture them to head into the air lock for the access tube they'd rigged out to the *Zan'droshi*.

The arrival of the *Zan'droshi* was a heaven-sent opportunity for him to get his hands on some electronics tools and components. There was a little

gizmo he wanted to make and this would make it possible for him to do so.

\* \* \*

Inside the ship, despite the cleared path they were following, it was chaotic. From the blast scars on the bulkheads and carpets underfoot, there had obviously been a vicious and protracted firefight. Every now and then they saw smears of what could only once have been blood.

"How many bodies are still on her?" Banner asked.

"Around two hundred that we've found so far," said M'zynal. "But we've barely covered two decks. Those the recovery team found have been stored in one of the gyms so we can isolate them in a vacuum when we turn the atmosphere back on in selected areas."

"What do you plan to do with them?"

M'zynal looked over his shoulder at him. He could clearly see the young male's face behind the visor. "They're so long dead that we're leaving them on the ship when we set it into a decaying orbit round the gas giant. There are far too many of them for us to even think of giving them a decent burial."

"You bury your dead?"

"In the General's time they did." M'zynal stopped, holding up his arm to communicate this to those behind them. "Beyond here we've established an Ops Center with an atmosphere and gravity in it. We've got floor plans of the *Zan'droshi* and are mapping the areas to be cleared. On the right side of your helmet, the other mouthpiece is your suit communicator to Kij'ik and the rest of our team. We're being constantly monitored by the bridge and the landing bay flight command in case of any accidents. They've even set up a link to your Captain so you can talk to him if need be." He began keying open the makeshift air lock. "You and I now share control of this salvage operation, Lieutenant Banner."

\* \* \*

"Have you got the monitors up and running yet?" asked Banner, lifting his gaze from the deck plans to look over to M'zynal.

"Going on-line now," the Prime said as the bank of eight screens suddenly came to life.

Grabbing up his comp pad, he hurried over to the monitors and sat down. He scanned them, registering the name written underneath each screen with the view above it.

"Khadui, pan around that engineering station and tell me what you see," he instructed.

"This one's in pretty good shape as far as I can tell," said Khadui's voice. "Only superficial damage to screens and the like. Definitely worth opening up the console for components, same with the computing area next door."

"Can you manage to do it in suits, or do you need an atmosphere?"

"Could be a long job if we have to do it with our gloves and helmets on."

Banner looked over at M'zynal.

"Isolating the unit now and initiating atmosphere. Estimated time, ten minutes," said M'zynal.

"We heard," said Khadui. "Thanks."

"Carry on," said Banner, turning his attention to Jayza in the med lab. "Report, Jayza."

"Zhookoh is going through the list of things we need. We've a couple of floaters we can load to transport the stuff over to you. We don't need air, we can handle this in our suits."

"Bring them to HQ to be packed for transportation when you're finished. Dzaou, looks like your team is in a rec hall."



"Copy that. We've found drinks, games, and furniture, all in an excellent state of preservation. We'll need transportation for them, though."

"Copy that. It'll be arranged and on its way to you shortly," said Banner, glancing at M'zynal who was already issuing orders to that effect.

Banner looked at the next monitor. "Shezhul? What's in the Officers' Training Hall?"

So it went for the rest of the day with only a short stop to eat their packaged rations in the HQ's designated mess area.

## Chapter 9

### Kij'ik Outpost, data lab

KUSAC'S day had been strained. A medical office, next to the library on the Officers' level, rather than the library itself, had been made available for them. However, with both him and Zayshul working at one desk and terminal, he kept catching himself inadvertently leaning closer to her, nostrils flaring to better breathe in her scent, in the subconscious hope that they would touch. It came to a head when she leaned back in her seat and rested her head against him with a small sigh of contentment.

He got to his feet hurriedly, suggesting they ask M'kou to find another terminal he could use. M'kou had directed the exchange of the examination bed from their room into the next, and its replacement with the desk and terminal from the adjacent room. That had eased the situation for him, but when their shift finally ended, they were both relieved.

"Don't forget M'kou's bringing you down to the Command level to spend the night with Shaidan," she said as they closed their terminals.

"I have a training session with my crew first," he said. "I'll be an hour, possibly two."

"Being a parent means giving your time to your child," she began.

"Don't lecture me on parenthood," he growled, interrupting. "I've been a father for over a year. I must go tonight, it's my duty as their Captain."

"Take him with you," she said as the door slid closed behind them.

"No," he said unequivocally. "It isn't suitable for him to be there. We're sparring, not exercising."

She glanced curiously at him as they started down the corridor. "Kezule's taken him to your classes when you've been sparring, what makes tonight so different?"

"I don't want him to see us fighting each other. I've been neglecting those duties because of Shaidan for too long. I don't want my crew getting suspicious of our relationship."

"Does it really matter that much? They'll know one day," she said reasonably.

"I'll tell them in my own time," he snapped, beginning to walk faster. He needed to get away from her. The attraction of her scent was suddenly too overpowering, too demanding in its pheromone-laden message. "I'll tell Security when I'm ready to come down."

\* \* \*

Missing the weekly crew practice sessions hadn't bothered him as much as it should. It had been one less opportunity for Dzaou to cause trouble. By convention, this was the one time on a distant posting that rank was left outside the gym, except for the one whose turn it was to run the session. He was thankful to find it was Banner.

Like the others, he removed his belt knife, bonding bracelet, wrist comm, and, with a few misgivings, his neck torc, leaving them on the bench before joining the others on one of the exercise mats. Since there were five of them, they were each taking it in turn to sit out so they could work in pairs. He sparred with Jayza first, then moved on to Banner. Despite his injured arm, his Second made him work hard to get his blocks and counter-moves in place, making no allowance for failure. Although the blows that contacted him were pulled and not full force, they did hurt and succeeded in banishing the semipermanent daze he seemed to live in, making him focus completely on his fighting techniques.

Suddenly, it was as if time had slowed down for everyone but him. He'd experienced it once or twice before, but only in life or death situations, never during practice or training sessions. Instinctively, he slowed his own pace, continuing to let the odd blow get through while one part of his mind observed the phenomenon as if divorced from it. There was nothing to be gained by using his sudden extra speed to beat Banner and, quite possibly, more to lose. If this happened again, and he proved to have a dependable

edge over the others, better to keep it to himself, the analytical portion of his mind said.

"Now you know why I said you needed to practice," said Banner, straightening up when the timer on his wrist comm sounded.

"Speed isn't the only thing that suffers, accuracy does too."

"Point taken," he said as they moved on to their next partners.

This time, he was facing Dzaou. The other's mouth dropped in a feral grin that showed his teeth and never reached his eyes. He ignored the implicit threat, forcing his ears to remain upright and his hackles to stay flat.

"Time to see what you're made of now you can't hide behind your rank," said Dzaou in a low voice.

Without warning, he found himself fending off a full-scale attack with Dzaou's blows and kicks coming in at full impact. Caught unprepared, and cursing himself for it, it was a good three seconds before his reactions kicked in and he was able to dance out of the way and retaliate. Again, time slowed for him, however, he found it easier to match his speed to Dzaou's. Even at that pace, he managed to land a couple of hard blows before Banner intervened by clouting Dzaou hard round the ears.

"This is a practice session," Banner snarled, "not an opportunity for your private vendetta! Go work with Jayza. Khadui, take over with Kusac!"

As Dzaou shrugged, flicking his ears arrogantly, then walked away, Kusac remembered the time he'd done the same to the young Prime Prince on Shola.

"I'm fine," he replied more sharply than he intended.

The memory of that day was burned in his mind for more personal reasons than Kaid's justifiable anger at his attack on Zsurtul. It was then that he'd asked Kaid to make good the pledge they'd exchanged across the Warriors' tomb when they'd become sword-brothers.

*"When death runs close behind you, Kusac, the need to know you're alive can be overwhelming. If your sword-brother has risked everything for you, and needed that reassurance, what would you do?" Kaid had asked, locking eyes with him.*

*He'd hesitated before answering. "I don't know, Kaid. I'd offer what I could," he'd said quietly.*

*Kaid nodded. "It's enough. You had to consider it, Kusac. You needed to know your limits within our relationship. No one knows what can happen after the heat of battle, and shortly, we leave on just such a mission. So swear the sword-brother's oath with me, in the name of Vartra the God, over this tomb."*

*He'd tried to pull free from Kaid's restraining arm. He felt trapped and once more vulnerable at the hands of this male he felt he hardly knew despite their weeks of living together.*

*"Will you swear it with me?" Kaid had demanded, tightening his grip till his claws began to penetrate Kusac's skin.*

*"I will," he'd said, his voice tense.*

*"Swear then that from this day onward, my fight will be your fight, in battle you'll never be more than a sword's reach from my side, and that my honor you'll hold as dear as your own."*

*As he repeated the oath, his voice had grown firmer.*

*"Swear also that if I'm killed, you'll not risk your lives in seeking revenge."*

*That had surprised him.*

*"Swear it!"*

*"I swear!"*

*"Swear it in Vartra's name!" Kaid had said, pulling him closer till their faces were only inches apart.*

*"I swear it in Vartra's name, dammit!" Anger had crept into his voice now, and he knew Kaid saw his free hand begin to clench into a fist. "What will you swear in return, Kaid? What do you offer me?" he demanded, suddenly realizing it had to be an equal relationship.*

*"I swear the same, and offer myself," Kaid said simply, opening his mind and reaching out with it to him.*

*The contact had been immediate and totally overwhelming.*

He hadn't been prepared for his mind to merge with Kaid's, nor for it to waken his Link to Carrie. It had surged through them, awakening in them sexual responses identical to those he and Carrie had shared on their Link days.

Abruptly, he pushed the memory aside, shaking his whole body as if ridding it of water, trying to forget that in the row he'd staged with Kaid, he'd broken that oath by calling his honor into question.

"Are you sure?" demanded Banner, catching him by the arm.

This time, he didn't pull away. The touch of one of his own kind was reassuring in a world gone mad. "A random memory, nothing more," he said more gently, letting his Second's emotions wash over and through him, feeling his concern, and a hint of something more. "I'm fine," he repeated, moving carefully away.

\* \* \*

Showering afterward, he found his ribs tender where Dzaou had hit them and winced as he tried to avoid twisting his body to rub soap on his back.

"Need some help?" asked Jayza.

"I'm done now," he said, giving up the struggle and just letting the water sluice though his pelt.

"Are you bringing Shaidan to our lounge this evening?" asked Banner, stepping out from his shower stall and stopping in front of him.

"No. Kezule's given me a room for the night on the Command level," he said, turning off the water and reaching for his towel.

Dzaou gave a bark of laughter. "From the sound of it, Kezule's turning you into his pet! You were with him yesterday, too. Soon he'll have you following him around like Shaidan was!"

Ignoring the gibe, he began toweling himself as he walked over to the bench where his tunic and belt lay. He sensed Banner following him.

"Is there something about this I should know?" his Second asked quietly.

Should he say nothing, or tell him? He decided on the latter. "Shaidan's spending the night with me once a week, on the Command level."

"Memorize what you can of the layout— you know the drill, where the exits are, if they're guarded, then you can sketch it out for us. This is a great opportunity to...."

"Get the cub used to being Sholan," he interrupted. "What for? They outnumber us by too many. Besides, I gave my word— for all of us."

"Be realistic, Kusac!" hissed Banner, trying to keep his voice low so as not to attract Dzaou's notice. "Kezule keeps altering your agreement. If he feels no need to stick to it, why should you? I'm not suggesting we plan a coup, but knowledge of the layout of the Command level could be invaluable one day."

"Enough plotting," he growled. "I've made my decision. Blame it on my Telepath training if you want, but I, at least, am acting with honor." Pelt still wet, he threw aside his towel and began pulling his tunic on, anxious to leave Banner and his awkward questions.

\* \* \*

Judging by its proximity to the sick bay complex, the small suite on the Command level, almost a carbon copy of his own, was one that was intended for use by medical staff.

"Should you need anything, Captain," said M'kou, opening the door for him, "someone will be on duty opposite your room all night."

"Guarding us?" he asked, his ears adopting a cynical slant.

M'kou smiled. "On call for the sick bay, actually," he replied. "The food replicator has been set with familiar dishes for you. Shaidan has already eaten, but I don't believe you have."

"Thank you," he said grudgingly. "Can you change the day for me for next week? This is the evening when we work out. I've been missing practices for too long."

"Certainly, Captain. Someone will come in the morning to take you back up to the Officers level. I wish you a good night, Captain, Shaidan," M'kou said, nodding to him, then toward where the cub sat on the sofa.

When they were alone, he turned to his son. "Are you still hungry? I know I was at your age."

Shaidan shook his head.

"Maybe another dessert?" he suggested, heading over to the dispenser.

\* \* \*

The food was bland, much like the meals had been when they'd first arrived, but it was filling. Shaidan played with his dessert while Kusac ate, both of them deep in their own thoughts. He didn't need his Talent to know his son was unsettled because he didn't want to be there.

"Where am I to sleep?" Shaidan asked at length, pushing his plate aside.



"In the bedroom with me," he said, finishing his meal with a swig of the coffeelike drink. "You're not wanting to go to bed already, are you? I had hoped we could talk."

"I'm tired," the cub said, getting up from his stool.

\* \* \*

"There's only one bed," said Shaidan, eyeing first it then his father nervously.

"We'll share it," he said gently, putting a reassuring hand on his son's shoulder. "It's quite usual for parents to share beds with their cubs."

"I've never shared a bed."

"Didn't you and the other children creep into each other's beds before you were rescued?"

Shaidan shook his head slowly. "Why would we do that?"

Why, indeed, he sighed to himself. The Directorate programming had ensured they were each secure in their knowledge of the lowly place they occupied in the order of life around them.

"It's a big bed, Shaidan, there's plenty of room for us both. You'll hardly know I'm there," he said as his son began taking his tunic off. He watched, checking the visible texture of his cub's pelt, both the long hair on his chest and belly as well as the shorter fur covering the rest of him. He had to give Zayshul her due, at least she appeared to be grooming him reasonably well.

As he took the tunic from him, the light glinted off the metal collar. He frowned, and reached out to touch it briefly. "When we leave here, Shaidan, I swear you'll never have to wear this again."

"I don't mind it," Shaidan said as he clambered onto the bed and slid down under the covers.

His son settled at one side of the large bed, he returned to the living room where he prowled restlessly round, looking in every drawer and cupboard for he knew not what— maybe some sign of the previous occupant— but they were all empty. The room had obviously not been used since Kezule had arrived at the Outpost.

He sat down at last, flicking aimlessly through the channels on the vid unit, ignoring those playing the few Sholan Storyteller tapes they had, and the couple of ancient rousing Valtegan battle ones, stopping when he came to the one showing Kezule's derelict ship. Sealed containers, glinting by the light of the distant sun, were strung out like strange jewels in the space between the *N'zishok* and Kij'ik as they were ferried slowly to the landing bay. Sighing, he leaned back, resting his head against the back of the sofa.

What if his son preferred to sleep rather than talk to him— no matter, Shaidan was only a cub and he probably was tired. As for being unsettled, it was likely because his routine had been broken— cubs liked routine he remembered his mother telling him. That was good, then, if Shaidan saw meeting him every evening at fifteenth hour as a regular part of his life. He was reading too much into it, especially since he knew his son was finally beginning to warm to him.

He stretched his arms, checking the time on his wrist comm, aware of his bandage binding slightly— still early, barely the eighteenth hour yet. What had M'kou said? There'd be someone in the room opposite on call for the sick bay? Perhaps now would be a good time to get a fresh dressing pack and redo his arm. He was curious to see how it was doing as he'd been aware of it itching on and off all day.

Getting to his feet, he padded out into the corridor, stopping to look at the doors opposite, wondering which of the two was the one he wanted. Instinct alerted him to the faint movement of a security cam off down the corridor to his right just as his senses told him the door to his left was about to open.

"Can I help you, Captain?" asked Ghidd'ah as her door slid open. "There's nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing. I just wanted a fresh dressing pack for my injured arm," he said, smiling wryly to himself about the speed at which his presence in the corridor had alerted the civilian nurse. Kezule might trust him down on this level, alone overnight with his son, but only so far.

"I'll get one for you now," she said, joining him in the corridor as her own door closed behind her. "Would you like me to do it for you?"

"No thanks, I can handle it myself."

"If you want to go back to your room, I'll only be a few minutes."

He nodded his thanks and returned, to continue pacing restlessly round the room until he heard a gentle tapping at the door.

"I didn't use the buzzer in case Shaidan is sleeping," she said quietly, handing him a small metal bowl containing a pair of scissors, a couple of dressings, fresh bandages and a sealed pack of antiseptic wipes. "You'll find everything you need here. Just leave the bowl in the room, I'll see it's collected in the morning. Good night, Captain."

"Thank you, and good night, Ghidd'ah," he said, taking it from her.

He set it down on the low table in front of the sofa and, pushing his tunic sleeve out of the way, began cutting off the old bandage. What he found under the dressing surprised him. Each puncture wound was covered by a layer of very pink, new flesh— not healed yet, but well on the way, far further along than he would have expected them to be under normal circumstances. Not only that, but the fur was already growing back. The dressing was really only needed for protection now. No wonder his arm had been feeling itchy.

Thoughtfully, he opened the wipes and went through the motions of making sure the almost healed wounds were sterile again before putting on the fresh dressing and binding it on securely with the bandage. He couldn't squash the uneasiness he felt about the speed at which the wound was healing. Even using Fastheal, it wouldn't have reached this stage in so short a time, and then there was the physical cost of using the drug— it

drained one of energy as it used the body's own stored fats to fuel the healing process.

Giyarishis had been the last one to dress it and he'd said something about using the pool water on it for its healing properties. Well, he'd certainly doused it in the pool the night before seeing the TeLaxaudin. He turned his mind away from that thought as he packed up the empty wrappers, putting them into the bowl along with the scissors. He didn't want to remember his evening with Zayshul, especially not now when he was with his son.

He looked at his wrist comm again— just over half an hour had passed and he still felt as unsettled and restless as before. He glanced at the vid unit again but watching the *Zan'droshi* was as interesting as watching grass grow, or paint dry. Maybe trying to sleep wasn't such a bad idea.

Getting up, he shut off the vid unit and headed for the bedroom, putting off the living room light and opening the door slowly so as not to disturb his son. Stumbling a little in the dark, he found the edge of the bed and sat down. Stripping off his tunic, he edged under the covers and lay still, listening to Shaidan's quiet breathing. It was like a balm to him, banishing the loneliness he'd tried to ignore since leaving Shola.

Suddenly he needed to touch him, to feel his warmth, know he was really there. Inching himself farther into the center of the bed, he stopped short when he felt the heat radiating from his son's small body. Tentatively, he reached out, resting his hand on his son's side. Shaidan whimpered in his sleep, flinching away from him briefly before relaxing again. He moved closer, letting his arm encircle the cub. This time, he was rewarded with small animal noises of pleasure as his son began to wriggle backward against him, seeking contact with his body. A small hand grasped his, clutching him tightly until, with a small sigh of contentment, echoed by Kusac, the grip slackened.

\* \* \*

"Well, our brave leader is welcome to his night of cub-sitting," said Dzaou, joining the others at their usual table in the rec lounge. He took a long drink of his ale before setting it down. "I'd rather be here, enjoying

my drink. Always knew there was a good reason for never taking out a bonding contract."

"You did the gene pool a favor, then," muttered Jayza.

"Stow it," said Banner automatically as he watched M'kou make his way between the tables to the bar. All the females he passed looked up to greet him, most taking advantage of his nearness to reach out and touch him, their gestures, in Sholan terms, ones of intimate friendship. Something stirred at the edges of his mind—he was observing something important, but he was damned if he could put his claw on what it was.

"I'm glad to see the General is allowing Shaidan more time with us," said Khadui.

"Yeah, but it isn't with us, it's with him," said Dzaou.

Jayza thumped his mug down on the table. "Give it a rest!" he said angrily. "You know he's the only one of us with any parenting experience! You said you didn't want to cub-sit. If he wasn't prepared to do it, we'd all have to take turns. Be grateful to him for once in your life!"

When Banner and Khadui began to chuckle, Dzaou's ears flattened and his face creased in anger, but he held his tongue.

### **Zhal-Kuushoi, 30th day (December)**

Two days sitting alone in the same, small room with Zayshul, hyperaware of her nearness and her scent, had only made Kusac more aware of his physical need for her. By the morning of the third day, he was seriously thinking of requesting to work with the rest of his crew on salvage. Then he remembered the scent marker on him and shuddered, imagining the look on M'kou's face. Compassion from a Prime because he couldn't cope? He could cope with that even less.

\* \* \*

"So they obviously controlled the aggression and sex drives of the ordinary warrior castes by drugging the drinking water supply with varying quantities of la'quo or feeding them raw meat," Zayshul was saying.

"And aggressive sports." He tried again, and failed, to not look at the long legs that showed below the hem of the dress she was wearing.

"That would tie in with them rising through the ranks by attacking any superiors they felt were incompetent," she agreed, turning aside from her console to look at him. "Kusac, would you please sit down? You've been pacing up and down like a caged beast for the past three hours! You're making it almost impossible for me to concentrate."

He stopped beside her. "I can't," he said in a low voice, trying not to look at her. "It's the only way I can control myself when I'm so close to you." He raised his head, ears folding flat into his hair. "You said the marker affects you. Do you feel nothing?" His need for her was once more threatening to banish sense and reason.

Her skin darkened and she turned away from him, looking back at her screen. "We've work to do."

Grasping the back of her chair, he swung it— and her— around to face him. "Tell me you feel nothing," he said harshly. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't need me again!"

"It's not real, it's the scent marker," she stammered.

"I don't care!" he said, leaning forward to trap her in the chair by grasping the arm rests. "Tell me I'm wrong when I say I can feel your need calling to me— why wear a dress to show off your legs if you don't want me to notice them?"

"I didn't... You said you didn't want me near you..."

"I lied," he interrupted, dropping his voice to a whisper as he leaned closer still. He flicked his tongue out, capturing the salt tear that spilled from one

eye and rolled down her face. "I lied to myself," he murmured, touching his lips to her cheek, drinking in her scent and the taste of her skin, letting go of the self-control he'd tried—and failed—to maintain in her presence. He shuddered, closing his eyes briefly, permitting the light-headedness to spread through him, feeling his belly and groin muscles tighten as he allowed his body to respond to hers.

She pulled back, eyes widening in fear as she realized what he was doing. "Kusac, we can't... Not here... not now... This isn't real, Kusac, it's only the marker!" she said frantically, reaching out to push him away.

"Yes here and now," he said, grasping her hand and pressing it against himself. "Feel me! That is real, and your marker caused it!"

He let her go, pulling her to her feet, one hand reaching for the fastenings on the front of her dress while he continued licking and nipping her face and neck. Beneath his hand, the naked skin of her chest was burning hot.

"No... I don't want this," she moaned, trying to push him away.

"You're lying, but your body can't," he purred, teeth fastening on her tiny earlobe as he surrendered to the sensations her scent was generating. "I know the signs. You want me— why else would you dress like this?"

"The door..."

He reached out with his mind for the mechanism: it took only a thought and it was done.

"Locked," he murmured, teeth and tongue traveling down her throat to her shoulders as his hands slid her skirt upward.

She moaned softly, leaning against him, reaching down, frantically searching for him. Another, deeper moan escaped her when his hands discovered she was as naked as he beneath the dress.

He laughed, but it turned to a gasp of pleasure as her fingers tightened round his erection.

"Gods," he whispered, pressing himself against her as he looked round for a clear space they could use. "Don't even try to deny this is what you want, Zayshul!"

It was a pairing born of lust and need, but that mattered not at all to either of them. Her claws raked his back, but he was ready this time and reared up, capturing her hands and pinning them to the desk. With the last shreds of reason, he closed his mind utterly to hers, concentrating only on the sensations coursing through his own body. As he hovered on the brink of orgasm, she fastened her teeth into his shoulder, biting down hard.

He cried out, pain lacing briefly with pleasure, but she stifled him with her lips, kissing him deeply— just as she'd done that night on the *Kz'adul*. Then it was over and they lay locked together, panting and damp with sweat.

Head pillowed on her shoulder, he waited for the pounding of his heart to slow as he allowed her to unlace her hands from his. Despite the warmth of the room, her skin was cooling now, and this combined with his own damp pelt was making him uncomfortable. Though her scent, comingled with his, was still strong, whatever power it had over him had dissipated now that their frantic coupling was over.

She moved under him, giving a small grunt of discomfort.

"Sorry," he mumbled, easing himself back then pushing himself upright.

She sat up, concentrating on pulling her dress around her, looking up only when she could do no more because his hands were resting on her thighs.

He snatched them away, backing off, aware he was in a similar state of disarray. Turning away from her, he began adjusting his tunic, only to see the ubiquitous vid com.

"I disabled it," she said, as if reading his mind. "There's a shower and toilet facilities through the door opposite. I need to set the air recycler to cleanse the room of our scents."



Her matter-of-fact tone angered him and as he spun back to confront her, she slid off his desk.

"You had this planned down to the last detail, didn't you," he snarled, pelt rising around his face and neck.

"Don't flatter yourself," she said coldly, walking over to the panels by the exit door and resetting the extractor. Instantly a concealed fan began to hum. "This room has been used by couples as a secret meeting room since we arrived here." She turned to face him. "There are also fresh coveralls in a cabinet in the bathroom. You'll have to invent your own reason for wearing a pair, if you can get into them, unless you want even your scent-blind crew to know what we've been doing."

"Don't take that high tone with me," he said angrily. "You're forgetting a few important facts! None of this is of my doing, or by my wishes! So what do you intend to do now to remove your marker?"

She lowered her head, breaking eye contact. "I can't," she said quietly.

"You can't?" He was beside her in three strides, grasping her by the arms, shaking her. "What do you mean you can't?" he demanded furiously. "Tell me how you turn the marker off!"

"It's biofeedback," she said, trying to push him away and failing. "I can only do it while we're coupling."

"Do what? What exactly did you do when you marked me? Did you try again just now to turn it off?" He could hear his voice taking on a dangerously hard edge but was beyond caring now that her scent was no longer drugging his senses.

"We produce a chemical— internally— at will, that's absorbed on the male's skin," she stammered, watching his eyes dilate until they were totally black. "Yes, I did try again to turn it off, but it hasn't worked."

His sight was narrowing and he could feel his claws un-sheathing in rage as his hands clenched even more tightly round her arms.

"You're too different, Kusac..." she stammered, terrified. "It went wrong somehow. There shouldn't be this obsession— for either of us. I don't know what to do about it."

"Synthesize it— do lab tests on my blood, on yours," he snarled, trying to force back the tunnel vision of the hunter/kill state. "Have you even thought of trying that?"

She shook her head, the tears welling from her eyes flying in shining droplets around her. He could feel her fear like a palpable cloak around her, could see himself through her eyes as she projected her terror— he'd grown in stature as his almost waist-length hair and the visible pelt across his shoulders had bristled out to its full length; his lips were pulled back from teeth which shone white and deadly against the pink flesh of his mouth.

"It can't be done," she whimpered, trying desperately to pull away from him, shocked that her superior strength was failing her. "It's been tried before and never succeeded— the chemical's too volatile, it can't exist in the air. You're hurting me, Kusac— and frightening me!"

He released her suddenly, backing away from her and the temptation to hurt her for what she'd done to him. "And you accuse me of not thinking my actions through," he snarled contemptuously, trying to slow his breathing and control his rage. "Have you any idea what you've done to me? What I lived through on Shola before coming here because of this marker? It wasn't till I smelled your scent on Kezule's message that I knew it was connected to you! I saw all your males as rivals— was ordered to work with your M'zullians because everyone assumed my imprisonment had made me prejudiced!"

As he turned his back on her, the incident with Prince Zsurtul suddenly fell into perspective. "Dammit, I even attacked your prince because of your marker!" he snarled.

"Prince Zsurtul? Oh, no!"

He turned back to her. "Oh, never fear, he only got a bruise or two. Kaid stopped me pretty damned quickly," he said with heavy sarcasm. "Your marker played hell with my life, Zayshul, even then. It alienated me from my wife, from Kaid— everyone. Now you tell me it may be permanent. I can't accept that. You must find a cure for it." He could feel the prickling sensation on his scalp and shoulders as his hair and pelt finally began to resume its usual level.

She cowered against the door, hands scrubbing at her eyes, trying not to weep. "I can't... You don't understand... The chemical's only produced when I'm aroused by you... There's no way to collect it!"

"Vartra's bones!" he swore. "Then think about it! We'll invent a way!" Even as he said it, the ludicrous side of the situation hit him, dissipating the last of his rage. He took a step toward her, making her edge farther along the wall away from him. Stopping, his mouth twisted into a lopsided grin. "Looks like we'll have to continue these— encounters— for a while longer if we're going to turn the marker off." Another thought struck him and he frowned. "You do want it turned off, don't you?"

"Yes! You think I want this any more than you do? It's humiliating being driven by such base instincts to couple with you, an alien, without everyone else's assumptions and curiosity..." She stopped abruptly, looking away from him again, hiding her face with her hands.

"Thanks," he said dryly. "Mutual, believe me."

"Just go and shower," she said, her voice muffled. "We haven't much time left before someone will want us. There's some short white hospital gowns in the cupboard beside you. Use one of them, and in the name of any deity you choose, wash your tunic as well!"

Annoyed, he turned on his heels and stalked off to the shower. He'd been trying to make amends— not very well, he had to admit— but she'd thrust it straight back at him. So be it. Next time, he would wait her out, make her come to him! As for tomorrow, he'd ask M'kou to get a data link established to the comp in his own room.

\* \* \*

It was only sheer determination and willpower that kept Zayshul from falling apart until after Kusac, showered and wearing one of the short white gowns as a tunic, left. Once in the bathroom, with the door locked, she collapsed in a heap on the damp shower mat and wept. Kusac had terrified her when he'd suddenly changed into the enraged warrior—it had been his eyes more than anything, so cold and focused. Then there had been his contempt for her and what he believed she'd done.

In her heart, she couldn't blame him. From what he'd said, the marker had destroyed what had been left of his life after Chy'qui had robbed him of his telepathic abilities. Worst of all, it didn't stop there— now it was destroying them both. If she couldn't find a way to turn off the marker, it could mean they were locked in this obsession permanently, and it wasn't what she wanted either.

When she'd cried herself out, she got up and showered, trying to think through yet again how he'd been marked in the first place. Kezule had believed in her innocence, why couldn't Kusac? In fact, had Kezule believed her too easily? Did he know something she didn't? The more she thought about it, the more she was sure he must know more than she did. Had he found out something at the Directorate, before he'd destroyed it and all their people? Or had it been something that the TeLaxaudin Kzizysus had done? Certainly they used scents as a major form of communication— and more, she thought, remembering how she'd been helped by them when giving birth to her egg. Had he found a way to either reproduce her scent marker chemically, or to somehow harvest her own without her knowledge? If they could produce a device that when pointed at a female could instantly make it possible for her to bear eggs that were small enough to carry full term, then who knew what else they were capable of doing? But why would either of them have got involved in faking her scent marker? The only ones with anything to gain had been Chy'qui and the Directorate, and that made them the main suspects. And the only one who might possibly be able to help her still remained Giyarishis. She had to speak to him as soon as possible.

She dried herself hurriedly, dressing in a fresh pair of coveralls. Bundling her wet dress in another, she hurried down to her quarters to sling it into

the laundry machine, then headed up to hydroponics to see the TeLaxaudin.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis was busy in his lab when she arrived. He continued to flit between the various experimental plants and his comp while she hesitantly told him her problem.

"Cannot help," his translator said as he jumped up on his chair to look at a sample. "Busy am. You go."

"Kezule said you were going to help us," she persevered.

The TeLaxaudin stopped to look at her, eyes swirling darkly as the dual lenses adjusted.

"You must be able to do something. You use scents all the time— and it is a scent that is marking him apart."

"Is more. Found it I did when him I examine." The translator seemed to be speaking slowly, if such a trait could be attributed to a machine. "His species different, marker bound in such a way unexpected. Only if you can undo can be done. This have I told your mate."

She hesitated, wondering whether to admit that she'd already tried. "What did Kezule say when you told him that?"

"He say not acceptable," said Giyarishis, folding himself up on the chair and regarding her. "I can do nothing, Doctor."

"But I didn't do it!" she exclaimed, taking a step closer to him. "How could it have been done in the first place without my involvement?"

"So sure you were not involved? How else could it be done you ask. I say, you did but no memory have of it."

She stared at him in shock. "What?"

"You say yourself— how can anyone else do it. I say it was you then."

"It can't have been!" she said, stunned. "I would have remembered, I know I would!"

"Is only explanation to fit facts."

"But you let Kezule believe that you could..."

"You rather I say you did?" he interrupted. "Him I told nothing. Did not say you aware of doing, only said you do." He turned his back on her to continue his work.

It took a moment or two for what he'd said to sink in. "Are you saying I was drugged and... used... like *he* was?"

"Fits facts. You go now, I busy. No more I can help."

Still in shock, she turned and walked slowly out of Giyarishis' lab, through his office, and out into the Security area. It wasn't until she'd entered the elevator that it finally hit her. It couldn't have been her, could it? How could it possibly have happened without her knowledge? Then she remembered the power Chy'qui, as one of the Emperor's Adviser's, had wielded aboard the *Kz'adul*— enough power to secretly find and recover Kusac's cryo unit from space, to have him taken to a room beside one of the hospital labs and implanted with one of the M'zullian controlling devices, and... She shook her head, trying to dispel those thoughts. Yes, Chy'qui had had the contacts, and the knowledge to have made it possible for her to have been the one who had visited Kusac all along. A cold chill went through her as she suddenly realized it would also explain why her DNA was present in Shaidan. She *had* been the one who'd supplied the breeding sample. But where did N'koshoh fit into it? Why had she visited Kusac— or had she? And if not, why had she been killed? Questions with no answers tumbled round and round her mind and it was on unsteady legs that she got out on the Officers' level and headed for the main elevator down to Command.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis watched her leave with a feeling akin to relief. It sat uneasily on his conscience that he'd had to make the female sand-dweller believe she had been the one responsible for scent-marking the Hunter, but it was imperative that no trail should ever lead to TeLaxaudin involvement. He knew they'd had another coupling, but as before, his net had gone blank. He had, however, sensed enough of her fear and mental turmoil when the net had reestablished itself to know the Hunter was not acting as had been foreseen— in fact, his reactions were the antithesis of what they needed. He must bond emotionally to the female. At least his work socializing her husband was proceeding to plan. His experiment forgotten, he began to ponder his next course of action.

### **Later, in the rec lounge**

"Not possible, Captain," said M'kou regretfully when he asked him that evening in the rec room. "The feed comes from the library, and it and the medical office you are working in are connected to the main databases. Those in the other rooms aren't. May I ask why?"

"I want to be able to access my own comp data as well," he said shortly.

"Let's sit down," said M'kou, gesturing to an empty table nearby. "Perhaps something can be arranged."

He followed him over and sat down, putting his glass of ale on the table.

"Now, what exactly is it you want to do?" the young Prime asked.

"Multiple searches and cross-references with my own database," he said. "I work more efficiently when alone. I'm not used to having to explain what I'm doing to someone else."

"I thought that the point of you working with Doctor Zayshul was so she could help interpret data from our past for you."

He shifted in his seat, picking up his glass and taking a drink from it. "I work mainly on instinct and experience, Lieutenant," he said, placing the

glass carefully back on the table. "Explaining it takes time and breaks the flow of thoughts."

M'kou nodded. "I can see that it would. The library is only two rooms down from where you are at present. How would it be if I made several terminals there available to you? You'd also be close enough to the Doctor if you needed to collaborate on anything."

He nodded. "That would be fine," he said. "I want to go into records older than Doctor Zayshul is currently going through. I think the answers we need are unlikely to be in those of the male-only society to which the General belonged."

"Are there any older than that?" asked M'kou.

"I believe so, though the files look like they may have degraded during the passage of time. I may need to do some work on recovering them and I have some programs on my own comp that could help me do that."

"Sounds promising. If you'll excuse me, I'll go and make sure all will be ready for you for tomorrow morning," said M'kou, getting to his feet. "I'll see you later, Captain," he added as the door slid back and a small group of civilian females entered, followed by the Sholans.

"Alone, M'kou?" said Zhalmo, smiling broadly as she passed him on the way to their table. "I was sure Lazaik would be with you. Captain." Nodding at Kusac, she slipped into an empty seat beside him.

"She's working this shift," Zhalmo's brother said. "I've some business to attend to but I'll be back shortly."

"I'll keep the Captain company," she said, reaching out to touch Kusac's hand briefly. "He can tell me how his research is going." She looked up at M'kou. "Go, go! He'll be fine with me."

M'kou was frowning slightly as he left.



"What's the ale like tonight? I hear it's a new batch," she said, reaching out to pull his glass closer and sniff at the contents.

"Tastes the same as usual to me," he said lamely. "Uh, can I get you a drink?"

She smiled brightly at him, the rainbow-colored skin round her eyes creasing slightly. "Would you mind? I've just come off-shift on the *Zan'droshi* and I'm exhausted."

He got up and joined the others clustered round the bar.

"You're here early," said Banner as he took his drink from the young civilian Prime serving at the bar. "How's the work going?"

"Slowly," he said. "I came here to see M'kou so he could arrange for me to use the library tomorrow. It's going to be a lot faster if I can set some search parameters on a couple of comps and let them crunch the data for me. And you?"

"It's interesting exploring on one of their battle cruisers, I'll give you that. We've worked our way through to a refueling area today, by one of the fighter landing bays. Sent a couple of drums of fuel over for testing to see if it is still good. Also found their machine shop. If the fuel's good, they plan to try it out on one of the fighters they've been restoring."

"How many fighters have they found now?"

"Usable ones? About ten, I believe, out of fifty. The rest had been shot up in what must have been a pretty bad fire in the landing bay and are beyond repair. Found a couple of other craft too— deep space scouts."

"Useful," he said, then gave his order to the waiting youth.

"Depends what for," said Banner in an undertone.

He shot his Second a sharp look, getting one of complete innocence back.

"What?" asked Banner with a slight grin as he began to move away from the bar.

"Mixing with the natives now?" asked Dzaou silkily as he took Banner's place. "The good Doctor is having a bad effect on you."

Taking his drink, he pushed past Dzaou, choosing to ignore him and returned to where Zhalmo sat.

"Thank you, Captain," she said gratefully, accepting her drink as he sat down. She took a long drink then set the glass on the table. "Do you mind if I call you Kusac since we're both off duty? It isn't often any of us gets a chance to talk to you alone. How are you enjoying your visit here? It must be lonely for you all so very far from home and your families."

"We're used to that," he said, avoiding her question as he picked up his glass to take a drink himself.

"At least you do have some female company," she grinned, "even if we aren't your own species."

He was spared answering her only because his mouth was full.

"Tell me about your world," she said. "Is it beautiful? What are your homes like? Do you live in a great walled city like we did?"

"It's beautiful," he said. "We have great forests full of game, and plains of grain and other crops. We have a few cities, but mostly we live either on large family estates or in the towns that support them."

"Sounds lovely. And your Emperor? Does he live in a palace?"

"We have an elected President, and, yes, he lives in a palace that belongs to us all, not to him." He jumped as her fingers touched his wrist, fighting the instinct to draw it away from her.

"I've been so curious about your hands," she said, her voice dropping as she turned his hand over. "I saw you running on all fours when we were

planetside for the hunt, but I can't imagine how you did it." She began tracing the outline of the soft center of his palm with her finger, making sure to keep her shortened claw from touching him. "It looks far too tender to be used for running on."

"We don't run on that part," he said, suddenly intrigued by her actions. She was making up to him—he could smell it in her scent, and feel it in her unguarded mind. He remembered their first day here and how she'd approached him in the gym. Maybe it was to his advantage to let her get a little closer.

He clenched his hand slowly, retracting his fingers till only the hard tips were exposed. "We run on the pad at the heel of our hand, and on the fingertips," he said.

She turned his paw over, looking at it from the other side, then grinned up at him. "Put it back into a hand," she said. "That's amazing. I would never have believed you could do that." She turned his hand over again, stroking the center suggestively. "So why do you have such vulnerable palms? And how do you feel anything with such hard fingertips?"

He caught her hand with his, curling his fingertips into her palm. "Oh, we lose no sensations, believe me," he said, letting the ghost of a purr of amusement into his voice. "There're many things we can do with our hands."

Her eyes widened briefly, and she chuckled. "Maybe one day you can show me," she said quietly.

"Perhaps," he murmured, letting his index finger gently stroke her palm.

She shivered, and withdrew her hand. "You're far too tempting," she said, patting the top of his hand. "And this is too public a place for that—my scent will give me away," she smiled. "Tell me more about your world."

He spent half an hour talking to her before excusing himself to join Banner and the others. As he was getting to his feet, she grasped his hand tightly, stopping him.

"Remember my offer, Kusac," she said quietly. "It may be that sometime it would be, shall we say, mutually beneficial, for us to get closer."

"I'll remember," he said, surprised by her offer. It made him think as he walked over to where his crew sat. Perhaps from her he could find out more about scent markers. It was no secret after all; Zayshul had said all the Primes could smell her marker on him.

"What was that all about?" asked Khadui. "It looked very intense."

He shrugged. "She wanted to know how we could run on all fours. I was showing her."

"Just a PR job," said Dzaou.

"Exactly," he replied.

"You looked too much like you were enjoying it," Dzaou objected.

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked, raising his glass. "She was charming company."

"They are, aren't they? You forget how different they look after a while," said Jayza artlessly. "They're just people like us, really."

Banner laughed and patted the youth on the shoulder. "Well said, youngling!"

"Three months," growled Dzaou. "I can't wait till it's over and we can leave this Godsforsaken place!"

A bustle at the entrance drew their attention— a civilian female was handing out leaflets.

"It's Nisho," said Banner. "Looks like she's got the latest newssheet ready. Go fetch one, please, Jayza."

"I thought she was one of Kezule's harem," said Khadui.

"She is. Who better to produce the Outpost gossip sheet," Kusac said.

Jayza engaged in some animated conversation with her then sped back to their table, throwing several copies into the center while he rapidly scanned his own.

"What's so exciting?" asked Banner, leaning forward to pick up two copies, one of which he handed to Kusac.

"Yes!" exclaimed Jayza. "She's right! There, halfway down the page—there's a swimming pool up on the hydroponics level and it's being opened to everyone as of tomorrow!"

"You're joking," said Khadui, reaching for a sheet for himself.

"You can bet we'll be excluded," said Dzaou sourly, taking a copy.

"It's a bit more than a pool," he murmured, reading the appropriate paragraph.

"Well, I'll be," said Banner. "Who'd have guessed a place like this would house a pool? And it does include us. The only stipulation is that we refrain from using the pool on their first day of the week as that day is for their religious observances. As Kusac said, it's more than just a pool."

"What's the religious significance, Captain?" asked Jayza.

"They believe life evolved from a pool they hold sacred on their world. Each Outpost of any size, and each conquered world would have had a replica of that pool made by the Commander."

"To be able to go swimming," said Jayza, a large grin on his face. "It's going to make the time go faster."

"Don't get too excited about it," he said, scanning through the finds of civilian interest that had been made on the *Zan'droshi* over the last week. "It's a mineral pool, not a freshwater one."

"It doesn't say that here," said Khadui.

"Giyarishis said something about it the other day when I got trapped up there. Said the pool has healing properties," he replied. "He used it on my arm."

"Did it work?" asked Banner, intrigued, looking at him.

"Certainly seems to have done. It still needs a bandage," he added, aware of Banner's interest in seeing how his wound was progressing.

"I should check it later tonight," said his Second.

"No need, the Doctor changed the dressing today," he said, concentrating on the list of the library's latest acquisitions of entertainment vids that he'd reviewed for anything of interest the day before.

"New vids, Banner," said Jayza. "Hope they aren't the usual heroic tales of ancient Valtegan battles."

"Worth a look, I suppose," said Banner.

Startled, he glanced up at them, but there was no sign, either on their faces or in the set of their ears that their comments had been anything other than a coincidence.

## **Stronghold, Zhal-Kuushoi 31st day (December)**

Lijou leaned on the battlements, looking out over the mountains. From the faint glow behind the leaden clouds, he knew the sun had only just cleared the horizon. A cold wind was blowing from the northwest, promising more snow.

"You seem troubled, Father Lijou," a quiet voice said from behind him.

He straightened up and turned round to face the newcomer, wrapped, like himself, inside the hooded black robe of the priesthood. "Well met, Conner. May the sun shine on you today."

"And on you," replied the elderly Human. "Though from the look of the sky, I doubt it. May I join you?"

"You're welcome," he said, indicating the crenelated wall on which he'd been leaning. "But I warn you, it's a cold perch this morning."

"Many's the dawn I've seen," said Conner, moving forward to lean against the stonework. "Either from one end or the other. I found nothing cleared my mind quite like this time of day. The world is so quiet you can almost hear Her breath."

Lijou didn't miss the faint gleam of humor in the other's eyes. "Very true," he murmured, mouth dropping in a slight grin. "Which Her do you mean?"

"Kuushoi, Winter's Goddess, of course," said Conner, his breath misting in the cold air. "It's Her season after all."

"It is indeed," he replied, eyes narrowing slightly as he regarded the Human more thoughtfully. "What brings you out here so early?"

"I find I need less sleep these days," said Conner, turning his attention to the snow lying in the gap between the crenellations. Reaching out, he scooped up a handful and began rolling it into a ball. "One of the more useful symptoms of age." He leaned over the parapet and lobbed his snowball down at a rocky out-crop several yards from the base of the wall.

"I hear you're settling in well."

"Yes, indeed. Stronghold is an amazing place. Your library alone is a treasure house for me, now that I can read your language."

"I'm told that when you aren't busy with Noni, or in the library, you're usually to be found in Ghyakulla's shrine."

"I have always been a servant of the Lady," said Conner quietly. "Only Her name has changed."

A freak gust of icy wind swirled round them, making their long robes flap against their legs. Lijou had to lean into it to keep his balance. Automatically, he put out a hand to steady the older man, but stopped. There was no need. It was as if the wind had passed him by. As he continued to stare at Conner, beneath the Human's neat gray mustache, the corners of his mouth twitched in a gentle smile.

"There's a larger shrine to Ghyakulla at Vartra's Retreat," Lijou said, needing to break the silence. "And some of her priesthood. You could go there if you prefer. We're more of a warrior priesthood here."

The gentle smile widened. "I am more than content here. There's a purpose to everything, if we only stay still long enough for it to find us."

As Lijou began to wonder on how many levels their conversation was taking place, the wind gusted again, this time bringing with it the first flakes of snow.

"I think we should go in now," he said. "We've an hour yet till the morning bell rings. Will you join me in the kitchens? We should be able to scrounge something to eat and drink."

Conner pulled back his hood, looking up at the sky, letting the snowflakes land on his face. "You go. I think I'll stay a little longer," he said. "It's been a long time since I've been able to enjoy winter."

Winter. He'd said that word again, thought Lijou. "Don't stay out for too long," he said. "You're not long out of a sickbed, you shouldn't overdo it. I don't want to face Noni's wrath even if you do."

Conner laughed, a deep, genuine sound of pleasure. "Ah, the good Noni. We've had several interesting conversations. She finds it hard to accept I'm an adult, quite able to make my own decisions."

Lijou chuckled and turned to go back inside. "She's like that with all of us who come under her care."



"Before you go, Father Lijou," said Conner, "on that other matter, perhaps you could clarify something for me. You're Head of the priesthood, aren't you?"

Lijou stopped, confused. "Yes, I am." What other matter did he mean?

"Am I right in assuming that all members of the Brotherhood who have a Leska relationship are under your jurisdiction?"

"Yes, they are, but for a slightly different reason. They are En'Shalla, in the hands of the Gods."

"Ah," Conner nodded. "I understand now. Thank you."

"A pleasure," Lijou murmured, catching the ghost of that smile once again.

\* \* \*

It wasn't till he was thawing his hands round a mug of c'shar in the kitchens that he realized he'd been given his solution. "That wily old dzinae," he murmured. Had Conner known what was bothering him— or had it just been a coincidence? Somehow, he didn't believe it was a coincidence, and he began to get an inkling of why the Regent at Old Sarum had been so eager to send Conner to Shola. There was more to this Earth Priest than met the eye, a whole lot more.

\* \* \*

When Rhyaz joined him in his office, Lijou didn't beat about the bush, he told him the news from Haven straight.

"Let me go over this again," said Rhyaz slowly. "Vartra visited Tanjo and spoke to the cub Dhyshac, gave him a coin, and told him he was to go to the Shrine and follow in his father's footsteps?"

"Yes. He's taken the Creed and is now training under Tanjo and L'Seuli," said Lijou.

The Warrior Master's ears were tilting sideways now in anger. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but over a month ago, I gave L'Seuli explicit orders that the cubs were to be placed in cryo. I can't believe you countermanded those orders, which can only mean L'Seuli disobeyed them."

"You do realize it's winter here, don't you, Rhyaz? And that cryo involves freezing."

"Your point being?" said Rhyaz, his voice deepening with his growing anger.

"Some of those placed in cryo dream, and when they do, Kuushoi can reach them."

"I fail to see what you're getting at! It seems to me you're excusing L'Seuli's..."

"Rhyaz, think for a moment," Lijou interrupted. "We know Carrie dreams in cryo, and that Kuushoi has visited her. Did you really want the cubs— hybrid telepaths ten years old— all in cryo during winter when Kuushoi rules?"

"The chances of that happening are..."

"As great as those of Vartra visiting one of them! What if they had been in cryo? Would you have faced Vartra's wrath, Rhyaz? We should be grateful L'Seuli had enough compassion for the cubs to ignore your orders."

Lijou could sense Rhyaz remembering his one encounter with an enraged Vartra when they'd found His tomb deep in the tunnels under Stronghold, but the Warrior Master thrust the memory aside.

"That doesn't excuse his disobedience of my direct order!"

"L'Seuli is in command of Haven, Rhyaz. We chose him because we believed he embodied what we both stand for, and the ability to make his

own decisions, including the final decision on whether his orders are appropriate or not."

"Are you condoning his actions?" demanded Rhyaz, getting out of his chair and beginning to pace round the room. "Because if you are, you can defend him at a hearing when I haul his ass back here on charges!"

"This one time, yes, I am condoning his decision, because of what has subsequently happened," said Lijou firmly. "I never did agree with you on putting the cubs into cryo, you know that. As for bringing him back on charges, I don't think so, Rhyaz. He and Jiosha are Leska-Linked. We can't remove them both."

"He's not fit to run Haven if he can't..." Rhyaz stopped abruptly and turned on Lijou. "What did you say?"

"I said you will not bring him back on charges. He's as fit to run Haven as you are to run the Brotherhood Warriors."

Rhyaz walked back to the chair and sat down, staring at Lijou. "I can't believe I'm hearing you right," he said more quietly. "You would fight me on this?"

"This time, I'll not back down, Rhyaz. I said it before and I'll say it again, had you put them in cryo, when Kaid and Carrie found out, you would have made yourself two implacable enemies."

"You mean if..."

"I mean *when*. Both Carrie and Kaid have been touched by the Gods, you know that. They will find out."

Rhyaz snarled softly. "Dhyshac can stay out, but the others go into cryo immediately. That's all I'm prepared to concede. As for L'Seuli..."

"Don't make me pull rank on you, Rhyaz," said Lijou quietly. "Just accept what is done and be grateful that Kuushoi couldn't reach the cubs and tell Carrie about them."

"Pull rank on me?" Rhyaz stared at him. "How can you pull rank on me?"

"You're En'Shalla now, a telepath with a Human Leska. Technically you are answerable to me, but I have no intention of invoking that unless you force me to."

A stunned look crossed Rhyaz' face. "You'd betray my trust in you like that?"

*Don't even think that! Lijou sent angrily, knowing Rhyaz understood there could be no lies in mind speech. I'd die to protect your rights as the Brotherhood's Guild Master, you know I would! Your En'Shalla status will never be mentioned again by me. But in this one instance, you've been wrong from the start. The only betrayal would have been to put those trusting, innocent cubs into cryo!*

*It's still a dirty blow, Lijou! One not worthy of you!*

"Am I not Brotherhood, too?" Lijou asked, raising an eye ridge. "You were once my pupil, Rhyaz. I learned from you as much as you learned from me."

"That's an even dirtier blow," Rhyaz muttered, but his ears were righting themselves. "I can't believe you'd do that to me!"

"I didn't help overthrow Ghezu's rule by being a doormat," said Lijou dryly. "I have chewed L'Seuli out for disobeying you, trust me on that, and given him a heavy penance for it, but let what's done be done and move on. The cubs are safe with Tanjo. None of the Sleepers there will know they are hybrids, and they're used to keeping their mouths closed. As for Dhyshac, Tanjo took him to L'Seuli in secrecy. We've arranged a diversion so that the crew on Haven will believe he's been brought in by one of the *Watcher* patrols from Shola. We're sticking with the story that Vartra chose him because as you well know, it pays to hide a lie in the truth."

"You were born a Brother, you just had the misfortune to be a priest first," said Rhyaz wryly, getting to his feet. "Very well, I'll concede this to you this time, Lijou."

Lijou stood up, and clenching his right fist over his heart, sketched a bow to Rhyaz. "Thank you, Guild Master."

Rhyaz grunted. "Don't mock me as well."

Lijou put on an air of injured innocence. "I wasn't mocking you. I was showing my respect for your judgment."

Quick as a flash, Rhyaz reached out and clouted him lightly round the ears.

"Ouch!"

"Gotta get my own back somehow," Rhyaz grinned before leaving.

### **Shola, gymnasium complex, Zhal-L'Shoh 3rd day, Winter's Hellmouth (January)**

"I'm glad you agreed to help me out at the hospital," said Vanna, biting a chunk out of her fruit pastry. "You've hardly gone anywhere in the last couple of months."

"I went to the midwinter festival," said Carrie, picking hers up from the plate in the center of the canteen table and nibbling on one end. "And that was a disaster."

"So you had to leave early. At least you did come."

"None of you gave me an option." It had been held on her bond-mother's estate this time, and she'd sat at the back of the hall trying to hide from her memories of the one the year before. There couldn't have been a greater contrast between how happy she'd been then, and how miserable she was now. She sighed, then tore a chunk off the pastry and chewed it, hardly noticing the sweet taste of the berries inside. "I made a fool of myself, breaking down in tears like that."

Vanna leaned forward and patted her hand. "Hardly anyone but Rhyasha noticed, cub, and she had you out of the hall and on your way home with Kaid in no time."

Carrie winced as she picked up her mug of coffee. "Please, don't call me that, Vanna. You know that's Kusac's name for me."

"Carrie, you must stop being so sensitive about everything," sighed Vanna. "I know how much you miss him, but Kusac will turn up eventually, and then you'll all know what really happened."

"Considering the warrants out for his immediate arrest, Vanna, he'd really be mad to come here," she said quietly. "I'm sure he's hiding somewhere, waiting for us to find him."

Vanna sighed. "And here was me thinking how well you'd done today. Do you realize you went a whole morning without mentioning him once?"

She managed a weak smile before she took another bite of her pastry.

"Looks like those two young males found their way over here all right," said Vanna, flicking an ear toward the entrance off to her left.

Carrie glanced up and saw two Humans heading for the food counter.

"Where did they come from?" she asked, curious in spite of herself.

"Valsgarth hospital. They arrived yesterday. I've had them working with Nioku and M'Zio, going through our records. They're Earth doctors, sent here as part of an exchange scheme to learn how to treat Sholans using our own medical techniques. They've been on Shola for about six months, and are now spending some time here to learn about our very specialized requirements."

"Mmm," she mumbled, vaguely remembering Kaid mentioning something about them a week or so ago.

"Hi there," said a cheery voice from behind her, making her jump. "We found our way here. Not a bad canteen. I'm Ray, that's Andy."

Carrie looked up and nodded politely. Ray's pleasant round face was framed by an unruly mop of brown hair that fell to about his jaw level. Andy's was thinner, his dark hair short cut. Both looked to be in their late twenties. She returned her attention to her pastry.

"Mind if we join you?" A plate with a meat pasty on it and a mug of coffee got placed on the table as one of the two empty chairs was pulled out.

Taken aback, Carrie looked up again. Under the table, Vanna's tail tip twitched against her ankle warningly.

*Let them be, they're new.*

*They're wearing psi dampers, she grumbled. I hate dampers!*

*I know. It's the latest idea to enable nontelepaths to work here. Don't worry about it, they have the necessary Security clearances.*

*From us or Earth?* she asked sarcastically.

*Both,* chuckled Vanna.

"Ah, I know that look," said Andy, picking up his snack. "You're using telepathy to talk, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Vanna, treading hard on her foot this time. "I apologize, we don't usually do it in front of nontelepaths, but this was important."

"No problem," said Ray. "Interesting setup you've got here. A mix of civilian and military from what we've seen."

"We're a unique clan," murmured Carrie. *If I had a nickel for every time I've heard that one!*

"We're military," said Vanna, ears flicking in amusement at Carrie's comment.

"When we were going through those records, most of the treatments are for civilian-related conditions, very few of the kind you'd expect from soldiers," said Ray.

"We're not soldiers," said Carrie. "We're Brotherhood. How long did you say you've been on Shola?"

"Me, or Andy?" asked Ray with a smile as he raised his mug of coffee. "I've been here for six months, and Andy for about four."

"Then you should know our military setup, and that of our estate," said Carrie. "Brotherhood members are all paramedics, they treat their own injuries in the field. We don't see them unless they warrant more treatment. That's only one side of the estate. The other is treating Leska pairs, and their cubs. You should know all this." She turned to Vanna. "Who's in charge of Visitor Reception right now?"

"Hey, slow down, young lady," laughed Ray, raising his hand. "Your person did the job fine. I'm only making conversation!"

Carrie ignored Vanna's sending as she gave Ray a long look then got to her feet. "Here it is in brief. Yes, nearly everyone is either a telepath or an empath. No, they are not the same. No, we can't read your darkest secrets without you being aware of it, we can only hear what is in the forefront of your thoughts. Yes, psi dampers do work, but not when you're shouting your thoughts at the top of your mental voice. And no, I'm not big on conversation right now." She turned to Vanna. "I've got to go see Ghyan. I'll catch up with you later." *And don't you say a word! I know I shouldn't have done that but he got right on my nerves!*

Grabbing her coat, she made good her escape.

"Damn, but she's feisty. Who is she?" asked Andy.



"I think we just met the boss lady," said Ray wryly, taking another bite from his pasty.

"That was our Clan Leader," confirmed Vanna. "You'll have to excuse her, she's got a lot on her mind right now, and every newcomer always thinks and asks the same questions."

\* \* \*

The path to the Shrine, though it had been cleared that morning, was snow-covered again and as she crunched through the ankle deep powder, Carrie was glad of the boots she wore. Sunlight glinted off the icy tree branches, and ahead, a faint plume of smoke rose vertically into the bright blue sky above the building. As she got closer, the snow underfoot gradually gave way to slush, then to churned mud.

The large wooden door burst open, spilling out four laughing and chattering younglings, each carrying pails and shovels, into her path.

"Pardons, Liegena," they exclaimed, scrambling away from her.

"Mentor Ghyan is in his office," said Dzio, the eldest. "Would you like me to escort you there?"

"I can manage, thank you," she said, picking her way through the slick, icy mud. "What's with the pails?"

"We've frozen pipes," said the smallest one, swinging his bucket. "We're fetching water to melt to unfreeze them."

"I thought you had central heating now."

"We have. And frozen pipes!" said the other.

"Khinn! Shaya! Hold your tongues," said Dzio sternly, trying to appear in charge of the situation. "You've a job to do, get on with it while I talk to the Liegena! Valden, you're in charge."

They watched them, black robes flying round their ankles, scamper off down the path in the opposite direction.

"They're just kitlings apart from Valden," Dzio said, "and we've been shut in all morning learning our Litanies."

Carrie chuckled as she stepped at last onto the paving stones that fronted the Shrine. She began stamping her boots on the steps, attempting to rid them of the slush and mud.

Dzio held the door open for her. "It's the laundry pipes that froze overnight," he said. "We don't have heating in that outbuilding."

"Ah, I see," she said. "But all the others are fine?"

"Oh, yes," he nodded, glancing over his shoulder to where the kitlings had gone. The sound of shrieking and giggling sounded faintly. He sighed. "I'd best catch up with them," he said.

"Have fun," she said as he set off after them. He shot her a look over his shoulder, decided she meant it, and with a huge grin, sped off.

She was still chuckling when she stopped to knock on Ghyan's office door.

"Carrie, well met," said the priest, getting up to greet her. "Come, take your coat off and sit by the fire." He gestured toward the armchairs flanking the hearth. "I've been expecting you. I made a transcript of Kusac's message so I could study what he actually said." He reached into one of his desk drawers, pulling out a sheet of paper. "I have a copy for you, of course."

He made his way round his desk and waited until she'd shed her heavy jacket before handing it to her. "Some c'shar?" he asked as she sat down and began to read it.

"No, thank you. I've just had a snack at the gym canteen."

When she'd finished, she looked across at Ghyan. "Did you find anything?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't."

She sensed the tiny hesitation. "But what?" she prompted him.

"It's nothing, really," he said. "We only went sailing once. Kusac was very ill, in fact," he said with a smile. "Nearly fell over the side while throwing up. Mind you, we were only ten years old at the time. We stuck to dry land after that. I'm not sure why Kusac would choose to remember that."

"Where did you get the boat from? Maybe that's significant."

"I don't think so. It was at the small jetty at his mother's estate. What also struck me was that he mentions feeling his place was beside you and Kaid when you were due to have your cub. Didn't you say that was part of what he rowed with Kaid about?"

"No. Kaid said the row started over me being taken up to his house in the first place. Kusac said I should have remained at the estate, yet at the time he was pleased for me to go as it meant we'd be nearer him, and Noni."

"Ah," he nodded. "Well, I can see why you are convinced there's a hidden message there for you. It seems straightforward on the surface, but there are just a couple of points that don't quite feel right, and no logical reason for them. I'm sorry I couldn't help you further, Carrie."

"So you don't think I'm fooling myself, then?" she asked.

"I didn't say that," he said gently. "Kusac was ill, my dear, we both know that. An illness like his can cause all his judgment and reasoning to be just slightly off true."

Carrie felt her eyes starting to fill with tears and blinked furiously to contain them. "I'm sorry," she said, putting her hand up to brush her damp cheek. "Because he mentioned you by name, you were my last hope."

"Not your last hope, surely," murmured Ghyan, getting to his feet and stretching his hand out to her. "Let's visit the Shrine. Perhaps Vartra might be able to help us. He's taken a hand in your lives more than once."

## Chapter 10

GHYAN had insisted on walking back to the hospital with her. From there, he'd headed up to the villa to see Kaid.

"This is a surprise," said Kaid, looking up as Nyan ushered the priest into the den. "What brings you here, Ghyan?"

"You, and the mess you're making of your relationship with Carrie," he said bluntly, striding over to the desk where Kaid was working. "She's hurting so badly I don't know how you can ignore it."

"Now just a minute," began Kaid, getting up as Ghyan swept past him and down into the lower level of the den.

"No more avoiding the matter— or me, Kaid— we'll discuss it now," he said firmly.

Growling, Kaid joined him. "You've no call to come here like this, demanding I talk to you! I don't care what Carrie's asked you to say to me..."

"Carrie hasn't asked me to speak to you," Ghyan interrupted. "I want to speak to you! In Vartra's name, what are you thinking of, Kaid? The pain she's in is there for anyone with one eye to see! As for you, you're walking around cloaked in anger and despair." Ghyan reached out to take him by the arm. "You and Carrie are leading this Clan now. You must do something about it, before you hurt each other in a way that can never be repaired."

"Like Kusac hurt me?" Kaid snapped back, pulling away from him. "It's easy for you, on the outside, to pass judgment on me, Ghyan, but you know nothing about the matter!"

"Then tell me," said the priest, sitting down.

"It's private, none of your business."

"How private can it be when everyone around you knows how you both feel, and is afraid to approach you? How is this affecting your cubs, Kaid? Have you asked yourself that?"

Kaid uttered a wordless snarl and turned away from him.

"Tell me about it," Ghyan said gently. "I'm a priest, like you. It will go no further, I swear it. How dreadful can this row have been?"

Kaid glanced back at him and laughed, one devoid of any humor, but he did move over to one of the other chairs. "You're nothing like me, Ghyan," he said, flinging himself into the seat. "Apart from my children, I've only ever loved two people, three if you count Noni," he said, very quietly. "One of them, after gaining my respect and trust, binding me to his life in ways I never thought possible, then betrayed not just me, but Carrie. He risked her health and life, and that of our child, Ghyan! I cannot forgive him for that!"

"What happened?"

"Why should I tell you?" Kaid demanded, glowering at him. "You don't care anything for me. For them, yes, but not for me."

"That's not true," said Ghyan. "I'll admit at first I thought you hard and insensitive, but I came to know you better. Many times I've let you know I'm willing to do what I can to help, but you've ignored me. I can't make you accept my help, Kaid."

"You're doing a damned fine job of trying right now," he grumbled, resting his head against the back of the chair.

"Have you told anyone what happened between you and Kusac?"

"Only Carrie."

"So the hurt is eating away at you just as it is at her. Isn't it time to share that burden?"

Kaid laughed again. "The row *was* about sharing."

Ghyan watched him shut his eyes and sit there in silence. He waited patiently, knowing Kaid would speak when he was ready.

"Just before Carrie was due, Kusac came to see me. He refused to talk to me on the aircar so I went out to meet him. He said I'd had no right to bring Carrie there, she was a Clan Leader and her place was at home on the estate, especially to have her cub. Then he saw T'Chebbi through the window. If you remember, she was pregnant at the same time. He accused me of taking them both there to satisfy my own wishes, not do what was right for Carrie. There was more like that, about me refusing to see him as an adult, being used to everyone looking to me for leadership, not him, that I was trying to take over his life, that kind of thing. He said I'd never even seen him as a real sword-brother because he'd forced me to accept him as one." He fell silent again.

"And had he?" asked Ghyan.

"In a way," Kaid admitted. "It was after we came back from the Fire Margins, when I had difficulty coping with the fact I'd been born in Vartra's time. Noni suggested Kusac ask to be my sword-brother. She felt that having a relationship with him, as well as with Carrie, would help me come to terms with my past. Vartra knows, I didn't want a sword-brother, and was afraid to have Kusac as one because of what I felt for him, but he was persistent. No matter what I did to try and put him off the idea, he refused to give in."

"Sounds like you have a lot in common," said Ghyan, dryly.

"We did," said Kaid, and the priest could hear the pain in his voice and see his hands clenching against the arms of the chair.

"Upsetting as all this was, surely it wasn't enough to make you part so bitterly, was it?"

"No," said Kaid so quietly Ghyan had to strain his ears forward to hear him. "No, it wasn't." He got up, walking toward the veranda doors and looking out into the snow-covered garden.

"We were sword-brothers, Ghyan. That means being there for each other, whatever the need. Remember when he had that brain fever, when we were at the Warrior Guild, training the M'zullians?"

"Who could forget that?" Ghyan murmured. "We thought he was going to die."

"He nearly did. In his fever dreams, he relived his torture by J'koshuk. Only if Carrie or I shared his bed could he rest quietly. It happened after Carrie had left, the night his fever broke." He fell silent again, his tail swaying gently from side to side.

"It was his need, Ghyan, not mine. He turned to me and when I refused, thinking him still feverish, he asked me," he said, his voice barely audible. "It was what we both wanted."

"And in the row, he accused you of..."

"Forcing him, yes," said Kaid, turning round to look at him bleakly.

"Your anger's understandable," said Ghyan, getting up to join him and clasp his shoulder comfortingly. "But why should he make such an allegation? In most of the other Triads, all three partners are lovers. Surely you all knew this?"

Kaid nodded. "After that, so were we. When you're pairing in a three-way mental Link, it's impossible to hide your feelings from each other. He was more than happy with what we all shared. Most of Kusac's accusations were old arguments that we'd had before Kzizysus treated him. Except for that one."

"What were you picking up from him while he was saying all this? What was his mental state?" asked Ghyan thoughtfully, going back to his chair.

"Troubled. He felt troubled, but apart from that, he was blocking. Even with his Talent sleeping, he was capable of erecting strong natural barriers round his mind."

Ghyan frowned. "You say his Talent was sleeping? Carrie told me he'd been cured."

"Yes, Kzizysus' treatment restored his Talent, but there was a glitch. Something to do with a memory loop. Until Kusac came to terms with the past by reliving and accepting his memories of what happened to him on the *Kz'adul*, he wouldn't be able to use his Talent again."

"That explains why you all believe he's headed for the Prime world— he found he couldn't handle the memories. I can understand why what Kusac said hurt you, but you knew that he didn't really believe his own accusations, so why did you react the way you did?"

"He did believe what he was saying, Ghyan," said Kaid, his tail beginning to switch angrily from side to side again. "It's not just that he called my honor into question, but that he came all the way out to my house, just days before Carrie's cubs were due, to do it! He endangered her health and that of the cubs. That is unforgivable. I told him that until he'd apologized, I'd have nothing to do with him."

"I think we both agree he was mentally ill, Kaid. You can't hold him wholly accountable for what he said or did that day. And as it turned out, Carrie was fine and so were the cubs."

"No thanks to him," he said. "And there's still the distress he caused her."

"I'd say you're causing her as much by refusing to talk to her about it," said Ghyan gently.

Kaid shot him an implacable look. "She doesn't want to talk about it, she wants me to agree to the fact he must have had some other reason for stealing the ship and leaving Shola. She's convinced there's a coded message in the crystal he left her. I watched it, and there isn't. I won't feed her false hopes, Ghyan. He turned his back on us. I don't wish him any ill. Vartra knows, I do want him back here safe— and well."

"Carrie asked me to look at the message for her, and I did. There are small inconsistencies in it, but I think you're right, she's looking for something



that doesn't exist. However, would it cost you that much to look at the message once more, and to talk to her about it?"

"Yes, it would. I can't do it, Ghyan," he said harshly. "What he said and did still hurts too much."

"You know you're pushing her away because of this."

"And she's pushing me away from her. Did you tell her to stop pressuring me? I thought not," he said when Ghyan didn't reply.

"Are you so sure Kusac will have headed for the Prime world? Have you had any dreams or visions about this?"

"Why should I?" Kaid asked tiredly. "Where else would he have gone?"

"Where else, indeed?" said Ghyan quietly as he stood up, too. "I can't help feeling that this all fits together just a little too conveniently. There's something— off— about it all, but I can't close my teeth on it."

"You're getting to be as bad as Carrie," he said. "There's no mystery, Ghyan."

"Maybe not, but none of this is like the Kusac I knew, Kaid."

"The *Kz'adul* changed him. It changed us all."

"Hmm," said Ghyan. "At least try to be a little more patient with Carrie. Don't let this destroy what you two share. For the sake of your cubs if nothing else, Kaid."

"I do try," said Kaid as he walked the priest back to the den door.

## **Kij'ik Outpost, Recreation room, same day**

Kusac had found the file he was trying to unscramble fascinating, and by staying in the library out of Zayshul's way had almost replaced his obsession with her by working on it. With the pool now open, for the first

few days, the rec lounge had been quieter. He'd taken advantage of his crew's absence to pursue his "friendship" with Zhalmo.

Their reactions after their first visit had amused him. Mindful of Banner's warnings about not isolating himself from them, he'd been sitting waiting for them in their own lounge when they returned.

"They swim naked," said Jayza, flopping down onto a sofa. "Can you believe that, Captain?"

"So do we," he'd replied.

"Yes, but we're furred, you can't see our sex, even when we're wet. With them, everything shows. And the females' markings! You have to see them for yourself. Rainbow colors, each one slightly different, but they match the ones round their eyes."

He'd glanced up at Banner as if for confirmation.

His Second nodded, going over to the dispenser to help himself to a drink. "Quite striking," he said. "And you were right, it is a mineral pool— very warm and humid, almost too much for me."

"Is that what the Humans look like? All that bare flesh?" continued Jayza.

"I can't speak from experience of the Primes, but certainly Human females do have some body hair," he replied.

"What about the males, Banner?" Jayza asked. "Are they like the Humans? You and your sword-brother, Jurrel, have a male Human lover."

"I wasn't busy staring at the bathers making comparisons, Jayza," said Banner, ruffling the youth's hair as he passed him. "I think you've been celibate for too long."

Amid the laughter, Jayza's ears flattened and he hung his head in embarrassment. "I wasn't staring at them," he said defensively. "It was impossible not to notice."

Banner took pity on him as he sat beside Kusac. "Essentially, yes, their sex organs are external, unlike ours. Though, as Kusac says, Humans still have some body hair. You should have come with us, Kusac. I'd have thought that as a member of AIReI it would have interested you."

"I'll go another time. I wanted to get on with that file." He nodded toward where his portable comp lay on the low table nearby.

"How's it going?"

"Patchy. I get whole chunks, then the data is scrambled again. It is a story, though, and very old. There are females in it, free ones."

"So Kezule's memories of a long ago past when females were free is accurate."

"Seems to be. When I've finished it, I'll give you a copy." He looked over to Jayza again. "Apart from the nudity, what was the pool like?"

"Huge, and landscaped to look like an island with a smaller one, reached by wooden bridges, in the center. There were cushions and mats all over the place. And trees, flowering plants everywhere. It was really beautiful."

"You forgot to mention the temple we went through to get there," said Khadui. "One to their fertility Goddess. We had to go through a foot bath to reach the showers and changing rooms, then a second one before we entered the pool itself."

That was news. There had been nothing like that when he'd met Zayshul there. It made sense, though. She'd obviously taken him in by another door.

"It was too well established for the length of time the Primes and Kezule have been here," said Dzaou, going over for a drink. "Trees like those take a good few years to grow."

"No mystery there. It's like they've all been saying from the start, the TeLaxaudin has obviously been here for a lot longer," said Jayza.

"But why?" said Banner in a low voice that only Kusac could hear. "That's the question to ask. What is the nature of the Prime and TeLaxaudin partnership? Were they using this place first until Kezule decided to come here, or were they preparing it for him?"

That had made him think, and he'd been gently putting innocent questions along those lines to Zhalmo.

\* \* \*

"You've gone very quiet," said Zhalmo, her fingertips grazing his in a brief but intimate way.

"Just tired," he said, looking up at her and forcing his mouth into a smile. "I've been concentrating on my work too much."

"I was going to turn in myself. Want to walk with me? I pass your quarters on the way to mine."

"Sure," he said, finishing his ale and getting up. "I'll see you to your room, if you like."

He was watching Dzaou, the only other Sholan present, standing over at the bar, talking to some of the Prime males, and almost missed her mental flare of pleasure at his offer. He'd noticed that when his crew weren't around and he was sitting with Zhalmo, though the other Primes would stop by them for a moment or two, none would join them. It was as if they were being purposely given time alone together.

"Thanks," she said.

As she stood up, her scent wafted toward him, like, yet unlike Zayshul's. He found it attractive, but thankfully, nothing more. Zayshul had never been to the rec room, for which he was very grateful.

His eyes met Dzaou's as they left, and he knew the other was yet again feigning a friendliness with the Primes that masked his need to spy on him. He inclined his head at him before turning away.

"You haven't come up to the pool yet, Kusac. Why's that?"

"As I said, I've been busy," he said as they stepped out into the corridor. "I'll try and make time soon."

"I think you'd enjoy it, the rest of your crew certainly do," she said, resting her hand lightly on his arm as he slipped his hands into the opposite sleeves of his robe. "You'll find it relaxing, and the minerals will do you as much good as they do us."

"Soon," he said, glancing at her. She was nearly his height, he noticed, taller than Zayshul by a fraction. "My work is important to your father, you know that."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of asking you to compromise that," she assured him, pupils widening slightly then returning to normal.

He felt himself responding to her instantly and quashed his reaction. He needed to keep his guard up with her— Zayshul's scent marker was making him vulnerable to all the females.

"But your leisure time is your own, the same as our off-duty time is ours," she continued.

"I don't have as much leisure time as you," he said. "I'm with Shaidan for two hours each evening, then I have to train with my crew."

"You make a good father."

It took him a moment or two before he could bring himself to answer her. Had it been a lucky guess, or did she know about Shaidan?

"My daughter is one. I miss her," he said.

"I'm sure you must. What's she called?"

"Kashini," he said. He didn't want to talk about his life back home. "Have you any children?" he asked, checking mentally to see where the rest of

his crew were. Banner and Khadui were playing a board game in their lounge, but no Jayza.

She laughed, her hand tightening round his arm. "No, I'm not interested in breeding yet. Though I think it won't be long before my brother, M'kou, and his mate do."

"M'kou has a mate?"

"Oh, yes. She's even marked him, you know."

"Marked him?" He tried not to sound as if he was pouncing on what she'd said. He felt her flare of annoyance as she realized she'd said something she shouldn't.

"Oh, you know," she said, adopting a slightly vague tone. "A bite on his shoulder. Don't your females do that?" she asked, artlessly.

"No. Sounds painful." Damn! The opportunity was lost, now. "We prefer to give each other pleasure."

"So do we," she said, a gentle hiss of amusement underlying her voice. "No point in coupling if it isn't pleasant, is there?"

He sensed the change in her scent and realized he had to get off that subject quickly. "None," he said. "I must congratulate M'kou and ask him to introduce me to his mate."

"That would please him," she said, stopping and removing her hand from his arm. "He respects you, Captain."

"He does?" He looked at her in surprise.

She nodded. "He knows you're handling a difficult situation as best as you can. This is my room, by the way," she said.

"Then I'll wish you good night," he said, pulling his hands free of his sleeves.

She leaned toward him, reaching out to touch her hand to his cheek. "So soft," she murmured, stroking him.

He froze, seeing Zayshul heading toward them. He could feel her anger radiating out around her like an aura.

"Captain, I need to talk to you," she said, coming to a stop beside them as Zhalmo dropped her hand with a sigh.

"Yes?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral.

"Now. In the sick bay," she said forcefully, waiting for him to move.

Anger surged through him even as her scent began to affect his senses. Dammit, how dare she treat him like some cub caught with his hand in the cookie jar! Putting his hand on Zhalmo's shoulder, he leaned closer till his cheek just brushed hers.

"Shall I tell her we're busy?" he whispered quietly, letting a purr of amusement he didn't feel creep into his voice.

"So tempting," Zhalmo murmured. "Better not. Ask me again another night, Captain."

"As you wish. I'll say good night, then," he said. Then he started walking slowly back toward his quarters, using his Talent to eavesdrop on them when Zayshul remained to talk to her.

"Don't use those scent tricks on him," Zayshul hissed angrily at the younger female. "You've no right to take advantage of him like that!"

"Why not?" asked Zhalmo, her tone one of sweet reason. "We're both adults and he wasn't objecting, as you saw. Just because you've done nothing in the last two months...."

"Don't even think that!" Zayshul's hiss of anger had risen in pitch. "Any other Sholan, yes, but you will not play games like that with Kusac!"

"He's been seeking my company, Doctor," Zhalmo replied. "You know I'm free to respond to his advances if I choose to."

Zayshul uttered a strangled sound and he heard her footsteps, and anger, following him. He increased his pace, reaching his own room before she reached him.

"What do you want, Zayshul?" he asked, feigning indifference as he keyed open his door.

"I told you I want you in the sick bay. Your dressing needs changing."

"Is that all? It can wait till tomorrow. I did it myself several days ago. I was on my way to bed."

"So I noticed!" she snapped. "I told you to report to the sick bay now!"

"Don't give me orders, Doctor," he said angrily, stepping into his room.

She grasped hold of his arm, stopping him. "How can you let her use you like that?" she demanded, her voice low and intense.

"Everyone here's using me. What's one more or less?" he said, disengaging himself. Standing in the doorway, the air current in the corridor was blowing her scent away from him. What was reaching him only served to fuel his anger.

"They've got bets going, did you know that? To see which of you they can seduce first!"

"So when do you collect?" He regretted it the instant it was said and made no effort to stop the slap he saw coming. His head rocked back with the force of it.

"I deserved that," he said, rubbing his bruised cheek. "Look, we're incapable of rational conversation right now, leave it till..." He stopped as she suddenly burst into huge, body-shaking sobs.



Swearing, he grabbed hold of her and hauled her into his room, sealing the door shut, then hitting the privacy lock.

"Gods, Zayshul, stop crying! Someone will hear you," he said urgently, holding her tightly against his chest in an effort to stifle her sobs. It made no difference, she continued to cry, her hands now clutching frantically at his robe.

Her anger had gone, and in its place, her distress was flooding through his mind, tearing at him as badly as it was her. Her thoughts were so jumbled that nothing made any sense to him. Threats, or warnings about being discovered wouldn't do any good, she was beyond reasoning with.

Reaching for the air conditioner controls, he set the cold air up to full. He had to keep his wits about him right now. Three of his people had rooms opposite his, and two belonged to Banner and Dzaou.

He moved her farther into the lounge, away from the door and closer to the stream of cold air that was issuing from a vent in the ceiling. Bending over her, he began whispering in her ear, talking to her as he would to Kashini or Shaidan.

"Hush, Zayshul. Hush. It's all right." He began to stroke the back of her head, wondering what else he could do to calm her. He didn't dare use the most effective method, that of directly affecting her mind. He'd purred to soothe Kashini, and he remembered that when Zayshul had dressed his wound the first time, he'd been purring; that had pleased her. It was worth trying—he was getting desperate.

It wasn't easy to force himself to purr under the circumstances, but somehow he managed it.

"Hush," he said. "Whatever it is, it can't be that bad. Talk to me."

Lulled by the deep, rhythmic rumble he was making, gradually, her sobs began to subside.

"That's better," he said gently, resting his head against hers as he stopped purring. "Tell me what's wrong."

Her scent was sharper, he noticed, slightly less potent, and he knew that for the moment, he could afford to let his mind remain passively open to hers.

"I didn't betray you," she sobbed. "We were both drugged and used! I have no memory of going to you that night. I lied when I said I had because you wouldn't believe me, but it must have been me because it's the only way my marker could be on you."

He could feel her absolute belief in what she was saying. She genuinely had no memory of pairing with him on the *Kz'adul*.

"And Shaidan... He has my genetic material because the sample Chy'qui took from you... it had my scent marker in it!" Her sobs began to increase again.

"Hush, I believe you," he said automatically, still trying to take in what she'd said, and the extent to which she, too, had been used. "I believe you now, Zayshul."

She lifted her head to look up at him. "You do?" She blinked owlishly through reddened eyes at him before pulling an arm free to rub it across her face. "Why this time?"

"Because I'd have to be totally mind dead to not feel your distress," he said, running his thumb across her cheek to remove the last of her tears. "I still have a little mental sensitivity left."

"When I saw you with Zhalmo, being gentle with her..." Tears welled up again, threatening to spill over her cheeks. "And I heard the others talking about you sitting with her nearly every night in the rec..."

"Jealous?" he asked in surprise, aware that she had indeed been.

"No! Yes..." she admitted, seeing the look on his face.

"I've treated you badly," he said, forcing himself to let her go and move away from her. "I should have remembered I owe you my life several times over for what you did for me on, and after, the *Kz'adul*. My only defense is that every time I'm near you, your scent robs me of all reason. All I'm left with is an animal need to pair with you."

"I know. It happens to me, too. Once you start responding to me, I start responding to you, then nothing else matters," she said, her voice low. "It isn't supposed to be like that! It's supposed to just enhance our attraction for each other, nothing more." She began to shiver, wrapping her arms across her chest to try and keep warm.

"You're cold. I'll get you a robe," he said, leaving her to go into the bathing room for his toweling one.

Putting it around her shoulders, he folded her in it, then moved away again before her scent could affect him too much. "So there's no way to turn it off?"

"None. It could spontaneously stop by itself, in time," she said, clutching the robe gratefully. "I can't even study it. We haven't got equipment sensitive enough even on K'oish'ik to isolate whatever it is that causes this addiction from my scent."

"Please, sit down," he said, gesturing awkwardly to one of the easy chairs beside him. "I forget my manners." Still keeping a reasonable distance between them, he sat down on the edge of the sofa, leaning his arms on his knees.

"This is the first rational conversation we've had for some time," she said. "We need to come to some kind of truce, Kusac. You have to try to stop hating me now you know the truth."

He looked down at his hands. "It isn't going to be easy," he said. "You have no idea how your marker has affected my life, Zayshul. Your Emperor contacted my people, telling us that Kezule had left your world and asked us to let him know if we had any word of his whereabouts. Then Kezule's message was intercepted and read by the Brotherhood. I was

called in and told to keep the rendezvous and find out why a known enemy of mine wanted to meet me, and what it was he had that I would want." He looked up at her again. "You can imagine how much of a shock it was for me to be given your message, complete with your and Shaidan's scents on it, in public. Obviously I couldn't tell anyone."

"Why didn't you tell them about our night on the ship? You could have legitimately said you'd been raped."

He looked away again. "Because you'd helped me— and I had enjoyed it," he admitted eventually. "After what I'd been through with J'koshuk, I needed some physical contact that didn't bring pain. It— you— gave me the strength I needed to get through the exchange of hostages the next day."

"We have to cope with our need for each other, Kusac," she said after a small silence. "Deal with it so it doesn't get out of hand the way it has done so far."

"I know. How long can we keep it from Kezule?"

She shrugged. "He has his other females. Marriage to him is only for breeding; he told me so. He doesn't see me as belonging to him. He calls you my Sholan, you know. Leave that worry to me, I can handle him."

"I'd prefer him not to know. He has enough leverage over me already."

"I can understand that."

The door chime rang, making them both jump. He began to swear. "It's Dzaou," he said. "He's checking to make sure I'm here and not with Zhalmo."

"Why should he do that?" she asked, obviously confused and worried.

"It's a long story," he muttered, getting up. "The bathing room's through there. Lock yourself in— both doors— while I deal with him."

When she'd hidden herself, he quickly stripped off his robe and flung it over the back of the chair she'd been using, and headed for the door, remembering to shut off the air conditioner before opening it.

"What is it, Dzaou?" he asked, standing so that the other, seemingly inadvertently, had a good view of his empty lounge. "I was about to shower."

"My punishment detail finished today, Captain. I just wanted to know what your orders were for me for tomorrow," Dzaou said, sketching a brief salute.

"And you couldn't have asked me that in the rec?" He raised an eye ridge. "You report to Banner first thing with the others. He'll give you your orders."

"Yes, Captain." The older male turned away then stopped. "Are we information gathering now? I noticed you were getting close to one of Kezule's daughters."

"We're here for another two to three months, Dzaou. I want you to do what the rest of us are doing— socialize! In Vartra's name, try and lose some of your damned prejudices. And that's an order!"

"You can't..."

"I just have," he snarled, hitting the door close control and locking it. He leaned against it, shaking with anger and reaction. He was getting to the point where it was going to cause him less grief to mentally adjust the damned male!

His blood instantly ran cold at the thought. To do that would be to break one of the main tenets of the Telepath Guild. Only a properly appointed Court Telepath could do that as the result of a judicial sentence. For him to do it was a criminal offense, punishable by his own mental readjustment, or worse, the destruction of his Talent by the Telepath Guild. Only he was no longer in that Guild, he was of the En'Shalla Brotherhood, answerable

only to Father Lijou and Vartra Himself— and he'd already adjusted the memories of both Dzaou and Banner.

He pushed the thought away and moved to the bathing room door as Zayshul opened it. "He's gone," he said, turning back to the lounge and walking over to pick up his robe again.

"Kusac, wait," she said, catching hold of his arm. "We're alone here now..."

*I still don't want this*, he thought, briefly closing his eyes as her scent began to reach his nostrils. With a sense of inevitability, he left his robe where it was and turned to face her.

"You won't be missed?" he asked.

"They don't watch me like they used to, before you saved Kezule's life."

"I know what your scent does to me, but how does mine affect you?" he asked abruptly, needing to know.

She reached out and laid her hand against his chest, gently running it across the muscles almost hidden by the slightly longer pelt that grew there.

"You don't realize how beautiful you appear to us, do you? We've nothing on our world that resembles you at all," she murmured, her eyes glinting in the light from the ceiling. "You give off the combination of your scent and mine laced together," she said. "That's what your scent is now. It's in your pelt, on your hair— my body absorbs it when we touch."

His body shivered in response to her touch and embarrassed, she lowered her hand and her gaze. "I taste it when you kiss me."

Taking a deep breath, he moved closer and took her by the arm. Better to get it over with, he thought as the now familiar light-headedness hit him and he felt his pulse starting to rise.

"We might as well be civilized about this," he said, drawing her toward the door to his bedroom. "Vartra knows, I haven't been so far."

"It's all right," she said. "I understand."

\* \* \*

Turning out the lounge light behind him, he adjusted the bedroom's lighting to low. She handed him the toweling robe, which he threw toward a chest at the other side of the room. When he turned back, she was already beginning to unfasten her coveralls.

"Let me," he said, pulling her into his arms and lowering his head to lick her cheek. Her scent wasn't affecting him as quickly this time, and he needed the release from responsibility that touching and licking her body would give him.

"Kusac," she said. When he continued to lick her, she took hold of his head and pulled him away so he had to look at her.

He gave a small rumble of annoyance. "What?" Already his eyes were losing focus and he could hear the blood beginning to pound in his head. Automatically his hands flexed on her shoulders, claws pricking through her clothing. He stopped with an effort. "What is it?"

"Please, don't punish either of us. We're both victims. Stop fighting the scent marker."

"I'm not," he said.

"You're fighting it with anger, I can feel it. Let go this time, don't try to stay in control," she said.

He growled, low and deep. "You ask a lot."

"I know. I'm asking you to trust me," she said, stroking his cheek. "Let the marker work the way it's supposed to work."

He turned his head, licking the inside of her wrist, over the pulse spot. "Just let go. Don't stop the drug," he repeated.

She nodded, releasing him.

"Yes," he said, reaching for her mouth with his. He kept his eyes open as he caught at her bottom lip gently with his teeth. Her tongue flicked out, its forked tip touching him. He released her quickly. Too soon for that, he shouldn't have watched. He shuddered, shutting his eyes.

He felt her mouth close on his neck, then her tongue was forcing his pelt aside till the forked tips touched the flesh beneath. Gently her teeth began to nip him as she roamed across his throat.

With an effort, he opened his eyes again, focusing on continuing to unfasten her coverall, but his hands were unsteady now as the urgency to have her increased. His fingers touched hers as she helped him and moments later, he was sliding her clothing off.

He pulled her into an embrace, kissing her again, making sure to close his eyes this time. When her tongue touched his lips, hesitantly, he let her enter his mouth for the first time. Her tongue felt strange, and she tasted different, sweeter than before. He trapped her briefly against the roof of his mouth so he could taste her fully. Remembering what she'd said, he surrendered himself to the sensations as fire coursed through him, igniting all his senses. He grasped her hand, pressing it against his belly, then down over the smoothness of his groin.

"Hold me here," he whispered as his body began to spasm in pleasure. He rested his head on her shoulder, moaning gently, his breathing becoming more rapid.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." The word was drawn out, almost a gasp. "Just wait." He clutched her close as suddenly, his genitals descended into her waiting hand. His breath came out in an almost explosive gasp as he lifted his head.



"So that's..."

"Gently," he hissed, wincing slightly as her fingers began to explore. Her touch became lighter, more sure, and he began to purr. "You've no idea how good it feels when that happens," he murmured, licking her neck with long sweeps of his tongue while his hands began to stroke their way down her back and hips.

Beneath his hands, he could feel her skin flushing with heat, and her scent changing as she became more aroused. When her hand encircled him and she began to slide it up his length, he had to stop her.

"No more," he said, grasping her hand and removing it. Backing off, he drew her with him until they tumbled onto his bed. When he reached for her, she caught his hands in hers and sat up.

"Not tonight," she said, moving till she knelt astride his thighs. "Tonight you're mine."

Letting one hand go, she began pushing her fingers through his pelt until she reached his collarbone, then she circled the base of his neck, just under his torc, pressing her claws against his flesh.

A sudden chill of fear rushed through him but when he reached for her hand, it was gone and she was leaning over him, her tongue and teeth flicking and nipping at his ear. Her scent surrounded him now, driving thoughts of anything but the sensations she was generating from his mind. She moved lower, working her way under his jaw then along his shoulder.

He reached for her head, cupping the back of it, encouraging her as his breath began to come in shorter and shorter gasps.

Her nips, which had been gentle, became sometimes sharp and almost painful. It made him tense and he grasped her by the waist, trying to free his other hand but he found she'd pinned it effectively to the bed.

"Trust me," she said, lifting her head as her fingers and claws raked their way carefully down his side and hip, making him shudder with pleasure.

She moved lower, her teeth finding one nipple while her hand, on its way up his chest, found the other.

He moaned gently, wondering how she knew they were so sensitive.

"I can read," she said, her tone amused. "I know they must be sensitive because your females use them to suckle their young."

She was resting on the tip of his erection now, pressing it against his belly; her moist warmth against him almost unbearable. He could almost feel the marker being absorbed by his naked skin.

Arching his hips up, he tried to enter her, gasping and collapsing back on the bed when she nipped him hard.

"Not yet," she whispered. "I'll tell you when."

"Enough teasing," he said, his voice ragged. "I want you now." He tried to break her grip on his hand but she laced her fingers between his, holding him down even more firmly.

She slid lower, the sensation so intense he felt himself beginning to swell again as waves of pleasure and tension rippled through his whole body, making him shudder violently.

"What are you doing?" he gasped as her hand again raked its way down his side and across his hip.

"Showing you how the marker enhances pleasure for males," she said, sliding lower still before sitting up. Her claws now began to slowly circle his belly, moving to the sides of his groin then across his thighs.

He closed his eyes, relaxing under her gentle touch. Then he felt the flick of her tongue on his erection. Images of her many tiny sharp teeth came instantly to his mind and, eyes flying open, he tried to sit up.

"Not that," he said, reaching with his free hand to stop her.

He found himself instantly pushed back, her hand pressed against his diaphragm to keep him there. He tried again to rise but the pressure she was exerting made it too painful.

"Vartra's bones!" he hissed, watching and feeling her teeth gently take hold of him. He shut his eyes, unable to watch. "Be careful!"

She teased him, taking him almost to the point of orgasm before stopping. Every breath he took now was heavy with their combined pheromone-laden scents. That, coupled with what she'd been doing to him, had driven him to an almost feral state of desire.

His hand was freed as she matched her body to his and lifted her face up to him. He grasped her head, kissing her furiously, tasting himself as well as her on her lips.

"Now," she murmured, pushing herself down till he was almost inside her.

Lifting her up, he arched his hips to meet her, pulling her down onto him, burying himself deep within her with a low, drawn out moan. He stayed like that for a moment, feeling his whole body throbbing with desire, then he pulled her down against his chest and tumbled them over so he was poised above her.

Shuddering, he began to withdraw from her, thrusting back deep inside her at the last moment, making her cry out in pleasure, a cry she quickly muffled by sinking her teeth into his shoulder.

A rhythm established, wave after wave of pleasure, exactly matching hers, coursed through him until he thought he could take no more. Their bodies climaxed together, holding them tight in a pulsating, swirling sea of sensations. At the height of it, he felt her mind explode inside his, flooding him with erotic imagery of his body penetrating hers; against his neck, the torc vibrated a frantic, painful warning. Shaking his head in real distress, with his final thrust, he pushed her mind aside. Spent, he collapsed against her, slamming up all his mental barriers as he tried to calm his ragged breathing and make sure his mind was still his own.

He felt her moving beneath him, and relieved he hadn't knocked her out with his mind, he shifted his position slightly to make sure his weight wasn't on her.

It was several minutes before he realized she was playing with his hair. His limbs felt heavy and lethargic, but even despite the shock of the mental contact, he was more relaxed than he remembered being for many months.

"That's how the scent marker is used," she said.

"It's effective," he murmured. "And intense."

"Better?"

"Better," he agreed, reaching out to touch her cheek gently. "I can see why those of you who could scent mark became dominant. Definitely a desirable trait as far as males are concerned."

"At least you weren't angry this time," she said.

Carefully, he withdrew from her and moved over, wincing as he flexed his bitten shoulder. "You were far too skillful to allow me to think of anything but what you were doing," he said. "It was unexpected."

"I was trying to remove the marker the other two times," she said, sitting up. "I can't use it and try to switch it off at the same time. We had the comfort and the security for me to do that tonight, Kusac, we won't always have. I thought you should know the more pleasant side of it at least once."

"I'm not complaining," he said hurriedly, pushing himself up into a sitting position.

"We're going to have to meet like this every few days," she said. "The pool's useful, if we can't manage anywhere else."

"I don't like situations like that day in the office," he said with a low rumble. "I've a suggestion. Can we hide in plain sight?"

"Excuse me?"

"Take the pressure off by meeting socially with some of your friends? The other females like to touch me, so amongst them, you'd be unremarkable. I've begun to socialize with Zhalmo."

"I see what you're saying," she nodded. "We could try. Just remember, Zhalmo is interested in you." She bit back what she was going to say next.

"What?"

She looked away from him. "You are, of course, free to sleep with Zhalmo or any of the other females if you wish. I have no right to ask you not to."

"I think I'll pass on that," he said, flattered. "Life's complicated enough."

"I should shower and leave," she said awkwardly, getting off the bed. "I'll leave the water on for you. Having one long shower will cause less suspicion from the room on the other side of you than having it on twice."

"There're towels in the closet in there," he said.

She stopped to pick up her coveralls and underwear.

He lay back on the bed, waiting for her to finish, grateful that she seemed not to have noticed their minds meeting briefly. He tried to figure out how he felt about her now. Nothing much had changed, except he knew she'd been used as much as he had. In a way, it was a relief not to have to hate her, knowing that she'd saved his life at least twice. He'd never really felt comfortable with blaming her, if he was being honest.

He woke with a jerk to her shaking his foot.

"You were asleep," she said, a slight smile on her face.

"Sorry," he said, rubbing his eyes as he got up. "Look, I need to apologize for treating you the way I did the other day..."

"It's forgotten," she interrupted, turning toward the door. "I would have felt the same had it been me."

"No, I should have trusted you, you were right," he said, keeping his voice low as he accompanied her into the darkened lounge. The glow of the wall clock caught his eye. He couldn't believe three hours had passed!

She turned round by the door. "It's not your fault," she said. "You came out to meet us just over two months ago and were suddenly presented with a group of hybrid children, me and my compelling scent, then Shaidan, a son you didn't know existed. You weren't to know how it had all happened— hell, I still don't know most of it," she said candidly.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said. "I need to keep working in the library, but not to stay away from you." He smiled wryly. "Come in any time."

"All right," she said.

He leaned forward and touched his lips gently to hers. "Good night. I think it's safe for you to leave now." He opened the door for her, making sure he was well out of sight.

She smiled then slipped out into the dimly lit corridor and disappeared.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis surfaced slowly from his trance, satisfied with the effect his talk to the female had had. Matters between her and the Hunter were now proceeding as they ought. All he had to do for now was make sure the sand-dweller male remained compliant. The dreams he'd had the night before should help.

\* \* \*

Taking off the dressing on his arm, he found what he expected— the wound was now fully healed, the tiny scars only slightly pink amid the new growth of his pelt.

He showered swiftly, rubbing some antiseptic cream into the shallow bite Zayshul had given him, then returned to his bedroom and surveyed the wrecked bed with a sigh. He'd left his pelt slightly damp knowing that nothing could smell as pungent as a damp Sholan left to dry naturally overnight. It was not something he liked doing.

Pulling the top cover off, he took it into the bathing room and sloshed it round in the shower for a minute or two before wringing it out and spreading it over the cubicle to dry.

Back in the bedroom, he switched off the air conditioner, sniffing the air cautiously. It smelled neutral now, with no trace of the heavy sexual scents that had been present before. Sighing, he crawled into bed and put the light out. There was still a trace of her scent, but strangely, it didn't bother him. He realized that by letting go with her, and accepting what he couldn't change, he'd taken some small measure of control back over his life on board Kij'ik.

Curling up, he felt himself begin to drift into sleep almost instantly.

### **Zhal-L'Shoh 4th day (January)**

At breakfast the next morning, Kezule seemed restless.

"I didn't sleep well," he admitted, getting up to help himself to another drink as M'kou took the children off to the nursery.

"Oh?" She looked at him meaningfully.

He had the grace to color in embarrassment as he sat down again. "Not what you think," he said. "I rarely stay with Shishu or Nisho overnight. I usually sleep alone in my room here. I've been having dreams. Or memories, call them what you want, but they've been troubling me."

"What sort of dreams?" she asked, interested.

"They're too fragmented at the moment to make much sense," he said, taking a sip of his kheffa. "I know Kusac is working on an old text he found in the data banks and was wondering how far he'd gotten with it. Perhaps they have some areas in common, maybe fill in the blank spots for me."

"He's working in the library these days, so I don't know how far he's actually got. I do know it has him fascinated," she said.

"I'll have to talk to him about it today."

"You know, if you're not remembering all the details of your dream, perhaps doing a scan would help. We can set it to pick up anything related from your subconscious."

"That's a possibility. How long would it take?"

"Not long. Maybe an hour. If M'kou can cover for you, come into the sick bay and we'll do it now."

"Is it possible to turn it into a form that I can view, on a screen? Like the vid that I used as a punishment tape?"

"Theoretically, but that will take longer. I can take the scan, but interpreting it into another medium is not one of my skills. For that you'd need Lazaik."

"M'kou's young female?"

"Yes. I don't know how long it would take her, though. Probably several days."

He nodded. "That part isn't so urgent. I will be able to play the scan like a learning tape and know anything that I have forgotten in my sleep, won't I?"



"Yes, that you can do almost immediately," she said.

"In that case, shall we go?" he asked, draining his cup.

"Yes," she said, getting up.

"Zayshul," he said as she turned to leave.

"What, Kezule?"

"I just wanted to say I appreciate you not complaining over me spending nights away from here," he said awkwardly. "Sometimes I just need space."

"So long as you give me the same privileges, Kezule, I don't mind," she said. "You were honest, and made no secret of the fact our marriage was one of heritage, not love."

"You make me sound so... cold," he said, wincing. "I have great affection for you, and value you as a companion, I've told you that."

"True, but your affection doesn't keep me as warm as your Court ladies do you when I need company at night."

His face hardened slightly. "Not him. Anyone else, but not your Sholan. All I ask is that, and that you be discreet."

"I made no rules for you."

"No. There's too much past between us. You will not take him as a lover."

"I didn't say I wanted to," she said, turning away. "You can't keep holding the fact he brought you forward in time against him, Kezule. Even you have to admit that living now is preferable to the past you'd have faced on Shola. Had he left you there, as I understand it, you'd have been killed when the asteroid hit."

He was at her side in an instant. "That's irrelevant," he snapped, taking her by the arm. "You will not disobey me on this!"

"I didn't say I wanted him," she repeated, staring him down until he let her go. "We should get started on your scan," she said, walking toward the doorway.

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, Kezule sedated in the scanner chair in one of the sick bay cubicles, Zayshul and Ghidd'ah sat talking at the central nurses' station.

"I need your help with something," she said. "I want one of the Sholans seduced."

Ghidd'ah's eyes widened. "You want what?"

Zayshul laughed. "Dzaou," she said. "He's so obnoxious, and so xenophobic, it's time he got taught a lesson."

"You aren't suggesting I do it, I hope! He is obnoxious!"

"No, not just you. I need a group of you to start making him feel popular at the rec, and at the pool if he goes there. Especially the pool, because there, if the chance arises, several of you can... seduce him."

"Hmm. I don't think even curiosity about the Sholans will get anyone to actually want to couple with him."

"You never know. Finding himself apparently liked may well change his disposition," said Zayshul. "Even if it goes no further than flirting outrageously with him, it could help."

"Help whom?" asked Ghidd'ah shrewdly. "The Captain? Everyone knows Dzaou is a troublemaker. All he does is stalk around after the Captain, looking for opportunities to cause trouble."

"If he's being kept busy by some of you, all the less chance for him to do it," said Zayshul. "Will you help?"

Ghidd'ah sighed. "Maybe. If I can find another couple of willing people to help, but I'm not promising," she warned as Zayshul grinned and patted her on the shoulder.

"Thank you, Ghidd'ah."

\* \* \*

The result of the scan had worried Kezule, making it impossible for him to concentrate on monitoring traffic in and out of the landing bay. Leaving one of his sons in charge of flight control, he headed up to his office on the Command level. A cup of kheffa at his side and his feet propped up on the low table in front of him, he lit one of his smokes and tried to think through what the scan had shown him.

Many of his unanswered questions now had answers, and he wasn't sure he liked them. Foremost was why he'd instinctively chosen Zayshul as his mate. She carried the same anomalous small internal organs that he, as a Warrior caste male, did and the only reason they appeared vestigial and unused was because she didn't know how to use them. She was his natural mate, a female Warrior. Not just of that caste, but capable of being a fully active Warrior with all the extra speed and healing abilities he possessed. And there were more like her here on Kij'ik with him.

The dim memories and half-remembered dreams had coalesced into something concrete under the scan, something he didn't want to contemplate and which filled him with dread. But what he'd relived when he'd viewed the scan would not be quieted any longer. He had to face it, and now.

His memories of a past when they'd all been one people were accurate, up to a point. And it hadn't been as long ago as he'd thought, only five hundred years before his time. Yes, they had been one people, ruled by the females of that time, by a Queen with ambition and cruelty in her nature. Only the females had possessed the traits of the Warriors, which they'd

evolved to help them survive and breed on a hostile world. The males possessed none of these abilities. More, some of the females had also been telepathic.

He drew deep on his cheroot, letting the smoke fill his lungs, welcoming the calmative effect it had on him.

This Queen— he searched for her name— Kszafas, Queen Kszafas— hadn't been born close to the throne, but she had murdered and plotted her way there. Once on it, as in his day, she surrounded herself with those few of her family she trusted, and who feared her power. Ambition and arrogance had led her to expand the relatively peaceful Empire of her predecessor by adding nearly all the male population to her armies. Till then, they'd played a small part in any military action. When it became obvious that the males didn't survive as well, with the help of scientists from among the Valtegens and their allies, the six-limbed Hrana, the beginnings of the division of their people into the caste system had been initiated.

With their ability to mature early, it hadn't taken long. Once breeding centers had been set up, it took only three generations, then there had been Workers, Warriors, Intellectuals, and Drones— and the Empress and her chosen females. This accomplished, she turned her armies on her allies, the four species with whom they'd traded, including the Hrana. Why trade for what she had the power to take for nothing? And the Valtegan Empire had been born, and expanded to fill three colony worlds, worlds with more males than females because to Kszafas, only telepathic female Warriors had any value, and why waste them in wars of acquisition when they could use the males and keep her females for controlling them?

It had lasted for three hundred years, during which time the memories of how it had happened had dimmed, extinguished by royal decree for a more palatable past. In some families the memories had remained, hidden deep in the subconscious of the racial memory passed on to them when their mothers had licked their eggs.

He sat up, knocking the ash off his cheroot, and picked up his cup. The kheffa was cold and tasted bitter, but he ignored this, taking a large

mouthful anyway. The taste was less bitter than what else he'd discovered about his people's past.

The system under which he'd grown up had come about two hundred years before, when, under the charismatic leadership of one Warrior, on all four worlds simultaneously, the males had risen against the females, drugging and murdering them till few remained. The tables had then been reversed, with the surviving females drugged and kept in breeding harems, the memories of it this time systematically and efficiently all but obliterated.

This, then, was the true history of his people, the race he wanted to blend back into one caste with males and females living and working as equals.

What mischief could telepathic Warrior females create this time, he wondered darkly? No more than the Warriors of his time had done to them, came the quiet voice of his conscience, forcing him to remember the female given to him as his wife back in his own time.

She'd been feral because of the drugs she'd been constantly fed from the moment of her hatching. There had been no chance for any intelligence to develop or show under those circumstances. He remembered the Emperor's hatchery, where the eggs had to be taken from the females as soon as they'd hardened lest they eat them. Unbidden came the knowledge that the females were acting instinctively to protect their young from the harshness of the regime under which they existed— a regime that drugged them almost into insensibility for what was no more than legalized rape, that destroyed most of the female eggs, that threw male prisoners to them to kill, and treated them with callous indifference the rest of the time. A regime he'd fought not only to protect, but to expand onto other worlds.

He threw his mug across the room, shattering it against the far wall in anger. Would it be wise to awaken the memories of his people to such a past? At least the Primes were mentally further away from it than he was. Stubbing out his cheroot, he lay back in his chair, sickened at the thought of Zayshul, Zhalmo, or Shezhul in one of the harems of his time. Or worse, his daughter Mayza being killed because no female offspring of anyone in the royal family, save those of the Emperor himself, were allowed to live.

Suddenly he needed to see his daughter. Getting to his feet, he headed for the Officers' lounge where the children played during the day. The door slid open, and he entered, looking round the room for Mayza.

There were nine of them, some playing board games, others sitting at the table working with Shishu, his favorite from the Court.

She looked up at the sound of the door.

"Where's Mayza?" he demanded, still looking for the child among the others.

"Beside me," said Shishu, a puzzled look on her face as she sat back to let him see his daughter. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, striding over to her. Reaching down, he picked Mayza up, pleased as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Nothing's wrong," he said, letting his chin rest on her head, smelling her scent to reassure himself she was there and was real. "I'm taking her out for a while. We'll be back shortly," he said.

As he turned away, he saw Shaidan looking up at him and reached down briefly to touch the child's head. "Mayza will be back soon," he said.

He walked down to the main corridor, then along to the elevator with no real idea of where he was going.

"General," said M'zynal, as he stopped to wait for the elevator. "Anything wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just taking Mayza for a walk."

Once inside, with the doors closed, he pressed the button for the Officers level, knowing he needed to see Zayshul.

\* \* \*

He found her in the library, reading a printout with Kusac. They looked up as he entered.

"Is something wrong with Mayza?" she asked, instantly on her feet and coming toward him.

"She's fine," he reassured her, taking her by the arm and drawing her out into the corridor. "You'll excuse me, Captain, but I need to speak to Zayshul."

"Of course," said Kusac.

"What is it?" Zayshul asked, looking very worried. "What's happened?"

"When we're in your data room," he said.

As the door closed, she reached for Mayza, needing to make sure she was all right for herself.

"She's fine," said Kezule, passing her over and leaning against the edge of her desk. He hesitated. "I reviewed the scan," he said.

"You did? Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked, setting their daughter on the ground.

"More than," he said dryly. "I just needed to remind myself what's real."

Zayshul frowned at him. "You're not making much sense. Kusac and I need to talk to you, too. We found something you won't believe on that file he's been decoding."

"I found out how my people ended up as a male-only society," he said. "They tried to erase it from our racial memory, but there was enough still left for me to piece it together."

"You did? Kusac's found out something about a Queen who founded the Empire."

"I know. Queen Kszafas. I have memories of her, too."

"You have? That's great!"

"No, it's not. I wish I'd never known about it," he said. "When I realize I was part of it, that I helped keep the females drugged and in harems..."

"Kezule, you weren't responsible for the society in which you lived, remember that. You were only one person. How could you know what was going on?"

"I was given control over the Royal Hatchery on Shola, Zayshul! I was responsible for three of the Emperor's daughters— one of them my own wife!"

"Did you drug them?" she demanded.

"No, there was a doctor to see to that," he admitted.

"There you are. And what could you have done even if you had known?"

He sighed. "Nothing, I suppose, but when I think of you, or Mayza, living in those times..."

She leaned over to hold him close. "But we don't," she said quietly. "And you live here and now with us; forget the rest and remember only that."

"I'm not sure I can," he admitted, holding her close.

"You told me you had very little to do with any females in your time, either drones or your wife," she said. "If that's so then you have nothing to be ashamed of. What could you have done had you known? Reduced the females' drugs? They were the Emperor's daughters! You couldn't touch them, unless you wanted to die!"

"True." He let her go with a sigh. "Can you leave what you're doing? I want to spend some time with the two of you."



"Yes, of course. We could take Mayza up to the pool. She's never been there yet, neither have you."

"Then let's do that," he said, picking Mayza up again.

"We'd best tell Kusac and Shishu where we're going," she said as they left the data room.

\* \* \*

That night, still feeling the need for reassurance from his family, Kezule had wanted M'kou to dine with them in their suite. When the meal was over, he asked Zayshul what she planned to do that evening.

"Go to the rec room," she said. "It's about time I socialized occasionally instead of working in the evenings. And you?"

"I'm going to go over the file that Kusac has been working on. He sent a transcript of what he has so far to my office. I'll be back later tonight," he added before leaving.

Returning to the lounge after putting Mayza to bed, she found M'kou still there.

"The nurse is here," said M'kou, getting up. "She put Shaidan to bed for you. I was about to leave but she asked me to tell you Shaidan wanted to talk to you before you go."

Zayshul nodded. "Thank you. What are you doing this evening?"

"I'm actually off duty, so I plan to spend my time with Lazaik up in the pool," he said with a slow grin.

"Enjoy yourselves then," she said, waiting till he left before heading for Shaidan's room.

By the glow of the night-light, she could see him sitting on his haunches in the center of his bed, tail flicking slowly but rhythmically beside him. He looked up as she came in.

"What's the matter, Shaidan?" she asked, sitting down beside him. "Can't you sleep?"

He leaned against her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "You were upset last night."

Surprised, she hugged him back, pleased to see him show a spontaneous emotion. "No, I wasn't," she said. "I don't know what gave you that idea."

"I felt it, late last night. With my father. But you are happier now."

Her blood ran cold, and automatically, she reached up to his neck to check if he wore his collar. It was there, the metal warm with his body heat.

"I think it's your imagination, Shaidan," she said quietly. "You're wearing your collar, you can't possibly be picking up anything."

"I feel your mind sometimes, but only a little."

"I'm sure you think you do," she said, with a little laugh. "But you can't possibly."

He lifted his head to look up at her, amber eyes serious, ears tilted back slightly. "You don't wear a collar. I can hear you best when we touch. Your mind talks like mine, but you don't know it."

Stunned by his words, she could only stare at him. "What?" she finally managed to ask.

"Your mind is like mine, you can mind-speak."

"You're saying I'm a telepath?" she asked weakly. "That's impossible."

"No. The General wears a psi damper now because of you and the other females."

She unfastened his arms and sat back, studying his face carefully. "Shaidan, are you telling me the truth? Because it's very wrong to lie, especially about something like this." Even though she knew it was impossible for him to lie with the Directorate programming, she couldn't believe he was telling the truth.

"Vassals are not permitted to lie," the cub said.

It had to be true, then. "How do you know this?"

"I can tell when they touch me," he said. "And I've heard their thoughts when I've had my collar off. None of you use it to speak to each other, though."

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

He shook his head.

"Then keep it to yourself for now. If I asked you, could you write me a list of those who can mind-speak?"

"Yes."

"Is it only us females? Can any of the males do it?"

He shook his head. "Only females. You use your minds differently, that's why," he said, sliding up the bed to where the covers were rumpled. He yawned, putting his hand up to try and hide it. "May I sleep now?"

"Yes, of course," she said, getting up and helping him under the covers.

A thought struck her. "How can you hear your father's mind when he's not touching you?"

Shaidan curled up on his side, snuggling his face into the pillows. "He's my father. We share our blood."

A strange way to put it, she thought, stroking his head gently.

*Blood relatives.* The thought was there, in her mind, just as clear as if she had heard the words spoken.

"Did you say that?" she asked sharply.

*Yes,* came the sleepy answer. *It is so much easier than talking.*

She could feel herself mentally retreating from Shaidan as she said good night and left his room. Somewhere inside, she knew she was running round and round in circles, screaming in disbelief. What was she going to do? How could she find out if it was true? If? She laughed mockingly to herself. Shaidan had undisputably demonstrated to her that it was true! And for how long had Kezule known? She wished there was someone other than Shaidan she could talk to about this since she certainly couldn't talk to his father. It was cruel enough that Kusac had lost his abilities without making it worse for him by telling him she might well be a telepath herself and could hear his son.

Trying to put her worries out of her mind, she checked with the nurse then headed up to the rec room.

\* \* \*

In the corner of Shaidan's room, a shadow darker than the rest coalesced into the shape of a black-robed male. He moved to the side of the bed and bent down to stroke the cub's head.

"You did that well, little one," said Vartra. "Now sleep."

## **Rec room, that evening**

He was aware of her as soon as she entered and looked up to see her coming toward him.

"Now there's someone you don't usually see here," said his Second quietly, leaning on the table.

"What?" Kusac could feel how nervous she was, and how determined not to let it show. He prayed that her scent wouldn't start working on him in its usual fashion.

"The Doctor."

"May I join you?" she asked, stopping at their table.

"Of course," he said. "Jayza, would you get the Doctor a seat?"

"She can have mine," said the youth, vacating his. "Can I fetch you a drink, Doctor?"

"Thank you," she said, sitting down next to him. "Just an ale."

"I don't think I've seen you here before, Doctor," said Banner.

"Please, call me Zayshul," she said with a slight smile. "I'm usually busy in the labs in the evenings."

"Then you're definitely due some leisure time."

She looked around nervously. "What do you do in here?"

"Mostly talk," he said, realizing with relief that though very aware of her scent, it was still doing nothing more to him than make him feel relaxed in her presence, as it had earlier in the day. "With us all working in different areas now, we even have something to talk about."

Banner laughed. "It isn't that bad, Kusac. There are games we can play, too, Zayshul," he said. "Card games, or matching the marks on tiles, or strategy games with counters."

"Sounds quite interesting," she said.

"I'll challenge you to a game of squares later, if you like," he said quickly, aware that Banner was about to offer.

"I'd like that," she said as Jayza returned with her drink. Behind him stood two of the civilian females, obviously waiting for him.

"Captain, do you mind if I..."

He gestured with his hand. "Go. Have fun," he said with a slight smile.

"You know," said Banner thoughtfully, watching the set of Jayza's tail and ears as he went off to another table with them, "I think that he'll win their bet."

Zayshul choked on her drink and even he had to grin as he automatically began to thump her back.

"Enough!" she coughed, turning aside from his hand. "You know about that?"

"Of course," said Banner, picking up his glass. "It's quite a natural thing to do. We would. In fact, I've taken a wager myself with Lorish. Though I'm a bit unsure as to what I was betting or what the payout for the winners is."

"Mess privileges, Ghidd'ah said. But they're also using the fictional credits we hope to have when we do introduce a monetary system," she replied, taking a more cautious sip of her drink.

"You need to have money and goods to sell before you can do that," he said. "You're some way off from that, I'm afraid."

"I know. Don't you mind about him going off with our females?" she asked Banner. "You don't think it... betrays your own kind?"

Banner glanced briefly at him before answering her. "Why would you think that? The Captain and I discussed it and decided it was up to each individual to decide for himself."

"No reason," she said, flustered.

Khadui and Dzaou took that moment to arrive, pulling empty chairs up to the table and joining them.

"Doctor," said Khadui with a polite nod to her as he put his glass down on the table.

Dzaou was busy taking a drink from his glass as he sat down. He'd hardly taken it from his mouth when Ghidd'ah approached him, tapping him on the arm.

Startled, he looked up at her.

"Captain," she said, "you don't mind if we borrow Brother Dzaou, do you? We need him to settle an argument for us."

"Be our guest," he said.

Ghidd'ah wrapped her hand round Dzaou's arm and gently urged him out of his seat as she began to regale him with some details of the argument, which centered round Sholan tails.

Puzzled, he glanced at Banner, who shrugged.

"Tails?" said Khadui, shaking his head as he watched Dzaou dragged off to a table where three other females, including Shezhul, one of Kezule's daughters, sat. "I can't think of a more boring topic."

"I wouldn't say that," murmured Banner. "I'd say the running on those bets just increased."

"Dzaou?" he said incredulously. "You think they're making up to Dzaou?"

"He's not exactly known for his subtlety, is he?" said Banner. "One could almost think his emotional behavior betrayed a passionate nature, if one didn't know him."

Khadui grunted, but then grinned. "Ah, now wouldn't that be a turn up for the books! I just hope they don't come after me, that's all. I have no interest in these females— no offense, Doctor," he added hastily.

"None taken," said Zayshul, obviously enjoying the banter. "What about you, Lieutenant? Have you been approached yet?"

Banner gave a slow smile. "I prefer to make my own choices," he said. "As I'm sure the Captain would."

He smiled neutrally, continuing to watch Dzaou. "He sat down with them," he said. "I am surprised."

"It's amazing what a little flattering female company can achieve, Kusac," said Zayshul.

Catching her reference, he glanced at her, keeping his ears from folding back in embarrassment with an effort. "Doubtless," he said, "but not even that will cut through his xenophobia."

She leaned toward him. "Tell me, what caused Dzaou's hatred of any but his own kind?"

"He was held prisoner by another species many years ago," he replied.

"Males or females?"

"Males."

"Ah," she said, sitting back. "Then you're wrong. It can still work. Every male likes his ego massaged, and we females, no matter our species, have ways of doing it that are difficult to deny. We can be very persuasive."

Banner laughed aloud at this and raised his glass to her. "Doctor Zayshul, all I can say is I am glad you're not after me! May Vartra have mercy on Dzaou! He's in for a rough time!"

"It's a compliment," he said in a low voice to her as, unsure, she glanced at him.

As the evening wore on, Dzaou, surprisingly, remained with Ghidd'ah and the others.



He waited for a moment when Banner had gone to chat briefly with Lorish, and Khadui had gone to the bar to fetch more drinks.

"Shaidan had his hair braided today," he said.

Zayshul looked at him. "I know, I saw it tonight when I put him to bed. I thought it looked very nice. Shishu was working with the children today, she did it. Do you have a problem with it? If I remember, one of your people on the *Kz'adul* had hair that was braided."

"No, I rather liked it too," he said. "T'Chebbi. It was T'Chebbi, she braids her hair."

"Ah, is it a female thing?"

"No. Some of us wear it braided," he said. "I just never have."

"You should, with your long hair," she said with a slight smile. "You and your son are so alike."

Surprised, he sat there for a moment then picked up his glass. "How did Shishu know how to braid? It isn't as if you have hair yourselves."

"Of course, you don't know her, do you? She's one of Kezule's young females, from the Royal Court," she said. "They often wear elaborately braided headdresses made from exotic fabrics."

"Did you mix much in the Court?"

"Only immediately after my marriage," she said, looking down at her hands. "The Empress took a liking to me." She looked up, another slight smile on her lips. "Like Kezule, I liked the person, but not the Court."

"Was that why Kezule left?" he asked, putting his now empty glass back down.

"That and the fact he didn't appreciate them harvesting him to create one hundred children."

He raised an eye ridge. "I knew all the military personnel were his offspring, but I didn't realize there were so many."

"Most of them he left on our home world to act as the Emperor's bodyguard."

"Then he really did leave because he didn't want to attract another uprising?"

"How did you know that?" she asked as Banner rejoined them.

"Know what?" asked his Second, easing into his seat.

"Why Kezule left K'oish'ik," he said. "Your Ambassador asked our government to keep an eye out for the *N'zishok* and tell them if we saw it. Seems the Emperor wants Kezule back and disagrees he'd be a focus for dissidents."

"And your government agreed to this?" she asked, the shock obvious in her voice.

"They had no reason to refuse," he said. "I was asked to find out why he really left. Had we decided it was better to not inform your Emperor, then we wouldn't. As it was, when I returned to Haven, I had nothing to report about Kezule's reasons for leaving." He looked at Banner.

"My report said you'd returned here at Kezule's request to retrieve a final cub after you'd trained his people," said Banner. "I had no more information than that to give. Only Kusac had the coordinates for the rendezvous."

"No one will be looking for us," he said. "They're preparing for war with the M'zullians."

"Which is another reason we need to get back on schedule," said Banner. "Pleasant as it is here."

"Kezule will keep his word," she said slightly stiffly. "Once he's given it, and he has."

As Khadui returned with the tray of drinks and began putting them on the table, he hand-signaled Banner to change the conversation to something neutral.

"How's the decoding going, Kusac?" Banner asked casually, thanking Khadui with a nod as he picked up his fresh glass.

"It's a text, a story about a Queen who, as far as I can tell, is responsible for the Valtegan Empire."

"Queen Kszafas," said Zayshul.

"A Queen?" said Khadui, resuming his seat. "I thought theirs was an all male culture."

"Not always," said Zayshul. "I'm sure your Captain told you the General wishes to return our people to being one integrated species, with no castes."

Khadui nodded. "I expect he did. I just follow orders, Doctor," he said with an openmouthed grin. "I don't bother with the whys of them. Will this text end up in the data banks for us to read like the other ones?"

"It should," said Zayshul.

The conversation became more general after that and just as he and Banner decided to call it a night, they noticed Jayza slipping out with the two females he'd spent the evening with.

"I doubt he'll sleep alone tonight," said Banner with a grin, getting up.

"He'll enjoy himself," he said, pushing his chair back. "I'm sure," he added in the small silence that followed.

"Would you like me to walk you to the elevator?" he offered Zayshul as they headed out into the corridor.

"There's no need," she said with a smile. "Good night." She nodded to the three of them then disappeared in the opposite direction from the one they were taking.

"An interesting person," said Khadui. "It's the first chance I've had to talk to her. You knew her before, Captain?"

"Yes. We met on the *Kz'adul*. She treated me there and at Haven," he said.

"She's the kind of female that would interest me," said Banner lazily.

He glanced at his Second, feeling something akin to resentment that he should even think that and realized, as their eyes met, that he'd fallen for the bait. Looking away, he said nothing.

When they came to the small corridor that led to his and Banner's quarters, Khadui wished them good night and walked on down to his own room. He turned toward his door only to feel Banner take hold of his arm.

"I'd like a word if I may," his Second said quietly.

"Would tomorrow do?" he asked, keying open his door. "I'm tired."

"No, now, if you don't mind."

He stood aside for Banner to enter.

"Can I offer you a drink?" he asked, walking over to the dispenser, deciding to make the best of it. "Coffee or kheffa?"

"No, thanks," said Banner, following him in. "It won't take long."

He turned round, perching on one of the tall stools at the meal bar. "What is it, Banner?"

"Is there anything between you and the Doctor?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because I know the signs. Both of you are skittish around each other. Was there anything between you on the *Kz'adul*?"

"I wasn't exactly in any physical condition for anything like that," he said.

"That's not a factor, and you know it isn't. All I'm going to say is it isn't wise to pursue a relationship with her, given she's Kezule's wife."

"I know she is," he said, irritated. "I also know theirs is the equivalent of a Clan marriage."

"Kusac," he said warningly. "You know the danger that could cause. We're here to do a job. A fling with one of their willing females is one thing, but an affair with her is something else, particularly since she's..."

"Stop right there!" he said angrily, sliding off the stool. "I don't intend to jeopardize my reason for being here, namely finishing this job and taking Shaidan home. You've had your say, now leave it at that."

Banner sighed. "Just remember that, Kusac, that's all I'm asking," he said, turning to leave.

## Chapter 11

THE beeping of his wrist comm finally woke Banner. As he turned it on, he looked at the time. "Banner," he acknowledged.

"I'm outside," whispered a young voice. "Let me in, please, Banner. I need your help."

He squinted at the face, trying to make out who it was. "Jayza?" he hazarded, going by the voice.

"Yes! Please, Banner! Before Dzaou hears me!"

"Do you realize what time it is?" he asked, getting out of bed and padding across to the door to open it. "It's the middle of the night!" He switched off his comm.

"I know," said Jayza, slipping in. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't stop it myself."

"Stop what? This better be important, Jayza," he growled, switching on the light.

Jayza, ears lying back against his skull in acute embarrassment, stood there unclothed, one hand holding a towel to his shoulder, a slightly red-stained towel.

"What've you done to yourself?" he asked, instantly taking him by the arm and steering him through to the small bathing room at the rear.

"It was an accident," Jayza said hastily as Banner pushed him under the light and lifted the towel away. "She didn't do it to harm me, I'm sure of that."

He looked up from inspecting the mouth-shaped punctures on the youth's shoulder. "She? Don't tell me this is a love bite?" He raised his eye ridges in disbelief.

"Yes," he said, hanging his head as Banner began to chuckle. "We couldn't stop it bleeding," he added hurriedly, "and she knows nothing about first aid, so..."

"You woke me." He reached into the cabinet for his antiseptic. "What happened?" he asked, dabbing some on a clean part of the towel, and commencing to pat it onto the bites.

"Ouch!"

"Stop squirming, youngling," he said sternly, applying pressure to the wounds.

"Everything was fine until..." He ground to a halt, looking up at Banner for help.

"Until?" prompted Banner, deciding that Jayza needed to suffer for dragging him out of bed at this time of night.

Jayza sighed and looked away, knowing he'd get no help from the older male. "Until she came," he said. "Then she went kind of wild, scratching and biting at me till she really sank her teeth into my shoulder."

"She did, eh?" he said, lifting the towel to check if the bleeding had stopped. It had, and handing him the towel, he reached for the can of wound sealant and began spraying it over the affected area. "Well, learn from it, lad," he chuckled. "Next time, keep her head away from you."

"How?" he asked, peering at the wounds on his shoulder and gingerly touching the film forming over it.

Banner smacked his hand away. "Don't touch it! You'll stop it setting. Be inventive. Use your hands to keep her away, Jayza," he said, turning away from him to replace the sealant in the cupboard and shut it. He grinned widely, showing his teeth. "And you don't always need to be face-to-face with her."

"Oh." His ears, which had lifted upright, sank down again.

"Right. Thanks, Banner," he mumbled, backing out into the main room.

"So where is she?" Banner asked, switching off the light and following him. "Gone back to her own room?"

"No, she's waiting to see I'm all right," he said, face breaking into a grin. "She wants to stay till morning."

"Go!" said Banner, exasperated, pointing to the door. "And if she bites you again, don't come to me! And put out the light!"

"I won't," he assured him as he turned to leave. "And she won't!"

Still chuckling, he crawled back into bed. Then it occurred to him that he now had a way, albeit not conclusive, of finding out if Kusac was indeed closer to the Doctor than he admitted. Something was going on between them, he was sure of it.

As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered how Dzaou had fared, and if the Doctor had put her friend Ghidd'ah up to tonight's little performance. Maybe finding himself the focus of some female attention might do Dzaou some good. More likely L'Shoh's frozen hell would thaw first.

## **The pool, Zhal-L'Shoh 5th day (January)**

The next evening, Kusac went up to the pool as arranged earlier in the day, to meet with Zayshul and some of her friends. He made his way onto the island, turning left once he reached the main clearing. As he passed beneath the trees, he saw the small beach area ahead of him. Ghidd'ah was there, as well as three others, two of whom he vaguely recognized from the training sessions.

"Captain!" said Ghidd'ah, spotting him first. "You found us. How do you like the pool? This is your first visit, isn't it?"

"Amazing place," he said, looking around. It was the first time he'd seen this section. Opposite, some twenty feet away, was another, wider beach



area. Like this one, it was bordered by grass and shrubs, and scattered with cushions and padded mats.

"Sit here," said Ghidd'ah, patting an empty cushion at the edge of their group. "We've brought some wine and fruit with us. Help yourself," she said, pointing to the glasses and plates.

"A picnic," he said, sitting down and putting his towel to one side. "Nice."

Zayshul poured a glass of wine and handed it to him.

"Thank you," he said.

Knowing that they bathed naked, he'd been concerned that he'd respond to Zayshul's nearness, but she'd assured him that the odor-masking chemicals now in the pool water would help suppress the effects of even the scent marker. She'd been right. Their nearness to the water, and the presence of the others, were enough to let him relax. Nonetheless, he was pleased to see that they all wore something like a scarf draped round their waists and tied over one hip.

"I don't think you know everyone," said Zayshul.

"You know me," smiled Ghidd'ah.

He nodded. "From the sick bay," he said. "You work with the Doctor."

"No titles, please!" said one, lying sprawled on her cushion. She sat up, holding out her hand to him. "I'm Shishu. I work with the children."

"Shishu," he said, taking her hand in his. It was slim, and for a Prime, delicate, the nails cut quite short and engraved with blue-painted intricate swirls that matched the predominantly blue hues around her eyes and on her body. "You're from the Royal Court, aren't you?"

"You've heard of me?" she said with a grin as he released her hand. "Yes, I was."

"This is Khiozh."

"Hello," said a round-faced female. "What should we call you, Captain?"

"Kusac," he said. This one's markings were more reddish, he noticed.

"And I'm Na'qui," said the last, her markings toward the green shades. "I doubt you'll remember me, Kusac, but I helped Zayshul look after you on the *Kz'adul*."

He smiled politely. "I remember very little of my time there," he said.

"More like you want to forget it," said Khiozh, reaching for a piece of the cut fruit.

"We're all very relieved that you haven't held what happened to you against us."

"Enough about that," said Zayshul sharply. "Let the past stay there. We invited Kusac here to enjoy himself."

"I wouldn't have thought a furred species would like the water," said Ghidd'ah.

He took a sip of the wine, finding it a little bitter, and put the glass down carefully in the sand. "I live by the coast," he said. "I grew up swimming in the bay there in the summer."

"Then you'll enjoy swimming here."

"Did you bring Shaidan's brush and comb, Zayshul?" asked Shishu.

Zayshul reached into a small bag that he noticed beside her and drew the items out.

"What's that for?" he asked suspiciously as she handed them to Shishu.

"I enjoyed plaiting Shaidan's hair, and when he told me that you'd liked his, I said I'd do yours tonight," she said, getting to her feet in a move so fluid that a Consortia would have been proud of it.

"I don't think so," he began.

"Don't be a killjoy, Kusac," she said teasingly, moving round him and sitting down behind him. "You're here to relax, and brushing Shaidan's hair nearly put him to sleep. Besides, he's expecting it to be done tomorrow. You wouldn't want to disappoint him, would you?"

"Have some fruit," said Zayshul with a laugh, holding the plate in front of him as Shishu began running the brush through his hair.

"With such long hair, it will only get in your eyes when you're swimming," said Na'qui. "Besides, we want to know how to plait like Shishu. She's going to teach us how to do the head decorations they used at the Court."

He took a piece of fruit just to get rid of the plate from in front of him, beginning to wonder what he'd let himself in for by agreeing to join them.

"It's moving!" exclaimed Khiozh. "Your tail's moving!"

He stilled it, realizing he'd been flicking the tip in irritation.

"Don't be such a stupid," said Shishu, starting to comb his hair into sections. "Of course he can move his tail, it's attached to him!"

"How was I to know?" Khiozh asked scathingly. "He's always wearing that long black robe! I've never seen his tail before. Or the rest of him," she added, looking him over appreciatively.

"My view's pleasant, too," said Shishu with a small laugh. "You should wear a tunic like the others of your crew do, Kusac."

He could feel her plaiting his hair now and it suddenly, and painfully, reminded him of his early days with Carrie. "I prefer my robes," he said, hearing the strain in his own voice.

"Stop teasing him," said Zayshul. "Tell us about your world, Kusac. What do your people do for entertainment?"

"Many things," he said. "We have large game forests on Shola where we hunt in the right season. Eating is a social pleasure so there are many good restaurants. We have Storytellers' theaters where we go to hear professional Storytellers tell their tales."

"That sounds interesting," said Na'qui, stretching out on her cushion. "Do you have set stories— legends— that they tell, or do they make new ones of their own?"

"Some do, some just tell other people's. Those who invent their own tales tend to be the most famous ones."

"I like the sound of the restaurants," said Khiozh. "The food here isn't very interesting."

"It's better now we have fresh meat occasionally, and the meat vats are growing from real protein," said Shishu, starting on a new section of hair.

"True," agreed Zayshul. "The mush we had at first was awful."

He felt a hand on his tail and looked down. It was Khiozh.

"You were moving it again," she said, running her hand up it. "Your fur is very soft."

He put his hand on hers to stop her. "You're brushing it against the lay," he said. "Please don't. It's painful."

"Sorry," she said, grinning as she moved her hand from under his and stroked down it this time. "What do you use your tails for?"

He flicked it out of her reach across his legs. "What's with the interest in tails?" he asked, exasperated. "Ghidd'ah, you dragged Dzaou off last night to ask him about that."

"Well," she said, her face taking on a mischievous look. "For starters, we don't have them. And until very recently, you've all kept very much to yourselves. No one has been close enough to you to either ask you, or to do what we've all been dying to do, which is touch you."

He caught sight of Zayshul's *I told you so* look, and sighed. Holding out his arm, he said resignedly, "Go ahead, get it over with."

"Kusac," Zayshul said, "are you sure?"

"Yes. Go on," he said to Ghidd'ah while looking around at the rest of them. "I won't bite you, I promise." He grinned widely, showing off his canines.

"Very soft," said Khiozh, reaching out to stroke his arm gently.

"It is, isn't it?" said Ghidd'ah, taking the next turn.

"I'll pass," laughed Na'qui. "I remember it from looking after you as I said."

Raising an eye ridge, he held his arm out to Zayshul.

She hesitated, then stroked him, too.

From behind, he felt a light touch across his shoulders— Shishu.

"Mm," she said, her voice almost a purr. "I could get to like that."

"About the tails," prompted Khiozh.

"We use them for balance," he said. "And to communicate."

"How?"

"Too complicated to tell you," he said. "But the angle we hold our tails at, whether they are still or moving, how fast it's moving, and whether we're moving the tip or more of it, all tells something about the mood we're in."

"And flicking the tip means irritated," said Zayshul.

"You've been reading again," he said with a grin.

"No, just working with you," she replied, taking a sip of her wine. "Tell us some more about the things to do on your world. We don't go outside the City of Light on ours."

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous," she said. "The City survived the Fall, but there were civil wars outside. Order of a kind was restored, of course, but there are large areas that are still unsafe."

"Our world is arranged in Clans. We have the fishing Clan who catch the fish, and the town beside them is there to serve their needs, so it sells items the fishers need. Same goes for boat-building clans and farming clans. So we can go sailing, or there are riding beasts, or climbing in the mountains." He shrugged. "There's so much to do, it's difficult to know where to begin."

"It sounds a nice world," sighed Khiozh. "I'd like to visit it sometime."

"Who knows?" he said. "One day you might. Your Prime Prince may still be there."

"Tell us one of your stories," said Na'qui. "One that isn't on the entertainment vids we can see."

"I'm not a Storyteller," he said.

"But anyone can tell a story."

"Not the way it should be told."

"Try," urged Ghidd'ah.

By the time he'd told them a tale of Nylam, the Hunter God, finding the love of his life, Shishu had finished with his hair.

"Do I get to see it?" he asked, putting his hand back to feel the intricate braids.

"Mirror," said Shishu, holding her hand out to Zayshul, who produced one from her bag.

He couldn't see it that well, but it looked pleasing and, more importantly, didn't bind when he moved. She'd made several small braids then bound them round each other and tied them off with some cord. On the whole, he was pleased with it.

He handed the mirror back to Zayshul. "Thank you," he said. He glanced at his wrist comm, seeing it was quite late. "I think I'll have a swim then turn in for the night," he said, getting up. "Thank you for your company. I've enjoyed it." He was surprised to find he had.

Zayshul got up. "I'll come with you," she said.

The warm water was pleasant against his pelt and skin as he waded out into it. He didn't have far to walk until it was deep enough for swimming. Striking out for the middle of the small channel, he sensed Zayshul keeping pace beside him and began to swim to his left toward a small headland.

Once out of sight of their small cove, he stopped and treaded water, waiting for her to do the same.

"Banner's suspicious of us," he said in a low voice.

"How can he be?" she asked.

"He says we're reacting to each other. We need to be careful."

"Then tonight should have helped deflect his suspicion because there were many of us."

"Maybe."

"There's not a lot we can do," she said.

"We'd better swim back," he said. "The more we're in plain sight, the safer we are."

"Agreed," she said, letting herself rise in the water again before starting to swim back.

He followed her, aware of enjoying watching her body sheering efficiently through the water. Landing at the other side of the sandy cove to the amusement of the group, he shook himself, getting rid of the water in his pelt before going back to them to get his towel.

Giving himself a cursory rub, he slung the towel over his shoulder. "Thank you again for your company and the picnic. Good night," he said.

### **Zhal-L'Shoh 6th day (January)**

He banged on Banner's door the next morning.

"Ready," said Banner, automatically opening the door without looking as he grabbed something from one side before leaving. Then he realized it was Kusac. "Something wrong?" he asked, sealing his door.

"No. Just thought we could walk down to the mess together," he said.

"Sure."

"Weren't you expecting someone?" Kusac asked, hesitating.

"Not really. Sometimes one or the other of them bangs on my door first thing, that's all."



"Did you go to the rec last night?" he asked as they began to walk.

"Yes. Didn't see you there."

"No, I went up to the pool to join the Doctor and some of her friends," he said. "An amazing place. Not at all what you expect of the Valtegens."

"That's what I was saying the other day," said Banner. "Is the pool there because of the TeLaxaudin or the Primes? That wasn't restocked in a few weeks."

He glanced at his Second. "Zayshul told me that the TeLaxaudin have been friends of her people since their Fall. None of them are concerned about how the pool was ready for them."

"I'd be worried if I were them."

He shrugged. "Not our problem," he said.

"Don't you think it strange that they have so much influence over the Primes?"

"I haven't been aware of it. Aren't you being a little paranoid, Banner? There's only one of them here and he spends most of his time up in hydroponics."

"Maybe you're right. I just thought it odd that no one seems to be concerned about it."

\* \* \*

They'd barely started their meal when Khadui and Dzaou arrived, followed a few minutes later by Jayza.

"Morning," said Khadui, joining them.

"What's with the hair?" asked Dzaou, sliding his tray onto the table. "You didn't do that yourself."

"It keeps it tidy," he said, spearing some meat on his fork. "And no, I didn't. Shaidan's nurse did it when I was up at the pool last night."

"Good morning," said Jayza, smothering a yawn as he grabbed the nearest chair. "Like the hair, Captain. Shishu do it? Wonder if she could do mine."

"Ask her."

"A second late night, Jayza?" asked Banner with a humorous glance in his direction. "Who was it last night?"

"Shezhul," the youth answered, taking a large mouthful of kheffa. "Same as the night before."

"One of Kezule's daughters," grunted Dzaou. "Just be careful what you say to her."

"Jayza's neither stupid nor inexperienced," he said. "Anyone got anything to report about the salvage work?"

"Lots of bodies where we are at present," said Khadui. "Mostly killed by their own weapons. The Primes move them, though, they don't ask us to do it."

"Any sign of Sholan casualties?"

"Were there any on the *Zan'droshi*?" asked Banner.

"Must have been at least one, why else would they have fought each other?" said Khadui.

"Likely he— or she— would have been near the bridge," said Jayza, "and we're nowhere near that part of the ship."

"Kezule has us pressing toward the main fighter bay," said Banner. "What about you? Anything interesting from all the data they found?"

"Actually, yes," he said. "As I said, I'm working on a very old and damaged text file. A story from the days when Kezule's species were ruled by the Queen who founded their Empire."

"A Queen? That alone is interesting. Tell us more," said Banner.

"I've not descrambled much, but enough to know the beginnings of it." He glanced at his wrist comm. "There isn't time for much. It's in the usual Valtegan heroic mold. The Queen, against great odds and plots against her life, triumphs and takes the throne. She sets her faithful female warriors as her royal guard, pressing more males into military service."

"Female warriors? A complete reversal of what they had in Kezule's day," said Banner thoughtfully.

"What could possibly have happened to reverse their society so completely?" asked Khadui.

"The text isn't clear on that because of the sections that have been destroyed. But it does say that she started breeding the males into better warriors, and from that point on, her society was divided into the castes that existed in Kezule's time, except that it was still a matriarchy."

"Perhaps there were less female births because of some genetic damage through her breeding program," said Banner.

"That wouldn't turn it into a male-ruled society," said Khadui, chewing on his piece of bread. "The only thing that would account for that would be civil war."

"A *gender* war, so bitter that the females were reduced to slavery," he said, nodding. "That's what I'm expecting to find, and hopefully the reason for it."

"The Queen was evil?" suggested Jayza.

"It would take more than that," he said. "Remember, a whole world, if not four, all became dominated by their males."

"Maybe it didn't happen all at once," said Khadui.

"Maybe I was right when I said helping Kezule was a bad idea," said Dzaou, wiping his bread round his plate to get the last morsels of food.

"Don't start that again," said Banner sharply, glancing at the wall clock. "If Kezule wanted power, why leave his home world where he had the perfect opportunity to take it? What he's setting up here isn't a power base in the usual sense."

"Isn't it?" said Dzaou, staring at him, bread poised partway to his mouth. "Tell me that again after he's got those fighters all repaired and fueled up in the fighter bays here."

"Who's he going to attack, Dzaou?" he asked quietly. "Kij'ik isn't going anywhere, and it isn't near anyplace strategically important to us or them."

Dzaou shrugged and looked away. "I hope you prove me wrong," he said.

A burst of laughter from the nearby Primes' table drew their attention and as they looked up, one of the civilian males made a friendly gesture in their direction.

Jayza made a strangled noise somewhere between a whimper and a grunt and turned back to his food, ears flattening as Banner began to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" asked Dzaou, looking from one to the other of them.

"Nothing much," said Banner. "Jayza just won a bet for me."

"I thought that had been won yesterday," Kusac said, grinning as Jayza kept his head down and began shoveling the food into his mouth.

"Not mine," said Banner cryptically, taking a drink of his kheffa.

The klaxon went off to signify the start of the first shift. Picking up his tray, Kusac got to his feet. "I'll see you all later," he said. "Jayza, a word, please?"

"Yes, Captain," said the youth, ears still only at half height as he came round to his side of the table.

He waited till the others had left the table before speaking. "You need to get enough sleep to cope with the day's work," he said quietly, holding him briefly by the shoulder. "You're working in suits in a vacuum, there's no margin for errors caused by tiredness. If you can't stay alert today, tell Banner and get sent back to the Outpost, you hear me?"

Jayza nodded, ears flattening. "Yes, Captain. Sorry. It won't happen again."

"See it doesn't or you'll find yourself on a punishment detail. You're putting other lives at risk as well as your own."

The youth nodded, and executing a crisp salute, went off to return his tray.

Banner was waiting for him and accompanied him up to the main corridor until they came to the library.

"What was your bet?" he asked, intrigued.

"That? Oh," he grinned. "That Jayza would be the first one seduced, and that he'd be with the same female for a second night."

He laughed, genuinely amused at his Second's perception.

"I'll keep an eye on Jayza, don't worry," Banner said more seriously, stopping for a moment. "You're acting more like your old self, Kusac. It's good to have you back."

He watched his Second disappear through the iris and down the remainder of the corridor to the main elevator, well aware that he was wrong. Nothing about him was as it had once been, and he didn't need the reminder of her scent as she came up behind him to tell him that.

"Good morning," Zayshul said. "I take it from your and Banner's good moods that your hair didn't attract undue attention."

"On the contrary," he said, turning round. "Jayza wants his done the same way."

Zayshul laughed. "Shishu will be pleased. She said braiding hair is a very sensual experience for her, more satisfying than braiding material for headdresses."

He raised an eye ridge at her questioningly, glad to note that her scent, though he found it attracting him to her as usual, was still tolerable.

"Oh, there's no harm in her, she likes Kezule too much."

He pressed open the door to the library. "And that doesn't bother you?"

She shook her head. "We both need our own space, and he isn't completely comfortable living with me."

"I'm continuing working on that text," he said, going in. "What are you doing?"

"Is that an invitation?" she asked very quietly.

He glanced up at her, seeing the glint of humor in her eyes. "Not today," he said.

"Still wading through the entertainment vids," she said, making a face. "I'm running them at double speed once I've seen the first few minutes because so far, they're all from Kezule's immediate era, nothing older."

"Any newscasts?"

"Not yet. I just get them stacked randomly in boxes. They didn't have the time to catalog them as they were in the *Zan'droshi*. It's a matter of luck what I have in each box."

"If they're labeled, you might be better sorting them first," he said, sitting down at his row of screens. "I'd offer to help, but I need to get on with this."

"You're not using your own comp now?" she asked.

"M'kou loaded my program into your main computer. Saves me carting it about each day."

She nodded, moving casually between him and the large vid com screen that dominated the wall to his right.

He felt her hand rest on his shoulder, and slip beneath the braids to touch his neck.

"We should meet again in a day or two," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "Shaidan told me that he can sense it when we row."

"He can't possibly. He's wearing a psi damper," he whispered, shocked.

"He can. He says it's because of your blood link."

*It's more, he thought. How could he be that powerful a receiver at his age?* "You're right," he said. "We mustn't leave it too long."

She slid her hand away and moved back toward the door. "I'll see you for lunch in the mess as usual, then," she said.

"Yes."

## **Officers' level Briefing Room, Zhal-L'Shoh 13th day (January)**

"Coffee for you, Captain," said the server, putting a tray with a large, sealed jug, whitener and sweetener down between him and Banner.

He nodded his thanks and was reaching for one of the bowl-shaped cups when a plate of stew and various fresh vegetables was placed in front of him.

"Looks like our foods are catching on," murmured Banner from his right.

He gave a grunt of agreement and finished making his drink.

"I've called this meeting to informally assess our resources, or lack of them," said Kezule from his seat at the head of the table. "Eat," he said, looking around the small group of seven. "It's a lunch meeting to save time. Lirtosh, as civilian leader, how have your resources improved, what do you need?"

Lirtosh was one of the Primes who hadn't taken well to any military training, he remembered, glancing across the table at the round-faced young male. He was one of the very few who seemed to run to what could only be called plump for his people.

"We have more entertainment vids," Lirtosh said round a mouthful of food. "If you can call heroic military legends entertaining, no offense, General."

"None taken," said Kezule, the edges of his mouth twitching. "I didn't consider them much of an entertainment in my own time."

"And we got the training construction kits, some of which are useful for the children and one or two of the adults."

"Training construction kits?" Kusac asked, putting his fork down to take a drink.

Lirtosh looked over at him. "Kits of components for making basic reader pads, communicators, that kind of thing. They were used to teach the military extra skills in their leisure time."

He nodded. "Good idea."

"Again of limited use, General. We also have more in the way of furnishings, though the materials won't last long— time has taken its toll on them." Lirtosh stopped to shovel another forkful of food into his mouth.



"The crates of drinks were fine, and we now have a good supply of playing cards, board and tabletop games for the rec areas, and some books— again military heroic stuff. Talking of which, can we utilize the M'zullian rec room now that they are no longer with us? It's ideal for the larger games."

Kezule nodded. "I'll have it opened up and life support restored to it and the ancillary facilities there."

"As to our needs, they can't be supplied from the *Zan'droshi*, General. We need clothing and toys for the children, and for ourselves. We need fabrics to replace those that are disintegrating on the furniture, sewing items like thread, needles, and bedding, towels— and decent entertainment vids."

Kezule glanced at M'kou, who was scribbling furiously on a sheet of paper. "You eat, too," he admonished his son.

M'kou reached for his fork, scooping up some food which he managed to get most of into his mouth. "Sorry," he mumbled, picking up the small amount of greens that had fallen on his paper.

He watched Zayshul, sitting next to Kezule on his right, shoot him a look that plainly told him to say nothing.

"M'zynal?" the General asked quietly, returning to eating his own food.

"We're fine," said the Security chief from where he sat beside Banner. "Power packs and chargers arriving with only a little work needing to be done on them. Vehicle fuel was stored in vacuum containers and those we've tested are usable. Engineers are still working on the laser and missile turrets we found adjacent to the fighter flight bay. I'm hoping we can salvage as many as possible of them. I want a team checking out the meson cannon on the *Zan'droshi*. We need to strip it for parts for ours."

"We can't reach the cannon," said Kezule. "The main elevator shaft is blocked and we haven't got access to the drop shafts for the gunners yet. It's on the agenda."

"If you plan on moving the fighters over here, we'll have to take time off to clear the fighter deck first. There's a mess of broken and damaged loading gantries as well as several vehicles."

"We haven't the personnel to spare," said M'kou, looking up from his plate.

"Leave that for now," said Kezule, pushing his empty plate aside and helping himself to the jug of kheffa. "Zayshul, what's the status of medical and the labs?"

"We're slowly running out of medical supplies," she said. "The personal first aid kits you found would be great if I had anything to replace the out-of-date contents. All the drugs and consumables like dressings are so old I daren't use them. We've got some useful items, though, like small portable scanners and some surgical tools. Like the civilian side, we could do with more bedding and towels. Oh, and other consumables like soap, washing powder, that kind of thing. At our present rate, we have enough supplies for maybe two months."

Kezule looked round the group again. "Anything else?" he asked.

"Yes, paper goods," said Zayshul. "We need them for a variety of purposes— drawing, writing, our festivals."

"You need to trade," said Kusac, pushing his empty plate to one side. "Have you anything to offer in exchange for the goods you need?"

"That's why you're here," said Kezule.

"Apart from needing someone to trade with, you need to be able to offer goods, services, or money," Kusac said. "Have you any of these?" He looked at Lirtosh. "Trade comes under civilian affairs."

"We have found some money on the *Zan'droshi*," admitted Kezule, "but it's the coin of my Empire, not in use even on the Prime world."

"What's it made of?" asked Banner. "If the metal is valuable, it may not matter."

M'kou drew a small packet out of his pocket and spilled the contents on the table. There were ten coins of different sizes and denominations, and made of at least three different metals.

"Alloys," M'kou said. "Their face value doesn't reflect their actual value. I'm told it's the same with most currencies."

He leaned across, picking up several of the coins, handing two to Banner, and examining some himself.

"They look ordinary to me," said Banner, after examining them and handing them back to M'kou.

"Unless you can find anyone else still using them, I think they're worthless, Kezule," he said, using a claw tip to scratch the surface of the gold-colored ones. He slid them back across the table to M'kou. "You will never be totally self-sufficient. You need to offer services, since at this time, unless you have an excess of produce from the hydroponics area, you have no goods to offer in trade."

As the two servers returned with a selection of whole fruit and to remove the empty plates, Kezule began drumming his claw tips slowly on the table.

"How's morale?" he asked when they were alone again.

"Not bad," said Lirtosh. "Opening the pool helped a lot, and getting the other rec room running will be another boost. There's some grumbling about the long shifts caused by salvaging the *Zan'droshi*, but nothing serious since everyone has seen some benefits for themselves."

M'kou nodded agreement. "Morale among the military side is also high."

Stilling his hand, Kezule looked at him. "Captain?"

"We're here to do a job, Kezule," he said. "Morale is not an issue. Do you have a problem with the salvage operation?"

"There's more wreckage on the *Zan'droshi* than I first thought. Getting to what we need is taking longer than I anticipated and we're falling behind schedule," he said. "Not by much, as yet, but it's increasing daily. The state of our medical supplies also concerns me. I don't want them to fall any lower."

"You're thinking of making an official approach to Ch'almuth," he said, breaking the small silence that followed. "You may get the people you need, but if they're an agricultural world, you shouldn't assume they have the medicines and other goods you need to spare."

"Medicinal plants were also grown there," said Kezule. "I've been checking the databases from my ship." He reached out to take a brightly colored oval fruit from the bowl, using his knife to peel off the outer skin.

"What services can we offer in exchange?" asked Lirtosh, helping himself to a bunch of small round, dark fruits.

"Engineers, programmers, advanced medical treatment," said Banner. "They're bound to need one of them. Services can always be negotiated."

"And there's always the chance they're still using the same monetary system," Kusac said.

"I need you to draft me a First Contact plan, Kusac," said Kezule, quartering his fruit and beginning to eat it. "I want you and your crew to accompany me. We're leaving in three days. M'zynal, you'll be in charge here. M'kou, Zayshul, you'll come with me. Send me a list of what each department needs, and a list of those with skills we can use for trading. I'll post a list of the personnel we'll take tomorrow. In the center of the table, you'll find a folder for each of you with a briefing of what was on Ch'almuth in my time— details of the main crops, the personnel distribution according to castes, where they were located, and on the spaceport and technical level overall. Work on the *Zan'droshi* will continue while we're away."

"If I remember, my earlier research showed they had an enclave of ruling Intellectuals, Kezule, as well as the obligatory military presence. Approaching them might not be the open and shut scenario you expect. You may even find yourself dealing with some of your relatives."

"I expect you to take that into account," said Kezule.

"You'll be well over your deadline by the time we get back," he warned. "Six weeks it will take us, not counting any time spent there."

"We could be there and back in a week," said Kezule. "We now have the means to move even more quickly between our Outposts and worlds. M'kou will brief you shortly. Are we ready to test the device from the *Zan'droshi*, M'kou?"

"The final test is scheduled for tonight at eighteen hundred hours, General. The *N'zishok* is already anchored outside Kij'ik. Boarding is at seventeen hundred."

Kezule nodded, pushing his chair back and getting to his feet. "Until later," he said before leaving.

"What's this device he's talking about?" he asked M'kou.

M'kou, busy peeling a citrus fruit, looked across at him. "As I understand it, the *Zan'droshi* had just been fitted with a prototype device," he said. "It created passageways through space to predetermined destinations. Each of the four Empire worlds had a receiver, and they were being installed at the Outposts. There's one here, which is how the General was able to track the *Zan'droshi*, and there appears to be one at Ch'almuth. The one on the Prime world is no longer operational, as far as we know."

"How does it work?" asked Banner.

"I'm afraid I don't know, it's not my field," said M'kou.

"The test tonight is to see if there's a receiver at Ch'almuth?" he asked.

"There is a receiver," said M'zynal. "The General's attempting to open a passageway and send a probe from the *N'zishok* through."

"I hope we don't emerge too close to the planet when we go," said Banner. "I'm not sure I like the sound of this. Why didn't they develop it fully?"

"The Fall happened," said M'kou, looking across at him again. "The General told me a handful of your people managed to overthrow the Empire in less than a week."

"The receivers are not on the actual worlds, or Outposts," said M'zynal. "The one here is set into one of the defense asteroids."

"Excuse me?" asked Banner, turning to look at him.

"There's a network of partially automated asteroids out there, all bearing weapons emplacements," M'zynal elaborated. "Some need to be actually manned, and are capable of supporting a team of three for several days. Like Kij'ik, they're all powered. We haven't had the time to check them out yet, but none of them are responding to signals from the bridge."

"Powered?" he asked.

"Kij'ik can be moved, Captain," said M'kou with a small smile as he popped a segment of fruit into his mouth. "But not very far."

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, picking up his coffee and taking a drink. "How far out is the General taking the *N'zishok* for this test?"

"Not far. You should be able to see the passageway opening if it's successful," said M'zynal. "Would you like me to send the images to the vid coms for you?"

"Yes. It'll be a sight worth seeing," said Banner.

"I suggest you view it in either the mess, the Assembly Hall, or the rec lounge as they have the largest screens."

Lirtosh got up from his seat, muttering something about needing to go check his files on civilian skills and ambled off, followed by M'zynal.

"Is it wise to take us with him?" Banner asked M'kou. "The Ch'almuthians may be as paranoid of us as the M'zullians are."

"Then we need to know that now," said M'kou. "Because it will affect whether or not they can work with you here. You'll not be exposed to any danger, that I promise you."

Banner sighed and reached out to snag an applelike fruit with a claw tip. "I better get going too," he said, taking a bite out of it before pushing his seat back and leaving.

"You heading back to the data lab?" Kusac asked Zayshul, finishing off his coffee.

"Yes."

"I'll wait for you, then. Has Kezule said what he plans to do with Shaidan while we're all away?"

"He'll stay here with Mayza's nurse," she said, drinking her kheffa. "He'll be fine, Kusac."

"I can ask Lazaik to spend some time with him every day, if you wish, Captain," offered M'kou, licking his now very sticky fingers in an effort to clean them. "She's been spending time in the nursery lately so he knows her."

"I'm sure it isn't necessary, but thank you, I'd be glad of that," he said, surprised at the young male's gesture.

"It's not a problem," M'kou said with a smile. "He is your son, and I'm beginning to understand how important family is."

He stared at him in shock.

"I was with you and the General when you were discussing the arrangements for Shaidan's visits to you, Captain," the young Prime reminded him. "No one knows but us."

"I'd forgotten," he said, relief flooding through him.

"I'm ready," said Zayshul, getting up.

## **Camarilla council chamber, Ghioass**

In the Camarilla council chamber, a small group watched the holographic projection as space itself in front of the *N'zishok* began to distort and bend. At the center of the distortion, a shimmer began to coalesce. As the passageway established itself, the shimmer became a glow that exploded outward in a circle, forming the entrance.

"This technology the sand-dwellers should not have been allowed to keep," said Hkairass in disgust.

"Is limited," said Kuvaa, wrinkling her long snout at the TeLaxaudin. "Only works with receiver, only goes to Ch'almuth, M'zull, and Haven. Cannot develop it further. If try, will find cannot replicate either part of it. This was ensured even in their time."

"Is necessary they reach these destinations quickly," said Azwokkuss. "Is it not? Binding other sand-dwellers now is part of pattern we foresaw."

"Is done," said Khassiss, touching the lectern control and turning off the image. "All proceeds as it must."

## **Assembly hall, Kij'ik, 18:00 hours**

"If that device could be reverse engineered," began Banner, as they watched the passageway finally being closed.

"We've spent a week trying, Lieutenant," interrupted M'kou. "Certain elements of the technology are beyond us now. We've no idea how it was constructed, and dismantling it was not an option."



"Did you scan it?"

"Of course, but several components are sealed units that none of our scans could penetrate. The General says there were only four made in his time."

People were beginning to drift away now that the test was over.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to go and fetch Shaidan for you, Captain."

He nodded absently, his mind on Zayshul's whereabouts now that her scent was more noticeable in the emptying room.

"You realize Dzaou could be right about Kezule and this Outpost," Banner said, catching hold of his arm. "It is heavily fortified, and it can move."

Banner had his attention now and he extracted his arm from his Second's grasp. "That's Dzaou's paranoia talking, not yours. Have you any idea how much energy it would need to move this any distance?" he asked. "I don't, but I know it's more than this Outpost could produce. Yes, it's heavily armed, but everything M'kou said it has in the way of armaments is defensive, not offensive, even I know that."

"We still need to take that into account, Kusac. What if one day he's a threat to Shola and we need to attack Kij'ik? I'll be watching to see if he takes that finished fighter with him."

"He won't."

Banner sighed. "When will you take a realistic view of what's happening under your nose, Kusac? We must talk properly about this."

"Later," he said distracted again as he opened his mind, trying passively to locate Zayshul. "I have Shaidan to see, things to do before we leave. I may go to the library, or the lab."

"Then I'll see you later, in your quarters."

She'd already left the hall and was heading toward the main elevator. With an effort, he drew his attention back to Banner. "Perhaps. I want to start work on drafting a plan for contacting the Ch'almuthians," he said.

"Later, then."

\* \* \*

"I'd like to play squares," said Shaidan when asked what he wanted to do after they'd eaten.

"You know where the box is," he said, clearing the dishes into the disposal unit. "Shall we sit here or on the sofa?"

"Here," said Shaidan, slipping down off the high stool and heading over to the sideboard.

He was pleased with the way his son was progressing. It had taken a long time, but by dint of giving him small choices every visit, Kusac had gradually got him to the point where he could make a choice of his own when offered one.

Shaidan pushed the box onto the meal bar and began to clamber up onto the stool again. Once up, the cub opened the box, tipped the pieces out and, turning the opened box over, began to lay them out on the squared surface.

"You've got new ear studs," he said, noticing the small silver-mounted stones his son wore in each ear.

"Yes, blue ones." He stopped laying the pieces out to reach into a pocket in the side of his tunic. "There's one for you." He held out a small package. "So we can be the same, Aunt said."

He took it from the cub, opening the package up to find one blue-stoned stud. "I don't wear them," he said awkwardly.

"It's a present. Aunt will be sad if you don't," Shaidan ventured hesitantly, resuming laying out the counters, black for him, white for his father, one set on each side of the board.

"I'm sure she'll understand."

Shaidan looked up at him. "She will be sad. She likes you," he insisted.

"I know she does." He hadn't, but he did now.

"I'll put it in for you," the cub offered, reaching out to take it from him.

"I don't think you can," he said, leaning forward to let his son look at his ear. "I took the other one out soon after she made the hole."

"I can see it," Shaidan said.

He felt a slight prick as the stud pushed the skin apart again, then it was in, and his son was fitting on the back piece.

"It looks nice," Shaidan said, head on one side, examining his father appraisingly.

"I'll take your word for it," he said dryly, sitting back. He'd only let Shaidan try because he believed the hole had closed up completely.

"She can hear your mind, like I can," said Shaidan, pushing the board around ready to play.

"What?"

"Aunt is like us, she can hear minds. You go first."

As the floor dropped out from his world, automatically he pushed one of his center disks forward two spaces. "You're mistaken, Shaidan. I can't use my mind like that any more."

"I've felt your mind, and I spoke to Aunt the other night and she heard me."

Gods, which did he answer first? He chose the safer one, hoping it would divert him. "Aunt heard you telepathically? You spoke to her?"

Shaidan nodded. "Your move," he reminded him. "Some of the other females can, too."

He pushed another disk forward one space. "How many?" he asked, wondering at his son's unaccustomed communicativeness this evening.

"Aunt asked me to write her a list. I put four down but I only know them because they've touched me."

"You can tell when they touch you?"

"You can, too. I remember how to do things every now and then."

"What kind of things?"

Shaidan screwed his face up in thought as he jumped his disk over one of his father's, setting the captured one to one side of the board. "How to find people." He looked up. "I can only really do it with you, and only when you're near. You're not concentrating," he said accusingly, pointing to the lost disk.

Kusac tried to gather his thoughts and failed. "Let's talk first. Is there anything else you remember?"

"Sometimes I think I remember people, but not very well."

"Which people?"

"A female, with yellow hair on her head. She's not like anyone here I think, but it's not very clear."

He closed his eyes and tried not to groan aloud. How in Vartra's name had Shaidan got an image of Carrie?

"He said I had your memories."

"He? Which he?" he asked sharply, opening his eyes again.

"The Sholan who wears gray. I don't see him very often, and usually he's lost because he's on our level and he's not allowed there."

Gray? None of them had brought their grays with them. "My memories? He said you have my memories?"

Shaidan nodded.

"That's how you knew how to use your Talent," he said, realization dawning. "But how did they get my memories to give you?"

"Sleep tapes, he said."

"What else can you tell me about this person?"

"He said he had grown-up children."

He sucked in a breath. It was definitely not one of them, which meant it could only be Vartra. "Have you told anyone else about him?"

"No."

"Then don't. Keep this to yourself, Shaidan. Did you tell Aunt about me? Or anyone else?"

"No. Why don't you want anyone to know?"

"The General dislikes Telepaths, he believes I'm no longer one. He mustn't know about any of this. Can you do that? Not tell him?"

"I can try," said Shaidan dubiously. "If he asks me, I have to tell the truth."

"Avoid telling him the truth then."

"I can't lie," the cub said, slightly shocked. "It's not right to lie."

"No, it isn't. But if you tell the truth about this, I could get into a lot of trouble."

*Then you are still a Telepath.*

He heard the question loud and clear, and the joy he felt was equally balanced by the fear he had of his son being unable to keep the truth from Kezule if asked.

"Don't ask me that, Shaidan," he said quietly, reaching a decision. "Shall we carry on with our game?"

"Yes. You aren't angry with me or Aunt, are you?"

"No. Now let's forget about all this, shall we?"

\* \* \*

He met Zayshul later, much later, at the pool when it was empty.

"You're wearing the stud," she said, pleased.

"Yes. Zayshul," he began.

"The blue is much nicer against your pelt." She reached up to touch his ear gently. "And with it matching Shaidan's, I thought it less likely to arouse comment."

"I don't know about that," he said as she moved closer and began to stroke his cheek. Her scent enveloped him, making it difficult to resist her. "Zayshul..."

"We can't be too long," she murmured.

"I know. When were you going to tell me about Shaidan mind-speaking to you?"

She froze. "I... don't know," she admitted.

"You're a Telepath, and so are more of you, all females according to Shaidan," he said accusingly.

She rested her forehead against his chest. "I didn't want to hurt you by telling you I could hear your son," she said quietly. "Don't be angry. Please."

"I can't be," he said, his voice tight with a mixture of emotions as he put his arms around her. "Shaidan would sense it, and I have no intention of upsetting my son. But believe me, I am angry. Does Kezule know about this?"

"He suspects I am. He's wearing a small psi damper, one he got from the Directorate when he raided them to rescue the children."

"Did you also know Shaidan's been programmed with my memories?"

"We suspected it when we realized they all knew how to use their telepathic abilities."

"How? How did they do that?" He could hear the growl creeping into his voice and tried to still it.

"Mind scan. Chy'qui certainly had you long enough to do one."

"He destroyed my Talent!"

"He must have done it before," she said, lifting her head to look at him. "I don't know, Kusac. I wasn't involved with you then."

"He took everything from me! Even my memories, dammit!" he snarled, trying hard to suppress the outrage he felt.

"Not your memories. The children only got your knowledge of using telepathy, as far we know."

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, for Shaidan's sake if nothing else. "My son has a faint memory of my wife, Zayshul. They didn't just give them knowledge of how to use their Talents."

"I'm sorry, Kusac, I really am, but I had nothing to do with it, you know I didn't," she said, stroking his arm in an attempt to calm him.

"Did Kezule find the scan?"

"No, I swear he didn't. That's why he wanted you to agree to another one."

"Hell will freeze first," he growled.

"I know," she said soothingly. "But now isn't the time to talk about this, when neither of us is really rational."

"You're right," he said, too aware of the warmth of her body pressing against his and his own body's involuntary response to hers. "We'll talk about it later, but in the meantime, for Vartra's sake, be careful! Don't make Kezule's suspicion into more. And tell him nothing about Shaidan."

"I'm not a fool, Kusac," she said, shivering as she felt his hands beginning to stroke their way down her back and flanks. "I've always protected Shaidan."

"I know," he murmured, tilting his neck toward her as she began to nibble it. "This visit to Ch'almuth is going to be impossible. Is there any way you can stay behind?"

"I can try," she said. "But won't it be worse when you return?"

"Hiding a meeting on the *N'zishok* will be impossible, it's far easier to lose ourselves here on Kij'ik. Now, enough talking."

### **Kezule's suite, Zhal-L'Shoh 15th day (January)**

"Yes, you can stay here on Kij'ik if you want," Kezule said lazily, pulling Zayshul against the curve of his body. "I thought you'd have enjoyed the chance to get off the Outpost and visit another world."

"I would, but the timing is wrong," she said. "I have patients depending on me, pregnant females and Mayza, who's still very young. I wouldn't feel right leaving them at this time, even if only for six or seven days."



She'd chosen her moment carefully, knowing Kezule would want to spend the whole of the night before the journey with her. Right now, he was relaxed, his senses satiated by the meal she'd cooked him earlier, and their lovemaking.

"I'll send Ghidd'ah with you. You know she's my right hand."

He grunted, letting his head rest on her shoulder. "Is this scent marker business getting you down?" he asked. "I thought you were coping well."

Panic fluttered in her stomach and she had to force herself not to stiffen in his embrace. "A little," she admitted carefully. "It's very difficult for me not to respond to him."

"He seems to be managing. I hear he's mixing more, even talking softly to our females. Zhalmo is certainly taken with him. Perhaps a coupling between them would stop the marker."

"The marker can only be removed by the one who put it there," she said stiffly.

"And she's dead. Yes, I remember. Giyarishis is working on it, I'll have another word with him when we return," he murmured, yawning, his hand idly caressing the gentle curve of her belly.

She wondered if she should tell him that she'd spoken to the TeLaxaudin herself and he'd said there was no cure for the marker. Maybe Kezule knew already. Suddenly she was aware of his surface thoughts with no idea of how it had happened.

He hadn't visited Giyarishis in some time, but she could feel his absolute faith in the TeLaxaudin's ability to find an acceptable solution to the scent marker.

"Doesn't the marker bother you?" she asked abruptly, turning round within the circle of his arm to look at him. "I know you can smell it."

"Not particularly," he said sleepily. "I have no need to brand you as mine. To me, you smell more of Shaidan than him."

His mind was growing fuzzy, the images she was receiving beginning to blur as he drifted closer to sleep. There was a small spike of mental activity as he briefly enjoyed the fact he still had something Kusac craved.

That annoyed her. "You said you hated the scent of mammals," she said almost sharply.

"I've gotten used to it," he replied, pulling her closer again.

His thoughts had faded now and she could feel his need for her warmth pressing against him, and the flash of irritation that she was delaying his sleep with her chat.

"Sleep, pretty one," he mumbled, tongue flicking out briefly to lick her cheek. Then he was asleep, leaving her taken aback by the unexpected endearment.

## **N'zishok bridge, Zhal-L'Shoh 18th day (January)**

Kezule had called him up to the bridge and sat him at a comm console just before emergence from the passageway.

"Start the recorded message as soon as we emerge," ordered Kezule.

"Emergence in five seconds from my mark," said Captain Zaykkuh.  
"Mark. Four, three, two, emergence!"

He felt a slight wrench, followed by a brief moment of nausea, not dissimilar to that of a normal jump transition. Finished reconfiguring the console to his own needs, he hit Kezule's recording, monitoring it through an earpiece as the message was broadcast on as many bands as they thought the Ch'almuthians might use.

*"This is the Prime vessel N'zishok, from K'oish'ik. Our mission is peaceful. We wish to reestablish communications with the sovereign people of Ch'almuth. We ask you to please respond to our message."*

"Emergence on course, General," said Maaz'ih from his Nav station.  
"Plotting course to spaceport landing site."

"Jump drive off-line. Maneuver drives initiated," said Zaykkuh.

"No life signs on the orbiting station, General," said Maaz'ih from his sensor post.

"I'm not picking up any communication signals, General," said Zhalmo.

"No space traffic either," said Kushool, looking up from her sensor post.

He turned in his seat to look at Kezule. "It appears that they are still planet-locked."

Kezule nodded. "So it appears. Screen on," he said.

"Course plotted," said Maaz'ih, sending it to the pilot's console.

"Received and initiating," replied Zaykkuh.

The large view screen darkened then resolved to show a view of the approaching world. It hung in space, a mottled tan and green-colored globe, with small patches of deep blue where the mainly landlocked seas were located. Patches and wisps of white clouds were sprinkled across the hemisphere they could currently see.

"A dry planet," he observed.

"We prefer such worlds," said Kezule, resting his elbow on the command chair arm and his chin on his hand. "Any airborne vehicles?"

"A few low-level ones," confirmed Kushool.

"Picking up communications now, General," said Zhalmo. "The vehicles are being advised of our arrival and ordered to land immediately."

"Signals originating from an area corresponding to coordinates for the spaceport," he said, tracking them on his monitor.

"Any response yet?" asked Kezule.

"None."

"Appears to be a communications blackout," said Zhalmo a few minutes later.

"I'd say they've been visited before, and not peacefully," he ventured.

"I have to agree," said Kezule, watching Ch'almuth grow larger in the screen. "At least we're not being attacked yet."

"Do they have that capability any more?"

"Not from what I've been picking up," said Zhalmo from beside him.

"We'll find out soon enough," said Kezule, keeping one eye on his monitors, the other on the view screen. "Stay alert."

\* \* \*

The spaceport, as they approached it, looked deserted, the buildings surrounding it a strange mix of neglected and ruined. As the *N'zishok* settled slowly to the ground, they saw a small group of people emerging from what would have been the control building.

"Picking up thirty life-forms in all," said Kushool from her sensors post. "Only six leaving the building."

"Reading no weapons, but I am getting several blank spots in buildings around the port perimeter," said Noolgoi.

"Zhalmo, take over gunnery, M'zynal, I want you with us," said Kezule, getting up. "You, too, Kusac, and bring Lieutenant Banner. Zaykkuh, keep the ship running ready to leave."

Leaving the comms earpiece behind, he got up and followed Kezule off the bridge to the elevator opposite, calling Banner on his wrist comm. On

Deck One, where the landing party was gathering, there were only a few people waiting for them— D'haalmu, Chiozo, Shezhul, and Banner. M'zynal went over to a locker and, unlocking it, pulled out side arms which he began distributing.

He was bringing Banner up to date when he sensed the Security chief trying to get his attention.

"Captain," M'zynal said, holding out two pistols. "For you and the Lieutenant."

He raised an eye ridge as he accepted one. "Trusting us with weapons?"

"Stunners. You know how to use them?"

He nodded as Banner inspected the one given to him. "You can change the settings to kill."

M'zynal gave him a long look. "General's orders, but he doesn't believe lethal force is appropriate here."

"Let's hope he's right," said Banner, slipping the pistol into the empty holster on his belt.

When he put his own there, he found it a shade too small for a good fit, but it was acceptable.

Shartoh was handing out small ear and throat pieces. "Communicators," he said. "Put the microphone on the neck of your robe so it touches your throat, Captain. I hope the earpieces are comfortable. Our ears are quite a bit smaller."

"They'll do," he said, positioning it carefully.

When they were all ready, Kezule led the way to the starboard elevator down to the landing bay. Once there, they gathered by the landing ramp. Beyond the faint blue glow of the force field, the small group of Ch'almuthians seemed to shimmer in the distance.

"No fighters," Kusac sent to Banner, using hand signals.

"Lower the field and the ramp, Zhalmo," Kezule ordered.

"Aye, General," he heard her say through the earpiece.

The field down, the searing heat of Ch'almuth hit them, almost taking their breath away.

Banner glanced at him. "So I was wrong about the fighters. You'll cook in those black woolen robes," he said quietly, hand blocking the throat mike.

"A robe for you would have been a good idea," he murmured, watching the Primes and Kezule form a small group in front of them. "The less alien we appear to them, the better."

Banner grunted. "Let's just hope they aren't like the M'zullians."

As they followed Kezule's group down the ramp, they began to be able to identify individuals among the approaching Ch'almuthians.

"This place hasn't been used in years," said Banner in an undertone, hand again blocking the mike so his voice didn't broadcast. "Have you seen how much grass is growing in those cracks?"

"I have." He was more concerned with what thirty people were doing out in the middle of nowhere at a derelict spaceport. He lowered his mental shields, passively absorbing what he could from the strangers.

When they were twenty feet away from the ship, Kezule gave the order to stop.

The sun was still high in the sky, and standing on the dark surface with no shade, the fierce heat was beginning to get to him. Without thinking, he began to slow his heart rate by a fraction and lower his body temperature.

"They're unarmed, General, as far as I can tell," said Noolgoi's voice in his ear.

As the group drew closer, he began to notice details, like they all were male, and all had pallid, almost Valtegan-colored skins. The clothing they wore— embroidered or patterned loose-sleeved tops over trousers— was not that of people living rough, or even what he'd expect of peasants from the surrounding villages they'd flown over. Another anomaly to add to the others.

They stopped a few feet away, one stepping forward a little. This close, he could see other, more subtle details, like their lack of crests, and their build— all were more bulky than the Primes, with more variety in their features and body shapes. One was even stout. And though they had all registered his and Banner's presence, there had been no reaction to them.

"My name is Nishon. How may we help you?" said the lead male.

"We know you received our message. I'm Kezule shan Q'emgo'h, from K'oish'ik. Our mission is peaceful. We wish to open friendly communications with you and your sovereign world."

As he spoke, Kusac noticed the glances the other five Ch'almuthians exchanged between themselves. He nodded to himself, pleased Kezule had remembered his briefing on the importance of letting the Ch'almuthians know they considered them as equals, not still part of a long lost Empire.

"I see you know my name," Kezule continued smoothly.

"I know your family name," said Nishon cautiously, trying not to stare at Kezule. "To us, K'oish'ik is a legend, so is the name of its Emperor."

"Once Emperor of your world," said Kezule. "But my family no longer rules. It died out in the Fall of the Empire."

"We're peaceful here, an agricultural world. What do you and your alien companions want of us?" asked one of the others, his tone slightly belligerent as he came forward.

"Trade," said Kezule. "We've come to make trade negotiations with you."

"Trade?" said the second male incredulously.

"They're afraid, Kezule," he said subvocalizing into the mike. "And hiding something."

"Yes, trade," Kezule confirmed. "If you don't wish to trade with us, we'll leave peacefully. We're not here to take anything from you by force."

"And what can you possibly offer us in return?" demanded the belligerent one.

"What currency do you use?" asked Shezhul. "Is it still the old Imperial one?"

"Yes," said Nishon, turning to look at her.

"Then we can pay, or if you prefer, we can offer our services by providing medical aid, or by repairing any electronic or mechanical equipment you have."

This time, Nishon turned to look at the others briefly.

"We have no need of..." began the one beside him.

"Be silent, Shaalgo," said Nishon sharply. "The decision isn't ours to make," he said apologetically. "I will have to send your request to the Elders of our community. Perhaps if you tell me what kind of goods you are in need of, I can tell you if we can provide them."

"We have a list," said Shezhul. "It includes medicinal plants that were once grown here, cloth, soap, common items like that."

"How long will it take to contact your Elders?" asked Kezule.

"An hour or so," said Nishon. He hesitated a moment. "Perhaps we could offer you our hospitality while you wait? We have cold drinks, and some light food if you are hungry."



"Are you out of your mind?" demanded Shaalgo.

Nishon grasped him by the arm and dragged him back a few paces.

Kusac had to strain his ears, as well as his other senses, to hear what they were saying.

"Be silent! I recognize the aliens! If they're with him, then we have nothing to fear!" said Nishon.

"How so?"

"They were once slaves of the Empire!"

Shaalgo snorted. "And still are, likely. I don't have the benefit of your racial memories, so why should I trust them? Their leader looks like one of them!"

"He's different— he has a female with him! The Elders have the same memories as I do," said Nishon sharply. "They will decide. Meanwhile, I need to know if these aliens are friends or servants."

"I serve no one," he said, stepping forward into plain view and startling everyone. Banner hurriedly joined him.

"I work with Kezule and am here voluntarily, as are others of my people."

Nishon came closer, studying them both openly. "Your kind were rare here. There was one, at the Overlord's Palace, but she died in the civil war. Sholans, that's your species name."

He nodded, widening his mouth in a smile that showed his teeth slightly, and held out his hand, palm uppermost. "Yes, Sholans. I'm Captain Aldatan."

Nishon cautiously held his out, touching Kusac's fingers just before they were withdrawn.

"Captain?"

"I have my own ship. My crew is with me." He gestured toward Banner.  
"My Second, Lieutenant Banner."

Banner nodded and held his hand out in greeting.

"We'll accept your offer of hospitality," Kusac said.

"We'll all stay," said Kezule hurriedly, not to be outdone.

Nishon gestured to the buildings behind them. "You're welcome. You'll find our facilities are a little austere, though."

"No more than ours, I'm sure," said Kezule as they began to walk away from the *N'zishok*.

"We notice your ship is a military one."

"Not all the Valtegan people are friendly," Kusac said before Kezule could reply.

"You've had trouble from some of us?" asked Nishon.

"Not us," said Kezule. "The Sholans have."

"We met the Primes because of them and now our people share treaties," said Kusac.

"Primes," said Nishon thoughtfully. "First ones, from the home world. It makes sense," he nodded.

Kusac turned to look over his shoulder, using the opportunity to subvocalize to Kezule. "Don't ask them what they're doing here yet. Keep the conversation light." He fell back a little, letting Kezule talk to their host.

As the building grew closer, they could see it wasn't as neglected as it had first looked. Though the paint was dry and peeling, door hinges and locks were well oiled and free of rust.

"More here than meets the eye," Banner's voice whispered in his ear.

He flicked his ears in assent and using the Brotherhood hand signals, advised him to be cautious.

Nishon and his companions led the way inside. They found themselves in a vast, almost empty warehouse, that had obviously once served the spaceport. The temperature inside wasn't much cooler, despite several large fans high up in the ceiling, but it was a relief to be out of the direct glare of the sun. At the far end, people were bringing in bales and boxes of goods.

"Our villages work together," said Nishon, leading them deeper into the building. "Each one specializes in different crops and we share our produce between us. We store it here because it's central and easily distributed." He turned round to indicate an interior structure ahead. "Our offices are over here."

"I count eighteen workers," murmured Banner in their ears. "Plus this six makes twenty-four."

"Why do you need a currency if you share your goods?" asked Kezule.

"Luxury items we do sell," said Shaalgo. "The basics everyone must have."

"Very egalitarian," remarked Kezule, clapping his hands behind his back as he followed them into the office.

Three tables, two covered in papers, the third, larger one had three people sitting at it. Kusac almost stumbled at the doorway as soon as he smelled their scents. One of them was female, the first they'd encountered here, and she was pregnant.

Shaalgo shot him an angry look. "No doubt you disapprove."

"On the contrary, our females are as free as we are," said the General. "My daughter Shezhul is with me."

"Keeshu, fetch our guests some cold drinks," said Nishon to one of those at the table. "He'll look after you while I send someone to the Elders."

As Nishon left the room through another door, the remaining two at the table stood up.

"Please, sit down and join us. I'm Shikoh, Nishon's wife."

In his best courtly manner, Kezule advanced on her and took her hand, bowing over it. "Charmed to meet you," he said. "Unfortunately my wife and youngest daughter had to remain at home."

"You're married?" she said, sending a sidelong look at Shaalgo which Kusac caught as Kezule sat down beside her.

"It was my duty as a member of the Royal household," he said, glancing at Kusac as he took a chair. "I was lucky enough to find a suitable mate."

"Then the stories of a home world other than here must be true. Tell us about it."

He listened with only half an ear as Kezule and his daughter Shezhul regaled the Ch'almuthians with information about the City of Light and the Royal Court. His attention was on gathering as much information as he could about these people. To this end, he was cautiously extending his mind beyond the confines of that room, listening in passively to the conversations of those working outside as well as trying to listen to the surface thoughts of those around the table.

It came as a shock when another mind suddenly touched his, then seized and held it, trying to examine *his* thoughts. He had just enough warning to slam up his mental shields before even his torc reacted to the presence.

Trying to appear unconcerned, he picked up his cold kheffa and sipped it. All he knew for sure was that the person was female, and not in that room. Moments later, he was released, leaving him with the certain knowledge that on Ch'almuth they had at least one active female telepath.

A few minutes later, a communications device buzzed and Nishon answered it. After a brief, monosyllabic conversation, he replaced the receiving device in its cradle and turned to them.

"I've been asked to take you to meet the Elders."

## Chapter 12

TRANSPORT was an open-sided vehicle that seated sixteen easily, which was as well since their welcoming party accompanied them. It was obviously used for bringing the work force from the villages to the spaceport. Once they were seated, it rose off the ground and began to move out into the surrounding desert.

"Not as primitive as they'd have us believe," whispered Banner.

"Agreed," came back Kezule's equally quiet reply.

Once free of the buildings, the vehicle sped up and their journey took only some fifteen minutes.

The countryside was unremarkable scrubland, but they knew from their scans that the village was sited around an oasis. As they got closer, they could see the fields and irrigation ditches that fed them as well as the several greenhouses that they'd noticed when they'd flown over them before landing.

This settlement, the nearest to the spaceport, spanned several acres and was served by a village of thirty or so dwellings made of local materials—not dissimilar to the way the settled desert houses back home looked as if they'd grown organically out of the actual soil of Shola, Kusac noticed. The roofs, however, glittered in the sunlight and were probably made of some form of augmented solar panels, the accumulated energy used to power the whole community.

The buildings had been positioned on either side of a single main street which opened out in the center to form a square. This was where he was sure they were heading.

Outside the largest one, two people in long colored robes waited, obviously for them. They stopped just short of the building and disembarked.

While making sure he was at the back of their group, he surreptitiously looked at the two. Both were elderly, he realized, noting the lines and wrinkles on their faces. He'd never seen a really elderly Valtegan or Prime before. When the one in the blue patterned robes looked at him, she had eyes that seemed to bore straight into his despite his efforts to remain unnoticed.

"This is M'zayash, and Szayakk, our Senior Elders." said Nishon, introducing the two Elders as they moved toward them.

The cool interior of the single story building was welcome after the heat outside. However, within moments of entering, their comm links suddenly went silent. Banner, slightly ahead of him, signaled "*Null zone— blocking devices. Sophisticated for an Ag culture.*"

Passing what was obviously the Council Chamber, they followed Nishon and the others into a side room. Walls of off-white sloped gently toward a ceiling some ten feet above them where fans rotated lazily. Unusually large windows, tinted to keep out glare, punctuated the walls, opening onto a view of formal gardens. Furniture was in the form of sectional seating, made of some local canelike plant. Soft seat cushions, and small fixed back pads kept the furnishings comfortable but cool. It reminded him strongly of the lounges off the various meeting rooms at the Governor's Palace at Shanagi. This room, however, had an— unfinished— feel to it, as if items normally displayed there had been hurriedly removed.

The sections had been arranged so they made small enclaves where groups could gather for private discussions. Unconsciously, as people began to take seats at one of the larger such enclaves, his eyes were drawn back to the elderly female again. He sensed what might have been the lightest and most fleeting of mental probes brush against his shielding, then it was gone, without triggering any of his alarms.

His brow furrowed thoughtfully as the Elder gestured for them to also take seats. He chose one to the side, out of her direct line of sight, leaving Kezule's group as her main focus.

The seat beside him gave slightly, the cane creaking as Banner joined him.

"Read them," he signaled, fingers tapping as if unconsciously on his thigh. Knowing Valtegan females could be telepaths and that there might be one present with them, he couldn't take the risk of lowering his own shields, but Banner's empathic Gift worked differently.

He filtered out the sounds of the conversation going on around them, programming his mind to only pick up the positive or negative verbal and physical signals. Instead he concentrated on increasing the sensitivity of his most external shield. If anyone probed him again, he'd have some information this time.

"Mood cautious," Banner signaled. *"Very disciplined. Control what I'd expect if we had a known Telepath with us. They know our species."*

Curiouser and curiouser. *"Stay with it,"* he responded just as the ghostly tendril touched him again.

Head turning instantly, he checked the two Elders, but their attention was focused on Kezule. M'zayash was in fact deep in conversation. That, however, meant nothing. He'd once been more than capable of taking part in intricate trade negotiations, and using his Talent fully.

"We'd be prepared to let those who wish to go with you leave Ch'almuth," she was saying. "There are always those slightly dissatisfied with the life they have, eager to explore and try new pastures."

Kezule nodded. "Those are the kind we could use. I've no wish to put this settlement at risk, however. Are you sure you can spare some of your people?"

"Our population is larger than it appears at first, Kezule shan Q'emgo'h," said Szayakk.

*"Sense of satisfaction from him,"* signaled Banner. *"He is—disconcerting— a rival— no, stronger— a— it's gone. Lost him."*

It would be interesting to see who volunteered if Szayakk thought it would give him— or the Ch'almuthians— an advantage. An advantage over whom, though?



"All volunteers will need to be psychologically screened by us," he said, breaking into the conversation. "Not everyone is suited to living in the artificial environment of space."

Now he had M'zayash's undivided attention and was the focus of her intense gaze.

"Only those we deem suitable will be allowed to volunteer," she said.

"Captain Aldatan is right," said Kezule. "We will still need to screen them, for their safety as well as our own."

"As you wish," said M'zayash, looking back to Kezule and inclining her head in acceptance. "Who will conduct these tests of yours?"

He sat back, letting himself once more become part of the background to their conversation.

"The Captain. He's trained in these matters. My son M'kou will help him. Perhaps now we could turn to discussing matters of trade."

M'zayash rose to her feet. "I'll leave Szayakk to discuss trade matters with you while I have a word with your Sholan Captain."

Her words jolted his attention back to her as she walked toward him.

Kezule glanced at him, then her. "I hardly think..."

"Captain," she said. "A moment of your time, if you please."

It was a command, impossible to refuse, considering the circumstances.

As he got to his feet, so did Banner.

"Only your Captain, Lieutenant," M'zayash said with a slight smile.

"I'm yours to command," Kusac said with a slight bow. He had no doubt that she was the telepath he'd sensed.

She fastened a clawlike hand round his forearm and began leading him from the room. "We'll sit by the fountain and talk."

He accompanied her to the center of the square where a fountain, in the form of a natural rocky spring, babbled merrily. Round it was a low wall with a wide seating area, the whole shaded by a cloth awning. Now that the sun was on its way down, a slight breeze had sprung up.

"Sit," she ordered, letting him go.

He sat, looking out across at the meeting house.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"Kezule told you why," he said, trying to focus on the welcome coolness coming from the water beside him.

"I want to hear it from you."

"Why?" he asked, risking a glance at her and noticing for the first time the slight ridge down the center of her head. He felt his brow begin to furrow and immediately smoothed it out. "What can I say that will add anything to the matter?" Was she more Valtegan, like Kezule, he wondered?

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm descended from the same family as he is. My memories go back to the Fall and beyond. I remember your kind well. Your world had been enslaved for nearly two years when the civil war broke out all across our Empire."

He remained silent, waiting to hear what she'd say next.

"Pets and slaves, that's what they thought you. But they were wrong, weren't they? Who'd have thought a mere handful of you could have brought down an Empire of millions, spanning nine worlds, counting your own?"

"There were around a hundred of us," he said, wondering where she was going with this.

"So few? Well, it only goes to prove you can't coerce telepaths, doesn't it, youngster?"

He glanced up again, confused by her response, this time to find his gaze caught and held by hers. "Don't you hate us for bringing about your downfall?" he found himself asking.

"Our downfall? Your kind freed us from the yoke of our military, Kusac Aldatan. Why are you hiding your abilities?"

"You're mistaken," he said, trying to look away and failing.

"Am I? Your elaborate shielding tells me otherwise," she smiled, but there wasn't much warmth in it.

"You're mistaken," he said again, feeling the sweat beginning to start between his shoulder blades and on his palms. "I was once, but a renegade Prime did experiments on me which resulted in the loss of my Talent."

"You've been scent-marked," she said, changing the topic abruptly. "You have a Prime lover, don't you?"

His ears flattened instantly. "No," he said, this time succeeding in wrenching his gaze away from hers. Zayshul was *not* his lover!

Suddenly her feminine scent surrounded him and he found himself unwillingly responding to it and leaning closer to her. Just as suddenly it was gone, leaving him floundering emotionally and feeling as if he'd been left out to dry for a week in the scorching sun.

"Don't lie to me," she said sharply.

"Yes," he said, clenching his hands against the wall. "What of it? We're both willing." Even as he said it, he knew it was becoming the truth for him.

"Nothing," she said mildly, breaking eye contact. "If enemies can become lovers, that's to the good. Why are you working with the Primes?"

"We have treaties with them. Their Emperor's son is a visitor on our world."

"The Enlightened One is your guest?"

"Yes. Young male with a flaming egg-shaped tattoo on his chest."

She nodded thoughtfully. "That's the Royal Heir. But why are you, a telepath who was mistreated by them, now working and living with them?"

"I told you I'm no longer a telepath," he said with the hint of a growl in his voice.

Internal alarms went off as one by one, she began to force her way through his shields. Raising his head, he looked her full in the eyes. Indignation flooded through him as with a thought, he began altering his shields.

"I'm not here to play mental games," he said quietly, his voice hardening.

She nodded, the smile remaining on her face even as he felt her retreating. "Why are you working with the Primes?"

"I'm not. I'm working with Kezule," he said. His hands were slick with sweat now, and it was running down between his shoulder blades. He knew she could smell it. He risked splitting his concentration to try and lower his overall temperature.

"Why?"

"Ask him."

"I'd rather ask you." The pressure on his shields returned, this time it was the ghostly touch waiting, watching, then slowly trying to insinuate its way past his defenses.

If she carried on like this, he'd be forced to either fight back or let her into his mind, neither of which he was prepared to do. "He told you the truth.

He's broken away from the Primes, setting up his own small colony. I'm there to help him, as a member of Sholan Alien Relations."

"Why leave his world and his people?"

He'd had enough of her probing, and his own fear of discovery. Mental shutters came down behind his eyes, isolating him on several levels as he changed his shielding to form impenetrable reflective surfaces. Now her efforts would only bounce back on her.

"Kezule told you all this, and you read it from his mind," he said. "What do you really want from me, M'zayash?"

Instantly her mental pressure stopped. Surreptitiously, he wiped his hands on the sides of his robe. Gods, Noni could learn lessons from this one!

She smiled, reaching out to touch his hand briefly. "I have what I need, Kusac Aldatan. Kezule may be holding your son, but that's not what keeps you at his side, nor working for his cause. Stay here and rest. You may wash your face and hands in the fountain, the water gets purified as it recycles," she added, getting to her feet.

When she'd gone, as he rolled his sleeves up and leaned over the water to drink and wet his face and hands, he realized he was shaking. He knew she'd picked up nothing from him, so she must have taken that information from Kezule. But she did know that he had enough ability left to maintain effective shielding.

"Would you like to use this cup?" asked a voice from behind him, making him jump and spill the water in his hands.

He turned round to find a child standing beside him, holding out one of the ubiquitous widemouthed cups.

"Thank you," he replied, taking it from her. She looked to be about Shaidan's size, but what age she was, he had no way of gauging. He dipped it into the crystal clear water, drinking deeply before handing it back to her.

"I'm five, and M'zayash is the oldest Elder," she said confidentially, "and really scary. You're a Sholan, are you? Were we really once enemies?"

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"M'zayash relays information to all of us who can hear her mind, and speak it for the others."

"Are there many like you?"

"About a quarter of us girls." She grinned, eyeing him appraisingly. "You look friendly."

He had to smile. "I am. I wouldn't harm you."

She reached out a tentative hand toward his bared forearm. "Can I touch? I've never seen a covering like that on a person before. Can you take it off?"

"It grows on me. Yes, you can touch," he held his arm out to her. The small hand stroked his pelt cautiously and he was aware that she was sharing the experience with everyone who could hear her.

Her face lit up just like his daughter's did when she got a treat. "It's so very soft, softer than a bird's feathers."

"You have birds here?"

She nodded, taking her hand away. "Nothing with fur, though."

He risked opening up his mental shielding for a moment by just enough to be aware of her mind constantly exchanging information with the others in her village. This was the way his Clan was evolving, into a community that could share information and thoughts simultaneously with each other.

"I have to go now, and help prepare a meal for us all, Granny says."

"She's your grandmother?" he asked, taken aback.

"My Noni," she confirmed as she skipped away, her skirts swirling round her bare feet.

His stomach lurched with the shock of it and he got up to kneel by the side of the fountain, scooping water over his face. She knew, dammit! Despite all his efforts, she *knew* what he was! He shook himself to get rid of the excess, wondering when she'd tell Kezule, wondering why she'd chosen to speak to him. Was his shielding that obvious, and that weak? Why hadn't his torc warned him?

*All your secrets are safe, she sent. I needed to know if you worked with him voluntarily, and if you were his enemy or friend. You're neither, but you admire what he's trying to do. It's enough. I will help you.*

He groaned, resting his arms on the fountain surround, hands still dangling in the cool water.

\* \* \*

The remainder of the meeting was short. In under half an hour, Kezule came out, followed by the others. The General came over to where he was lying along the edge of the fountain.

"We've got everything we asked for— more in fact," he said as Kusac sat up. "They are recruiting young folk, including several families with children, from the surrounding villages. We'll have about sixty new colonists."

"Kezule, do you realize that the females here— yours, too— are telepaths?"

"I don't want to talk about that now," Kezule said, a shuttered look coming across his face.

"You need to if you're going to be taking them home with us," he said, swinging his feet to the ground.

"I wear a psi damper," the Valtegan said shortly, turning away from him. "I've been aware of this for some time. Zayshul doesn't yet know what she is."

"She'll realize soon. Can you cope with them?"

Kezule turned back to look at him. "I can, and will, cope," he said, a low hiss underscoring his words as the female Elder joined them.

"If you want our people returned to what they were before the males rose up against the Empress Queen Kszafas, then you will have to accept that we females tend to be telepaths," M'zayash said, drawing them with her away from the fountain.

"You obviously had a lot of the Intellectual caste living here before the Fall," Kezule remarked, obviously not pleased that she'd overheard their conversation.

"No, we just made sure they bred prolifically," she countered with good humor. "They didn't object."

"I don't suppose they did," said Kezule, with a slight smile despite himself. "Where are we going now?"

"To eat, where we'll discuss the trade price, and the maintenance manuals you can give us for our equipment," she said, moving ahead of them.

"What did she want with you?" he demanded, sotto voce, holding Kusac back. "You shouldn't have left like that, it could have undermined my authority!"

"You're being paranoid," he said, pulling himself free. "She only wanted to know I wasn't your slave or vassal. I had no choice but to go with her."

Kezule hissed softly as he passed him but said nothing more.

## **N'zishok bridge, Zhal-L'Shoh 19th day (January)**

The following day, while his crew were helping Kezule and his people check off the supplies as they were delivered to the *N'zishok*, or repairing worn-out equipment in the village, Kusac and M'kou had been interviewing their prospective new settlers. In reality, it meant the work fell mainly on his shoulders as he also had to give M'kou a crash course in what qualities to look for, as well as some basic AIRel skills. M'kou had



proved to be a quick learner and well suited to the work. Only five of the prospective candidates had been turned down so far, but there were at least another twenty still to process the next day.

By the time they returned to the ship, he was almost too exhausted to eat but he forced himself to accompany M'kou up to the main mess on Deck Three, the bridge level, where they joined Kezule. On this voyage, though they hadn't been confined to their own deck, a guard was stationed on duty outside the bridge at all times.

As he pushed his plate aside and reached for his cup of kheffa, he realized his hand was shaking slightly and the headache that had been threatening him all day had started to settle in with a vengeance.

"You don't look too good, Captain" M'kou said.

"I've a headache," he said, reaching for the pouch on his belt where he kept analgesics. As he tore open the blue wrapper, he was aware of Kezule watching him.

"That bad?"

"I get them from time to time," he said, taking the pill with a mouthful of kheffa. "A leftover from my time on the *Kz'adul*." He got to his feet, picking up his tray of dishes. "You'll excuse me if I turn in early."

Kezule nodded. "I'll see you in the morning. The sick bay is opposite your rooms if you need anything."

## **N'zishok, Zhal-L'Shoh 20th day (January)**

The night had passed for him in a fitful haze of periods of fever and nausea. By the time he realized the alarm on his wrist comm was going off, it had been buzzing for about ten minutes. Then, as the muscular cramps began, he realized what was wrong.

Using only the Voice function, he called the sick bay. A male answered him.

"Captain Aldatan here. Get me Ghidd'ah," he said tersely.

"I'm on duty..."

"Do it," he snarled.

Within a few minutes, she answered him. "How can I help, Captain?"

"I'm sick," he said hoarsely. "I need your help. Come alone, and don't tell anyone."

"Can you answer the door?" she asked. "I can get a passkey if not."

"Get the key," he said, signing off and falling back on the bed as a wave of nausea swept through him, leaving him sweating and shaking.

He lay there, trying just to get through the next few minutes without throwing up. He didn't notice her arrive, but when the next spasm hit, she was there, holding a bowl for him when his stomach finally rebelled.

Afterward, she gave him a cup of water to rinse his mouth out with then helped him lie back among his pillows.

"Zayshul and I've been expecting this," she said quietly, reaching out to take his hand comfortingly in hers. "She told me everything, but don't worry, I won't tell anyone. She and I are old friends."

The look he gave her was haunted. "She shouldn't have told you." He drew his hand away from hers.

"She had to once you asked her to remain behind. At least I can treat you."

"The marker's turned her scent into a drug for me, hasn't it? And I'm addicted to it." He remembered how ill he'd been after his failed suicide attempt when he'd overdosed on sleeping tablets and analgesics washed down with neat spirits.

She nodded. "You're going through withdrawal symptoms. I do have some medications to make you more comfortable and take the edge off the symptoms."

"Will I be free of the marker once it's over?" he asked, turning onto his side in an effort to still the trembling of his limbs. The mattress flowed against his limbs, cushioning and supporting him.

Ghidd'ah reached for her medical bag, pulling it closer to where she sat on the floor beside his low-level bed. "No, I'm afraid not. Coupling gives you the actual addiction, but the pull of the marker is so strong you can't avoid doing that." Opening the bag, she pulled out a small, sealed bundle which she put to one side, then took out a hypo and began preparing a shot.

"I'm giving you this to calm your stomach and relax you so the cramps will subside. I have another for the headache. It'll make you drowsy and you should sleep for most of the day."

Tearing open a sealed pack, she parted the fur on his shoulder and swabbed the skin before applying the hypo.

It stung slightly and he put his hand up to rub it.

"Zayshul also gave me a blanket for you," she continued as she prepared the second shot. "It's identical to those on the ship. She used it before you left. We don't know if it will do any good, but it should have enough of her scent and natural body oils on it to alleviate your symptoms considerably. I'm also having you transferred to the sick bay— I want to monitor your condition."

"I don't want to leave here," he mumbled as he suddenly found it difficult to keep his eyes open. He was only vaguely aware of the sting of the second shot. "Don't want her blanket. I'll fight it."

"No, you won't," said Ghidd'ah firmly, putting the hypo away in her bag and closing it. "You'll do as you're told. My patients don't suffer unnecessarily, even if they feel it is good for their souls."

He blinked up at her. "I'm not punishing myself," he said, slurring the words as he tried to lift an arm that wouldn't cooperate. "Will she be suffering, too?"

"Maybe you're not now," she conceded, unpacking the blanket and replacing his with it, making sure that it was touching as much of his body as possible. "No, Zayshul won't suffer." She then draped his own over the top to hide Zayshul's scent from the other Primes. "Now try to sleep," she ordered, leaning down to stroke his cheek gently before pulling out her communicator.

\* \* \*

By the time he'd been transferred to a floater, the nausea had mercifully receded and so had the spasms. Cocooned in the scent of Zayshul's blanket, he was only vaguely aware of the sound of Kezule's and Banner's concerned voices. Ghidd'ah was telling them not to worry, he'd only picked up some minor local fever, but was being quarantined in the sick bay until he'd recovered.

At first, he tossed and turned in a delirious haze of half-formed images and sensations that remained just beyond his ability to decipher. Then, as his temperature lowered in response to the drugs and the cooling properties of the almost living, formfitting Prime bed, and Zayshul's blanket, the fever dreams began at last to make some sense.

\* \* \*

*Swirling blue tattoos etched into shaved cheeks filled his field of vision, hypnotizing him with their complexity until nothing else existed for him.*

*He felt a blow to the side of his head, sharp and hard enough to break his involuntary trance and make his eyes water as his head rocked on his neck.*

*"Listen, not look!" said the voice in Cabbaran.*

*He looked above the tattoos, at the eyes, seeing Naacha this time.*

*"Shielding you had before implant not enough. Need better—far better," said the Cabbaran mystic. "Build protection for mind same as build protections and danger warnings into ship. Same as force shields which change frequency. Same your mind do. Do now. Start outermost layer."*

*Hour after hour, they'd sat there on the floor of the Cabbaran shuttle on his estate while he learned to set his personal mental space farther out than he'd ever done before, and learned to set triggers into each layer, warnings that would alert him to changes around him. The first would tell him if his name was spoken in a certain way, the next if another strong Talent was within fifty feet of him, another if anyone should take too great an interest in him— and so it went on.*

*For the first few, Naacha had mentally grasped hold of his mind, showing him how to set the alarms; the rest he had to set himself. Once he'd finished, he was made to lower the shields one at a time, then set them up again swiftly with his warning systems still functional and in place. Then, with Annuur's help, his alarms, then his shields had been tested. It had been grueling, unremitting work, but by the end of it, even with his ears still ringing from Naacha's repeated cuffs, and his mind feeling bruised, he could block all but a sustained forced contact from the mystic without betraying his psychic abilities.*

*"Now the hard work begins," said Naacha, finally satisfied with him.*

*And it had. He'd had to be shown the new mental pathways in his mind because the old ones no longer existed. Every skill he'd possessed before had to be relearned, and they'd only five days in which to do it. There had been accidents, like the time the lab had exploded when Naacha had been showing him how to affect the molecular structure of objects in order to move them. He'd panicked, and Naacha had been unable to control him because his shielding had become too strong for the Cabbaran to penetrate. They'd had to sedate him to stop him that time, and the next, when he'd been tracking Tirak mentally through the ship. He'd lost his patience because he couldn't find him and had lashed out mentally. The backlash had rendered the U'Churian unconscious for two hours.*

*He suddenly knew that because of his lack of self-control, and Naacha's inability to stop him, while he'd still been sedated, the mystic had gone into his mind and sealed off certain of the skills he'd learned, including most of his ability to shield. He had been uncontrollable, and in possession of knowledge and tools too powerful for him to be allowed to wield them. Shutting him down temporarily had been their only option, and was why they'd bio-engineered his torc to act as a temporary mental shield for him.*

*"You're a hunter," Naacha had said. "Hunters use stealth far more than force. Learn this well."*

*As his control over his returning abilities as a Telepath increased, the torc had intruded less often, and the knowledge of the skills he'd had locked away had started to return.*

"I did lock the door," he mumbled in surprise, realizing that the day he and Zayshul had paired in the data room, he had reached out mentally and operated the locking mechanism.

"Excuse me?" asked Ghidd'ah, sitting at his side monitoring him, but he had already drifted into sleep.

\* \* \*

Ghidd'ah pushed Kezule and Banner firmly out of the sick bay into the corridor. "I will not have you raising your voices in my infirmary," she said sternly, closing the door behind her.

"What's wrong with him?" demanded Kezule.

"I told you both, he's picked up a local fever, nothing more."

"That's not just a fever," said Banner. "Not when he's throwing up like that."

"You didn't tell me that," said Kezule accusingly. "Have you tested him for poison, or bites? That M'zayash female took him off alone for a good quarter of an hour!"

"It's not poison, General," began Ghidd'ah.

"Dammit! I can't have him falling ill like this! I need him and his expertise to finish interviewing these volunteers!" He was having visions of his carefully laid plans suddenly collapsing.

"He's in no fit state to leave his bed," interrupted Banner. "M'kou can handle it. Have you run diagnostic tests on him, Ghidd'ah?"

"Of course I have! I'm not an amateur, Lieutenant," she said stiffly. "He has contracted a local virus, that's all. Some form of gastric fever, nothing more. You've seen him for yourself. Unpleasant, but not dangerous."

"I need him up and functioning," insisted Kezule, reaching out for the door mechanism.

"No," said Ghidd'ah, moving to block him. "He's not leaving here. Do you want this virus spreading throughout the whole ship?"

"She's right," said Banner. "He's better in isolation. We could end up being stranded here for up to a week. I can help M'kou."

Kezule glanced at him. "What do you know about Alien Relations?"

"Not a lot, but I've been a recruiter for the Brotherhood and worked in the Alliance for over twenty years. I can certainly help screen your colonists."

The General glowered at him, obviously hesitating.

Banner sighed. "I may not be as committed to this cause of yours as the Captain, but I will carry out his orders."

Reluctantly Kezule nodded. "What did their Elder want from him last night?" he asked abruptly, turning away from the sick bay.

"Kusac said she only wanted to know if we were a sovereign species or still your vassals."

"He had no right to go off with her like that."

"He didn't exactly have a choice, General," muttered Banner as they walked down the corridor. "I don't believe he welcomed her attention either. Do you think these new colonists will be willing to interbreed with your people? There seem to be a lot of families among them."

Kezule pushed his concerns aside with difficulty. "They'll integrate. The families all have at least one, if not two youngsters almost at sexual maturity. We're gaining many more colonists with them than with the single volunteers."

"There is that," agreed Banner. "And more youngsters to bring up in your military traditions, of course."

Kezule stopped dead and turned on Banner. "Are you Sholans born suspicious?" he demanded. "Have you seen any signs of coercion on Kij'ik? Do I force my people to join my small military group? Of course I want everyone to be trained to defend themselves and this Outpost in an emergency, but that's a far cry from maintaining a military base! Even I'm aware the majority of my colonists are born and bred civilians!"

"You can't blame us for being suspicious, General," said Banner, his tone carefully neutral. "No matter what the Captain chooses to believe, we're here under duress."

"Ask your Captain if he wants to leave," hissed Kezule, losing patience with him. "All of you have been free to return to Haven since the day you arrived!"

"We can't leave Shaidan."

"In a few weeks, you won't have to!" he said angrily. "The more efficiently you do the job, the quicker you can all leave!"

"So you intend to keep your word this time?"



Kezule's hand snaked out and grasped Banner by the shoulder. Seeing the brief flicker of pain in the Sholan Lieutenant's eyes, with an effort, he flexed his fingers, making sure his claws no longer dug into his flesh.

"I intend to keep my word, Lieutenant," he said. "You keep yours. M'kou is in the cargo hold getting ready to interview the final twenty possible colonists. Join him there, and have your crew report to M'zynal to help him stow the luggage belonging to those coming with us."

\* \* \*

Thoughtfully, Banner watched the General stalk off before taking his Prime comm unit from his pocket to call M'kou. At least on the *N'zishok* they weren't plagued by the intermittent comms blackouts—a very few of which, he admitted to himself with a slight grin, he'd caused.

\* \* \*

They'd completed ten of the interviews by the time a group of Ch'almuthians came with a midday meal for everyone.

Tables used for checking off the trade goods were hastily cleared and chairs augmented by suitably sized crates. Banner made a point of sitting with M'kou and M'zynal, signaling Khadui to continue keeping an eye on Dzaou who was being unusually amenable.

The food was a variety of slices of cut meats and cheeses, accompanied by large bowls of salads tossed with a variety of unusual dressings.

"A nice change in food," Banner said, forking the meat onto his plate.

"Very," agreed M'kou, helping himself to salad. "We've been given twenty flightless fowl to take back to provide fresh eggs and meat."

"They'll make an interesting addition to maneuvers in the fields," said Banner, grinning. "Trying to get quietly past them will be a Challenge in itself!"

"Indeed," said M'zynal with a pained look. "Messy creatures too— all those feathers and droppings spread all through the corridors of the ship..."

Banner laughed. "The joys of farming, M'zynal!" He munched his food for a few minutes, washing it down with a glass of chilled fresh fruit juice.

"So what do you make of this closer working relationship between our commanders?" he asked M'kou, putting the widemouthed glass down.

M'kou glanced at his brother, but he was concentrating on his food. "I think it's good," he said, folding several slices of meat with his fork and knife. "I like the life we have at Kij'ik, compared to what we had on K'oish'ik— though now I've seen Ch'almuth, perhaps I'd prefer to live on a planet one day. But I like the more relaxed way of life— unlike the ceremony the City of Light has. I enjoy dealing with people, sorting ordinary everyday matters for them." He glanced up at Banner. "Soldiers don't have to fight, Lieutenant. I prefer to protect our community by peaceful means."

"Peace has to be guarded vigilantly," murmured M'kou. "Fought for, if necessary, when negotiations fail."

"Agreed," said Banner, "but..."

"Lieutenant, our people now are not that dissimilar," interrupted M'kou. "We," he indicated M'zynal with his fork. "We are not the same as our father, Kezule. We were also programmed with a Prime background as we developed. We weren't given his descendants' racial hatred of your species. The only way for us to survive in this time *is* to follow his lead and breed ourselves back to what we once were, breed out the hate and paranoia of the M'zullians and the J'kirtikkians. Then we will not be the threat to the Alliance that you fear us to be. So yes, I approve of the understanding that's flourishing now between our commanders."

"What about M'zull and J'kirtikk?" he countered. "They're a threat to everyone. This world, and the Prime one, are ripe for their picking!"

"Emperor Cheu'koh is going to contact them on the Alliance's behalf. That was the plan, wasn't it?"

"And if they don't agree to a nonaggression treaty, what then?"

"Then it is even more important that our colony succeeds, Lieutenant," said M'kou softly, picking up his juice and taking a sip.

Banner leaned toward the young aide. "Why? What do you know that we don't?"

"Nothing, but the General was one of the top field tacticians of his time. You need him, and us, as your allies," said M'kou. "He could exert dominance over those two worlds by virtue of his birthright alone."

"This conversation is unsettling the Ch'almuthians," said M'zynal. "Continue it later, if you must, in private."

"We've ten people left to interview," said M'kou, his loaded fork held in midair just short of his mouth. "So far, it seems our volunteers have been screened pretty effectively by their own people. We should be finished in another three or four hours, don't you think, Banner?"

"Yes, at tops. When does the General plan to leave?"

"As soon as the last people and their belongings are on board. M'zynal told me the cargo is almost fully loaded," he said, glancing at his brother for a confirmatory nod. "The General is finalizing trade agreements with the Elders now."

"What about the other settlements?"

"Representatives from several of them arrived this morning. Apparently on our next visit, we'll see those who were unable to attend this time."

He nodded, continuing to eat his meal. There was something happening here that he was missing, but what, he didn't know. Glancing down the table, he briefly caught Nishon's eyes on him before the other looked

hurriedly away. His feelings of unease were now centered on him: whatever it was, Nishon was involved, of that he was certain.

"M'kou, get M'zynal to do a thorough security check on all goods the Ch'almuthians have brought on board," he said very quietly, leaning toward the other again.

Startled, M'kou looked up at him. "For what?"

"I don't know. Something about this doesn't feel quite right. They are just too friendly, too obliging."

M'kou's pupils shrank to vertical slits. "You're an empath, aren't you?" he said softly. "Are you picking up a threat to the ship?"

"Nothing that obvious. They could have hidden some kind of long-range communications device, or bugs."

"Bugs?"

"Yes, bugs. Small, easily hidden transmitters that relay private conversations and such."

"They're technologically backward compared to us."

Banner caught and held his gaze. "Are they?" he asked very softly. "How do we know that for sure?"

"You're quite right, Lieutenant," M'kou said, raising his voice after a moment's hesitation. "We should run our decontamination procedure. We can't afford to allow any parasites or vermin onto Kij'ik's controlled ecology. M'zynal, you'll see to implementing that, won't you?"

Somewhat reassured, Banner continued eating.

\* \* \*

"The Sholan Lieutenant is suspicious of us," Nishon said without preamble into the communicator.

M'zayash made a sound of annoyance. "He has empathic abilities; he would be, with you broadcasting your nervousness so loudly. We're almost finished here, I'll join you shortly. Meanwhile, remain in the warehouse out of his sight."

"They're checking everything, claiming to be decontaminating it..."

"Let them, they'll find nothing, because there is nothing to find," she said, hanging up on him.

### **N'zishok, Zhal-L'Shoh 22nd day (January)**

He woke much later to find his forearm secured and a drip attached to it. Ghidd'ah was at his side instantly.

"How do you feel?" she asked, checking his pulse.

"Better," he admitted. "Hungry and thirsty," he added, trying to lick his dry lips.

She poured him a cup of water and lifted his head to help him drink it. When he tried to raise his hand to the cup, his body still felt leaden and wouldn't respond properly, and his mind was decidedly fuzzy.

"Your fever seems to have broken. I'll get a light meal sent down to you then I want you to rest again," she said. "We've got real eggs now, and birds to lay them."

"I should get up," he said as she called a medic over to help her raise the bed for him. "A day in bed is long enough."

"A day?" she smiled. "We're on our way home, Kusac. You've been here for two days. I've had to keep you sedated to stop the symptoms from returning. And the General and Banner out of here," she added.

He knew he should feel more shocked than he did, but right now, it didn't seem that important.

## **Kij'ik, Zhal-L'Shoh 24th day (January)**

Next time he woke, Zayshul was there, lying on top of his bed, her head resting against his shoulder. Underneath her scent, he could smell the familiar surroundings of his quarters on Kij'ik.

"You're awake," Zayshul said with a faint smile, sitting up. "We're nursing you in your own rooms."

He caught sight of Ghidd'ah behind her at the doorway.

"She kept me unconscious," he said accusingly, struggling to sit up. He still felt a little light-headed and not quite coordinated.

"I know. I told her to," said Zayshul. "If she hadn't, we'd have had a lot more explaining to do to everyone. As it is, you're back with as little fuss as possible, and I have an excuse to be in your rooms."

As he watched Ghidd'ah leave the room, shutting the door behind her, it took a moment or two for what she'd said to sink in.

"You're becoming too devious for my good," he murmured, automatically checking that his mental shields— those he'd learned from the Cabbaran mystic— were fully up as he turned his attention to matters of a more pressing sensual nature.

The first touch of his lips to her skin brought the craving for her back with a vengeance. "Your scent's a poison," he murmured, his tongue flicking out to gently graze her cheek. "You are a drug I can't do without. I shouldn't be doing this." His voice, almost inaudible, tailed off as he kissed her.

\* \* \*

When she'd gone, taking Ghidd'ah with her, he showered, unplaiting his hair and thoroughly washing away the sweat and grime caused by his fever and the stay on Ch'almuth. He'd much to think about now he was alone and rational, not least of which was that his separation from Zayshul hadn't diminished the effect her scent had on him. The prospect of him being able to leave Kij'ik and Zayshul without severe physical repercussions was looking bleak to say the least. He had an uneasy feeling about some unfinished business he had on Ch'almuth, but the thought was elusive, maybe no more than a real fever dream.

It was early evening when he finished, and the food he'd shared from the processor with Zayshul and Ghidd'ah had been nothing more than a snack. Given no one but the two females had seen him for the last five days, he decided it was time he made a public appearance.

With a last attempt to tame his hair, which refused to lie flat and insisted on framing his face like a U'Churian's full mane, he pulled on a tunic and belted it, realizing he'd no idea where his knife was. His robe had gone to the laundry, he knew that. Somewhat concerned, he called Banner on his wrist comm.

"Kusac! How are you?" his Second demanded.

"I'm fine, but hungry," he said. "Where are you, and is the mess still open?"

"Yes, and we're in the mess now," was the reply. "I have your knife, by the way. Ghidd'ah gave it to me to look after for you."

"I wondered where it was. I'll see you in five minutes," he said and signed off.

He left his room and headed for the mess where he found Banner and Jayza sitting over mugs of hot kheffa.

As he slid into a seat opposite them, Banner passed his knife over to him. "I hadn't realized that coming here had been your first command," he said,

indicating the single inset brass slash mark on the black hilt. "I thought you were in charge of the Jalna mission."

He took it gratefully and slipped it into the sheath which sat over his left hip, the mark now hidden against his side. "No, that was a joint command, with Kaid."

"Are you feeling better, Captain?" asked Jayza. "Getting a fever like that was bad luck."

"It was no fun, believe me," he assured the youth, stabbing a piece of meat with his fork. "This is my first real food since I took ill."

"You certainly look well," said Banner, eyeing him carefully. "More relaxed than I've seen you in a long time."

"Don't say a word about my hair," he said, shooting him a look. "I seem to be carrying a static charge at the moment. I'm going to get Shishu to braid it again."

"Mine, too," said Jayza with a grin.

"You could cut it," suggested Banner.

"What for?" asked Jayza at the same moment he did, making them both grin.

"Just a suggestion," Banner said with a shrug. "I like mine shorter."

"Mine was always long, until I joined the *Khalossa*," Kusac replied.

"Captain," said M'kou, coming over to them. "Good to see you up and about again. The General will be pleased to hear you're recovered."

"Thank you," he said, pushing some greens onto his fork. "How are the new arrivals settling in?"



"Very well. I know the General wants to talk to you in detail about arrangements for them. Perhaps tomorrow morning?"

"No problem. In the meantime, tell him to let them find their feet until early afternoon tomorrow, then give them a pep talk about the differences in living on a space station. You know, the usual things I'm sure he told all of you when you arrived here, like safety drills and so on. And he has to remember these are civilians who've never been in space before."

"I'll pass your message on. The General asked me to let you know Shaidan is concerned about you and that since this is your first evening up, perhaps you'd like to come down and see him briefly tonight. Your usual meetings will resume tomorrow night, of course."

"Thank you," he said, looking up at the young male. "I appreciate that." Then Jayza's surreptitious motions to attract his attention caught his eye and he looked questioningly at him.

"Shishu," said Jayza succinctly.

"Ah, yes. Do you know where Shishu will be this evening? If she doesn't mind, she has two customers wanting their hair braided tonight."

M'kou grinned, eyeing his hair. "I can see why. She'll likely be in her quarters right now. I'll call in and speak to her when I drop you off at the General's suite. I'm sure she'll be happy to do it for you."

He shoveled the last of the food into his mouth, washing it down with a mouthful of kheffa as he got to his feet. "I'll see you in about half an hour in the rec?" he asked, looking at Banner and Jayza.

Banner nodded.

\* \* \*

Kezule was waiting for him in the lounge when he left Shaidan's bedroom. "I'd like a quick word now, if you don't mind, Kusac, just to bring you up to date on what I've done with our Ch'almuthians."

"Certainly," he said, making for the nearest armchair.

"For the time being, I've put them into the M'zullians' dorm quarters on your level, opening up more of them as needed. The ten families have been given Officer suites. They have all the facilities they need there, including the rec room and lounge."

"I thought you were reopening that for general use."

"I am, but M'kou thought it made sense to settle all the newcomers together and let them get used to Kij'ik and our people on a more relaxed basis than being suddenly thrust into the middle of them. We've more than enough rooms to relocate them to as they form their own friendships and relationships."

He nodded. "It's what we did when we had a sudden rise in gene-altered Sholans and Humans on my estate. Because integration wasn't forced, they gained the confidence to move outside their own, small community and make new friends. Also, your new colonists are from several different communities, just as ours were. They need to get to know each other, too."

"That's what I'm hoping. It also occurred to me that our own people need to adjust to the newcomers."

He raised an eye ridge in surprise. "You learn quickly, General," he said. "So does your son."

"I watched how you and your people adapted to us, Kusac." He stood up. "I'm glad to see you fully recovered. You gave us— your Lieutenant and me— quite a scare. I won't take up any more of your time."

"It was just a fever," he said, getting up. "You obviously managed to finish off the interviews without me."

"I still need your help, Kusac," Kezule began.

He held up his hand. "I know that there's still a lot to do," he said. "I'm not trying to deny it."

Kezule nodded, and reaching into his pocket, drew out a slim card, not unlike the ones used as room keys on the *N'zishok*. "You should have this. Put it into the reader slot in one of the comps in the library," he said. "It's a transcript of a tape I had made of my memories from the far past. It'll help you fill in the blanks on that file you're translating."

"Thanks," he said, surprised, taking it from Kezule.

## **Zan'droshi, Zhal-L'Shoh 25th day (January)**

While they were away, work on salvaging the *Zan'droshi* had progressed to the point where power had been returned to a limited number of areas and functions. One essential had been gravity throughout the areas in which they were working. A briefing room near their HQ had been set aside for them as a place to eat. It was here that Banner was sitting, still in his suit, slowly sipping water from a vacuum pack.

The door opened and Khadui, helmet and gloves in his hands, came in. Nodding at Banner and the two Primes seated at the other end of the table, he went to the food box to pick up his sealed dish, then returned to sit beside his fellow Sholan. Dumping his gloves in his helmet and both on the vacant seat beside him, he put the dish on the table.

"Lieutenant," he said, snapping the sealed lid off. He picked up the vacuum sealed meal of meat and activated the heating mechanism.

"How's it going?" asked Banner.

"We've finished loading the suits from the port side lockers," he said. "Like the other Valtegan ones, the electronics seem to be fine but the padding needs some attention. They're being sent over to Kij'ik now."

"How many?"

"A hundred or so. Fix 'em up then give the newcomers a few days induction into wearing them, and they'll be ready to help us." He undid the cap on the meal pack and put the nozzle into his mouth, sucking up a

mouthful of the paste. He pulled a face as he swallowed. "Food like this makes you glad of the mess," he said. "Where's it come from?"

"The mess," grinned Banner. "They liquidize a meal and fill those reusable packs with it."

"Well, it still tastes as bad as our suit rations do," said Khadui, taking another mouthful. "It was good to see the Captain looking so well again last night."

"Yes," said Banner, taking another sip. "It was."

"He seemed sharp, really on top of things when he joined us," continued the older male, lowering his voice a fraction.

"Yes, he was." Banner stirred, wondering where Khadui was going with this.

"I've noticed that in the last few weeks he's seemed to be like that for a couple of days, then in some kind of stupor for the next four or five. Reckon that fever's been hanging around in his system for some while?"

"Could well have been," Banner replied. So Khadui did have some concerns about Kusac.

"Don't get me wrong," said Khadui hastily. "I'm not like Dzaou, I think the Captain's managing well enough."

Banner nodded, taking another sip of his water. He'd thought long and hard about taking another member of the crew into his confidence, but now that Khadui had made the opening move, this was as good a time as any.

"I'm concerned he's taken on too much responsibility from the start, what with the cub and everything else," he said carefully. "Considering the history he and Kezule have, and the aggravation he's had to put up with from Dzaou, he's holding it together well, but it's bound to be causing him stress. Maybe it's time you and I lent a hand there."

"With the cub?" Khadui glanced at him briefly. "I don't know that either Kezule or the Captain would let us. Captain's very protective of the lad."

"That's what worries me. It's going to be a wrench when we get home and he has to give him to the authorities."

"I heard Shaidan was technically an orphan and the Captain intended to keep him," said Khadui, sucking up the last of his meat course.

"Not everything works out the way we want it to, Khadui, you know that," said Banner.

"I'd be willing to help, of course," said the older male, putting the empty container back in the dish and taking out the one of water.

"Good. Meanwhile, there's something else you can do for me," he said, switching into the Highland dialect they used when they didn't wish to be overheard. He palmed a piece of paper out of his suit pocket onto the seat beside Khadui. "I need the components on this list. Can you get them back to Kij'ik for me?"

Khadui glanced at the list as he swept it into his hand. "Take a day or two, but yes, they're common enough here. You'll need a case. What size, and do you want a keypad and screen?" He stuffed it into his suit pocket.

"Size of our comp pads, and yes on the screen and keypad. It's central to our backup plan, in case we need one. Need to know basis, so keep it to yourself."

Khadui nodded, taking a drink from the pack. "That makes me feel a lot more comfortable," he said. "That lizard is one devious bastard."

"Thought it might, and yes, he is," said Banner, slipping back into Sholan speech. Finishing his drink, he packed it away and got to his feet. "I'll see you on the other side," he said, picking up his helmet and dish and heading off.

\* \* \*

At the end of his shift, as he was walking over to the elevator in Kij'ik's landing bay, he caught sight of M'kou ahead of him. "Hey, M'kou, wait!" he called out and began to run toward the young Prime Officer.

M'kou stopped and waited for him. "Is there a problem, Lieutenant?" he asked when the other arrived.

"No, just wanted a quiet word alone with you."

"We'll have the elevator to ourselves," said M'kou, turning to hit the call button. "Will that do?"

"Fine," said Banner. "I'm concerned that stress may have been a factor in the Captain's illness," he said when the door had closed on them.

"Youngsters can be tiring, I know, so I'm offering to take some of the burden of being with Shaidan off him, say two days a week?"

"On the contrary, I think that your Captain considers the time he spends with Shaidan to be the most relaxing."

"Can I be frank with you, M'kou?" Banner asked.

"Please," said M'kou, with a hint of surprise on his face.

"The Captain is getting too attached to the cub. When we do get home, no matter what he thinks, Shaidan will be handed over to the authorities, who will decide where he lives, and that will come as a great wrench to them both. I'd like to spare them some of that distress by helping them distance themselves a little from each other."

M'kou regarded him thoughtfully for a moment or two. "I'm afraid I can't help you, Lieutenant. That's a matter you'll have to take up with your Captain. I will tell you, however, that the General is not likely to allow it because Captain Aldatan is brought down to the Command level to see Shaidan. There the child has his own possessions around him and is more comfortable."

"Shaidan has been brought up to our level before now."

"On a few occasions," agreed M'kou. "At your Captain's personal request. I think you'll also find Shaidan himself resistant to the idea. He knows the Captain well now, and feels at ease with him. He isn't as comfortable with the rest of you."

"Don't you think that should be remedied, that it's bad for Shaidan?" Banner pressed him.

M'kou turned away from him slightly, watching the level indicator. "I think it's a matter for you to discuss with Captain Aldatan, Lieutenant," he repeated. "I'm sorry, but I can't help you." The elevator had begun to slow. "This is your level."

"Thanks, anyway, M'kou," said Banner as it drew to a halt and the doors opened. "I'll have a word with the Captain, then." At least he now knew that the General was also involved in deciding who Shaidan saw, not just Kusac.

As he headed up corridor A to their corridor, he began to think through what Khadui had told him at second meal. He'd been aware of Kusac seeming distracted and distant since they'd arrived here, but hadn't realized this new pattern of behavior in the last few weeks had become as marked as the older Sholan had inferred. He'd need to keep more of an eye on him than he had been doing, but working separately from him all day didn't make it easy. As for the evenings, Kusac ate with Shaidan, so they didn't even share third meal. When he was finished, he'd often as not stay in his room rather than come to the rec. The only night he could be sure of seeing Kusac was when they were sparring. Still, most mornings he now held a debriefing in their lounge after first meal, before they all started their shifts. He could get an idea of his mental state then.

Banner sighed. Kusac was as difficult to pin down as smoke. He and Kezule, in their own ways, made a strangely similar pair.

\* \* \*

"A word of warning," said M'kou quietly, several hours later, as he and Kusac left the room where he'd been with Shaidan.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Now might be a good time to tell your crew that Shaidan is your son. Some of them are getting concerned that you are too close to him for the good of either of you."

"Banner's been saying that for some time," he said. "There's nothing to worry about."

"I didn't say it was him."

"You didn't need to," he said, a slight touch of humor in his tone. "No one else would approach you."

"He asked me to arrange for Shaidan to be with him two nights a week rather than with you, Captain. He thinks stress contributed to your recent illness."

Kusac stopped dead. "Stress had nothing to do with it," he said angrily. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him to discuss the matter with you, Captain," he said, his tone placatory. "I did say that I believed you found your time with him relaxing, and that the General would be unlikely to allow anyone but you down to the Command level."

"It could amuse Kezule to let Banner do that," he said, the beginnings of a snarl in his voice.

"You're wrong," said M'kou instantly. "The thought might amuse him briefly, but he wouldn't allow it, either down here or on your level. He gave you his word that you would see your son every day and he hasn't broken it yet, Captain, because he trusts you."

Kusac stared at him, then sighed. "You're right," he conceded. "He has too much to lose if he breaks his word to me."



"I also told your Lieutenant that Shaidan himself would be unlikely to want to be with anyone but you," said M'kou.

He began to smile gently as the beginnings of an idea formed in his mind.

"Captain, why don't you just tell them who Shaidan is? Then your crew would stop worrying about the time you spend with him and that your authorities will take him away from you when you get home."

"I can't, M'kou," he said, starting to walk on. "There's a whole pack of reasons why I can't tell them until we leave here, but they mustn't know." He shot M'kou a glance. "Trust me on this, M'kou, and please say nothing."

"I wouldn't interfere, Captain," reassured the young Prime. "I haven't even mentioned it to the General."

Surprised, he looked at him again. "Thank you, M'kou," he said feelingly. "I appreciate that, and your warning."

"Now that I have a young sister, I understand the call of family," said M'kou. "I know how difficult it must be for you to leave Shaidan here nearly every night."

"I love him a great deal," said Kusac softly. "He'd make any father proud."

"You're lucky to have each other," said M'kou with a smile as they reached the elevator.

"Shaidan will have to spend more time with me and my crew," he said, shaking off the sentimental mood with an effort. "If I can have him brought to me twice a week so we can eat in the mess, then go to the gym after, it will do a lot to keep Banner's objections at bay."

"I'm sure I can find a way to suggest it to the General," said M'kou with a grin. "You might consider taking Shaidan to the pool. He hasn't been there yet."

"That's an idea," he said. "I hope you like playing games in the water."

"Water is our second home. Besides, it's good training for when Lazaik and I have our own children."

"You're thinking of that already?" he asked, astonished.

"We need to breed to sustain this colony, Captain," said M'kou. "Now we have families living with us, she will get even more broody."

He laughed, patting M'kou's arm. "I can't believe it! You as a father. You'll make a good one, though, I know it."

"I like to think I would," smiled the young Prime, inclining his head.

"Good night, Captain."

"Good night, M'kou."

\* \* \*

Vartra sat in the armchair opposite Shaidan's bed, watching him sleep. The seed of an idea he'd planted in the cub the night before had taken fruit already in Kusac when Shaidan had mentioned it to him. Now all that remained was to give Shaidan the necessary knowledge of the skills his father would start teaching him the following evening.

Fighting was not something he'd been good at, so he'd had to visit L'Seuli and take the knowledge from him. He'd never done a knowledge transfer before and hoped this one would go well. Oh, he knew the theory of how to do it, but that wasn't quite the same. Shaidan was certainly old enough to start learning, but given the circumstances, he'd decided that the sooner the cub knew how to defend himself, the better. No matter what the Camarilla thought, the future was far from written in stone yet.

He rose to his feet in a fluid move and advanced to the side of the bed, sitting down beside the sleeping cub. So small and helpless he looked, lying there with his hand curled on the pillow beside his face. Sighing, he

reached out and laid his hand on the child's forehead, marshaling his thoughts.

When it was done, he got to his feet and bent down to gently stroke Shaidan's forehead. "Sleep well, little one," he said, before stepping back and melting into the shadows from which he'd come.

### **Shola, Kusac's estate, Zhal-L'Shoh 26th day (January)**

Carrie picked Layeesha up out of the playpen, and holding her close against her chest with one hand, took a firm grip on her scruff with the other. Instantly, the squirming cub froze.

"You're very good with Sholan cubs," said Ray, parting the fur on Layeesha's shoulder then swabbing it with an antiseptic wipe before administering the inoculation.

"Shush, my pretty," she crooned as her daughter yowled in protest. "It's all over now." She rubbed her cheek against the cub's, then returned her to the playpen with her brother and half sister.

"They're not Sholan," she replied, reaching for three pieces of dried fruit she'd set aside for them. "They're hybrids." Bending down, she passed a piece to each of them.

"How can you tell?" asked Ray, dismantling the hypo gun ready for sterilization.

"Layeesha and Dhaykin are my twins, and Rishu is their half sister," she said dryly.

There was a small silence. "I didn't know you had children."

"I've three, and it looks like you're about to meet my oldest," she said, catching sight of T'Chebbi and Yashui, the cubs' senior nurse.

"Mamma!" shrieked Kashini, racing over to fling herself at her mother.

"Hello, sunshine," she said, bending down to catch the small blonde-furred cannonball. "Did you have fun seeing the rhaklas with T'Chebbi?"

"Yes. T'Chebbi put pretties in my hair. See!" she said, grabbing a braid and waving it in her mother's face.

"Very nice. I hope you thanked her," Carrie grinned over her head at T'Chebbi.

"I fank her," asserted the cub, ears flicking toward the other female. "Din I, T'Chebbi?"

"Yes, cub, you did."

"We've just finished," said Carrie, letting Kashini scramble back down to the floor. "Rishu was fine, much braver than my two."

T'Chebbi laughed and bent down to pick her daughter up, holding her carefully away from her knife and gun.

"This is Ray, one of the two Earth doctors I spoke about," Carrie said, indicating him with a nod of her head.

T'Chebbi nodded briefly at him. "You want we take all cubs home, Carrie?"

She glanced at her wrist comm. "If you don't mind. They're due to be fed in half an hour and I've still got to finish up here."

With much complaining, Kashini was finally persuaded to leave. It was the promise of being allowed to scamper through the snow at the side of the sidewalks that did it.

"It beats me how their bare feet don't freeze in that snow," said Ray, watching them leave after putting on warm jackets.

"Stop thinking of them as having bare feet," said Carrie as she collected the empty drug canisters. "They never wear shoes so their feet are very hardy."

Silence, apart from Ray's keypad, reigned as she loaded up the sterilizer and turned it on.

"Excuse my ignorance, but if they're twins, why are they listed as having different fathers?"

"Because they have." She was getting a little irritated at all the obvious questions.

He turned round to look at her. "I must be missing something here. I thought you were married."

"I am, to both their fathers," she replied shortly. "We're one of the Triads, the first in fact." She watched him trying to digest this without the shock he felt showing on his face.

"Isn't it asking rather a lot of Human women like yourself to follow their polygamous customs?" he asked finally. "I see that Rishu is also a child by one of your husbands."

"I'm not Human, I'm gene-altered, like my husbands," she said, going over to fold up the playpen. "And Triad marriages are only practiced here on our estate. Most Sholans never marry, they just take out bonding contracts to have families. As for T'Chebbi's cub, those of us who marry for dynastic reasons, as we did, are allowed to have a socially acceptable Companion. T'Chebbi is Kaid's. You should have been told all this at the induction course."

"We were, it just seemed very academic till now. Seems to me that system favors the men rather than you women if they can also have mistresses."

"A Companion isn't a mistress, she's more," she said sharply. "And we can take lovers, just like the males. Shola's a matriarchy, we just don't rub our mates' noses in it. Sholans are very like Earth felines in that way."

"In what way?"

She stared at him as she stood up, making full use of her feline eyes. "In every way you want to mention," she said, a purr underlying her words.

It was Ray who looked away, unable to take the unblinking stare from eyes no Human but she possessed.

"In every way you choose to mention," she said softly.

"There's a big difference in being told about a culture and actually experiencing it," he said finally. "I don't know what you think of me, but I came here to get that experience because I am genuinely interested, not as some thrill-seeking voyeur."

She instantly felt contrite. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was the first person to meet the Sholans, and have a Leska, so I got all the flak from every direction. I still tend to stay away from Humans because of it."

"You're very different, even from the others here," he said, allowing a small smile to lift the corners of his mouth. "Those eyes of yours are a real put down, never mind the vocal effects."

She laughed and moved over to the cupboard where the playpen was stored, putting it away. "They come in useful, but they do identify me far too easily at times," she agreed.

"What happened?" Ray asked, turning round in his seat to watch her. "How did they change?"

She sat down on the other chair. "No one's completely sure," she said. "It happened not long after our Link was established. My father and I had a rather public row and I seemed to... change."

"Change? Into what? A Sholan?"

She nodded. "Just very briefly, and not completely. When I changed back, my eyes stayed as they are now. It's never happened since."

"They're very beautiful," he said. "How are things with your father now?"

"Fine," she said, more briskly, slightly embarrassed by the compliment. "He adores Kashini. He's seen the twins on a vid call, of course, but not met them yet."

"Doesn't it feel strange, looking at your children and seeing them so very different from Humans? How do you cope with it?"

That did it. Her face froze and she got to her feet. "It's all in the medical records," she replied coldly. "I told you, I'm half Sholan now. My children reflect my genetic makeup, not my outward shape."

Ray was out of his seat in an instant, hand on her arm to prevent her leaving. "I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to offend you," he said, letting her go and stepping back hurriedly as her eyes narrowed again, this time to vertical slits of anger. "Let me make it up to you somehow— take you out for a meal or something. It's just that all you Humans— hybrids," he hastily corrected himself, "seem so very— Sholan. It fascinates me."

She hesitated, using her senses to see if he was telling the truth. He was, there was none of the murky undercurrent she found too often in the minds of those who professed an academic interest in her people.

"I really am sorry," he repeated, backing off till he was sitting on his chair again. "I've so many questions I would love to ask, but you're the first hybrid Human person I've had the chance to talk to. I'm not a telepath, I've not even got the hope that one day I could belong to a group like yours. If you want outsiders like me to understand you, you have to talk to us," he ended lamely.

*He has a point, sent Vanna from her room down the hallway. Let him take you out for a meal, ask you questions. Who knows, he might even make a difference when he does go back to Earth. And we'll find out what it is about us that they're all so fascinated about!*

*You go if you think it's such a good idea!* she sent.

*It isn't me he's asked, cub. Kaid's been neglecting you. Go, you could do with a little male flattery for a change.*

*Why not*, she thought. Everyone, Kaid included, had been telling her to get out more.

"All right," she said. "I'll go with you, and you can ask your questions."

"What? You will?" he said, grinning from ear to ear as he pushed back the lock of hair that had fallen over his eyes. "That's great! When? Tonight?"

She nodded, sending to Kaid to tell him what she was doing.

*Very well*, he replied. *Take him to The Hunter's Rest. Dzaka and Kitra plan to be there in an hour or two. My son can act as your bodyguard if needed.*

She was about to object when he sent again.

*Raiban has agents in Valsgarth. I don't want any of them getting overenthusiastic. If you don't want to travel with Dzaka and Kitra, get Ni'Zulhu to arrange an aircar for you. He can get permission to break the transport curfew and set you down outside the restaurant, the same to bring you back.* There was a small silence. *Why didn't you ask me if you wanted to eat out?*

*Why didn't you offer?*

*You know I lack the social skills and don't always notice when...* he began.

*That's too convenient an excuse. You used to make an effort, once.*

*I don't want to argue with you, Carrie.* There was a weariness in his tone.

*Neither do I.*

*Then I'll see you when you get home.*

"Yes, tonight," she said to Ray.

\* \* \*



When they arrived, she discovered Ni'Zulhu had also rung ahead, reserving them a table.

"Liegena," said the owner, coming forward as soon as they entered. He bowed his head to her, beckoning an underling forward to take their heavy outer coats.

"Please, come this way. We've provided cushions for the Djani's comfort."

"Thank you," she murmured as they followed him to their table.

"Djani, what's that?" asked Ray, looking round the many-alcoved room. "I've never heard that word before."

"Honorific— translates to gentleman," she said, sending a return greeting to Kitra and Dzaka whom she could see were sitting in easy line of sight of the table to which the owner was escorting them.

Though not full, the restaurant was busy. Many heads turned to look at them, but were quickly turned away again when she stared at them and they took in the fact she was wearing a Brotherhood purple-edged black tunic over the same color trousers. Inside, she cringed slightly, strengthening her mental shields. She'd known that the scandal Kusac had created when he left Shola would draw some unwelcome attention to her when she'd accepted Ray's invitation because this was her first public outing.

"Enjoy your meal, Liegena, Djani," said the owner, bowing slightly to them before leaving.

"Seems a lot of people know you," said Ray as he sat down on the high-backed, curved padded seat.

"They know of me," she corrected him, drawing her legs up into the bowl-shaped seat and arranging herself comfortably. "Valsgarth town grew up to serve the needs of the Aldatan Telepath Clan, of which we're a branch." She'd no intention of telling him exactly why the interest in her tonight.

Their table was one of the few two person ones, and inside a small alcove which gave them a degree of privacy.

She watched him with amusement as he tried to get comfortable in a chair obviously not designed for the more rigid-limbed Humans.

"I give in," he said at last with a slight grin. "How do I get comfortable in this chair? Come to think of it, how do you make it look so easy?"

She laughed, suddenly feeling a lessening of the tension that had dogged her for so long. "For me, it is. Another result of my change, I think. My joints move more easily than yours, and I'm used to them. Just fill the dip in the center of the chair with the cushions, then pile them behind your back until you can sit on the chair as you would normally do. It's designed for curling up in, not sitting."

He turned and began moving the half dozen small cushions around until he'd achieved something he was comfortable with.

Sighing, he leaned back slightly. "That's better. I take it they're used to us Humans in here."

"They're used to our Clan members coming now and then," she said, picking up the menu in front of her. "But few nontelepath Humans come here. Several Human specific outlets have opened up in Valsgarth. Not many, because the town caters to our needs."

"You keep saying that. What does it actually mean? That they're run by telepaths, or they sell things telepaths need?"

"Kind of a mixture. Some establishments are run by nontelepath members of the main Aldatan Clan, but many are just run by traders prepared to have telepaths as customers." She looked up at him. "This is the heartland for telepaths. The Telepath Guild is here, also the main Temple to Vartra, and the hospital has the main branch of telepath medics working in it. Not everyone is comfortable in our presence, some people actively dislike us because they're afraid we're constantly reading their minds. We need the town nearest to us to be sympathetic."

"So the traders here are all happy to serve you," he nodded. "I understand now. It's not that obvious when you read about it."

She smiled. "I don't suppose it is."

Having decided what she wanted, she put the menu down and relaxed back in her seat, waiting for Ray to choose. Opposite, Dzaka made a few sparse hand gestures, asking if all was well with her. She replied in kind, assuring him they were fine.

"Uh, a little help would be appreciated," he said after a few minutes, as a waiter approached and put down a pitcher of lightly fruit-flavored water then hovered near her elbow. "I can read Sholan fine, but menus are slightly different." He grinned up at her, his smile self-effacing. "It's the first time I've been to a restaurant here. The inns, yes, but not somewhere as classy as here."

"Do you like Sholan food?" she asked, and receiving a nod in reply, tilted her head at the waiter who came forward instantly. She reeled off a selection of dishes and handed him the menus.

"Sharing a meal has social significance here," she said as Ray poured out a glass of the water for each of them.

"I read about that, too," he nodded. "It's a hospitality and friendship issue."

There was a small commotion at the other side of the room as a group of people got to their feet and began to leave. Carrie glanced up at them as they came level. The lead male, a local community leader, stopped dead and snarling, began to spit out a string of insults at her, aimed at how Kusac had betrayed them all.

Instantly Dzaka was there, gripping the male by the arm and firmly escorting him to the door. At the same time, Kitra bounced over to greet her enthusiastically.

"Carrie! It's good to see you out again!" she said, leaning forward to embrace her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, kitling," she said, hugging her one-handedly, still a little shaken by the encounter. "This is Ray, one of our two visiting Earth doctors."

As Kitra let her go and turned to look at Ray, she surreptitiously replaced her stunner in its holster. "Ray, this is Kitra, my husband Kusac's youngest sister—and this is Dzaka," she added as he returned. "He's Kitra's husband."

Ray tried to rise from the chair and gave up, holding out his hand instead as Kitra giggled at his efforts.

"Pleased to meet you," he said as they brushed fingertips. He offered his hand to Dzaka who did the same. "What was that all about? Nothing to do with me being here, I hope."

"Absolutely not," reassured Dzaka. "It was politics. Some people just can't leave them at home when they come out to enjoy themselves." He smiled, displaying his canines.

*I'm sorry, Carrie, he sent. Would you like us to join you? You'll be less vulnerable to incidents like this with four of us here.*

Carrie looked round the room. Everyone else was concentrating on their food. *No, thanks. I don't think from the looks of it anyone else is wanting to make a scene.*

*True, they are eating, he chuckled mentally. "Looks like they're bringing our meal, Kitra," he said to his mate, putting an arm round her shoulders. "See you later, Carrie."*

The owner was bustling over to them, full of apologies. "That this should happen here," he said, shaking his head, his ears held at half height. "I have told them they will never be welcome here again, Liegena. Please, accept the meal as a gift to make up for the insult."

"That's all right," she began.

"No, I insist," he said firmly before disappearing again toward the doorway.

She looked at Ray who was sitting watching her. "It isn't usually like this," she said. "I do apologize."

"Not your fault," he said slowly. "I didn't realize that you carried a gun."

"A stunner, nothing more lethal," she reassured him.

"You drew it. I saw you."

She shrugged, settling back in her chair. "You never know with some people."

"Not exactly the usual response."

"I'm Brotherhood," she said quietly. "In case you don't understand just what that means, let me explain. We're Shola's Warrior Elite, independent of any other force of arms or law on this world. We're sworn to protect the Sholan species, telepaths particularly, at all costs. When I first came here, there were threats against my life. I don't take chances. Some Sholans still resent the fact I have Sholan Leskas. He was one of them. I told you eating had a social significance. It's also a time of truce between enemies. He and his party left because they didn't want to eat in the same place as me. If you'd like to leave now, I'll understand."

"No," he said hurriedly. "It was just a bit of a shock, that's all."

A slightly uncomfortable silence fell until their meal was brought out. As well as a serving of a stew rich with meat and applelike fruit, served in a creamy sauce, there were side dishes of various vegetables placed in the middle of the table, and a bottle of wine, also courtesy of the owner.

"You said that couple who came over to us were married. I'm not that good at judging Sholan ages, but she looks very young," he said. "And he looked rather old to be her husband."

"Dzaka? His gray pelt makes him look older than he is," she said, pouring out wine for them both. "He's only just into adulthood, despite his coloring. Yes, Kitra is young compared to him, only just fifteen, but they're very much in love."

He looked at her in shock. "She's a child! He's got to be twice her age."

"Kitra, a child?" She grinned. "Don't let either of them hear you say that. You wouldn't believe the lengths they both went to in order to get each other! She may not have reached her majority, but she's an adult in all that matters. They even have a young cub."

He shook his head. "It's sad when that happens."

"No, you're getting it wrong," she said, passing the glass over to him. "They're Leska life-mates, joined mind and body for life. Their cub was very much wanted by both of them, and they're still of an age when having a family is everything to them. It's not like it is on Earth."

"Obviously," he said, glancing round the side of his chair at them for a moment. "They certainly look happy together."

"They are."

"And they're one of your dynastic marriages?"

"Not exactly," she said, amused, looking up at him from her food. "They chose to marry, I told you. But Kitra is from a Clan Leader's family. Under normal circumstances, as a member of a Telepath Clan Leader's immediate family, she'd have been betrothed by now, to be married in two or three years, but not expected to have cubs for several more years."

"And this Leska Link thing, it can happen to all telepaths?"

"No, only those with the strongest Talent, level ones, and it doesn't happen for everyone, thankfully, only a few of us."

"And how does it happen?" he asked, helping himself to the side dishes of vegetables and cooked fruits.

She stopped eating momentarily, fork poised in midair. "No one really knows. It's a breeding imperative, though, so we think it has something to do with meeting your perfect match genetically."

"Yet you're of totally different species, and you said you both change—Humans become more Sholan, and Sholans more Human."

"Vartra knows," she shrugged, with a little smile at the truthfulness of what she'd said. "We're a new species, Ray, the best of both our people."

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly. Ray's questions continued to be thoughtful ones, showing he was making an effort not just to understand the Sholans, but also her people, the gene-altered ones. By the time they were ready for coffee, she decided to invite Kitra and Dzaka to join them.

"So what brings you here tonight?" she asked them eventually when the general conversation died down.

"We're celebrating," she said, glancing at Dzaka with a huge smile on her face. "Khayal was born on the first anniversary of our becoming lovers, so we couldn't celebrate then."

"So this is to celebrate that, and Khayal's birth two months ago," finished Dzaka.

"Have you been together that long?" she said in surprise, thinking back. "Gods, it *is* that long! Congratulations to you both. How is Khayal?"

"He's fine," smiled Dzaka.

"He's developing some brindled coloring like Dzaka's, now," said Kitra with a grin. "It looks really strange against his blond pelt."

"It does not," said Dzaka. "I think it looks fine."

"She's teasing you," said Carrie.

"I know," he smiled, taking Kitra's hand in his.

"How did you manage to wrench him away from Khayal to bring you here?" asked Carrie, winking at Kitra.

"With great difficulty," she said, keeping a straight face. "He's so devoted to his son that I come a poor second these days."

"One of these days I'm going to have to teach you how to lie convincingly," said Dzaka with a laugh. "It was me who wanted to have you to myself as my mate rather than as Khayal's mother for an evening."

Carrie leaned forward to stroke his cheek, then Kitra's. "I'm so happy for you both," she said. As she sat back, she glanced at her wrist comm. "Gods, the time! I have to get back. Ray, where are you staying? I'm sorry, I don't remember if you're quartered on our estate or here, in town."

"We're staying with Ruth for the time being," he replied, finishing off his coffee.

"Then we can drop you off," she said. "You don't mind us all going back together, do you?" she asked Dzaka, who shook his head.

"I'll call Ni'Zulhu," he said, activating his wrist comm. "He'll have an aircar here in about fifteen minutes."

\* \* \*

*He's nice, sent Kitra as they got off at the main estate house. Are you planning to spend some time with him?*

*Good grief, no!* she replied, hurriedly making sure Kaid couldn't overhear their mental conversation. *Why should I want to do that? Or he, come to that?*



*Because you're unhappy and he makes you laugh. And he is interested in you. It would do you good, Carrie.*

*No it wouldn't, she replied tartly. You wouldn't do it if...*

*I did when Dzaka and I were separated because of that dreadful betrothal, she interrupted as Dzaka shut the aircar door.*

*You didn't, did you? It didn't exactly work, though, did it?*

*Well, it made the Chazouns mad, which was what I intended.*

*Well, I've no wish to make Kaid mad, so let's forget about it!*

*As you wish. G'night, Carrie!*

"Saying good night?" asked Ray as the aircar started up again and headed inland for their estate.

"What? Oh, yes. Kitra was saying good night," she said, still distracted by what her bond-sister had said.

"You were right about them. They do make a great couple."

"They do. Dzaka lost his first wife and child when their colony was destroyed by the Valtegans. It hit him really hard. We were all pleased when he and Kitra fell in love because they're both so good for each other."

An awkward silence fell until they reached the village and stopped outside Ruth's.

"Thank you for suggesting a meal," she said as he got out. "I enjoyed myself."

"Maybe we could do it again," he said with a smile.

"Perhaps," she said. "Good night."

\* \* \*

Kaid was waiting for her when she got in. "You had a nice time," he said. "I'm glad. It's so cold outside I thought you might like a hot bath so I made sure we could have the communal bathing room downstairs to ourselves."

"That would be nice," she said, surprised, as he helped her off with her coat.

"I also thought I'd give you one of my massages," he added, putting an arm around her waist and drawing her toward the bathing room. "It's been a long time since I did that."

"Why all the sudden attention?" she asked.

"No real reason, except I've been getting more stressed than I want to lately and a bath will help me as much as you." His mouth parted in a very Human grin. "Besides, you know I like giving you massages."

"I remember them," she murmured. "It was when my leg and arm were healing after that Challenge I fought. Tonight has been an evening of memories, you know. Dzaka and Kitra were celebrating a year together, and Khayal's birth on the same day as their anniversary."

"I can't believe I'm a grandfather," he said, shaking his head.

She laughed, reaching up to ruffle his ears. "You have to be the youngest, and at times the oldest, grandfather I know!" she teased.

## Chapter 13

### Next day, Zhal-L'Shoh 27th day (January)

NEXT morning at first meal, Carrie again tried speaking to Kaid about the message from Kusac, but he refused to be drawn. When she got up from the table and walked off, he followed her.

"Carrie, don't be like this," he said.

"When you disappeared to go off after Khemu, then got caught by Fyak and Ghezu, we didn't give up on you," she said, rounding on him.

"That's not fair," he said, pulling back. "You know why I went. It was a matter of honor. She was Dzaka's mother. I had to make it right for them both."

"What makes you so damned sure Kusac hasn't an equally good reason?" she demanded.

"We'd have known!"

"Like we knew about you and Khemu?"

"I admit I had secrets then, but Kusac doesn't, you know he doesn't."

"Why has everything to be so black or white for you, Kaid, especially when most of your life has been nothing but shades of gray? Why can't you admit there could be gray areas with him, too?"

"I refuse to be drawn into this conversation," he said, backing away from her toward the dining room door. "When Kusac is found, if he has an explanation, then I'll listen to it, that's the most I'll concede."

Still fuming, Carrie headed into the main hallway, stopping only long enough to grab her coat from the closet before heading out into the village.

"Never thought I'd say you stupid," T'Chebbi said, coming out of the kitchen carrying Rishu.

He swung around to face her. "Is there no privacy here anymore?" he demanded.

"Not when you argue so loud," she said amicably. "You pushing her away. Stupid when are those who interested in her she can go to. Want that, Kaid? Want her to turn to a Human male instead of you?"

He stared at her, mouth hanging open in surprise.

"Common knowledge," she said. "He asks many questions about her, about you."

"No, I don't want that, but it's up to her, not me," he said, a look of anguish briefly crossing his face. "I can't watch Kusac's message again, T'Chebbi."

"Why? Because it mentions only her, leaves you on outside?" she asked. "You said her hurt worse than yours, is it? You making her choose between you and Kusac, Kaid, something you said would never do."

"I am not!"

She nodded. "Yes. Is like you telling her, Forget him, forget what you shared, remember only me and my hurt, not yours or his."

"Dammit! I am so sick of this matter!" he snarled. "You females stick together like nesting jeggets! I'm going out to find someone rational to talk to!" With that, he left.

Sighing, T'Chebbi hushed her whimpering infant and headed into the lounge to call Rezac, Kaid's father.

\* \* \*

Suddenly feeling the need for another Human to talk to, Carrie stomped off through the lightly falling snow to Ruth's house. As usual, even though first meal was well over and Ruth's daughter Mandy and fosterling Daira, a young male Sholan, were at the estate school, Ruth had a full kitchen—

full of half the archaeological team, including Josh and Mara, the only known Human Leska pair. Ruth's home was a kind of halfway house for newly gene-altered young Human telepaths, a place for them to adjust more easily to their new lives among the Sholans. At the moment, she had none living with her so the two visiting Earth doctors were lodging there.

Today, Ruth had taken refuge in her lounge, and was sitting at her table with her comp running while looking through a pile of books.

"Carrie, come and look at this," she said in English, beckoning her over. "They've brought out a book about Vartra's Retreat, full of all the wonderful murals from before their Cataclysm on the walls there. They are so like Earth is now that you wouldn't believe it!"

"I've seen them," she said, nodding to Jurrel who was sitting in the middle of the floor working on the main vid unit. Taking off her coat, she threw it over a dining chair before joining Ruth at the table.

Looking up, Ruth shut her books and turned away from the comp. "Mara!" she called. "Bring us a coffee, would you, love?"

"Already done," smiled Mara, coming in with two mugs which she put in front of them. "We'll be off shortly, when Toueesut arrives to let us know his folk are ready."

Ruth nodded. "Are you sure it isn't too cold for you up there in that cavern? What about the snow? I heard there was going to be a blizzard later today."

"There is, but not till after dark and we'll be back long before then. And it isn't too cold. Today we're only going up to get some bits to work on in the hanger they put up at the side of the village parking lot."

Ruth nodded. "Take care, nonetheless."

"We'll be fine. Rulla's driving us."

Ruth made a face. "Then be doubly careful!"

"Are you inferring I don't know how to drive in snow?" asked Rulla, coming into the room and bending over to nuzzle Ruth's neck. "I'll remind you I'm Brotherhood, I got my pilot's license at Stronghold and it rates as the most dangerous place to fly in and out of, even in high summer. A blizzard here is nothing compared to the whiteouts we have on the Dzahai Mountain ranges."

"I know, I'm only teasing," she said placatingly as she patted her Companion's cheek.

"Well met, Carrie," he said, smiling at her. "May the sun shine on you today."

"And on you, Rulla," she said, feeling a pang of sorrow that she and Kaid had lost that closeness.

"I'll see you later, Rulla," said Ruth. "Now scat, and shut the door behind you and tell everyone else to stay out, I'm busy."

"What about me?" asked Jurrel from the floor, hunting in his toolbox for something.

"I don't mind you being here, Jurrel," Carrie said. "Ruth needs her vid working."

"Let me guess what the problem is," said Ruth, picking up her mug. "Kaid and Kusac."

Carrie nodded.

"Before you start, tell me what your deepest fear is. Forget all the niggles, little or large, they aren't the issue."

She took her tobacco tin and lighter out of her trouser pocket and rolled herself a cigarette, marshaling her thoughts. It was something of a relief to be thinking and speaking her native tongue after so long, made it a little easier to work out what was really at the heart of the matter.

"I'm afraid that Kusac's message to me is a cry for help," she said finally, lighting up. "And no one who could help me solve it will look at it for me. They all say I'm kidding myself."

"No one primarily being Kaid," said Ruth.

She nodded again.

"Well, how about showing it to me? I haven't seen it before and I certainly don't mind watching it."

"I've got a transcript, too," Carrie said, bringing the folded paper out of her pocket along with the crystal.

Ruth took the crystal and put it into the reader then started playing it.

Not far into it, Jurrel spoke up. "I didn't know Kusac had been given a command yet," he said.

"Excuse me?" asked Carrie, turning to look at him. "He hasn't. What made you think he has?"

"The inlay on his knife. The Brotherhood awards us a brass-colored inlay mark on our knife hilt every time we get given command of a mission," he explained, getting up and taking out his knife to show them. "Of course, I haven't commanded a mission yet," he said. "It's the outward symbol of your rank since we don't hold ranks normally."

Carrie rubbed her hand across the hexagon-shaped black hilt. "Where would it be?" she asked, searching through her acquired memories for the reference.

"Here," he said, pointing to the upper end by the flat lozenge-shaped pommel. "If you rewind the message to the beginning, I'll show you."

Ruth exchanged a glance with Carrie as she rewound it and set it to play again.

"Stop it right there," said Jurrel. "Kusac's fiddling with his knife. See? And there's the mark."

Shaped like a small claw slash, wider at the top than the bottom, they could clearly see it.

"You'd have to know to look for it," he added. "If you start the message up again, you can see that when he puts it down, the mark's hidden."

"Hidden in plain sight," murmured Carrie. "No, Kusac's never commanded a mission. He led the Jalna one jointly with Kaid, but there was no mark on his knife then or after."

"Seems to me you've found something," said Ruth. "He was obviously drawing attention to the knife by playing with it, so he wanted you to notice it."

"Not me," she said thoughtfully. "Kaid. That was for Kaid." She turned to Jurrel. "You better watch the rest of it in case there's anything else I wouldn't know about. Does it mean what I think it does, Jurrel?"

"It means that he's had his knife marked to show he's commanded a mission," said Jurrel, dragging over a dining chair and putting his half-finished mug of c'shar on the table. "And given that Banner's gone with him, it's my bet they're on a mission right now." He looked at her. "I don't think Kusac's gone off on his own, Carrie. I think he and Banner were sent somewhere."

"By Stronghold," she said, aware of her heart suddenly beginning to beat faster. "That's why they didn't give me the message until I asked for it!"

"If it's secret, and it must be, they'll have crawled all over this to make sure he didn't give away anything about it."

"Then how did they miss the knife?" asked Ruth.

Jurrel shrugged. "It's so obvious. The message would probably have been examined in the cryptography department and they wouldn't have been



looking for something so blatant. Had the message been Kaid's, then Rhyaz would likely have gone over it too since Kaid's known to be a devious bastard," he grinned. "With someone like Kusac, a Clan Leader and Kaid's sword-brother, cryptography would ignore that, assuming he'd already led his first mission."

He put his hand briefly over Carrie's. "Don't get your hopes too high, yet, Carrie. We need more evidence of a hidden message, then we need to check with Kaid about the command mark on the knife. Until then, it's still speculation."

"It's more than I've had till now," she said. "And it would explain a lot of his behavior, like the sudden row with Kaid before he left."

Ruth frowned. "How would it explain that?"

"Look at it this way," said Jurrel. "The mission had to be top secret since Banner didn't even drop me a hint about it. With Carrie's twins due in a few days, the last thing anyone at Stronghold would want is Kaid demanding either to go with Kusac, or to follow him." He reached for the keyboard. "May I?" he asked.

Ruth made a gesture of agreement. "Carry on."

"What are we looking for?" asked Carrie as he started to play the message from the beginning.

"First of all, his inflection as he speaks, and any hand signals, but I don't expect to find anything," he murmured. "Not if cryptography have been over it. Next, any break in sequence to show they cut out sections of it. Then we'll look at your transcript for key words, like names, or dates and numbers, stuff like that. All of them can be used to give coded information."

\* \* \*

A couple of hours and several pieces of paper later, they seemed to be no further along than before.

"We've several instances of numbers," said Jurrel, doodling on the margin of the top piece of paper. "Mainly references to two, like him and Ghyan, your twin, your two children, since he knew nothing about Dhaykin. Then there's his five missing crew mates, and then again two for the two of you, and the reference to going sailing with Ghyan when he was ten, but if you tie them into letters in the alphabet, you don't get any words that make sense. I don't know what to make of it, Carrie."

"Then it can't be numbers," said Ruth briskly. "Let's face it, that's so obvious Stronghold would get it immediately, wouldn't they?"

"There is that," admitted Jurrel.

"So given this is a one-off important message, we should look at what he does talk about. He mentions children several times. Why would children be so important to him?"

Carrie shook her head. "I don't know," she said, feeling near to tears now that her hopes seemed to be coming to nothing.

"He mentions your twin, Elise. What was the reference to her about?" asked Jurrel. "What did she do that could be similar to what Kusac's done?"

"I have no idea," Carrie said, rubbing her eyes with one hand. "Elise didn't have any issues except she hated the Valtegens and joined the guerrillas to spy on them as her way of fighting back."

"Maybe that's it. Kusac was sent to spy on someone," said Ruth. "But who?"

"Not the Primes or we'd have heard by now," said Jurrel thoughtfully. "Nor the M'zullians, we have the *Watcher* ships doing that. Why send Kusac and Banner to do the same job?"

"Who's left?"

"Kezule," said Carrie, sitting up. "He's gone missing from the Prime world."

"A possibility," agreed Jurrel.

"He keeps coming back to children, though," said Ruth, tapping the now heavily underlined transcript. "And what happened to him on the *Kz'adul*. Why the connection? Why does he say *The time I spent as J'koshuk's prisoner left too many scars for me to easily forget. It left a darkness on my soul that I need to somehow try and remove first. I wish it wasn't our children that had to bear the consequences because they're the truly innocent ones. It's not their fault that we, their parents, were used as we were on the Kz'adul.*"

"Parents and children, actually," Carrie said, thinking back to those days of captivity. "When they did release me from isolation, I was convinced they were trying to breed us. Not only did they remove my contraceptive implant so I fell pregnant immediately Kaid and I Linked, but we were sure that Kate had been pregnant and miscarried without her knowing it."

"Breed you?" asked Ruth, surprised. "Why would they want to breed you?"

"Why experiment on Kusac and me to find out about our Link?" she asked. "Because having their own hybrid telepaths could be very useful to any species. Look how the Chemerians tried to kidnap Kate and Taynar. And Chy'qui, the Prime in the Directorate who did the experiments, he tried to keep Kusac's presence on the ship secret."

Jurrel looked at Ruth. "Without mothers, how could they possibly breed them? Medical science in the Alliance hasn't perfected artificial wombs yet, and the Primes don't seem to have either."

"As far as we know," countered Carrie. "We do know that Kezule married the doctor who treated Kusac on the *Kz'adul* and at Haven. What if they did manage to breed hybrid children, and Kezule has them? If Stronghold somehow found out, that would be a good enough reason to send a secret mission out to look for him."

"Let's hold fire on this a little, Carrie, it's all supposition," said Ruth. "You're using pyramid logic— if this is true, then that must be too. It

doesn't work like that. You said you checked with Ghyan about the sailing incident. Did you check with Vanna on how many crew survived the crash on Keiss?"

"I don't need to, I know. There were four of them, five counting Kusac," she said.

"Ah, but Kusac says five crew and Vanna," said Jurrel. "That makes six in all, not counting Kusac."

"It can't," she said. "The survivors were Garras, Vanna, Mito, and Guynor, that's all."

"So why did he say six of them?" asked Ruth thoughtfully.

"Six children bred by the Directorate, or the Primes?" Carrie suggested.

"Let's stop there," said Jurrel, sitting back in his seat. "We need to check if we have any hard facts now. Kusac has a command mark on his knife, so he may have been given a mission that none of us knows about. We have a reference to your twin spying on Valtegans, and an out of context reference to Kusac and Ghyan when they were ten years old. Finally, we have the number of the survivors of his crew given as six, not four."

"Valtegans have ten-year-old cubs, six of them," said Carrie automatically. "And he's been sent to spy on them. If that doesn't constitute a highly secret mission that the Brotherhood would go to any lengths to keep quiet, I don't know what does!"

There was a small silence as they looked at each other, taking in what she'd said.

"Again, it is possible," said Jurrel. "The attacks on the two colonies could have resulted in captives, but why take cubs, and how would we find out about it now?"

"It's certainly more realistic than the idea of breeding hybrids without having mothers," said Ruth. "Even if they had, they couldn't possibly be ten years old now."

"The only Valtegan Kusac could approach would be Kezule," insisted Carrie. "Just like the one that kidnapped Kate and Taynar from Keiss, he was an Intellectual/Warrior caste officer, not as affected by the racial hatred of us as the ordinary soldiers were. Kezule is involved in this somehow, I know he is."

"Well, we have one person here who could give us a few answers," said Jurrel. "Prince Zsurtul. He was on the *Kz'adul* before and after the hostage exchange. He was also at Court part of the time Kezule was there. Perhaps if we spoke to him and told him what we suspect, he'd have some new information for us, something he couldn't tell you at the time."

"Not possible," said Ruth. "Zsurtul's at the Palace today, he won't be home till tomorrow."

"I'll talk to him then," said Carrie. "Meanwhile, I'll find Kaid and ask him about the command mark on Kusac's knife."

"No, let Jurrel do it," said Ruth. "You and Kaid have rowed too much about Kusac. He'll at least hear Jurrel out."

"You have a point," she admitted reluctantly. "What do I do, then?"

"Nothing till we've talked tomorrow," said Ruth, taking the crystal from the reading slot and passing it back to Carrie. "As for today, you can help me get second meal ready. I've got Ray and Andy coming back to eat, and I suppose I'll have to feed Jurrel. You might as well join us, Carrie."

\* \* \*

Kaid had headed over to the house where Rezac, Jo, and Zashou lived. He sent out a questing thought, making sure Rezac was there, and received a reply.

*I'm as outnumbered as you are,* Rezac replied, a touch of humor in his mental voice. *Meet me in the staff lounge at the gym if you don't want the females around.*

He sent an assent, and heading off the path into the deeper snow, tried to cool his anger. By the time he reached the gym, he'd forgotten it, but was cursing himself instead for being so foolish as to take the cross-country route when there was a perfectly adequate, almost snow-free path.

Frozen snow clung to his pelt to about knee level, and he was cold, very cold. He ducked in a side entrance, heading for the lockers and shower room. Rezac was already sitting there, waiting for him. As Kaid approached, his father held out his brush, trying not to grin.

"Thanks," he muttered, taking it and bending down to begin the painful job of brushing out the solidified snow.

"It'd be easier to just have a shower," Rezac suggested, when he'd winced for the third time.

"You're right," he said, standing up and putting the brush down on the bench.

Rezac handed him his soap. "Want me to help?" he asked, keeping his tone noncommittal.

Kaid glowered at him and, ignoring the bottle, began peeling off his layers of clothing.

*Like father, like son, sent Rezac. Been there, done that, know the consequences. Don't use hot water, though, or you'll get chilblains. I did.* The mental tone was pained this time.

Kaid had to laugh then. *Why not?* he sent, opening his unlocked locker and shoving his outer coat in it.

As Rezac got up and began to undress, too, Kaid glanced at him, trying to not remember that his father, like him, was an exile from Shola's far past, and younger even than his own son, Dzaka.

"I suggest a warm shower, then a hot meal up in the staff lounge," said Rezac, hauling off his tunic and putting it in his own nearby locker. "Then

if you want to talk, we can talk over coffee. Coffee because it is mildly intoxicating," he added. "I could do with it on a day as cold as today."

"Where d'you get the common sense from?" Kaid asked dryly, unfastening his weapons belt and stowing it away.

"Family trait. Brothers do share 'em, you know," said Rezac lightly, for the benefit of anyone else around. "You're still not used to having me here yet."

Kaid nodded. Rezac was right. Having a father was still something of a novelty to him, let alone one whom the world outside their families knew as his brother.

Though still not quite adult, therefore lacking a little of his full physical development, Rezac and he did look enough alike to be brothers. The similarity was more in the way they moved and held themselves, and their personalities than in their coloring. Rezac's pelt was dark brown, and his hair almost black, whereas his own pelt was mid-brown and his hair the dark brown of his father's pelt. Their ears were the same, though, wider and slightly shorter than average, showing their Highland ancestry, and both shared the same almost hooded brown eyes and strong jawline.

"C'mon," said Rezac, finished. "You're shivering. If you take much longer, you could end up with a chill."

Kaid snorted good-humoredly and hauled off his tunic, shoving it into the locker. Slamming the door, he activated the lock.

"Don't lecture me," he said with a grin. "I spent longer than you growing up in the mountains."

"True," agreed Rezac complaisantly, picking up the soap container as they moved off to the showers.

"Fatherhood has mellowed you," Kaid said. *Or should I say grandfatherhood?*

"Ah, shut up, old one," retorted the younger male, jostling him forward.

"Who you calling old?" demanded Kaid, shoving him back. *You lived those fifteen hundred years in that stasis cube, I at least jumped forward in time and lived all of mine!*

*We lived our years more intensely,* countered Rezac, clutching hold of him as his foot slipped in a patch of wetness on the floor.

"Oi! You two!" bellowed out a voice. "Stop behaving like kitlings in here!" Ni'Zulhu, head of the estate security, suddenly appeared in front of them, then backed off hurriedly. "Sorry, Master Kaid, didn't realize it was you and your brother. But don't you go setting the young ones a bad example!"

Sniggering, Rezac grabbed the surprised Kaid and hauled him off out of sight into a cubicle. As he leaned against the cubicle wall and began laughing, Kaid just looked at him. "Now see what you've done," he began.

Rezac turned the shower on, drenching them both and effectively silencing Kaid. Still laughing, he shook his head, sending even more water flying. *Damn, but it's good to laugh,* he sent as Kaid began to see the funny side, too.

\* \* \*

They'd finished their meal, and their talk, and were sitting nibbling on fruit pastries with their coffee when Jurrel knocked on the door.

"Come in," said Kaid.

"This is a cozy little place," said the younger Brother, stepping in. "I didn't know there was a staff lounge here."

"Don't go telling everyone," murmured Rezac from his position sprawled out on the sofa. "No point in having a bolt-hole if anyone can come in."

"It's open to anyone taking classes as an instructor here, Jurel," said Kaid, lazily swinging the leg hanging over the arm of his chair. "What can we do for you?"



"Wondered if you could answer a question for me, that's all. Win me an argument," Jurrel said, sitting down on the arm of the remaining easy chair.

"So long as it doesn't require much thought. What is it?"

"Who was in charge of the Jalna mission?"

"Kusac, ostensibly," said Kaid. "But we did it together."

"Ah, then he has had a command."

Kaid roused himself. "A command? From Raiban, yes," he said.

"Raiban? I thought the Jalna mission was for the Brotherhood."

"No, the Forces," said Kaid, sinking back into his chair again. "Kusac hasn't had a command from the Brotherhood yet."

Jurrel was silent for a moment or two. "Then that command mark on his knife can't be there."

"What?" Kaid jackknifed into a sitting position. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The message from Kusac— he keeps playing with his knife at the beginning. I saw a command mark on it."

Kaid sat back again. "Not the message," he groaned. "It was likely Banner's knife you saw."

"No, it was Kusac's. You can clearly see the single command mark and the graduation seal on the top of it. It's dated for last year."

"You're mistaken," said Kaid.

Jurrel shrugged and got to his feet. "I hope not, because Banner's been gone long enough. I'd prefer to think he was on a Brotherhood mission rather than jetting about randomly with someone on the edges of sanity."

When he'd reached the door, Rezac called out to him since he knew Kaid wasn't going to. "Are you positive it wasn't Banner's knife?"

"You think I don't know my sword-brother's knife?" he asked, his tone slightly acerbic as he opened the door.

The silence after he left was unbroken till Rezac spoke again. "Well, she was right. She did find something. Are you going to look at the message again, or must I?"

Kaid looked over at him.

"Don't make this an issue of pride," Rezac warned him, sitting up. "Look at all the problems that caused Zashou and me."

"If it's really Kusac's knife, then I'll watch it again," he said eventually. "Check it out for me, please."

"How will I know if it's Banner's?"

"The graduation date will be some twenty years ago, and there will be at least four command marks on it."

"And if it's Kusac's?"

"He graduated late last year. And if they've given him a command mark, then he is on a mission, and I'll want to know why we've been lied to and he was thrown to the wolves," he said grimly.

\* \* \*

"Jurrel!" Rezac called, sprinting up the path to the village. "Wait up for me!"

Jurrel stopped and turned.

"Any chance I can see that message?" he asked as he drew level.

"Kaid sent you?"

Rezac nodded. "Yeah, asked me to look into it for him," he said, sinking his hands in the pockets of his long coat. "Pulled the 'That's what little brothers are for' stunt on me."

Jurrel chuckled as they began to walk on. "We'll need to stop at Ruth's, see if Carrie's still there talking to Ray and Andy. If not, she'll be back at the villa."

\* \* \*

Carrie was back at the villa.

"Why should I let you see it?" she asked Rezac. "Kaid shouldn't have sent you, he should have come himself."

"He asked me to come because I could be more objective than he would. He thinks it's Banner's knife and that Jurrel made a mistake."

She gave him a scathing look. "And just how likely is that?"

"I know," he said. "The point is, Kusac has never been given a command. If it's his knife, the grip should be completely plain—no command mark."

She got up and headed toward the den workstation, climbing the few steps up to the half level by the entrance. Switching on the comp, she put the crystal in the reader.

"See for yourself," she said. "Then read the notes we made this morning while analyzing it." She reached into an eye level pigeonhole and pulled out a sheaf of papers, slapping them down beside him, then headed back down to the main level.

## **Stronghold, same day**

"You've a sure touch with the ointments, right enough," said Noni, sealing the last jar.

In his seat by the stillroom fire, Conner laughed gently. "I told you I've been making them since I was less than half the age of your apprentice, Teusi."

"So you did, so you did," said Noni, heading back to sit in her seat opposite him.

"I know," he said. "Just as I would, you needed to see for yourself. I take it you're satisfied now?"

"You'll do, I suppose," she admitted grudgingly.

"Then make good on your promise," he said. "The knowledge exchange—your religions for ours."

"You young ones are always so hasty," she grumbled, sipping her drink. "What's wrong with learning it the old-fashioned way?"

"It was your suggestion," he said, frowning. "What's the matter, Noni? Afraid?"

"Me? Afraid?" she said, faking outrage. "I'll have you know there's nothing of Shola that can frighten Noni!"

"But I'm not of Shola, that's it, isn't it? Then let me do it."

"You? An untried, untrained off-worlder..." she began scornfully.

As she spoke, she was peripherally aware of the temperature in the room dropping suddenly, and the lights beginning to flicker then dim. It wasn't till the fire also began to fade that she realized he was drawing energy from them, and then it was too late.

Conner stood up, almost disappearing into the shadows because of his black robe. He seemed to grow taller, larger, as he fed on the energy. His blue eyes and long gray hair crackled with it as he stared at her.

She tried to stop him by blocking the flow, but found her efforts as useless as if she'd tried to stem the spring floods. Here was a Talent far more encompassing than any she'd encountered before, that carried within it the echoes of many, not just one. He, the stranger, the alien, had done the

seemingly impossible— he'd harnessed the energies of fire and air and earth all at once.

"Do not make the mistake of underestimating me, madam," he said, his voice rolling through the small room like thunder echoing in the mountains. "I've played your games long enough. I will not be toyed with again."

As he turned, he seemed to gradually shrink back to his own height again. The lights flickered and buzzed, then resumed their normal brightness; in its grate, the flames once more began to dance. When she looked back at the door, he was gone.

\* \* \*

"Power all over the building was being drained, Noni," said Lijou. "That's all I can tell you."

"What I want to know is what is he," muttered Noni. "Ain't natural, is what it isn't."

In one of the armchairs, Alex was sitting chuckling quietly to herself.

"What's up with that youngling of yours now, Rhyaz?" Noni demanded tartly, glancing over at her.

"Ask her," said Rhyaz, looking up from the report he was reading. "I've no idea, Noni."

"Well?" the elderly Sholan demanded.

"Nothing," said Alex. "I was just thinking, that's all."

"Vartra preserve us now!" exclaimed Noni waspishly. "She's thinking!"

Alex's smile died and she got to her feet. "Fine. Find out for yourself, then. Go ask Vartra, see if he'll help you." With that she swept out of the room in a huff.

"Not wise, Noni," said Lijou gently. "She comes from the same country as Conner. She might have been able to help you."

"The day I put up with a youngling's hormone-fueled moods is my last day on Shola, Master Lijou," she responded. "Now, what you got on this Conner?"

Rhyaz suddenly began to chuckle but when he caught sight of Noni's glare, he hastily stifled it. "I think I'll go find Alex," he said, leaving his report and heading hurriedly off after his Leska.

*What is it with you two?* asked Lijou, going to his desk to fetch a printout he'd prepared for their healer.

*Alex won't tell me anything except she thinks Noni's met her match,* replied Rhyaz, using the same tight mental link that his colleague had.

Thoughtfully, he returned and handed it to Noni. "This is all I've been able to find out about him. They haven't been that forthcoming at the Old Sarum College."

She pushed herself up out of her chair and took the papers from him. "I suppose it'll have to do," she said. "Get one of your lads onto it, Lijou. We can't have him running round Stronghold with a rogue talent, can we?"

"It isn't rogue, Noni. He can obviously control it, and well, since he's never exhibited this side of himself before. He helped me solve a problem without me even telling him what it was. Somehow he just knew, and I'll swear he didn't read my mind."

She looked at him seriously for a moment. "If you couldn't feel him read you, then it's some Talent he has," she said thoughtfully. "You and Konis Aldatan have the two strongest Talents on Shola, excepting maybe for his son, Kusac. There's more to him than meets the eye, Lijou, mark my words."

With that, she left for her quarters where Teusi was waiting for her.

\* \* \*

Conner had gone to the Goddess' Shrine inside the temple. He was angry and frustrated, mainly with himself. For one such as him to be treated like some raw beginner by Noni had rankled with him all along, but until tonight, he'd managed to contain it.

The artificial sunlight had dimmed to dusk in the grotto. He closed his eyes, leaning back on the bench, trying to let the sound of the running water and the smell of the nung tree soothe his raw nerves. What he'd done had exhausted him, cost him dearly in terms of his own energy levels. With a quiet request to the Goddess for healing, he slipped his bare feet out of his sandals and let them sink into the grass. Opening his mind, he felt the familiar tingling as the earth began to gently replace the energy he'd lost. It was the first time he'd tried this since he'd arrived, and was pleased to find that this much was the same here as it had been on his world.

He was here for a purpose, he knew he was, but how could he find out what if that damned old crone wouldn't help him?

He heard a faint chuckle, followed by, *If I were you, I wouldn't let her hear you even thinking that!*

Opening his eyes, he sat bolt upright and looked around. The small cavern was as empty as it had been a few minutes ago. He frowned, knowing there was someone else there, but unable to see them or even sense their presence.

*You can hear me?* The thought was slightly stronger this time, and full of surprise.

*I can,* he replied. *Who are you? Where are you?*

*You can pathwalk?*

It was a question, and he felt his heart leap inside his chest. *Yes!* An Entity, it had to be an Entity!

*Then come to me in my realm. The thought was getting fainter, almost fading. Look for the blue-white crystal at the heart of a triple spiral on a wooden door. It will be late spring, as it is here in the Shrine. I will meet you.*

That he could do, and easily! He even knew the triple spiral for it existed even on Earth. At last he'd found what he needed.

With an ease gained from years of practice, he began to relax himself into a light trance until he was able to step between the worlds and enter the void. Ribbons of light flowed around and past him until one, of bright green, came toward him and swept him away with it.

He kept his mind clear of all thoughts save late spring and the door he knew he would come to, with its sign of the triple spiral with the crystal heart.

\* \* \*

The Head Priest, Lijou, was gently shaking his shoulder, trying to wake him.

"Conner, are you all right?" he was asking.

He stirred. Putting his hands up to rub his eyes, he felt something drop to the ground, heard the metallic clink it made.

"I'm fine," he said as Lijou stooped to pick whatever it was up. "I wasn't asleep," he began.

"I know," said Lijou with a smile, handing the object back to him. "You were pathwalking to Vartra's realm. He gave you this."

Conner examined it carefully. It was like a coin. On one side there was the triple spiral, on the other, in the cursive Sholan script, a V.

"Do you understand its significance?" Lijou asked, sitting down beside him.



The face Conner turned to him was bleached of all color. "Never before have I brought anything back from the Entities' Realms," he whispered. "It's unheard of. I hold the memories of hundreds of..." He stopped what he'd been about to say just in time. "Of previous leaders of the College, but this is truly unique."

Lijou raised an eye ridge. "Things are different here on Shola," he said quietly. "You'll find that to the Chosen few, our Entities do appear. In fact," he said wryly, "sometimes they are a bit too active."

The color was creeping back into Conner's face as he nodded. "So I understand. We have to seek them out, usually."

Lijou reached inside his own robes and brought out a coin identical to the one Conner held. "This is the symbol of the Brotherhood," he said. "It is only worn by our members. Normally they are only given out at Graduation, but a few here have been given one personally by Vartra."

Conner nodded.

"It means you're Brotherhood now, one of us."

It was Conner's turn to raise his eyebrows. "I belong here?"

"Yes, you belong here, Conner," Lijou said, letting go his pendant and putting his hand on the old man's arm. "Just as you once belonged at your College, except you will never be asked to leave here. We don't banish our elderly, to cryo or anywhere else. We honor them."

He could feel his eyes beginning to fill with tears as he clutched the coin more tightly, realizing just what a precious gift he'd been given. To belong again...

"I've sent for Rhyaz," said Lijou, breaking into his mood, well aware the other would welcome the interruption before his feelings overcame him. "You will need to be sworn into the Brotherhood. Is that acceptable to you? It isn't often the God chooses a member for us, but when he does..." He could see he needed to say no more.

"I'd be proud to swear your oath," said Conner. "I knew my Goddess had sent me here for a reason, but I never thought it would be this."

"Your Goddess?"

"Gaia, the Earth Goddess. Here you call her Ghyakulla."

"Ghyakulla's Consort and son is Vartra," explained Lijou, some what surprised, yet realizing it made sense. "There is a synchronicity to everything. Perhaps you are the link to your world that we've been searching for."

"I was a Guardian on mine," said Conner quietly, noticing how Lijou's ears flattened in shock as he said it. "There is so much that is the same."

"Apparently so," murmured Lijou as they heard approaching footsteps. He looked up as Rhyaz and Alex entered the shrine. "I didn't expect to see you, too, Alex."

"I had to come when I knew it was Conner," she said, grinning.

*Alex was right about him*, Lijou sent very privately to Rhyaz, who merely smiled.

"We should do it here, Rhyaz," said Lijou. "Conner has brought his ties to the Green Goddess, whom he calls Gaia, with him from his own world."

"Then he's been doubly blessed," said Rhyaz. "He will be with the priesthood, I take it?"

"Definitely," said Alex.

*You know something*, sent Lijou.

*It's not for me to tell*, she replied, her mental tone serious. *Either he will tell you, or you will find out.*

*I've learned to trust her instincts, Lijou, sent Rhyaz. It's something at which the Humans excel.*

Conner's swearing of the Creed over, Alex gave him a hug, staying momentarily to whisper something in his ear.

He looked at her in amazement, and shook his head firmly. "I left that behind me," he said quietly before returning the hug.

As they all left the chapel and walked through the temple, Conner turned to Lijou. "Will anything actually change now for me?"

"Of course," he replied. "The Brotherhood has two sides, like the coin. It has the Warriors under Master Rhyaz, and the Priests under me. Normally they are interchangeable as all new recruits do time with us both as part of their training, then they choose which side they wish to serve. However both can be called upon in time of need to perform either Warrior or Priestly duties."

"In your case, however," said Rhyaz, "you will be excused any Warrior duties, though if we need your services in a Priestly way, I will make use of you."

"That is to be expected," said Conner.

"Tomorrow you can start training with a group of our seniors," said Lijou. "Unless you would prefer to study alone?"

Conner shook his head. "I was taught, and inherited, many skills," he said. "Tactics and warfare were among them, so were law-giving and law-making. They are at your disposal."

"I don't think we'll make the mistake Noni did of underestimating you, Master Conner," said Rhyaz dryly.

Conner's lips twitched slightly. "What do you know of my past at the College?" he asked as they left the Temple and entered the front hallway.

"Euan would tell Master Aldatan very little," said Lijou.

"There's much I can't reveal," he said, "but I can tell you that when I was involved in Choosing the new leader, I gave my memories of my incumbency to the young girl who will be his teacher."

"Nimue," said Lijou.

Alex started, drawing attention away from Conner briefly so that Lijou almost missed the expression of pain that flitted across the old man's face.

"Just so," he said. "In my turn, I was given the memories of the leader before me, and his memories, as mine do, held those of all the past leaders. I have memories stretching back in an unbroken line for nearly three thousand years. I think it is similar to how your Leskas exchange memories when they Link to each other for the first time."

"Vartra's bones!" exclaimed Rhyaz, ears flicking back at the thought. "How do you tell them apart?"

"I don't, at times," said Conner, glancing at him in amusement. "When I need to, I just search in my mind for what I need and it is usually there. You can imagine that being treated as a novice by your very worthy Noni is not something I am used to."

"Noni has many admirable qualities, and we value her dearly, but she can also be very irritating," said Lijou quietly. "It will be interesting to know her reaction to tonight's happenings."

"All that knowledge," said Rhyaz. "All that experience! Can't you record it in some way so it's never lost?"

"It's continued in Khyan," said Conner. "And he will have Nimue to help him."

"That's not what I meant," began Rhyaz.

"I know it isn't," interrupted Conner with a gentle smile. "The Goddess, or Vartra, will tell me what I must do about that. But that knowledge, as I said, is at your disposal now."

"Thank you," said Lijou, inclining his head. "Believe me, we are aware of just how much you are offering us. It is appreciated, and as Rhyaz said, will not be underestimated. One thing we do here is make use of a person's Gifts in positive ways. Our Charter as a Guild is to protect Sholan life at all costs, especially the Telepaths, and now the En'Shallans."

"Then we'll work well together because they comprise the best of both our species. I'll say good night now, if you don't mind. It has been a tiring evening for me."

"Good night, Conner," said Lijou as the elderly male bowed to them and headed up the stairs.

"It's Earth's loss," said Alex, watching him. "But only on Shola could he ever find the respect he's due, and only here will he be free enough to really help us."

"How do you mean?" asked Lijou as they began to slowly ascend the stairs together.

"You know how they viewed telepaths until you came along," she said. "What government would ever think of, or admit to consulting him and the College?"

"You have a point," said Rhyaz. "Shall we include him in our daily briefings for a week or two to see how he works out?"

"It certainly can't hurt," said Lijou, thinking of the advice Conner had given him in handling the matter of the hybrid cubs and Rhyaz. "I want to know more about his Talent. It may be that we have Brothers capable of working the way he does. And possibly even our few telepaths."

"Now that would give us a sound tactical advantage," said Rhyaz with satisfaction.

## **En'Shalla estate, afternoon**

"It could be a fake," said Kaid, sitting back from the screen.

"Why am I not surprised you said that?" said Carrie, too mentally exhausted to care any more. Kaid had finally agreed to look at the message, but only at the small portion where Kusac was playing with the knife.

She switched the comp off and took the crystal out, putting it away in her drawer.

"It could also be real," he added. "I have no way of knowing, neither do you."

"We can go to Stronghold and ask Lijou and Rhyaz."

"We could call them."

"No, I want to be there and know if they're lying to us."

Kaid sighed.

"Did Rezac tell you everything? About what we think the message means?"

"Yes," he said tiredly. "He told me everything. It proves nothing, Carrie."

"Wouldn't it explain a lot, including Kusac's behavior?"

"Very conveniently, that's my problem with all this," he said, gesturing to the now blank screen.

"I'm going to talk to Zsurtul tomorrow," she said, getting up. "Maybe he knows something that can help."

"Don't go putting pressure on him, Carrie, remember who he is. Apart from anything else, he's our guest here."

"I'm well aware of that," she said testily. "I'm going up to say good night to the children, then I think I'll turn in."

"I'll come with you," he said. "Look, Carrie, this... crusade of yours is driving us apart. We shouldn't be letting that happen."

She stared at him. "The answer's in your hands," she said. "It's your attitude that's turned it into my crusade."

"All right!" he snapped angrily, tail swinging from side to side. "If you find one more thing to support this crazy theory of yours, we'll go to Stronghold and ask them! Now will you *please* call a truce between us?"

She hesitated. "I intend to go to Stronghold anyway," she said. "If you won't come, I'll go alone."

"You're impossible at times!" he said and stormed out, closing his mind off to her.

She listened as he went upstairs to his room. "I'm not going to cry," she muttered to herself, blinking back tears. "I'll be damned if he'll make me cry!"

### **Next day, Zhal-L'Shoh 28th day (January)**

"What is it you want to know, Carrie?" asked Zsurtul as he sat down at Ruth's living room table with her.

"You heard all about Kusac leaving Shola, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I was sorry for you all. It was very distressing."

"Did you know the Brotherhood said he left to go back to your people because he'd got so used to J'koshuk's torture that he couldn't exist without it?"

The young Prime Prince looked shocked. "That I can't believe," he said. "No one would want to go back to that. Besides, J'koshuk is dead. How

would going to the Prime world help him? And wouldn't they have told you if he was there?"

"You're quite right," she said. "They would have, which is why I am convinced he didn't go to them. I think he went to meet Kezule."

"Why would you think that?" Zsurtul asked after a moment or two.

"He didn't get on with Primes, Zsurtul. Something about your people set him off— look at the way he attacked you."

"That was different," he said automatically, then stopped, aware he'd nearly said something he shouldn't have. "He was teaching me to defend myself," he said lamely.

"That's not what you meant," said Carrie. "What was different about you?"

Zsurtul was hard pressed not to squirm visibly under her stare. He liked Carrie, and he liked Kaid and Kusac— he admired them all for the strength they'd shown under Chy'qui's dreadful treatment. And he did not like lying to her, or keeping secrets from her.

"He was programmed to kill me. Perhaps he never really got over that," he said, suddenly remembering the hostage handover.

"I heard Doctor Zayshul and Kezule got married," she said, switching the topic.

He brightened visibly. This wasn't dangerous ground for him. "Yes. I was at their wedding. My mother helped her prepare for it, dressed her up like a Court lady. She was very beautiful," he confided in her. "I wonder if she's still alive."

"Pardon?"

"You didn't know?" he asked, surprised. "She was expecting, but because she married the General, who was a member of the old royal family, she



had to bear her egg herself. My mother nearly died with two of her eggs, that's why there's only me."

"What do you mean she had to bear her own egg?"

"We have growth tubes where all the young are grown," he said. "Since the Fall, our females are too small for the size of eggs they carry so the doctors remove them very early and they are grown in the tubes instead. But not for our family. They have to carry their own eggs because then everyone knows it is the true child of the Emperor."

"You have artificial wombs?"

He nodded. "The TeLaxaudin developed them for us immediately after the Fall. Without them we would have died out because there weren't enough females to breed from safely."

"Did you find evidence that Chy'qui had taken samples from us— eggs and sperm— and was trying to breed hybrid Human/Sholans?" she demanded, leaning closer to him.

He frowned dubiously. "It's possible," he said. "They did do that to the General. I heard he was not pleased."

"They bred from Kezule?"

"On the *Kz'adul*, they took samples while he was unconscious. We carried growth tubes for the samples from the M'zullians. We had to as the implants made them sterile within a few weeks." He noticed Carrie had gone very pale. "Are you all right, Carrie?" he asked, concerned for her. "Shall I get you some water?"

"No, no, I'm fine," she said, taking a few deep breaths. "Was Doctor Zayshul involved in this?"

"Yes, she ran the system. It was she who programmed the tubes to choose the donor eggs for each M'zullian sample and fertilize them. Then they were implanted in a tube and so on."

She sat there for several minutes, obviously thinking, so he picked up his bowl of c'shar and sipped it, waiting for her.

"So it is possible Chy'qui did try to breed from us," she said at last.

"It's possible, but unlikely. All the tubes went down to our world at the same time and were delivered straight to the labs where Doctor Zayshul and Doctor Kzizysus worked. If they hadn't, the embryos would have died. Had there been any not of our species, they'd have noticed it and informed the proper authorities."

"Would we have been told about it, though? Wouldn't your people have been afraid we'd be so angry that we'd break the treaty?"

He thought this over carefully. "They would have told you," he said. "The Doctor would never have done it, only Chy'qui, therefore we would not be to blame."

"Did you ever find out who murdered Chy'qui?"

"How did you know that?" he asked, surprised. "Only the Doctor thought he'd been murdered, by a steward who disappeared when we were downloading cargo and people to our world. Everyone else thought he'd committed suicide."

"If this steward did escape, could he have taken any samples with him?"

"Samples, yes, but not growth tubes. They're just too big, Carrie. But where would they grow them?"

"I don't know, Zsurtul. You tell me."

"I can't, because I don't know of anywhere but the labs. You could ask Kzizysus."

"I will, but didn't the Directorate have a base which Kezule destroyed when he stopped the plot to kill your father?"

The Prince shuddered, screwing his face up at the thought of a plot against his father and mother. "Yes, they did."

"Might there not have been tubes there?"

He spread his hands helplessly and said, "I don't know, Carrie. I wish I did and could tell you."

"Why did Kusac get aggressive around the M'zullians?"

"Their scent," he said. "He could smell them. You can't, but he could because he'd been scent..." He ground to a halt, realizing he'd fallen neatly into a trap.

"He'd been what, Zsurtul?" Carrie asked quietly.

Now he was stuck, and he began to squirm again. "He'd been scent-sensitized we think," he said eventually.

"How?"

"I can't tell you, Carrie," he said, hanging his head. "The Doctor told me to say nothing."

"The Doctor may be dead now, you said so. And don't you think I should be told something that important about my mate? Why could he smell your people when none of the rest of us can?"

"I can't say."

Carrie grasped hold of his hand. "Tell me, Zsurtul," she said, her voice growing angry.

"I can't!" he said, glancing up at her briefly and looking away when he saw her predator's slitted eyes.

"If you think it would damage the treaty, think of this. If you don't tell me, it definitely will, I'll see to it myself!" she all but snarled at him.

"He was scent-marked!" he said, trying in vain to pull his hand away. "She scent-marked him!"

Carrie released his hand in shock. "What?"

"Our females can mark a male with their scent when they couple with him," he said in a rush. "The Doctor said it wasn't her, but he smelled of her scent."

She shut her eyes and muttered something under her breath. "What does this scent mark do?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

"It sets them apart as a desirable mate," he said, cringing back in his seat. "Makes them attractive to the other females, and makes the males want the female that marked them."

"Would it make him see other males as rivals?"

He nodded.

"That was why he went for you, wasn't it?" she asked. "You're a Prime, so is she. He saw you as a rival."

He nodded again. "It wasn't his fault, he had no control over it. I think the marker went wrong because it changed him so he could smell us."

Carrie got up and began pacing the room. "When did you find out about this?" she demanded.

"Only when I came here," he said. "Not before, on Haven. I could smell her scent and his bound together. I called home and asked the Doctor about it. That's when she told me to say nothing. She said another female on the ship did it, not her, and that the other had been found dead just after the exchange of Kusac for me."

"But you don't believe her."

"How could another female put the Doctor's scent on Kusac? It can only be done when they are coupling. I'm sorry, Carrie. I liked your husband Kusac, and I like you and Kaid, too. We need this treaty so much that I couldn't risk it by disobeying Doctor Zayshul," he said unhappily, watching as she continued to pace the room.

She stopped and came over to him, laying her hand on his shoulder, smiling faintly when he automatically shrank away from her at first.

"It's all right, Zsurtul," she said. "I know you weren't to blame for any of this."

He sighed with relief.

"Is there anything else you haven't yet told me that I should know?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Oh, one thing more," he said. "Perhaps the Doctor is all right, because my mother suddenly decided to have another child after the Doctor visited her. It was just before she and the General left K'oish'ik. I think perhaps this is connected. My mother has certainly borne this egg easily."

"You may be right," Carrie said, sitting down at the table again. "Kaid's on his way over. Would you mind repeating this to him for me?"

"Won't he be angry with me?" Zsurtul asked anxiously.

"No, he knows as well as I do that you weren't involved in any of this. We do understand why you were afraid to tell us."

"Will you report this and break up the treaty?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you what will happen, Zsurtul. All I'm concerned with is finding Kusac."

\* \* \*

Kaid spent an hour asking Zsurtul questions before he decided he'd learned all he could. Thanking the Prime Prince, they left Ruth's.

"Well?" said Carrie, once they were outside. "What do you think now?"

Kaid stood idly kicking at the snow as he formulated a reply for her. "All right, we go to Stronghold," he said. "I still don't think you're right, but I promised if you found out anything else, we'd go."

"Is that all you're going to say?" she asked in disbelief.

"What else do you want me to say?" he asked, looking up at her. "That I'm shocked and angry beyond belief? I am, more than I can say," he said, a note of anger entering his voice. "If it was the Doctor, it would explain why Kusac said he was concerned for her safety when we got him back. Do you want me to say that only the fact she saved his life will stop me from wanting to tear her apart if we meet her again, assuming it was her and not this dead person Zsurtul mentioned?"

She nodded. "Yes, I did need to hear that. Kaid, do you realize what Zsurtul told us? The Primes have artificial wombs, they could have grown hybrids in them! Kezule attacked the Directorate base. What if he found them there?"

"He'd have found embryos, Carrie, nothing else."

"Growth can be accelerated."

"That's a rather large leap of logic."

"Wait here," she said, and darted back into Ruth's. Zsurtul was still in the lounge, but Ruth and Ray were with him.

"Zsurtul, the growth tubes— can your people accelerate growth, too?" she demanded, ignoring the other two.

"Yes. The General's offspring were accelerated to the age of twelve in only a few weeks. They wanted them two years older than the M'zullians so they could be their officers."

"Thank you," she said, turning round and walking straight into Kaid who'd followed her in.

*Six cubs, ten years old, she sent to him. It's become more than a possibility. Will you now at least admit that?*

*I want to read over your transcript before I'll admit anything.*

She sighed and turned away from him. *I'll stay here with Ruth for a bit, then.*

*I'd rather you came with me.*

*And I'd rather you read the transcript alone, so you can't accuse me of trying to influence you,* she replied.

*Very well,* he sent after a small silence, then walked away.

Pulling out a chair, she took off her jacket again, flinging it on the sofa and joined them at the table.

"You look like you could do with some coffee," said Ray, getting up.

"Make it a strong one," Ruth called out after him. "So he still doesn't believe us," she said to Carrie.

"He admits something is not quite right, but that's all. He has agreed to go with me to Stronghold, though."

"That's at least more positive," said Ruth.

"Why do you want to go to Stronghold, Carrie?" asked Zsurtul, picking up the bowl of c'shar Ruth had brought him.

"I think they may have sent Kusac to find, or meet up with Kezule," she said tiredly.

"Then you think he was ordered to steal the Touibans' ship?" he said after a moment's obvious thought.

"I hadn't thought it that far through, but now you mention it, yes, I think he was," she said, her mind suddenly darting in several directions as she sorted through the possibilities.

"Then why didn't the Brotherhood speak up for him instead of letting him be thought a traitor?"

"Because the mission was so sensitive they couldn't admit it existed," said Ruth quietly as Ray came back with Carrie's coffee.

"One to Kezule could certainly be that," said Zsurtul. "I know our Ambassador asked your government to inform us if Kezule was seen anywhere. My father certainly wants him to return. He feels the General's counsel is more important than the possible risks of anyone using him to stage another coup."

"This all sounds very cloak and dagger," said Ray, putting the mug in front of her then taking the empty seat at her side. "What's it all about?"

"Too complicated to explain," said Ruth succinctly.

Zsurtul opened his mouth to start telling him only to find his hand, which lay on the table, covered by Carrie's and squeezed warningly.

*Not his business. He's an outsider,* she sent to him, using a mental frequency that she knew could pierce his natural mental barriers and be heard by him.

He started, and glanced quickly at her, then away again.

"What do you plan to do now?" asked Ruth as Carrie took a mouthful of her coffee.

"Speak to Kzizysus," she said. "But I don't want Kaid to know I'm going." She looked across at Ruth. "This is strong," she said, putting her mug down.



"You need it," she replied, smiling. "Listen to Mother. Even you need mothering sometimes, Carrie."

"Kzizysus, that's the TeLaxaudin doctor who lives in the shuttle out on the parking lot, isn't it?" asked Ray.

"Yep," said Carrie. "He was working on the *Kz'adul* with both Doctor Zayshul and Chy'qui. It was the ship that rescued us from the M'zullians on our way back from Jalna."

"I've heard of them. They're the ones that destroyed your two colonies and attacked Keiss."

"A Warrior caste," said Zsurtul. "Bred only to fight and kill."

"Is it wise to go there without Kaid?" asked Ruth. "I know Kizzy has only got Shrulo there, but all the same, even one Cabbaran can be a fierce bodyguard."

"I don't think Kizzy will be a problem," she said, taking another drink.

"I shall go with you, Carrie," said Zsurtul.

"I'll come too," offered Ray.

"No need," she said, feeling the caffeine rush start to hit her.

"I'd leave it till tomorrow, if I were you," said Ruth, eyeing her carefully. "That coffee was a little too strong for sensitive conversations."

"I'm fine," she said.

"You should drink decaf if it gives you the jitters," said Ray.

"Wouldn't make any difference," said Ruth. "It affects us and the Sholans the same way, like alcohol."

He looked at her in surprise. "You can get drunk on coffee?" He grinned and shook his head. "We should be so lucky as to have such cheap booze!"

"Coffee can be quite expensive here," Carrie said, finishing it off and getting up to fetch her jacket.

Zsurtul got to his feet and followed by Ray, went to fetch his own coat.

*Take Zsurtul at least, sent Ruth. If the worst happens, the Cabbaran won't make a move against you with the Prime Prince there.*

*Mothering me again?*

*Sure, grinned Ruth. Why not? It's tough enough being a mother to twin babes and a toddler without Kaid as well, and the worry of Kusac on top.*

Carrie was laughing as the two males returned.

"You will not prevent me going, Carrie," said Zsurtul firmly, fastening the seal on the front of the full-length, padded coat. "It is my duty and responsibility to you. The TeLaxaudin are our allies, and Kzizysus was on our ship."

She nodded at him. "Come on, then. But there's no need for you to come with us, Ray. This is a friendly visit."

"You can't stop me either," he said with a slight grin. "Besides, I haven't yet met this TeLaxaudin. I'm not going to miss that opportunity."

Carrie raised her eyebrows and was about to assure him she could, when she caught Ruth's gently shaking head. Sighing, she turned to leave. "You can come, if you do exactly what I tell you," she said. "Protocol is important here. Our relations with both the TeLaxaudin and the Cabbarans is not as free and easy as it is with some of our other allies."

He nodded. "Understood."

\* \* \*

The shuttle was the same one that Annuur and his family had lived in before they'd joined the *Watcher* patrols with the U'Churian, Captain Tirak, and the rest of their crew. As they neared it, Carrie knew that Kzizysus would see them approaching through the hull of his main living

quarters. Though it looked opaque from the outside, Cabbaran technology was capable of turning it transparent from the inside.

With a shudder, she hoped the slightly built alien would remember her dislike of it in that state. The impression of walking in midair had made her feel decidedly queasy.

They'd barely set foot on the ramp when, with a gust of warm air, the air lock slid open for them.

"Welcome, Liegena," said a voice over the intercom that could only be Shrulo's. "Apologies not meet you. Too cold it is for us. Come to lounge. The way you know."

"I hope you don't intend to leave me out here in the cold," said Ray, glancing up at the darkening sky.

Carrie sighed and beckoned him to follow them. "Remember, do exactly what I tell you," she said as they stepped inside and the door closed behind them.

It was warm, even in the corridor, and they had to open their coats. Carrie led them to the lounge, and to her relief found that the bulkhead was opaque.

Shrulo was sitting on one of the sloped Cabbaran loungers while round him, piles of cushions were scattered on the floor.

"Please, be comfortable," he said, sitting up on his haunches and indicating the cushions with one forearm. "Annuur told me the view you not like, Liegena," he said with a sound approximating a chuckle.

"Thank you for the courtesy, Shrulo," she said, picking her way toward a pile of cushions. "I think you know Crown Prince Zsurtul of the Primes, and this is Ray, a visiting doctor from Earth."

Shrulo dipped his long-snouted head low in the direction of the other two. "Greetings, Enlightened One," he said. "And you Earth Doctor Ray."

"May you always be remembered," said Zsurtul in his own language as he inclined his head to the small alien. Then, in the first graceful move she'd seen him make, he sat down next to her.

"A pleasure," said Ray, sitting down beside them.

"Some refreshments?" asked Shrulo, leaning down slightly to activate the small control unit on the arm of his lounge.

Carrie heard a slight noise and looked round to see an automated trolley roll into the room and wend its way between the cushions to them.

"That's new," she said, helping herself to one of the mugs on it. "Annuur didn't have it when I was last here."

"Were many here then, including their U'Churian family. Not so easy for one you call Kizzy, and me."

"True," she said, sipping the delicate warm herbal drink as Zsurtul and Ray helped themselves.

"What aid can we be to you?" Shrulo asked.

In her mind, she could feel Kaid's awareness of where she was, and his disapproval of what she was doing. Pushing it aside, she strengthened her shields until she could no longer sense him. She had no intention of leaving until she had the information she wanted, and she didn't need Kaid's interference.

"Actually, I came to see Kizzy," she said.

"Pardon intrusion, but what about?"

"Something I wanted to ask him about our stay on the *Kz'adul*," she said, putting the mug back on the trolley. She began to get to her feet. "Since he's not here, I assume he's in the lab? It won't take me more than a few minutes. Ray and Zsurtul will stay with you as I know Ray would like to ask you many questions."

Shrulo began to object, but Carrie was already heading out of the lounge and back down the corridor. She knew that by abandoning him like that he'd be torn over what to do since his natural politeness dictated he remain with his other two guests.

She found the spindly alien perched on a stool working in the medical lab.

He looked up as she entered, his black oval eyes whirling as the lenses adjusted so he could see her properly.

He began to hum, then the translator kicked in. "Carrie," said the almost inflectionless voice. "Unexpected this visit is."

"Really?" she asked, leaning in front of him on the other side of his desk. "I thought you'd have expected us to work it all out sometime and come looking to you for answers." She let her mind search for his mental frequency, knowing when she found it, she'd be able to at least sense his emotions.

"Your pardon. Not understand," he said, the small mandibles on either side of his mouth clicking gently.

"I know about the growth tubes on the *Kz'adul*," she said. "I also know about the samples you took from Kezule and how they were fast-bred into adult Warriors of twelve years old in a matter of weeks."

The mandibles were clicking faster now, and the draperies around his neck began to stir slightly, emitting a scent that reminded her of overripe fruit. Her mental searching stopped, and she could sense his anxiety.

"This not secret," he said. "Primes know it."

"No one thought to tell us," she said.

"Important to you is not."

"To us, yes, it is." She leaned a little closer. "Why were we not told that a female Prime had sex with my husband, Kusac, and scent-marked him?"

she demanded, narrowing her eyes till the pupils became angry vertical slits.

"Nothing of this known to me," said the translator before spitting out a burst of static as his words became untranslatable.

"You're lying," she said, letting a snarl creep into her voice. "You said you didn't treat Kusac till after it was discovered that Chy'qui had him. You allowed my mate to be sexually assaulted while under your medical care! I want to know if breeding samples were taken from him by that female!"

The scent got stronger, and the mandibles began to move in almost spastic convulsions as Kizzy sat back on his stool and peered at her.

"Who tell you this? I know nothing of it. They lie."

"*You* lie! I know who it was! It was either Doctor Zayshul, because it's her scent he's marked with, or some female called N'koshoh. I want to know which of them it was and why!"

"N'koshoh dead. Chy'qui killed. Nothing more I know." Kzizysus' small hands were flapping agitatedly in front of his face as if trying to protect himself.

Carrie moved her head back a little, waiting a few moments till the TeLaxaudin appeared to calm down slightly.

"Did Chy'qui take breeding samples from us?" she asked more quietly. "All the telepaths were taken, two at a time, a male and a female, out of our quarters for several hours, then returned. Why— if not to take eggs and sperm from them?"

"Impossible!" the translator said as Kzizysus again became very agitated. "Cannot do. Prime growth medium not for hybrids!"

His panic was palpable, and she could feel he was lying. She thought it through furiously, sensing that Kaid was heading for her and the shuttle;

she didn't have long left. Then she remembered Kaid's conviction Kate had been pregnant and miscarried.

"One of our females was pregnant," she said, walking round to his side of the table. "We know she lost the child. Chy'qui and you took it so you could reproduce the growth medium, didn't you?"

Kzizysus suddenly jumped down from his stool and began to run jerkily for the doorway. She lunged after him, grabbing him by one spindly bronze arm, taking care not to harm him. Swinging him around, she grabbed him by the other one. He weighed almost nothing and she was suddenly afraid of hurting him.

Squashing the fear, she shook him several times, making the large head bob alarmingly on the spindly neck. The scent he was emitting now smelled like rotting fruit.

"Your people are the breeding experts," she spat at him. "You taught the Primes all they know, provided them with the technology to do it. So don't lie to me about this. Our people had breeding samples taken from them, didn't they?"

The translator was emitting a constant stream of high-pitched unintelligible noises so she shook him again. "Shut that bloody noise up!" she said when she stopped. "Tell me the truth or I'll do a damned sight more than shake you!"

"Yes! Yes! Were taken! Chy'qui do same you! Breed hybrids. Eight of them only."

Stunned, she almost dropped him. Eight, not six, eight hybrids. Hurriedly she collected her thoughts as in the corridor behind her, she heard rapid footsteps heading toward the lab and her name being called out.

"And the female— who was it?" she demanded, tightening her grip on him just enough so he could feel it pinch.

"I not know!" he said.

As she released Kzizysus, she felt hands grabbing hold of her and pulling her away from the TeLaxaudin. It was Ray.

"Carrie, what the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

With her mind as open as it was, Ray's touch was intensely painful.

"Don't touch me!" she snarled as she turned on him, seeing Kaid in the doorway beyond him, his face a mask of rage.

Everything happened at once as she spun into Ray, wrenching herself free in the process and punching him across the room with a blow from the flat of her hand. Instead of heading for the Human, Kaid slowed down, coming to a stop by the cowering Kzizysus.

With controlled fury, he reached out and grasped hold of the TeLaxaudin, lifting him into the air until their eyes were level.

"What made you think you had the right to abuse the bodies of my mate and my crew like that?" he roared. "You created lives from us, children that you gave to that abomination Chy'qui! Where are they now?"

The translator screeched its garbled sounds at him until he shook Kzizysus, once, hard.

"Directorate," was the first word they could understand, followed by, "Kezule has."

As she felt Kaid's rage suddenly cool, and as the translator fell silent, she was aware of an animal screeching elsewhere in the ship.

"Zsurtul and Shrulo," she said succinctly, heading out of the room at a run.

Kaid lowered Kzizysus to the ground and let him go. "This will not end here," he snarled then turned on his heel to follow her.

\* \* \*



An astonishing sight met their eyes as they burst into the lounge area of the shuttle. Shrulo was pinned to the floor under a somewhat bloodied Zsurtul, who had his work cut out to stop the Cabbaran from escaping him.

*I'll see to this*, he sent to Carrie, striding over to help the hard-pressed youngster.

"Desist immediately, Shrulo," he ordered, using subliminal voice commands.

Instantly the Cabbaran froze and Kaid leaned down to help the Prince to his feet. Shakily, Zsurtul stood up and staggered back from the Cabbaran.

As Shrulo tensed, ready to spring, Carrie stepped forward, her pistol drawn. "Don't even think it," she said, her voice as cold as ice.

"Fetch Kzizysus," Kaid ordered her, drawing his own weapon. "Zsurtul, go with her and see to the Human, please," he added as she left.

"You break treaty," snarled Shrulo, crouching back on his haunches to lick an injured forelimb.

"I've no quarrel with you at present, Shrulo," he said more moderately. "Prince Zsurtul may want to press charges for assault against you, though."

"He attack me!"

"I don't think so. The Primes are known to be pacifists," he said, activating his wrist comm to call for the estate security.

Carrie returned, holding Kzizysus by the arm. Behind her came the Prince and a still dazed Ray.

Escorting the small TeLaxaudin into the center of the room, she released him to join Shrulo and stepped back beside Kaid.

"Security has been called," he said. "They will disable the drives of your shuttle. You'll remain here under house arrest until Alien Relations have been informed of your crimes against the En'Shalla Clan and decided what action to take. Your short-range communication systems will not be touched and you will be able to contact us by those means if necessary."

"Blame not mine," said Kzizysus as he stood there visibly trembling, his hands and mandibles making rapid, jerky movements of distress. "I tell mate this. Chy'qui threaten harm. No defender on *Kz'adul*. No option but obey."

"I was there," said Zsurtul. "I spent a lot of time down in the medical area with Doctor Zayshul. You could have told either of us."

"This attack to us I see will break treaty with our peoples," said Shrulo. "Primes, Sholans, and Humans. No more treaty."

"Your governments may think otherwise when they hear the facts," said Kaid.

"The treaty wasn't in force then," said Carrie. "There had been no hostage exchange. What you did to us was tantamount to an act of war! As for you, Kzizysus, if you were forced into doing this, why, after Chy'qui was exposed, didn't you tell anyone?"

"Too late know. Tanks on K'oish'ik. Too late," he said, wringing his hands.

"Leave it, Carrie. We'll let the diplomats sort this one out," Kaid said in disgust. "This is not our problem. Retrieving our cubs is."

"I will also be putting in a formal complaint," added Zsurtul. "Against the TeLaxaudin. This is an act against us, too, because it was done on our ship when you were supposed to be our guests, not prisoners, or creatures in a laboratory."

"Security's arrived," said Carrie, putting her pistol away. "I'll go let them in."

Minutes later, a team led by Rulla entered.

"We'll take over now, sir," he said, giving Kaid and Carrie a crisp salute.

Kaid nodded. "You know your orders. Post two guards in the corridor by the air lock at all times. I want their engines and long-range communications disabled for now. And see to any injuries either Shrulo or Kzizysus may have first. I'll not have us being accused of neglecting their health."

"Yes, sir."

While he was doing that, Carrie glanced at Ray. "You all right?" she asked.

He nodded. "Couple of bruises, nothing more," he said quietly. "You really overreacted, you know. There was no need to hit me like that."

"Sorry, but you should have done what you were told and stayed put. You had no right to interfere."

"I thought you were killing him."

"It was still none of your business, and if I was, there would have been a good reason for it," she said.

He stared at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"I was working, and you touched me," she tried to explain. "You have no idea how painful it was, nor the damage you could have done both to me and Kzizysus. Shola has a law specifically designed to stop that happening. It's a criminal offense here for a nontelepath to touch one of us, unless invited."

*Leave it, Dzinae, sent Kaid. He'll never understand. He isn't one of us.*

"We should get Zsurtul to Vanna," he said, taking her gently by the arm.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked Ray, as Carrie relaxed against him.

"Yeah," he said ruefully. "Nothing but my pride. I'll survive."

"Might be as well to get Vanna to check you out. I know how hard Carrie can punch."

He shook his head. "I'll head back to Ruth's, let her doctor me up," he said.

Kaid reached out and took him by the arm. "What you heard here is not to be repeated," he said. "Understand? This is interplanetary politics, with the danger of the possible dissolution of major peace treaties. It must not be discussed."

"I understand," he said. "I heard enough to know how explosive this is, believe me."

"Good."

\* \* \*

"You did well, Zsurtul. I'm proud of you," said Kaid as they waited for Vanna to finish dressing the bite on the hand he'd got from Shrulo.

"Really?" He looked over at Carrie and Kaid, his face breaking out into a huge smile.

"What did you do to him?" Carrie asked, amused.

"I just used the training you gave me," he said. "He tried to follow you when he heard the translator making all those noises, so I attempted to stop him."

"If you hadn't, Carrie would certainly have been in trouble. I appreciate you looking out for her, guarding her back."

"I was guarding Carrie's back," he said, obviously liking the sound of it. "Ouch!"

"Sorry," said Vanna as she sprayed on wound sealant. "I warned you it would sting."

"Would you like to start training again here, in the gym?" asked Kaid.

"Yes. I enjoyed it when we were at the Warrior Guild. At least here there is no one to beware of, like the M'zullians," he said. "One day, I'll have to lead my people, and I must be able to fight, to know what to do to defend them."

"You'll be able to do that," said Kaid. "Being a Warrior is something you have inside you, something indefinable, but part of your personality. And you have it. You don't have to be like the M'zullians to be a Warrior, you know."

"I know that because I've watched you and the people here," said Zsurtul.

"All done," said Vanna, as she finished tying a plain gauze bandage over the wound. "That's only to help you remember to keep it dry," she said. "A week at most and it'll be healed. It wasn't a deep bite, and we got it before any infection could set in."

"Kaid, when I heard what Kzizysus said," Zsurtul began, getting up from his seat.

"We'll talk about that later," said Kaid, interrupting him. "Come up to the villa with us for the night. We do need to talk. You can call Ruth from the house."

Zsurtul nodded.

## Chapter 14

IT took a warm herbal drink, followed by an equally warm, comfortingly viscous nutrient bath prepared by a very supportive Shrulo, followed by yet another warm drink before Kzizysus had calmed down fully. Using one of the Camarilla's own communications devices, he contacted his Skepp Lord.

"Skepp Lord Aizshuss," said Kzizysus, making the gesture of respect with his hands to his superior.

"Your call expected," said Aizshuss calmly. "The hunters, as anticipated, have discovered your part in the breeding of the hybrids."

"Yes, Skepp Lord. The Human hybrid Clan Leader laid hands on me, shook me violently in air!"

"Regrettable, but understandable. You are unhurt."

"Yes, but..."

"Warned you were fieldwork dangerous," said Aizshuss sternly. "No other way we give them information without suspicion of us and Cabbarans."

"Am under arrest, in shuttle. Armed hunter guards inside air lock," said Kzizysus quietly, realizing that he'd been told to remain on Shola after the Hunter had gone to the sand-dweller outpost for this one reason.

"Is temporary. Tomorrow they will be removed. Already message to Alien Relations telling them of *Kz'adul* happenings and your part. Explains you vulnerable, had to do, but sent message to us. Message delayed, only just found so we tell them immediately. All will be resolved peacefully."

Kzizysus sighed, lowering his head. So the assault on his person, and Shrulo's, would go unpunished. At least he was not being sacrificed to save Camarilla face.

"Wish to return home now. Not enjoy being shaken."

Aizshuss unbent a little. "Work you do vital for Camarilla," he said. "Promise you show. One day you likely join us. Remain on hunter world and continue medical work. Need more understanding of these two species Linking and breeding, as well as hybrids. Need know where they fit in pattern of potentialities. Relax, enjoy meal, bath. Your work for Camarilla for now is done."

With that, the Skepp Lord broke the connection.

Kzizysus stared at the screen glumly, his mandibles still twitching spasmodically. He'd had a bath, and it hadn't helped enough.

"Food is good idea," said Shrulo, getting to his feet. "I prepare meal for us, bring scent-blender to lounge. Soon you feel better."

Kzizysus gestured his appreciation. He was touched. Shrulo knew it relaxed him, but didn't like it when he used the scent-blender—the Cabbaran's nose was a little too sensitive, so its use had been confined to his own quarters. To suggest he bring it into their main lounge was a major concession to his continuing overanxiousness.

\* \* \*

Konis was busy when Kaid tried to reach him, so he was put through to Falma.

"Master Konis has just received a communication from the TeLaxaudin regarding this matter," said Falma. "He's busy dealing with their Ambassador now. The general feeling is it should be kept under wraps for the time being as they are not directly responsible. It was Chy'qui and the Directorate, both of whom no longer exist."

"Someone must be made to answer for it!" said Kaid angrily.

"The matter's in hand," said Falma firmly. "Master Konis will get back to you tonight if he can, and if not, tomorrow morning. We are not taking it lightly, I assure you, Kaid."

## **Stronghold, that evening**

Despite it being very late at Stronghold, after speaking to the TeLaxaudin Ambassador, Konis was in conference with Rhyaz and Lijou.

"Did you know about this?" Konis was demanding. "It's obvious that Kezule has these cubs and that's why he wanted a meeting with Kusac."

"We decided to keep the matter as quiet as possible, Konis, given the obviously explosive nature of it," said Rhyaz. "You know how much we need that treaty, we cannot let it be disrupted, even by something as serious as this. Those responsible for creating them are dead."

"The TeLaxaudin isn't!"

"Konis, listen to yourself," said Rhyaz soothingly. "You're enraged because this affects your son's clan. You have to distance yourself. There's far more at stake here. The TeLaxaudin are close allies of the Primes and have been for fifteen hundred years. We cannot hold them responsible and not endanger the Prime treaty."

With an effort, Konis forced his ears back up and took a few deep breaths. "You're right," he said shortly. "I've spoken to the TeLaxaudin Ambassador and he wants this kept as quiet as we do. Right now, only you and I are aware of it. I take it you do have the cubs."

"Yes," said Lijou. "They're safe and well at Haven. They're ten years old, Konis. Somehow the Directorate accelerated their growth. We can't return them to Kusac's estate because it is only too obvious they are hybrids. That's the other reason we said nothing to you."

"They belong with their parents, Lijou," said Konis coldly. "You have no right to keep them."

"How do you explain their existence to your clan members without telling them how and by whom they were created?" asked Rhyaz. "They have to stay at Haven."



Konis fell silent, only too well aware that Rhyaz was right. "Where's Kusac?" he asked at length. "You didn't even tell me he'd returned."

"He went back to Kezule for a sixth cub," said Rhyaz. "As you know, the General left K'oish'ik with a group of civilians and some of his sons, bred the same way the hybrid cubs were. He's setting up house on an old Valtegan Outpost and wanted Kusac's help to train them. Kezule kept back one of the cubs to make sure Kusac returned. The good news is all his crew apart from the female member, went with him. He's not out there alone, Konis."

"I don't intend to lie about my part in this, Rhyaz," he said, after another pause. "So don't expect me to when they ask me about it. Kaid and Carrie will add it all up and head out to you very soon."

"Say as little as you can. In fact, if I were you, I'd have pressing business at the capital. We'll play it by ear when they come, Konis, see how much they know first. We'll take the brunt of their anger. It mustn't be allowed to damage you as a family."

"From what they told Falma, they know all about the cubs," said Konis. "After that, everything else is blindingly obvious."

"That doesn't mean they know we have them," said Rhyaz. "Can you keep this matter from our government?"

Konis nodded. "So long as I have Kaid's and Carrie's cooperation, and right now, they understandably want heads to roll."

"Do what you can. Pass them over to us if need be." He hesitated a moment. "You do realize that we still can't exonerate Kusac publicly when he does return, don't you? Not without all of this coming out and doing irreparable damage."

"I understand perfectly, Rhyaz," said Konis and hung up.

"That did not go well," sighed Rhyaz, switching off their large viewing screen.

"How could it?" asked Lijou. "I never thought I'd say this, but Kusac's probably safer with Kezule than coming home."

Rhyaz got up. "We'd better get back to bed. If I know Kaid, he'll be on his way here at first light tomorrow."

En'Shalla estate, next day, Zhal-L'Shoh 29th day (January)

Carrie and Kaid rose at dawn and were having first meal in the family kitchen when Nyan called Carrie on her wrist comm to tell her Falma was here to speak to them.

"Show him in," she said, surprised. "Zhala, another mug and plate, please."

He was shown in a few minutes later, and offered c'shar or coffee.

"Thank you," he said, choosing the c'shar jug and filling his mug.

"Let me guess," said Kaid, taking a stim twig out of the packet on the table beside him as Carrie began rolling a cigarette. "Master Konis has been called to the Palace."

"In a nutshell," agreed Falma, declining Carrie's offer of food with a polite negative gesture. "Let me explain. Normally, because they are such obviously fragile beings, the TeLaxaudin are accompanied by several of their own kind, if not by a Cabbaran bodyguard as well. This was not the case on the *Kz'adul* because Chy'qui requested Kzizysus specifically at the last minute and there was no one who could accompany him." He stopped to take a sip of his drink.

"Kzizysus, as well as being alone and with the obvious disadvantage of his morphology, is a youngster in TeLaxaudin terms, about the equivalent of Mara's age in Human terms."

"Are you telling us we let a trainee medic operate on Kusac?" asked Kaid, a touch of anger in his voice. "What's he doing here as a supposedly competent doctor?"

"He is competent, and fully qualified," Falma assured them. "They use intensive technology-assisted learning programs to educate their young. You have to understand he's lived a lot more years than Mara, it's just that in proportion to their long life span, it amounts to him being in his late teens, or early twenties."

"You're telling us that's why he was easily intimidated by Chy'qui," said Carrie. She could understand that, remembering back to when she'd lived on Keiss under the Valtegens. It explained, but didn't excuse him.

"Not intimidated," said Falma, with a slight grin, "frankly terrified. He couldn't go to Zsurtul as the Prince suggested to you because he knew what little regard he was held in for the same reason— his age."

"This is the TeLaxaudin excuse?" asked Kaid, raising an eyebrow.

"You're forgetting the kind of person Chy'qui was," said Falma. "And the fact he had the Enforcer, J'koshuk, as a henchman. That's enough to terrify anyone. Don't forget Kzizysus did send a plea for help and details of what he'd been made to do to his own people, Kaid. It wasn't his fault that the message was delayed by Chy'qui and not sent out by the *Kz'adul* till much later."

"What's your point, Falma?" asked Carrie. They were selling them out again, she could feel it.

"Master Konis says this matter has to be dealt with in-house, between him and the TeLaxaudin Embassy, at their request, to prevent a scandal that would destroy public confidence in the new treaty and alliances with the Primes and the TeLaxaudin. He asks that your guards be stood down and Kzizysus' shuttle returned to working condition. He isn't going anywhere. Kzizysus has been ordered by his government to remain here and continue his essential teaching work at both your hospital and the main one in Valsgarth."

"Political expediency wins again," said Carrie, angrily stubbing out her cigarette. "We're talking six innocent cubs, here, Falma! We're talking the theft of our DNA, the creation of life from us without our consent!"

"Would you set the lives of those six cubs against those of the whole Alliance, Carrie? I can't believe you would, nor does Master Konis," said Falma quietly. "Personally, he, and I, agree with you, heads should roll, but all Kzizysus' refusal to help would have achieved would have been his own death, and the cubs would still have been created. The TeLaxaudin assure us they will make reparations to you."

"Another ship?" Carrie asked, her tone derisory. "Seems the life and limbs of us hybrid telepaths are held a little cheaply by our allies."

Falma had the grace to wince at her reference to the gift from the Primes to Kusac for what he'd suffered at Chy'qui's hands. "They'll be contacting you themselves on that matter," he said.

"What about this scent mark on Kusac?" she demanded. "What part did Doctor Zayshul play in that since it's her scent he's been marked with?"

"The TeLaxaudin know nothing about this, Carrie. It's a matter that you'll have to take up with Kusac when he does return."

"Where is he, Falma?" asked Kaid, removing the twig from his mouth. "Did he get sent to meet up with Kezule because of these cubs?"

Falma shook his head before taking another mouthful of his c'shar. "I have no idea, Kaid. AIReI certainly knows nothing about it to my knowledge. There's no reason I can see to link Kusac's regrettable departure from Shola with this disclosure by Kzizysus. Can I tell Master Konis you will comply with AIReI's request to stand down your security?"

Kaid nodded once and got to his feet. "I'll do it now, but I want my objections to go on your records. You'll have to excuse us now, Falma, we've a trip of our own planned and need to leave very shortly."

"I noticed the speeder outside," said Falma, rising. "Anywhere interesting?"

"Family visit," said Carrie as Kaid headed out of the kitchen to make his call to Ni'Zulhu. "And Kaid has some things he needs to collect from his home."

\* \* \*

"Why a speeder?" asked Carrie as she settled into the front seat beside Kaid.

"We'll not be so tired when we get there," he said, starting up the engine. "Also, it'll be twenty-fourth hour there, still their night, so we're going to my place to rest and eat before heading over to Stronghold."

"Makes sense," she said, snapping her safety harness closed.

As the small craft rose into the air, he glanced over at her. "You ever driven one of these?"

"No."

"It's easy. Want me to show you, then you can have a try later?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"My way of saying I'm sorry," he said awkwardly, studiously keeping his attention on the controls. "I was wrong, there was a hidden message from Kusac on the crystal."

"Apology accepted," she said, well aware how difficult it had been for him to admit he'd been wrong. "How fast can she go?"

"Let's find out," he said with a smile as he accelerated.

## **Dzahui Mountains, 24th hour**

Kaid stared at the pile of windblown snow almost covering the front of the house, and groaned.

"I'd forgotten about that," he muttered, folding his arms on the panel in front of him and resting his head on them. "I don't think there's even a shovel on board the speeder."

Carrie chuckled and dug him in the ribs, fairly gently, with something hard. "I didn't. Here, take this," she said.

He grunted and automatically shied away from it, his hand coming down to clasp over hers before sliding away, the object now in his grasp. Sitting up, he examined it.

"A portable sonic device for clearing snow. I'm impressed. Where did you get it?"

"Taizia gave me it as a midwinter gift," she said. "To keep me from getting in too deep, she said."

Kaid gave her a curious glance then began to unbuckle himself from the harness. "You stay here while I clear the snow. It's got to be six feet deep in places. You'll disappear under it," he said with a grin, already ducking from the swipe that he sensed coming.

She stopped the swing halfway. "You're no fun," she complained. "I'm not that small. You might at least let me take my revenge! I hope you remembered to close the shutters for the winter."

He threw her a scathing glance before opening the door and jumping down into the snow. The craft's motors had melted an area several feet wide around it so he was able to get reasonably close to the door before turning on the device. He swept it in a narrow arc, corresponding to where the pathway should be, watching as the snow dissolved into water which flowed a few feet away before reforming as ice.

Five minutes later, he opened the speeder door again. "Finished," he said, tossing the device back to her. "If they do larger ones, we should look at getting one for the villa."

"I'll get Garras to check it out," she said, picking up their kit bag and sliding over his seat to climb out.

The temperature in the house was reasonable, considering it was only set to keep the chill off the air.

Carrie stood in the main lounge as Kaid tossed his coat at the nearest chair and headed behind the room-dividing meal counter to the kitchen.

"I'm not actually hungry yet," she said, the memories coming back as she took her coat off and looked round.

"Me neither," he admitted, filling up a jug of water to make hot drinks. "But coffee would be good."

She glanced over at him. "You don't drink coffee," she said, flinging her jacket on the sofa and walking over to the counter to lean on it.

"I could do with some after that drive," he said, spooning it into the coffeepot. "Not that your driving was bad," he added hastily.

She ignored the comment, her mind obviously on their forthcoming visit. "I hate waiting."

"I noticed," he said, grinning as he looked up at her and switched the pot on. "But going there now will gain us nothing, believe me. Better to wait till they're up."

She shivered, wrapping her arms around her chest. "It's cold. Can you turn up the heating?" Over her trousers, she only wore a light woolen tunic.

"Of course," he said, coming round to her side of the counter.

He stopped behind her, matching his body to hers as he wrapped his arms around her. "I was thinking of keeping you warm slightly differently, though," he said, pushing her hair aside to nuzzle her neck.

She relaxed against him. "Were you, now? The bed'll be freezing," she objected as he turned her to face him.

"I'm not," he murmured, his tongue flicking lightly across her cheek. He wasn't concerned with her objection because he could sense her teasing him.

"I don't know," she demurred, arching her neck toward him as his licks went lower.

"It would solve your dislike of waiting," he said persuasively, taking several slow steps backward and drawing her with him. He felt her arms encircling him.

"Well..."

"The coffee won't be ready for a while." He drew her farther, stopping to reach for the heating control as he began to gently nibble her jawline. "The only warm place is bed. With me."

She shivered again, but he knew it wasn't from cold this time. "I don't think even you could warm me up just now." Her hand was pressing open the seal on his tunic.

"Now that's a Challenge if ever I heard one," he purred, eyes glinting with humor as his lips and teeth worked their way closer to her mouth then closed over it in a gentle kiss. He could feel the magic of their Link flowing between them, knew the fire that burned in him had ignited her. Their anger with each other over the past months had dulled even that on their Link days.

He felt cool air against his chest as she pushed his wool tunic aside, then her fingers were plowing through his pelt, looking for his nipples. He sucked in his breath, his teeth closing on her bottom lip and nipping it gently as he felt himself harden against her palms. The muscles in his groin began to contract but with an effort of will, he forced them to relax, his mouth closing on hers again as he reached for her tunic.

When his hands cupped her breasts, her kiss grew wilder, deeper, threatening to break his self-imposed control. Her hands moved down, reaching for his belt, unfastening it and letting it thud to the floor behind him before returning to push his tunic aside. When she reached lower, he stopped her, sweeping her up into his arms.

"Not yet," he whispered, licking her ear as he took the few steps up to the bedroom level in one stride. "I promised to make you warm."

"I am," she murmured, insistently trying to edge his robe off one shoulder.



He stopped only long enough to flick the covers back before laying her down gently. Then, stripping off his tunic, he joined her, pulling the covers back over them both.

"But I'm still dressed," she objected, looking up at him with heavy lidded eyes.

"Not for long, Dzinae," he promised, his whole body vibrating with the depth of his purr. "Not for long."

He had it down to a fine art now. Her belt went first, then the boots, followed by her trousers, an inch at a time as he gently used his tongue and claw tips on each bit of newly-exposed flesh. By the time they were off, she was in a frenzy, trying to reach him. So was he as his groin muscles contracted suddenly and his genitals descended.

Matching his body to hers, his tongue worked its way upward till he reached her breasts. There he began licking and nipping her until she began to climax, her mind reaching out for his as she whimpered his name in an agony of still-unfulfilled pleasure.

*Tallinu!*

Rearing up on his knees, he flipped her over onto her belly, lifting her hips and pulling her toward him. Matching his movements to hers, he entered her slowly, swelling almost instantly as their minds met as fully as their bodies.

Leaning forward, he ran his hands up her sides, catching hold of her ear gently between his teeth for an instant.

"I love you, Dzinae," he whispered as all feeling of being *Kaid* dissolved into the unity of *them*, and their bodies, pulsing with wave after wave of shared pleasure, climbed to dizzy heights.

The intensity was almost too much to bear and he collapsed on his side, pulling her with him, his arms welding her to his body as his tail snaked

round her legs. Finally, with a long drawn out moan that echoed hers, they exploded within each other.

Afterward, held fast in each other's arms, their minds still joined and closer than they had been in the weeks since Kusac's departure, all arguments between them were forgiven and forgotten. Nestled amid the warmth of each other and the covers, sleep claimed them.

## **Stronghold, midmorning**

"I hear you're one of the Brothers now," said Noni, sitting down opposite him at the dining table in the Seniors' common room.

He accorded her the briefest of glances before returning to the book he was reading. "Word gets around."

"Haven't you lot got somewhere else to be?" she demanded, looking at the other half dozen occupants in the room.

He sighed and moved to close his book and get up.

"Not you," she snapped. "You and I need to talk."

"I'm used to being asked, not told, Noni," he said quietly as the door shut behind the last Brother.

"If you think that becoming a Brother will make me treat you any different, you got a..."

"Now why would I think that?" he interrupted pleasantly. "You'll treat me as you do nearly everyone around here, because you like to be seen as an overbearing, grumpy old female. Life is short, Noni, and I don't have time for your games. I've better things to do."

Since she'd entered the room, she'd been trying to find his mental wavelength, but his shields were too strong. In fact, she was having the devil of a time trying to find her way through his shields; every time she thought she'd got it, he changed them and she had to start again.

"You think you're someone now, think you can insult old Noni..."

He got to his feet, picking up the book, and inclined his head to her. "No, I just realized last night that I'm still the same person I was on my own world," he said. "I am still the equivalent of a Guild Master. The College I ran at Old Sarum was as large as this one here. I am still a Guardian, and there is still work for me to do, not only for my people, but for yours. I'll talk to you when you accord me the basic courtesies of an equal instead of treating me like a geriatric new recruit."

He began to walk to the door. "And you can stop trying to read me," he said, finally repulsing her efforts with a mental side-swipe of his own. "You won't succeed."

"Master Conner," she said, fending it off without a second thought. "Please, sit down. You found your feet quicker than I expected."

Slowly he turned to look at her, an air of puzzlement on his face.

She nodded, setting the end of her long white plait bobbing slightly. "We've been expecting someone like you since the first Human came to Shola. I thought it was you the first time I saw you, but I needed to see your metal to be sure. You have to admit that until last night you kept your true nature to yourself. I wondered how much longer I was going to have to keep thinking up exercises for you to do!" she chuckled.

With the air of a sleepwalker, he resumed his seat.

She leaned forward to pat his hand, a slight frown of apprehension briefly creasing her features as she sat back. "There's few who can withstand me when I'm determined to get them to reveal themselves. You lasted longer than most. I knew if you were what we hoped, and used your Gifts, it would attract Him."

"Him being Vartra," he said, finding his voice.

She nodded again. "Right," she said briskly. "There's work for us to do. I take it you were at the morning briefing, and likely Lijou gave you a comp pad full of background information."

"Yes, he did. Apparently we're close to war with a species of Valtegans called M'zullians."

"Yes, but that can wait for the time being. I need your help with another matter. How much do you know about Leska pairs and Triads?"

\* \* \*

"Morning, sir, Liegena," said Chaddo as they entered the main hallway. "Father Lijou is waiting for you in Master Rhyaz' office."

"Thanks, Chaddo," said Kaid.

"It's very quiet," said Carrie as their footsteps echoed on the stairs.

"It will be, with nearly everyone at the Outposts except the younglings and a couple of units of Sleepers undergoing processing and retraining," he replied.

Rhyaz got up from his desk to greet them as they opened the door into his office.

"Well come. It's been quite a while since we saw each other," he said, gesturing them over to the less formal seats where Lijou sat by the fire. "Can I offer you refreshments since you've traveled such a long way?"

"No, thanks," said Kaid, letting Carrie take her seat on the sofa before he sat down. "I'd rather get down to business."

"What can we do for you?"

"Which one of you sent Kusac on a mission, and when?" he asked without preamble.

"What made you ask that?" asked Rhyaz with a slight frown.

Kaid reached inside his coat and drew out a photograph which he tossed down onto the low table between them and the two Guild Masters. "This,"

he said. "Before you deny it, you'll notice the command mark is on the inside of the handle— it wouldn't show when he's wearing the knife."

Lijou glanced at Rhyaz then reached out to pick up the photograph. He looked at it before passing it to him.

"Where did you get this?" asked Rhyaz, glancing at it then holding it back out to him. "Obviously it's a fake." When Kaid didn't take it, he put it back on the table.

"I took it off the message crystal," said Kaid, leaving the photo lying there between them. "We all know what a command mark on the inside face of our knives means, Rhyaz. It means the mission is classified. I'm asking you again, when did you send Kusac on a classified mission?" There was a rumble of anger in his voice now.

"Classified means just that, Kaid," said Rhyaz quietly. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you anything more."

"Then perhaps we can tell you," said Carrie, her voice deceptively quiet as she put a piece of paper on the table by the photo. "About six hybrid cubs, ten years old, that General Kezule had, or has."

Neither of them missed Lijou's ears tilting fractionally back then righting themselves with an effort.

"In the message?" asked Rhyaz, his voice betraying nothing. "You must be mistaken."

"It's all there," said Carrie, pushing the paper closer to him. "I've underlined the relevant sections. Read it."

He shook his head, making no move to pick it up. "You're mistaken," he began.

"Read it!" Carrie almost spat at him.

"I'll read it," said Lijou, hurriedly picking it up and scanning through it. This time his ears tilted back to half height and remained there. He held it out to Rhyaz. "You should read it," he said tonelessly.

Rhyaz snatched the document from him and began to read.

"It was there, in front of our noses all along," Lijou murmured. "We were looking for something sophisticated, not something as simple as this."

Rhyaz handed the paper to Carrie. "I still can't confirm or deny anything, Carrie," he said, his tone genuinely regretful. "You know I can't."

Raised voices in the corridor outside drew everyone's attention to the door, which suddenly burst open to admit Konis Aldatan.

"This has gone on long enough, Rhyaz," the Clan Lord said angrily, striding over to them. "You will tell them everything. Now!"

"I'm sorry, Master Rhyaz," murmured Chaddo from the doorway. "I said you were busy but..."

"It's all right, Chaddo," said Lijou, gesturing to him to leave.

"We'll see to it now."

The pieces were beginning to fall into place now for Kaid as Lijou urged the Clan Lord to sit down, and Rhyaz swore volubly under his breath.

"AIReI requested the mission," said Kaid quietly. "But you sent him, Rhyaz, didn't you?"

"This is highly classified," began Rhyaz angrily.

"Since when were you worried about my security clearance, or Carrie's?" Kaid snapped back.

"Dammit, Kaid! We were protecting you and Carrie!" the Warrior Master said angrily, sitting forward in his seat. "Have you forgotten how pregnant she was?"

"One of you had better start telling us about this mission," said Carrie, raising her voice. "Before I get really angry!" The snarl in her tone was only too apparent and made the three Masters look at her in shock.

"I didn't know she could do that," murmured Lijou.

"Get on with it!" roared Kaid, clenching his fists till his claws came out.

"Haven received a message from Kezule for Kusac," began Konis.

"I'll tell it," interrupted Rhyaz. "Mine is the responsibility. We opened the message for security reasons, fearing it was trapped," he continued. "It was a request from Kezule for Kusac to meet with him because he had something of interest to him. Kezule wanted Kusac specifically and said to bring no telepaths."

"I'd been asked by the Prime Ambassador to let them know if we heard anything about Kezule as the Emperor wanted him back," said Konis.

"Rhyaz knew this and called me here to see the message. Our government wanted information on Kezule and what he was doing so it was decided my son must keep the rendezvous."

"So you sent him," said Kaid, his voice deathly quiet, looking at Konis and Rhyaz. "Between you, you sent an unstable Brother out on a mission to meet with a known personal enemy."

"He wasn't deemed unstable enough not to send, considering the situation," said Rhyaz. "I said mine was the responsibility for sending him, and it was. We needed the information, Kaid, and we needed to know how stable Kusac was."

"And if I know you, you sent a Special Operative along, too!" Kaid snarled, his hair beginning to stir around his shoulders.

"Kaid, calm down. Two were sent," interrupted Lijou. "I sent Banner to protect Kusac from himself, and from Dzaou."

Kaid looked at Rhyaz in disbelief and contempt.

"You sent Dzaou?" exclaimed Carrie. "You know he hates Kusac! Vartra's bones, Rhyaz, what possessed you to send that xenophobe on such a sensitive mission?"

"To test Kusac by putting him under pressure," snarled Kaid. "As if the mission itself wasn't enough!"

"So the whole story of stealing the *Couana* was bullshit," said Carrie, using the English word as she glared at the three males.

"He did steal it," said Rhyaz. "Kusac refused to leave before your cub was born— your first cub, that is. He's too high a profile to just drop out of sight for several weeks or months, and we couldn't officially send him off-world, so he had to appear to be a renegade. The *Couana* was his choice as it was the only ship fast enough to make the rendezvous in the given time."

"And then you threw him to Raiban," said Kaid, almost beyond rage. "To be branded a traitor and thief. By Vartra, you'd better clear him once he returns, Rhyaz!"

Carrie caught the look that Konis and Lijou gave the Warrior Master. "They can't," she said, the life suddenly going out of her. "If they do, they have to admit to the mission, and they can't do that."

Kaid leaped to his feet, eyes blazing, lips pulled back in a snarl of pure fury. "By all you hold holy, Rhyaz, you will clear his name and reputation! Do you think I'll sit back and let my sword-brother and Triad partner go to jail or be brain-wiped for this?"

"Do you want the treaty with the Primes shattered right now when the M'zullians are busy plundering the Valtegan world they destroyed the same way as they wiped out our two colonies?" Rhyaz demanded. "Because if word gets out we met with Kezule, didn't tell the Primes, and picked up five artificially-grown hybrid cubs, that's what will happen!"

"You have the cubs?" said Carrie breaking the standoff that followed.



Lijou stirred. "Yes, we have five of the eight cubs. Two were unfortunately killed during their rescue."

"Two killed? How?" she asked, already too numbed to feel anything more.

"One was killed by a Directorate guard, the other by accident when a gas canister was shot into the room. Apparently it bounced off the rear wall and hit one of them on the head, according to the other cubs."

"Where are they?" demanded Kaid, moving away from the table.

"They're safe," said Konis. "We're not at liberty to tell you where."

"How long have you had them?" demanded Kaid. "And where's Kusac?"

"Since the end of Zhal-S'Asha," said Lijou.

"Zhal-S'Asha? That's three months, Rhyaz!" said Kaid. "What the hell are you doing with them? They belong with us— we're their parents, dammit!"

"They can't come here, Kaid, you must see that," began Rhyaz.

He got no further because Kaid lunged across the room, hauled him up out of the chair and landed him a blow on the jaw that sent him and the chair flying backward. As the others were just starting to react, he followed it through by vaulting the chair and hauling Rhyaz to his feet again.

"You are not keeping our cubs," he snarled, holding onto him by the front of his tunic. "They're our blood, and clan rights supersede all others, you know that! I want a ship to wherever they and Kusac are, and I want it now!"

"You bring them back here and everyone will know they're hybrids," coughed Rhyaz, grabbing Kaid's hands for support but otherwise not defending himself. "And that will break the treaty."

"Strangling Rhyaz won't help, Kaid," said Lijou, moving slowly over to the two males. "If they find out about the cubs, all Shola will be howling for blood. You have to see we had no option but to keep it quiet. They're in good hands, I promise you. Those who created the cubs are dead. There's no one we can blame, except the innocent Primes."

"Keep your distance, Lijou," warned Kaid, relaxing his grip slightly on Rhyaz. "I don't accept that anyone will know they're hybrids. There's very little difference between Kashini and other cubs her age."

"There's more in a ten year old," said Lijou. "I know, I've seen them on the vid. They are safe, Kaid. Your son is with L'Seuli and his Leska, training at the Shrine there. Vartra visited him and gave him a coin."

"What?" He dropped Rhyaz in shock, spinning round to look at the Head Priest. "My son? Training as a priest?"

Lijou nodded. "A Brotherhood priest. He's yours and Kate's. He's called Dhyshac."

As Kaid stood frozen to the spot, Rhyaz stumbled to his feet, massaging his throat.

"And me," said Carrie, her voice brittle. "What about me?"

"You have two sons," said Lijou, still facing Kaid. "Zsayal with Rezac, and Shaylor with Taynar."

"Oh, God," she said, sitting down suddenly, her face white.

"And Kusac? What about him?" asked Kaid.

There was an obvious hesitation from Lijou. "None that we know about," he said.

"Five cubs, you only said five," said Kaid as the door burst open again. "Where's the sixth?" he demanded.

Alex, a bruise already marring her jawline, flew over to Rhyaz' side, an angry expression on her face. "You'd no call to go hitting Rhyaz! You know damned well I feel it, too!"

"I'm fine," said Rhyaz gently, holding her close for a moment. "You can't stay."

"I'm not leaving!" She glowered at Kaid, then Carrie.

"Alex, go. Please," Lijou said firmly. "No one is going to be harmed. Kaid hit Rhyaz in the heat of the moment, it won't happen again. Konis, if you please?"

She glowered at Kaid as Rhyaz urged her to leave.

Carrie roused herself. "He'll be fine, Alex," she said quietly. "You don't understand Sholan males well enough yet. Trust me, Kaid will not harm your Leska."

Bristling at the implication, reluctantly Alex allowed Konis to take her to the study door. When it closed behind her, Kaid turned again to look at Rhyaz.

"Where is Kusac?" he demanded again.

"Kusac stayed long enough to drop off the cubs, and an adult female and her infant, then took his ship, the *Venture II* and returned to Kezule," the Warrior Master said, glancing at Kaid before heaving the chair upright again. "All his crew apart from Chima, my Special Operative, went with him," he added, resuming his seat. "There's no threat to him now from us."

"Why, in Vartra's name, did he go back?" Kaid asked, suddenly confused.

"The sixth cub," said Carrie. "Kezule kept Kusac's cub, didn't he?"

"We don't know for sure," said Lijou. "But, yes, he did keep one. Shaidan. He was apparently badly injured in the rescue."

"That's not why Kezule kept him," said Kaid, tail beginning to sway again.

"Kezule left the Prime world with a group of about sixty people to start a small colony. He wanted Kusac's help to train them to defend themselves, so he kept Shaidan to make sure he returned," said Rhyaz, stopping as a coughing fit took over. He reached for a glass and the water jug.

"Who's Shaidan's mother?" asked Carrie at length.

"We don't know. The cubs have no idea who their parents are, they weren't told. The only way we were able to identify them was from blood samples," said Lijou. "We've had no word from Kusac since then."

"I want a ship to Haven, Rhyaz," said Kaid. "I intend to have my son back, and I want to know where the others are."

"No," said Rhyaz. "I'll not let you threaten the treaty, Kaid. There's no way at this time that you can take the cubs home without their identity as ten-year-old hybrids being discovered."

"They'll be safe on the estate," began Carrie.

"They can't come home," said Konis, with equal finality. "Believe me, I wish they could—they're my grandchildren, Carrie. I'm sorry, but there's too much at stake right now."

"I'll find a way to explain them!" snarled Kaid. "They've lost enough of their young lives to the Directorate, I don't intend to leave them on some Godsforsaken asteroid for the next several years! I grew up without parents; it's not happening to any son of mine or Carrie's!"

"No. I refuse to compromise on this," coughed Rhyaz. "I'll have guards set on the spaceport, Kaid. You will not leave Shola and that's an order!"

"Try and stop me," he snarled, turning away. "I'm not one of your Warriors, Rhyaz! Carrie, we're leaving!"

"Not without an escort," said Rhyaz, pressing his wrist comm. "I want to know you're back on your estate."

"Kaid, please, accept the escort and go home," said Konis.

Getting up, Carrie turned on him. "How could you send Kusac on this mission?" she demanded. "You know what Kezule feels about us! And as for throwing him to Raiban and the newsvids— I can't believe you did that after everything he's been through!"

"Believe me, it was the hardest decision of my life, Carrie," Konis said, reaching out to touch her.

She sidestepped him and strode over to join Kaid. "If you don't have him cleared, by every God you hold dear, I swear I'll go to my father and have the whole story broadcast from Keiss, treaty or no treaty," she said furiously. "You find a way to exonerate him, or I *will* do it!"

"One last thing, whose idea was it for Kusac to fight with me before he left?" demanded Kaid, looking from one to the other of the three males.

"Mine," said Rhyaz. "I told him he had to prevent you from going after him and risking the safety of Carrie and the cub she was carrying. He left immediately your daughter was born, Kaid. He doesn't know he has a son."

"He was almost anxious to go, Carrie," said Konis. "Perhaps he was afraid that, against the odds, he would Link to you again."

*Say nothing!* sent Kaid, aware of Carrie about to refute this and tell them about the scent marker.

A tap at the door and three security Brothers entered.

"Escort Brother Kaid and Sister Carrie straight to their speeder and then follow them back to their estate," Rhyaz ordered.

"This is not the end, Rhyaz, trust me," snarled Kaid as they left.

On their way down the stairs, Carrie stopped dead as she caught sight of an elderly Human with long gray hair flowing over the shoulders of his black Brotherhood robe.

"I think I know him," she murmured to Kaid as he stopped beside her. "But I can't possibly. There was no one like him on Keiss." Something deeper than personal memories tugged at her mind as she tried to place him.

"Master Rhyaz said to escort you straight to your speeder," reminded the guard behind them as the newcomer approached the foot of the staircase and smiled up at them.

"You must be the Sister Carrie I've heard so much about," he said as they continued down the stairs again.

*He's old, she sent to Kaid. He feels far, far older than his years.*

*Is this important?* asked Kaid.

She studied the stranger, taking in the long hair, the neatly-trimmed full beard, also gray, and the blue eyes that smiled up at her. His name hovered on the edges of memory, a memory from her part of Earth: not a personal memory, a cultural one.

As they came level, he reached out to place a hand around her shoulders, and held out his other hand, taking hold of hers when she automatically responded.

One of their escort moved forward to intercept him but at a glance from the gray-haired male, fell back looking slightly confused.

"A pleasure to meet you, child," the stranger said quietly in English, turning them both so they were effectively hidden from the others as he walked with her toward the front doors. "I'm Conner."

Her eyes widened in surprise. She knew who he was! "You're Mer..."

*No. Never call me that*, he sent, pressing something hard into her hand then closing her fingers tightly over it. *That was another world, another life, Carrie. I no longer hold that position. Take this, you'll know how to use it.*

"I'm from England, like you, here as part of a cultural exchange. We must get together someday and chat," he continued.

*Who is he?* demanded Kaid, concerned for her.

*Later*, she sent, palming the object, which she suspected was a comm crystal, into her pocket. "I'd like that," she said to Conner. "You must come and visit our estate."

"One day," he agreed, stopping and releasing her by Chaddo's desk. His hand briefly touched her cheek and his eyes twinkled in accord with his smile. "I'm looking forward to meeting all your cubs. The Goddess has blessed you in giving you children born of both worlds."

Carrie didn't miss his emphasis of the word *all*. "We'd be honored to have you visit us, wouldn't we, Kaid?" she said, turning to him.

Baffled, but having every reason now to trust her judgment in this, Kaid inclined his head and held his hand out in the telepath greeting. "You'll be most welcome, Conner," he said, inclining his head in a gesture of respect.

"We must leave now," said the escort, getting decidedly twitchy at this unauthorized encounter.

Kaid shrugged, his gesture saying volumes. "Another time, Conner," he said.

As they climbed into the aircar and shut the door, Kaid asked, "So who is he?"

"Imagine coming face-to-face with someone who's a legend in your country's history," she began, then stopped dead and groaned.

"Like Vartra," Kaid said with a faint grin.

"Just like him," she said. "Very like Vartra. I wonder if Stronghold knows exactly who he is."

"I suspect they'll find out," he said, his tone reverting to one of suppressed anger. "I hope he leads them on many false trails!"

Something dug into her side sharply as she fastened her safety harness and she remembered the object Conner had given her. Digging it out, she held it in her lap in case anyone outside noticed, and looked at it in surprise.

"A message crystal?"

"Conner gave it to me. It's from him, and Noni. I can feel they've both handled it. He said I'd know how to use it so it must be important."

"What's Noni up to now," he muttered. "Whatever it is, I want none of it."

"You don't know that," said Carrie, stashing it in one of her belt pouches for safety.

\* \* \*

The Brotherhood craft took up a holding pattern just short of the gatehouse and Ni'Zulhu's security as they passed over the boundary into their Clan's land. Their journey back had been mostly silent as they each sat with their own thoughts.

It was sixteenth hour, past third meal, when they finally arrived, however Kaid had called ahead and they knew Zhala would have a hot meal waiting for them.

"We need to speak to Zsurtul again," said Carrie as their speeder finally settled down in the villa's small parking lot.

"Agreed," he said, switching off the engines.



"Tallinu, the darkness on his soul that Kusac mentioned, it's Zayshul, or whoever scent-marked him, isn't it?" she said in a small voice. "Why didn't he tell us?"

"It isn't that easy for a male to admit to having been raped," he said awkwardly, turning to look at her. "It makes you doubt yourself on all kinds of levels you cannot believe."

She leaned forward, cupping his cheek with her hand. "I'm sorry, I forgot you'd been raped as a cub and a youngling." Something else clicked into place. "That's why Kusac's accusation in that fake row hurt so much, didn't it? Oh, I am..."

"Sh," he said, putting his index finger across her lips. "It's forgotten and forgiven. We both made mistakes that are very obvious now with hindsight."

She nodded as he took his finger away. "There's more, though, to what Kusac said, isn't there? That scent marker, Zsurtul said it would attract him to the female who put it there. That's why he didn't tell us, and why he was willing to go— to see her again. That's the real darkness for him, isn't it, and the issue he had to resolve?"

"What little we know seems to point that way," agreed Kaid. "Look, there's no point in driving ourselves mad speculating, Carrie. I fully intend that we'll find the cubs, then Kusac, and bring them all safely home, no matter what Rhyaz or your bond-father Konis says. Now, they'll have heard us landing, and Zhala will be getting ready to serve our meal. I need to see the twins and Kashini first, don't you?"

She nodded. "I needed to..."

"I know," he said, smiling gently. "There's no need to say any more. Let's go in."

\* \* \*

The cubs were delighted to see them and it was almost half an hour before they were able to escape downstairs to eat. While they ate in the den, and Kaid brought T'Chebbi up to date, Nyan, their main house attendant, called Ruth's and asked Zsurtul to come over. Carrie shoveled her food down and headed for the workstation on the half level by the door to read the crystal Conner had given her.

She'd no sooner started it up than she paused it and called Kaid and T'Chebbi over. "You have to see this. Conner and Noni have got hold of a copy of the record of L'Seuli debriefing the cubs at Haven."

He bounded up the stairs and grabbed the second chair, sitting beside her to watch while T'Chebbi hovered behind them.

There was a long shot of all the cubs together. One by one, they were called up to be interviewed by Tanjo and L'Seuli. Several things were obvious within the first few minutes. The cubs were all fully trained and active telepaths, far beyond what would normally be expected of them at their chronological age. They also had obviously formed a bond with Tanjo, especially the one they soon identified as Dhyshac, Kaid's son.

"Look how strong and healthy they are," said Carrie, trying to guess which of them were her two.

"And how hybrid," said T'Chebbi dryly, leaning forward to touch the screen and point out their straighter legs and shorter tails. "Keeping their heritage quiet is impossible."

"Be quiet," said Kaid. "We need to hear what they're saying."

They listened to Dhyshac talking about himself briefly, then trying to avoid answering questions about Shaidan, the cub left behind. As they listened, they learned about Gaylla's slowness and how Shaidan had shielded her as much as possible from the people at the Directorate. Dhyshac added that he was looking out for her and the others now Shaidan was no longer with them.

"He's so like you and Rezac," Carrie murmured, glancing at him as Dhyshac left to be replaced by one of the others.

"He's got my father's coloring," Kaid replied.

"But your personality, from the sound of it," she said.

"Maybe," he said.

T'Chebbi nudged him in the back. "Listen to her," she said. "She's right."

When they came to the end, Carrie switched it off and put the crystal in her drawer for safety before they all headed back down to the lower level of the den.

"There's no doubt Gaylla's slow," said Kaid. "Considering how they were bred, it's a miracle she's the only one."

"She's not that bad, Tallinu. She seems a happy cub, and kind to the others," said Carrie, settling herself on the sofa. "That counts for a lot. If we find her the right niche in the clan as she grows up, and keep an eye on the males around her, I think she will have a fairly normal life. What worries me more is what we do with them when we bring them back here. We can't split them up, and who has claim to them anyway? The mother or the father, since only Gaylla is the child of an established couple? We have to keep them all together."

"Ask Ruth," said T'Chebbi. "Give her one, maybe two permanent staff to help her."

"That's an idea, if Ruth agrees. But parents must also have the right to have them stay over at their homes every now and then, and be encouraged to help out regularly," said Carrie.

"Looks like our estate nursery just got fully underway," said Kaid.

"Ruth's will be nothing like the one Dzaka went to on the Arrazo estate," began Carrie.

"I know," he said, interrupting her. "It was only an observation, not a complaint."

"I think they're all still at Haven, Tallinu," said Carrie. "I didn't recognize their surroundings, though."

"They're with Tanjo," said Kaid. "There are several smaller hollow asteroids around Haven, used for stores and as armed posts capable of housing several people. In one of the larger ones, Tanjo runs the resus and briefing center for the newly awakened Sleepers stored at the Haven complex."

"I didn't realize it was more than just the one asteroid. Are they safe with him?" Carrie asked. "I know there was bad blood between you at one time. They did look attached to him, and very settled."

"Over and done with," said Kaid. "The old Tanjo would have been perfect for the job, and I've a feeling he's right for it again now."

"Maybe he feels he's repaying the debt he owes you," said Carrie shrewdly.

Kaid thought about it for a moment then nodded. "Maybe he is at that."

A knock on the door and Nyan entered to announce Zsurtul.

The young Prime still looked a little pale from the cold night air and rubbed his hands together as he came down the stairs to join them.

"Sorry to call you out so late, Zsurtul," said Kaid. "I forgot your need for warmer temperatures than we get here in winter."

"I'm happy to come," he said, bobbing his head courteously at them each in turn before accepting the other end of the sofa on which Carrie was sprawled. "It is the least I can do to make amends for what happened to you. Did you find out anything of interest at Stronghold?"

"We did," said Kaid, and proceeded to tell him.

Zsurtul nodded his head all the way through the briefing. "Much becomes clear," he said. "Kezule will likely have made sure the Doctor's scent was also on the message. This would explain why Kusac would be willing to go—he was drawn by her scent." He shook his head, a worried expression on his face.

"So Kezule likely knows about the scent marker," said Kaid. "Tell us it all, Zsurtul."

"When a male is scent-marked, normally they each carry the other's scent, bound to theirs, but I smelled nothing like that on Doctor Zayshul before I came here to Shola. That is very strange. But then, for a marked male and the female to be apart before the marker is removed is also not normal."

"It can be removed?" asked Carrie, pouncing on his words.

"Oh, yes," the Prince smiled. "Just as a male's mating bite can be removed. She can turn it off when they pair. I thought you knew that." He caught sight of the expressions on the other three's faces.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked worriedly, looking at them in turn. "Do you not all have the right to take lovers if you wish?"

"Yes, we do," said Kaid quietly. "I think what you're forgetting, Zsurtul, is Kusac's physical condition when he was on the *Kz'adul*. He'd been beaten and tortured and was in no state either physically or mentally to have taken a lover."

Zsurtul looked horrified as Kaid's inference dawned on him. "No," he said firmly. "The Doctor would never have forced him, I know she wouldn't! After we found him, he spent most of the time until the exchange under sedatives in the medical section being healed. It was only on the last evening that they stopped the drugs." He ground to a halt, realizing he'd unwittingly provided them with an answer.

"He was still under the influence of drugs when we got him back," said Carrie.

"Excuse me saying this, but when you got him back, he'd been controlled by Chy'qui's implant which had raised all his hormone levels, and he'd been shot by you, Carrie. He also went into convulsions. He was in no state for anyone to tell what had been given to him. The Doctor would not have forced him, nor would she have drugged him, it's not our way, or hers," he said, his voice holding an undercurrent of anger. "She might well have tried to persuade him, but nothing more. She had too much to lose personally when it was discovered. He must have been willing."

Kaid stirred. "It's possible he was willing, Carrie. J'koshuk had broken him, we know that, and he'd come close to death. Maybe he needed the physical closeness that was offered to know he really was alive and free. It often happens between sword-brothers after a life and death situation."

*How could he do that with her, a Prime?* she sent to Kaid.

*Don't jump to conclusions, and don't grudge him the need to grasp a physical contact that wasn't full of pain. Remember what happened between us when I was rescued from Ghezu. Pairing with you then saved my sanity. I'm sure it must have done the same for Kusac.*

"I'm sorry, Zsurtul," she said stiffly. "I accept what you say about Doctor Zayshul."

Zsurtul sighed with relief. "Thank you, Carrie. The Doctor is my friend, she listened to me when no one else would. I cannot believe she'd act in such a dishonorable way toward one of her patients, and one as badly hurt as Kusac was."

"How strong is marker?" asked T'Chebbi. "Is it aphrodisiac level or just attraction?"

The young Prime grinned. "Difficult to say. Other females find a marked male very seductive. After all, one female has troubled to mark him out as a good lover and potential mate, so they are interested, too. However, for the male, it focuses their attention on just that female. Only when she removes it can he take up the offers of the others. I asked one of my lovers to mark me once. I found it great fun."

*He would!* Carrie sent to Kaid, who decided it was wiser to ignore her.

"If you were Kezule, where would you take your people?" asked Kaid.

"I have no idea," said Zsurtul. "The General is a Warrior like yourselves. You would know more about the place he'd choose."

"Are there any inhabitable worlds nearby that your people wouldn't think of searching?" asked Kaid.

"None that don't belong to another species," said Zsurtul.

"Not a world," said T'Chebbi, thoughtfully. "Too big to be secure and too many dangers from wildlife. He will think like a General, not a civilian."

"Somewhere like Haven," said Carrie. "His ship wasn't big enough to live in with the number of people he took, so that isn't an option. If not a world, then another Outpost fits the bill."

Kaid flashed her a grin. "You're a genius, Dzinae! Yes, an Outpost would be ideal, but if he plans on expanding, then it would need to be a very large one, perhaps even one of the main ones we know they must have had."

"Didn't we hear of a plaque at Haven they decided was a map of the Outpost grid? Only we couldn't decipher it," said T'Chebbi.

Kaid was out of his seat and on his way up to the comm in an instant.

"You're right, there was one, but I don't think it was Haven." He sat down and switched the comm back on. "Let's hope they haven't terminated our access to the Brotherhood data banks yet. If they have, it'll take me a little longer to get what we need."

"The General and the Doctor were given a suite of rooms at the empty Summer Palace for their bridal holiday," said Zsurtul. "There is a very old and extensive library there with many books and maps from his past."

"I'll bet he spent a fair bit of time there looking them up," said Kaid, entering in their password to log onto the Brotherhood.

"You're going to find Kusac. What can I do to help?"

"Call Ruth and tell her you're staying here tonight," said Kaid over his shoulder. "Yes! I'm in. We'll need you to translate the maps for us."

"Astronavigation wasn't my best subject," the Prince admitted, "but I will try."

"Can this library be accessed on-line?" Kaid asked.

"No. Most of the information is in actual maps or books, and after the Fall, we utilized our data banks for more important information. The locations of the Outposts were not in that category any longer."

T'Chebbi got up. "You want to take Zsurtul to lounge to call Ruth, or make coffee and c'shar?" she asked Carrie.

"I'll take Zsurtul," she said, rolling off the sofa. "While he's doing that, I'll go raid the kitchens for snacks for later."

\* \* \*

It took several hours before Kaid found the map made from the plaque and downloaded it. Understanding it was another matter. Zsurtul could tell them what the words referred to but could recognize no common reference point from which the map had been drafted. It was nearing dawn before they decided to call it a night.

"If we could run this through a ship's nav comp, we might get somewhere. Its point of reference should be the Prime world K'oish'ik," said Kaid, trying to stifle an enormous yawn as they walked along the corridor to their rooms after showing Zsurtul to the guest room.

He stopped outside Carrie's suite, but taking his arm, she urged him past it. He was surprised but pleased when they went to his. It had been several weeks since she'd come to him of her own will.



"But with Rhyaz having the spaceport guarded, and no doubt keeping his people outside the estate perimeter, we've no chance of doing that," he continued, yawning again.

"What about the *Couana*? Maybe Toueesut could help," suggested Carrie.

"Good idea. In fact," he said, stopping dead, tail swaying excitedly, "the *Couana* is the one ship no one could stop coming here! If the Speaker and his swarm would let us borrow it, we could be on our way to Haven tomorrow!"

"He might not be willing, considering Kusac stole it in the first place," sighed Carrie. "But we can at least ask."

"Toueesut was very understanding about that," said Kaid, leading the way through his lounge to the bedroom. "He refused all Raiban's attempts to get him to file charges against Kusac. I think he'll help us."

"Tomorrow," said Carrie, firmly, shutting the bedroom door behind them.

### **Kij'ik Outpost, next evening, Zhal-L'Shoh 30th day (January)**

Kusac hesitated briefly in the doorway of the assembly hall, looking round the sea of faces for the black and gold uniform of M'kou. Finally catching sight of it, he began to thread his way toward him through the throng of Ch'almuthians and civilian Primes.

"Captain, thank you for joining us," said the young Lieutenant, the relief in his voice just barely concealed. "It seems we have a slight problem."

"You could say that," Lirtosh said. "We were told we could use the rec facilities on the starboard side and now we find they've been allocated to the Ch'almuthians!"

"Where are we supposed to go if they are there?" Kzellish, the Ch'almuthian leader, demanded angrily. "You have your own facilities on the port side!"

"The port side ones are for everyone, not just those living there. You don't need to have recreational facilities exclusively for yourselves," said Kusac. "As I understand it, Kezule told you that you could make use of them for a day or two on your own, until you settled in, then they would be opened to everyone."

"A day or two isn't long enough to settle in," objected Kzellish, pulling his overrobe more closely around his middle.

Kusac took the middle-aged Ch'almuthian by the arm, drawing him away from the crowd, gesturing for M'kou and Lirtosh to follow.

"Let's look at this calmly," he said. "You chose to come here and settle with the Primes, so keeping yourselves apart rather defeats that objective, wouldn't you say?"

Kzellish hesitated. "I suppose so," he admitted. "But some of us prefer to take our time..."

"Why?" asked Kusac. "Yesterday, we integrated the mealtimes and there were no problems. Last night your younger adults came along to the rec and joined in with everyone there. Is there any reason for you to keep yourselves separate from the Primes?"

"No, but..."

"Captain," interrupted M'kou. "Kzellish was telling me yesterday some of his people saw that there was once a store on this level and asked if they could reopen it. They also asked for facilities in which they could carry out some of their traditional crafts— weaving and such— so they could make more of their goods to sell them as luxury items."

"That sounds like an admirable idea, M'kou," he said, jumping at the young Prime's suggestion. "I'm sure there would be many of the Primes who would like to learn some of those crafts. However, I know the General will not want to make extra facilities available until he is sure that the two communities are making real efforts to integrate," he added, fixing first Kzellish, then Lirtosh, with a look.

"That is the case, Captain," said M'kou. "He has actually allocated some rooms that they can use, and given permission for the store to be reopened."

Kusac nodded. "As I'm sure you can both see, everyone will benefit from making concessions to each other. Lirtosh and his people have many skills, and facilities that they can share with your people, Kzellish. The starboard rec was scheduled to be opened as a games room, with some larger table-sized games available for all of us."

"I understand where you're going, Captain," sighed Kzellish.

"Good," said Kusac, smiling brightly and slapping him on the shoulder in a friendly way. "Then Lirtosh, you can start moving your equipment into the other rec now. Kzellish, if you send someone along to Security to find M'zynal, I'm sure he'll contact the General and make an appointment for you to see him about opening this store of yours. I take it you have brought some of these luxury goods with you?"

"Yes, we have, as well as our looms and other equipment, but..."

"Then that's settled."

"Thank you, Captain," said Lirtosh, trying to hide a grin. "If you'd like any help setting up your store, Kzellish, just let us know."

"I suggest we take Kzellish to inspect the store, M'kou," he said as the civilian Prime leader disappeared with several young males. "Has power and atmosphere been routed there yet?"

"The General had it restored last night," said M'kou. "And activated the requisite air locks so we have access."

Flustered, Kzellish looked around, beckoning to some of the younger males until his eyes lighted on one of the long-robed females hovering nearby. "Liyak, come with us," he said. "I'll need you to take notes for me. We may need some raw materials, Captain."

"Give a list of your requests to Lirtosh," said M'kou as they began to walk toward the starboard exit. "He's the leader of the civilian side here. He'll let you know what's available. I've been told we can open four of the Officer suites on the other side of corridor K as craft rooms. They're outfitted in a modular mode, so we can remove interior walls and fittings to suit your needs."

"When could we get the keys for those areas, Lieutenant M'kou?"

"In a week or two," said Kusac smoothly, answering for him. "Everyone has to undergo basic safety training first. Then, while the younger adults are helping with stripping the *Zan'droshi*, the rest of you will doubtless be putting the store to rights. Remember, these privileges will remain yours only as long as your people make a concerted effort to integrate."

"What about the council here? Do we have any right to representation?"

"Of course," said M'kou. "Lirtosh will doubtless approach you in a day or two, asking you to choose representatives to sit with him and the current civilian council."

As they stopped at the first iris, Kusac stepped back to allow M'kou and Kzellish through. As he did, the person behind stumbled into him, startling him into turning round with claws flexed and body slightly crouched, ready to attack.

"Your pardon," stammered the young female, stepping back hurriedly, her face paling as she drew her shawl across it in fear. "I meant no harm."

M'kou stepped instantly between them. "Our Sholan friends are highly trained Warriors," he said pleasantly, escorting her past Kusac. "It's not wise to crowd them, or us, from behind."

Retracting his claws and relaxing his stance, he followed them through, annoyed with himself for overreacting. Something about her set his teeth on edge, though.

"I was told this wasn't a military establishment," said Kzellish testily, waiting for them on the other side of the second iris.

"It isn't, but I know you were made aware that we do have a military presence here," said M'kou. "You'll soon get used to our ways."

\* \* \*

His nose prickling with the dust that had been stirred up, Kusac picked his way through the rubbish toward M'kou, almost tripping over the female yet again.

Muttering, he dodged round her and the remains of collapsed shelving.

"There's little of value here," he said to M'kou, stifling a sneeze. "Only crumbling uniforms and old medals. Can you cope alone?"

M'kou nodded, rubbing at his streaming eyes with one hand.

"Don't," said Kusac, stopping him. "You'll only make it worse. You're covered in dust. You need to get the ventilation system scrubbing the air in here, then clear out the garbage wearing some kind of protective gear. Didn't you check this room out when you first got here?"

"We did," M'kou confirmed, blinking furiously. "And left it alone because there was nothing we needed."

He grunted, taking the half-blinded M'kou by the arm and turning to lead him out of the store only to find his way blocked by the female again.

"Some water?" she asked, hurriedly holding up a small bowl.

He shook his head, biting back a low rumble of annoyance just as she turned away in response to a call from Kzellish.

"What is it, Captain?" asked M'kou sharply, once again reaching to wipe his eyes.

"Nothing," he growled, again pulling the young Prime's hands away from his face. "I'm getting you out of here, M'kou. You need to wash the dust out of your eyes, and so do I," he said, steering him toward the upper exit.

\* \* \*

He leaned against his washbasin, waiting for M'kou to finish sluicing water over his face and eyes, handing him one of the towels when he was done. "Pat yourself dry, don't rub," he advised him.

"Thank you, Captain," said the young Lieutenant, gingerly touching the towel to his reddened eyes. "I can't believe how irritating that was."

"Fine dust like that will do it every time. Get some of your maintenance people to help the Ch'almuthians clean up in there, and stay away yourself. Have them put the garbage in sealed containers. You don't want it tracked all through the Outpost."

M'kou nodded. "I'll see to it now," he said, walking over to the rack to replace the towel while checking the time. "I'm afraid that took longer than we anticipated. It's past time for you to meet with Shaidan. I'll take you down to Command with me now."

"Is it a sleepover tonight? I've lost track because of the trip to Ch'almuth."

M'kou nodded. "It is. I'll contact our mess and have them send you a decent meal tonight. The food in the dispensers is nutritional, but lacks taste," he said, pulling a face. "My thanks for your help in there."

Automatically he flicked an ear in acknowledgment.

"I'll take that as a yes for the meal," said M'kou as they left.

\* \* \*

His sleep was unsettled, full of disturbing images of home and those he'd loved. The sound of Shaidan's whimpering finally awakened him. Still groggy with sleep, he reached out for the light, switching it on at the dim setting, then held his son's trembling body closer to his own.

"What is it, korrai?" he mumbled as the cub wound his hands in the longer pelt on his chest. "What's wrong? There's nothing to be afraid of, we're safe here."

"You were upset," Shaidan said, nuzzling his face up under his chin. "I felt them, the pale female and another, talking about you."

He froze, all traces of sleep gone from his mind. "What did you say?"

"I sensed them from you, the ones I think I remember."

"You can't have," he said automatically.

"I did. You could feel them, far away, and it upset you," insisted Shaidan. "Who are they? Are they coming here?"

"No, they won't come here," he said through numbed lips, retreating slowly behind shields that even his son couldn't penetrate as he thought of the message he'd left for them. "They don't know where we are."

They couldn't come to Kij'ik, why would they? There was nothing he'd said on the crystal to make them come, he'd made sure of that. All he'd done was give them clues as to the cubs' true heritage, and try to reassure them he'd been on a mission and not guilty of the crimes he knew would be laid against him.

"Who are they? Why could you sense them?" Shaidan yawned.

What should he tell him? What *could* he say? "She's a Human, my life-mate, and she was mind-linked to me," he said slowly, his arms tightening slightly round his son, the words hurting even as he spoke them. "He's my sword-brother. I had to leave them behind when I came here."

"Will I meet them one day?"

His son's voice was fading as he slipped slowly back to sleep.

"Perhaps," he whispered as their faces refused to be banished from his mind's eye. Had he somehow been aware of them while he'd slept, and if so, how could Shaidan possibly have sensed them from his thoughts? Why now, of all times? Were they contemplating trying to find him? These questions and more made sleep almost impossible for several hours. Banner's fears might not be so far off the mark after all. He had to ensure that if Carrie and Kaid did turn up, the weapons that would protect Kij'ik couldn't be turned against them.

### **Zan'droshi, Zhal-L'Shoh 31st day (January)**

"Your helmet cam's down, Dzaou," said Banner, looking at the display terminals. "Power it off and on again."

"Copy," said Dzaou, his voice sounding distant.

"Problems?" asked M'zynal.

Banner shook his head as the static on Dzaou's screen went blank. "Probably just a loose connection."

"You should have vision now," said Dzaou over the comm system.

"Negative," he said, glancing at the large wall display they now had to see the telltale tracer that marked Dzaou's position on the deck plans also blink out. "Your tracer's out now. You could have power problems in your suit. Head back to HQ immediately and get maintenance to check it out."

"Copy that."

Reaching out, Banner toggled on the ancillary tracer he'd hidden in the older male's suit. For a few minutes he sat watching as the red light began moving in the general direction of their HQ.

"Want me to send out a rescue team to him?" asked M'zynal, glancing over from his own screens.



"No, he's not too far from here," said Banner, suddenly aware that he'd been tapping his claw tips on the desktop. "I have a backup tracer in his suit." He lifted his hand, reaching out for the water pack at his side. "He'll be fine."

For the last few days, Dzaou had been keeping an unusually low profile. He'd been expecting him to do something, which was why he'd planted the extra tracer in his space suit. Automatically, he replied to calls from Khadui and Jayza while watching as Dzaou turned off the main route back to maintenance and headed down a side corridor that would take him close to an area that was marked out as possibly holding an armory.

Leaning forward, he scanned the names on the monitors, matching them with their nearness to Dzaou. The older Sholan may have cut his camera and the tracer, but his comm system was still functioning.

"Maintenance bay crew, be advised we have a possible malfunction on your power routing," he said. "I'm sending a team to investigate. Zhalmo, take a left and head for the terminal in corridor 3. I'm getting slight fluctuations in the power readings from there. I don't want it cutting out on the team in the maintenance bay."

"Copy that, Lieutenant," she said. "On our way."

Satisfied, he sat back, watching as Zhalmo's group began heading in Dzaou's direction. M'zynal swung round in his chair to glance at him, before returning to study the wall display. Dzaou had now reached the prohibited area and had stopped there. Moments later, he turned sharply and after a brief hesitation beside an intersection, began heading directly to maintenance. Banner made a mental note of the location. Second meal break was coming up in half an hour. He'd have a word with Khadui and get him to check out the intersection when they returned to work.

\* \* \*

It was a couple of hours into the afternoon shift before Dzaou was able to return to the small pile of tangled wreckage under which he'd stashed the two energy cells. Carefully he moved aside the small pieces of twisted

metal and torn carpeting. In the center was a piece of paper. Swearing softly to himself, he picked it up and read it.

"Didn't catch that last remark, Dzaou," said Banner's voice inside his helmet. "Please repeat it."

With a low growl, he screwed the paper up and tossed it aside, aiming a vicious kick at the rubbish.

"I said, repeat your last message, Dzaou."

"Nothing, Lieutenant," he said, trying to keep his snarl of anger out of his voice. "I tripped over a pile of wreckage, that's all."

"Copy that. Report to your next location. Zhalmo's team is waiting for you."

## **That evening**

Kusac came round slowly. Despite his muzzy and sore head, he knew something was wrong. Remaining still, he checked that his mental shields were still intact. Finding they were, and none of his alarms were going off, meant he wasn't actually in danger.

The sound of someone's quiet breathing, and a scent— Banner's— told him he wasn't alone. Letting himself come to full wakefulness and extending his senses brought the final pieces of information. He'd been drugged, by Banner, probably with half the normal dose from a trunk capsule, and he was lying on an unfamiliar bed with his wrists bound— lightly— to the bed frame. He could almost feel his body working hard to process and purge the drug, but not fast enough for him. Even as he thought it, he felt the process start to speed up, triggering his adrenaline levels among other things. With a detached curiosity, he realized he'd only been out cold for fifteen minutes, half the time expected for a dose that size.

Even as he cursed himself for getting caught like this, he was reaching out mentally to read Banner's surface thoughts. He felt his heart rate and

breathing begin to increase and his head began to clear. Time to admit to being awake, before his Second noticed it for himself.

By now he'd recognized where he was— the bedroom of the suite attached to their temple. Originally it had been provided as living quarters for the four Valtegan priests serving the temple, but although the rooms had been opened up and fitted out, they were unused.

Banner was sitting on the chair beside the bed opposite reading something on his comp pad.

"Is this your idea of a joke, Banner?" he asked quietly, resisting the temptation to test the strength of the knots on the bonds.

Banner looked up, his surprise hidden by the time their eyes met. "It's no joke, Kusak," he said quietly, putting his comp pad away. "Believe me, it's no joke. I've done this to draw your attention to how far you've let yourself slip since we got here."

His Second got up, and lifting the chair, brought it over to sit closer to him.

Kusak measured the distance between them.

Banner smiled gently and shook his head. "You can't reach me with your feet. I'll let you go as soon as you've heard me out, don't worry. This isn't some kind of takeover of your authority, I'm doing it as a friend."

That explained why he'd used a trunk— it was known to make the recipient amenable. He didn't feel like being that cooperative, especially when he'd been hijacked like this, but he'd better try to play out the part he'd been given.

"I'm listening," he said, moving his wrists as if to ease them. No give there, and the rope was the fine, silken Brotherhood one, nearly impossible to break.

The muzziness had gone completely now, but he was still left with the feeling of being distanced from everything and everyone but the Doctor that built up in him in the days between his encounters with Zayshul.

"As I said, you've let yourself slip, Kusac. I couldn't have managed to drug you like this when we first arrived here. If I can do it, anyone can."

He was about to ask how he'd accomplished it when the knowledge came to him—a poison ring with a small extending needle as the delivery system. The Brotherhood manufactured and carried a few of them for its agents, but it wasn't regular issue. It must have been something Banner had brought along himself. Slowly he moved the wrist farthest from Banner, making the bonds taut, then began to rub them slowly up and down the edge of the frame.

"You're my Second in Command, I shouldn't need to keep watching you over my shoulder. I should be able to trust you," he said.

"That's my point," said Banner, leaning forward slightly. "Maybe now you feel a little of what I've felt over the last three months. Three out of every five days it's as if you are off on another world. Everyone's noticed it, not just me. They look to me for an explanation and I've none to give them. Khadui suggested it was almost as if you were drugged. I put his mind at rest, but I took the liberty of taking a blood sample from you in case you are being drugged and know nothing about it." He hesitated. "I take it you haven't a dependence on any medication you've used here?"

Every five days! That was the same pattern as a Leska Link dependency! He felt himself about to break out in a cold sweat until he remembered that they had set this time limit themselves to lessen the risk of being caught.

"I'm not taking any meds right now. Put the sample in the med kit analyzer, did you? You'll be unable to make sense of it," he said confidently. "Neither you nor it knows what you're looking at in generaltered blood, never mind finding something foreign."

"We'll see. I'm a good enough empath to know that there's a lot going on that you're keeping to yourself. I'm worried about you, Kusac, worried about the amount of stress you're under. You're piling up extra grief for yourself when we get home the way you're so possessive about Shaidan."

"I've brought Shaidan to eat with us for the last few days, Banner, and taken him to the gym afterward to play or train with all of us. I can't do any more. Remember it's Kezule who makes the decisions about the cub, not me." He tried not to let his anger at that show in his voice. "Try asking him, you'll see that he'll only allow Shaidan to be alone with me."

Banner sighed, and he could feel that his Second was aware of this, but hoped that Kusac hadn't been.

"It comes down to trust, Kusac. You expect me to trust you, but you refuse to give me the same level of trust. You're letting yourself and the Brotherhood down, as well as insulting me by your attitude. I have no idea what your real agenda here is because you tell me what you think I want to hear, then do your own thing. You know very well that only the rawest of recruits believe they can handle everything themselves. For Vartra's sake, show me some trust and let me help you in whatever you're trying to do!"

Banner's very real concerns were beginning to penetrate the daze he felt surrounded him, and he knew that his Second had made some valid points.

"If you don't start trusting me, Kusac, you may wake up one morning to find your sorry ass back on Shola because I've drugged you and put you in cryo as mentally unfit to lead us!"

There was a hardness in the other's tone he'd never heard directed at him before and he realized he needed to take him very seriously right now.

"You were right about me using subliminals and voice commands on the M'zullians," he said abruptly. This he could now tell Banner because it no longer mattered. "I was trying to subvert them away from Kezule so they saw us as their natural superiors. I thought it might be of use to us at some point. Only they went and blew it during the hunt." The cord round his wrist was getting hot now because of the friction, and cutting into his wrist, but he felt a few strands begin to give.

Banner nodded. "I thought that might be the case. Why didn't you tell me at the time?"

"I didn't know if it would work, and the skills I used none of you have. They're advanced ones in either AIRel or the Brotherhood. You couldn't have been of help for that." His brain was ticking over at high speed trying to think up other plausible reasons for keeping him at a distance, and continuing to do so.

"At least I would have known you were planning ahead. Right now it seems all you're doing is living from day to day!"

"Did you read that file on the Valtegan Queen yet?" he asked.

"Not yet. Jayza got to it first. It was only made available yesterday. Why?"

"Then you don't know that some Valtegan females were telepaths. Zayshul is one."

"Excuse me?"

He chuckled at the sound of disbelief in the other's voice. "You heard. Zayshul and some of the other females in Kezule's original group are telepaths. They don't yet know it in most cases, but Zayshul does. Shaidan told her."

Stunned, Banner sat back in his chair. "Tell me this isn't true."

"It's true, and Kezule isn't exactly happy about it either. He's wearing a small psi damper these days. What does concern you, though, is the fact I have to work with her every day. The time will soon come when she figures out how to read people for herself. When that happens, I want as few of you knowing any of my plans as possible. She can't read me because my mental shields are still too strong." He was almost through the rope now.

"When did you find this out?" Banner asked. "This changes things."

"I suspected it quite a while ago. Some of the Ch'almuthians are also telepaths. M'zayash was."

"Who else among the Primes is a telepath?"

"Shaidan's going to make me a list."

"Shaidan's helping you? I thought he was still programmed."

"That's something else none of you can do— help him to help himself break the programming," he said softly. "I have been busy, Banner, I just can't tell you most of what I'm doing."

"Aren't you afraid Zayshul or one of the others will find this out from me and put the cub in danger?"

Kusac flicked his ears in a shrug. "No. Zayshul knows what I'm doing because she's the one who started it." The rope finally snapped and he prayed Banner hadn't heard it. "My agenda is the same as it always was— do what it takes to get Shaidan back. We should be finished here in less than nine or ten weeks, maybe sooner if I can persuade Kezule to let us go early. I was thinking of asking him to let you go in a couple of weeks and Shaidan and I will follow when we're done here."

"No," said Banner unequivocally. "Kaid asked me to look out for you and I swore that I would. I'm not leaving you here."

That surprised him. "When did Kaid ask you to do that?"

"Some time ago," Banner said evasively. "But the only way I'm leaving here without you is in a body bag."

Damn! "That's unlikely," he said, deciding he'd had enough of this. Rolling over and sitting up, he began untying his other hand. "Have you covered everything you wanted to say? Do you now appreciate why I need to keep my own counsel in a lot of matters?" he asked, never taking his eyes off him.

There was slight look of apprehension in the set of Banner's ears as Kusac finally handed him the pieces of rope.

"Yes, if you'll give your word you'll show me some trust from now on by telling me as much as you can," his Second said. "You know, you shouldn't have been able to do that," he said, looking at the raw edges of the piece Kusac had sawed through.

"I get told that a lot," said Kusac dryly. "I'll tell you everything I can, Banner. You have my word on that. It isn't that I don't trust you, it's that I don't trust anyone else around here. And you'd never get away with putting me in cryo until we leave here, you know. Neither Kezule nor Doctor Zayshul would let you do it without their own medical staff examining me because it's my skills from AlRel he needs most."

"Worth a try, though," said Banner with a faint grin. "Try to remember we're a team, Kusac, both working on the same side. I expect you to let me help when you can."

"I will," he said, standing up and putting his hand on the other's shoulder in a friendly gesture.

Then he tightened his grip so his claws penetrated Banner's tunic till they just touched the flesh below. "But don't you ever do this to me again." Purposely he made his tone harsh. "I do know what I'm doing, and though this might be my first Brotherhood command, I've held an equal responsibility on many AlRel missions that you know nothing about. And I suggest you read up sometime on what I was involved in on Keiss when I met Carrie." He let his Second go. "Now I suggest we go and get first meal before they stop serving it."

As Kusac released him, Banner put the pieces of cord in his pocket and got to his feet, returning the chair. "Kusac, don't underestimate me, either," he said quietly. "While you were still training in the Telepath Guild, I had graduated from the Brotherhood and was out on active duty."

He looked back over his shoulder at the black-pelted male. "I won't, believe me," he said softly, knowing that until now, he had.



## Chapter 15

### Zhal-Mellasha 1st day, Month of Spring (February)

NEXT morning, Carrie called the Touiban Speaker and asked for a meeting.

"Of a certainty it will be most pleasurable to be meeting with you," said Toueesut in his pleasant, fluting voice. "Today the weather is too severe with this storm and the snow falling to go to the monastery and be working, and not even at the hall is it warm enough. This is an excellent day for staying in the home and being with friends. Please to come over to us at our most well appointed dwelling as our ladies will enjoy their entertaining of you."

"Thank you, Toueesut," she said, blinking slightly at the out-pouring of words from the small alien. "We'll be over in about ten minutes." In the background she could hear the excited trilling of the other eleven members of his swarm.

"Looking forward to that we will be," assured the Touiban before he closed the connection.

\* \* \*

They felt almost cocooned and isolated from the rest of the world by the snow swirling around them as they walked down the main street. A sudden gust of wind whipped by them, making Carrie stagger and slip. She clutched wildly at Kaid for support. His arm was there instantly, steadying her as he murmured reassurances.

"I don't know how you manage to keep your footing in this," she said, her breath forming puffs of white vapor. "I can barely do it and my boots are designed for arctic conditions."

Kaid chuckled. "Maybe, but our feet evolved for this climate. Our pelts grow longer, especially on our feet, keeping us warm, and our claws give us a good grip."

She grunted, glad that the porch lights for the Touibans' house were now visible. "Just don't come to bed with freezing feet!"

He laughed, reaching up to ruffle her hair as they turned onto the path up to the door.

The door opened almost immediately, spilling warmth and golden light into the gray morning.

"Greetings and enter please before you turn into one of the people of snow that the young ones here so delight in shaping!" said Toueesut.

The hallway was redolent with the scent of winter spices and pine resins as two or three of the other Touibans clustered round them, helping them take off their heavy coats, and in Carrie's case, boots.

"Come, come," urged one, taking Carrie by the hand and gently tugging her toward an inner room.

The hand that touched hers was hard and callused, the fingers never still as they beat a gentle tattoo against her palm.

"I'm coming," she said, luxuriating in the feel of the deep pile carpet under her stockinged feet.

She'd never been in their house before and the opulence of their main room stunned her. Even Kaid seemed a little overwhelmed.

The first thing that struck her was the aroma. Here the incense and lightly perfumed oils that had gently scented the hallway were much stronger. She looked around, spotting the tall tables at each corner of the room from which the scents were coming. On them, in front of gold-colored statuettes, sticks of incense and bowls of scented oils burned.

For the rest of the room, there was almost too much opulence to take in as she was drawn across a floor scattered with luxurious animal hides and plush woven rugs to a low table. Large, soft cushions were spread around both sides of the table and it was on these that they were invited to sit.

As their host— or hostess, she could never tell them apart— disappeared into a huddle with Toueesut and several others by the doorway, she continued looking around. Each wall was covered with hangings, decorated not just by the weaving, but by rich jewel-colored embroidery and tiny inset reflective disks that glinted in the light reflected from the candles that burned in holders set on any available flat surface.

From the ceiling, fine, almost transparent material was looped and draped until it gave the impression that the room was actually a fabulous tent. Although the overhead lighting was on, it was diffused by the fabric into a warm glow that the candles accentuated. The large window was partially hidden behind more of the fine drapery but the light it shed into the room was softened.

*They're desert tent dwellers, Kaid sent to her. This is not that different from the tents of our own tribes out in the Ghuulgul desert.*

Everywhere there was the glint of golden knickknacks and utensils; large urnlike containers stood on the floor on either side of the doorway, a delicate drinking set with various bowls was displayed on the sideboard, and gold inlays glittered on the low table and in the fringing of the cushions.

"My, you have made a difference," Carrie said, turning her gaze back to the door where the equally flamboyant Touiban now stood alone.

"It is becoming more like the homes our ladies expect," Toueesut agreed. His face split into a conspiratorial grin and he danced closer to them, stopping briefly to crouch down, his hands folding so that his knuckles touched the ground to give him balance. "This is not what we males would choose, too many ornaments and candles there are but this is also our turn of the year time, which we celebrate for forty days, so we needs must let them have their way."

Looking over his shoulder, he gave a self-satisfied nod and lowered himself onto a cushion, arranging himself in a comfortable cross-legged position.

"Drinks and agreeable little comfits are being prepared for your delectation," he said, then grinned broadly, his bristling mustache twitching almost independently of him. "Yes, we can sit still, Carrie."

"Ah," she mumbled, feeling the blood rush to her face. "It's only that I've never seen you..."

"This is true, but then we are not always giving away those matters of ourselves. Far better it is that most species see us as a little difficult to accommodate because we always seem to be moving. It gives us more freedom among them because they, how you say it, underestimate us?"

Kaid nodded. "Wise. Seems we still have a lot to learn about you, if we know anything at all, that is." His mouth twitched at one corner into a wry smile.

Toueesut immediately reached out to briefly touch Kaid's hand where it lay on the tabletop. "No lies about us do you, our new family, know," he said earnestly. "Only less deep levels of true knowing us have you. Families make truths between each other, is this not so?"

"We've actually come to ask you for your help," began Carrie.

Toueesut turned his gaze on her, and in his dark, deep-set eyes, she could see his understanding of their situation. "This I know. Your conversation with the TeLaxaudin was heard by us all as was your anger and excitement when you returned from the seat of your Brotherhood last night. But we shall drink and nibble on some pleasant treats first," he said firmly. "Be restful, relax, you come to your family, how could we not wish to help you as we can?"

Under the table, Kaid's other hand closed gently on her thigh. *He's going to help us, he sent. Wait till after his hospitality, Dzinae. Let him mention it when he's ready. He's obviously pleased to have the opportunity to entertain us, even if only for a short time.* His fingers began to gently caress her.

*You certainly learned fast how to charm,* she replied, her tone gently teasing.

*You're worth the effort. I should have remembered that these past months instead of letting my pride come between us.*

Toueesut began to trill quietly but happily, making them start and return their attention to him.

"Excuse, I do not listen to your mind-music, but so close it is hard not to hear, but glad am I that once again all is well between at least two of my new Clan Leaders. Such harmonious tunes are so good to be hearing once again after the sad dissonances of the past."

This time, while she laughed, it was Kaid whose ears lowered in embarrassment and who mumbled something that sounded vaguely like an apology.

"Ah! Here are coming the ladies with the refreshments," said Toueesut, turning to the doorway.

Carrie looked up to see two Touibans coming in bearing laden trays. Originally everyone had believed they were two male-only swarms of six, rather than one hive group of twelve. Curiously, she watched the two approach. To her eyes, they were identical to the males. Barely four feet tall, they were almost neanderthal in look. A shock of sandy hair sprouted from the crowns of their heads and chins. Their eyes were sunk in deep, dark sockets under heavy brows, and below them, their thin noses had flanged openings stiff with bristles to keep out the desert sand.

Like their Speaker, Toueesut, they were dressed in clothing as garish as the house— deep, almost electric blue shirts, embroidered in bright swirls of multicolored patterns were worn loose over red trousers that sported a matching decorative panel down the outside of the legs. Gold chains, pendants, and rings glittered round their necks and on their fingers.

With much trilling between the three of their hosts, the trays of drinks and assorted sweet delicacies were unloaded onto the table.

"This female is first wife to us," said Toueesut, indicating the one with the most rings. "She is Suatoo, and the other is Twuleat."

Bobbing their heads at them, their trilling sounds becoming even higher pitched, the two females clutched each other then flashed wide smiles at them from under their mustaches. Then, still bobbing their heads, they twirled round and danced off, leaving her no wiser as to any observable differences between them and the males.

"Excuse their embarrassment, if you please," said Toueesut. "Not used to being introduced to others are they, but it was their request they be made known to you."

"It was a pleasure to meet them," said Carrie. "Perhaps sometime they can speak to us."

The Touiban shook his head. "Rare it is for any but a Speaker to talk to those of other species, but for the females, it is not their nature to do that since they are more timid. Lucky we are that they are bold enough to have come with us to Shola and can work among you easily. Maybe one day their courage will grow larger but if so it will only be with a very few people."

Reaching for the enameled jug, he poured the thick, dark liquid out into the matching cups. As he did, a pleasant nutty aroma drifted up to tease their nostrils.

"This is a drink not unlike your coffee, made from beans grown in the deserts of our own world. It is very strong and perhaps an acquired taste but adding the hot water may make it more palatable if this is the case," he said. He gestured to a bowl of clear liquid in which sat a spoon. "This you can sweeten it with to your taste for it is the nectar from a plant of ours that has a taste that wonderfully compliments that of the drink."

Picking up two of the cups, he placed one in front of each of them, then handed them spoons and pushed the bowl of sweetener closer.

"Please, help yourselves, I am sure you will be enjoying our drink."

Carrie reached for the bowl and spooned a small portion of the viscous nectar into her drink then stirred it with her own spoon. While Kaid did the same, she raised it to her lips and sniffed. It certainly smelled interesting. She took a cautious sip, then finding it enjoyable, a slightly larger one.

"You like," trilled Toueesut, his face wreathing in smiles as he nodded enthusiastically at her.

"It's good," she said, smiling at her host.

"Very nice," agreed Kaid, a faint tone of surprise in his voice.

"Then I shall be sending some over to the villa for your own use along with a container of the sweetener because they should be drunk together," said Toueesut, happily sipping his own drink. "Now you eat for like you, sharing food is a measure of trust between family and friends only and a time when other considerations of loyalties are set aside."

The delicacies were a mixture of sweets and tiny pastries filled with fruit that Toueesut also said were from his home world. They chatted amicably about the severe weather and the differences between the Touibans' end of the year festival and theirs while they steadily demolished the comfits.

Just as Carrie was afraid her impatience would begin to show, Toueesut leaned his forearms on the table and regarded them seriously.

"You have come to ask us to help you in some way," he said.

"What is it that you need of us?"

Now that the moment had come, Carrie was suddenly at a loss how to proceed. Kaid stepped in for her.

"We've found out that when Kusac stole the *Couana*, he did so because he'd been sent on a time-sensitive secret mission. Because he's so well known, he couldn't be sent off Shola; he had to appear to steal a ship and

leave for some purpose of his own. Your ship was the only one capable of making his rendezvous in the time left to him, so he took it."

Toueesut nodded thoughtfully but said nothing, obviously waiting for them to continue.

Leaning forward, Carrie placed her hand over their host's. "Toueesut, the information we have is very sensitive. We cannot tell you it unless it is in the strictest confidence. You'll have to be only our friend, not a member of the Touiban people, or we can say nothing more, and we desperately need your help."

"To find your husband," said Toueesut.

"To rescue him, and one cub," she said softly.

"This matter could lose us allies within the Alliance, Toueesut," said Kaid. "That's not what we want. We only want our family back."

Toueesut nodded and sighed, his eyes softening at the mention of children. "Did I not say that sharing food means other loyalties are set aside?" he asked. "You have my word as a member of your Clan on this matter. How came it that children are involved?"

He sat in silence as they explained what they'd pieced together, and learned from their visit to Stronghold the previous day.

"You did not underestimate the seriousness of this matter," he said, his heavy brows meeting in a frown of concern. "Were news of the growing of your cubs to come before the Alliance council, then the Primes, no matter what evidence was put forward, would be held responsible because they allowed it to happen even if they were not aware of it and because they still have the technology for it to happen again. All species would fear that happening to their own people. You are saying you have this star chart which maps the old Valtegan Outposts but it must be read by a navigation computer?"

"Yes," said Kaid. "And Rhyaz is having the spaceport watched to make sure we don't get access to any ships that would take us off Shola."



Again, Toueesut nodded thoughtfully. "You think you can find this place where Kezule is hiding from the map?"

"I believe so," said Kaid. "Let's face it, it is all we've got. He has to be fairly near a gas giant to refuel his ship, and his Outpost has to be near a system that also has a habitable world in it because he'll need to restock foods and water, since he can't go to anyone to trade for them."

"If you aren't willing to lend us your ship, Toueesut, and I can't blame you for that, can you at least let us run the map through your navigation computer?" asked Carrie.

"I did not say I was not willing for my ship to be used," said Toueesut, sitting up to refill their cups from the jug. "I will take you on this hunt for your family. Together we will find your children and your husband and bring them safe back to this estate."

"That's not necessary," said Kaid. "This will take weeks, maybe even months, and it will be dangerous. I'm more than capable of taking the *Couana* myself."

"No. We will all go," the Touiban said unequivocally. "You will not deny me the opportunity to be helping you in this matter. Two or three Suuman are part of my crew and in any dangerous situation they are the best to have with you. It takes a great measure of bravery to face up to an enraged Suuman. We will put a team together of your people and mine. We will represent four of the Alliance species and it will make more impact wherever we go. This is an important thing, do not be underestimating it, Kaid. Even Kezule will be wary of us with such a crew."

"He does have a point," said Carrie.

"It's too dangerous," said Kaid flatly.

"You think we get into Alliance and trade with other species by being always peaceful?" asked Toueesut, looking quizzically at him. "You never see our warlike side because no need have we had to show it, but it is in

us. We may be small compared with you, but we are strong, and fast." He grinned suddenly. "We have harmonics to help us in disputes."

"Very well," said Kaid suddenly. "If you want to come, it is your ship after all. How soon can you bring it here?"

"Not for two or three of your weeks," said Toueesut regretfully. "It is undergoing its yearly overhaul at your spaceport with our engineers. However," he said, holding up his hand to stop their exclamations of dismay, "it has advantages because I can call them and have them make a few modifications to it so it is a better fighting craft, and one suited to an extended flight."

Kaid began to grin. "You're devious," he said.

"Of a certainty," Toueesut grinned back. "It is also possible that I can ensure that since we often carry Sholans, there will be enough armored suits for your people as well as mine and the Suuman."

"Armor would be very good," agreed Kaid. "But I advise you against bringing your females."

"Our ladies will remain," assured Toueesut. "You will give me lists of anything else you may need as soon as is possible, also number of people you are taking. In the meantime I will give my requirements to our people and ensure the *Couana* is fully armed. With the time we have to wait, it will be plenty long enough for my requisitions to be sent from home. The *Couana* is capable of carrying more powerful weapons than she has now. By the time she arrives here she will be formidable indeed."

"Thank you, Toueesut," said Carrie.

"No need for thanking, grateful I am to find that my belief that Kusac was not the renegade he has been called was correct," smiled the Touiban, his mustache twitching excitedly. "This will be an interesting experience for us. Not often do we have the chance to be working so closely on a matter of this nature since we are more diplomats. The matter may yet be

resolved peacefully, but if not, we will be ready to stand beside you as family."

Kaid began to get up and held out his hand to help Carrie. "As Carrie said, we can't thank you enough."

"Is a pleasure to feel we are able to help you in your time of need," he said, rising nimbly to his feet. "I will hear from you soon."

"You can be assured of that," agreed Kaid.

As the door closed behind them, isolating them in the snowstorm once more, Kaid wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Now we have the problem of choosing a team," he said. "It's who we have to leave behind that will cause the most problems."

"Don't I know it," Carrie agreed.

## **Kij'ik Outpost, Zhal-Mellasha 11th day (February)**

These days he felt like he was walking on a knife edge on either side of which was only darkness and insanity. So mindful was he of Banner's warning that he'd insisted he and Zayshul should meet more frequently in an effort to hide the symptoms of the marker. Shaidan now spent three days a week with Kusac and the rest of the crew as he tried to play down the image of himself as being obsessed with keeping the cub to himself.

Kezule, meanwhile, had been busying himself between the salvage operations and his new colonists who were still, in the main, keeping to themselves in the old M'zullian quarters. The General was also distancing himself from Zayshul, spending more evenings with his two mistresses before returning late, if at all, to his own rooms in their shared suite.

Today had been one of the days Kusac and Shaidan spent together down on the Command level. He'd just returned and was lying sprawled on the sofa drinking some real coffee when he sensed Banner approaching.

"Enter!" he called out as the door chimed.

"I hoped you'd be back," said Banner, coming in. "How was Shaidan?"

"Fine. What can I do for you?"

"Just touching base," he said, moving away from the doorway. "Any news on when Kezule plans to stop the salvage? I noticed we weren't yet running the operations down and his six-week deadline is up in a couple of days."

Kusac sat up with a sigh. "Kezule's expanding the deadline by two weeks. From what I hear, you've gotten through to an ammo dump. M'kou was saying he has enough pressure suits ready to enable thirty more of the newcomers to join you tomorrow. Help yourself to coffee."

Flicking his ears in thanks, Banner headed for the coffee jug and began to pour. "Yes, so I heard. We're not being allowed near the ammo though, we're still working in the main engine room and the maintenance bay by the dorsal hangar. Doesn't Kezule's interest in the weapons and ammo concern you at all, Kusac?" asked Banner, spooning some sweetener into his drink.

"Not really," he replied. "You know as well as I do, Banner, that there is no way he could put what he has to use as an offensive fighting machine. For a start, he doesn't have the necessary pilots. His Prime civilians are no use for that, and as for the Ch'almuthians, that remains to be seen since they haven't been that keen on mixing with the rest of us yet."

"I'll admit that he's only got his sixteen commandos," began Banner, bringing his mug with him over to the easy chair, "but that's a reasonable number to be effective."

"He doesn't possess a ship capable of carrying them, Banner," he said patiently. "Not even the *N'zishok* and the *M'zayik* combined could carry sixteen fighters, they could only manage three between them."

"Three fighters on a covert mission can do a hell of a lot of damage, Kusac," said Banner.

"I appreciate that. Don't worry, I am considering a way for them to be protected without putting our allies at risk. I'm open to any suggestions you might have. I know what's bothering you," he said, glancing up at Banner as he leaned forward on his knees. "You want me to talk to Kezule about leaving when we're finished with the *Zan'droshi*, don't you? Well, I can't. We've only done just over five weeks— we still have at least another six to do, and I'm not going to squabble over six weeks."

"If he sticks to the agreement," said Banner, sipping his coffee. "Another two on the *Zan'droshi* only leaves us four more weeks to integrate the Ch'almuthians,"

"No, I've been working with them since they arrived," he said. "Lirtosh and Kzellish have been allocating several of the young adults to appropriate departments on Kij'ik. I'm not involved with the salvage, and I've transcribed all I can for now. The program I used is on their mainframe and has been updated by Zhalmo with what I've learned. They can now automate most of the file recovery process— the rest I can do as and if needed."

"Has Kezule said when he'll have Shaidan deprogrammed?" asked Banner, changing topics abruptly.

"During the last week," he replied. "You've seen for yourself he's a lot better now. He's breaking through his programming."

"To a degree," agreed his Second reluctantly. "He's still not behaving like a normal kitling of his age, though."

"How can he when he's mainly surrounded by adults? He does spend more time now with the Prime children, and we've been playing with him."

"Thank Vartra Kezule's stopped having the cub trailing round after him," said Banner. "Using him to cause you stress was pushing things too far."

"Agreed, but as you said, that has stopped. Now, is there anything else you want to discuss because I have had a hard day and need to relax," he said, hoping he didn't sound as irritated as he felt.

"No more business," said Banner. "Unless you found anything interesting in your translations?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Yesterday and today all I was working on were inventories from various departments on the ship. Interesting only in that it adds another element to the biopic I'm building of their culture. Oh," he said, remembering. "When Kezule's finished with the *Zan'droshi*, he's going to get his commandos to train the Ch'almuthians. He'd like you to help, and in a week or two, observe them and their trainees and assess how both are doing. He wants to make sure his people are capable of taking over from us when we leave."

"So he really intends to stick to his bargain?"

Kusac frowned. "Of course."

"Just good to hear him anticipating our departure after all his changes of plans. Are you intending to go to the rec tonight?" asked Banner.

"In an hour or two, yes," he said. "I want to shower first as I may head up to the pool later on, when I know it's going to be quiet."

Banner grinned. "Gets crowded now, doesn't it, despite Kezule's schedules."

He shrugged. He was meeting Zayshul and Ghidd'ah there later. Meeting her had become a little easier now that Ghidd'ah was around to keep watch and make it look less obvious that they were trying to be alone. "That's why I go later."

Banner got to his feet. "I'll let you get on, then," he said. "Mind if I take my coffee with me?"

"Help yourself," he said.

\* \* \*

"Ah, Zhalmo," said Kezule, getting up as his daughter entered. He gestured to the informal area. "Please, take a seat, and be at ease," he added.

Zhalmo relaxed her military posture and walked over to sit on the sofa, wondering what this was about. She was on bridge duty right now, and with the *Zan'droshi* right outside their landing bay lit up as if for a festival, the General depended on their long-range scanners to give them advance warning if anyone was in the vicinity. Granted her shift was almost over, but it was most unlike him to take anyone off essential duties like this, even for an interview.

She noticed the jug of maush and the two glass drinking vessels sitting on the low table, and became even more intrigued. This wasn't like him at all.

Kezule took the easy chair opposite her and picking up the jug, poured drinks for them. Lifting one dish, he handed it to her.

"I thought it was time we had a chat," he said, obviously uneasy in this social role he'd imposed on himself. "Are you getting on well here? Making friends?"

Even more perplexed, she accepted the bowl and took a sip of the drink. "Yes," she said, wondering what was expected of her. "Life here is good. The training facilities are far better than at the City of Light, and I've enjoyed learning from Captain Aldatan and his crew."

"Good," he said. "That's good. How do you get on with our visitors?"

"I've never had a problem with them," she said. "Except for the one called Dzaou," she added. "But then even his own people have problems with him. He's more than just disagreeable, it goes deeper than that."

Kezule nodded, obviously ill at ease. He hadn't touched his drink and he sat with his hands held restlessly in his lap.

"The Captain is containing him, though."

"Yes," she agreed, wondering where this was going. "Is there something wrong, General?" she asked. She could sense he was building up to something but had no idea what it was.

"How do you get on with the Captain?" he asked finally, his eyes catching hers briefly for the first time.

"Well enough," she said, feeling a sudden chill of premonition. "Not what I'd call friends because he doesn't give much away about himself to anyone."

"You like him, though."

"I've nothing against him, if that's what you mean," she said cautiously.

"M'kou said you will seek out his company in the rec."

She put her drinking bowl down on the table. "If you're asking me am I attracted to him, then yes," she said. "What female wouldn't be, even without that marker on him? He holds himself back and slightly aloof from everyone, yet when he is with you, he's charming. What is it you want to know, General?" she asked, tired of beating about the bush.

Kezule looked at her again. "Has he shown any interest in you?"

"Some," she admitted, thinking back to the night Zayshul had got so mad at her when Kusac had walked her back to her room after the rec session. "Why?"

Again he looked away. "You know about the scent marker," he said. "And the fact it wasn't my wife who put it there."

"We've said nothing," she said almost defensively, appalled that he could think any of them would disobey his direct orders. "If he's found out, then it wasn't one of us. If you want to keep him from finding out, the Ch'almuthians must be considered a security risk." Privately every one of them was sure the Doctor had marked the Sholan Captain, but if their father decided to believe otherwise, it was not their job to question him.

"No one's accusing you of anything," he reassured her hurriedly. "And I spoke to our new settlers myself." He hesitated. "Your brother, M'kou... his female has scent-marked him. You know this?"



She nodded. "Yes. She's a good match for him."

"I know. Like me, you've all inherited the ability to know your natural mates so you can breed true."

She cocked her head on one side, a slightly puzzled look on her face. Was that what this was about? "How can we breed true?" she asked. "Surely we're half-breed Primes?"

"No. Certain Prime females still carry the extra glands that the Warrior caste carry. You do, as do all your sisters. In fact, you can utilize them as well as your brothers."

Zhalmo stirred. This was unexpected. "How?" she asked.

"Biofeedback," he said, waving his hand as if this was an irrelevancy. "I intend to show you all shortly. They chose your mothers because they carried these traits, as does Zayshul."

"So what are we?" she asked. "Primes, or what?"

"Valtegans," he said. "As we once were, not like those of my time, or even those of today. You'll know instinctively those who are compatible with you."

"Then at least our brothers have some choice," she said dryly. "There are no such males among the Primes."

"I know," he said, finally reaching for his drink. "That's one of the main reasons why we needed the Ch'almuthians. But none of this is why I wanted to talk to you."

"Then what?"

"The Sholan Captain. I'm sure that because of your brother, you're well aware of the effects of a marker on the other females."

Again, as he took a sip from his drink, she could see he was becoming acutely uneasy. "Yes," she said, the feeling of dread returning.

"Then you can appreciate the situation my wife is in," he said, concentrating on his drink.

This time she said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

"I'd hoped our resident TeLaxaudin could have found some way to turn this marker off, but that's not been the case."

"As I understand it," she said carefully, concentrating on picking up her bowl and taking a small drink from it. "It can only be removed by the female who put it there. Besides, it's only an attraction— it can be ignored."

"Maybe our species can," he said sharply, looking up. "but the Sholan can't! With him it's created an obsession! Don't tell me you haven't noticed. I want it stopped now, before it becomes a greater embarrassment, and before it goes any further!" He banged the bowl down on the table, making the contents slop over the rim.

She had noticed, which was why she'd backed off from Kusac— that and because as far as she could see, the Doctor was equally affected by it. "Why are you telling me all this?" she asked, replacing the bowl. "What has it to do with me?"

"You said you're attracted to the Captain," he said. "I just wanted you to know that I'm in favor of your interest. If I can make your... pursuit of him any easier, by giving you a posting working with him, for instance, let me know." He hesitated for a moment, then began to speak rapidly. "There are certain common medications that will make him more relaxed if necessary. All I'm asking is that when you do... achieve your objective, you scent-mark him."

She stared at him, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. "Are you asking me to seduce and scent-mark the Sholan Captain— against his will if necessary?" she asked, hearing the disbelief in her own voice.

Kezule winced but didn't look away this time. "Yes. I'm only asking you to do something you want to do anyway. It's Zayshul I'm thinking of here, as well as the Captain," he said. "Hopefully, your scent marker will replace the one that's on him now, ending what's become an untenable situation for all three of us. Then, the next time you're together, or even the same night, you turn it off."

"Absolutely not," she said, trying to keep the anger from her voice. "I may be attracted to him, but I have no intention of forcing myself on him, with or without his consent! You taught us that a Warrior should be as ethical as possible in his dealings with friends and allies— this is neither, and will turn Captain Aldatan from a friend into an enemy when he finds out! Besides, it won't work. You can't replace one marker with another, otherwise what would be the point of us being able to mark males at all?"

"It's still worth trying. My wife is being drawn to him, Zhhalmo. Every day that this damned marker remains on him, her attraction to him grows stronger, as does his to her!" said Kezule, leaning forward slightly. "It must be stopped."

"Then may I respectfully ask why you canceled our orders to keep them apart and instead have them working in close proximity to each other?" she asked, getting to her feet and standing rigidly at attention. "I must refuse your request— unless it is an order." She stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him. If all she'd wanted with the Sholan was one night, she'd have pushed her slight advantage home when they'd first met, but she didn't.

Kezule sighed and sat back in his seat. "Relax, Zhhalmo," he said tiredly. "It wasn't an order. I didn't think you'd agree, if it's any comfort to you, but since you're the only one Kusac's taken an interest in, I had to ask you. As to why I stopped keeping them apart, I needed to learn for myself how the marker was affecting them both."

She relaxed her stance a little, accepting what was from him an apology.

"May I be excused now?" she asked.

Kezule nodded. "Yes. You're off duty now, I had your relief report early." He caught her gaze with his. "This conversation must remain private, Zhalmo."

When she reached the door, she stopped briefly. "Captain Aldatan won't show an interest in anyone else until the marker's removed," she said. "That's the point of it."

"I know, which was why I spoke to you. You were my best hope after Giyarishis said there was nothing he could do."

"I'm sorry, General, but not even for worthy reasons could I do that," she said awkwardly.

"Forget we even spoke about it, Zhalmo," he said. "I didn't realize you felt such loyalty to the Sholan."

\* \* \*

When she'd gone, M'kou came in from the Ready Room next door.

"Did you hear everything?" asked Kezule. The talk with his daughter had exhausted him because she'd been right. His whole plan was dishonorable in the extreme, beneath even his own contempt for one of his caste and principles, but he didn't know what else to do.

"Yes, General," said M'kou quietly, taking Zhalmo's vacated seat on the sofa.

"Is there no one else he's shown an interest in?"

M'kou thought for a moment. "There's Ghidd'ah," he said dubiously. "He's been seen quite a few times going about in her company since we returned from Ch'almuth, but she's a close friend of the Doctor's. I wouldn't recommend even talking to her."

"Agreed," said Kezule, rubbing his hand over his eyes. "Then we need to find a female willing to use subterfuge to seduce him. That's going to have

to be up to you, M'kou. You know everyone here. There must be the odd female from our original group who's less principled than the rest."

"There's one or two," M'kou agreed. "In fact, though the bet they had to see who'd be first to couple with a Sholan has been won, there's still another that hasn't— to see who'd be first to seduce the Captain. I know someone who'd like to win, regardless of how it's accomplished, but she's a Ch'almuthian."

"Speak to her and get it set up as soon as possible," said Kezule, closing his eyes. "I want this over with, for the good of both of them. Don't forget, she needs to scent-mark him, then turn it off."

"General, wouldn't it be easier all round just to let the Doctor go to him and turn it off?"

"No," he said unequivocally. "She didn't put the marker there in the first place so it wouldn't help, and I'm afraid if she tried, it would only make the situation between them worse."

"You realize the Captain will probably have to be drugged if she's to couple with him at least twice?"

"Just arrange it, M'kou," he said tiredly. "I know you don't want to do it any more than I do, but it has to be done."

"It's the Captain's birthday today and they're planning something for him in the rec," said M'kou thoughtfully. "Tonight would be the ideal time. I'll need some clothing of the Doctor's. It will make it easier if he thinks it's her to start with."

"Go ahead. You know where everything is in our suite."

\* \* \*

When Kusac joined Banner in the rec, his Second was already sitting with Khadui and a small group of females that included Lorish and Kiosh.

Looking round, he caught sight of Dzaou with Ghidd'ah and some of her friends, but of Jayza there was no sign.

"No Jayza?" he asked, flicking his loose hair over his shoulders then picking up his ale.

"Up at the pool with Shezhul," said Banner with a grin. "Lirtosh says he's becoming very popular."

Lorish nodded. "He's pleasant company, as well as being young and energetic," she laughed. "We like that in him."

"I don't doubt it," he murmured with a faint smile of his own.

"It won't do him any harm," said Banner, quietly. "He hasn't chosen his specialist field yet. I was going to ask you to recommend him for the Diplomatic Corps."

"I'll bear that in mind," he said, making a mental note to observe Jayza more closely. Their experiences here would qualify all of his crew for at least a field rating in AlRel, were they in any other Guild.

"Kiosh has been telling us that they were helping the Ch'almuthians stock up the old store on this level," said Khadui. "It should be open in a day or two."

"I didn't know they'd be ready to open so soon," he said. "The *Khalossa* had several stores, but most of their goods were for the females because we had a mixed crew. What kind of goods will they be selling and how are we supposed to pay for them?"

"Kezule's introducing a currency tomorrow," said Banner. "Apparently he and M'kou have been working on the idea off and on for the last couple of weeks. We'll all be issued with fifty credits at first meal tomorrow, and fifty more each week."

"Even us?"

Khadui nodded. "Even us."

"I suppose they'll start charging us for the ale then," Kusac said.

"Only a small, token amount, but the spirits will cost more," said Banner. "As for goods, Lorish says there will be clothing, material, and threads, jewelry, foodstuffs and sweets, pottery— luxury goods and some basics, the usual mix though not on the commercial scale you'd get on our ships. And, of course, custom-made goods will be available as well. They've also got books, which is what I'm most interested in, though accepting even credits from Kezule goes against my grain."

"Definitely worth checking out," he said, looking around as he suddenly picked up a stir of suppressed excitement.

"How's your work with the Ch'almuthians going?" asked Khadui.

Surprised at the other's inquiry, he looked back at him. "All right," he said. "I'm beginning to form a good idea of the workings of their culture and it isn't that far off the civilian side here."

"How about their religion?" the older male continued. "Are they happy with the idea of a main fertility Goddess?"

He was formulating an answer when he saw Zayshul come through the door. They'd been together in his quarters the previous evening, under some pretext Ghidd'ah, who'd been with her, had thought up, but his senses were still heightened enough to pick up her scent immediately despite the crowded rec.

"They gave up Emperor worship immediately after their Empire collapsed," he began, trying not to watch her as she crossed the room and passed him with a small nod and smile. "Being mainly an agricultural world, their fertility Goddess is about the only one they follow now."

He could sense she'd stopped not far behind him, then a moment later, he could smell her scent getting closer again. Then she was leaning past him and placing a large plate, covered with small, round decorated cookies in front of him.

"Banner told us it was your birth day today," she said, accepting the chair that materialized behind her and sitting down beside him. "This is what we have on that day, so Happy Birth Day, Kusac."

Taken aback, he could say nothing as those at his table wished him well.

"I'd forgotten about it," he said, his ears still tilted back in embarrassment. "Thank you."

"You must eat the top one yourself," said Zayshul, "but the rest are for you to give to your friends. For us, to be given one is good luck."

Reaching out, he took the topmost cookie off the pile, then gestured to her, Banner, and the others. "Please, help yourself."

The cookies, full of exotic berries from the hydroponics level, were delicious.

"Better take one over to Dzaou, and Ghidd'ah," he said, beginning to get up.

"Sit down, I'll take it over," said Banner as a couple of people headed over to their table to pass on their good wishes.

From that point on, there were always at least two people standing by their table chatting to them and any opportunity for private conversation was almost impossible. As soon as his glass of ale was nearing the bottom, another appeared, along with the odd glass of spirits. After the first two glasses, he decided there was no option but to give in with good grace, and it wasn't long before tales were being swapped and jokes exchanged.

He found the evening passed quickly and pleasantly. All too soon, it seemed, the rec began to empty of people and it was time to leave. It wasn't till he stumbled as he tried to stand up that he realized he'd probably drunk too much. Banner's hand was there to catch him.

"Easy there," his Second said with a grin.



"How much did I have?" he asked, steadying himself by holding onto the back of his chair.

"A fair bit," said Banner, guiding him toward the door. "Not so much ale, but you had maybe five glasses of spirits. Hell, a birth day only comes once a year; you're entitled to kick back and relax."

He groaned. "I'm going to have a hangover tomorrow."

"Drink plenty of water when you get back to your room," said Zayshul from his other side. "That will help."

When they reached the door to his suite, he insisted they leave him to manage the rest on his own. The cooler air in the corridor had woken him up a little and he was steadier on his legs now.

Yawning, he headed for the small sink in the kitchen area and getting his mug, he stuck it under the cold faucet. The first mug went down easily, and he poured himself a second, sipping it as he made his way through to his bedroom.

He was tired, but a pleasant warm feeling suffused him, and the fact that everything he looked at seemed to have a soft focus—slightly blurred, his logical side observed—made his surroundings seem friendlier. Setting his mug down on his night table, he unfastened his robe and tossed it onto the end of the bed. Pulling back the covers, he crawled into bed and was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He came to suddenly, blinking in the dim light as he tried to remember what had awakened him. He'd left the bedside light on, but he knew it wasn't that. Despite his still blurred vision, everything seemed to be the same. Barely able to keep his eyes open, he gave in and let them close again. Something was nudging at the edges of his mind, but he had no idea what. His thinking was as fuzzy as his sight right now, but he had a feeling it was important. Frowning, he tried to concentrate. There had been a dream, one with Vartra in it. What was Vartra doing in his dreams?

At the edge of his hearing, he thought he caught a faint sound from the main room. A vague sense of urgency began to build in him, but he was warm and relaxed right now and disinclined to move. Likely it was only a change in the speed of the ventilation fans. Unbidden, the memory of his dream of Vartra returned, nagging him till he began to wonder if they were connected. Then he heard the sound again.

Opening his eyes this time, he decided he really ought to get up. He tried to turn over but found his body leaden and slow to respond—moving was too much effort. He'd had far too much to drink and his imagination was playing tricks by creating noises and feelings of unease that didn't exist, that was all. Closing his eyes, he gave in once more to the lassitude and began to let himself drift.

He dreamed of Zayshul, smelling her scent surrounding him, feeling her naked skin sliding across his, moving along his pelt until she lay on top of him. Familiarity made his body respond instantly to her presence, kindling fires deep in his belly and groin as he welcomed her. Her hand stroked his cheek then brushed gently against his nose. He reached up to catch hold of her wrist, pressing his tongue to her palm and licking it with short, feverish strokes, aware of the toxins her skin carried rushing into his system, fully wakening and enhancing his sensitivity to her.

Her mouth covered his, kissing him deeply as she raked her claws slowly up his thighs. Moaning softly, he clutched her waist, feeling the fabric of the lightweight lab coat she still wore. He began pushing it aside but her hands closed on his, stopping him.

Leaning closer, she captured an ear between her teeth, nibbling gently on the outer edge, then let her forked tongue flick devastatingly against its interior.

"Slowly," she breathed, stroking his hair aside then brushing her hand across his lips, hesitating just long enough for him to lick her palm again.

His body convulsed briefly in pleasure as his genitals began to descend. She moved, sitting astride him, leaving him the space he needed. Her teeth gently catching hold of his lower lip, she reached for him, teasing him to full arousal while she nipped her way across his cheek and neck.

Her touch was like fire, and his breath coming in shorter and shorter gasps, he pushed his hands under her clothing, running his hands up and down her back till he spread them across her hips and pushed her up.

As she lowered herself onto him, making him groan in pleasure, somewhere in the depths of his drugged mind he realized it was no dream, and that this was not Zayshul. He was beyond caring, all that mattered was his body's urgent need for release.

She'd have none of it, and began to pace him, moving herself away from his frantic thrusts, moaning softly as tremors began to course through her body. Her muscles locked suddenly round him, then began to pulse as she finally let him bury himself deep inside her.

He'd barely begun when he heard the sound of a commotion in the corridor outside followed by a loud, sharp noise. She stiffened just as his bedroom door flew wide open.

In slow motion, he began to turn his head to see who it was. Painfully, she leaped off him and sprinted for the door, backhanding the Sholan standing there, sending him reeling back into the main room, then she was gone. The pain her abrupt departure had caused brought tears to his eyes, and with a whimper, his body curled up on itself. Gasping, he lay waiting for the hurt to diminish.

From outside his room, he was dimly aware of the sound of angry raised voices, Banner's and Dzaou's among them. Finally, as the hurt subsided, some idea of what had happened began to penetrate through his drugged senses. Pulling the sheet across himself, he managed to sit up and wind it laboriously round his body, then tried to get to his feet.

Now the adrenaline rush had subsided, he was again having trouble controlling his limbs and all he managed to do was fall onto the floor in an untidy and painful heap. Pushing himself up on shaking arms, he managed to reach the door and haul himself to his feet by hanging onto the doorframe with one hand while the other clutched the tangled sheet. Blinking furiously, he tried to make sense of what he could see and hear.

Four Prime guards were holding onto Dzaou and Banner, preventing them from either coming in or leaving, and they were arguing loudly. It took him three attempts and all his concentration before he could manage to get his tongue working enough to speak.

"Go!" he managed to croak as, his legs finally giving way again, he collapsed onto his knees. "Leave!"

The group froze and Banner took advantage of the moment to jerk himself free of one of the guards.

"Kusac!" he called out, before turning on the other. "Dammit! Let me go, can't you see he needs help?" he snarled as the third guard left the now handcuffed Dzaou to grab hold of him.

"The General has been sent for," said the guard. "You'll remain here until he arrives with the Doctor."

Kusac shut his eyes and leaned weakly against the doorframe. His blurred vision was making him feel nauseous now.

"No Doctor," he said. Bad enough that the whole Outpost would know what had happened without her seeing him in this condition. He pulled futilely at the sheet, trying to stop it pressing painfully against his erection that refused to subside, but it was now caught under him and he couldn't move it.

"Just go," he whispered, ears flattening against his skull in distress as he tried to shut out the sounds of the raised voices.

Silence descended and as he heard the General's voice demanding a report, he smelled her scent. Hearing her exclamation of shock, he opened his eyes to see Zayshul running across the room to him.

"Goddess!" she exclaimed as she knelt down beside him. "What happened to you?"

"No!" he hissed, trying to pull back from her. Her presence was having a devastating effect on him as the real marker began to arouse him even further.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Kusac," she began, reaching out to touch his face.

He let go the sheet to try and bat her hand away. "Don't," he said, but it was already too late as she gently pressed her hand to his nose then checked his eyes.

An involuntary shudder of pleasure ran through his whole body. As he leaned closer to her, he tried to fight it, unconsciously reaching deep into himself for the means to counter the drugs coursing through his system.

"What happened?" she asked again. "Dzaou says he saw a female breaking into your quarters and when he tried to get in, the night patrol jumped him."

"I've been drugged," he whispered, finding he could at least speak now. Craving her touch, he clasped his hand round hers. "In one of the drinks or food tonight, and like you did on the *Kz'adul*. She wore clothing of yours..."

"Dear Goddess," she whispered, her voice as low as his. "Who did this to you?"

"I don't know. Please go. If you touch me again..."

"I need a blood sample, you need an antidote..."

It took an effort of will to let her go. Leaning back against the doorframe, he shook his head. "Go, before he realizes."

"Release Lieutenant Banner instantly," Kezule was saying. "You can see his Captain is in distress. Next time, assess the situation immediately, don't wait for me to sort it out."

Banner was instantly at his side.

"He's been drugged," said Zayshul, turning to him.

"I can see that," said Banner roughly, elbowing her aside.

He heard footsteps and knew by the sound and his scent that it was Kezule.

"Let me see," Kezule said. "Some drugs carry a very distinctive odor that's outside your range of smell, but we can detect them."

Reluctantly Banner moved aside.

A male hand held his jaw firmly but not unkindly, and tilted his head up. He heard the Valtegan sniff a couple of times then release him.

"He's been given nothing dangerous," said Kezule, standing up. "Zayshul, you need to leave."

"He needs treatment," she began, looking up at him.

"I doubt there's any you can give him. Banner will look after him. He can get any medication he thinks suitable from Ghidd'ah. He's been given that analgesic of ours that makes Sholans drowsy and compliant, then some kind of aphrodisiac. You have to leave, your scent is making the situation worse for him. Q'almo, take Dzaou to the brig," he ordered. "Where are the other Sholans?"

"We initiated a lockdown on their quarters, General."

Kezule hissed his annoyance. "You've overreacted to the whole incident," he said disgustedly. "Remove it at once! There was no need to go to those lengths."

"Yes, General."

"Kusac, I have to take samples," said Zayshul. "She can be identified by her DNA."

He shook his head. He'd suffered enough indignities for one night.

"If not me, let Ghidd'ah do it," she said persuasively.

He looked past her at Banner, sending a mute appeal. "Make them leave," he said with difficulty. "Now."

Banner touched him briefly on the cheek as he got to his feet. "You heard the Captain," he said to them.

He heard Zayshul getting to her feet. "Banner, your Captain isn't in a fit state to make that decision," she began. "It's up to you to..."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," Banner interrupted, "but I disagree. He's been through enough. What he needs now is to sleep."

As he was walking them to the door, Banner began to protest against Dzaou's imprisonment.

"Lieutenant," said Kezule patiently, "as I understand it, he attacked my guards when they tried to prevent him from breaking into your Captain's quarters. Not content with that, he escaped and forced his way in. No matter what the circumstances, I cannot allow that kind of behavior. A night in the brig will cool his temper and do him no harm."

"I expect you to find the person responsible for this. Dzaou said she ran past your guards but they were too busy with him to take any notice!"

"As far as they were concerned, he was the one they'd seen committing the unlawful act," said Kezule, his tone placatory. "Dzaou has already said he can't identify her, your Captain has refused to give the Doctor any samples, so until he is fit to give me a statement, there's little I can do to track her down. We both know that this Dzaou is a born troublemaker. It is even possible that Captain Aldatan invited the female to his room."

He heard a low growl of anger from Banner. "You and I both know that's unlikely considering his drugged state! Dzaou did describe what she was wearing, at least you can follow that up tonight! You have security cameras all over this Outpost, there must be something on them!"

"We don't record from the cameras, Lieutenant. Unless someone in Security actually saw her entering or leaving, then our only two witnesses are Dzaou and your Captain," said Kezule. "May I suggest that we leave the matter until after breakfast, then we can discuss it in detail? I'll arrange for M'kou to escort you both down to the Command level. I'll also see that a guard remains outside all night since the suite is no longer secure."

His limbs began to shake as reaction set in, and he could feel tears coursing down his cheeks. Turning his head, he tried to bury his face between the doorframe and his arm.

It seemed an age until he heard the door close and Banner was back by his side.

"Can you stand?" his Second asked quietly.

Fighting the impulse to attempt it, he shook his head, trying to rub his face against his arm.

"Let me help you," said Banner, supporting him.

When he was upright, Banner eased his shoulder under Kusac's free arm and helped him stagger back to his bedroom. As his Second tried to turn him round to sit on the edge of the bed, his legs began to shake again and he collapsed back onto the floor.

Banner crouched down beside him. "I have to ask, did you invite her here, Kusac? Is that why you wouldn't let them take the tests?"

"No," he said, using his hands to pull his legs up till they were pressed against his chest. "It happened, it's over, leave it," he said, stumbling over the words as Banner began to swear angrily under his breath.

"What can I do to help? Would you like a shower?"

It struck him as funny and he began to laugh, well aware there was an edge of hysteria to it.



"It won't help," he said, wiping his still streaming eyes. "It'll wear off in an hour or two." He saw realization dawn on Banner's face.

"Gods, someone will pay for this!" his Second said, reaching out to cup his hand round Kusac's cheek. "I promise you they will!"

Banner's touch and scent were comforting, something reassuringly familiar for the first time in months, and without realizing, he relaxed into it. It was enough to set the tears flowing again as complex emotions—his own and Banner's—fueled by the drugs still in his system, coursed through him.

Sitting down, Banner put his arms around him, holding him close while he wept.

"Let me get fresh sheets at least," he said, smoothing Kusac's tangled hair when the worst had passed. "Maybe they can get her DNA off these."

Kusac shook his head. He couldn't let that happen. Zayshul had been there the night before, they'd find traces from her as well.

"Just help me into bed then go back to yours. I'll be fine."

"I'm staying," Banner said firmly. "There's no way I'm leaving you alone tonight."

"I need to be alone," he said slowly, fighting the drug's compulsion to agree with Banner. "It's making me..."

Banner took him by the chin and turned him round till they were facing each other. "I know what the drug's doing," he said quietly. "I'm an empath, remember? I am staying with you." He let his hand slide down to rest on Kusac's neck, the gesture an implicit invitation. "It's your decision whether or not we sleep."

\* \* \*

"I don't understand why anyone would do this to him," Zayshul said as they headed back down in the elevator to the Command level.

"I don't know either," Kezule said tiredly, leaning against the side wall.

"Was it wise to lock Dzaou in the brig? He was only trying to protect Kusac."

"Are you that naive, Zayshul?" he asked. "Dzaou does nothing without a personal motive. He's been seen by the Security cameras watching Kusac's room, that's why I started the night patrols a few weeks ago."

Her blood ran cold as she looked at him.

Misinterpreting her reaction, he continued. "You doubt me? Why did Dzaou have to break into Kusac's room once Security turned up? He'd reported the incident, it was up to them to deal with it, not him. He actually prevented them from investigating the situation. No, Dzaou suspected your Sholan had a female in his rooms and wanted to catch them in the act. And he did," he added, as the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. "That's what he wanted, though what use it would be to him, I've no idea. Your Sholan seems happy enough for the youngest one to mix freely with our females."

"To force him out of command," said Zayshul as they began to walk down the main corridor. "So Banner has to take over."

"Hmm?" He stopped briefly to consider this. "You may be right," he said as he began walking again.

"You said Dzaou... interrupted Kusac."

"That's what he said," replied Kezule, careful to keep his tone neutral.

"Then this is a rape, Kezule," she said, stopping dead and turning on him. "You must find out who did this! She must be punished as severely as you punished the M'zullians."

"She will be, if we can identify who it was," he said.

"Kusac said she had clothing that was mine. How did she get hold of it?"

"The Outpost laundry facilities are used for all work clothes, Zayshul," he said. "Anyone could have taken an item of yours, but I will look into it. In fact, I'll go back to Security and get them moving on it now."

"I can check the sick bays, see if anyone requested analgesic meds today," she said, beginning to move off. "If we can get the sheets from Kusac's room, I may be able to get a sample from them. I need to warn the laundry not to wash them. And run some simulations in the lab to see what she could have used as an aphrodisiac!"

He caught hold of her by the arm, stopping her. "Leave it for tonight, Zayshul. The aphrodisiac will do him no harm. Kusac will be all right, Banner is with him. I'm sure they have their own ways of dealing with this situation," he said with a slight smile. "But I will get Security onto checking the analgesics and warning the laundry for you."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked sharply.

"By what?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"By saying they have their own ways of dealing with this situation!"

His face cleared. "Of course, you've no real military experience, have you? It would have been better for Kusac had they not been interrupted, but since they were..."

"I got the picture at the time, thank you," she snapped.

He turned away from her, about to leave for the Security room. "In male only enclaves, such as existed in my time, and like the Sholan group, males will turn to each other, that's all." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "As I said, Banner stayed with him, he'll be fine. Now go back to bed and stop worrying."

She stared mutely after his retreating figure. Then, almost automatically, she began to walk back to her suite.

Chaos greeted her in the form of Ghidd'ah holding an inconsolably sobbing Shaidan plastered to her chest.

"Thank the Goddess you're back!" she said with relief. "I was about to take Shaidan to the Captain. M'kou sent for me when he couldn't stop him crying. Apparently he woke screaming just over half an hour ago. Thankfully he hasn't wakened Mayza."

"I'll take him," she said.

Hearing her voice, Shaidan lifted his head off Ghidd'ah's shoulder and turned a tearsoaked face to hers.

She reached out her arms for him and he almost leaped into them, holding her tightly as fresh sobs began to rack him.

"Go back to bed," she said to her friend as she carried him over to the sofa where they'd obviously been sitting. "I can handle it now. Thank you for helping out."

Sitting down, she began to rock him, patting his back gently while making soothing noises. With her free hand, she reached for the blanket lying there and wrapped it round him.

"Hush, baby," she said. "I've just left your father. He's fine, I promise you. He just had a nasty fright, that's all." She should have remembered that Shaidan would be affected by this.

His hands clutched at the warm top she was wearing over her nightclothes, gently tugging on it as he opened and closed his hands as if he was kneading the material. Gradually his sobs lessened and he began to quiet until his head lolled against her.

Looking down at the sleeping child, she smiled wryly as she saw that he'd actually been sucking on her sweater. Carefully she got to her feet and

began walking to Shaidan's room, then suddenly changed her mind and headed for her own room. She was not going to leave him to sleep alone tonight. If his father needed company, then the son needed it even more.

As she tried to lay him down in her bed, his hand tightened on her sweater, pulling it toward his mouth and beginning to suck on it again. She had to crouch down at the side of the bed and take it off before she could leave him.

Tucking the covers around him, she went over to her daughter's bed to check on her. As Ghidd'ah had said, she was fast asleep. Tiptoeing back to her own bed, she stripped off the trousers and crawled beneath the covers. As soon as the light was out and she'd made herself comfortable, she felt Shaidan start to move until his back was touching her, then he settled. Surprised, she turned on her side, only to find him wriggling closer again, not stopping till he was completely within the protective curve of her body. Smiling to herself, she put her arm around him, breathing in his scent which reminded her poignantly of his father's.

"You are so like him," she whispered, resting her head on top of his as she began to drift off to sleep, wishing it could have been her, not Banner, who'd stayed with Kusac.

\* \* \*

Kezule found M'kou in the main Security Office watching the screens while M'zynal gave his people their orders and sent them out.

"M'kou, a word," ordered Kezule, indicating he was to leave with him.

"That was a disaster," said Kezule when they were alone in his office.

"Why did no one pick up on Dzaou watching Kusac's room, and where is she now?" He went over to the sideboard and took out two glasses and a bottle.

"Not for me, thank you," said M'kou, taking a seat on the sofa.

Kezule put one of the glasses away then poured himself a small measure of one of Giyarishis' spirits.

"There aren't any security cameras in the small side corridors, General. There was no way he could be seen."

"Then move him. Have the older Sholan trade rooms with him," he said, sitting down in the nearest armchair.

"Khadui? What reason shall I give?"

"The real one— Security. If Dzaou's going to spy on their Captain, I think they'll be as relieved as us to have him moved. Next time he tries that, the cameras will pick him up in the main corridor as soon as he leaves his room."

"It wasn't a complete failure, General. She told me she did at least manage to put her scent mark on the Captain."

"She's lying," he said, taking a sip of his drink. The strong spirit spread its warmth down to the pit of his stomach, but did nothing to dispel his uneasy conscience. "They were disturbed before she finished and when I saw him, Kusac still smelled of my wife's marker."

"That's impossible," said M'kou in obvious surprise. "Why would she lie when it can so easily be disproved?"

"Why indeed?" said Kezule, thinking this through. "Did she manage to return to her quarters without being seen by anyone else?"

M'kou nodded. "Dzaou didn't get a good look at her, she says. He was blocking the bedroom door so she hit him and sent him spinning back into the main room. The guards didn't look at her twice, assuming she was there at the Captain's invitation."

"They hadn't checked his room for scents by the time I arrived, and Kusac refused to let Zayshul take samples for DNA testing, thank the powers above, so it looks like she'll go undetected. What about the clothing? Taking a lab coat was very clever."

"I put it in the incinerator," M'kou said. "I'd arranged for a change of clothing for her in the priests' quarters adjacent to our temple. She made for there then headed out through the back door of the temple."

Kezule nodded. "At least that went smoothly. If she did mark him, how long would it take to be effective?"

"It's noticeable fairly quickly," his son replied, "but to be fully effective takes maybe a day."

"So if by tomorrow morning he still smells of my wife, then we can assume it didn't work."

"I would say yes."

"Do you know if putting one marker on top of another will cancel out the first?"

"I've no idea. Zharmo did say it wouldn't work. I've been told that females are generally very cautious about marking anyone because it does attract that male to them. It's not something they do to annoy a male, or spite another female, because of the consequences to themselves."

"And after this incident, it's the last question we can ask anyone," he sighed, taking another sip of his drink. "I take it you and I and this female are the only ones who know what happened."

"I didn't involve anyone else," M'kou reassured him. "There was no need. The Captain is all right, isn't he?" he asked anxiously. "I gave her specific doses for him."

"He was well out of it," said Kezule, "but he'll be fine. I hadn't realized our meds affected them so strongly, and so differently."

"We're probably just as sensitive to their drugs," said M'kou. "I made sure that what I took won't show up when they check out the inventories in the sick bays."

"We have one loose end. My wife want his sheets for testing, and I've got to alert Security to warn the laundry to send them to her. They need to be intercepted, M'kou."

"When they're at breakfast, while Maintenance fixes the door, I'll change the sheets and see they're destroyed," said M'kou.

Kezule nodded. "I think we've taken everything into account. Let's just hope this dies a death when she can't be traced. And that it worked," he added, finishing his drink and getting up. "I think we should turn in— again," he said. "Morning is getting too close. Good night, M'kou."

### **Ghioass, Camarilla Council Chamber**

"What happened?" Kuvaa demanded angrily of Giyarishis. "This not show anywhere in potentialities! You in heart of matter— why you not see this coming?"

Giyarishis for once felt calm about this. "You are ones monitoring potentialities, telling me what I must observe. If you not see, how expect me to anticipate? I give to sand-dweller messages you instruct me to give. No more can I do. Warnings of mine you brush aside of no importance."

"You monitor reality of those involved! You to pick up variances from planned path!" The Cabbaran was incandescent with rage.

"I tell sand-dweller exact words you say to me! Is obvious not willingly let female of his pair with Hunter, changing mind when I not provide help unlikely! Miscalculation yours, not my failure." He stopped for a moment to regard the Phratry Leader. "Desired aim achieved now despite your failure," he said almost indifferently. "Sand-dweller female now free to meet with Hunter without fear of reprisals. Must now discuss the child..."

"Is of no interest," snapped Kuvaa. "Potentialities are swirling, roiling in flux! Our plans are falling apart! This departure from planned course bodes ill. Hunter must not pursue this matter, nor other hunters on his behalf. Stop this you must."



"Have taken what action I can— only small effect on him can I have from distance."

"Get closer! Peace must be between sand-dwellers and Hunter, impossible if this discovered. Much technology has been invested in Kij'ik to enable your work, use it!"

"I will rejoice when your turn for working in field comes, Kuvaa," said Giyarishis, eyes whirling angrily as he glared at his equal. "What appears simple at home, not when out here." With that he cut the connection.

He sighed, settling back into the cushions at his desk. Now he was faced with the problem of trying to affect the Hunter and his Second in Command when they slept. This would not be easy considering he'd had little contact with that male. Perhaps concentrating on the Hunter alone would suffice. After all, the Hunter was his superior, his orders would be followed to the letter.

Despite what Kuvaa thought, he was still concerned with the child. He was becoming a force in this matter, one soon to be reckoned with. Already, against his programming by the Directorate, he had made the Hunter and the female sand-dweller both aware of the fact that she was a telepath. Granted, the Hunter had a suspicion she was, but he knew for sure before the appointed time. He had been supposed to find out from the *Zan'droshi* data they'd carefully recovered, and added, for them to find.

How the child had managed to do this had eluded him, because like his father, he had the capacity— he couldn't yet be sure it was conscious— for some of his actions to be cloaked within a dark zone none of the Camarilla technology could penetrate.

Realizing that time was passing and he needed to be ready to infiltrate the Hunter's mind at the moment consciousness passed into sleep, he roused himself and jumped to the floor, hurrying off to the pool room. There, at least, the balmy, moist atmosphere suited him better than the warm dryness of the Outpost. It was easier to let his mind roam when he had no need to fret over his physical conditions.

## Chapter 16

### Zhal-Mellasha 12th day (February)

AS he surfaced from sleep, Kusac knew instantly that he was alone. Considering the alcohol he'd drunk and what he'd been dosed with the night before, he felt remarkably clearheaded. Moving his head, he lifted his arm to peer at his wrist comm. As he did, Banner's scent filled his nostrils, making him sigh and forget about the time. Had it been any other time but last night, and any other place but here... but it wasn't, and he had to deal with the fact he still had to keep Banner at arm's length.

There were other things he had to deal with, he remembered, like the matter of the sheets. A quick glance at his watch as he got up told him it was just past second hour. Time enough for him to see to what he needed to do, provided Banner didn't return first.

He left the remade bed in what he hoped looked like the ruffled state it had been when he first got up. The soiled sheets he had briefly considered stuffing down the garbage disposal, then decided not to in case they caused a blockage and were discovered. Instead he concealed them in his kit bag alongside the packs of fertilizer he'd taken from Dzaou, making a mental note that he needed to dispose of them, too. Then, emotionally tired out before his day had even begun, he had a shower.

He was toweling himself dry when he sensed Banner's return. A moment later, the older male poked his head round the door.

"You're up, good," Banner said, coming in and sitting on the end of the bed. "I've just been filling the others in on the basics— no details, of course— of what happened last night. I figured you'd rather not have to tell them yourself."

Automatically, his ears flattened against his skull. "Thank you," he mumbled, hiding his embarrassment, and gratitude, by going over to his drawers to pull out a clean black tunic. Getting caught once by Zayshul had been bad enough, but for it to happen a second time... He was angry with himself as much as her, whoever she was.

Acutely aware of Banner's thoughts as the other watched him, he wondered who'd be the one to mention their changed relationship first.

Slipping his tunic on, he pressed the seal closed as he turned round looking for his weapons belt.

Banner bent down and picked it up off the floor, holding it out to him. "About last night," he said, "Don't get yourself into a state about it. We both know I was there for you because you needed me. However, if you decide you'd like my company anytime, let me know."

He nodded, taking the belt from him and fastening it round his waist. "Again, thank you," he said. "I appreciate what you did."

Banner shrugged and got up, reaching out to ruffle the hair where his ears lay flat. "It was no hardship," he grinned. "Oh, they're sending someone from Maintenance to fix your door as soon as first meal's over. Till then, they'll leave a guard outside. Talking of which," he said, glancing at his wrist comm, "I suggest we get a move on. I took a stroll down to the mess after I'd spoken to Khadui and Jayza, and no one there seemed to be aware that anything had happened last night. You've no need to worry that everyone's talking about it."

"That's a relief," he murmured, forcing his ears upright again as he followed Banner out into the lounge.

"You're all right, aren't you?" Banner asked, turning to look at him as he stopped by the door. "I know your self-confidence will have taken a knock, but that's understandable."

"I'll be fine," he said, unconsciously squaring his shoulders. "The whole incident was embarrassing more than anything else."

Banner frowned. "You're sure?"

Impulsively he reached out to touch the other's neck briefly. "I'm fine," he repeated with a smile. "Let's go. The food doesn't improve by being cold."

Grinning, Banner turned back to the door, forcing it back into its recess until they could squeeze through the gap.

"Good job Dzaou's not here," Kusac said, surveying the wrecked door. "I'd be using his head to beat it flat from the other side."

Banner laughed. "Forgot to tell you that Security asked Khadui this morning to change rooms with Dzaou so he's on the other side of our block. Apparently they've been aware of him spying on you for some time and after this, they want him moved to where they can keep an eye on him with their cameras. He won't be able to peer through a crack in his door anymore."

"Thank Vartra for that!" he said. "Did Khadui agree?"

"Immediately," said Banner as they headed toward the iris at the junction with corridor K. "He's getting disillusioned with him, too."

"Dzaou's a liability. I'm going to have to do something about him."

"But what? The only opinion he really respects is his own."

"We'll see next training night," he said as they stepped into the air lock area formed by the three open irises where the corridors intersected.

"Can you take him? You're improving, but I don't know if you're up to his speed."

He glanced at Banner, an amused look on his face. "I can take him," he said. "You've only seen me sparring, not fighting."

"You'd better be sure," Banner said. "If you fail, he'll only become more of a problem."

"Trust me," he said.

\* \* \*

M'kou ushered them into Kezule's office.

"Good morning," said Kezule from his desk at the other end of the room. "Please make yourselves comfortable on the seats there, I'll be with you in a moment. I'm just reading through the report from Security."

Kusac took the first easy chair as Banner headed for the sofa opposite him. A few minutes later, Kezule joined them.

"So far, Security have drawn blanks," the General said. "The female, whoever she was, disappeared without leaving any clues as to her identity behind. Lab coats are sent to the main laundry to be washed— anyone could have walked in there and taken one without being noticed. No meds of that kind were issued to anyone in the last three days, and none are missing from either sick bay. Since you were unwilling for tests to be taken last night, we really need a description if we're going to have any hope of finding her."

"I was asleep when she came into my room," he said, forcing himself to meet Kezule's gaze. "I was so drugged that I thought I was dreaming. It wasn't till Dzaou flung the door open that I realized what was happening."

"Can you describe her, Captain?" Kezule asked. "Was there anything about her that you remember? Any distinguishing features or markings? Her scent or the way she talked? Did she wear any jewelry?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing. She only said a couple of words, not enough to be able to identify her."

"Then, unfortunately, I am at a loss as to how to proceed. Security have kept their inquiries low-key so as not to draw attention to the incident since hardly anyone outside your crew and the Security personnel themselves know about it. However, if you wish, we can question everyone, but I have grave doubts that anything useful will be achieved."

"She shouldn't be allowed to get away with this!" exclaimed Banner.

"I deplore what happened as much as you, Lieutenant, but there's nothing more I can do."

"What did Dzaou see?" he asked.

"He was kind enough to tell us that all the females look alike to him," said Kezule wryly. "He didn't get a good look at her because as soon as he opened the door, she attacked him and ran off."

"Dzaou was saying that your Security personnel were so busy trying to apprehend him that they totally ignored her," said Banner. "Where were they when Dzaou was inside Kusac's suite?"

"They were in the lounge," said Kezule. "As I said last night, you have to appreciate that having a female in your room was not considered as important as apprehending the person they'd seen trying, then succeeding, in breaking open your door and who had attacked them. They didn't believe his allegations, and given the evidence of Dzaou's subsequent actions, who can honestly blame them?"

"What did Dzaou actually do when the night watch came on the scene?" asked Banner.

Kezule picked up his report and leafed through it. "Dzaou was pressing the number pad, trying to gain access to the Captain's room. When challenged, he demanded that the Captain's door be opened as he'd seen a female entering it illegally. When the guard refused to believe him," Kezule looked up briefly, "for that I think we can assume it reads laughed at him, Dzaou grew angry and began to use force on the door. He was then apprehended, and started a fight, which resulted in a second guard coming to the assistance of the first."

Kezule stopped to turn the page, then continued. "By that time, Dzaou had forced the door open and entered the suite. As they followed him in, they called for reinforcements. This was the point at which Dzaou was sent flying by the female and she came running out. The guards apprehended Dzaou as you," he glanced up at Banner, "came out of your room and into the Captain's suite, demanding to know what was going on. Reinforcements arrived at this point, and you know the rest," he concluded, putting the file down on the low table. "I can have copies of this made for you if you wish. It includes Dzaou's statement, taken when he was booked into the brig."

"Please," said Kusac, looking across at Banner. In one way, he was glad the female couldn't be found. He'd no wish for the whole Outpost to know what had happened to him. He had his own suspicions about her. "I don't think there's much else you can do," he said. "As for Dzaou, I'll punish him. He's one of my crew and answerable only to me."

"I disagree," said Kezule. "He attacked two of my officers, and seriously damaged property, that makes him answerable to me and the rules governing the military side of Kij'ik."

"I told you when we arrived that we would not be bound by your rules," Kusac said, his ears tilting forward and sideways in the beginnings of anger. "We're independent of you, Kezule. I will discipline my own people."

"What would your punishment be?" asked Banner. "A month in the brig? We can devise something far more useful."

Kezule sat back in his chair and surveyed them both. "Continue," he said.

"Two weeks on fatigues, working in the kitchens at mealtimes, and the laundry the rest of the time," said Banner. "Double shifts. He doesn't go off duty till eighteenth hour, your 22:00 at night, then he's confined to his quarters until the following morning."

"It has appeal," said Kezule, a spark of amusement showing in his eyes. "It would also free up two people to help the salvage crew." He thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

"Agreed. He can be released into your custody now, his punishment starting immediately."

Kusac nodded. "Thank you," he said, getting to his feet.

"The brig's on your level. If you go to Security, they'll fetch him for you. I'll have copies of the report ready for you to pick up from Security when you come off duty today," said Kezule, standing up. "Doctor Zayshul is

waiting for you in the sick bay. I'm sorry we couldn't do more to find your attacker, Captain. You have my sympathy for what happened."

M'kou escorted them back to the elevator and left them there.

"There's nothing more he could have done, given the situation," said Kusac, breaking the silence as they waited for the elevator. He was well aware that Banner was more angered by the incident than he was.

"I know, but I don't have to like it," Banner growled. "A serious crime was committed against you last night. We shouldn't let them minimize it."

"I don't think he is," said Kusac.

Banner sighed. "I suppose. At least we have Dzaou back."

"Do we want him?" he asked with an attempt at levity.

"Not really," Banner grinned. "Still, he's got two weeks of hard work ahead of him, and a change of room."

The elevator doors opened and Kusac hesitated before entering. "Are you off down to the landing bay for your shift now?"

Banner nodded. "You take this one, I'll wait for it to return."

"I'll see you later, then," he said, stepping in and pressing the pad for his level.

\* \* \*

Once more back up on the Officers' level, Kusac headed for sick bay reception and was directed to the treatment rooms.

"You can cut through the door over there instead of going round, Captain," said the medic, pointing to the door opposite. "Doctor Zayshul's in the one nearest the lab."



"Thank you," he said.

Zayshul looked up as he entered. "You don't look any the worse for last night," she said as he came over to sit on the chair beside her desk. "Are you all right? How do you feel?"

"Fine," he said. "Annoyed that I got caught again like that."

"Any headaches, residual nausea, blurred vision?" she asked, reaching for her instruments. "Why wouldn't you let me take tests last night?"

She pushed his short tunic sleeve aside and reached for his upper arm. The prick of a needle made him start.

"None. And you know why," he said, watching as she withdrew a blood sample. "I couldn't cope with you even in the same room. Whatever she used, it was powerful."

"Then why didn't you let Ghidd'ah," she began.

"Look," he said firmly, putting his hand over hers when she'd pulled out the needle. "I didn't want any females near me, just leave it at that."

As he let her go, she flushed and turned away. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I should have realized." She handed him a swab to place over the tiny wound. "Shaidan sensed something happened and was distressed when I got back to our quarters."

His ears flattened themselves to his skull. He'd forgotten about his son's ability to sense his strong emotions.

"He was fine as soon as I told him you'd just had a nightmare," she reassured him. "There was nothing you could have done for him last night, Kusac." She got up to go over to her console and insert the sample in the analyzer slot. "I can still get samples from the sheets," she said, coming back.

"Thank you, and no," he said very quietly, still pressing the pad against his arm. "We can't take that risk. I forgot to change them after you were with me the night before. I took them off and put fresh ones on— they need to be incinerated."

"Oh," she said, taken aback. "There's an incinerator here. If you can get them to me, I'll destroy them. You realize it means we've no chance of identifying her, though. Unless you could recognize her scent again."

"She smelled of you, Zayshul, because of the lab coat," he said. "I know we've very little chance of finding her, but I've my own theory about that."

"Which is?" she asked, turning to the screen on her desk as some results began to come through.

"The method she used was the same one you did— some kind of sedative and then a drug she had on her skin."

"It wasn't me," she said flatly.

"I know that," he said, flashing her a slight smile in reassurance. "But where did she get that information from? How did she know what to use on me?"

Zayshul turned round and pointed to the wall behind him, at a notice on the drug cabinet door. "There," she said. "A list of meds we can safely use on you, those that have some side effects, and those that are unsafe."

He looked. "That throws that theory out the window," he said with a rumble of annoyance.

"Not completely. It could narrow it down to someone working in the sick bays or labs. I've been trying to work out why anyone would do that to you. They must have known you'd be aware of what had happened when the drugs had worn off."

"I know there was a purpose behind it," he said, checking under the wipe then throwing it in her waste bin. "I just don't know what, but I'm sure

Kezule's involved. The way she did it, down to using a lab coat of yours to get the smell right, is just too meticulous." He was finding himself more than a little distracted this morning, especially now he was this close to her.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, turning round again. "Why would he do that? It's more like something Dzaou would set up to try and force you out of command in favor of Banner."

He digested this for a moment then shook his head. "No, not Dzaou. He's not that popular with your people. He'd never be able to persuade anyone to take that kind of risk for him."

"There is another solution," she said. "Someone who does want you that badly but knows that with my scent marker on you, you'd never look at her."

"I doubt that," he murmured, ostensibly leaning forward to look at her screen, but in reality just wanting to be closer to her. "I think you have a result." Something in what she'd said niggled at him, demanding more consideration.

She looked back, and punching a few keys, waited for the information to collate. "She wouldn't be expecting to get caught. My bet is she'd have sedated you fully so that when you woke in the morning, you'd have thought it was a dream, a very vivid one, but a dream. Just like you did last time," she added hesitantly.

He grunted noncommittally, sitting back again as he tried to follow his own train of thought. "Say there was someone interested in me," he said slowly. "Could she replace your marker with hers?"

"I don't know. I've never even thought about that," she said. "Probably not. There wouldn't be much point to the marker if it was possible, would there?"

"Replacing your marker would be a motive, though, and one that would suit Kezule," he said, doggedly returning to his feelings that the General was behind this.

"Don't talk rubbish," she said sharply. "Kezule wouldn't stoop so low! We're talking about rape here. That's a criminal offense here under his laws."

"Believe me, I know that! If not Kezule, then would someone else do it for him?"

"I think you're on the wrong trail completely," she said, reading the results off the screen. "There are traces of three compounds in your blood," she said. "Chaiu and laoe, which when combined, make you very amenable, and kyi, which is a general anesthetic we use for surgery. That is unexpected." She turned her chair away from the screen to face him. "I expected to find the chaiu and laoe. The kyi must have an aphrodisiac effect on you in a smaller dose. She couldn't have used a normal one or she, never mind you, would have been out cold."

"What do the first two do?" he asked.

"Chaiu is a local anesthetic and laoe a strong analgesic. I used both of them on you when I was treating the bite you got during the hunt. Alone they're not a problem for your species, but in combination they do have a kind of hypnotic and suggestive effect on you. Basically, it would make you do what you were told without questioning it."

He nodded. "That would tie in with the effects I felt. I was having to fight against that when you all arrived."

"What is surprising though is how little of it is still in your system. To make you as groggy as you were when I saw you, you must have had a fairly high dose of the first two."

He frowned slightly, remembering doing something the night before to try and neutralize the drugs in his system— had he actually succeeded?

"You know, at least with us, the brain is a remarkable organ, Kusac. It can repair itself, find new pathways when the usual ones are blocked or destroyed. Is it possible that your mental abilities are coming back? Have

you ever done anything like this before?" she asked, following his train of thought with uncanny accuracy.

Damn! He had to be more careful, he realized, strengthening his shielding. She was reading him a bit too closely for comfort. "My mind isn't capable of healing itself," he said shortly, suddenly remembering how on Ch'almuth he'd been automatically adjusting his body temperature in order to stay cool. "The damage was too extensive."

She nodded, not pursuing the matter any further. "I'll run some tests on the blood sample you gave me and find out exactly how it reacts to kyiu. We ought to know in case we ever need to do major surgery on any of you."

He nodded and got to his feet. "I better get on with my work," he said. "Let me know your findings."

"Meet me in the rec later," she said as he headed for the door. "Oh, and if you bring me the— objects— you need destroyed at lunchtime, I can do it here."

He looked quizzically at her.

"My tests won't be finished till tonight. I can tell you my findings then," she said. "I think you should know as soon as possible, and tell the rest of your crew."

"You have a point," he conceded, moving toward the door.

As he did, it slid open to admit Giyarishis. "Good, here you still are," the small bronze being's translator said. "Speaking with you I am needing."

He hesitated, then obeying an impulse that came from his feelings of unease about their last encounter, he said, "Sorry, I'm late for work," and brushed past him.

Giyarishis stood there, hands flapping in distress, watching his retreating figure.

"Was it important?" Zayshul asked, glancing at him.

"Will wait," he said and stalked off despondently.

\* \* \*

Kezule arrived in her lab not long afterward. "I need to have a few words with you," he said, coming toward where she was working. "Can you stop what you're doing?"

"I'm only waiting for the results of some simulations," she said, turning aside from her data analyzer to look at him. "I found out which drugs were used on Kusac."

"Oh?" he said, perching on a tall stool beside her.

"What I expected. A mixture of a local anesthetic and a strong analgesic, coupled with a general anesthetic. Apart from the analgesics, the other two are only available to medics working in one of the sick bays and myself."

"I wonder how she got hold of them," said Kezule.

"I wonder, too, because she left no tracks in either sick bay. There's nothing missing on the inventory, and we do keep it rigorously up-to-date."

"Sounds like you think it may have been one of your staff."

"It could well be, considering a lab coat of mine was also taken. But then again, maybe all that is window dressing just to put us off the scent."

He frowned, the skin around his eye ridges creasing. "Why would anyone go to such lengths?"

"I wondered that, too," she agreed, watching him carefully. She could feel his uneasiness. "I've been trying to think of a motive, and the one that seemed to fit best is that perhaps it is someone jealous of my marker on

him, someone who wants him enough to drug him so he'd pair with her. She could then replace my marker with hers."

"Sounds rather convoluted," he said, not meeting her gaze. "I think you may be onto something with the jealousy, though. And I remember something about a still-unclaimed bet concerning the Captain. Perhaps that was all the motivation she needed."

"I don't believe that, and neither do you!"

"Jealous yourself, Zayshul?" he asked, raising a brow at her. "Why shouldn't other females be interested in him? Isn't that part of what the marker does? I know my daughter Zhalmo has been interested in him from the first."

She leaned toward him, bracing herself against the work surface with her arm. "There's a military precision to this whole incident that suggests you or your young commandos are involved, Kezule. The only loose end was caused by Dzaou disturbing them! The only motive that makes sense is to try and change the marker on him. You're the one person who has most to gain from that!"

"You're talking nonsense, Zayshul," he said, getting up and moving away from her. "I only came to tell you that I no longer care if you have your Sholan, so long as you turn the marker off."

"Why now?" she demanded. "Because your little plan failed? How could you even think of doing that to him, Kezule? You were outraged when you found you'd been harvested on the *Kz'adul*, how did you think he'd feel about being raped? Didn't it occur to you what would happen if he found out?"

"I had nothing..."

"Don't lie to me!" she hissed, jumping down and going over to him. "I *know* you were involved! At the very least, you asked for this to be done!"

He grasped her by the shoulders. "Did it occur to you that I did it for your benefit, and his?" he demanded, his voice low and angry. "I've watched both of you these last weeks and seen what effect this marker has on you! I asked Giyarishis long ago to find a cure for it, but he's come up with nothing! I thought that maybe another marker could replace yours!"

"Then what?" she asked, trying to pull away from him. "He'd be tied to her the way he is to me!"

"No, he wouldn't! The plan was for her to replace your marker with hers, then turn hers off, leaving him free of it completely! What kind of person do you think I am?"

"One that would send a female to drug and rape someone who is supposed to be your ally," she said, wrenching herself free and backing away from him. "What you did was despicable and dishonorable!"

"What choice had I? I was afraid you could be injured by him taking his rage out on you when he found out about the marker, or that you'd end up obsessed with him!"

"He didn't," she said. She'd had enough of his plots and lies, it was time he knew the truth, no matter the cost. "Despite how you've tried to manipulate him over Shaidan, you managed to get his cooperation, and he didn't hate you. What do you think he's going to do when he finds out about this?"

"What did you say?" he demanded, taking a step nearer to her as his crest rose in anger.

"You should have asked me first about replacing the marker. I could have told you it's impossible. I know, because I've tried."

"You disobeyed my orders?" he said, his tone deathly quiet.

"Listen to yourself! Who do you think you are? A General still? Only in a vanished army and a way of life that's been dead for over a thousand



years! I'm not under your command, Kezule! I may be your wife, but I'm as free a person as you! You've no right to give me orders!"

He stood looking at her, then, in a quieter voice asked, "What else did you tell him?"

"He knows about the marker, and he knows I'm not Shaidan's mother," she said. "He also knows that my DNA is bound into Shaidan's."

"And he still helped us."

"Yes," she said more calmly. "Can't you see that all he wants is his son and to leave here?"

"And can he with the marker still on him?" he asked, his crest slowly lowering.

"I don't know," she admitted. "When he was ill on your trip to Ch'almuth, that was the marker."

"How?" he asked. "How did it make him ill?"

"The marker reacted badly with his alien physiology, Kezule," she said, backing off to her bench and stool again now that she could see his anger was dissipating. "It bound to him in a very different way, one that has turned my scent into a drug that it seems he can't do without."

"Can an antidote be made?"

"I don't know. I haven't dared to try working on one."

"Then I suggest you try now. The female did succeed in putting her marker on him before she was disturbed, but obviously it didn't work. Has he realized he may have to remain here indefinitely?"

She nodded. "He's aware of it, but hasn't dealt with it yet."

"He mustn't find out I was involved in this, Zayshul," he said. "You realize that, don't you?"

"I think you should tell him. He'll be angry, yes, that's to be expected, but when he realizes why you did it..."

"Don't be ridiculous!" he said, crest beginning to rise again. "Even if we could get him to understand, there's his crew! Had that damned Dzaou not interrupted them, he'd be none the wiser now. She'd have sedated him before leaving and when he woke, he'd have thought it was only a vivid dream."

"I think you're wrong," she began.

"Don't go behind my back on this, Zayshul," he interrupted. "You could put all our lives at risk if you do. Banner is taking this as personally as if it had happened to him. They'll be gone in a few weeks, even if Kusac has to remain. We can tell him then if you must, but not now."

Reluctantly, she nodded.

He reached out and grasped hold of her arm. "I mean it, Zayshul. He mustn't find out. Keep him occupied, do what it takes to keep your Sholan's mind off this or all we've worked for could be lost. Do you hear me?"

"You're hurting me," she said.

"Do you hear me?" he repeated, shaking her slightly.

"I hear you," she said. "And I'll do it, but I hope you're ready for the repercussions."

When he'd gone, she sank down onto her stool, mentally exhausted by their confrontation.

\* \* \*

When second meal was sounded, Kusac excused himself from the Ch'almuthians he'd been working with in their shop, and headed back to his room as fast as he could without drawing attention to himself. Diving

into the wardrobe, he pulled out the sheets and began to fold them. On an impulse, he brought the one he was holding up to his nose and sniffed it. His and Banner's scents were strong, and underneath them, he could smell Zayshul's. He tried another couple of places on it and after drawing a blank on it, he finished folding it and tried the other one.

This time, the fourth scent was there— very faint, to be sure, but enough for him to be able to identify it as not belonging to Zayshul or Banner, or himself.

Thoughtfully, he folded that one, too, and bundling them both up together, looked for something in which to conceal them. Nothing came to mind and finally, he grabbed a tunic from his drawer and making an incision in the stitching on a side seam with his knife, he wrapped them inside that. Now he could claim he was taking his tunic to Zayshul to get help with mending it.

The corridors were deserted as he hurried to the sick bay. Passing the main entrance, he made for the one leading to the treatment rooms and the lab. Zayshul looked up as he came in, shaking her head slightly in warning.

"Don't be much longer," he heard Ghidd'ah say moments before she came into his sight. "All the food will be gone." She smiled as she saw him. "Hello, Captain."

"I came to ask Zayshul for help fixing my tunic," he said lamely, hovering in the doorway.

"I'll take it," she said, reaching out to take it from him.

"It's all right, Ghidd'ah," said Zayshul quickly, getting to her feet. "I'll see to it."

Ghidd'ah laughed as he moved to one side to let her pass. "Like that is it? Well, I'll make myself scarce then."

Zayshul pointed to the far corner of the lab. "The incinerator's over there," she said quietly. "I take it your tunic is fine."

"No, there's a split in the seam," he said, heading over to where she'd indicated.

Lifting the hatch, he hastily stuffed the sheets in and closed it. There was a click as the hatch automatically locked, then a faint roaring noise, then moments later the click as the hatch unlocked. He opened it again, checking it was empty and with relief went back to her.

"Leave the tunic with me," she said. "I'll send it to the laundry for you to pick up tomorrow."

"Thanks," he said, handing it over. "We ought to go for second meal now," he said awkwardly.

"You go. I'll be along in a few minutes. I've something to finish up here first."

He nodded thankfully and hurried off to the mess.

## **Shola, Dzahai Stronghold, same day**

The Anchorage Brotherhood logo on Rhyaz' comm screen cleared to show him Nassad, Leader of Anchorage.

"Did you receive the message safely, Master Rhyaz?" asked Nassad.

"Yes, thank you," said Rhyaz. "It's being worked on by cryptography. Where exactly did it originate?"

"It came from a location outside the City of Light on the Prime world, K'oish'ik, but it wasn't sent through their regular channels."

"Could you pinpoint its origin?"

"From the map you provided us with, we think it was from one of their decaying cities. And it was bound for M'zull, which is why we intercepted it."

"You didn't say whether you forwarded the message or not."

"We haven't so far. Since it was unauthorized, I thought it advisable to delay it until we knew what it said. Unfortunately, as I said in my message, that was beyond our resources."

"I hope it isn't beyond ours," he said. "So far it's defeated several of our programs."

"Should I forward the message then?"

Rhyaz hesitated, tapping his claw tips on his desktop as he thought. "No, hold onto it for now," he said. "If it didn't go through their official channels, then there's more to this than meets the eye. Keep a watch and see if they try to resend it. If they do, intercept it again and this time, try to get a location on the surface for it. Then we can send our operatives from the Embassy to investigate further."

"Aye, Master Rhyaz."

The call over, he sent a questing thought out to locate Lijou, finding him in the temple winding up his evening service. Deciding to join him, he got up and headed down the corridor for the main staircase.

The sound of chanting could be heard even through the heavy wooden doors. As he hesitated for a moment, someone called his name, asking him to wait. Turning his head he saw one of the Warriors in his dark gray winter robe hurrying down the stairs toward him.

"A message from the Ambassador on the Prime world," said the youth, feet skidding on the slightly damp floor outside the temple entrance.

"Thank you," said Rhyaz, accepting the sealed envelope from him. He could feel the hard lump of a data crystal inside, along with a letter. Inserting a claw tip under the seal, he slit it open, putting the crystal into one of his belt pouches for safety as he pulled out the message.

Leaning against the heavy door, he pushed it open with his shoulder, slipping in the gap he'd created, then caught it with his foot and gently shoved it closed again.

The chanting was clearer now, the voices of the Sisters pitched sweetly above the deeper ones of the Brothers as they brought the day to a close with one of the traditional prayers of thanks. Around him, the air was gently perfumed by incense that reminded him of pine trees and exotic spices. Scanning through the message from his operatives at the Sholan Embassy on K'oish'ik, he veered away from the wide central nave where the congregation was gathered, heading between the stone pillars to the side aisle.

Glancing up as the final notes were rendered, he came to a stop beside Vartra's tomb and leaning against it, finished reading the message as he waited for his colleague to give the final blessing. As he did, he felt his Leska Alex send a wordless greeting to him. The message briefly forgotten, he responded instantly, a faint Human smile playing at the edges of his mouth.

"You have a faraway look about you," said a quiet female voice at his elbow. "I don't need to ask if you're speaking to Alex."

He blinked, refocusing his eyes and smiled at the titian beauty beside him. "Well met, Kha'Qwa," he said. "The chanting was beautiful tonight, I'm sorry I missed the service. Unfortunately I had pressing business to attend to."

She nodded understandingly, her dark green eyes clouding slightly as her eye ridges creased in a slight frown. "Brotherhood business must come first. Not bad news, I trust?" She indicated the message in his hand.

"Not reassuring, shall we say," he said, glancing at the approaching Lijou. Already the Brothers and Sisters were heading up the nave to the exit.

From Ghyakulla's shrine, the sound of raised voices drifted out. Kha'Qwa's lips twitched in a smile she failed to hide. "They're at each other's throats again," she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Rhyaz looked at her quizzically. "Who? I've been busy in my office all day."

"Conner and Noni, of course," she said quietly.

"Why?"

"They're arguing over the caretaking of Ghyakulla's garden," said Lijou with a grin, joining them. "Seems they both have quite firm ideas on what plants should be included in the Green Goddess' shrine."

"I thought you gave that job to Conner," he said, perplexed. "What has Noni to do with it?"

"I believe that was Kha'Qwa's point," said Lijou, his grin widening. "The poor fellow gets little peace from her. Everywhere he is, she turns up."

"And the way she argues with him..." Kha'Qwa left the sentence unfinished and rolled her eyes suggestively.

"You're joking with me," said Rhyaz disbelievingly. "Noni interested in Conner? She's a confirmed celibate as far as I'm aware!"

"Not according to Chaddo," said Kha'Qwa with a chuckle. "He remembers her name linked to one or two of the Brotherhood many years ago."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Rhyaz said, remembering the message in his hand. "Lijou..."

The Head Priest turned to his life-mate. "If you'll excuse us, Kha'Qwa?" he said apologetically.

"Of course," she replied, reaching out to touch his cheek fleetingly. "I'll have something to eat sent up to our lounge. You and Alex will join us, won't you, Rhyaz?"

He nodded, passing the invitation on quickly to Alex who was busy in the cryptography department. "We'd love to. In half an hour?" He looked at Lijou for confirmation.

"I've nothing else to do downstairs," the priest confirmed. "We may as well use the temple office since we're here."

As Kha'Qwa left, they turned and headed toward where the large statue of Vartra sat on its plinth before the crimson drapes.

"You'd better read this," said Rhyaz, passing him the letter. "It's from K'oish'ik."

Lijou scanned it quickly, handing it back to Rhyaz as they reached the statue. Bowing their heads briefly in respect as they passed it, Lijou pulled aside the drapes to reveal a concealed door and the corridor beyond.

\* \* \*

Switching on a heater, Lijou took one of the two easy chairs in front of it, indicating Rhyaz should take the other.

"So our agents were successful in gaining access to the room with the tanks in it," said Lijou.

The Warrior Master nodded. "As you saw in the letter, they were full of developing fetuses. They're breeding tanks, Lijou. There's also a crystal with data they managed to record on it. I haven't seen it yet."

"I have a portable reader on my desk," he said, getting up and going to fetch it. "If they're using breeding tanks, it would explain the lack of pregnant females. I'd hazard a guess and say their population is in trouble if they can't— or won't— breed naturally."

"That's certainly borne out by the general decay our agents have reported outside the City of Light," agreed Rhyaz, passing him the crystal and pulling his chair closer to the heat as the priest sat down again.

Though the screen was small, and the recorded images jerky in places, the scenes they depicted lost none of their impact on the two Guild Leaders.



"Stop it there," said Rhyaz abruptly. "Look," he said, pointing at the screen. "Can you see that male? The one going into that building?"

"Where?" asked Lijou. "I can't see anything."

Rhyaz picked the viewer up and began to run the recording slowly backward then stopped it. "Watch carefully, between the group of four people there," he said.

Lijou peered at the screen, exclaiming as the male in question suddenly appeared and Rhyaz froze the image.

"What in all the hells of L'Shoh is that?" he asked as they surveyed the large, thickset Prime dressed in faded jeans and a jacket that looked as if it was made of animal hide decorated with metal studs. On the hairless scalp and forehead they could see drawn the likeness of a severed head, with what was presumably meant to be blood coming from ruined eye sockets and the mouth as well as the neck.

"I have no idea," said Rhyaz. "Our agents mentioned seeing them, and that they pushed the residents of the villages and shantytowns around as if they were in charge. They have the look of some of the Ranz packs about them."

"They're so unlike the Primes we've met. Where did they come from? Are they perhaps throwbacks?"

"I doubt it. The Valtegan Warriors on Keiss looked like Kezule, nothing like that. They look and behave like thugs."

"Finish playing the recording," sighed Lijou, sitting back slightly. "No wonder they're writing that there's unrest building outside the City of Light if Packs of males like him are roaming around. K'oish'ik and the Primes are looking more and more like a species on the edge of disintegration and possible extinction. I'm not surprised they wanted our help!"

"That's all there is." He switched off the viewer and retrieved the data crystal. "I think we should alert our people at Haven to be ready to move

immediately," said Rhyaz. "We can't tell the Primes we know about their situation, but we can be ready to help if a crisis develops."

"Not if," said Lijou, glancing at him. "When."

"I'll also order our agents to conceal listening and warning devices as well as cameras at the tunnel entrances they've discovered and the main gates into the City. We need to be prepared for the slightest sign of possible insurrection."

"That would be wise," agreed Lijou.

Then Rhyaz remembered the reason he'd originally been coming to see Lijou. "I was on my way to tell you about a message from Anchorage when I was given the letter and the crystal. In light of this report, I'm sure the two are connected. The *Watchers* intercepted a transmission meant for M'zull. Anchorage sent it to us because they were unable to decipher the code. The signal originated from outside the City, quite possibly from one of these groups. They could be in league with the M'zullians."

"I think you're right. Have we managed to decipher it yet?"

"It just arrived. I'm going to get Alex and Kai onto it as well. Those two have a knack for this kind of work and we need it deciphered as soon as possible. I'll also have to get a report on all this off to Governor Nesul and the High Command. War could suddenly have got a lot closer to home than we anticipated."

"I'll help you after we've eaten. I'm glad Alex found her niche here," said Lijou, getting up to return the viewer to his desk. "I told you when she did she'd quiet down. Would you switch off the heater, please, Rhyaz? We should head upstairs. The food will have arrived by now."

"I don't know that she's calmed down that much," murmured Rhyaz, getting up to do as he'd been asked.

Lijou laughed. "You know what I mean. She's still a breath of fresh air about the place, one that we needed, but she's more settled now, especially with you."

"More like a mini-hurricane," said Rhyaz as he joined Lijou at the door.

Lijou placed his arm companionably around the younger male's shoulder. "Come on, Rhyaz, admit it, Vartra was right, you did need a companion to stop you getting overwhelmed by your work."

"I admit it, you and Vartra were right. She's become my touch-stone," said Rhyaz simply. "On those bleak days, like today, and when agents' lives are lost in the field, she's there for me. I can lean on her and find a reason for it all."

"We all need that, Rhyaz," said Lijou. "Especially now."

### **Shola, Kusac's Estate, same day**

"What's this all about, Kaid?" asked Garras as, putting his mug of c'shar on the low table, he sat down beside Rezac on the sofa facing the patio windows. "We haven't met like this in a long while," he said, looking round the crowded den. "Is there a mission in the offing? I thought there was something up when there was all that fuss around the shuttle the other week."

"Jurrel's here," said Dzaka quietly, looking across to where the dark-pelted young male sat opposite him. "Has it something to do with Kusac and Banner?"

"Have they found my brother?" demanded Kitra, sitting up and leaning past Carrie to look at Kaid. "Where is he? Is he all right?"

"Let Kaid tell you," said Carrie, putting an arm around her bond-sister's waist and drawing her back onto the sofa by her side.

Nursing his mug, Kaid looked around the sea of faces. He and Carrie had between them decided this would not be a full briefing on the situation.

There were certain facts that would remain private, like the matter of the scent marker, and others, like the existence of the cubs, that they couldn't risk divulging until they had left Shola.

"No, I'm afraid we haven't found Kusac yet," he said, glancing at Kitra, "but we do know that he was sent on a mission sanctioned by AIReI for the Brotherhood."

"I knew he couldn't have been guilty of those awful things Raiban and the newsvids were accusing him of," said Kitra delightedly.

"So all that business about him being mentally unstable and stealing the *Couana* was just a cover," said Dzaka.

"Not completely," said Carrie.

"Oh, he stole the *Couana*," said Kaid, taking a drink from his mug. "With the Brotherhood's help. The mission was so sensitive that it couldn't be known that Kusac had left Shola unless some plausible explanation was given. Thus the public statement that mental instability made him steal the ship to return to the Prime world."

"So he's not unstable," said Jo.

Kaid looked across at the dark-haired Human who was Rezac's Third, and his Leska at this time, just as Carrie was Kaid's. He hesitated. "I don't believe so, in the light of what we've found out," he said at last.

"What was this mission and how did you find out about it?" asked Garras.

"Jurrel noticed that in the message crystal Kusac left for Carrie, his knife had a command mark on the inner side of the grip. As to what the mission was, Kezule sent him a message requesting his presence at a rendezvous. He said he had something of interest to him."

There was a stir of surprise from all present at this news.

"I take it that Stronghold intercepted it," said Jurrel.

Kaid nodded. "Kezule, as you know, had left his world with some sixty young people and no one knew where he went. The Prime Ambassador asked our government to inform them if the *Watchers* caught sight of him. Seems the Emperor wanted him back as his adviser. And we, of course, wanted to know why Kezule left and where he was."

"That's why Kusac had to leave Shola openly under a cloud of suspicion," said Carrie, her anger evident in her voice.

"But he and Kezule are enemies," stammered Kitra, her ears folding flat in fear as she looked round the faces of the adults. "It could have been a trap! How could Stronghold send him there knowing that?"

"The need for the information was too great, Kitra," said Kaid. "And the need to find out why Kezule wanted your brother in the first place."

"Why did he want him?" asked Garras, picking up his mug. "Do we know that yet?"

"Yes, but unfortunately I'm not at liberty to tell you," said Kaid. "Suffice it to say, Kusac returned to Haven, then taking the *Venture II*, headed back to meet Kezule."

Exclamations of disbelief came from everyone in the room, except himself and Carrie. "He went back," said Kaid, raising his voice, "because he'd promised Kezule to return and help him train his people. Kezule left to set up a colony of his own because he said the Primes were dying out, and the Warriors like the M'zullians were not the way to go. Apparently he's trying to breed the castes out of the Primes, make them one people again."

Kaid waited till the exclamations of disbelief had died down. "All his crew went with him, except for Chima, whom he left behind because she was female," he said. "They must have agreed with what he was doing, known he wasn't unstable, or they would have prevented him from leaving."

"Apart from Banner, do we now know who went with him?" asked Garras.

"Khadui, Jayza, and Dzaou."

"Dzaou?" exclaimed T'Chebbi, speaking for the first time. "Whose idea was it to send that misbegotten tree-rhudda with him?"

"Rhyaz," said Carrie shortly.

"He had Banner with him," said Jurrel, looking at Garras. "He'd make sure Dzaou toed the line."

"Banner had been watching Kusac for me for some time," said Kaid. "Protecting him from himself, if you will."

"When do we leave?" asked Dzaka in the small silence that followed.

"There's a problem," began Kaid.

T'Chebbi's laugh was not humorous. "When is there not?" she asked.

"It wasn't easy finding out about this mission," said Kaid, ears tilting back fractionally as he glanced at Carrie. "Not least because just before Kusac left, he and I had rowed and I refused to believe there might be a hidden message for us in the crystal he left for Carrie. We went to Stronghold just over two weeks ago to speak to Rhyaz and Lijou and force the truth about this mission out of them. We did that, but as a consequence have been placed under planetary arrest—we can't leave Shola. The Brotherhood is guarding the spaceport and watching the perimeter of the main estate."

"When do we leave?" repeated Dzaka.

"In four days," said Carrie with a slight smile.

"How'd you manage that?" asked Garras with a grin.

"The same way Kusac left, except Toueesut's allowing us to borrow the *Couana*," said Kaid, taking a swig from his mug then placing it on the low table. "I can't take all of you," he said warningly, "but all of you needed to know where we're going and why. The choice hasn't been easy, believe me. I want my best people with me, but I also need to leave good folk behind to carry on in case none of us return." He looked round them all.

"We don't even know if our people are still alive, or if they are, whether they are prisoners."

"I'm going," said Kitra firmly. "You'll not stop me. He's my brother."

"Kitra, you need to stay here. If we don't return, then you're next in line as our Clan Leader until my cubs grow up," said Carrie, turning to the young female. "You have to stay, kitling."

"Stop calling me a kitling! I'm a mother like you, and I'm life-bonded!" she exclaimed angrily.

"We can't take you, Kitra, for the reasons Carrie said," replied Kaid. "I'm sorry. Rezac and Jo, you're coming. T'Chebbi, you too, and you, Garras, if you feel you can handle it."

"Try leaving me," he said.

"Jurrel, I'll need you on the backup vessel. I need those who've had experience of dealing with the Valtegans, not the Primes, with me. I'll brief you when I have more details, but for now, you leave with us."

Jurrel nodded.

"There's two other additions to the team," said Kaid, "but I didn't invite them here for obvious reasons. We're taking Ashay and Shaayiyisis, the Sumaan Captain. The *Couana* normally has three Sumaan crewing for it, we're going to take two. They're fast and they're heavy fighters, and they've been training with us. I reckon they can give a very good account of themselves if need be."

Garras nodded. "Some muscle on our side makes sense, especially considering the speed and strength of even the Primes."

"If Stronghold has the 'port guarded against us, how are we going to get to the Couana?" asked Rezac.

"It'll come to us," grinned Kaid. "We need to be packed in two days so Toueesut can take our gear on his aircar to load onto the *Couana* when he goes to pick it up. He'll arrive here at dawn on the sixteenth and we'll have to be waiting as we won't have long to get on board before Stronghold realizes what's happening. We want to avoid any confrontations with them."

"You haven't said where we going yet," said T'Chebbi.

"We believe Kezule is on one of the old outposts, a major one, near the Prime world," said Kaid, getting to his feet. "I have a map but we need to run it through the *Couana*'s nav comp to make sense of it, and we haven't been able to do that yet as the *Couana* has been at the 'port getting serviced. We have no idea how long we'll be away, so pack accordingly. All our preparations will need to be done covertly, and I'm sure I've no need to remind you that nothing we've said here must be repeated."

"Why such tight security, Kaid?" asked Garras. "Surely among our own there's nothing to fear?"

Kaid looked at Carrie before speaking. "Kusac was sent on this mission specifically at the request of the Clan Lord, his father," he said reluctantly when she gave a slight nod. "If he hears we're preparing to leave..." He left the rest unsaid.

"My father sent him?" said Kitra, her voice full of disbelief. "He asked Kusac to go and meet Kezule, knowing what he did to Dzaka and Kashini?"

"He did it on behalf of our government," said Dzaka as the others rose to leave.

"I don't care!" she exclaimed, tears springing to her eyes. "How could my father do that to him! Kaid, we're going with you! You'll not leave us behind, not now I know this!"

Kaid sent to his son and Carrie, asking them to calm Kitra down as he showed the others out. When he returned, the situation was no easier with both of them now sitting in angry silence.



"We're going," said Dzaka determinedly. "We've scores to settle with Kezule for one thing. You'll not leave me behind, Father, not this time."

"I can't take you," said Kaid, sitting back down in his chair. "Besides, Kusac may be on good terms with Kezule, we don't need personal grudges clouding the situation."

Dzaka snorted contemptuously. "You know me better than that. You want your best fighters, and you know how good I am. You have no excuse for leaving me."

"What of Kitra? Have you thought of her? She's..."

"Don't you dare call me a kitling," snarled Kitra angrily, hair and tail bushing out as her ears began to fold sideways in anger. "I've been training with Dzaka whenever I've been able, and you know I share his knowledge and skills!"

"But not his experience," said Kaid gently, leaning forward toward her. "It's too great a..."

"How am I to get experience if I don't go on missions? And you can't just stop Dzaka from doing them because of me! I have to go, Kaid! My father had no right to send Kusac. I need to go to right that wrong!"

"He had every right to send him, unfortunately," said Kaid.

"Let them come, Tallinu," said Carrie suddenly, getting up and heading over to the hot plate for a drink. "They're both right, we can't leave them. It was bad enough for Dzaka when you were taken by Ghezu, never mind what happened to us on the *Kz'adul*. As for Kitra, she may only be fifteen, but she proved what kind of spirit she has when she joined Dzaka as Kezule's captive. If she's old enough to have a Leska, be married, and have a cub, she's old enough to go with us."

"Carrie!" exclaimed Kaid. "Kusac will skin me alive if I take her!"

"And I will if you don't," she said, turning round to look at him with a feral grin. "So take your choice."

"Thank you, Carrie!" exclaimed Kitra, bouncing over to hug her, tail swaying excitedly.

"Don't thank me, kitling, you have no idea what going on a mission involves," she said dryly, returning the hug. "And don't expect to be in the front line! You'll go where you're told, hear me?"

"Yes, Carrie!"

"And no matter how angry you are, you say nothing to your parents. I suggest you two go and pack what you need under the pretext of staying with us for a few days and move in here till we leave. Less chance of anything going wrong."

"On our way now, Carrie," said Dzaka, grinning, as they got up and left before Kaid could contradict her.

"This is insane, Carrie," said Kaid, "Taking a child with us like that! Who'll look after the cubs if they go? We've no idea what we're facing, you know that, don't you? There's still the threat of war hanging over us all."

"Kitra will be as safe with us as she would be here, in that case," she said unrepentantly, coming back with her coffee. "As for the cubs, I'm sure Taizia and Meral would be happy to stay here with them. Forget Kitra for a moment. Dzaka needs to be with you, he needs to know you want him beside you this time, Tallinu. You can't leave him behind again, he deserves to go, and would if it wasn't for her."

"I know," he admitted. "But..."

"How good is Dzaka?" she interrupted, curling up on the sofa again.

"The best. He should be, I trained him myself."

"Are you saying he's not good enough to protect Kitra?"

"No, you know I'm not."

"Leaving him says to the others that's what you think."

He looked at her then got up and joined her on the sofa. "I'm not going to win, am I?" he asked, reaching out to stroke her cheek.

She shook her head. "Because you know I'm right."

## **Kij'ik Outpost, evening, same day**

Banner was sitting at the desk in his room, fitting an energy cell into the small handheld device he'd constructed. That done, he pressed the power button. The screen lit up on cue. He had power, now to find out if he could patch it into the main engineering comp.

Methodically, using the keypad, he worked his way through the frequencies that were the most likely ones. At last, the screen suddenly filled with a rolling stream of data, signifying that he'd made the connection through the back door he'd programmed into the machine several weeks ago.

His device wasn't sophisticated, it was very much a string and sticky tape job, but with any luck, he'd be able to access many of the support systems that kept the outpost running. Before he was willing to test it, he needed to know if there was anyone logged in or if the system was jogging along in standby mode.

A few more keystrokes and he could see there was no activity at the controls. Checking his wrist comm, he saw it was now seventeenth hour—21:00 in station time—too early to do much more than a quick and dirty test. Pressing the keys again, he programmed in a short blackout to start in two minutes and last for three, then sat and waited to see what would happen.

On the dot, the lights flickered, faded, then died. Switching off his device, he stuck it in his pocket and turned on the back-light of his wrist comm, watching the time. Outside in the corridor, he could hear doors opening and voices exclaiming loudly. Again, right on time, the lights came back on.

Pleased, he pulled the desk drawer out and tipping the contents on the desk, taped the device to the underside before replacing it in its runners. This was much easier, and far less traceable than the few times he'd hacked his room's vid com unit. With his hand, he swept the assorted bits and pieces back into the drawer, stopping when he saw the piece of frayed rope he'd used to bind Kusac with several days before.

Picking it up, he examined the raw edges again, still puzzled as to how Kusac had managed to get free. He'd felt no rough edges on the bed frame when he'd tied the knots, but it didn't mean there had been none. Looking more closely this time, he noticed that amid the frayed ends were a couple of strands that looked fused, as if heat or friction had been applied to them. How the hell had Kusac rubbed the rope fast enough to cause friction burns on it without him noticing his movements?

Baffled, he put it back in the drawer— even more baffling than that was Kusac's reaction to last night. He'd have expected him to have been angry, but he'd shown no reaction except distress at the time. Mind, considering the drugs had made him amenable in the extreme, he wouldn't have been able to feel anger till the effects had worn off. Still, all things considered, Kusac had taken it too well in his opinion. And as for refusing the tests... He supposed he could understand that, but it was still strange that he'd turn down the opportunity to find out who it had been— unless he really was too embarrassed, or he was protecting someone.

Thoughtfully, he leaned back in his seat. The female who came to mind first was Doctor Zayshul, but she'd arrived with Kezule so that was unlikely. He hadn't seen Kusac actually take an interest in any of the other females, unless Dzaou was to be believed about the incident in the corridors with Zhalmo, one of Kezule's daughters. Unfortunately, everything Dzaou said was suspect because of his determination to show Kusac up as unfit to command the group.

His wrist comm buzzed, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes, Jayza," he asked, answering the call.

"You were going to join us in the rec," said the youth. "The Captain's already here. It's quiet tonight, we were going to start up a card game."

"On my way," he said, getting up.

As he approached the iris just before the rec room, he heard low, angry voices, female ones, and instinctively ducked back into the residential side corridor that mirrored their own. Out of their sight, he strained his ears forward trying to make out what they were saying. At the same time he dug in his pouch for a coin he could drop as an alibi if he needed it.

The voices were too low for him to hear them clearly, and even when he edged closer, he could only catch the odd word. He did, however hear the last hiss of displeasure and the footsteps as one of them headed off down the corridor. He hovered there, unsure whether or not to wait for the other one to leave when he heard the second female start walking and the door of the rec open then close.

Sprinting through the opening, he glanced down the corridor but it was already empty. There had barely been time for her to make it to the next corridor junction, therefore it was likely her quarters were up there. He hurried into the rec, hoping at least to catch sight of the other female. Only one, Zhalmo, was on her feet and threading her way through the tables to the bar. Was Kezule somehow involved in this?

He acknowledged Jayza's gesture of greeting with an ear flick and made for the bar himself, running through his mind what he'd heard. Something about scents that they, the Sholans, couldn't smell— which was not news— and M'kou, Zhalmo's brother.

He nodded politely to Zhalmo as she looked round when he joined her at the bar.

"Lieutenant," she said, with a smile.

"I was wondering where M'kou was," he said as the male behind the bar began to pour an ale for her.

"He's off duty tonight," she said. "Spending some time with Lazaik for a change. Is something wrong? Can I help you?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing that can't wait till tomorrow. I didn't know M'kou had a partner."

"Oh, yes, for some time now," she confirmed. "One of the civilians we brought with us." Smiling politely, she turned back to take her drink then headed over to a table where her sister sat with some friends.

Carrying his drink, he made his way over to join the others, wondering if perhaps he was sniffing at the wrong scent. Maybe Zhalmo was just being protective of her brother. Kusac was the only one who could tell any of the Primes apart by scent alone, and if he'd been too drugged to be able to recognize her scent again, then unless she gave herself away to them, identifying the female responsible was virtually impossible.

"You look very thoughtful," said Kusac as Banner sat down.

"Me? No," he grinned, then decided to play a hunch. "I was just appreciating Zhalmo. She's an attractive female for a Prime. Well-muscled and trim."

"I prefer her sister Shezhul," said Jayza, grinning as he automatically looked over to where Zhalmo was sitting.

"I don't doubt you do. I'm not myself attracted to any of them," said Khadui. "Not that I would criticize any of you for forming a relationship with one," he added.

"What about you, Kusac?" Banner asked, raising his glass to his lips.

Kusac glanced over at her then back to Banner. "She's attractive," he agreed, "but if you're wondering if it was her last night, forget it, that's not her style. She's too direct. She propositioned me on the first day. Deal the cards, Khadui."

Banner moved his seat slightly, making sure that as well as not being able to see the other's hands, he had a good view of the room. He wanted to keep half an eye open to see if anyone showed an overt interest in their group, and in Kusac in particular.

His effort was wasted in one way as throughout the evening, upward of half a dozen females wandered over to chat with them, each of them standing as close to Kusac as possible without it seeming impolite. What it did prove to him, though, was that there was something about Kusac that made him more attractive to the females than the rest of them. And whatever it was, M'kou had it, too.

When the evening was over, on their way back to their quarters, they saw Dzaou being escorted to his room by a guard.

"Excuse me," he murmured to Kusac. "I want to have a word with him, see if he left anything out of his statement. I'll let you know what I find out."

\* \* \*

Dzaou was angry and kept pacing the length of his small room. "All this because I tried to stop that female from getting into his room!" he snarled, tail swaying in wide arcs.

"No, your punishment is because you attacked the guard when he tried to stop you and then you forced the Captain's door open."

"Don't give me that crap, Banner," he said, rounding on him. "Those guards knew what was happening! They were there far too quickly!"

"You had long enough to be able to mess with the keypad before the night watch found you," Banner pointed out from where he sat at the desk. "As for the others, you had the first two disabled for long enough to actually get into the room before the second pair arrived. You aren't trying to tell me that they let you break in?"

"No, of course not!" he said, the movements of his tail becoming jerky. "They did stop me, but they knew she was going to be there! How else do you explain them ignoring her when she ran out of his bedroom?"

"I don't suppose it occurred to you that Kusac might have invited her to his room?"

"He'd no right to if he had. That's fraternizing with the enemy!"

"We're not enemies," said Banner calmly. "We may be here under duress, but we're not being treated as prisoners. Kezule has offered several times to return us to Haven."

"Us, yes, but not the cub!" said Dzaou, resuming his pacing.

Banner got to his feet. "I think you're the one who's become unfit for this mission, Dzaou. You should listen to yourself sometime. You will stop spying on the Captain because I am not going to relieve him of command just to satisfy your paranoid delusions. I suggest you get some rest, you'll need to be up early in the morning."

"There's more going on than you know, Banner," said Dzaou, watching him make his way to the door. "You'll find out one day and then you'll know I was right. He's hiding something from us, something big, and that isn't good. I reckon he's in league with them against us. You should have seen him last night, he was actually enjoying..."

"Good night, Brother," said Banner firmly, closing his door. Outside, he nodded to the guard who then locked Dzaou in for the night and left.

Sighing, he made his way to Kusac's room to report to him on the conversation. When he was done with that, he intended to see what he could find on the data banks about the Prime females. If a male could secrete a substance in his bite that would bind a female to him to the degree she'd go almost feral to protect him, then it stood to reason the females might have the same ability, but of a less violent nature. If he found nothing, he would have to start paying more attention to Lorish, see whether he could soft-talk the information out of her.



He also needed to talk to Khadui. It was worth keeping an eye on Zayshul and M'kou. With Kusac disinclined to push the matter, he was pretty sure Kezule wouldn't, on an official level at least. He might, however, deal with the female responsible on a less obvious level, if for no other reason than that he couldn't afford the breach to his own code of discipline.

\* \* \*

"I can understand the Captain not wanting to push for the female to be found," said Khadui, relaxing back on his bed and looking over to where Banner sat on the sofa. "It's not unusual. No male, especially a Brother, would like to admit publicly to being raped, Banner, and if she's found, there would be very public consequences. I don't know that you should pursue this against his wishes. I'll follow your orders, of course, but if we find out who it is, I suggest we deal with it ourselves in a less public fashion."

He considered the suggestion and reluctantly nodded. "We could do that," he said. "Scare the hell out of her and threaten to tell Kezule. We can decide that if we find her. Meanwhile, as I said, just watch the Doctor and M'kou, see who they speak to, try and eavesdrop if you can. The *Zan'droshi* gets cut loose in three days and we'll be working here again."

Khadui nodded as Banner got to his feet. "You really going to get close to Lorish?" he asked.

"If I have to," said Banner.

"May I suggest that you do it before Dzaou gets off his punishment detail? You don't want him messing it up one way or another."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, opening the door.

### **K'oish'ik, Palace kitchens, same day**

K'hedduk continued sprinkling the chocolate flakes over the dessert as Lufsu came into his small cold room.

"Stand back, K'hedduk," said the Inquisitor, holding the electronic wand ready.

He glanced up at him and then returned to the sprinkling, spinning it out for another half minute. Then he stood back.

Lufsu came closer and waved the wand carefully over the food and the few preparation dishes of fruit and chocolate.

"What's this?" he demanded, peering at it.

"Cakes soaked in sweet alcohol with fruit, a fruit gelatin mixture on top, then cream with the flaked chocolate," he replied.

"It's clean," said Lufsu, making a face. "Don't know how anyone can eat that stuff."

"The Empress became fond of it when she was pregnant," he replied, then, lowering his voice he said, "Tell M'zzik I'm striking on the nineteenth. He'll need to make sure the entrances we discussed last time are left open. Have you the sedative for me?"

"We've had no word back from M'zull," said Lufsu, equally quietly, as he reached into his pocket and slipped a bottle to him.

"I know. That's irrelevant. I only need them as backup after I've taken control," said K'hedduk, palming it into his trouser pocket. "I can't afford to wait. I have more than enough people if those who pose a danger are killed that night."

"M'zzik says don't look for more help from us than the opening of the doors."

"I won't need any more," he snapped, trying to keep his impatience in check.

Privately he was glad there had been no reply from M'zull. He could hold K'oish'ik himself for some time, he had no need of reinforcements courtesy of his brother, even if they were led by those loyal to his cause. It also gave them more time to gather support for him from the common

soldiers. "You'd better leave; the chef is going to suspect me of using poison at this rate!"

"The Enlightened One is still on Shola."

"We could wait forever for him to come back. He'll be dealt with later," snapped K'hedduk. The Prince's continued absence did annoy him, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had to move soon, establish his own power base now before the false Emperor tried to make treaty negotiations with M'zull and discovered the true situation.

"M'zikk wishes to know when your brother, the true Emperor will arrive."

"I don't know, he hasn't told me! Now get out of here!" he hissed angrily.

Lufsu stared at him coldly. "M'zzik is concerned that there are too many loose ends."

"Is there a problem, Inquisitor?" said a voice from the doorway.

"None," said Lufsu, straightening up. "I was intrigued by the smell of this dessert and asked what was in it. Perhaps the Head Inquisitor would like to sample this delicacy himself."

"It's not all for the Empress," said K'hedduk, suddenly obsequious. "It will be served to all present at the Royal table tonight. I'm sure High Inquisitor M'zzik will be there and will be able to taste it for himself."

Lufsu nodded and moved toward the door. "I'll be sure to tell him what's in store for him tonight."

"Get on with it!" hissed the chef as the crimson-robed Inquisitor disappeared.

K'hedduk hissed in anger. The nineteenth couldn't come soon enough, then he'd be rid of both this chef and the annoying Head Enforcer!

## **Kij'ik Outpost, Zhal-Mellasha 13th day, early morning (February)**

The proximity klaxon blared out suddenly, startling the entire bridge crew. Zhalmo slammed her hand down on the control, silencing it, then routing her readings to the duty officer, hit the main alarm and the Outpost-wide comm system.

"General Kezule and main crew to the bridge. All other personnel to emergency stations. Initiating Outpost-wide lockdown in three minutes. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill."

"Begin power shutdown. Terminate all active scans and initiate emergency backup systems," ordered Zaykkuh, hands flying over his board, checking the readouts and pulling up an image of the surrounding area on the long-range, passive scanners. "Cut all fuel feeds to the mess areas and temples."

"Draining hydro level stream, Captain," said Shartoh. "Pool emptied, sealing air locks to contain the water."

\* \* \*

Kezule, closely followed by Q'almo and Maaz'ih, entered the bridge at a run, taking the Captain's chair that Zaykkuh hurriedly vacated. "Status," he demanded as the lighting level briefly fluctuated.

"Powering down initiated for silent running," said Zaykkuh, taking the board to his left. "Proximity alarm went off and the passive scans show a large vessel heading our way."

"Get me visuals on screen," ordered Kezule. "What's the status of the *Zan'droshi*?"

"No one's on board, General," said Shartoh. "All utilities to it have been severed. Only the last cables anchoring her to Kij'ik remain."

"Winch her in against the landing bay doors," he snapped, cursing silently. Only a few more hours and they'd have cast the damned ship into a

decaying orbit around the gas giant. "Are the landing bay doors closed yet?"

"Flight command is doing that now, General," said Zaykkuh. "Meson cannon being retracted."

"Preparing to shut off life support and gravity to main Outpost."

"Leave gravity on, Shartoh. Shut down the atomics. Kill all other power except for bridge functions, passive scans and the Officers level sick bay. Route all comms and computing functions through the bridge."

"Aye, General. All irises closed. Initiating emergency air circulation," said Q'algo from Life Support. Like a slow heartbeat, they heard the sound of the giant fans in the air shafts begin to pick up speed. "I'm ordering corridor sweeps now to locate any stragglers."

"Flight control reports bay doors closed and winching in the *Zan'droshi* has commenced," said Shartoh.

"Zhalmo, I need visuals now," said Kezule, glancing toward her comms station.

"Reports coming in from Officers and Command mess areas confirming safe shutdown of facilities," said Q'algo.

"Laser signals coming in from the active defense asteroids, General," said Maaz'ih from the Nav board.

"Shut them down, we don't need offensives."

"It's coming into range, General," said Zhalmo. "On screen... Now."

Silently, the flattened diamond-shaped nose of one of the Primes' two science ships edged its way onto the screen.

"The science ship *Zh'adasho*," said Maaz'ih.

Kezule swore briefly. "Put up tactical, M'zynal. They're not science ships, they're heavy cruisers," he said. "What the hell are they doing out here? See if you can pick up any internal communications from them on passives, Zhalmo."

"Yes, sir," Zhalmo said, grabbing her headset.

He scanned the display, calculating the *Zh'adasho's* probable course and weighing his options. "Shartoh, tell engineering to route control of the attitude jets to my board. We need a ninety degree rotation to conceal the *Zan'droshi*. As soon as rotation's complete, cut gravity to the Outpost."

"Aye, sir. Command routed to you now," she said. "Flight command reports the *Zan'droshi* will be anchored to the side of Kij'ik in ten minutes."

"Tell them they have five," he snapped. "The *Zh'adasho* is coming in at 11:00 high to the plane of the ecliptic. I want the *Zan'droshi* at 6:00 low as soon as possible. Where are the Sholans?"

"The Captain and his Lieutenant called in. He's in the gym, and Lieutenant Banner is in the main assembly hall with the rest of their crew and the majority of the civilians on that level," said Zhalmo.

"Tell them to report to the briefing room. I want them on corridor sweeps— except for Dzaou. He can stay where he is."

"Yes, General."

\* \* \*

"Outpost rotational change is commencing in two minutes," said Shartoh's voice over the internal comms. "Gravity will be cut after the maneuver. Secure all loose objects."

Kusac had just finished checking the Prime temple and locking down the rec. Banner was off checking out theirs while Jayza and Khadui were pounding on the doors of the starboard living quarters and games room.

Now, while everyone was either occupied or gathered in the safe areas, would be a good time for him to examine the Outpost's main defense, the meson cannon.

Power to the secondary elevators had been cut, but there were staircases that went all the way down to that level. The low-level emergency lighting in the corridors gave him added cover as he snuck the last few yards toward the air lock leading to corridor A. Keying it open, he carefully looked round the corner, praying that the air lock at the far end would be closed, since beyond it was the main Security station on this level.

Thankfully, it was. Letting his breath out slowly, he edged his way into the main corridor, sealing the iris behind him. He was committed now, no matter what happened. Keeping himself close to the wall, he took the last few steps to the air lock slowly. Underneath the sound of the giant fans, he could no longer hear the rumble of the cannon's outermost muzzle being retracted. Even the faint sounds generated by the closing of the great clamshell doors had now ceased.

He checked his wrist unit. Still one minute to go before rotation. Slipping through the lock, he ran down the short access corridor to the stairwell. Opening it, he gripped the railings and after listening for any sounds, began to take the stairs as fast and as quietly as he could.

As he came level with the Command deck, he slowed down, stopping to listen and to reach out with his mind, searching to make sure the way was clear. It was; the minds he sensed were all too occupied with the imminent rotation.

He stopped on the landing, holding onto the stair rail and waited. It took less than two minutes for the rotation, then he felt himself begin to rise gently from the floor. Pulling his feet up onto the safety rail, he kicked off from there, aiming himself downward to glide to the half-landing below. Twisting at the crucial moment, he landed with all four limbs against the wall and sprang down the remaining section, grabbing at the handrail and easing himself, hand over hand, to a stop.

\* \* \*

Banner, meanwhile, had had a similar idea but his hinged on making for the seldom used main elevator at the other end of corridor 1. Forcing the doors open just enough to ease himself through into the lift shaft, he leaped across the empty gap for the maintenance ladder and started making his way down.

\* \* \*

The meson cannon level was empty apart from the two-person crew who'd just finished cranking the muzzle of the cannon back within the asteroid's shell and closing the concealing cover. There were fewer air locks on this level, and the emergency lighting had been cut to half what was normal. Quietly, keeping one hand on the safety grips attached to the walls, Kusac made his way along the narrow transverse starboard corridor, past empty pilots' living and recreational quarters that closely mirrored those on the Officers level.

At the final air lock, he waited until he sensed the cannon crew leave, then keyed it open. Ahead of him, stretching from floor to ceiling, was the massive reinforced barrel of the cannon that spanned the width of the Outpost. Once more kicking off from the wall, Kusac let himself drift toward the firing room. The door was locked. Without thinking, he put his hand on the pad and moments later, the door slid open. Taken aback, he pulled himself inside, snagging hold of the command chair. Sitting down, he anchored himself into it with his feet and began to examine the controls.

\* \* \*

Balancing precariously on the inner narrow lip of the meson cannon level, Banner eased his fingertips between the elevator doors, trying to pry them apart. They gave unexpectedly, and he found himself flailing in an undignified fashion in the center of the shaft. A hand snaked out, catching him by the arm and hauling him out.

"What the hell are you doing down here?" Kusac rumbled angrily as Banner grasped hold of his other arm and pulled himself upright.



"I could ask you the same question," his Second countered.

"Making sure the cannon can't be used against our people," Kusac said shortly, letting him go. "As I said I would. Now I suggest we get back to our own level before we're missed."

"What else is down here?" asked Banner, looking around as Kusac started moving back down the corridor.

"Pilots' quarters, and simulation rooms," said Kusac. "All empty. There are grav shafts that lead up to the flight deck above, but we can't risk using them. The stairs are safer."

"What did you do?" Banner asked, grasping hold of the grips and following him.

"Made a few adjustments that can be undone quickly if necessary," he said.

"Sounds good," said Banner.

## **The Bridge**

After two hours spent watching the *Zh'adasho* sitting motionless approximately five light-minutes away, Kezule could feel his crew getting restless. The fact they'd been unable to pick up any internal communications from it hadn't helped.

"Shartoh, get some refreshments for us from the dispensers," he said. "The rest of you, remain at your posts and be vigilant, but stand down."

"I'm picking up a jump point forming outside the system, General," said Zhalmo, her voice tense. "Putting it on screen now."

"Cancel that order," he snapped as all eyes turned to the far wall.

The jump point formed, spitting out a small and easily identifiable craft.

"It's one of the *Watchers*," said Zhalmo.

The scent of tension in the air increased, but there was no fear, Kezule noted with satisfaction even as he ran through all the possible reasons for a *Watcher* to join the *Zh'adasho*.

"Have they found us, General?" asked Q'almo, turning to look at his father.

"Unlikely. Even if they have, the worst we face is a request for talks," said Kezule thoughtfully, as the small craft altered course to rendezvous with the *Zh'adasho*.

Over the course of the next half hour, they watched as the landing bay doors on the *Zh'adasho* opened and the *Watcher* slowed to intercept and dock inside it.

\* \* \*

In his quarters on the hydroponics level, Giyarishis was observing it all through his local Unity net, composing himself for the call he knew would come from the Camarilla. This had *not* been expected. He could imagine the scene there now, the consternation, and even panic from some members, the anger from the Isolationists. He bobbed his head thoughtfully. Since they had awakened the Hunter, in his opinion, for the first time in the Camarilla's long history, far too much had become unpredictable. Hkairass would make much of this. At least Phratry Leader Annuur was on board the *Watcher*.

Within the swirling mists and colors of Unity, he watched as the *Zh'adasho* closed its bay doors and slowly began to accelerate away from the area.

\* \* \*

Kezule kept Kij'ik locked down for another two hours before sounding the all clear. Once the Outpost had returned to normal, he waited until the damage reports had come in then gave orders for the civilian leaders, the

Sholan Captain, and the various team leaders to gather in the briefing room on the Officers' level for debriefing. Lockdown had been achieved within the time limits he'd set, but he was certain it could be done even more efficiently. Thankfully, damage from abandoned food and drinks had been restricted to soaked carpeting and wet floors in the mess and rec areas, no essential equipment had been damaged, but there was still room for improvement.

**Litany for Relaxation.**

*Eyes closed, I set my cares aside,  
of Pathways Vartra bring me tranquillity.  
Still my limbs and quiet my mind,  
Vartra grant me serenity.  
My heart beats a more languid pace,  
Vartra bring me tranquillity.  
Breathing slows to soft and calm,  
Vartra grant me serenity.  
Bringing with it a gentle peace,  
Vartra bring me tranquillity.*

— Attributed to Sister M'Nokada,  
from the Brotherhood's  
*Book of Pathways*

## Chapter 17

### **Shola, En-Shalla estate, morning, Zhal-Mellasha 13th day (February)**

RAY stopped at the door of the treatment room watching Vanna and Carrie as the latter read from a list and the former collected the items from her drug cabinet.

"Fifty large field dressings," Carrie called out. "Isn't that rather a lot, Vanna?"

They couldn't be more different, he thought, watching the lithe felinoid, tail extended for balance, stretching up to reach the contents of the cupboard, then turning to look at the small blonde Human female in her black military-style jacket and trousers who was lounging against the treatment bed.

"Not for a restock, Carrie," she said. "Hello, Ray. I thought you were busy with Jack," she added, turning round to pass five cartons to Carrie.

Carrie glanced up as she put the comp pad down and took them from Vanna. "Ray," she said, nodding before turning back to stack the cartons in the large container on the bed.

"I'm taking a break," he said, coming into the room. "What're you doing?"

"Restocking personal medikits," said Vanna smoothly. "What's next, Carrie?"

"Same of medium," said Carrie, picking up the pad again briefly, "and two hundred small dressings, plus one hundred rolls of bandages."

"Sounds like you're outfitting a small army," he said, sitting down in Vanna's desk chair.

"That's what we are here," said Carrie, accepting the first lot of cartons. "We're actually quite busy, Ray. If you're going over to the gym mess, you'd better head off now before your break is over."

"I was going to get some coffee from the dispenser in the staff lounge," he said. "I hoped you'd join me. I'm sure Vanna can spare you for a quarter of an hour."

"Vanna is helping me," she said, continuing to pack the container. "This is my responsibility as Clan Leader."

"Come on, what difference will fifteen minutes make?" he said. "I'm sure there isn't a pressing need for this to be done right now."

"Ten rolls of tape," said Carrie, glancing at the list again as she stowed the last carton away.

"They're loose," warned Vanna, starting to lob them at her.

He watched her catch them all, even the one Vanna miscalculated and nearly dropped.

"You've got good reflexes," he said, kicking himself as he did. Of all the inane things to say, he could pick them.

She turned to look at him, her pupils suddenly shrinking down to vertical slits. "I've got the eyes for it." Then they expanded again to black circles.

He could swear he heard her purring! "Don't do that eye trick on me," he said uncomfortably, looking away from her to blink. "It's unnerving."

Vanna laughed. "That's our Carrie," she said. "Okay, what's next?"

"Fifteen hypoderms," she said. "I brought the others back and put them in the sterilizer first thing this morning."

This time Vanna came over to hand them to her.

"I think that's everything," Carrie said, checking her list and having a final look at the nearly full container.

"You forgot the sterile water packs," said Vanna, going over to another cupboard. "I'll issue you fifty."

"What about the coffee, Carrie?" persisted Ray. "You just said you're finished."

"Ray, you're jangling my thoughts," said Carrie, scrolling through the comp pad. "I really can't take a break right now, I'm too busy. Energy cells," she said to Vanna. "I forgot fresh energy cells for the hand scanners."

Vanna pulled a drawer open and took out a pack which she tossed to her.

"Thanks," she said absently, continuing to look at the pad as she automatically put her hand out to catch the pack. "Has Garras organized the chargers and the fresh power cells for the energy pistols and rifles?"

"He's doing that this afternoon."

She nodded, then looked up at her. "Are you sure we've enough wound sealant and coagulant sprays? Fifteen cans of each doesn't seem much and this batch of cans is a lot smaller."

"These are designed to fit in the jackets," said Vanna, turning back to her cupboard. "Take another five if you're really worried, just update your pad for me. You did remember to add in the sterile water packs, didn't you?"

"Doing it now," she said, punching the tiny keypad then glancing at her wrist comm. "I gotta go, Vanna. I promised Kitra and Dzaka I'd meet them in the gym. Rezac will pick this up in about half an hour."

"Flash it at my desk comp before you go," said Vanna, putting the rigid top on the container and sealing it. "You can always review the lists later and make up the quota if anything's been missed."

"Will do." She turned and walked over to the desk. "Excuse me, Ray," she said pointedly. "I need to update Vanna's records."

He got up, more than a little irritated by the way the two were ignoring him.

Carrie pointed the comp pad at the desk unit and pressed one of the keys. A small beep sounded, then the screen flashed up a message. "Updating medical stock data," it intoned as she turned away from it.

"Done," she said, pushing the comp pad into the thigh pocket on her trousers and moving toward the door.

Ray reached out, catching her by the arm, being careful to make his touch light, unlike the last time.

He heard her yelp, but all he remembered afterward was Carrie's hand clamping down on his, and his arm being twisted, hand in a wrist lock, his fingers held painfully downward, then he was released.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snarled, eyes blazing in anger. "I told you before, never touch a telepath! Dammit, Ray, you've been here long enough to know better!" With that, she stormed out the door.

Ray stood massaging his hand, too shocked to say or do anything.

Vanna came over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Come on, I'll take you down for coffee," she said, drawing him out into the corridor with her.

"All I did was touch her arm," he said, reverting to English. "What's with that woman anyway? There was no need to react like that."

"She was mind-speaking with her bond-sister," said Vanna, letting him go. "A physical interruption at such a time is extremely painful. She'll have quite a headache now. I did tell you when you came here why you couldn't touch any of us unless invited. That's why we have laws concerning no touching."



"You actually have laws about it?" he asked incredulously as he followed her down the stairs to the ground level.

"We do," she confirmed. "If that had happened in Valsgarth town and been seen by one of the Protectors, you'd have been instantly arrested. There's a jail term as the penalty, quite a stiff one actually."

"That's a lot over the top," he said, following her round the corner into the short corridor that led to the lounge. "Just for touching?"

"Think of it this way," she said, opening the door and holding it for him. "Apart from the physical pain and the discomfort you've caused Carrie, every time you touch any telepath we instantly know what's in your surface thoughts. You are invading our minds, forcing your mental presence on us."

"You're kidding."

"I assure you, I'm not," she said, heading over to the dispenser and dialing for a mug of coffee and one of c'shar. "Everyone's mind is giving out their thoughts all the time. Mostly it's like hearing a low, background buzz unless they're looking at you or interacting with you on some level. Then, unless we've got our mental shields up, we can hear your surface thoughts loud and clear. Don't worry, we usually have them up," she added, catching sight of his stricken look.

She handed him his mug and waited for her own to fill. "But touch is different. If we're expecting it, we can make sure we pick up very little from you. However if we're not expecting it, then the effect can be devastating, depending on the circumstances."

Collecting her own mug, she went to sit on one of the sofas.

"So just for bumping into a telepath on the street I could end up in jail?" he asked, taking a seat at a safe distance from her. "That's not a very fair system."

"Not for bumping into one," she said with a slight smile, "but you would get yelled at, maybe even an official warning. That's why all telepaths wear purple, or in the Brothers' and Sisters' case, a purple edging, to make us highly visible. You did get told that, didn't you?"

He nodded, trying to make sense of what she'd said.

"I bet you dismissed it as being unlikely, didn't you?" She grinned at him over the rim of her mug. "Believe me, it's not. We're more physically vulnerable than nontelepaths so we're protected from physical harm by the law."

"Fair enough," he said. "I can see why you'd need to be, but still, she didn't have to do some martial arts moves on me."

Vanna raised an eye ridge at him. "That was your second mistake," she chuckled.

"Second?" he asked, giving a wry grin. "One wasn't enough, huh?"

"I know Carrie's told you she's one of the Warrior Elite of Shola, a Sister in the Brotherhood of Vartra. When you grabbed hold of her, she reacted as a Warrior, to protect herself."

Since he'd arrived here, he'd heard a lot about the Brotherhood, especially from the other Humans on the estate. "Come off it, she hasn't been here long enough to be trained to that degree. It takes years!"

"Not if you have a Sholan Brother or Sister as a Leska," said Vanna quietly. "If you've been talking to our Humans, then doubtless you'll have heard them mention Kaid Tallinu."

"Yes," he said warily. "He's one of the best around, was nearly their Guild Master." That wasn't all they'd said, he remembered. He was the hardest bastard around and when he took training sessions, you'd better know your stuff because he took no prisoners. "You're not going to tell me that her Leska is that same Kaid, are you? You are." He shut his eyes briefly.

"Shit!" Trust him to pick on the one woman on the whole estate who was his wife!

"He and the Clan Leader, Kusac Aldatan," she confirmed. "Oh, you've nothing to worry about," she chuckled. "Kaid isn't mad at you, neither is Carrie now, despite being angry at the time. She's already explained it wasn't done intentionally."

"He knows already?"

"He knows everything she does instantly," Vanna confirmed. "Just as my Leska does."

"That's some link," he muttered, gulping down a mouthful of coffee to steady his nerves.

"Yes," said Vanna, a gentle smile on her face, "It is. However, I suggest you forget any romantic ideas you have about Carrie. She's more than happy at the moment."

"That obvious, huh?" he muttered.

"Only to me," said Vanna, getting up. "I'm afraid Carrie hadn't even noticed. If you want to apologize for giving her a headache, I suggest you leave it till second meal. She'll still be over at the gym. Now I'm afraid I have to get back to my work."

"Thanks," he said as, taking her mug with her, she left.

\* \* \*

At lunchtime, he headed over to the gym as usual but went to the front desk to ask which room she was in.

"Down the hall on the right," said the Human behind the desk. "If they're not there, you'll find them in the gun range over there," he pointed down the opposite corridor.

They had a gun range here? He was beginning to get the distinct impression that he'd completely underestimated Carrie. He'd seen what he thought was a young woman in an unhappy relationship with a Sholan, and had been attracted not only by her looks and what he'd seen of her personality, but by her vulnerability. From what Vanna had said, this was far from the case.

Given the noises coming from behind the door, the gym was occupied. He stepped inside carefully. As well as Carrie, who was now dressed in loose sweat trousers and top, there were three Sholans there. One he recognized as Kitra from her size and distinctive blonde coloring, the other two he wasn't quite sure of as he couldn't see their faces. From their size, both were males, one brown-coated, and the other one was gray.

The lighter of the two males was demonstrating a kick to the young female while Carrie was sparring with the darker male. He leaned against the wall, watching them. Her partner was launching a flurry of kicks and punches at her, at a speed almost too fast for his eyes to follow. Carrie, though backing off, was meeting them with blocks until she saw an opening and grabbed his arm. Moments later she had twisted him around so his back was against her chest and a knife he hadn't seen her wearing was held to his throat.

The male froze, and as she instantly released him and backed off, the lighter male laughed and called out to them.

"She had you there, Dzaka. Don't be afraid to use your strength on her, she's tougher than she looks."

He recognized them then. She'd been sparring with Kitra's husband, and the other one had to be Kaid. He began to worry that he'd done the right thing by coming here.

Carrie turned to look at him. Her face creasing in a frown, she came over to him. "What is it now, Ray?" she asked.

"I won't keep you long," he said, pushing himself off the wall. "Just wanted to say sorry for giving you that headache. I didn't realize fully how just touching you could be painful. Vanna explained it all to me."

She grinned. "It's okay, I managed to get rid of the headache quickly. Just remember you aren't on Earth and we're not Humans."

He nodded, not knowing what to say next. "I suppose I'll head off for lunch, then."

"Good-bye," she said, heading back to the others.

He made his way down the corridor back to the mess, realizing Vanna had been right. Nothing about Carrie was ordinary, even leaving aside her Telepathy, her eyes and her Sholan husbands. Damn, but she'd moved fast! And the way she'd stood up to Dzaka like that... faced with a Sholan male that size, he couldn't have stood his ground the way she had. As for pulling out the concealed knife... He shook his head and sighed. No, she would never have been interested in him the way he'd have liked. She belonged to another world, the one she now lived on, not to his.

### **Toueesut's house, night of Zhal-Mellasha 15th day (February)**

Carrie stirred on the cushions, running through in her head the lists of everything she'd packed, trying to make sure she'd forgotten nothing just to keep her mind busy. She was missing her cubs already.

"They'll be fine," said Kaid quietly from beside her, his hand touching her thigh comfortingly. "Taizia and Meral will enjoy looking after them, and having playmates for their young one."

She nodded, then jumped as a high-pitched beep sounded from Toueesut's comm link.

A few, unusually short for him, trills and riffs of sound, and he was beaming at them. "We go outside now as they will be here for us in a few minutes."

There was a general rustling as they got to their feet. Filing out into the night, they headed quickly down to the landing pad. They were traveling

light, the last of their luggage having been taken to the *Couana* by Toueesut two days before when he'd checked his ship out.

The shuttle arrived first, doors opening as soon as it touched down. They piled in, diving for the seats as they heard the almost inaudible whine of the *Couana* approaching. Then their small craft was flooded by a blinding beam of light as it rose vertically into the air to dock in the tail section of the *Couana* high above them.

\* \* \*

"Ray! You gotta see this!" Andy called out. "It's a ship, an interstellar one! I've never seen anything this big around here before! And there's a shuttle taking off from the landing pad!"

"What?" Ray was at his side in seconds, peering up at the bright lights hovering a couple of hundred feet above the end of the village. "Jesus! What the hell is that doing here?"

There was a loud banging at their door and Andy rushed to answer it. He was back a few minutes later, by which time the ship's lights had gone out and the sound of the engines had grown to a skull-splitting whine as it began to accelerate. Moments later, it had vanished.

"That was one of the Brothers. We're not to worry, it was a scheduled pickup. Seems there's a mission on."

Ray let the curtains drop, remembering the medical supplies Carrie and Vanna had been packing, and how Carrie had said good-bye to him when he'd spoken to her two days before.

"I think I know who's gone and why," he said.

"Yeah? Go on then, tell me," said Andy.

He shook his head. "I don't think that would be a good idea," he said. "If they're leaving in the middle of the night, then they don't want anyone to know, do they? I don't want to get on the wrong side of the Brotherhood."

Andy shrugged. "Suit yourself. We'll find out tomorrow anyway when we see who's missing."

\* \* \*

"We staying in shuttle until out of Shola's gravity as transferring would prevent Shaayiyisis from accelerating," said Toueesut, looking round at them. "Speed is of essence now as we must leave orbit and rendezvous with our contact, the *Tooshu*, in order to further conceal ourselves from pursuit, and to finish off the modifications they were unable to do at the spaceport because of the eyes of the Brotherhood being upon everything unusual happening there."

Kaid relaxed back against his seat and glanced at Carrie. "We'll only be about fifteen minutes or so," he said. "I know you hate the waiting, but relax, we're on our way now."

She nodded and lay back, closing her eyes.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, they were in the *Couana's* cargo bay, heading for the elevator up to deck two. First off had been their Suuman pilot, Ashay.

"Carrie! Kaid! And Jo!" exclaimed the young male, bouncing over to them. "Is good to see you!" He stopped beside them, his huge clawlike feet gripping the roughened surface of the cargo bay floor, his tail swinging carefully round behind him.

Carrie looked up at him as a large paw descended gently on her shoulder and the head, on its long, snakelike neck, lowered itself to her eye level. A large pink tongue flicked out to touch her cheek gently then retract.

"Ashay! You've grown again," said Carrie, smiling with pleasure.

Ashay grinned, tilting his head on one side, exposing teeth almost as large as tombstones. "I will not grow much now for some years," he said,

lowering his eyelids in a coy expression. "I am now more careful because of that."

She reached out to lay her hand along the side of his cheek, feeling the slightly dimpled reptilian skin warm beneath her touch. "It's good to see you again."

"I'm gunner now," he said proudly as he removed his hand and turned to pace over to the elevator with her and Kaid. "Good enough not to hit wrong targets ever," he chuckled.

"You were an excellent gunner on Jalna," said Jo. "You didn't hit the *Hkariyash*, did you?"

Ashay's head swiveled round, neck lowering again to look at her as he gave his rumbling laugh. "No, not hit the *Hkariyash*," he agreed.

On deck two, as Ashay headed up to the bridge, they were shown their quarters by Toueesut.

"You go with Garras, Jurrel, as your luggage we put in his cabin. It will only be a few hours till we rendezvous but you will maybe want to rest and check you have all you should before you are transferring to the *Tooshu*," said the Touiban.

"How long will this refit take?" asked Kaid as the others headed off to their cabins.

"A day but the *Tooshu* will be taking us toward Haven so no time will we be losing."

A shout of surprise interrupted them and they turned to see what had happened. They could hear a loud voice, but it was muted by the interior so they couldn't make out the words.

"Curious," said Kaid, heading slowly toward the iris that separated them from T'Chebbi's and Garras' cabins.



Garras emerged dragging by the ears a very subdued Zsurtul and a young Sholan. "Look what I found hiding in my cabin," he growled.

"I had to come," exclaimed the young Prince, eyes scrunched up in pain. "It is my responsibility to see you find Kusac safely. Please let my ear go, Garras, this is very painful!"

Kaid signaled him to let the Prime youth go and adjusted his features so his ears were sideways in anger and his brows creased and meeting above his nose.

"What the hell do you think you're doing stowing away on this ship?" he demanded. "You lied to us when you said you were going to your Embassy at Shanagi, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Zsurtul, straightening up and rubbing his abused ear. "I knew you wouldn't take me with you, but I had to go! It is a matter of honor, Kaid. You understand that, don't you? It is my fault this happened for saying nothing about the Doctor's scent marker on Kusac."

"We'll talk about that later," interrupted Carrie, seeing the interested looks on the faces of the rest of the team. "Right now we're concerned about you stowing away. As for you, Valden..." She left the rest unsaid and glowered at him angrily. "You realize we can't send you home, now, don't you?"

The Prince nodded. "That was the point," he said. "We brought our luggage with us," he said brightly. "Valden helped me board the *Couana*. I can help you. Kezule will recognize my authority and it will make matters easier to get Kusac back as well as this cub, who's probably his son."

"I think you should start that briefing you promised us," said Rezac, glancing at Kaid. "Seems there's a lot about this mission you left out."

"I intended to," said Kaid. "The rec room here is forward on this block, you can't miss it—the head and showers are opposite. Meet me there in quarter of an hour. Garras, can Zsurtul bunk in with you when we're on the *Tooshu*?"

Garras nodded. "I'll see our little krolla behaves himself, trust me," he said menacingly.

"What about me?" asked Valden plaintively, head tilted to one side to lessen the pain in the ear Garras still gripped tightly between his thumb and forefinger.

"I'll deal with this tree-rhudda," said Jurrel menacingly, reaching out to take the hapless youngling's ear from Garras.

"See you do," growled Kaid, his tone angry as he turned and headed off back the way they'd come. "Zsurtul, come with me." *I'll handle this, Carrie. You check our personal gear is all there.*

Once in the rec room, the door shut behind them, he rounded on Zsurtul. "This is not the behavior of a responsible adult, Zsurtul! Have you stopped to think of what could happen if you were injured, or we are attacked by our own people? It would cause an interplanetary incident that would rock the Alliance to its foundations!"

Zsurtul braved it out, his gaze not flinching from Kaid's. "I know this," he said quietly. "I took it all into consideration before deciding I had to come no matter the risk. As I said, it is my duty, Kaid. Had I spoken out earlier, then perhaps there would have been no need for Kusac to meet with Kezule at all."

"That's not true and you know it!" Kaid snapped. "Yes, we might have been able to do something about the marker, but Kezule would still have found the cubs and left your world, so the rendezvous would still have happened."

He hissed in exasperation, making Zsurtul take a step back in shock. "You don't know what a difficult position you place me in! Already I've had to take two extra people, and now you! And frankly, you're a liability, at least the other two aren't."

"I know I'm not that good at fighting, but I am learning, and there will still be a need for diplomacy. That I can do," he said. "It could be very

beneficial having me along when you hope to meet so many Primes from my world."

"You're not coming with us so get that notion out of your head right now! You and Valden will stay on the *Tooshu* with Jurel! What possessed you to take Valden with you in the first place? Neither of you have the sense you were born with!"

As Zsurtul opened his mouth, Kaid held up his hand. "I don't want to hear it! Now get out of here before I decide to slap the pair of you in the brig!"

Zsurtul left hurriedly, only to return and hover in the doorway moments later. "Where shall I go?" he asked quietly.

"To Garras' cabin and stay there!" roared Kaid, thoroughly exasperated.

### **Kij'ik Outpost, same evening**

In the main assembly hall, and in the recs, the wall screens were all showing the scene as the *N'zishok* loosed the towing cables and set the *Zan'droshi* free into its final fast-decaying orbit round the gas giant. As the *N'zishok* turned and began to head home, they could see the ancient ship start to disappear into the planet's envelope. Clapping broke out spontaneously from the original colonists, joined a few seconds later by the newcomers.

Banner turned aside as Kusac did. "Thank the Gods that's finally over," he said. "Only four more weeks to go. I know you're working with the Ch'almuthians, but what are we doing now?"

"I'm putting you in charge of assessing the newcomers and tailoring a training program to suit them," said Kusac as they made their way through the jostling crowd to the tables laid with snack foods and jars of ale and kheffa. "You'll talk Kezule's commandos through it and watch them implement it for the first week, then report to me. After that, we'll decide what needs to be done next."

Banner nodded as they stopped to pick up plates then help themselves to the various delicacies. "Do you want to check my program first?"

"No. You saw how I worked the last ones, this is completely up to you. You've had the experience, and as you pointed out, you've got the seniority." He smiled briefly at his Second. "Show me what you can do."

Banner tilted his head slightly to one side. "I can take that Challenge," he said confidently. "Whose idea was the celebration? Yours?"

He nodded. "I've told Kezule his colonists need excuses to celebrate. Since they aren't planet-bound, there's no cycle of weather or growing, so he has to take advantage of events on the Outpost. Like this, the successful completion of a task involving nearly everyone here."

"Good idea. It's exactly what we all need."

The sound of a few practice rolls on drums, followed by small passages of music from various pipes and flutelike instruments cut through the general babble of conversation.

"Music, too?" said Banner. "Another of your ideas— and no doubt dancing, I'll wager."

He grinned. "That idea came from the colonists. Preparing for this gave me the opportunity to get them to really start mixing. Luckily, M'kou thought to ask the Ch'almuthians to bring any instruments they had with them. I would have asked but I was somewhat out of it at the time," he said. "I've had them running practice music sessions and dancing classes in the evenings down on their side of the Outpost. They have a great many folk dances they were only too happy to teach to the Primes. It was in the news sheets, surely you read about it?"

"Probably," Banner said. "So that's what you've been doing down there with them?"

"They have a culture worth passing on," he said. "Kezule's people are looking for one, so why not use theirs? No point in me reinventing the wheel."

His last sentence was drowned out by a single long note on the klaxon, followed by the Outpost intercom announcing tersely, "General Kezule to the bridge. General Kezule to the bridge."

"Isn't he on the *N'zishok*?" asked Banner.

"No, he's around here somewhere. He had M'kou and Zaykkuh take her out. Wonder what's up." He scanned the room to see how the military members of the colony were responding but so far, there was no reaction from them. "I take it their hand comm units are on the blink again.

"Seems like. Doubtless we'll find out what's going on at some point," said Banner.

\* \* \*

Kezule had been up on the hydroponics level and as soon as he heard the call, he headed to the closest wall comm.

"Kezule here, patch me through to the bridge," he said.

"Aye, sir."

"Shartoh here, General. We've received a distress call from Ch'almuth. They're waiting to speak to you now."

"On my way," he said, already running toward the port elevator.

\* \* \*

M'zayash was waiting for him when he took the call in the privacy of his ready room, next to the bridge.

"General Kezule, you came to us for help, now it's our turn to ask you for yours," she said.

"I must admit to being surprised at receiving your call," he said. "You gave me the impression you were an agricultural world with very little technology beyond what you'd salvaged and copied after the Fall."

"It's a fool who shows her full hand at the first meeting," she said. "Especially with the M'zullians out there. We never claimed to have no technology, you assumed that."

"What else would I think when we found no planetary communications or transport and you had us giving you technical manuals for some of your machinery?"

She shrugged. "We had ample warning of your approach."

"What's the nature of your emergency?" he asked abruptly, tiring of the verbal fencing.

"For the last two decades, every five years the M'zullians come to demand a tithe from us in crops and our young people. We've had advance warning that they're on their way here and will arrive in three days' time. The goods you saw in our warehouse at the spaceport are for them, not for distribution to our own people. We don't yet have the means to defend ourselves so we're asking for your help."

He leaned back in his chair, observing her thoughtfully. "Defending your world will draw unwanted M'zullian attention to me, M'zayash. I'm not in a position to wage a war against them. I only have the one cruiser— you saw it when we visited you."

"They only send one ship— an armed merchantman— because they know we have no defenses."

"An early warning system infers differently," he said. "Ch'almuth had a defensive capability in my time."

She stared at him, then blinked. "You're not from this time? Then when?"

"From the Fall itself, but that's irrelevant. You said they take your young. How young and why?"

"Females almost into adulthood," she said. "And a few young males of the same age. You're no fool, why do *you* think they take them, General? They still run the harems."

"I know," he said, his mind already turning over several possibilities. "Are you aware you have a space station orbiting your world?"

"Aware of it, yes, from old data, but we haven't the means to reach it."

"What exactly is your level of technology, M'zayash?"

"We've ground and air transport of a more sophisticated level than the goods container on which you traveled here," she said, lips twitching in faint amusement. "All backward-engineered from those left after the Fall. We have developed some advanced farming aids, underground irrigation systems, weather control..."

He held his hand up. "Enough. How do you get advance warning of the M'zullians arriving?"

"From the orbiting station. We have a control center on the planet at the spaceport that sends us data, but despite the best minds on our world working on it over many generations, we've been unable to make it respond to us in any way."

"Do you have warnings of ships, the movements of ships, that don't come to you?" he asked, a sudden thought hitting him. He knew the M'zullians couldn't utilize the passageways because they hadn't a ship capable of using them, which meant they would travel the conventional way, taking three weeks to reach Ch'almuth. Was it possible the receiver at M'zull was still active, and was feeding information on ship movements to this station, and thus to Ch'almuth?

"Yes, we do," she confirmed. "But we can tell when they're sending one to us."

If that was the case, why wasn't there a similar data feed to M'zull through their receiver? Or was there, and they just hadn't found it yet? Examining the Ch'almuthian's control center, and checking out their orbital station would be worth the trip alone. Maybe only ships left over from the Fall had the capacity to transmit data to the receiver. He hoped so, or M'zull could be aware of their comings and goings and that thought filled him with disquiet. He'd better get Shartoh and Zhalmo onto it immediately.

"If I came and we destroyed this merchant ship, they'd know it was missing when it failed to return three weeks later," he said. "You realize you may only have a respite of six weeks before they send another, more heavily-armed ship, don't you? One that I'm not capable of defeating."

"It may also discourage them," she said.

"It won't. They're a Warrior culture, bred to fight and kill. This will be something they won't ignore unless it costs them too much."

"If, as you say, the orbiting station had a defensive capability, then can it be fixed?"

"We've no idea what state it's in and whether it was automated or manned," he said. "To find that out we'd have to go there and look. It took us quite some time before we had Kij'ik up and running, I don't yet have the time or personnel to spend on a project of this nature."

"We have engineers," she replied, getting obviously agitated. "Give us the means to reach the station and we'll do that! The M'zullians can't be allowed to continue to rob us of our young! You're the first hope we've had to stop them; you have to help us!"

"The families who came with us, they're the ones most at risk from the M'zullian tithe, aren't they?" he said as that puzzle suddenly fell into place.

She nodded.

"The M'zullians are at war with the other Valtegan Warrior world, and I believe they plan eventually to reunite the old Empire. I'm not in a



position to undertake any hostilities against them— they have a whole world geared up as a war machine— two if they conquer or make an alliance with J'kirtikk. I have one cruiser, that's all, and some ancient fighters that aren't yet fit to fly. I came to Kij'ik to avoid this conflict. I'm prepared to help you this time, M'zayash, but I cannot commit my few resources to taking on M'zull to protect you," he said at last. "I can spare you an ancient cargo pinnace, but that's all. Are you sure you wouldn't rather just leave things as they are than face the probable reprisals?"

"We'll take your help," she said, a look of relief crossing her face. "And the pinnace. May we call on you for advice if the orbital station has any defenses that we can use?"

He nodded, thinking fast. This could work to his advantage and weld Ch'almuth even closer to him. "I'll bring the pinnace and a couple of our engineers to stay on the station and help you, providing it is habitable. There may even be some usable shuttles still berthed there. We didn't check it out on our visit. Does the merchant ship land at your spaceport?"

"Yes," she confirmed.

"My help won't come completely free, M'zayash. I want something from you in return."

M'zayash narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"I have memories of the time before we were bred into castes, do you?"

"Some. Why?"

"I formed the colony on Kij'ik to bring back to our species what was lost— to blend all the castes back into one. It seems to me you may have achieved this. I want..." He stopped for a moment, then continued. "I would like to combine my people with yours. You have the remnants of the caste I lack— the Workers. My people can provide Intellectual and Warrior stock combined so the mind rules, not the instinct to fight."

M'zayash's expression relaxed. "General Kezule, why do you think we agreed to let our people go with you?"

He stared at her for a moment. "I'll patch you back to the bridge. Give my duty officer the details of how we can communicate with you when we arrive without alerting the M'zullians in case they get there before us," he said. "I'll see you in three days. Incidentally, how did you know we could reach you in time?"

M'zayash smiled. "I'm an extremely good telepath, General," she said.

\* \* \*

"You'll be shorthanded till we return," said Kezule as he went down to the landing bay in the elevator with M'kou. "Can you manage with a mainly civilian Security staff?"

"We will cope, General," said M'kou reassuringly. "I'll keep those of my brothers you left behind on the Officers level so the Sholans are unaware of the situation until I brief them tomorrow. Not that I expect trouble from them," he added. "They will all be very busy, and with the one Sholan troublemaker still doing punishment duty, the rest will be more content. There's only a month left till they leave, after all."

"True," said Kezule as the elevator stopped and the door opened. He turned to face his son, taking him into an awkward hug before stepping out onto the landing bay. "Take care, M'kou."

"And you, Father," his son replied quietly.

\* \* \*

The celebration continued with only a few people noticing that some thirty of their colleagues had gone missing.

Zayshul appeared at their table and took a spare seat next to Banner. "Enjoying yourself, Captain?" she asked over the sound of the music as

she watched the knots of people performing the country dances up at the other end of the hall.

"Yes," he said, getting up and moving round his Second to sit beside her. He stumbled slightly, realizing he'd been drinking a little more than he realized. "What was that alarm about and why are so many people missing?" he asked, leaning close to her.

"There's no secret," she said, picking up a sandwich from a nearby plate. "We received a distress call from Ch'almuth and Kezule's gone to help."

He tried to ignore her scent. "What's happening there?"

Smiling, she shrugged, putting her glass down on the table. "He didn't say."

"How did they send the message?" asked Banner. "I thought they were a low-tech culture?"

"Again, he didn't say. He probably left some communications device with them if they didn't have one," she said, tapping her foot to the beat of the music. "M'kou will be announcing it tomorrow. Our people have really taken to this dancing, haven't they? Yours, too."

"Yes," he said. "Are you sure Kezule didn't say anything?"

"Sure," she said. "I'd like to dance. Will you dance with me?"

"You'll be lucky," Banner said. "There's been a steady stream of females asking him, and he's refused every one."

She grinned almost playfully at Banner. "I think I can persuade him," she said, taking hold of Kusac's hand and getting up. "Come on," she said, tugging him gently.

He shook his head, trying to disengage his hand. "No, thanks. I'd rather watch."

Moving closer, she rested her hand on his shoulder and lowered her head to whisper in his ear. "Are you sure? I wouldn't want you being jealous." Her breath was warm and smelled of the sweet fruit spirits.

"Have fun," he said, sitting back with an effort of will.

Straightening up, she smiled and shrugged. Then, the full skirt of her dress swirling round her knees, she turned and headed for the dancers.

"Unusual to see her in a dress," said Banner as Kusac picked up his glass and took a drink from it.

"Yes," he said, watching her approach one of the newcomers and let him lead her over to join the other couples as they formed into groups for the next dance. He turned back to the table, doing his best to ignore her as Lorish came bouncing over.

"Dance!" she said to Banner, holding both hands out to him.

He saw the questioning look from his Second and waved his hand vaguely. "Go," he said.

The music was beginning to sound too loud to him. What he wanted most was to think. The closer their leaving date came, the more he worried over whether or not it was possible for him to go home, and if he could, what waited for him in the way of legal repercussions.

Draining his glass, he reached for the jug of ale and refilled it. It dulled his senses and blurred the edges of his world just enough to make it bearable.

\* \* \*

"You should be enjoying yourself, Captain," said Ghidd'ah, slipping into the seat beside him some time later.

He glanced up and raised his glass to her. "I'm enjoying the ale," he said.

"So I see," she said, taking the glass from his slack grasp and putting it out of his reach farther down the table. "Is something the matter?"

He shook his head slowly. "Nothing new," he said, leaning his cheek on his hand and propping his elbow on the table.

She got to her feet and reached down to grasp his hands. "You need to work some of that ale out of your system," she said, pulling him to his feet. Looping her arm over his, she steered him across to the dancers.

"I can't," he said, trying to dig his claws into the thinly carpeted floor. "I don't have the coordination right now."

"Rubbish," she said brightly, making him stumble as she hauled him forward suddenly. "They're doing pairs dancing now, not group dances. I'll hold you up."

Before he could object any further, she'd caught him round the waist and had whirled him into the group of dancers.

For the first few steps, if he wasn't stumbling, then his tail, held out at more of an angle than usual, kept getting struck by the other dancers, but at last his natural sense of balance took over and he was able to lower it and keep his footing if nothing else. His head cleared a little as the exercise made him breathe faster, and he quickly found he was able to match the simple steps she was using.

"See?" she laughed, pulling him closer, "I said I'd hold you up!"

"You smell nice," he said with surprise, catching a whiff of the perfume she wore. He was also aware of the scents of everyone around him and realized he was checking them on an almost subconscious level, looking for one particular scent— that of the female from four nights ago.

She came to an abrupt halt as the music stopped, supporting him when he'd have stumbled at the suddenness of it. Moving closer, her arm now encircling his waist, she started to speak very softly.

"Captain, Zayshul and I are working to find an antidote for your reaction to her scent and sweat. She hasn't given up, you mustn't either."

"What?" he said disbelievingly. Suddenly the alcohol in his system was annoying him. He needed to sober up.

"She's not trying to keep you here, I promise," said Ghidd'ah as the musicians began the next tune. "I'm sure we'll find a way."

As she moved back, sliding her hand so it rested just above his hip again, he felt a sudden subtle change inside himself as the world around him began to come slightly back into focus. Then he was being whirled round by her again.

His thoughts were still slow and as she moved sideways, his right hand lost its hold on her. Spinning round, he felt her let go completely, then, just as an attack of dizziness hit him, she had hold of him again. He clutched her more tightly, afraid of really falling this time, but she moved closer, her arms circling his waist until they were almost in an embrace.

"You won't fall," she said reassuringly in Zayshul's voice. "Just keep dancing."

Confused, he tried to focus on her face, but as her scent filled his nostrils, he knew Ghidd'ah had switched partners on him.

"Why?" he asked.

"I wanted to dance with you," she said as the music slowed slightly. "I'm tired of having to avoid your company when no one else has to. Why shouldn't we do ordinary things like this?"

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. This wasn't like the Zayshul he knew— or was it? Their recent meetings, though short because of the fear of being discovered, had still been more leisurely, with one or two even lasting several hours. He opened his mind slightly to hers, letting her surface thoughts filter into his mind. Though not completely drunk, he was certainly in no state to properly interpret what he was picking up from

her. He needed to sober up fast. What Ghidd'ah had said needed to be discussed, especially as Zayshul had said nothing to him about a possible antidote.

Again he felt a surge of something through his system and once more, there was a sudden improvement in how he felt— his sight was almost back to normal, and his thinking, though still slow, was that bit sharper. Was he actually affecting the alcohol in his body the way he thought he'd done with the drugs four nights ago?

The music speeded up and she moved slightly away from him, increasing the speed of her steps. Lifting his head, he looked around and seeing they were level with an exit, he tightened his grip on her waist and whirled her toward it, slowing as they came to the edge of the dancers where several people were standing talking. Coming to a stop, he grasped her hand and drew her swiftly out into the corridor.

"We need to talk, and I need to sober up," he said by way of explanation as he led her down the corridor toward the stairs and the main elevator.

"I was enjoying the dancing," she exclaimed as he towed her through the first iris.

"Shh," he said, beginning to jog now that they were out of sight. He was aware that in leaving the way they had it would likely cause some gossip, but he could get away with it by claiming he hadn't been exactly sober—neither was she, he was beginning to realize.

"The pool is good," she said with a deep chuckle as he headed toward the staircase. "Especially the bubble pool."

"What's that?" he asked, pushing the door to the stairwell open.

"Jets of hot air and water that massage you," she said, stumbling on the steps and nearly falling.

He caught her, jerking her upright, then continued heading upward.

The lighting level was station night when they finally emerged into the hydroponics level. As they started down the main pathway, a small figure suddenly appeared in front of them making Zayshul squeal in shock.

"Talk to you I must," said the TeLaxaudin's translator.

"Later," said Kusac, trying to sidestep him.

"Now!"

He began to growl, and, dropping Zayshul's hand, advanced on the small alien, who suddenly took a step backward.

"Violence not necessary!"

"Then get out of our way," he said, tail swaying angrily. Part of his mind was trying to tell him this was not a good idea, but he was acting mainly on instincts right now, and they were telling him he wasn't going to be stopped by anyone.

As he reached out to take hold of Giyarishis, the TeLaxaudin backed hurriedly into the doorway of his office.

"Only wish talk. No need violence."

Ignoring him, he reached for Zayshul's hand again and pulled her along in his wake.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said, almost running to keep up with his loping stride. "We need the help he and his people give us."

"I don't like him," he said shortly. "Makes my skin crawl."

Minutes later, they were in the changing room and he was drinking his fill at the water fountain. As he stood up, a wave of dizziness passed over him, and holding onto the wall for support, he sat down on the bench. Everything was beginning to go a little blurry as the alcohol caught up with him again.



Zayshul came over with a water bottle which she filled and put on the bench beside him.

"We can take this with us."

"I like the dress," he said, touching the edge of the hem. He must be more drunk than he thought bringing her up here to the heat and humidity of the pool.

"Thank you. The pool is the best place to talk, actually," she said quietly. "The bubble pool will help you sober up— and me," she added, "though I'm nowhere near as bad as you. Dragging me out of the hall like that is going to cause quite a lot of gossip, you know."

"Let's get changed," he said abruptly, getting up and moving toward the lockers.

By the time he'd stripped off, she was waiting for him. He was relieved to see she was dressed in a blue robe because he didn't want their talk to become too personal. As they went through the door to the pool, she took him by the arm.

He tried to disengage himself but she tightened her grip on him. "Zayshul, if anyone's here, you'll draw attention to us," he whispered.

"It's all right," she said. "Trust me, we'll talk when we get there."

The grass was soft and springy underfoot, and the air among the tall bushes and plants was less humid than he'd feared. A paved area stretched out ahead of them, leading off on his right to the second bridge over to the island. He could hear the sound of voices coming from that direction.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said, feeling warning prickles running up and down his spine.

She began to talk, prattling on about the vagaries of Giyarishis who had haunted her lab that afternoon, giving him no time to answer. When they rounded the bend and came in sight of the small knot of Primes, it

appeared as if they were merely colleagues exchanging gossip about their day.

One turned round— Nisho— and promptly drew attention to them. Like a cork from a bottle, a sandy-pelted Sholan suddenly sat bolt upright, looking at him.

"Captain! I thought you'd be down at the main hall."

"The Captain's had a little too much to drink," said Zayshul, steering him toward an empty mat a little distant from them.

"Did you have to say that?" he hissed at Zayshul from the other side of his mouth.

"It's your alibi," she chuckled, stopping and turning to take his towel from him. Dropping it on the mat, she pointed across the pool to a raised, stone-ringed structure. "That's the bubble pool. We can talk there safely and no one can overhear us."

"Fine," he growled, turning his back on her as she began to take off her robe.

He'd thought everyone would be down at the celebration and was not pleased to be seen alone publicly with her, especially by one of his crew. Walking into the water, he waded out until it reached his hips then waited for her. In a moment of lucidity, though he knew it was the Human influence in him, it didn't change the fact that being seen alone with a furless and naked female meant only one thing.

He heard her wading out to join him and when she drew level, he turned round.

"You're being paranoid," she chided him. "No one will think anything of us."

"Stop reading me," he snapped as he ducked into the water and began to swim to the other side.

He could feel her startlement and immediately regretted what he'd said.

"What did you mean by that?" she asked as she caught up to him.

"Nothing," he said as they struck out together for the beach ahead.

On dry land, he shook himself, making her exclaim in shock, then laugh. "I wouldn't bother," she said, leading the way to the small pool. "You'll only get wet again."

"What's the point of this?" he asked, watching as she lowered herself into it until the water was at the base of her neck.

"It's identical to the main one."

"Just get in," she said. "It's different."

As he stepped onto the first ledge, he realized the water was almost blood temperature. "So it's warmer," he said, sitting down on a ledge near her. "Why did we have to come here to talk?"

She reached behind her for a manual control and the pool instantly began to bubble up.

"What trick are you playing on me?" he demanded over the noise of the churning water.

"I thought you'd have come across these before. The bubbles are caused by jets of the warm water and air, and over the noise, no one can listen in to us."

Resisting the urge to glance over his shoulder at Jayza and the others, warily he lowered himself in, letting the jets play against his body.

"How do you like it?" she asked.

It felt as good as a massage, he decided, turning his back so the kink just under his right shoulder blade was in the stream of the nearest jet. "Good," he said, beginning to grin. "Very good. I could get to like this."

"Now we can talk," she said, hooking the back of her neck over the inner lip of the pool and allowing her body to float just below the surface. "I need to tell you something."

"In a minute," he said, his eyes half closing and a look of bliss crossing his face as he adjusted his position slightly. She'd been right about the pool, he was beginning to feel better already. "I've had this knot in my back for a week now, since the last training session."

"You only need to listen to me," she said.

"I'm listening," he said lazily.

"Kezule knows about us," she said.

Ice clutched his stomach and he sat up abruptly, sending the water surging round them. "What?"

She reached out with her foot and touched him. "It's all right," she said. "He understands about the marker and realizes it's causing us problems. All he asks is that I work on a way to turn it off."

"How did he find out?" he asked.

"I told him," she said, closing her eyes. "But he came to me about it first," she added. "There's no need for us to worry any more."

He stared at her. "When did this happen?"

"A day or two after you were drugged."

Now he knew why her attitude to him had changed. "I won't be seen as your lover, Zayshul," he said firmly. "There's a world of difference

between what Jayza's sharing with Shezhul, and us. It wasn't voluntary on my part."

"I know," she agreed calmly. "To be seen behaving like them isn't what I want either. It does give us more freedom, though. We can be in the same company, both be missing at the same time, all with less gossip."

"I want it ended, Zayshul, I don't want it made easier," he told her forcefully, grasping her by the ankle and jerking it to make her pay attention to him.

"Hey!" she said, flailing her arms to stop herself from sinking as she was pulled off the edge.

He let go of her ankle to lean forward and grab her round the chest to keep her from going under. "All I want is to be free of this marker and to take my son home," he said, trying not to wonder if he meant it or if it was merely words.

Beads of sweat were forming on her brow and despite the pool chemicals, he could smell her scent. He let her go hurriedly. Bathing in water this hot made his groin muscles respond as they did when aroused, and it wouldn't be long before he'd have to leave the pool, for modesty's sake if nothing else.

Her feet on the pool bottom, she moved away from him to lean her forearms on the stone surround and look out across the main pool. "Be careful, Kusac," she said quietly, lifting an arm to wave at her friends. "You're drawing just the kind of attention to us that you want to avoid."

With a rumble of anger, he took the place she'd vacated in time to see her friends wave back. Jayza was being prudent enough to have his face turned the other way.

"Stop worrying," she continued. "Ghidd'ah and I are working on trying to find an antidote, or substitute for what your body seems to be interpreting as a drug."

"Why didn't you try this sooner?" he demanded, standing up. His body was beginning to send him warnings he'd be foolish to ignore. "Why did I have to be told this by Ghidd'ah, not you?"

"Fear that Kezule would find out what I was doing," she said, glancing over her shoulder at him. "Now it doesn't matter if he knows. And Ghidd'ah shouldn't have told you about it. I intended to tell you myself. There's no need to leave the pool, you know. It's too public for them to think we'd do anything."

The hot water was having one desired effect— he was beginning to sober up, and beginning to make sense of what he was picking up mentally from her.

"You might not want me seen as your lover, but now Kezule's allowing you to pair with me to try and turn off the marker, you do want people to know I'm interested in you," he said angrily.

"What's wrong with that?" she demanded, looking at him again. "I've had to put up with your public lack of interest in me despite everyone assuming we have coupled! It's been humiliating for both of us. Why shouldn't I want you to at least acknowledge in public that you're interested in me?"

"If it wasn't for the marker, I wouldn't be," he said angrily. "You know that!"

"You're lying to yourself, Kusac," she replied quietly. "And you know it. On the *Kz'adul*, when you said I'd been with you the night before, you showed me you cared about me and enjoyed coupling with me."

He thought back to that day, remembering that she'd been the first person to show him gentleness, that he'd enjoyed their pairing despite himself—and he remembered more. He remembered telling Kaid she might be in danger, that he was worried for her because she'd warned him he'd been drugged. He'd forgotten that in the anger he'd felt at finding out about the marker.

"You'd forgotten about that, because of your anger when you found out I'd scent-marked you. You think it doesn't matter now, that you can blame those feelings on the marker."

"Dammit, Zayshul, stop it," he insisted. "You don't know what I'm thinking!"

Startled, she stared at him.

Fury flared through every atom of his being. "You think you know me, Zayshul, but believe me, you don't," he said, his voice deceptively quiet as he moved up behind her.

His vision was beginning to darken round the edges. He stopped trying to hold back his reaction to the hot water and her scent and focused instead on preventing the darkness from growing.

"You have no idea of who I really am," he said. As his genitals descended, he leaned forward, placing an arm to either side of her, gripping her hands against the pool rim.

She gave an exclamation of surprise as she felt him press her belly against the side of the pool and realized she was trapped.

He rested his cheek against hers, licking it, letting the marker's poison continue what it had begun.

"Don't make the mistake of assuming what I felt for you then was more than it was. I'd come fresh from J'koshuk's physical and mental tortures. You came to my bed, drugged me then paired with me. It was the first gentleness, the first kind physical contact I'd known since he woke me from cryo. I was grateful, no more than that, but in my damaged mental state, I was afraid it meant more."

The darkness in his vision increased. He could feel her fear, smell and taste it now, but it didn't touch him. It echoed through him as it had done in the days before Kzizysus and Annuur had repaired the damage done to him by Chy'qui.

"I... I understand," she stammered.

"No, you don't understand," he said, easing himself against her now that he was fully aroused. "But you will. Whether or not you participated willingly, that marker drove a wedge between me and my Triad partners, gave Kezule a weapon to force me to come here."

"They'll see what we're doing," she whispered, terrified, yet as caught up in the moment as he was.

"It's what you wanted," he said, entering her. Then he reached out with his mind and, grasping hers, let her feel what he'd experienced the night he'd been given Kezule's message, what coming to meet Kezule had cost him personally.

She made whimpering noises and sagged back against him, but he ignored her, lowering his mouth to her shoulder, licking it, letting the marker's drug surge through him, pinning her fast against the poolside as he began to climax.

Breathing heavily, he leaned against her for a moment before withdrawing. He pulled her round to face him.

"Now you really understand," he said, tightening his grip on her arms. "You know what I am, and some of what I can do. Don't presume to know my mind again, Zayshul, do you hear me?"

She nodded, eyes still wide in shock at the onslaught on her mind and body. "You're still a telepath," she stuttered, clutching at him for support.

"That you'll keep to yourself," he said, showing his teeth. "Especially if you ever want me to show you how to use your own telepathic abilities." He reached for her mind again to reinforce his command. "You wanted a public show from me, this is it. You'll get nothing else from me."

Letting her go, he turned and got out of the pool.



"You can't go in that state!" she hissed at him. "Burn it, it's obvious what we've been doing!"

He grinned down at her without humor and shrugged. "So? I look no different from how your males look all the time. That's why I wanted to leave the pool— hot water alone has this effect on me."

Turning, he walked back to the water's edge and waded out until it was deep enough to swim. As he approached the other side, he could see by the way the group with Jayza were studiously looking the other way that they were well aware of some of what had been happening between him and Zayshul.

His incipient tunnel vision was still there and he was in no mood to talk to anyone. He knew that when it finally passed, he'd regret what he'd done, but at least she was incapable of telling anyone about his returned abilities— that much he'd made sure of.

Wading out, he headed straight for his towel and began to dry himself, resisting the urge to drape it round his waist. The cooler water of the main pool was having the desired effect anyway and it wouldn't be long before he could forget about any concerns over modesty.

"Mind if I walk back with you, Captain?" he heard Jayza say from a few yards away.

He turned round to glare at him, but even though the youth could see the state of his eyes, he held his ground.

"Why not?" he forced himself to say. He knew he needed the company right now as his judgment was still shot from the aftereffects of the alcohol in his system and the hunter state. At least they were far enough away from the Primes for him not to need to say anything to them.

"The Doctor's staying?" Jayza asked carefully, coming a few steps closer.

He turned back to look at the bubble pool. Zayshul was getting out now.

"I've no idea," he said shortly, turning away again. "Shall we go?"

"Sure."

They started walking toward the exit.

"I thought I'd have a hot drink before turning in. Would you like to join me, Captain?" Jayza asked as they reached the path.

His vision had virtually returned to normal by then and he was beginning to realize the utter insanity of what he'd done. "No, but thank you," he said.

"I just thought you might want someone to talk to before you turn in."

"No," he repeated, glancing at Jayza. "The water was too hot, that's all. The Doctor's fine," he added in a low voice.

Jayza nodded. "It's easy for them to underestimate us at times," he said. "Especially with them being stronger and faster than we are. I'm beginning to realize how complicated Alien Relations are."

"Yes, they are. I'm actually intending to recommend you for that when we get home," he said, pushing the door into the changing rooms open.

"I'd like that." Jayza hesitated. "Are you sure everything's all right, Captain? Banner asked me to keep an eye on you when he heard you were coming up to the pool."

"It's a private matter between me and Zayshul," he said reluctantly. "Let's just say we both had too much to drink and leave it at that. And I'd prefer if you kept it to yourself," he added.

Jayza nodded. "Of course, Captain. You're entitled to your privacy. But if I can help..." He left the rest unsaid.

"Thank you," said Kusac sincerely.

\* \* \*

Jayza and he headed straight for their rooms, but as he opened his door, Banner came out.

"I was wondering where you two had got to," his Second said.

"We were up in the pool," he said, making sure he had his mental shields up. "I'd had a bit too much to drink so Doctor Zayshul took me there to sober me up. There's a bubble pool there that massages you with jets of hot water and air," he said, forcing a grin onto his face. "It worked. I met Jayza there."

Banner grinned. "I know it. I think we should get one for the gym back home."

"Good idea," he said, stepping into his room. "If that's all, I'll say good night."

Banner shrugged. "No, nothing else. I just heard your door, that's all."

"Good night." He closed the door with relief. Thank the Gods he'd come back with Jayza!

He headed for his bedroom, stripping off his belt and tunic and lay down on the bed. All the way back from the pool he'd been cursing himself for being a fool. Zayshul might not be able to tell anyone what she knew about him, but she knew, and moreover, he'd offered to teach her how to use her Talent!

Guilt was also taking its toll on him and he regretted having treated her the way he had. It appalled him to realize he'd actually reverted back to the coldness that had filled him in his early days on Shola after losing his Talent— which was probably why he'd offered to train her in the first place. He owed her an apology at the very least. He'd no doubt that the story of their— assignation— would be all over the Outpost by the next day.

He sighed, turning his thoughts to other matters. He was only too sober now, and he was damned sure it had little to do with the bubble pool and a lot more to do with a newfound ability to directly affect his own body

using his mind. He'd gone from pretty drunk to fairly sober in a matter of maybe half an hour, which was fast. He wished he could ease his conscience as easily, and as quickly.

It was worth investigating this further, and beginning to recite the Litany for Relaxation, he turned his mind inward to see if he could work out how he'd managed to do it.

\* \* \*

When Banner shut his door, he saw Lorish had moved from the sofa and was now comfortably sprawled on her stomach on his bed. He went over to join her.

"You worry too much about your Captain," she said with a smile. "He's a grown male, able to look after himself."

"It's my job," he said, touching her cheek with a fingertip. "Now, where were we?"

\* \* \*

Something roused him from his trance, but he didn't know what until he was sitting up. Zayshul. Leaping from his bed, he headed into the lounge at a run and opened the door. The last thing he wanted was an upset Zayshul found outside his room by either Banner or Jayza.

The door was still sliding back as he reached out and pulled her in before shutting it again and pressing the privacy lock.

"I'm sorry," they both said together as he let her go. As she hesitated, he continued. "I had no right to do what I did. I'm the one who owes you the apology."

She shook her head. "No, you were right, I was assuming too much. I'd no idea how much you'd suffered."

He reached out and put a finger briefly to her lips, hushing her, pushing the ever present awareness of her scent to the back of his mind. "In the end, I chose to come." He turned away, walking toward the dispensing unit, thankful that although her eyes looked a little bloodshot, she didn't appear too distressed.

"Sit down, make yourself comfortable. Can I get you something?" he asked, dialing himself a kheffa. Now was his chance to undo his mistake in letting her know what he was, or to teach her how to use the Talent she possessed and obtain some small revenge on Kezule. He still hadn't decided which he wanted to do.

"A kheffa," she said, going over to sit on the sofa.

He could feel how confused and jumbled her thoughts were. She had so many questions and no idea where to begin.

Taking the drinks over, he put them on the central low table then pulled one of the easy chairs around to sit opposite her.

"My mind was damaged beyond its ability to heal," he said, taking pity on her by answering the questions he'd prevented her from asking. "A new, radical surgical treatment was tried on me. It destroyed the tendrils created by the implant and reestablished new neural pathways. Yes, it resulted in me reacquiring my abilities, eventually, but it was a painful process."

He remembered having to relive his way through all that had happened to him on the *Kz'adul* and shivered slightly. "No one, not even my crew, are aware of this, and it must remain that way."

She nodded, sitting with her hands cupped round her mug. "That's why the link between you and Shaidan," she said.

"That's unusual," he admitted. "It might be because he was taught how to use his talent with sleep tapes prepared from a scan of my mind, but I can't tell while he wears that collar."

"How about me? When did Shaidan tell you I was one, too?" she asked.

"Some time ago, but I'd suspected it for a while," he admitted, taking a drink. The hot herbal drink warmed him, banishing the last vestiges of his drinking session.

She looked up at him. "You said you'd teach me. Will you, or were you just saying that?"

Now he had to make up his mind one way or another. Her Talent was no longer a danger to him, she wasn't in his league—he doubted if anyone he knew was now, and there was no danger of them forming a Link, unless he wanted it. Right now it was more important she be taught by him and could pass it on to the other Talented Prime females. Doing that, he could gain their loyalty for his people rather than leave them to be assimilated by the Ch'almuthian telepaths. Making her forget about him solved only one problem and left the larger issue untouched.

"I can teach you," he said, "the way my son was taught, but you need to practice to be able to use your Talent."

"You'll let me make a scan?" she asked incredulously.

"No, no scans," he said. "I'll use a skill transfer. You'll have the skills, but as I said, you'll need to practice to use them."

"How can I practice alone?"

"Some of it you can do alone," he said. "As for the rest, we've six days before Kezule returns. If you set aside some time to be with me each day, we can practice together. Then you can teach the others."

"When do we start?"

"Now," he said before emptying his mug and getting to his feet.

He tried several times, but each time, her mind slammed shut as tightly as the proverbial demon fish's ass.

"I can't help it, it hurts," she complained, rubbing her temples and blinking back tears.

Frustrated, he sat back on his haunches and looked at her. He wasn't actually surprised, as she had the same strong natural barriers as all the Primes and Valtegens he'd come across, including Kezule. He could force the contact, but there was a risk of causing damage. He sighed. There was another way to do it.

He leaned forward and stroked her cheek. "Let's have a break," he said gently. "You're tired. We can try again tomorrow."

"No, I want to do it now," she said doggedly.

"If you wish," he said. "Come through to my bedroom and I'll give your shoulders and neck a massage. It'll help the headache."

It began with the massage, but before long she was lying in his arms making small noises of pleasure, her mind wide open to his. As they joined, he reached for her, creating a mental rapport between them, then transferred the skills she needed.

As the transfer tailed off, she began to whimper gently. "Your mind... I can feel it... Feel what you're feeling!"

He could feel her, too, and it was destroying the little self-control he'd managed to keep. It had been so long since he'd shared like this. He shied away from the memory of the last night he'd shared with Carrie and Kaid. Opening his mind a fraction more, he let the feedback between them increase, his mouth seeking hers for the first time as he was swept up in their combined sensations now coursing through him.

As the marker's drug began to increase in his system, he suddenly realized he could sense it, like a virus that had no right to be there. A tiny part of his subconscious followed it, tracking it to the source in himself, then temporarily neutralized what it had followed. Understanding exploded into his conscious mind, over-loading his senses, causing their rapport to shatter and him to instantly climax.

He managed to collapse beside her and lay there utterly exhausted, his breathing ragged as he instinctively retreated behind his mental shields and tried to take in what he'd experienced.

For the first time, there had been no feral frenzy from Zayshul, he realized when he was capable of thinking again. Panic surged through him as he realized there had in fact been no reaction from her at all. Lifting his head, he reached out to shake her still form.

Her glazed eyes suddenly blinked and he let out the breath he'd been holding in an enormous sigh of relief.

"Are you all right?" he asked, still concerned.

She nodded. "What happened? I felt *inside* your mind..."

He carefully withdrew and moved off her, lying on his side in the midst of his wrecked bed. "I shared," he said. "After I transferred the knowledge you needed, I shared my sensations with you, as you did with me," he added. He smiled slightly, pushing the information he desperately wanted to follow through to one side. "It's what Telepaths do when coupling, as you call it."

"This is what you shared with Carrie?" she asked, raising her head to look at him. "You lost this because of what happened on the *Kz'adul*?" Tears filled her eyes. "I had no idea! How could you stand to be without it?"

"I couldn't," he said, reaching out to wipe the tears away with his thumb. The drug he'd absorbed from her was gone from his system, and as adrenaline began to surge through him in a delayed response, he felt his senses begin to spin. Instantly he reached inside and reversed the effect.

"I couldn't," he repeated softly. "That's why I was so ill when I returned to Shola. I didn't think I'd ever be able to share like that again, but you showed me I could." Leaning forward, he placed his lips gently on hers and kissed her. "Thank you," he said.

"Then I can do this, too?"

He shook his head as he lay back among the tangled covers. "I don't know. You only have female telepaths," he said. "You'll have to find out for yourselves what happens when you try to share with your males."



*Can you hear me?* he sent to her.

"Oh, Goddess!" she said, sitting bolt upright. "I heard that!"

"Think it," he said. *Don't speak it. Tomorrow we'll practice this and using mental shielding. I'll put a temporary shield round you for now or else the sound of everyone's thoughts will make you feel quite ill.*

*Think it like this?*

Yes, he replied, noticing she was shivering. He rolled over, taking her with him until they were clear of the covers and he could draw them over her.

*Rest for a little while, he said. Mental work is tiring. You'll find you'll need to eat or sleep more when you've been working, and absorbing the knowledge I sent you was tiring even though you don't know it.*

Her head was resting on his arm, and she moved closer, stretching out beside him, one arm sliding across his pelt as she tucked it round his waist. He could smell her scent but its effect was minimal on him, as if what he'd done had given him a limited resistance to it.

He lay there, glad of her presence for once because tonight she'd helped him finally become whole again. There was at last a glimmer of light in his world.

## Chapter 18

### Zhal-Mellasha 16th day (February)

HIS wrist comm buzzed insistently, finally dragging him from sleep. About to answer it automatically, he suddenly realized Zayshul was still curled up asleep beside him.

"Shit!" he muttered. He couldn't take the call here. Checking the time, he fell out of bed and ran for the bathing room. Second hour! Vartra's bones, how could he have let this happen?

"Yes?" he said, answering his comm.

Jayza's face looked out at him. "Captain," he said quietly. "I thought I should wake you. They're looking for the Doctor. Seems she didn't go to her quarters last night."

"Who else is up?" he asked.

"None of our crew yet," the youth said. "I'm with Ghidd'ah in the sick bay."

Ghidd'ah's face replaced Jayza's. "Is she there?" she demanded. "She is, isn't she? You bloody fools! Get showered, both of you, I'm on my way over with an alibi."

Jayza came back, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry, Captain."

"Forget it, just do what she says," he said, cutting the connection and heading back to the sleeping Zayshul.

He shook her awake none too gently. "It's morning," he said as she blinked up at him. "We slept all night. We need to shower," he said, pulling the covers off her and hauling her unceremoniously out of his bed. "Ghidd'ah's coming over with an alibi."

They crammed into the shower together, she trying to rub soap into his back as he tried to soap his front.

"Never mind me," he said, turning and soaping her rapidly and efficiently. "Get yourself dried and dressed. This is my room, at least I have a reason for being in the shower."

"How could we have fallen asleep like that!" she muttered, letting the water sluice the soap off her as he backed out of the shower to give her room.

He thrust a towel at her as she stepped out. "The safety's on the door. They'll expect you to open it. For Vartra's sake, just make sure it's them first," he said, getting back under the water.

"Kusac, I'm sorry," she began.

His expression softened slightly and he reached out to run his fingertips along the edge of her jaw. "Forget it," he said, his hand curling against the back of her neck and drawing her under the water again. His lips touched hers gently. "I don't regret it, Zayshul. You made me whole again last night." Then he released her and began hurriedly rinsing the soap from his pelt.

\* \* \*

Ghidd'ah and Jayza were in the lounge, making the sofa look like it had been used as a makeshift bed by the time, still damp but dressed in his black robe, he emerged from his bedroom. Zayshul had changed into her rumpled coveralls from the day before and was sitting at the meal counter gulping down a kheffa. A drink sat beside her, waiting for him.

Finished, Ghidd'ah flopped down into an easy chair and looked over at them. "If you haven't changed the bed, do it now," she said. "And don't you ever do this to me again unless you want the whole Outpost knowing exactly what's going on between you two! You can get me a kheffa."

He looked at Jayza. "If you wouldn't mind getting Ghidd'ah a drink," he said, trying not to let his ears fold back in shame, gesturing to the bedroom. "I have to..."

"No problem, Captain," said Jayza, interrupting him as he walked over to the dispenser.

Kusac ducked back into the bedroom and hurriedly remade the bed, stuffing the sheets into the laundry chute before returning to the lounge.

"If anyone asks, you were ill during the night because you drank too much," said Ghidd'ah. "Zayshul was staying with me so we both came over when you called us. She stayed the night, I didn't. Since I knew Banner had company, I told Jayza what had happened. When he couldn't rouse anyone here this morning, he came for me. You got that?" she demanded, glaring at him.

"What's the point?" he asked resignedly. "What happened in the pool last night will be all over the Outpost by now. This will only confirm what everyone already knows."

"You should make an effort," Ghidd'ah began.

"Leave it, Ghidd'ah," said Zayshul.

"You probably want an explanation," he said awkwardly to Jayza.

"I wouldn't presume to ask, Captain. It's your private life," said Jayza, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "You gave us permission to make liaisons with the females here, why shouldn't you do the same?"

"Just leave it that it goes back to his time on the *Kz'adul*," said Ghidd'ah more moderately. "Anything else is too complicated. We better be leaving, Zayshul," she said, getting up and draining her drink. "If we're lucky, no one will ask any questions."

"Are they still looking for me?" she asked, standing up.

"No, I told M'kou our story and he was satisfied," her friend said.

When the two females had left, he looked at Jayza. "Banner had company last night?" he asked, needing to say something.

"Yes," said Jayza, joining him at the meal counter. "Lorish. I saw them come down here."

"I was surprised to see you leave the pool alone."

Jayza grinned. "She joined me a short while later."

"Thank you for..."

"It's nothing," said Jayza, interrupting him. "We've all had a lover with a stropy relative at one time or another. Protecting Doctor Zayshul's privacy is only right."

He relaxed, immensely relieved that the youngster had interpreted the whole affair as just a need to protect Zayshul from Kezule and was unaware of the undercurrents.

"Might be wise for us to leave for the mess now as well," he said.

## **Haven Stronghold, Zhal-Mellasha 19th day (February)**

"When you've refilled the bowl with incense, you put the box back here," Tanjo was saying as he shut the cupboard door in the shrine's office. He turned round to find Dhyshac had vanished and he was talking to empty space.

"Dhyshac!" he called, frowning as he walked to the door. This was most unlike the cub. He was a good student, and meticulous with any task he was given. Just like his father had been, in fact.

The shrine room was empty, too. Even more puzzled, Tanjo walked through it, reaching for the child with his mind. Nothing. Now concerned, he picked up his pace, hurrying out into the corridor. He had a choice of

two directions, and didn't know which to choose because the area was deserted and he couldn't sense the child at all.

In the distance he heard the elevator whining as it began to move. Playing a hunch, he headed toward it at a run.

\* \* \*

Dhyshac stepped out of the elevator into the landing bay. He'd never been down here before on his own and was a little intimidated by its size. Moving away from the elevator and keeping close to the wall, he headed for the Landing Control room.

Excitement surged through him again. They were near, very near. It wouldn't be long now. He could feel his brothers' and sisters' presences in his mind anxiously waiting for news from him.

A warning klaxon sounded and the crews working on the parked shuttle and fuel tender ran to the sides of the bay. He snuck forward, peering round the Landing Control room, trying not to be seen as he stared at the pale blue shimmer of the force field across the entrance. Just beyond it he could see an approaching craft.

A hand fell on his shoulder, gripping him firmly but gently. "Dhyshac! What are you doing down here? You know you're not allowed in the landing bay alone!" said Tanjo.

"They've come for us," the cub said, watching the craft—he could see it was a shuttle now— approach.

"Who has?" asked Tanjo, confused.

His body taut, Dhyshac waited, totally focused on what his inner senses were telling him. He was on the shuttle, he could feel his presence even though he knew nothing else about him. Blood was calling to blood, and he couldn't have ignored it even if he'd wanted to.

Automatically compensating for the lensing effect of the field, he could see the shuttle growing larger and larger.

"We shouldn't be here," said Tanjo, attempting to draw him back to the elevator. "Accidents happen, Dhyshac, and particularly when a craft is landing. It's a very dangerous time."

He tried to dig his claws into the metal flooring, resisting the senior Brother's attempts to move him. "No," he said firmly. "They're almost here. I need to see him."

Slowly the shuttle penetrated the shield, bringing the high whine of its engines with it. The dissonance dropped down several notches as it nosed its way into the bay until it reached the large cross painted in the middle. It almost appeared to hang suspended in the air, then gradually, it sank to the ground, the wailing of the engines becoming louder until it finally touched down. Then silence fell abruptly.

From behind them, ten armed Brothers erupted out of the elevator, taking up positions facing the shuttle's air lock, their weapons held upright but ready.

As the air lock opened, Dhyshac pulled away from Tanjo and began to run over to it.

"Dhyshac!" yelled Tanjo, heading after him.

He could see them coming out onto the ramp. Ducking and weaving to avoid the landing crew now chasing after him, he kept going. He *had* to reach them, find the one whose presence called to him, for all their sakes! Through the ring of guards he could see the lead male on the ramp stop to look in his direction. A jolt of recognition ran through him, then he felt the touch of the adult's mind, heard it say his name.

*Dhyshac!*

Only feet from his goal, he stumbled, almost losing his footing in shock.

From behind, hands grabbed at him, lifting him in the air. "Got him!"

As the dockhand turned away from the guards and the shuttle, he struggled frantically, knowing he couldn't get free, knowing he couldn't allow them to deprive him of this meeting. For the first time in his very short life, he opened his mouth and screamed piercingly in anger laced with terror.

\* \* \*

With a matching roar of anger, Kaid, closely followed by Rezac, launched himself off the ramp, running for the male who'd grabbed the cub. He heard the whine as ten rifles were powered up and centered on them. Ignoring it, he rammed aside the guards trying to block him. Skidding to a stop, his face a mask of fury framed by a halo of raised hair, he grabbed the dockhand and swung him around.

"Give me my son!" he snarled, reaching for the struggling, screaming cub.

Dhyshac's hands scrabbled at him, trying to find a grip on his jacket as the dockhand hurriedly released him. As the cub held on for dear life, his legs frantically attempting to find a foothold, Kaid, used to holding Kashini, grabbed hold of one windmilling leg and wound it round his waist. Pulling him close against his chest, and with Rezac pacing him, he backed off to the shuttle ramp.

"Stand down!" a voice, recognizable as L'Seuli's, roared over the comm as Tanjo strode into the scene knocking the rifles of the nearest Brothers aside.

"You will not point guns at a cub!" Tanjo roared at them.

At the foot of the ramp, surrounded by the rest of his team, Kaid stopped and adjusted his grip on his son.

"Dhyshac," he said, stroking his sobbing cub's head. "Relax, I have you." He looked up at the brown-pelted figure of the Instructor as the older male finally turned to face them. "Well met, Tanjo," he said, flicking both ears as he tacitly acknowledged the debt he owed him.

"He knew you were coming," said Tanjo. "Before you arrived. I don't know how."



Kaid nodded. "I sensed him, too. Where are the others?"

"Safe," said Tanjo, moving closer so he could use hand signals to Kaid without being seen by the guards.

*They're quartered with Tanjo and his Sleepers,* Kaid relayed to the others. "What's with the welcome party?" he asked casually. "We didn't come here to do battle with anyone."

"I don't know. Probably Captain Kheal's orders. I was in the Shrine with Dhyshac teaching him religious duties when he suddenly bolted down here," Tanjo said with a smile. "I should have known nothing would keep you two apart."

He felt Dhyshac move in his arms, lifting his head to look at the others in the group. "Is she my mother?" the cub asked, rubbing the tears from his eyes as he stared down at T'Chebbi.

"No, she's your Aunt," he replied. "Carrie, my mate, will be your mother. Will you go to her for now, taiban?"

"I'd like to meet you," said Carrie, coming to stand beside him. *Your father needs to deal with the guards, Dhyshac,* he heard her send.

Reluctantly the cub nodded and began to loosen his hold on his father.

*Don't worry,* Kaid sent, *no one will take you from me now.* Still keeping his eyes on Tanjo and the guards, he lowered his son to the ground, holding his hand as he passed him back to Carrie. Immediately he sensed the others forming a living shield beside him in front of Carrie and Jo.

"Where's Commander L'Seuli?" he asked.

Tanjo looked behind him. "Probably on his way," he said.

Minutes later, L'Seuli, his black robes billowing, came striding across to them. "Stand down," he ordered the guards as he passed them. "You can see there's no threat, especially now he has the cub." He stopped in front of Kaid. "I've been expecting you," he said.

"Obviously."

"L'Seuli! How nice to see you," said Carrie, pushing through the others, still holding Dhyshac by the hand. "I hear you've a Leska now, too! When do we get to meet her?"

L'Seuli smiled wryly at her. "Hello, Carrie. Nice move, getting the Touibans to bring their ship for you. It wasn't anticipated, but then you never do what we expect, do you?"

"We try," said Carrie with a grin. "How about showing us some hospitality, or do you and Captain Kheal intend us to stay here and chat at gunpoint?"

"Of course not, now that we know you're not storming us by force," he said, half turning. "Dismissed," he said to the guards. "We'll go to my office." He looked at Tanjo. "Bring the other cubs over, Tanjo, please."

Tanjo bowed and turned to go.

"Tanjo," Kaid called out as he reached to pick Dhyshac up again. "You have the thanks of my Clan."

The Brother smiled before he headed over to the other shuttle.

In the elevator, Carrie leaned forward to stroke Dhyshac's cheek. "You're so grown up," she said, grinning at the child. "Almost a youngling."

Kaid leaned quietly against the back of the elevator as his cub's mind tentatively reached for his. He responded, letting his son experience his emotions at their meeting, letting him know how he was acknowledged and welcomed, and loved.

Dhyshac's mind opened up to his father's little by little as each feeling of loneliness and isolation, of being an object of uncertainty even at Haven, was met and answered with his father's simple reply. *I'm here, you're my son, we belong to each other always, and I love you.*

Carrie leaned against him, her presence on the edges of theirs, letting the cub know that she felt the same. When she sensed that Dhyshac no longer needed the continual mental reassurance, she said quietly to Kaid, "Shall I do the introductions, or will you?"

*You do it, he sent, resting his head against Dhyshac's. I'm still getting to know my new son!*

"You're going to be a little overwhelmed, I'm afraid, but it can't be helped," she said with a smile.

"I'm Rezac, your father's brother— your Uncle," said Rezac, grinning down at him. He pointed to the dark-haired Human female beside him. "This is my mate, Jo, your Aunt. I understand what it's like to have no family one day, then suddenly have brothers and Aunts and Uncles, because it happened to me."

"And this is Garras, and T'Chebbi," Carrie said, pointing to the two beside L'Seuli.

"A family outing," said L'Seuli dryly, with the ghost of a smile.

"I haven't met your kind before," Dhyshac said, looking back to Carrie.

"We're Humans," she said, reaching up to touch him again. "I brought you a vid of your other brother and sisters since they couldn't come with us. I'm afraid they're very young, still infants."

The elevator doors opened and they stepped out into the corridor.

"My office is over by the Command area," said L'Seuli. "I imagine you still remember your way around here."

"How could we forget?" asked Carrie as they headed off to their right.

"Jiosha's waiting for us," said L'Seuli.

"I'll look forward to meeting her again," she said.

Carrie took Dhyshac from Kaid again as they settled themselves round the table in L'Seuli's office.

"You shouldn't be here, you realize that, don't you?" said L'Seuli. "Lijou and Rhyaz both ordered you to remain on Shola. I'm disobeying my orders in letting you even see the other cubs, but since Dhyshac had foreknowledge of your arrival, I know the others are aware of your presence. I figure there's no point in preventing you from meeting the rest."

"They know," confirmed Dhyshac.

"You have two cubs of mine here," said Rezac, his voice tense. "If Dhyshac can sense his father so strongly, then they will because I can. I have no intention of being prevented from seeing them!"

Jo put her hand on his. "L'Seuli has just said we can meet them, Rezac," she said soothingly.

"I want more than to meet them," he said forcefully. "They're staying with me!"

"Let's get this settled now," said Kaid smoothly. "Clan comes before anything else, you know the law, L'Seuli, and these children belong to our Clan. We've come for them."

"You know the situation," began L'Seuli.

"They're Clan," interrupted Rezac with finality. "There's nothing more to discuss."

"Kaid," said L'Seuli, looking at him.

"My brother has said it all."

Carrie looked over at the priest and within moments, his face creased in distress and he looked away.

"That was unfair, Carrie," L'Seuli said. "I know Dhyshac wants to be with his father, I didn't need you sending me his feelings on the matter."

"Yes, you did," she said. "This cub, like the others, was dragged into the world by uncaring beings to be used against us. Tanjo has looked after and cared for them very well, and I know you and Jiosha have done your part, but they need the love of their parents and the rest of their family now. They need to know they belong, and that they *are* precious and wanted, things only we can give them."

"I can't allow it," he said, his voice hardening. "When their existence is discovered, it could destroy not just the treaty but the Alliance. Too much depends on it."

"They'll be taken to the estate, L'Seuli," said Kaid. "No one outside will see them. How can it threaten the Alliance? We've no intention of taking the matter further and exposing them to the reporters and the newsvids. All we want is our children— and Kusak."

"I can't give you him either. We've had no word from him or his crew since they left several months ago."

"You must have some idea of where they met Kezule."

"None," said the priest.

Kaid felt Dhyshac stir both mentally and physically beside him, before Carrie sent him a warning.

*I know*, he sent to Carrie on a tight mental wavelength. The cub had a good idea of the location, how, Vartra alone knew, but it could prove useful.

"You can't leave here, Kaid, you realize that, don't you?" continued L'Seuli.

Kaid raised an eye ridge. "And how long do you intend to keep us here?" he asked. "Until our cubs back home are ten? That's impossible. Be realistic, L'Seuli."

"The Touiban Speaker has been told to return to Shola," said L'Seuli, ignoring his question. "You will remain on Haven for the present. As for the cubs, they can stay with you for the time being at least, but they will have to resume their studies in a few days."

Rezac began to rumble in anger. "Their education is not your decision to make," he said.

"What are they being taught?" asked Jo.

"How to use their Talent," said Jiosha.

"We know that," said Dhyshac. "We were taught with sleep tapes made from the mind of Kusac."

Exclamations of shock and surprise rippled round the table.

"How do you know that?" asked Jiosha, staring at him. "You never mentioned this before."

"It wasn't important till now," said the cub, leaning against Carrie.

"In which case, they're fully trained Telepaths, L'Seuli," said Kaid. "There's no need for them to be educated here; Rezac is right."

L'Seuli got to his feet. "I think you and I should continue this discussion later, Kaid, alone, when you've all eaten and rested," he said. "Jiosha will show you to your quarters. We have four double-occupancy rooms where you can stay. Meals are at the usual times. When Tanjo returns, I'll have him bring the cubs to you."

Kaid got to his feet, bending to lift Dhyshac from Carrie. "Very well," he said. "But you won't change our minds."

"We need access to our shuttle," said Carrie. "We have overnight things we need."

"I'll arrange for two of you to be escorted down," said L'Seuli. "And, Kaid, I'll want your weapons."

Kaid raised an eye ridge. "What weapons? We left our side arms in the locker on the shuttle, and they'll stay there."

L'Seuli sighed as they left.

\* \* \*

T'Chebbi and Garras had returned with their overnight bags before Tanjo arrived at their room with the other cubs, holding a very nervous Gaylla in his arms.

"Liegena," he said as the other three clustered close around him. "Gaylla knows neither of her parents are here and feels..."

"I understand, Tanjo," she said, reaching out to take the little female from him. "We know about Gaylla. Hello, sweetie," she said, smiling at her. "My, you're heavy, aren't you? I swear you're heavier than Dhyshac!"

Gaylla surveyed her from enormous eyes, keeping her fingers firmly in her mouth.

"I've got something in my bag for you and the others," she said, carrying her over to the bed. "I bet you've never had candies before, have you?"

Gaylla shook her head as Carrie put her down beside Dhyshac.

"You'll like them," grinned Dhyshac, holding a lollipop out to her. "They taste really nice. I chose this one, with a face on it, for you."

She took it from him and looked at it, unsure what to do next.

"I promise it tastes nicer than your fingers," said Carrie, gently taking the cub's fingers out of her mouth and urging her to put the lollipop there instead. An expression of surprise, swiftly followed by delight, lit up her features. Carrie turned back to Tanjo, looking carefully at the other three cubs, frowning slightly.

"This is Vazih," said Tanjo, urging the light brown-colored female forward before the two young males. "Zsayal and Shaylor."

*Gods, this is a mess!* she sent to Kaid, paling slightly even as she welcomed them and urged them to help themselves to the candies on the bed. *I'm the mother of both those little males, and one of them is Rezac's!*

*Don't worry, it seems for some reason, the blood link is stronger to the father.*

*I don't know how I feel about it, Kaid. He's my son, too!*

*Then you share him,* said Kaid calmly, resting his hand on her shoulder. *Let's see which of you they're drawn to. You see to Shaylor, I'll get Rezac and Jo.*

\* \* \*

By the time the introductions were over, and they'd all eaten, it was obvious that despite the cubs' obvious desire to be with their parents and family, they didn't want to be separated.

Reassured that they wouldn't be except at night because of the physical limitations of the rooms, they'd bedded the cubs down, leaving Gaylla with Dhyshac and Shaylor so they could use the room Garras and T'Chebbi were sharing as a lounge until they all retired for the night.

Gaylla had attached herself to T'Chebbi, wanting to sit with her in the mess and following her around as they walked back to the bedrooms. When she'd offered to have the little female in with them overnight, Carrie had accepted gratefully.

"Can they really keep us here?" asked Jo, as they were finally able to relax. Kaid's and T'Chebbi's search of the room had turned up only two concealed listening devices, both of which were now sitting in coffee dregs in the bottom of a disposable cup.

Kaid nodded, rubbing an oilstone gently over the blade of his belt knife. "Can, and will," he confirmed.

"What's the plan?"



He stopped to test the edge on the ball of his thumb. "We sit it out and wait for Toueesut and the others to come up with the goods."

Rezac threw him a curious glance. "And what's that?"

Satisfied, Kaid grinned, slipping his knife back into its scabbard. "Wait and see. It'll take four, maybe five days. Things should start to move late tomorrow when the *Tooshu* arrives and parks outside."

Carrie laughed softly as Rezac's lips twitched at the edges.

"One upmanship," said Rezac. "They tell Toueesut to leave, so the Touibans send a destroyer."

"Watch and learn," grinned Kaid.

They heard a scratching at the door and Kaid got to his feet to answer it. "It's a runner to say L'Seuli's ready to see me now."

"Want me to come with you?" asked Rezac.

He shook his head. "No need. He's going to say nothing new except how pissed Rhyaz and Lijou are that all Haven now knows the cubs belong to us, and that we'd risk the Alliance to come here."

## **K'oish'ik, City of Light, night, Zhal-Mellasha 19th day (February)**

K'hedduk, flanked by twenty of his altered Workers, crept silently along the second floor colonnaded corridor that led to the Great Hall. The evidence of his main force's passage was plain to see as they passed guards, their throats slit, lying in pools of their own congealing blood. The drugged food and wine served at the banquet had done its job well, as had the weak ale served to the guards and in the barracks. Here and there he'd seen the signs of a struggle and bodies battered beyond recognition when someone had remained conscious long enough to object.

His people weren't subtle or particularly bright, but they were fanatically loyal to him, as were the half M'zullians the Sholans had returned to them. So far, everything had gone as planned and this had been nothing more than the wholesale slaughter he'd hoped for. Another fifty of his people were in the barracks now under Zoshur, making sure the threat of Kezule's offspring was dealt with permanently.

There was still the mop-up work to do, which was why he and his twenty, under Shekkul's command, were making their way to the Great Hall where the evening's banquet had been held. Gelshuk had already checked the room, and killed all the guards, and was now checking the rest of the Palace, but only he could decide which of the Courtiers would be allowed to survive the night.

Sporadic gunfire sounded in the distance and he triggered the comm set he wore. "Report, Zoshur," he said, signaling his people to stop.

"Meeting some resistance, Commander. Seems some of them were in the sick bay and drank no ale."

"Take them alive if you can. Bring them to the Great Hall and lock them in the office there," he said, motioning his people forward again. Zoshur was a good leader, one capable of keeping his small army of psychopaths in order.

Silence reigned in the Great Hall. People lay where they'd fallen when the drug had finally claimed them. Some were slumped on the tables, others had realized something was wrong and remained conscious long enough to attempt to crawl to safety. Thanks to the custom of everyone, including the guards, having to drink a toast to the Emperor at the beginning of the meal, they were all either unconscious or dead. Two of the Sholan Embassy guards had pretended to take the toast, then when they saw everyone collapsing had shown the presence of mind to do the same. It hadn't saved them, though. As soon as his people entered the room, a firefight had ensued, resulting in their deaths when he wanted them kept alive as a bargaining tool. It had also cost him dearly— ten of his fighters had died under the Sholans' gunfire.

He picked his way through the bodies and the debris caused by servers spilling their trays of food as they fell, his gaze darting all around the room, checking details, making sure the slaughtered guards were where he expected to find them. Every now and then he'd point to one of the people at the tables or on the floor and give the order to kill them. He gave the two dead Sholans a wide berth, checking the number of them all again to make sure none had been missed. Almost falling over one of the unconscious ones, he landed several well-placed kicks before moving on. Tonight, he was repaying all debts.

At last he reached the High Table where the Emperor and Empress lay slumped in their ornate dining thrones.

Slipping his gun into the waistband of his trousers, he grasped Emperor Cheu'ko'h by the shoulder, pulling him upright till his head lolled against the padded seat back. Removing the ornate Imperial circlet, he set it on his own head, then, drawing his gun again, he placed it against the Emperor's temple and pulled the trigger. It was such a simple act, almost impersonal, he thought.

The body jerked briefly as the side of his head exploded in a spray of blood and brains. As he returned the gun to his holster, Shekkul tipped his head back and roared, "Long live Emperor K'hedduk!" His cry was echoed by the other nineteen members of his personal bodyguard.

K'hedduk allowed himself a small smile as he acknowledged their salute, aware that he wasn't Emperor yet.

He turned his attention to the Empress. Pulling her chair back from the table, he picked her up and slung her inert form over his shoulder.

"The food is to be destroyed," he reminded them. "When you're done, cover it with the tablecloths. Bind the Sholan Ambassador and his two live guards well, strip them and put them in the serving pantry. They conceal weapons in their clothing. Then bring all the Courtiers still left alive to the throne room," he ordered, turning his back on the carnage and walking toward the pillars into the room beyond where the two golden state thrones flanked a statue of the last true Emperor, Q'emgo'h.

Passing between the pillars behind the high table, he entered the dimly lit shrine of the throne room. Central to it, on the dais in front of the huge wall-hanging depicting the Royal Egg, its two halves open to display the flames of the sun, towered the immense golden statue of the long dead God-King, Emperor Q'emgo'h, considered the Founder of this post-Fall dynasty. But he was not interested in that.

He stopped at the edge of the red carpet and, in front of the thrones, lowered his burden to the ground, pulling her hands behind her back and binding them with the cord he'd brought with him for that purpose. Leaving her there, he turned to look at the throne of the Emperor.

The throne's gilded magnificence, even in this dim light, out-shone that of the statue. The tall back was fashioned to resemble a sunburst, its rays reaching out a full six feet from the center. The rest was richly decorated with the carvings of beasts that had once roamed their world. Jewels glittered in their eye sockets, and the winged avian predators that formed the legs each held one enormous gold-flecked blue stone carved to represent an egg. On the seat was a cushion made from the tanned hide of the previous dynasty's Emperor. This was the Throne of Light.

Beside it, the much simpler and more modern throne meant for the Empress, paled into insignificance.

K'hedduk slowly mounted the steps. He'd waited and plotted for this, and now he was filled with a sense of his destiny and his place in history. Turning round, he lowered himself onto the cushion, stretching his arms along the ancient carved rests, savoring the moment. He, not his so worthy brother, was the one sitting on the Throne of Light, the pinnacle of power of their ancient Empire. Tomorrow, he'd have them skin Cheu'ko'h then preserve his hide— a new cushion for *his* new dynasty.

"Prisoners taken, Commander," said Zoshur in his earpiece.

"Well done," he said, then looked to his bodyguard. "Shekkul, deploy guards throughout the hall and immediate areas, the barracks unit is returning."

Now all he had to do was wait for Zoshur to arrive and for his Court to awaken. He checked his watch. Less than half an hour left.

"Bring me the Enforcers." It was time to deal with M'zzik.

\* \* \*

The bound Enforcers were dragged into his presence and forced to kneel. Around them, the Courtiers were beginning to wake into a world of terrifying mutated armed males and the reek of blood.

"I should have known you had no intention of honoring our agreement," hissed M'zzik, angrily pulling his arm free of the guard holding him. "I knew you never intended to take the throne for your brother!"

"Wisdom after the event is common," said K'hedduk mildly. "Our positions are somewhat reversed now, aren't they? I am the one in charge. As for my brother, he's a weakling, ruled by his Generals. Not me. I have the same birthright *and* the nature to rule."

M'zzik laughed. "Anyone can sit on the throne and claim to be Emperor, but you need more than that to rule here, K'hedduk!"

He pointed to where the Empress was being helped to sit up by those around her.

"Why do you think she still lives? With her as my wife, the Primes will be content enough. If they're not, I have your Enforcers, my guards, and the M'zullian twenty to ensure their loyalty."

"How long do you think those nightmares you've created will follow you?" said M'zzik, staring pointedly at Zoshur. "Look at them, K'hedduk!"

Restructured by his gene therapy technique, they'd been recruited from the dregs of the cities outside. Tattoos on their faces and heads, the imagery bright and brutal, was worn as their own badge of arrogance.

Dressed in faded trousers, scuffed boots, and thick animal-hide jackets, so far they'd refused to wear anything else. They were the antithesis of the affluence and sophistication that typified the City inhabitants.

M'zzik was right, their loyalty would only last so long, which was why he needed to recall the implants now from what passed for the Prime space fleet, and contact those loyal to him on M'zull.

He signaled to Zoshur. "Take him out and kill him."

"You'll not last a month, K'hedduk!" said M'zzik as he was dragged from the room. "How many of Kezule's offspring did you kill? He'll come looking for you, mark my words! Then your life will be worth nothing!"

K'hedduk felt a pang of fear which he quickly quashed. Kezule was a Warrior, he understood that in a coup, lives were lost. If he heard about it, he'd know better than to come back to challenge the Emperor who'd slaughtered so many of his top troops.

"I'll never marry you," Zsh'eungee hissed angrily, struggling to her feet. "Where is my husband, your Emperor, and why do you dare to sit on his throne?"

K'hedduk ignored her and looked to where Lufsu knelt. "The position of High Inquisitor is now vacant," he said as the sound of M'zzik being shot carried through to the throne room. "If you're prepared to swear loyalty to me, you can have it."

"I'll gratefully accept the position, and give you my allegiance, Emperor K'hedduk," Lufsu said, inclining his head respectfully.

K'hedduk gestured to Zoshur to cut him free. "Then your first act is to immediately conduct the service for my wedding to the Empress."

Startled, Lufsu rubbed his wrists and, getting to his feet, bowed. "As you wish, Majesty. I will need the Book."

"Send one of your priests for it," he ordered, getting up from the throne and coming down the steps toward him. "And use the old ceremony, from Q'emgo'h's time, *may His memory be revered for all time.*"

"I refuse!" said Zsh'eungee, tilting her chin up and staring at him.

K'hedduk's hand lashed out faster than a striking snake. His blow made her stagger and she'd have fallen had one of the Courtiers not leaped up to catch her.

"You will do as you're told," said K'hedduk coldly. "Females will no longer be allowed to roam freely. They'll be confined to the homes of their husbands, and if of marriageable age and not decently married, put in a public harem. They have two purposes in life, to breed, and to give pleasure, nothing more."

His gaze swept the Court. "Kneel!" he roared. "I am son to the late Emperor of M'zull, as Lufsu can confirm. You are here to witness my ascension to the Throne of Light by the ancient right of my bloodline, and yours by marrying the Empress. You have heard my words, they are now law. See that you obey them."

Zoshur kicked the nearest Courtier on the leg, forcing him to his knees.

"It shall be as you proclaim, Emperor K'hedduk," he stuttered as the rest of the Court followed suit and echoed his words.

K'hedduk frowned and Zoshur kicked the terrified male again. "And the rest, you scum!" hissed his henchman.

K'hedduk winced and sighed to himself as the Court dutifully intoned the old litany.

"It shall be as you proclaim, Emperor K'hedduk, *May your memory be revered forever.*"

\* \* \*

The wedding was nothing but a formality proclaiming him the husband of Zsh'eungee; she had no say in the matter. When it was done, and he'd signed the gold-bound *Book of Destiny*, K'hedduk grasped her by the arm.

"The Court is now dismissed. Males only will gather here tomorrow as usual. We have much work to do. Celebrations for my coronation will be

held in two weeks, on the day of the Spring Festival for La'shol." He smiled toothily. "I intend my dynasty to be a fruitful one."

Turning, he hauled Zsh'eungee with him toward the exit to the Royal apartments as his twenty guards fell in around him. He stopped beside Zoshur.

"Have this mess cleared up," he said. "I don't care who you have to drag from their beds, but I want it cleared. Cut the heads off the bodies and have them displayed round the perimeter of the City courtyard, except for those of the two dead Sholans and Q'emgo'h— send those to the tanners and have them skinned and the hides preserved, complete with heads for the Sholans. Q'emgo'h's head place at the entrance to the Palace. Also roust the carpenters and others out of their beds and get them to open up the Royal Harem." He would see to recalling the implants and contacting M'zull himself, when he was done with his new wife.

He stooped to caress Zsh'eungee's face and grinned up at them when she hissed and pulled herself away. "Just as well I like my females feisty! I want the harem ready for my wife tomorrow morning, Zoshur. At dawn, see that the Heralds are sent round the city to proclaim my ascension to the Throne of Light, and my marriage."

"Yes, Emperor K'hedduk," said Zoshur, pointing to several individuals. "Do as our Emperor commands," he ordered. "What about the skinny aliens?"

"Lock the TeLaxaudin in their quarters and post guards outside."

\* \* \*

Once in the Royal apartments, he dragged Zsh'eungee toward the Emperor's bedroom where he knew her egg was sitting in its specially heated incubator.

Realizing what he planned, Zsh'eungee began to plead with him. "No, you can't! Please, not my egg!"



He laughed at her, clamping her firmly to his side with one arm. "You think I'll let that misbegotten egg survive?" he said, pulling out his pistol and aiming at the incubator. "Never fear, I'll give you more hatchlings, enough to found my new dynasty, ones worthy of ruling instead of those sand-colored drones Q'emgo'h gave you!"

His three shots, and Zsh'eungee's shriek, echoed around the room as the incubator and the egg exploded, sending bloody shards everywhere. Zoshur burst in with five of his followers, but when they saw the cause, they backed out hurriedly.

As her shriek turned into a high-pitched keening, K'hedduk hit her again.

"Be silent!" he hissed, tossing her, still bound, onto the bed. "You should be honored to be the mother of a line to equal that of Q'emgo'h Himself, *may...*"

He bit his tongue on the rest of the words. Never again would he have to say them, *he* was now the Emperor, the divine God-King of the Primes.

"We'll start now." Putting his gun on the night table, he began to undress.

\* \* \*

"You're Brotherhood, supposed to protect me! How could you get taken in by drugged ale?" Ambassador Fingoh demanded from where he sat, hands and feet bound, on the floor of what was obviously a pantry.

"We were being watched carefully," said Shamgar, struggling to sit up. "All I did was pretend to drink it then when that page stopped watching me, I spat it back into the goblet. It must have been heavily dosed. Ouch! I'm covered in bruises! What the hell happened to me when I was out cold? You got any, Vaygan?"

Fingoh snorted in disgust as he eased his shoulders and pulled against the band that held his wrists behind his back. "It's one of the oldest tricks in the book, and you got caught by it! And why have they taken our clothes?"

Vaygan, still lying on his side, was scanning the room in the hope there was something they could use to cut through their bonds.

"To make sure we had no concealed weapons. No, I haven't, Shamgar. The simple plans are the ones that work best, Fingoh," he said. "Instead of moaning at us, start trying remember if anything unusual has happened over the last few days that would help us work out what's going on."

"Sh! I heard gunfire," said Shamgar, his ears rotating toward the door. He began to wriggle and bounce his way there, trying not to yelp when he landed on his tail a couple of times.

He put his nose to the edge of the door, sniffing audibly. "I smell blood," he said quietly. "A great deal of it, and I hear the sound of feet."

Still on his side, Vaygan rolled over to join him. "Blood, definitely," he said sniffing at the bottom edge of the door. "Then there's been a coup of some kind. Discontented nobles?"

"Doubt it. Had you got Cheu'ko'h any nearer to agreeing to contact the M'zullians, Fingoh?"

"He said something about doing it next week but the High Inquisitor was still against it," said the Ambassador.

"Then my money's on the Directorate," said Shamgar. "Remember the info they made available to us about Kusac Aldatan and the Enforcer he met? This High Inquisitor is head of the Enforcers here."

Vaygan shuddered. "Don't remind me. The Directorate's gone, Kezule destroyed it. You putting your money where your mouth is, Shamgar? Twenty credits then?"

"Done," said Shamgar, beginning to bounce back toward Fingoh. "Ouch, dammit!"

"Will you two stop making wagers and do something to get us out of here?" demanded Fingoh. "They could come back and murder us at any time! Fine bodyguards you are! Can't you contact the other two?"

"Probably dead," said Vaygan regretfully.

"If whoever's in charge now wanted us dead, Fingoh, we wouldn't be here now. As for the rest, look at yourself," said Shamgar. "They've taken our wrist comms, our weapons, including our belt knives, and our jackets and belts. At least you're still wearing a robe."

"Vaygan, sit up and have a try at getting your claws into the rope around my wrists."

"It isn't rope, it's some kind of polymer like we use back home. Look at the one binding your ankles."

Shamgar did and shrugged. "Still worth a try."

Vaygan pushed himself up into a sitting position then shuffled around till Shamgar and he were back to back. Feeling with his hands, he located the semi-rigid band imprisoning his friend's wrists and began to insert a claw tip between it and him.

"Ouch! Dammit, I have enough bruises already without you trying to stick your claws into me as well!"

"It's not going to work, Shamgar," he said, leaning back against him.

"What about your teeth? Try biting through it," said Fingoh, watching them.

Vaygan arched an eyebrow at the Ambassador. "With the dental plan they've got here, you want me to risk breaking a tooth? I don't think so!"

Silence fell for several minutes during which time they could hear the sound of bodies being dragged around.

"What do you think they want us for?" asked Fingoh eventually, ears flicking back.

"Who knows? Information, maybe, or hostages. The Prime Prince is still on Shola, isn't he?" asked Shamgar.

"If they question you, Fingoh, just tell them the truth, don't try to keep anything back," said Vaygan.

"I can't do that!" exclaimed the Ambassador. "I can't give away Sholan state secrets!"

"Yes, you can. They have all your data now, they probably know everything anyway."

"Our job is to protect you, Ambassador," said Shamgar. "Do what Vaygan says. If you give them what they want, you'll survive this, and maybe even see Shola again. We all might, if we're really lucky."

"We can't just sit here and wait!"

Vaygan rolled over onto his side again. "There's nothing we can do right now, Fingoh, except wait, and take any chance we can to escape. If I was you, I'd settle down for a long wait. You'll only make yourself stiff sitting up like that."

Shamgar tried to lie down gradually but he overbalanced and fell. "Ouch, dammit! Even my ribs are bruised! When I find whoever kicked me while I was out cold, I'll leave claw marks all over them!"

"Will you quit moaning about your bruises?" muttered Vaygan, trying to get comfortable. "Some of us want to get more sleep."

## **Kij'ik Outpost, mess hall, Zhal-Mellasha 20th day (February)**

Banner waited until the other two got up to put their plates away before leaning forward across the table. "Kusac, I need to talk to you in private. Do you mind going back to our lounge?"

Taken aback, Kusac looked at him. "Sure," he said, getting up. He tried to sense what Banner was thinking, but his Second was keeping himself well shielded. Sighing inwardly, he assumed the worst, that Banner had heard the common gossip about him and Zayshul.

Once there, he headed for the sofa. "What's so important we had to come here?" he asked.

"Something's been puzzling me for some time," said his Second, taking the chair opposite. "I've been watching M'kou, how the females always want to be near him, and trying to work out what it is."

"No secret there," he said with relief. "He has a mate. It happens all the time— if you have a Companion, others are interested in you, if you don't, no one seems to want to know you."

"It's more than that. I believe the females have a way to mark their partners, the opposite of what males like Kezule do with their bite. I think they may be able to mark them with a very specific scent."

He shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"I thought you would, especially as the females are equally attracted to you. Have you been bitten by a female Prime?"

"Me?" He feigned surprise. "No, of course not."

Banner sat back in his seat, staring at him. "When are you going to tell me the truth, Kusac?" he asked quietly. "You have bite scars on your shoulders. I saw them the night we spent together."

His eyes narrowed as fear and anger rushed through him. "What I do in private is none of your business," he snapped.

"I'm only asking because if you had been marked in some way, it might explain the incident of the female in your room— and the way you behave around Doctor Zayshul. If I'm right, I thought you should know that your attraction to her isn't voluntary."

He got to his feet, tail beginning to sway from side to side. "You're treading on dangerous ground, Banner," he said, his voice low and menacing.

"So are you," his Second retorted. "Can't you see that either you're being manipulated, or you're behaving like a fool and doing this only to get back at Kezule? I know damned well you and Zayshul are having an affair and have been for some time! Hell, after your performance four days ago, the whole Outpost knows! We've only got three weeks left before we leave, in Vartra's name! Can't you stay away from her for that long, before he finds out and it jeopardizes everything?"

"You think I'd use Zayshul to get back at Kezule?" He couldn't believe he was hearing this.

"If you are, it's beyond bad judgment, Kusac, it's a dereliction of duty. Isn't getting Shaidan back to his parents the priority here, not your personal revenge on Kezule?"

"More than you can ever guess," he muttered, beginning to pace behind the sofa. He stopped suddenly and leaned on the back of it, staring at his Second. "Consider this, Banner. What the hell have I to go home to? Lijou and Rhyaz threw me to the wolves when we left Shola. When I return, I'll be up on treason charges for threatening the Alliance by stealing the *Couana*, not to mention the civil charges for disrupting the spaceport! Then there's the small matter of leaving Haven to come back here. The Brotherhood will be after me for that!"

He thumped the sofa back with his hand. "Dammit, do you know what they could hit me with in terms of punishments? Mental reprogramming, or years in some correction facility, and that's if they accept a plea of temporary insanity!" He stopped, sensing Banner's utter shock at what he was saying. "The rest of you are safe," he said in more moderate tones. "I at least made sure Stronghold would support you as acting under my orders."

"I thought this was a fully authorized mission, albeit highly confidential. Why did you agree to take it if you knew what they were going to do to you?" Banner asked, ears almost invisible.

"It is, or rather the first part was," he said tiredly, running his hands through his loose hair. "I made no secret of the repercussions of coming

back to Kezule. As for why I did it, I told you already. Kezule asked specifically for me."

"Stronghold will tell the authorities about the cubs. Surely that'll change everything," said Banner, leaning forward in concern. "They can then admit to having to set up the mission the way they did to ensure secrecy from the Primes."

"They can't," he said, beginning to pace again. "Not unless the whole situation with the Primes has changed radically. There're factors involved here that I cannot tell you about, that I hope Stronghold hasn't figured out. Just trust me that this whole situation is a powder keg and I'm treading a thin enough line as it is."

Banner rose from his chair. "For Vartra's sake, Kusac, tell me what it is. I can help!"

"No, you can't," he said. "It would be better if you and the others left now, and Shaidan and I remained here."

"That's not an option," said Banner, his voice hardening. "I've told you before, Kaid asked me to look out for you, and I'm not leaving Kij'ik without you! I'll do what it takes to get you back safely, even tell Stronghold I overruled you and insisted we come to Kij'ik for Shaidan."

Kusac glanced over at him and shook his head slowly, touched at what his Second was prepared to do for him. "Thank you, but it won't wash."

"Then at least stay away from Doctor Zayshul before Kezule finds out! If you continue like this, you're heading for a fall, and I can't allow that to happen!"

"You can't allow it? You have no say in any of this. Your presence has made my position more difficult right from the start! I've tried my best to keep you all out of danger but you refuse to obey my orders and go home!"

"Kusac, I don't want to argue with you," said Banner, obviously trying to defuse the situation. "We've only three more weeks then we can leave all this behind us. If we all stand together, then they can't prosecute us all for treason, and even if they do, we get to put our case."

"You think so? Believe me, it's in everyone's interests that this is buried so deep it never surfaces!"

"They can't do that, Kusac. You've too high a profile as a Clan Leader."

"That won't stop them. Remember, the official reason for me stealing the *Couana* is because after what J'koshuk put me through, he damaged my mind to the point I couldn't exist without him so I had to return to the Primes! I'm insane, remember? They'll Readjust my mind and bury all this. Take our crew and leave now while you can, Banner, before you know too much and they do the same to you!" he insisted angrily, making for the door.

"Kusac!"

Ignoring him, he hit the door mechanism and left, heading off down the corridor, cursing. He needed to see Zayshul. Damn Banner, and damn his loyalty! All it was achieving was putting them all at risk instead of just him!

Ignoring the knowing smile of the medic on duty in reception at the sick bay, he headed over to Zayshul's lab.

"What's wrong?" she asked, aware of his state of mind instantly.

"When Kezule returns, I want him to send my crew home," he said, pacing restlessly back and forth in front of her bench.

"They refuse to obey my orders and leave, so I need him to make them go."

She paled. "Why? Why do you want them to leave?"



"If they remain any longer, their lives could be at risk back home. You know what's waiting for me, you figure it out. If I return to Shola with Shaidan, I have to do it alone, and I need to find some reason for the authorities to drop all treason charges against me. Right now, I have no idea how to do that."

"But you came to get the cubs," she began.

"And we can't admit that!" he interrupted, stopping opposite her. Her scent was distracting him as usual, and without a second thought, he reached deep inside himself and damped its effect down to a bearable level.

"If they suspect for a moment that Shaidan is my son, they'll know he was artificially created and grown by the Directorate. If news of that gets out, then the treaty with the Primes goes up in smoke. I need time to work out how I can return safely, and I can't do it with my crew breathing down my neck every few minutes!"

She nodded. "It sounds like the best course. But Kezule's returned," she said. "The *N'zishok* docked fifteen minutes ago. You can speak to Kezule yourself. This would probably be a good time because his mission to help the Ch'almuthians went extremely well."

Something that Banner had said to him was niggling at the back of his mind. "Zayshul, could Kezule have been responsible for that female getting into my quarters? She didn't break in, so she must have had an access code."

"Why would he do that?" she asked, turning back to her work "To make you jealous, maybe to divert attention from you. I don't know, that's why I'm asking you."

"I can't see him wanting to do either of those."

He could feel her retreating mentally from him. She was hiding something. "What do you know?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she said, glancing up at him. "What makes you think I do?"

"Then you suspect something."

"You're beginning to sound paranoid, Kusac," she said, getting to her feet. "I was just finishing up here. Kezule wants me up on the hydroponics level. We'll talk later, when you're not so agitated."

"You're avoiding the issue," he said, following her out and into the sick bay.

"Shh!" she said, heading for the exit. "You'll draw attention to us. I'll see you later," she said as a medic approached them with a box of supplies.

Zayshul gestured to her without stopping. "In the first treatment room, please."

The medic nodded and hurried past them.

Stopping, he turned to look at the medic as she went past him. There was something about her... Looking back, he saw Zayshul had already gone. Annoyed that she'd left their conversation so abruptly, he resumed walking toward the exit, trying to work out what it was about her that had caught his interest. It wasn't so much that *she* was familiar, but her scent was.

On an impulse, he began to follow her. Standing in the doorway of the treatment room, he watched as she unpacked the box.

"Can I help you, Captain?" she asked, glancing at him.

He could smell her apprehension, and beneath it a touch of fear-scent. "No," he said. "You seem familiar. Have we met?"

"I'm sure I would have remembered it if we had," she smiled, continuing to unload the contents into the cupboard by the treatment bed.

"You're one of the Ch'almuthians, aren't you?" he said, stepping into the room. Why was she afraid of him? He moved closer.

"Yes. I'm not usually on this level, though. I work down on the Command level, in the sick bay there."

Grasping her arm, he pulled her closer. "It's you, the female from the shop. I know your scent," he growled as the realization of who she was dawned on him. "You've a scar on your arm," he said, pushing her sleeve up. "Just here."

Her fear-scent flooded the room as he exposed the tiny scar on her upper arm.

"Let me go, Captain," she said, trying to wrench her arm away from him.

"Why did you drug me and come to my room?" he demanded, grabbing her with his other hand as well. "I want to know!"

"I don't know what you're talking about! Let me go immediately or I'll call for help!" She was panicking and struggling to get free of him now.

"Don't lie to me," he snarled, all the anger he'd felt with Banner and Zayshul was now directed at her as his hair began to bush out. "Rape is a criminal offense! General Kezule said he'd prosecute you if I found you, so I want to know why you did it! Was it for your own selfish reasons, or did someone put you up to it?"

"You've made a mistake," she said, stopping her struggles and trying to speak calmly as she realized he was too strong for her to break free. "Got me mixed up with someone else. Sholans can't smell our scents properly."

"How did I know about your scar?" he demanded, flexing his claws so they began to prick her flesh. "And I can smell Prime scents since I got marked by one! Your name, tell me your name!"

Her eyes dilated and she began to stammer. "Liyak. It wasn't me... I... didn't... I've never met you!"

He pulled her closer, till his snarling face was inches from hers. "Try again!" His rumble of anger had become a low growl that was rising in pitch.

"He said you'd never know... said I was doing you a favor by turning her scent marker off with mine! I meant no harm, please don't bite me!" she wailed, eyes filling with tears of terror.

"Who said? Who told you to do it?" he roared.

"M'kou! Please... please don't hurt me!"

Shocked and stunned by her answer, he let her go and turned away. M'kou? Why would M'kou do something like that to him? It was totally out of character. He needed to think. Ignoring her, he walked out of the treatment room as the medic on duty, running to see what was happening, skidded to a stop in the corridor and cowered against the wall as he went past.

His wrist comm was buzzing but he barely heard it as he wandered blindly down one corridor, then another. When he finally came to his senses he was outside his quarters. Punching in the code, he went in and headed for the dispenser to get coffee— strong coffee.

He needed to think, he had to think this through. It was inconceivable that M'kou would do something like this. He was almost a classic by-the-book person, following his orders to the letter— or was he? Taking his drink, he perched on one of the high stools at the meal bar and spooned in the whitener and sweetener, stirring it carefully, making almost a ritual of the simple, familiar tasks.

M'kou appeared to be by-the-book, but he wasn't. There was that time he'd warned him that Banner intended to ask for Shaidan to go to other members of his crew rather than him— there had been no reason for the warning except to help him. There had been other times, too, now he came to think of it, so what would make M'kou set up something like this? Had the young Lieutenant really believed he was acting in his and Doctor Zayshul's interests, or had he done it at Kezule's request?

This was what Zayshul had been hiding! The anger began to return as he remembered how anxious she'd been to reach Kezule— to warn him, no doubt! Whether or not Kezule had ordered M'kou to do it, all three of them

knew about it and had been involved either in setting it up, or preventing him from finding out who the female was!

He'd been cynically used and manipulated once again by them, including Zayshul! It hurt, Gods, but it hurt more than he wanted to admit that she'd kept the truth from him, that she'd betrayed him again, but it would be for the last time. He drained his mug, slamming it down on the counter with such force that it smashed, and got to his feet.

Banner was right, he'd been both a fool and manipulated. No Valtegans, be they Primes or Ch'almuthians, could ever be trusted. They were leaving now, and Shaidan was going with them. Their Gods help anyone who stood in his way this time, whether here or on Shola. The damned treaty with the Primes needed to be exposed for the sham it was.

He checked his wrist comm: Shaidan would be up on the hydroponics level with the TeLaxaudin now, and so were Kezule and the rest of his crew.

Cold rage flooded through him as he headed for the bathing room and began unpacking the components of the la'quo gun.

### **K'oish'ik, barracks cells, same day**

Shamgar was standing looking out of the reinforced window into the barrack's exercise yard when they heard distant footsteps marching along the corridor.

"Sounds like they finally learned how to march in step," he said.

"Wonder who they're coming for," said Vaygan lazily from where he was reclining on his simple one-piece metal cot. "Us, or them."

"Ask them," said Shamgar.

Reaching out behind him, Vaygan banged on the wall. "Hey, Khay, they coming for you today?"

"No, not that we know of," said Khayikule from the other side of the wall.

"How's Cheelar? He had any treatment yet?"

"Doesn't need it. He's gone into laalgo—a deep healing trance."

"Handy. It's a biofeedback thing?"

"A fair translation," agreed the Prime. "We go into a deep trance then trigger internal organs that help us to heal very quickly. It requires larger amounts of food, though, as we burn up stored fats to do it. And, of course, we're extremely vulnerable during that time."

Suddenly there were two loud raps on the wall.

"The guards are coming down here," said Vaygan quietly to the Ambassador. "Remember what we told you, Fingoh. If they question you, tell them everything they ask, and try not to show fear."

The Ambassador nodded, ears flattening out of sight.

"He'll do fine," said Shamgar reassuringly, turning to watch the cell door. "You know, Fingoh, you'll be able to dine out for years on the strength of the stories of what you've experienced here."

"At least they gave us our tunics back," said Shamgar, brushing imagined dust specks off the stains on it.

"How do you do it?" Fingoh asked, his voice taut with fear. "How can you make jokes at times like this?"

Aware of the footsteps nearing, Shamgar came over to the Ambassador and crouched down on his haunches in front of him. "It's how we cope," he said quietly. "If you laugh, it doesn't let the fear take hold. It's there, Fingoh, but we control it, it doesn't control us."

He stood up as they heard their door being unlocked. "Vartra preserve us," he muttered as they caught their first sight of their captors.

A head taller than them, and bulking about half as much again, these were the largest Primes they'd ever seen. Unfastened black jackets, probably at least a couple of sizes too small, trimmed with enough gold braid to decorate a room for the winter festival, were worn over ordinary faded trousers. The attempt at a uniform would have been amusing except for the head perched above it on a neck as thick as Shamgar's thigh.

The forehead and scalp had been tattooed with the lurid image of a decapitated head, blood running from the severed neck and empty eye sockets, the lips pulled back from the needle sharp teeth in an obvious scream of agony.

"Face the wall," the Prime ordered in a deep and gravelly voice, his rifle aimed at them as he and a companion came into the room.

Shamgar helped Fingoh to his feet and led him over to join Vaygan.

"Hands behind your back," snapped the other.

Metal restraints were put on their wrists, then they were herded out into the corridor where two other guards waited.

In silence, they left the prison block and entered a narrow, dimly lit corridor. This part of the City belonged to the Palace staff as it served the barracks, kitchens, and other utility areas never seen by the Royal Court, but as soon as they entered the public area and the pillared portico, that changed. Exquisitely painted bas-relief carvings of a procession of people bearing elaborate gifts covered the walls on both sides, though they had little chance to take them in as they were hurried through the room to the staircase opposite.

At the top of the stairs, another corridor with similar scenes led them to the wider main one. This they knew led to the Great Hall and throne room.

"Smells better than it did last time," Shamgar muttered to Vaygan only to receive a blow from the butt of a rifle in the small of his back.

"Silence!"

He staggered and had to be caught by the guard as he fell.

The Great Hall, and the throne room beyond it, were brightly illuminated giving the impression of one huge room. Clustered beyond the pillars they could see the Courtiers. Beyond them, the Throne of Light itself glittered and shone in the glow from the reflected lights.

When they reached the pillars, Shamgar's arm was again grasped by the guard beside him. Aware of their presence, the Courtiers fell back, gradually opening a path for them that led to the throne. Fear was palpable on their faces and in the air.

His attention focused on the identity of the male sitting in the throne, Shamgar was taken by surprise when he heard a sharp intake of breath from Vaygan, and a cry of horror from Fingoh. Then he saw what lay at the feet of the new Emperor.

Before he could react, his legs were kicked and he was thrust to the ground as a voice called out, "Kneel at the feet of the living God-King, Emperor K'hedduk!"

As his gorge rose, he swallowed convulsively and stared at the red carpet beneath his knees, desperately not wanting to see the remains of Tokidi and Shi'Kui, not wanting to even think about what had been done to them. He risked a glance to his right, seeing Fingoh between him and Vaygan.

"Say nothing," he hissed as quietly as he could, only to receive another sharp kick from his guard.

"I see you've noticed my new floor coverings, Ambassador Fingoh," said the Emperor smoothly. "Handsome, aren't they? An improvement on the originals, in my opinion."

Shamgar heard a sigh, then a thump as Fingoh collapsed beside him.

"I don't think the Sholan Ambassador approves," said the Emperor.

A ripple of nervous laughter ran through the crowd.



Shamgar tried to concentrate on the name K'hedduk. He knew he'd heard it somewhere before.

"Wake him," the Emperor ordered sharply.

He heard footsteps running away, then back, and the sudden spray of cold water as it splashed from Fingoh onto him. The Ambassador was hauled spluttering up to his knees.

"Try to stay awake, Ambassador," said Emperor K'hedduk. "I had you brought here to tell you that the presence of Sholans on our world will no longer be tolerated, and to return this to you."

Shamgar had to look up now, but he kept his eyes averted from the horrific sight of the pelts, complete with heads, of his two comrades.

A red-robed Prime, his chest decorated with some insignia on a gold chain, was walking toward Fingoh carrying a small round tray. He groaned inwardly, wondering what new horror was on it, but when the Prime reached them and tipped the contents onto the floor, only scraps of paper fluttered down.

"That is the treaty that the traitor known as Q'emgo'h signed with your people." The tone was hard now. "I have revoked it. You will be released only when Prince Zsurtul is returned to us. A message to this effect has already been sent to Shola. Until then, you will remain in the prison as our guests."

He heard the sound of running from behind him, and a voice growing closer as it cried out, "They're gone! The TeLaxaudin have vanished!"

"What?" The Emperor's tone was one of shocked disbelief. "They can't have gone! Search the city for them! And get rid of these stinking Sholans!"

They were hauled to their feet and hustled out of the throne room.

\* \* \*

Shamgar waited till they'd been released and the door locked behind them before he gave vent to his feelings.

"May L'Shoh damn him to His darkest, fieriest pit of hell! Vartra's bones, he had them skinned and turned into floor coverings! Including their heads! What kind of barbaric animal is he? I pray they weren't still alive when he did it!"

"I doubt they were alive at the time, Shamgar," said Vaygan soothingly, reaching out to take him by the shoulder. "Leave it alone. They're past caring now, thank Vartra."

"I recognized his name," said Fingoh quietly, sitting down on his bed.

"They had no right to desecrate their bodies," raged Shamgar, oblivious, as he thumped his hand against the cell wall. "It's barbaric, uncivilized!"

"I know who he is!" repeated Fingoh, raising his voice.

"Shamgar, stop it!" said Vaygan, shaking him. "Listen to Fingoh. He knows who this new Emperor is."

"Who?" demanded Shamgar, brushing his forearm across his eyes.

"K'hedduk from the Directorate. They never found his body after Kezule foiled the last coup. Now we know why."

"It can't be!"

"Ask Khay," said Fingoh. "They know all about it."

"We heard," came Khay's slightly muffled voice from the next cell. "We weren't involved in that. I remained in the Palace guarding the Emperor. What did he look like?"

Shamgar looked at Fingoh. "I can't tell them apart well enough," he whispered.

"More like your coloring, not quite the usual sandier Prime color," said Fingoh. "The ridges on his head were fairly pronounced."

"That's K'hedduk," confirmed Khay. "My brother M'kou did send a description of him to me before they left here. You have our sympathy for the fate of your friends," he added somberly.

"The Directorate strikes again," said Vaygan softly.

"K'hedduk tore up the treaty between us," said Shamgar, moving closer to the door so he didn't have to raise his voice too high. "He wants Prince Zsurtul in exchange for us."

"Will Shola hand him over?" asked Khay after a short silence.

"No," said Vaygan. "They won't. He's as much our best hope as yours."

"What will happen to us?" asked Fingoh quietly.

"Shola will delay and prevaricate, hoping to keep us alive for long enough to mount a reprisal action," said Shamgar.

"Not all of us were killed or captured, Shamgar," said Khay quietly. "Our brother Zhookah had a unit on maneuvers in space and I managed to get a message off to them. They'll go for the General."

"May our Gods smile on us," said Shamgar fervently. "Let's pray we can all stay alive till then!"

"Why are they keeping you, Khay?" asked Vaygan.

Khay laughed bitterly. "For the same reason the Primes wanted our father— breeding stock. It's our sister Shiya I'm concerned for."

"It'll cost them dear if they come near me," said Shiya with a hiss of anger.

"The Gods help you, djana," said Vaygan with feeling.

"Did you notice there were no females there, none at all? And the Empress' throne was missing?" said Fingoh.

"K'hedduk wants to restore the old Empire," said Khay. "That includes retaking all the slave worlds, and returning females to harems. He'll be looking for a treaty with M'zull now."

"He has got to be stopped," said Shamgar.

"I know," agreed Khay.

"The TeLaxaudin have vanished," said Vaygan, suddenly remembering.

"What?"

"They've gone. Could they have escaped?"

"Who knows? They're a strange species, very secretive. In my time here in charge of Palace Security, I hardly ever saw them."

"Someone's coming!" they heard Kho'ikk hiss urgently.

## Chapter 19

### Kij'ik, hydroponics level, same day

"HOW'D the chat go?" asked Khadui, glancing at Banner as he came to stand beside him and Jayza at the railing overlooking the first field area.

"We move tonight," he said, his voice low but angry as he leaned on the rail, apparently as relaxed as they were. "In the mess, when we have Shaidan and Dzaou there as well."

Jayza leaned forward to look from Banner to Khadui. "Move? What am I missing here?" he asked quietly.

"Brief him when you get the chance, Khadui," said Banner.

"Aye, Lieutenant," said Khadui with a sigh.

"What is it?" demanded Jayza, his whole body tensing.

"Relax, dammit, Jayza," said Banner, turning his face away from the group of Primes under Q'almo and M'kou who were briefing the new Ch'almuthian trainees. "They can read our body language. The Captain's lost it, I'm taking over as of tonight."

As he spoke, the lights flickered briefly, then dimmed before returning to normal, making everyone automatically look up at the ceiling high above.

"Might as well brief him yourself," said Khadui. "Looks like we've got a few minutes now. Kezule's just arrived. Maybe we'll find out where he went in such a hurry."

Banner glanced round to see the General open the fence gate and go over to M'kou.

"Khadui's been helping me set this up," he said quietly, turning back. "I'll start some power failures, apparently random ones, just before third meal. First will be the internal address system, so they'll not be able to reach the

departments they want, followed by blackouts. One will eventually take out the mess, at which point Dzaou will join us and I'll knock Kusac out with a trunk. You'll take Shaidan and we'll make our way under cover of the blackout to the elevator. From there we head for the landing bay and the shuttle and take off."

"We've made one-shot stunners," said Khadui. "If we meet resistance, we use them and take their guns. I've also got a couple of homemade smoke canisters."

Jayza stared at them for a moment. "We know these people," he said. "We've become friends with them. And I don't believe the Captain's lost it. Why do we have to do this? Surely we can wait three weeks."

"If we don't do it tonight, Kusac intends to have Kezule send us home without him and Shaidan," said Banner quietly, turning away from them to look back at the small knot of Primes about thirty feet away. "Vartra knows, I don't want to hurt anyone, Jayza, but I can't let Kusac do that."

"I understand, Lieutenant," said Jayza.

"Meet in my room half an hour before third meal," said Banner. "Bring any weapon you've made that's small enough to conceal on your person. We'll finalize it then."

Banner heard Zayshul, followed by Shaidan, come out of the Security post in front of the TeLaxaudin's office and watched as they hurried through the gate and across to Kezule.

"I also want us away from here before Kezule finds out our Captain and his wife are having an affair." He sensed Jayza's reaction and looked at him. "You knew. When did you intend to tell me?"

Jayza tried to outstare him and failed. "He's as entitled to his privacy as any of us," he said, looking away.

"Not when it threatens all of us," said Khadui before Banner could. He shook his head sadly. "There were others interested in him, choosing her was foolish."

"Kezule wants us," interrupted Banner, moving back, ready to leap the fence. "Remember, act normal."

\* \* \*

"I hear Q'almo is conducting this session himself," said Kezule, clasping his hands behind his back.

"It's time your commandos took on the responsibility for training, General," replied Banner. "We'll still be monitoring the situation and giving advice where needed, of course."

Kezule nodded. "What's happening today?"

Banner looked across at Q'almo, standing a few feet away with his group of five, made up of four Ch'almuthians and another of his brothers.

"Zsifar and I are holding the hut over there with four of the new folk," said Q'almo, pointing behind them, "and Keeshu will lead his unit of seven as they try to take it from us. We're using the tagged armor so we'll know when we take hits."

"So you have the flag today."

Q'almo grinned. "And we intend to keep it."

With a momentary smile, Kezule nodded at him. "Carry on."

As Q'almo barked out his orders and the two groups headed out to take up their positions, Kezule turned back to Banner. "I'll stay and watch for a while, if you have no objections."

"They're your people, General," said Banner. "You need to feel confident that they're performing well."

\* \* \*

Unbuckling his belt, Kusac pulled his heavy sleeveless jacket on over his tunic. Sealing the bottom portion, he swiftly belted it again. The small canister of la'quo spray he pushed into one of the chest pockets, making sure the flap remained loose so he could pull it out easily and quickly. The loaded gun he slipped into the built-in cloth holster inside his jacket. Finally he checked to make sure his knife was seated correctly.

Leaving his room, he headed for the small port side elevator that went straight up to the hydroponics level. Opening his mental shields fractionally, he began to reach out, making sure his son was there. He could feel them all; Shaidan and Zayshul, Kezule and his son, M'kou, then Banner, Jayza, and Khadui as well as fourteen others. They'd need to take hostages. Kezule and Zayshul would do, and Jayza could call Dzaou to meet them by the main elevator on the Officers level.

As he retreated mentally, his mind felt something else, something truly alien even for Kij'ik. Homing in on it, he sensed it was like a network, spread throughout the Outpost with nodes every so often, nodes that absorbed... information. Glancing up to the location of the nearest such node, he could see nothing— it had to be concealed behind the actual bulkhead.

Reaching the elevator, he hit the call button. Intriguing as this find was, he had more important matters on his mind. Focusing on it and the next in the sequence, with a thought, he destroyed them. While part of his mind was surprised at the ease with which he'd done this, another was telling him that he was finally utilizing his Talent efficiently.

\* \* \*

Giyarishis was considering the puzzle that was Shaidan. Against all odds, the cub had almost overturned the Directorate programming. It shouldn't have been possible, but it was happening and required further study. He'd been attempting to do that when the sand-dweller female had arrived and insisted on removing the child to greet her mate.

An alarm fitted to his belt began to vibrate against his side, startling him and at the same moment, he realized the impossible had happened: the



minor Unity net which had been constructed throughout Kij'ik had collapsed. He was blind, unable to tap into the potentialities around him.

He began to panic. Never before had this happened. The network was utterly foolproof, there was no way it could fail—and yet it had, and he had no means to fix it himself.

Frantically he tried to remember where they were on the current line—was there a nexus soon? If there was, who was involved, where and when would it be? The endless permutations began to run through his mind without him consciously thinking of them: he didn't know what to do and he couldn't contact the Camarilla! It paralyzed him, left him rooted to the spot like a broken toy.

\* \* \*

Kusac left the elevator and headed down the pathway, automatically taking in everything around him. His thinking was sharp, the world around him crystal clear as he noted the security guard standing opposite the gate, and Q'algo disappearing with a team of five into the clump of trees surrounding the hut. Opening the gate, he started across the field.

Ahead, Kezule was in conversation with Banner, with Khadui and Jayza standing behind him and slightly to one side. Beyond Kezule, Zayshul stood talking to M'kou. His vision began to narrow as soon as he saw them. Doubtless she was telling M'kou of his suspicions. Behind them, Shaidan stood quietly, his eyes on his father from the moment he'd come into sight.

As he drew closer to Kezule, the General turned around, looking surprised to see him. Banner frowned, starting forward, but he signed him to stay put and be ready for action.

Stopping, he looked directly at Shaidan, pitching the sending so the psi damper couldn't prevent it.

*Go to Banner, Shaidan. Now.*

The cub hesitated, looking from him to Banner then back. He took several small steps forward until he was in front of Zayshul but was stopped as she automatically reached out to pull him to her side. It was the instinctive reaction of a mother, but it made his anger burn brighter, and his vision slowly start to shrink.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Kusac," Kezule was saying.

"I found the female, Kezule," he said, his voice even and calm. "Liyak, a Ch'almuthian working on the Command level in the sick bay. I expect you to deal with her immediately."

Caught completely by surprise, Kezule's mouth fell open.

M'kou's head instantly jerked up to look at them and the color drained from Zayshul's face.

"But you knew that already, didn't you?" he said softly. "All of you." His gaze flicked from Kezule to M'kou and Zayshul then back again.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you," said Kezule, unclasping his hands and letting them fall to his sides.

He stepped closer, narrowing the distance between them. "One chance, Kezule, the last one," he said softly. "Be honest with me. You arranged this, set me up. Why?"

"Your imagination is getting the better of you, Kusac," Kezule said, his tone slightly mocking. "You obviously have a thing for our females but seem to need the help of drugs or alcohol first!"

He ignored the insult. "Your son, M'kou, asked this female to come to my quarters," he said, a low growl underscoring his words as the beginnings of huntersight began to narrow his vision even further. "She was to replace your wife's scent marker with her own. M'kou wouldn't do that without you ordering it. You broke our agreement, Kezule. You had me raped to save yourself embarrassment! I want Shaidan now. We're leaving immediately."

Kezule began to laugh and turn away. "From what I heard you were a willing participant! Leave when you like, Kusac, I've never kept you here, but the child stays," said Kezule, his tone hardening. "He amuses me."

All he could see and smell was his prey— Kezule— as a red mist formed before him. He lashed out, mentally and physically, with a blow that sent the Valtegan flying. With a roar of rage, he launched himself on the fallen male.

\* \* \*

M'kou thrust Zayshul and Shaidan behind him and took a step toward the General.

"Leave them," Banner snarled at M'kou as Khadui and Jayza sprinted into supportive positions. "This has been building long enough! They've both got it coming to them!"

M'kou hesitated.

"You want it to escalate?" demanded Banner, moving out of the way of the fight, his hand going to rest on the pommel of his knife.

"No," said M'kou, obviously torn. "I want no deaths!"

"Then leave them to us! You can't handle a Sholan in kzushu!"

They'd been aware of Shaidan struggling against Zayshul's grip, but when he began to yell, they turned automatically to him.

"Let me go!" he shrieked, turning suddenly into a kicking, fighting fury. "I want my father!" He lowered his head and bit, his teeth sinking deep into Zayshul's hand.

She, in turn, let out a yell of pain and suddenly Shaidan was free.

\* \* \*

Stunned, and the breath knocked from his lungs as Kusac landed astride him, for several seconds Kezule could do little but lie there and take the punishing blows. As the next one came in, he snaked his right arm under it. Simultaneously grabbing him by the shoulder and grasping him above the wrist with his other hand, he twisted Kusac's arm into a lock that put painful pressure on the Sholan's complex shoulder joint.

It had the desired effect as, lifting himself just off Kezule's hips, Kusac twisted round to ease the pressure. The slight relief from the Sholan's weight was enough. Ducking the blow aimed at his face, he kept up the pressure on Kusac's shoulder and threw him to the ground. Scrambling to his feet as he released his grip, Kezule aimed a vicious kick at Kusac's side. As he backed off, the Sholan rolled with the blow and came up crouching on all fours.

They faced off, circling each other, Kezule trying not to be intimidated by the fact that with his long hair bushed out almost vertically from his head, and his tail bristling, Kusac looked twice his normal size. When a kick came in, he dodged at the last moment, countering it with a powerful, downward blow that caused Kusac to pull back, briefly favoring that leg.

Kusac was good, and far faster than he'd thought a Sholan could be. Triggering more adrenaline into his system, he went on the offensive, aiming a flurry of blows toward the Sholan's face and chest. A few got through, but not as many as he'd hoped as he found himself suddenly having to block a series of savage kicks to his legs and groin. Stumbling when one got through, he backed off panting, realizing this was nowhere near as easy as he'd assumed it would be. For some reason, he had no natural physical superiority over this Sholan.

\* \* \*

As one of Kezule's punches caught Kusac hard on the jaw, sanity began return and the red mist rage receded. Backing off, he shook his head, trying to force his hair back down again.

Suddenly a small figure rushed at him, flinging his arms around him and clinging to him, sobbing desperately.

"I want to go with you, Father! Take me home now!"

Hunter-sight faded abruptly, as did the heat of his rage. Clutching Shaidan to him, he backed off farther and risked glancing around to find Banner while his other hand reached into his jacket for the la'quo gun.

*Go to Banner! Do what he says instantly,* he sent to the cub, then pushed him away and drew the gun, pointing it at the Valtegan.

"Take my son, Banner, and tell Dzaou to join us," he said, training the gun on Kezule and slowly advancing toward him. "We're leaving now, Kezule, all of us, and you're my hostage as far as the landing bay."

"Stop it, both of you!" Zayshul yelled, the shock of her accompanying mental outburst freezing him to the spot.

There was a blur of motion and the whine of an energy bolt. Pain exploded in his left leg and it suddenly collapsed under him. His finger clenched instinctively round the trigger and the gun went off. The next moment, the ground came up to hit him. As he fell, he reached out to neutralize the shooter, sending out a mental blast of rage and pain that killed him instantly.

\* \* \*

Banner barely had time to absorb that Kusac was Shaidan's father before chaos broke out. As the cub was running toward him, and M'kou sprinted in front of Kezule, an energy rifle spat, followed almost immediately by a shot. Kusac went down as if poleaxed and M'kou spun about clutching his arm then he, too, fell to the ground.

He leaped for the cub, pulling him close and was about to run to Kusac when Jayza, appearing from nowhere, snatched the cub from him.

"Go!" shouted Jayza, sprinting for the trees twenty feet ahead.

\* \* \*

Kusac lay there, gasping for breath as his whole left side suddenly exploded in intense pain. The smell of burning flesh and singed fur filled his nostrils, making his stomach turn over. A sudden weight landed on top of him, causing him fresh torment. He tried to move, push whoever it was off, but the agony in his side made him cry out.

"Lie still!" hissed Banner, shifting his weight slightly. "You numb-witted bastard! Why the hell didn't you say Shaidan was your son?" he demanded, then added. "He's safe, Jayza's got him. They've gone for cover."

He was aware of loud voices around them, but the burning pain completely dominated him.

\* \* \*

Kezule had to work out later what actually happened. At the time, all he saw was Kusac suddenly pull a gun on him, and M'kou rushing forward between them. Then two shots rang out and both Kusac and M'kou were down, injured.

As Jayza ran past him carrying the cub, Kezule suddenly unfroze, realizing the whole situation could turn into a bloodbath in seconds— not because of his people, because apart from himself, M'kou, and the damned Security guard, they only had tag guns— but from the Sholans who were armed with lethal claws and knives.

"Hold your fire!" he roared, crest rising in anger. Ahead he could see Keeshu's unit racing back, and from his rear, he heard Q'algo shouting orders to his group.

Glancing down at his son, he was reassured to see that M'kou was only holding his arm and there was very little blood.

Zayshul ran forward, hesitated briefly as she looked over to where Kusac lay under Banner, then knelt down to see to M'kou.

"Let me see your arm," she demanded. "Someone get a medical kit from the First Aid room!"

"Already on the way," said Q'almo, coming to a stop beside her.

"Zsifar, immobilize Banner and Kusac," Kezule ordered. "Q'almo, disarm that damned Security guard and bring him to me!"

"Aye, sir," said Q'almo, disappearing.

Zayshul helped M'kou as, clutching his bleeding upper arm, he struggled to sit up. Moving his hand, she quickly checked it— there was a small hole in the shirt. As the blood started to flow, she pressed his hand back over the wound, checking the rest of his arm and his side for an exit wound.

"Bullet's still in there," she said as one of the Ch'almuthians came running over with a medical kit. Putting it down beside her, he opened it and located the dressings.

Kezule knelt down beside them as she slit his son's sleeve open and quickly bound a pressure dressing over the wound.

"How are you?" he asked, his voice rough with concern. "That was foolish."

M'kou gave a half smile. "I'll live," he said, then suddenly turned a sickly pale green and keeled over.

"Shock," said Zayshul succinctly, leaning forward to finish securing the bandage. She looked up at Kezule. "Get him sent down to the Officers sick bay, he'll need surgery. The bullet's still in there. Tell them to call Ghidd'ah on the way, tell her we've two gunshot wounds, one a projectile. She'll know what to do."

"I'll see to it," said Keeshu.

"No," said Kezule. "Send someone else. You take the guard's rifle and help find the missing Sholans." Standing up, he saw they had Banner and Kusac on their feet.

Zayshul closed the kit and got to her feet, starting to move toward where Kusac was being held up between Zsifar and one of the newcomers.

Reaching out, Kezule pulled her back. "No," he said unequivocally, gesturing one of the Ch'almuthians over. "Keep her here," he ordered.

"He needs treatment, Kezule," she said disbelievingly but he was already walking away. "Dammit, you can see he's got a serious thigh wound! Kezule!"

He stopped in front of Kusac. "Order your people to surrender," he said with barely suppressed rage. "You know they can't escape."

Kusac, attempting to keep his weight off his injured leg, glared at him, his lips pulling back from his teeth. "Get them yourself, you egg-licking reptile! And keep that cold-blooded qwene of yours away from me!"

Kezule hit him a stinging blow across his face, shocked when, with an incoherent snarling roar, Kusac's jaws snapped at him, narrowly missing his hand.

Almost feral with rage and pain, the Sholan managed to pull one arm free, lashing out at him with deadly claws that sank deep into his shoulder. He was jerked forward, Kusac's massive jaws almost closing on his throat before suddenly the Sholan froze.

Kezule had enough presence of mind left to punch him hard on the side of the jaw and stagger back, then one of the guards was hauling on Kusac's arm, trying to free him from the claws, and the other was between him and the Sholan, shielding him with his body.

"Trank him," said Banner urgently.



Freed, Kezule, aware of the blood running down his back, retreated to a safe distance and stared at Banner. More snarls and growling drew his eyes back to Kusac who was once again struggling. He looked like he'd break free at any minute.

"You can't handle him, no one can!" said Banner. "He's kzushu— in a blood rage. Trank him. In my belt pack."

"Q'algo, do it," he ordered. "Then get him down to the brig." Kezule was shaken to the core at his brush with death. He pulled his pistol and thrust it at Q'algo. "Use this if you have to."

Cautiously the Prime approached Banner, keeping the pistol trained on him.

"There's been enough bloodshed," said Banner tiredly. "Use the hypo on his neck. It won't knock him out, but he'll be so doped up you can handle him. Khadui! Jayza! Report back!" he yelled, raising his voice.

"I'm glad to see one of you has remained in control," said Kezule as he watched Kusac suddenly go limp in the grasp of the four Primes who'd been struggling to contain him.

"What do you expect?" Banner snapped back. "You've been using his son against him all this time, your wife's seduced him, and you sent someone to rape him! Dammit, the wonder is he didn't snap before now!"

"Enough!" hissed Kezule, crest rising. He didn't need to be reminded of his own part in causing this.

"He needs treatment," said Banner more calmly. "Your people shot first."

"I know, and believe me, he'll be punished!"

"I've been told the guard's dead, General," said Q'algo, returning to slip the empty hypo back into Banner's pouch.

"What? How?" demanded Kezule.

Q'almo shook his head. "He was bleeding heavily from the nose, mouth, and ears, that's all I can tell you. Face looked like he'd had a seizure."

Aware of Banner stiffening, he rounded on him, first gesturing Q'almo to leave. "How was he killed?"

Banner shook his head. "I don't know."

Kezule remembered the way his mind had been assaulted just as Kusac had hit him the first time, and the glazed look that had come over the Sholan's face as at the last possible minute before killing him, he'd stopped.

"Burn it!" he swore, stamping his foot on the ground and swinging away from Banner in anger. "Bring my wife over!" he called out then rounded on Banner again. "He's a mind reader again, isn't he? He's gotten his abilities back, damn it!"

"Not to my knowledge," said Banner as Zayshul was escorted over.

Kezule rounded on her. "He's a telepath, isn't he? And he's been teaching you. Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"If he hadn't taught me, I couldn't have saved your life," she retorted, pulling free of her guard. His crest began to lower. "You killed the guard?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, her eyes flicking briefly to Banner. "Be thankful I did. What idiot gave him a live gun?"

"I intend to find out," he said as Khadui, and Jayza, still carrying Shaidan, were escorted up to them.

"Take Shaidan back down to the Command level, Zayshul," he said, noticing the glazed look on the tear-stained face of the child.

"I need to treat his father," she said angrily. "He'll be going into shock with a wound like that! He needs fluids, surgery to remove the dead tissue..."

"He brought it on himself," interrupted Kezule coldly, taking Shaidan from Jayza and thrusting him at her. "He'll get no treatment till I say so! See to the child and my son, that's all you need to worry about."

"If he's not treated, Kezule, he could lose his leg, if not his life," she said, becoming distraught as she tried to hold onto Shaidan, who had suddenly come to life again and was demanding to see his father. "You can't do that to him, especially when he's morally in the right!"

"You're upsetting Shaidan," he said, gesturing to the guard who'd brought her over. "Take them back to the Command level, see Shaidan settled in our quarters with Shishu, then escort my wife to the Officers level to operate on my son."

M'zynal arrived then, with a unit of six armed guards.

"In the brig, strip-search them and scan them for weapons, the same with their quarters," Kezule ordered. "Then return them to their quarters and search this level, the Officers', and any rooms their Captain used on Command. He had a gun. They'll have more weapons hidden somewhere."

"Aye, General. The Sholan Dzaou's already there, and I left orders to process Captain Aldatan when he arrived. Their ship, too?" asked M'zynal.

Kezule nodded. He was beginning to feel decidedly light-headed now.

"May I suggest you go for medical treatment now, General?" said the Security chief as his men took charge of the Sholans.

Reaction was setting in and his shoulder was stiffening up. "I will. Do we have security tapes on this level?" he asked, starting to walk back to the gate.

"I believe so. I'll get it checked out when we're done and let you know. Relax, General, the situation's contained now."

"Watch Kusac every minute," he said tiredly. "Take no chances with him. No one goes into his cell alone, no matter the circumstances. No live weapons, only stunners without the capacity to kill." He looked at his son. "He was as strong and as fast as me, M'zynal, that's just not possible."

"I'll brief Security accordingly, General."

"One more thing. The psi damper collars we took off the cubs— the ones locked in your office— put one on the Captain and set it to maximum strength. Make sure the Duty Officer always wears a control bracelet and have the other one brought to me."

"Yes, General."

\* \* \*

As soon as the trunk hit him, Kusac sagged against his guards, all the fight suddenly evaporating out of him. Unable to stand, his limbs feeling like dead weights apart from the fiery pain that still burned down his left side, he was manhandled across the field to the emergency door in the covered walkway. A short ride in the elevator, then he was dragged out into the brig.

Through the fog in his mind, he recognized the guards who took over as more of Kezule's commandos. A chair was brought and they tried to get him to sit. When he yowled in pain, they stopped to examine his wound.

As he clutched the one holding him up, he knew they were talking but the words weren't clear. He fought to concentrate, pushing back the mists as they carefully stripped him of his clothing.

"I'm putting a pressure dressing on those wounds," he heard a voice he knew say.

"He's to have no treatment," objected another.

A string of expletives that made even him blink followed. "Kusac, hold still. It'll hurt but I need to put a dressing on your wounds."

He peered at the figure kneeling before him. Female from the coloring. His nose told him nothing as all he could smell was the stench of his own singed fur and burned flesh. His heart began to race and he felt suddenly cold and clammy. The nausea he'd been feeling began to increase, but his mind was clearing as his system fought back against the trunk.

"Zhalmo," he said.

She looked up and nodded. "Hold him still," she said as she tore open the dressing pack.

He was shivering but could feel sweat running down his back. Looking down, he wished he hadn't when he saw the swollen and charred hole on the top of his thigh. Feeling faint, he looked quickly away.

She pressed gently against his inner thigh, holding the outer edge of the dressing there with one hand as she wrapped it round the entry point to the other side to cover the exit wound. Even that slight touch was too much as he clutched the wooden chair and tried to bite back a low moan of pain.

He heard a loud snap as the chair back broke, then hands grasped him as he began to fall, but the pain continued as she swiftly bound the dressing in place.

"Carry him into his cell and put him on the bed," she ordered. "We'll finish the search there."

He swam in and out of consciousness until they finished, then she was helping him sit up and holding a bowl of water to his lips.

"Drink, Kusac," she said as he put a shaking hand up to catch hold of it. "You're losing body fluids. You need to replace them. Drink as much as you can, do you hear me?"

"I hear," he said, suddenly aware just how thirsty he was despite the nausea.

The door closed behind her, leaving him alone. He let the empty bowl fall from his hands to the bed beside him. He felt sick from more than the effects of the wound— he'd failed, and now any prospect of leaving here with his son was gone, probably for good. His vision began to fade and he slumped back on the bed, unconscious.

\* \* \*

Ghidd'ah was finishing off dressing Kezule's shoulder in the treatment room when Zayshul entered, still wearing her surgical clothes.

"How is he?" he asked, looking up at her.

She sat down on the chair by her monitor. "There was no bullet in him," she said. "As far as I can tell, it was designed to dissolve inside the wound."

"Excuse me?"

"Kusac wasn't using a straightforward weapon," she said. "It was a drug delivery system."

"Has he been poisoned?" Kezule demanded, starting to rise out of the chair.

"General!" exclaimed Ghidd'ah. "Please, sit still!"

"No, not a poison, exactly," said Zayshul. "What it did do was knock him out, now it's systematically targeting and destroying the Warrior glands that give him the extra speed and strength and allow him to heal faster."

"This drug is killing him!"

"No, he's in no danger, Kezule," she said hurriedly, seeing him about to pull away from Ghidd'ah again. "He's becoming the same as us Primes, that's all. Still a Warrior, but without the extra physical advantages of your caste."

"Then stop it!" he demanded. "That's enough," he snapped, turning on Ghidd'ah and reaching past her to grab the clean shirt that had been brought for him.

"I can't," she said. "The drug's in his system, there's nothing I can do. It's very clever, actually, because it does no other damage. As for his arm, there's no permanent harm. The bone was chipped slightly as the pellet hit it, but I've taken the pieces out. He'll need a sling for about a week, then he'll be fine."

"He won't be fine," hissed Kezule angrily, standing up and pulling his shirt on, wincing as he moved his injured shoulder and the stitches in the deep holes and slashes caused by Kusac's claws pulled. "He's been crippled as a Warrior!"

"He's alive and physically whole apart from that, and so are you," she snapped back. "And you have both been treated! I have to see to Kusac, Kezule. If you leave him untreated, he really could die."

"She's right, General," said Ghidd'ah as she cleared up.

"You need him alive," said Zayshul.

"Not any longer," he said coldly, buttoning his shirt and stuffing it into the waistband of his trousers.

"Ghidd'ah, would you excuse us?" asked Zayshul.

"If you let him die," she said when they were alone, "you'll have to kill them all because they won't rest until they've been revenged, and that includes Shaidan. You have no idea of how deep their family ties go."

"He tried to kill me, Zayshul! Where's your sympathy for me?" he demanded. "Or are you that besotted with him? I know what happened while I was away!"

"I have none for you," she said, hardening her voice. "Kusac was the victim here. I warned you to tell him about the female, and what he'd do if

you didn't when he found out. He even gave you a chance to admit it to him. Your Security guard panicked and shot him. Kusac's shot was merely reflexive, he had no intention of harming you, never mind M'kou. He only wanted you as a hostage."

"I'm not talking about the gun, I'm talking about how he went for my throat! Dammit, Zayshul, I would have been within my rights to have had him executed on the spot!"

"Had you done so— and if you let him die— you will alienate yourself from all of us who came with you! They know him, Kezule! He isn't a feared enemy, he's someone they've worked and played with, so is his crew!"

"His wound is not life threatening," he hissed, grabbing his jacket. "I've seen civilians survive worse in battle. He will not be treated, that's final, and he'll be punished for this, that I promise!"

He was heading for the door when Giyarishis arrived. "What do you want?" he demanded. "To plead for his life, too? It's with his Gods now," he snarled, pushing the small alien aside and stalking off down the corridor.

Zayshul sat there blinking back tears, frustrated and furious with both Kezule, and Kusac.

"Must live," hummed Giyarishis' translator as he hovered in the doorway. "Cooperate they must!"

\* \* \*

Kezule looked at the contents of the box that M'zynal had emptied onto the table in his office in amazement. Reaching out, he picked up a small unit that resembled a reader.

"What does this do?"



"It can hack into the engineering station on their level and trigger anything from blackouts to changing the addresses of our internal communications system," his Security chief said. "Somehow he also managed to access the station and set it up to respond to signals from his device. Very clever, actually."

Kezule put it to one side and picked through the various gadgets. "Garrotes," he said, touching one of the pieces of wire.

"And lockpicks," agreed M'zynal, reaching for another device which he held up for the General. "They'd made five one-shot stun guns like this," he said, putting it back. "There are several small explosive devices—plenty of smoke and some damage, good for getting out of tight situations. And a couple of small welding devices."

He picked up a bag of gray powder. "This?"

"Nitrogen-based fertilizer, an explosive compound when mixed with items such as fuel. Placed in the right areas, there's enough there to cause serious damage to Kij'ik."

"Who had that?"

"We found it hidden in the Captain's quarters. As well as the gun you were given earlier, he was also carrying a spray of the same chemical as the pellets."

"So all of them were preparing an attack," he said, sitting back down, his jaw tightening. "Are you sure you found everything?"

"Their quarters are clean, but as for the rest of their level, we swept it as thoroughly as we could, but I can't guarantee we found everything."

"Return them to their quarters and lock them in. Post guards outside."

"Aye, sir," said M'zynal, scooping the contents carefully back into the box and leaving.

Kezule sat back in his chair, staring into space. Now that some of his initial rage had burned off, his conscience was beginning to nag him. Much of what Zayshul had said was true, but Kusac's behavior had made it impossible for him to do anything other than what he'd done. Frankly, he didn't trust himself near the Sholan in the near future. Staring death at his hands— or teeth— in the face the way he had, had rattled him more than he liked. And what the pellet had done to his son, he couldn't forgive. The temptation to tear Kusac limb from limb was too strong right now. Whatever the provocation, and he had to admit there had been enough, there had been no excuse for the Sholan to react as violently as he had.

A knock at the door broke his reverie.

"Enter."

M'kou came in, still pale, his arm in a sling, but otherwise looking well.

"Sit down," he said, half rising. "You should still be in your bed."

"I'm fine. I came to tell you that my wound was an accident," said M'kou, taking the seat beside his father's desk. "When Kusac was hit, his gun went off as his hand clenched round the trigger. It was a reflex action, nothing more."

"He shouldn't have been carrying a gun," said Kezule grimly. "He'll be punished for the damage he's caused you and for attempting to kill me."

"That was after he'd been shot, Father. You'd have done the same. His wound is surely punishment enough."

"Have you come to tell me we need him, too?" he asked testily. "Seems everyone has an opinion that differs from mine!"

"We don't need the Sholans after us for killing him and his crew."

"You've been talking to Zayshul," he said angrily, getting up. "Stop pressuring me, M'kou. It's only making it more difficult for me to spare him."

"Then there's no point in me asking you to give him medical treatment," said his son, rising.

"None," Kezule snapped.

"You do realize he's just handed us a weapon we can use against the M'zullians, don't you?"

Kezule stared at him. "And you do realize what it's doing to you, don't you? Zayshul did tell you that his drug is destroying what sets you apart as a Warrior?"

He nodded, a shadow crossing his face. "Our Gods at least have a sense of justice," he said quietly. "My price could have been as bad as the one they're exacting from Kusac, and there's no reason for him to suffer."

"Enough!" Kezule hissed, pushing him aside as he left.

\* \* \*

He'd put off returning to his quarters as long as he could, but he couldn't avoid it any longer he realized as he keyed open the door to his suite.

Zayshul was in the lounge with Shaidan curled up on the sofa beside her, his head on her lap.

"Shaidan, why didn't you tell me your father had his telepathic abilities back?" he demanded, standing on the other side of the low table from them.

"You didn't ask me," the child said sullenly.

"Kezule, leave him alone. I've only just got him settled. You know he's only programmed to answer direct questions," said Zayshul.

"So he's still programmed, is he? Strange, he didn't behave as if he was earlier! I thought that perhaps you'd taken it into your head to alter that too!"

She looked up at him. "I haven't done anything to him."

Shaidan sat up on his haunches. "I want to see my father. He's hurt, he needs me."

"You'll stay here where you belong," said Kezule shortly. "Zayshul, put him in his room..."

"I don't belong here! I belong with my father!" he said, springing at Kezule who instinctively caught him. The cub began to lash out with his fists and feet. "You hurt him! I hate you! I hate you!"

"Stop this instantly!" Kezule roared, shaking him till Shaidan was so dizzy he was clutching at him for support. He thrust the cub at Zayshul. "Lock him in his room," he ordered. "When he's prepared to behave in a civilized way, he can come out! What is it with these damned Sholans? They go feral at the first opportunity!"

She hesitated.

"Do it now!" he roared at her.

When she returned, he'd gone.

\* \* \*

Kusac surfaced about two hours later with a raging thirst and in acute pain. His leg had swollen to the point where the bandage was actually cutting into him. With shaking hands, he reached down and began to loosen it.

Despite the dressing, his wounds were seeping so much fluid that his upper thigh and the bedding beneath him were saturated and beginning to stick to his pelt. He was cold to the point of shivering, an early sign he was starting a fever. His tongue was cleaving to the roof of his mouth and he knew he urgently needed to drink.

Using his arms, he tried to push himself closer to the edge of the bed and swing his legs over the side, but his hip and groin muscles were so

distended that flexing his left leg was impossible. To get off the bed, he was going to have to lower himself to the ground using his good leg.

In the end, he fell off, pulling the bedding with him, but luckily landing on his good side. He lay there gasping for breath, praying for the pain to subside. Even with his heightened tolerance, this was beyond the pain J'koshuk had caused him.

Luck was with him in that the bowl had bounced off the bed and rolled to within a few feet of the washbasin. Painfully, and slowly, using his forearms, he dragged himself over to the basin and throwing the bowl into it, hauled himself upright. Turning on the faucet, he put his head under it, lapping frantically as it streamed out from the tap. The edge taken off his thirst, finally he filled the bowl and drank from it. Twice more he refilled it before his thirst was slaked. Then he poured another two over his head and face in an effort to cool himself down.

His attempts at getting a full bowl down onto the floor resulted in a large puddle and a half empty container. Getting back up onto the bed was beyond him by the time he'd crawled back, taking the bowl with him. Pulling the covers off the bed, weak and dizzy, he spread them out as best he could then rolled onto them, making sure he was close to the bowl. Exhausted, he lay there and closed his eyes.

His sleep was riven by strange nightmares and visions. He heard the sound of familiar voices, and strained to hear what they said, but he couldn't make out the words. The voices trailed off, but one remained, speaking to him this time, calling his name, over and over. He was filled with a sense of urgency, a need to know and understand what he was being told.

*A healing trance, Kusac, you must go into a deep healing trance. The voice sounded familiar, very familiar. Vartra's face seemed to swim in front of his. You must eat to fuel the healing. Remember, reach deep...* The thoughts and the image of the God were fading as he began to wake.

The first thing he noticed was that his neck torc had been replaced by a metal collar such as his son wore. Ignoring it, and the way the blanket under him was clinging to his pelt, he pushed himself up on his elbow and

he reached for the bowl of water. Beside it lay a tray of food and a large jug of water. Still light-headed, he leaned against the side of the bed and picking up the bowl, emptied it then refilled it, wondering if what he'd experienced had been real or just a fever dream. Putting it down, he reached for the bowl of food. He wasn't hungry but if the dream was real... Luckily the food had been chosen to be easily digested whether hot or cold. Strips of meat in a creamy protein-rich sauce, with boiled eggs and fresh, nonacidic fruit.

He forced himself to eat, then when he'd taken as much as he could, he pushed the tray aside. Time to look at his leg and assess how much damage had been done. Only a sheet remained over him, he'd thrown the other covers off while he'd slept. Pulling the sheet back, he loosened the bandage. His leg was now almost rigid with the swelling and looked to be at least twice its normal size. The dressing over the entry wound was saturated and seeping a blood-tinged yellowish fluid. It had spread over the surrounding area of his thigh in a sticky, unpleasant mess that was matting his fur. Easing himself slightly onto his good hip, he could feel that the blanket below was stuck to his body from just above his hipbone to almost his knee. Not good, not good at all.

Returning to the dressing, he lifted it up. From his training, he knew what to expect, but it didn't prepare him for the reality of seeing his own charred and cooked flesh. He looked away as he let the dressing fall back, but his vision began to fade rapidly and he had to force himself to stay conscious by taking deep breaths.

He tried to be more dispassionate when he looked at it again. The entry hole, halfway down his thigh and on the outer edge of the quadriceps muscle, was actually reasonably small from what he could see under the fluid that was seeping out. Through his fur, the surrounding flesh showed tight and shiny and there was a fair amount of dead tissue that needed removing.

Replacing the front of the dressing, he rolled onto his good hip, twisting his upper body so he could lift the other side and check the exit wound. Three or four times the size of the entry wound, it covered much of the upper back of his thigh. He saw immediately that a sizable lump of flesh

had actually been vaporized. The fluid loss was greater, and under the constantly welling liquid he could see that the irregular edge of the wound was again charred, with a ring of flesh beyond it that had obviously been cooked. Swelling here was, if it were possible, worse.

Nausea and dizziness gripped him and he let the dressing fall into place again. Swallowing convulsively, he rolled back and reached for the water—he had to replace as much as he could of the fluids he was losing— as far as he could tell, Kezule didn't intend him to get any medical treatment in the near future. Fever dream or not, he was going to try that healing trance idea, he decided as he gulped down the water.

### **Vartra's realm, same day**

Vartra sighed, rubbing his temples as he got to his feet and stepped backward into his own realm. He was weary, with a tiredness he found impossible to shake off. Since the TeLaxaudin's power failure on Kij'ik, he'd been watching and waiting for this small window of opportunity to help Kusac. His head hurt with the effort of it, but he was beginning to form a small understanding of how and why he was being manipulated and used.

Beneath his feet, the grass felt good after so long on stone or metal floors. He'd chosen early summer since it was a time of year he'd always enjoyed. As he began to walk through the clearing to his cottage, he let one hand fall to his side and breathed deeply, smelling the blossoms of the fruit trees and the bushes that surrounded him. Insects buzzed in the distance, their sound usually a comfort to him, but right now their noise was exacerbating his headache. Even the scent of the nung trees, wafted over him by a gentle breeze, didn't help.

Something white dashed in front of him, stopping suddenly just to his right. As he looked, another lithe shape darted past him, joining the first. Then together, they bounded out in front of him, leaping and gamboling with each other, their long bushy tails trailing behind them like pennants in the wind.

"Jeggets," he muttered, still massaging his forehead. Since the Human had taken one back from a pathwalk, Ghyakulla in Her wisdom had seen fit to introduce them to his realm. Granted they weren't the pests here that they were elsewhere, but there were times when... He stopped, watching the little creatures, realizing that every few steps he took, they would run to him before returning to their game. It was as if they were encouraging him to follow them.

Looking ahead, he thought he saw a faint rippling, a distortion as if the boundaries were weakening between the realms. Once again the jeggets returned, rearing up on their hind legs and chittering before dashing off toward just that spot. Picking up his pace, he followed, stepping into Ghyakulla's garden.

Her garden was like no other. To most it would seem a wilderness, a profusion of wild flowers and overgrown bushes, but he knew that She rotated the plants so each species could have its turn being close to Her. Each time he came to Her garden, it was different. Today, it was high summer. For a moment, he basked in the warmth of the sun, smelling the heat rising from the rich earth around him: it was like feeling Her breath, he thought. The jeggets tumbled and rolled with each other for a moment, waiting for him, then set off down the pathway, chittering at him in encouragement.

The low-growing herbs he crushed beneath his feet scented the air with a lemon freshness that began instantly to help his aching head. He heard the sound of voices ahead, and rounding a bend, found himself in the middle of a small clearing of raw Earth. She was there, on Her haunches, greeting the jeggets. She looked up, mouth dropping in a smile, reaching an earth-covered hand up to brush a stray lock of Her hair from her eyes. Standing up, She gestured for him to look at the newly planted areas. He saw bushes bearing strangely intricate flowers, with petals that folded and curled into each other in a way he'd never seen before. Every bush was of a different color—reds, yellow, pinks—the varieties seemed endless. Curious, he moved closer, smelling their sweet perfume almost immediately. Breathing deeply, headache almost forgotten, he reached out to touch one delicate flower head. He saw the thorns and wondered at them, but knew that in Her garden, he'd no need to fear anything.



*Earth Roses.*

He glanced back at Her, taking the hand She held out to him, following as She showed him Her collection of new flora.

*Honeysuckle. Foxgloves.*

The voices sounded closer now, and as they passed a small gap among the taller bushes, he caught sight of two figures crouched on their haunches as she had been, chatting amicably as they patted the soil around the new plants. He stopped dead, blinking, hardly believing what he saw. Noni, but as she was now, not her usual younger self, and the Human, Conner.

He looked at Ghyakulla questioningly and found his mind filled with a sense of loneliness ending and companionship found for those who had served Shola and Earth so well. He turned to look at them again, watching Conner rescue the end of Noni's long white plait from the muddy soil. They laughed, then he reached out to run his fingertips gently along her jaw, then touch her neck. He turned away, guilty at disturbing their privacy.

"Noni and Conner?" he asked as She drew him onward.

She nodded, letting him know it was Her gift of healing to them both.  
*Your gift will come later.*

He wondered briefly before realizing what She meant, and why he'd been called here today.

*Delphiniums. Lavender.* As before, their names came to him as he passed each new species. Ghyakulla never spoke in words, She always communicated through images within his mind.

The colors and the scents dazzled his senses and when they came at last to Her fountain, he was almost glad of the respite.

Made of natural stone, it rose to a height of four feet. Water, from gaps set at irregular intervals, ran gurgling and chuckling into a basin at its foot. At

the top, it sprayed up in a delicate fountain only six inches high. Around it, the air was cool and refreshing.

*Drink.* She handed him a mug made from the clay of Her garden.

Leaning on the edge of the fountain, he held the mug under the cascading water, watching as, at his feet, the jeggets put their brown-tipped noses into the pool and lapped thirstily.

He hesitated, knowing only too well what Ghyakulla's water could do. It could bring forgetfulness, or visions. She shook Her head gently as She chuckled, Her eyes lighting up with humor.

He drank, feeling the tiredness, the headache, and the weariness of the TeLaxaudin and all they represented begin to slough away from him.

"Thank you," he said, returning the mug to Her. His eyes caught Hers, seeing green, verdant forests that stretched forever in their depths. He drew strength from Her, felt renewed and refreshed, able now to face what he knew was still to come.

## **Kij'ik**

Jayza joined Banner in the lounge area. "Any news on the Captain?" he asked, straightening the sofa cushions before sitting down.

Banner shook his head. "None," he said, making sure he kept his voice calm.

"He looked to be in a bad way."

"He was. The wound went clean through his upper thigh just missing the hip. I'm praying it didn't hit the bone or he could lose that leg."

"Ouch," Jayza said, wincing. He sighed. "Well, at least we know why he was so close to Shaidan, and so secretive about everything. There's one thing I don't understand, though."

"What?" asked Banner, holding out his pack of stim twigs.

"Thanks," the youth said in surprise, getting up and coming over to take one.

"Sit beside me," said Banner in a low voice, using the Highland dialect. "If they didn't have the vid com spying on us before, they sure as hell will now."

Jayza nodded and sat next to him. "I thought everyone was out of stim twigs. What I don't understand is how Shaidan can be Kusac's son," he said, lowering his voice.

"All the cubs are hybrids, and were grown in tanks by the Directorate," said Banner, putting the twig in his mouth and biting down on it. The slightly bitter taste was in tune with how he felt right now. "Their existence is a political nightmare."

"Ah," said Jayza. "Stronghold wouldn't have harmed them, would they?"

Banner shook his head. "They'll still be at Haven. Our government can't afford to have them go to their parents because of the risk of blowing this wide open. By coming here with Kusac, we now know about it. He was trying to get us to leave before we found out."

"So we're now a political embarrassment," said Jayza slowly, his ears folding down.

"More. We didn't know it, but for Kusac to take the mission, he had to be branded a traitor because of stealing the *Couana*. Now that we know about the cubs, I think we share the same charges."

Jayza stared at him. "Shit," he said quietly. Then he shrugged. "No matter. I wouldn't allow the Captain to face those charges alone anyway."

For the first time in several hours, Banner smiled. He said nothing because it wasn't needed.

"What do we do now?" Jayza asked after a few minutes. "Did they get everything we made?"

"Not all, but we can't get to anything while we're kept in our rooms, and only you and I can access this lounge. I was surprised to see what you'd all been making."

Jayza grinned. "I guess we all got bored," he said with an attempt at levity.

"What happens next depends on what Kezule does," said Banner. "It's just possible he'll let us all go, including Shaidan."

"You don't believe that any more than I do," said Jayza, glancing sideways at him. "What *is* Kezule likely to do to us?"

Banner shook his head. "No idea, but if he causes Kusac's death, I'll kill him," he said coldly.

Jayza nodded. "Did you see him fighting Kezule?" he asked, changing the topic. "I thought we were supposed to be slower and weaker than them. Sure didn't look like Kusac was."

"Kezule's older than those we've been training," said Banner. He knew that age hadn't slowed Kezule, that somehow Kusac actually was as fast and as strong as the Valtegan Warrior, but he was keeping that to himself for now, just as he was keeping the fact that he was damned sure it had been Kusac who'd mentally killed the guard who'd shot him.

Knowing about the scent marker, who Shaidan was, and that Kusac faced charges of treason on his return, answered a lot of his doubts about his Captain, but not those concerning how changed he was in other ways—like his increased speed and strength, and the return of his Talent. What had Annuur and Kzizysus done to him?

## **Ghioass, TeLaxaudin world, Camarilla chamber, same day**

"Silence!" said Khassiss from the Speaker's podium. She waited till the chittering of the Cabbarans and the humming of her own people had faded before continuing.

"The Unity net on the sand-dweller Outpost has been damaged, this is not in doubt. Cannot contact Giyarishis, this also not in doubt. Decision before us is how we remedy situation."

Zaimiss rose to his feet. "What point in exposing our interest further? Is wild element in potentialities now— has been for some time but you close eyes to it! No guarantee if we repair this that it not happen again."

"Repair is surely easy— we send unmanned ship as usual and have new components plus many spares for Giyarishis," said Aizshuss, obviously agitated, getting up as the Isolationist sat down. "Hunter must live, nothing else matters!"

"Is argument perhaps one agent not enough," said Kuvaa, sitting up on her haunches. "Send another with components."

"Is plain to all but you Hunter *is* wild element," said Hkairass contemptuously. "Is flawed despite changes you made to him!" He folded himself back down on his cushion, mandibles clicking in disapproval.

"I Speak for sending supplies and agent," said Shvosi, sitting up. "All must we do to ensure Hunter's survival. Nothing can Giyarishis do without the Unity net— even disruptor not work."

Azwokkuss rose. "All has been done to Hunter to ensure his survival. Send supplies, but no other agent necessary. Faith I have in work done by Annur and Kzizysus. If Camarilla decide agent must be sent, I Speak to send Hkairass— be good for him to experience closeness to nexus of potentialities. Send now, by our portal, no time for delay."

Hkairass leaped to his feet. "I protest!" he began, but a look and gesture from the elderly female TeLaxaudin silenced him and he sank, humming disgruntledly, to his cushion.

Khassiss stared fixedly at him then at Azwokkuss before emitting a scent of faint amusement. "Very well, we have two options now to vote on."

## **Kij'ik, Zhal-Mellasha 21st day (February)**

"How is he?" Zayshul asked, hovering in the doorway of Security on the Officers level.

M'zynal glanced up at the clock. It was 08:00. "The same as he was an hour ago, Doctor," he said gently, leaning forward to change the view on

one of his main screens to show the interior of Kusac's cell. "And the hours before that when you called my night officer. Apart from throwing off his covers, he hasn't moved since he was fed midafternoon yesterday."

Venturing into the room, she went closer to the wall mounted screens. "He's very still," she said. "Are you sure he's all right? Why's he naked?"

"His clothing had to be searched," said M'zynal. "Given the state of his leg, I thought it kinder not to try and put his tunic back on him." He looked at her. "They don't consider themselves naked, Doctor."

The image increased in size until she could see him clearly. He lay sprawled partly on his side, the weight of his injured leg supported by the good one folded underneath its knee. The visible part of his dressing glistened slightly.

"He's breathing very slowly," said M'zynal, "but he's breathing."

She moved closer still, peering at the screen. "Dear Goddess!" she exclaimed, rounding on him. "The blanket under him is saturated and his leg is more than twice its normal size! If there's an infection set in, M'zynal, he'll die unless I treat him! All the secondary wounds he suffered in that fight, none of them will be able to clot! You must let me in to treat him!"

"I'm sorry, Doctor," he said. "I've been told no one's to treat him, especially you."

"This is insane! I demand you let me in at once!" she insisted, advancing on him.

He came out from behind his desk and took hold of her by the arm. When she struggled, he tightened his grip.

"Doctor Zayshul, if you want to help the Sholan, take my advice," he said quietly. "Don't push to have him treated. Someone will be going in shortly to feed him and give him water. If you anger the General, he may prevent us doing even that."

She stared at him disbelievingly. "Why?" she asked. "Why are you helping him?"

M'zynal looked away, unwilling to tell her that he and many others thought the General was wrong. "M'kou asked us to," was all he'd say as he escorted her to the door.

"We had a new arrival last night. Another TeLaxaudin and some supplies— components and the like, nothing exciting. He went up to join Giyarishis. They had night maintenance hauling ladders about examining the bulkheads. Something about faulty electrics in the bulkheads."

"I'm not interested," she began.

"Be interested, and let us do what we can down here," said M'zynal, squeezing her arm gently.

She stared at him again and he nodded. "Go and eat, then visit the new TeLaxaudin. He's not like Giyarishis, he's got a temper on him."

She nodded slowly as he drew her out into the corridor.

"You'll call me if..."

"We'll call you," he said.

When she'd gone, he went through to the brig, gesturing to one of the males on duty to take his place in Security.

"Zhalmo, you need to rest," he said, going up to where his sister sat at the brig's control desk. "He's fine, I don't know what you and the Doctor are so concerned about. He's responding exactly as one would expect him to do without medical treatment."

Zhalmo looked up at him through bleary eyes. "He's not one of us, M'zynal, that's the point. This isn't normal for his kind. As for the Doctor!" She hissed a few choice swear words. "If she hadn't marked him in the first place..."

"Enough of that!" he said sharply. "I'm ordering you to go and eat then sleep for at least eight hours!"

She glanced at her wrist. "It's breakfast time already?" she said, getting up. "I'll fetch him fresh food and water from the mess. Then I'll eat," she added, seeing her brother's look. "I promise."

"And sleep. Take your meal to your room," he said.

\* \* \*

Deep though he was in his trance, he sensed her presence and was surfacing even as she put the tray down beside him. With consciousness came a sharper awareness of the constant agony from his leg. When she tried to help him to sit up, he couldn't move— all the aches caused by his earlier fight with Kezule had stiffened up and as for his injured leg...

She fetched a pillow off his bed, and the one from the other bed and tried to prop him up enough so that she could help him drink. It wasn't easy because the blanket he'd been lying on was now stuck firmly to his body from his shoulder to below his groin. In the end, he was whimpering in such agony that she gave up trying to separate it from him and just placed the pillows under it.

He was so thirsty, he almost snatched the cup from her. When he'd finished the second bowl, M'zynal called her from the door.

"That's enough, Zhalmo. He can help himself now."

"I have to go," she whispered, filling the bowl a third time, making sure it and the food were in easy reach. "Force yourself to eat, Kusac."

Too weak to speak, he grasped her hand in thanks, startling her as she was getting to her feet.

The temptation to drink all the water was intense but he forced himself to only sip it as he ate all the food. Finished, he turned his attention to his leg.



He'd been trying to ignore it despite the constant awareness of the fluid slowly oozing down his thigh. Pushing himself slightly nearer a sitting position, he leaned over to look at it again. His leg felt as if it didn't belong to him, like a huge, swollen and rigid appendage. When he touched it, the skin was tight and hot with the fever. The fluid oozing out from under the loose dressing had changed color and was now tinged with a musty brownish-grayness. A sudden dizzy spell claimed him and he slumped back on the pillows.

His vision was shrinking again as unconsciousness claimed him, but he knew he had to fight it and try instead to go back to the trance he'd been in. Every instinct told him that he was actually beginning to heal despite appearances.

### **Shola, Dzahai Stronghold, same day**

"Alex has translated the first message," said Rhyaz, entering Lijou's office with a comp pad in his hand. "I've just come from crypto. It's bad news, Lijou."

"I may have an idea of what it is," said Lijou, getting up from his desk and going over to the sideboard. "Tell me your news first," he said, taking out a couple of glasses and a bottle of strong spirits.

"Then the coup on the Prime world has succeeded, hasn't it?" he said, walking toward the chairs set round the fire.

"You know? Yes. The Prime Ambassador was called back last night. He and his staff have already left Shola. The new Emperor is demanding we hand Prince Zsurtul over to him or he'll kill our Ambassador and our two surviving agents. Everyone at our Palace is in a blind panic right now."

Rhyaz sat down and watched as his colleague came over and handed a glass to him.

"Thank you. The message was to tell the M'zullian Emperor that they were attacking yesterday," said Rhyaz, taking a welcome sip of the drink. "Seems this Emperor K'hedduk is the brother of the M'zullian one."

"Worse still, he's the one who headed the Directorate," said Lijou.  
"Ambassador M'szudoe told the Governor that much before he left in the middle of the night."

"We've a powerful enemy on the Prime throne, in that case," said Rhyaz, ears flicking back in distress. "But why is he on the Prime throne if the plan was to take it for his brother?"

"Excuse me?"

Rhyaz handed him the comp pad. "The message clearly says he's taking the Throne of Light for his brother."

"Looks like K'hedduk has greater ambitions. I wonder how much support he has at home?" said Lijou thoughtfully as he read the message.

"I want to know how he hid his paranoia of Sholans from the Primes when he was on the *Kz'adul!*"

"We know K'hedduk passed as a Prime, which means he isn't the darker green of the M'zullians," said Lijou, taking a sip from his glass. "Likely their royal family, like Zsurtul's, had to breed where they could to survive. Maybe that gave him the same response to us as Kezule and the Primes have rather than the paranoia of the ordinary M'zullian warriors."

Rhyaz nodded. "Makes sense. Obviously it didn't affect his ambition, though, if he's taken the Throne of Light for himself. Talking of Prince Zsurtul, he's still on Kusac's estate, isn't he?"

"Apparently not," said Lijou. "He was, but he can't be found."

"Would they lie about that?"

"No," said Lijou firmly. "You know as well as I that if he was there, they'd admit it and refuse to hand him over. Governor Nesul's position is we don't negotiate with K'hedduk, the Prime Prince stays with us. He asks if we've any news on Kezule's whereabouts. The Council wants to approach him with an offer of help to overthrow K'hedduk as quickly as possible. We may even be able to save our Ambassador and the two Brothers."

Rhyaz raised his eye ridges. "That's predictable. Suddenly he's our savior? He's the one person who can retake K'oish'ik and put Zsurtul on his throne and prevent the M'zullians combining forces with the Primes?"

"He's more than that," said Lijou quietly. "Think about it, Rhyaz. K'hedduk had the cubs bred, he had Kusac and his people tortured on the *Kz'adul*. He's now killed the rightful Prime Emperor and taken his throne. If we made this known, and that Kusac was on a secret mission to get Kezule's agreement to help us against K'hedduk, then it would solve all our problems. The cubs could go to their parents without danger to our Treaty with the Primes, and Kusac wouldn't face prosecution or Raiban's wrath when he returns."

Rhyaz sat back in his chair and gazed thoughtfully into the flames. "In principle, yes, but the timing is out. We'd have to get Nesul to agree to say we had secret information about this possible coup at the time Kusac left."

"No, we wouldn't. We say what happened; the cryptic message for Kusac which resulted in the return of all the cubs but his son, and his need to go back to help Kezule. He'd left Shaidan with the Valtegan because he knew he was returning."

"We can sort those details out later," said Rhyaz. "They are only details, after all. Our main problem is we don't know where Kezule is. And we don't know if he'd be willing to retake the Prime world, or put Zsurtul on the throne. He might just decide that with the Emperor dead he wants it for himself. Couldn't we retake K'oish'ik ourselves?"

Lijou shook his head. "It's not what the Council wants, unless Kezule refuses to help. You have to admit if he throws his lot in with us he'd be the ideal one to contact the M'zullians, far better than the late Emperor was."

"So long as we're not handing him an Empire on a plate," said Rhyaz dryly. "But you're right, we have to contact him. And though it sticks in my throat to say it, we have an ideal team sitting at Haven right now. If Kaid can't find Kusac, I don't know who could."

"Nesul will be pleased to have the Touibans off his back," said Lijou with a smile. "Since the *Tooshu* parked outside Haven, they've been lobbying him to accept that Kaid and Carrie are diplomats on behalf of the Touiban government on a legitimate mission to find Kezule. They say we have no right to be holding them, and their cubs, prisoner on Haven."

"I have to admit that was a very creative move on Kaid's part," said Rhyaz. "Perhaps letting them find Kezule officially will ease their anger with us over this whole issue."

"It'll assuage it, certainly, said Lijou. "May I suggest we contact Konis and tell him what we plan to do? He's suffered a great deal over his decision to send his son on this mission. Rhyasha has, too."

"You do that, I'll contact L'Seuli," said Rhyaz.

## **Haven Stronghold, same day**

Kaid sat silently through L'Seuli's briefing. "No," he said finally, getting to his feet.

L'Seuli looked at him, surprise writ large on his face and in the set of his ears. "I thought you'd leap at the chance to exonerate Kusac."

"I came here to find my sword-brother and Triad partner, and our cubs, L'Seuli, not go on a mission for anyone," he said, turning and walking to the door.

"You talk as if the two were mutually exclusive," said L'Seuli. "That needn't be the case."

"I don't need you, you need me," he said coldly, hand on the door activator. "And I'm not for hire."

"I wasn't suggesting you were. We protect, Kaid. Protect Shola and her people, which includes your Clan. A Prime and M'zullian alliance would be disastrous for us all. All we're asking is that you approach Kezule for us."

He turned slightly. "I'm En'Shallan now, L'Seuli. My loyalty is to my Clan and Vartra."

"Then ask Him."

"Vartra's been unusually quiet these last few months."

L'Seuli looked surprised. "Not here, since Kusac brought His relic here."

"Relic?"

The Priest nodded. "Vartra's head. It's in the base of our Shrine. He brought it for Father Lijou at Vartra's own request."

Kaid hesitated. "I'll think about it," he said, opening the door.

"Before you go," began L'Seuli.

"What now?"

"You and the cubs are free to leave Haven," L'Seuli said, getting up and coming over to him. He held out a piece of paper. "These are the coordinates of the original rendezvous."

Kaid took it from him, glancing at it as he put it in his main jacket pocket. "Neither Lijou nor Rhyaz told you to do this," he said, searching the other's face.

"I'm in command here, Kaid, not Rhyaz. I make my own decisions," he said softly. "As a gesture of my good faith, I'm giving you what I can, with no strings attached. All I ask is you think about talking to Kezule for us."

Kaid nodded and left.

*Get ready to leave, he sent to Carrie. We got what we came here for.*

*And their request?*

*I'm going to the temple*, he replied.

\* \* \*

He crumbled the incense in the brazier, enjoying the scent as it began to burn.

*So you've been freed from Shola*, he thought, going past the brazier to the statue of Vartra. It might only be half life-size, but it was still imposing in the dim light of the Shrine.

*I've neglected the estate Shrine lately, and I know I haven't been much of a priest. I've been too angry with Kusac to ask for your help for either of us.* He touched the sword lying at the feet of the statue, letting his fingertips run down the bronze blade. *Too proud to admit my fears for his safety.* He looked up at the face of the crouching God. *I've had enough of politics, Vartra,*

*I don't want another mission. I just want Kusac back safe with us.*

"A good priest looks after his family, Kaid," said a familiar quiet voice from above him. "Cubs are a blessing to us all, and you've been busy with them."

Startled, he looked up, stepping back from the statue as its eyes blinked slowly at him.

"For the sake of Shola, and him, there must be an alliance between you and the Liege of Hell," continued Vartra's voice. "No matter what you discover when you reach him, let nothing stand in the way of that."

His blood ran cold as he stared at the face of the God superimposed on His own graven likeness. "Has something happened to Kusac? Is he safe?" he demanded.

"He's alive, the rest is in his own hands. There's no place for revenge, Kaid, no matter the circumstances."

He stepped forward again, grasping hold of the statue by the arm. "I won't lose him again, Vartra! He means too much to me, to Carrie!" He could feel tears stinging his eyes.

"I've done what little I was able to do. Forces beyond your understanding prevent me from doing more. When you meet, you must look beyond the changes that you see and only remember what you share."

"I've done nothing but remember for months! He's never been far from my thoughts."

"Pray for him, keep him in your thoughts, and remember, you must make that alliance with the Liege of Hell," said the voice as it faded into silence.

When Carrie joined him, he was leaning against the statue weeping quietly.

\* \* \*

L'Seuli joined them at the shuttle ramp as they were leaving. "Have you thought over what I asked?" he said quietly, folding his arms inside the sleeves of his robe.

"Bring me a signed statement laying out exactly what Kusac's mission was, and exonerating him and his crew from any culpability in following the orders of the Brotherhood and the government, then I'll do it," Kaid said.

L'Seuli pulled out an envelope and handed it to him. "Already done," he said with a smile. "And signed by Master Rhyaz and Father Lijou as well as myself."

Kaid took it from him and nodded. "I want one more thing," he said.

L'Seuli held up his hand to silence him then triggered his wrist comm. "Tell Instructor Tanjo we're ready for him."

Kaid raised an eye ridge. "I'm impressed. How did you know?"

"Father Lijou gave me very good advice," he smiled. "And it was obvious you'd want written assurances after the secrecy of the original mission."

"And Tanjo?"

"You live for your family now, Kaid. The cubs will need a familiar face to look after them while you see to other matters. Tanjo is the obvious choice. I've also seen that when you forgive, that person has a second chance."

Carrie came down the ramp, smiling. "Take care of yourself, L'Seuli," she said, hugging him.

"And you, Carrie," he said, returning the hug as Tanjo came out of the elevator and headed toward them. "See Tanjo starts enjoying life, will you? He's been out here too long. He refused a posting back to Shola because he felt he hadn't paid his penance over the Guild Master incident, but believe me, he has. I had to persuade him that working with the cubs would be continuing it!"

"We will," said Kaid, clasping L'Seuli by the arm in a warrior handshake.



**Litany to banish Pain**

*By the Power of Vartra's Word*

*No pain I feel*

*Is greater than my will.*

*No pain I feel*

*Is stronger than my heart.*

*No pain I feel*

*Is brighter than my soul.*

*No pain I feel*

*Is more than I am.*

*No pain I feel,*

*Is too great for Him to ease.*

— Attributed to Sister M'Nokada,  
from the Brotherhood's  
*Book of Pathways*

## Chapter 20

### The Tooshu, same day

THE cubs clustered together in awe as Toueesut and his swarm met them in the main lounge of the *Tooshu*. Surprisingly, it was Gaylla who was the first to leave the group and go up to Toueesut, reaching out to touch his brightly embroidered jacket as he instantly stood still for her.

"Pretty," she said, smiling at him. "I wish I had one like that. I'm Gaylla."

Trills of pleasure filled the air and Toueesut's face became wreathed in smiles.

"A great pleasure it is to be meeting you, little one of the Sholans," he said as his swarm mates swirled off out of the room. "Most welcome you are all to be here as our honored guests on this vessel. Food and refreshing drinks are waiting for you on the tables over there if you would be willing to come with me."

The Touiban held out his callused hand to her and without a second thought, she placed her small hand trustingly in his and followed him across the room.

"Looks like Gaylla's made a conquest already," said Carrie as they took the other cubs over to the table.

While T'Chebbi and the males were seating them on the cushions, Carrie and Jo helped Toueesut pour out the sparkling cold drinks.

Holding her glass carefully in both hands, Gaylla sipped it cautiously then beamed up at T'Chebbi.

"This is very good! You must taste it, T'Chebbi!"

"Later, chiddoe," she said, ruffling her hair gently. "Food looks good. You eat now, we got business to attend to. Valden will look after you all."

Valden threw her a pained look.

Gaylla nodded solemnly, putting the glass down to take a warm meat pastry off the plate Dhyshac was holding out to her.

Toueesut's swarm mates returned, weaving and dancing their way across to the low table, stopping at Gaylla.

"This have we for you," said Etishu, holding out a brightly embroidered blue jacket. "Our size you about."

Gaylla's mouth dropped in a large "Oh!" of pleasure, and almost upsetting the table, she leaped to her feet and held out her arms for it to be put on.

While Etishu helped her, Carrie took advantage of the moment to draw Toueesut aside.

Taking her by the hand, he patted it, smiling broadly. "Is all right, Carrie, we are understanding of the little one. The harmonies of her mind may not be as complex as those of your other cubs but they are so sweet as to be a wonderful pleasure for us to be sharing. While we are away on the *Couana*, she will be a great favorite with the crew here."

"You can't come with us, Toueesut," said Carrie gently. "We don't know how dangerous the situation we're walking into will be."

"We come too," said Toueesut, his hands on her suddenly still. "Your Clan are we, where else but at your side we be?"

"We should discuss this later," said Carrie uncomfortably.

Toueesut put his hand on her arm, his fingers gently moving as always. "My government wishes us to be with you as a neutral third party to help this matter go well. There is much sense in this considering the bad history there has been between you and this Kezule."

Carrie smiled, putting her hand over Toueesut's. "We'll discuss it with Kaid later when the cubs are settled."

## **Kij'ik, hydroponics level, same day**

The air outside the Security office that fronted Giyarishis' quarters was filled with two ranges of high-pitched humming and the low clicking of mandibles. It certainly sounded like there were two of them. Zayshul ventured in, stopping at the doorway into his office as the smell hit her.

"You're having a scent war!" she exclaimed, staring at the two gesticulating aliens.

The two figures froze briefly, their billowing draperies settling around their bodies as, their argument forgotten for the moment, they looked at her.

"Prime Doctor Zayshul," said Giyarishis' translator as the scents in the air were immediately neutralized and replaced by one of calmness.

The newcomer, wearing strips in tones of orange and red, looked her up and down then pointedly turned back to Giyarishis.

Irritated at the insult, Zayshul stepped farther into the room, catching sight of the collection of bags and containers lying on the floor.

"Introduce me, please, Giyarishis," she said, "since your colleague lacks the manners to do it himself."

"Hkairass," said Giyarishis, walking over in his distinctive stiff-legged gait to join her. "Last night arrive."

She knew instantly that the two didn't get on and Giyarishis was looking to her for help. Pulling her hand out of her trouser pocket, she contrived to drop something and knelt to pick it up.

"You owe me," she murmured quietly as several fronds of his translucent draperies stirred and brushed against her face. A scent, matching her own pleasure scent, drifted up from them.

"I hear you two were working most of last night," she said, straightening up. "In which case, we need to sort out some quarters for you, Hkairass." She called out to the Security guard outside.

"Send for a couple of people from Housekeeping, please, Sergeant, and have them report to the Security room with bedding and cushions suitable for setting up quarters for our visitor Hkairass," she said. "And take his luggage out into the corridor—I'm sure Giyarishis doesn't want it cluttering up his floor."

"I stay, he move," said Hkairass turning abruptly to her, his draperies beginning to twitch agitatedly. "I superior."

"Not," said Giyarishis. "You just arrive."

"I Skepp Lord," said Hkairass. "Orders I give, you take."

If ever an electronic translator could sound haughty, his did, she thought. Its tone of voice was slightly different from Giyarishis', too. It sounded deeper and altogether harsher to her ears. The gentler scents Giyarishis was emitting were fading under an onslaught of more determined and angry ones—ones that she sensed matched the colors Hkairass wore.

"I, too, Skepp Lord. I long time here, experience I have, help allies. You none, you stay home, criticize," said Giyarishis.

The guard hesitated, looking at her.

"Carry out my orders," she said to him. "Hkairass, Giyarishis is my colleague and has earned a position of trust here on Kij'ik. Pleased though we are that you've joined us..."

"What you want unimportant. I here now, take charge," interrupted Hkairass' translator.

Thoroughly irritated, Zayshul turned to the guard. "Sergeant, forget the last order. Just escort Hkairass down to the priests' quarters next to our temple," she said coldly. "This is our Outpost, Hkairass. You'd do well to

remember that I choose with whom I work. Giyarishis has a valid point. I don't care who you are, he's been here doing the hard work, you haven't."

Hkairass folded himself up on the floor as the Security officer approached him. "I not move. You sand-dwellers no idea my importance. I grace you with my presence, expect respect."

"Get him out of here now, Sergeant," she snapped. "Carry him if you have to!"

"Yes, Doctor," said the Sergeant, advancing on the small alien.

Hkairass vented a sound like a small explosion of air and shot upright as the Prime touched him.

"I go," he announced, stalking out of the room, his draperies swirling round him. "Disrespectful. Uncivilized. Time-wasting," said his translator as he disappeared with the Sergeant in tow.

"What a pleasant individual. Do you know him?" asked Zayshul, turning to pick up the bags and carry them into the Security office. When she returned, Giyarishis' soft gray draperies were moving in a billowing wave around him as he worked at neutralizing the bad smell Hkairass had literally left behind.

"I regret know. Not liked, he."

"Why did he come? Did you send for him?" she asked, taking a seat on one of the two easy chairs as the TeLaxaudin moved off to his drink-dispensing machine.

"Not contact my people, they contact me. He arrive with parts needed. Angry I insist do immediately."

"Well, I have to say, he didn't make any effort to be pleasant."

"Likely sent to be rid of," said Giyarishis in what she could have sworn was a gloomy tone as he paced over to her with a fruit drink.

"Thank you," she said. "He's not becoming our problem. If he does, he can stay in his new quarters until your people send a ship to take him back!"

Giyarishis emitted a deep thrumming sound of laughter as he folded himself comfortably on his cushions beside her. "Is good. Do now. Less trouble."

Zayshul chuckled and sipped her juice. "What needed repairing so urgently?" she asked.

Untranslatable static burst from the speaker at his side. He tried again. "Sensor, but not."

She nodded, accepting there was no equivalent Prime word. "Was he sent because he's good at repairing things? Is he actually your superior?"

The TeLaxaudin laughed again. "Could say, better breaking things. No, not superior, I am because work off-world. Diminishes me to him."

"Why do you work with us?" She was curious to know. They appeared so physically fragile that she'd have thought they'd have preferred to stay on their own world.

"Interesting. Always new happenings," he said, dipping his long insectoid tongue into his drink. "I worry about Captain, too. Unexpected was his actions."

Guilt that she'd actually forgotten about Kusac for a few minutes washed through her and she put her drink down and got to her feet. "We were all surprised," she said, her voice tight with suppressed emotions. "I should go now, in case the General changes his mind and lets me treat him."

"General foolish. Needs Captain. Must learn trust."

"They'll never trust each other again," she said. "I only hope he won't try to prevent Kusac from leaving with his son."

"You talk, influence him."

"I have been, Giyarishis, but he won't listen to me," she said, trying to keep the distress out of her voice. At one point yesterday during their fight, she'd been afraid she'd lose both of them, and when Kusac nearly ripped Kezule's throat out, she'd had to stop him the only way she could. She did care for Kezule, it was just that all too often matters became either black or white for him, with no shades of gray. As for Kusac... She sighed. Ambivalence was the only way to describe what she felt. Like Kezule, he could show his temper, but given the nature of what was drawing them together, there were times when he was almost tender toward her, like the morning after the night they'd slept together.

"Thank you for removing Hkairass," Giyarishis said, breaking into her thoughts as he looked up at her, the lenses of his eyes swirling as they readjusted. "You have my gratitude—and this... one... you say I owe you."

She laughed. "I meant you owe me a favor. Don't mention it," she said, moving toward the door. "There isn't enough living space here for the two of you anyway." A thought struck her. "Does Hkairass work in medicine like you?"

"Regrettable, but also engineering."

"Maybe we can persuade him to work there rather than with us."

\* \* \*

Kezule stared at the image on the screen in Security. He'd spent the night alone, thinking, in one of the priests' rooms next to their temple. His thoughts hadn't brought him any comfort. Zayshul had been right. Had he not arranged for the female to visit Kusac, none of this would have happened. Reviewing the security tapes had confirmed that the Sholan's shot had not been intended, again just as Zayshul, and M'kou had said. As the shot from the energy rifle hit Kusac, the force of the impact and the shock he'd experienced had caused his hand to clench automatically on the trigger mechanism. M'kou just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.



None of this had assuaged his anger, but if he had to be honest, much of it was with himself. The fact still remained that Kusac had to be punished, and publicly, or it made a mockery of having any rules and laws to govern this society that they'd both— he *and* Kusac— worked so hard to build.

"Get him cleaned up," he said. "His punishment will start as soon as he's ready to move to the assembly hall."

"What about a fresh dressing, General?" asked M'zynal. "There's a lot of... stuff... coming out of both sides of that wound."

"Get Ghidd'ah to dress it, but nothing else." He turned to leave. "And give him some clothes, dammit! I never said he was to be left without them!"

"General," said M'zynal, then stopped.

"What now?" he asked.

"He's not fit to stand at all, let alone for several hours."

"Then get him a chair," he snapped, exasperated.

"With the wound where it is, he can't sit either," said the Security chief apologetically.

"Dammit, you sort it out!" he hissed, crest rising in anger as he stalked out. "He threatened me with a gun, damned near ripped my throat out, he and his crew were assembling guns and explosives, and he *will* be punished!"

\* \* \*

Once Ghidd'ah had her anger under control, she examined the unconscious Kusac. Then she started organizing them.

"I'll need a floater," she said, "and surgical gloves, scissors, antiseptics. They'll know what to give you. Get them to fold three sheets onto the

floater," she called out after them. "While we're cleaning him, you can get that foul bedding out of here and re-make the bed with fresh."

"If he's on the floor, he can feed himself and drink without moving," said M'zynal. "It also makes it easier for us to clean up if he..."

"He needs the fluids he's drinking," she interrupted. "Same with the food. He won't be passing anything soon. But you're right, the floor is probably better for him. Get it scrubbed down with strong antiseptic while I've got him in the shower."

With him lying on the floater on his good side supported by two nurses, Ghidd'ah began to soak off the blanket, trying not to rip his fur out at the roots. As soon as the water hit him, he woke, and though he tried desperately, he was unable to bite back his cries of pain. Thankfully, both wound sites were oozing so much of the gray-brown slime of dead tissue that nothing was stuck to either of them. When it came to washing the muck out of his pelt, she was thankful when he passed out again. She was shocked to see just how much fur he'd lost, and how thin he was getting.

\* \* \*

Hands cuffed behind their backs in metal restraints, and each held by two guards, Banner and the others were taken to the briefing room. On the table in front of the large tactical screen were spread the various weapons and other items they'd made over their months on Kij'ik. Behind it, Kezule and M'zynal sat.

They were lined up in front of four chairs, facing the Valtegan and the Security chief. Off to one side stood Q'almo, another of Kezule's sons; all of them were armed with stunners. Kezule wasn't about to underestimate them again, Banner thought grimly.

"I take it you recognize the various items in front of us," said Kezule, looking up at them. "All of them were made to disrupt, to disable, or to kill. Since you arrived here, you've been given the freedom of this level and the one above. You've been treated with respect and trust, yet you do this. Why?"

"You brought us here under duress, General, by withholding our Captain's son from him," said Banner coldly. "You also kept extending our stay here. What did you expect us to do under the circumstances?"

"I told you many times you were free to leave. You chose to remain. I didn't expect you to plot to kill us."

"You knew we wouldn't leave without the Captain and Shaidan."

"You weren't invited to come here in the first place," said Kezule. "Despite that, you were made welcome. You admit to making these devices?"

"Yes, we made them. You'd have done the same had the position been reversed. When you escaped from the Forces on Shola, you killed several people," said Banner. "We've killed no one, yet."

The word hung in the air between them.

M'zynal reached for the box beside him and put it onto the table. "These are items we found in your Captain's quarters," he said. "There's enough nitrogen compound here to make several sizable bombs. Plus a homemade garrotte, a tube and homemade darts."

Banner frowned. The nitrogen bombs didn't sound like Kusac. He'd had him pegged as more of a face-to-face fighter, confirmed by the way he'd gone for Kezule the day before. The darts were likely an influence from Kaid. Beside him, he could feel Dzaou was becoming restless.

"I think you planted that nitrogen," he said. "That's not how the Captain works."

"I resent your accusation. It was hidden in his kit bag at the bottom of his wardrobe," said M'zynal, his voice taking on an edge. "My people have always respected you and your Captain; we wouldn't stoop to such depths."

Then he sensed Dzaou's anger, directed against Kusac, and turned to look at him. "This has your spoor written all over it, Dzaou. What do you know about this?" he demanded, playing a hunch.

"It wasn't his," muttered Dzaou angrily. "I remember the Captain taking it from me. Bastard messed with my mind afterward."

The skin between Kezule's eyes creased in a frown. "Indeed," he said. "You surprise me. You have no love for your Captain, yet here you are taking the blame for this."

Dzaou smiled widely, displaying his teeth. "Not blame, credit. Stop jerking us around, Kezule, just cut to the kill. We all know you've dragged us here to execute us along with him. So announce our sentence and get it over with. Stop trying to justify yourself!"

"Dzaou, shut up!" snarled Banner, rounding on him only to be pulled back by the guards behind him. Half his anger was with Kusac for concealing and lying about his telepathic abilities. If he'd messed with Dzaou's mind, had he done the same to his?

Placing his hands on the table, Kezule stood up and stared at them. "You're here to admit your guilt about making these devices," he said, gesturing to the contents of the table and the box. "And of plotting to cause us harm. Your Captain obviously knew what you were doing, as Dzaou has just said, therefore I am holding him, as your commanding officer, responsible for you. He will be punished, not you."

"That's unfair!" exclaimed Jayza as M'zynal began packing the items into the box.

"I believe it's very fair," said Kezule, coming out from behind the table. "He gave the orders, or at the very least was aware of your activities since he was doing the same. Sit down."

"You have no right to do this, Kezule," Banner said angrily, taking a step forward. "If you harm the Captain..."

"Be silent!" ordered Kezule as the guards hauled the struggling Banner back and deposited him forcefully on a chair. "You should have thought of the consequences before you started planning this! I repeat, you were all free to leave any time you chose!"

"Shaidan wasn't!"

Kezule ignored him and leaned back against the edge of the table, folding his arms and looking at them. "Your Captain attacked me physically and mentally..." He stopped as he saw the look on Banner's face. "You didn't know your Captain had his telepathic powers back? Well, I can confirm he has," he said. "Not content with those attacks, he pulls a gun on me in a situation where he knew innocent civilians, including his own son, were at risk. My son M'kou was shot..."

"So was our Captain," said Khadui.

"My son was shot with a chemical bullet," said Kezule very quietly, leaning forward. "A bullet designed by your people to destroy certain organs we Warriors possess."

Banner couldn't prevent the shock he felt from showing on his face. "What?" he asked, ears flat against his skull. "Where the hell did he get that? Chemical weapons are banned under Alliance laws."

"You're lying!" said Dzaou. "No such thing exists."

"It does," said Kezule. "Not only did he have a gun that passed all our searches, he also had a spray canister of the same compound. He intended to use it, Lieutenant. He did shoot my son, M'kou, and when his plans fell apart, he did try to rip my throat out."

"The gun went off by accident," said Banner, trying to put his anger with Kusac aside and concentrate on the issue at hand. "When he was shot, he instinctively pulled the trigger."

"Considering what the gun was loaded with, I believe his intent was to shoot me when he'd finished using me as a hostage," snapped Kezule. "For

this, and his attempt to bite my throat, I'm fully entitled to have him executed!"

"You do that and you'll have to kill us all," snarled Banner, his hair rising round his face. "Because, by Vartra, I'll not stop hunting you till you're dead! If Kusac had originally wanted to kill you, you wouldn't be standing there now! You and M'kou brought this on yourselves, Kezule, by drugging him and sending that female to rape him!"

"Which is why I'm not executing him," said Kezule quietly.

Banner stared at him, confused.

"He will be penalized for his own seditious actions, and for your behavior. I'm sentencing him to three hours in the punishment booth. You can hold yourselves responsible for a good part of that time."

"He's just been shot!" exclaimed Jayza. "You can't do that to him!"

"Watch me," said Kezule grimly, taking a remote activator out of his pocket and handing it to M'zyna. "On that screen. Q'algo will see you're returned to your rooms half an hour after your Captain's punishment starts."

\* \* \*

Kusac had come round as they were finishing drying him off. The matter oozing from his wounds had already saturated the fresh dressings. Still feverish, and panting in an effort to reduce the pain, he could tell by his scent when Kezule returned even though he was unable to focus on him.

"Come to gloat?" he managed to say.

"I want him awake," said Kezule, ignoring him. "And fit him with a medical sensor. I want him monitored at all times."

"I'm giving him no stimulants," said Ghidd'ah firmly.

"I didn't ask for any," Kezule said coldly. "He must be conscious when the punishment starts, after that I don't care. When she's done, take him into the hall," he ordered M'zynal, turning to go.

"I need to change the dressing again," said Ghidd'ah, firing a shot into Kusac's upper arm. "You're not intending to put him in that booth, are you, General?"

"This isn't enough?" he muttered as the nurses began to hold him still for Ghidd'ah to replace the soiled dressing.

Kezule swung round. "No, it isn't," he said. "You brought this on yourself, Kusac! Had you not tried to leave here at gunpoint, you wouldn't have been shot! Dammit, there were only three weeks left!"

He stopped, and when he spoke again, the anger was gone from his voice. "You put your own son's life at risk by pulling a gun on me, and you and your crew have been making explosives and other weapons. I'm holding you responsible for their actions as well as your own. You cannot go unpunished, and you know it."

The moment Ghidd'ah touched his leg, he was beyond answering. His moans of pain rose to a brief high-pitched keen, then the dressing and its bindings were off. By then, Kezule had gone.

"Make it double thickness," Ghidd'ah ordered then bent down to whisper in his ear. "You'll pass out quickly because your blood pressure's so low. I am so dreadfully sorry I'm hurting you, Kusac, but I can't help it. Zayshul tried to get Kezule to allow us to treat you, but he'd have none of it."

"Finish," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

His leg was now so swollen that keeping the dressing on without the bandage binding was no problem. When they were done, they eased him off the floater onto his good leg. M'zynal caught him and supported him as they slipped a clean tunic over his arms and sealed it.

He knew nothing of the journey to the hall, only that he returned to a world dominated by pain as they began to ease him onto a narrow padded stool they'd placed in the booth for him. He resisted, bracing himself on his good leg, holding onto their forearms, tightening his grip and moaning when they moved his injured leg to the side of the sloping stool so there was no weight or pressure on it.

"I need my arm, back, Captain," said M'zynal, carefully trying to pry his left hand off.

He let him remove it, glad of the continuing support from the young Prime officer as his hand was guided to the corner of the stool, next to his uninjured right leg. They pushed him back against the rear of the booth, lifted his head, and easing the psi damping collar up, snapped a restraint round his neck.

Consciousness fading in and out, and hardly able to keep his eyes open, he could see nothing but M'zynal's face as the Security chief took hold of his other hand and began to loosen it. Automatically, his grip tightened, claws extending and puncturing the Prime's forearm.

As M'zynal hissed in pain, Zhalmo's hand clasped over his wrist in a numbing grip. "No, Kusac. Let him go. Don't move, M'zynal, you'll only make it worse," she added quietly.

*I can't. It's all that's holding me up,* he thought, but the words came out as an unintelligible mumble.

"I'm fine, just get his arm in the restraint," said M'zynal tersely.

As she wrenched his hand loose, he sat down hard on the stool, clenching his free hand till the claws dug deep into the underside and biting down on his lip to stifle his cry of pain. Panting heavily, he barely noticed as his now limp right arm was fastened to the rear of the booth.

Vivid memories of watching the now dead M'zullian soldier in the booth came to him as the pain began to ease. As they shackled his other arm, the first stirrings of fear began to wash through him. He thanked Vartra that



his vision was so poor he was spared the sight of the crowded hall. But was it crowded? His physical senses shot, he reached out mentally only to have crippling pain flare up and down his spine then explode outward along every nerve. Every muscle spasmed and locked, making his back arch away from the booth wall and forcing him off the stool onto his good leg. Unable to make a sound, he stood there, transfixed in agony.

Then it was over and, keening almost inaudibly, he slumped back down onto the stool, hurting his neck on the restraint.

"What the hell happened?" demanded M'zynal.

"Psi damper cutting in," said Zhalmo briefly. "Captain, don't use your mental abilities, the General put a damper collar on you."

He'd forgotten about it, he realized, feeling cold metal encircle his waist as the final restraint was locked in place. Taking a shuddering breath, he tried to remember why he was here. It came flooding back— how his rage with Kezule had been so great he'd risked everything he'd no right to risk— his son's life, those of his crew— on an insane plan conceived in anger.

"Shaidan," he said, his voice hoarse. "My crew..."

"Safe, all safe," said M'zynal quietly. "The Doctor will make sure your son doesn't see this."

When the headset was adjusted over his eyes, he tensed, clenching his hands and bracing his foot against the floor beneath him. Faintly, he could hear Kezule talking. He began to breath more rapidly, afraid to see what images Kezule had loaded for him.

## **Ghioass, the Camarilla council chamber**

This transition had been much easier, thought Vartra as he got to his feet.

"What do you want of me this time?" he asked, trying to sound bored.

"The Hunter is in danger, you must go to him and guide him."

"Guide him how?" he asked sharply, pretense forgotten.

"You must tell him to reach for the healing place, then guide him deep inside himself to this location."

A sudden, sharp pain lanced through his brain as another mind penetrated his, pulling his consciousness deep within him.

*The place is just beyond here, sent the presence within him. It does not exist within you. Unless he can do this, he will not survive.*

His mind was suddenly released and he staggered, leaning against the sides of the force field in which he was trapped.

"Go now and do this."

Almost instantly, the familiar warping of space began, forming the tear between their place and his. Rapidly it lengthened and widened, the vortex sucking him into its maw before he'd time to gather his wits.

When his world returned to normal, he found himself on Kij'ik at the back of the assembly hall.

Unseen by everyone, he walked toward the booth where Kusac was restrained, knowing that this time at least, he would gladly comply with the Camarilla's order.

\* \* \*

"This is uncivilized!" hissed Khadui, trying to get up, only to be firmly pushed down on his chair again as they listened to Kezule telling the assembled Primes why Kusac was being punished. "He has no right to do this!"

"Remain in your seats," said Q'almo. "We have orders to stun you if necessary."

Banner's vision was beginning to fade round the edges in rage as he stared at the screen. Even though the camera was some distance from the front of the hall, he could see how badly swollen Kusac's leg was. He began to slow his breathing, pushing back the encroaching huntersight. They were powerless to even help themselves right now, and if truth were told, this was at least better than the deaths he'd expected them all to face.

"Three hours," said Jayza, his ears invisible in his brown hair. "Kezule said that long could kill you or make you go mad."

"Depends on what tape they use," said Khadui quietly. "Kezule fitted the crime to the tape last time, so they won't use that one."

"Enough talking," growled Banner. They might be forced to watch this, but they'd do it with as much dignity as they could muster.

*"With the punishment tapes, you experience the pain firsthand,"* Kezule was saying. *"Every blow will feel as real as if it is happening to you. This is a tape we found on the Zan'droshi, one showing the Valtegens on Shola rounding up the Telepaths for questioning. It will be repeated until the three hours are over."*

"A piece of ancient history for you," murmured the guard behind Banner.

"Be silent!" said Q'almo, glaring at the civilian. "Unless you've a fancy to try the booth for yourself?"

"No, sir!" said the guard, the fear in his voice and scent obvious.

The tape began to play and Banner divided his attention between watching Kusac and the images on the screen in the hall.

\* \* \*

When the tape began, he found it so real it was as if he'd been transported there himself. He could smell the fumes from the vehicles, feel the sun on his body, and the faint breeze stirring his hair.

It was early summer, and the streets in front of the stores were fairly crowded. There were no cubs of any age, he noticed, only adults. At every road junction, groups of six heavily-armored Valtegens stood, energy rifles held at the ready. In the hand of one he could see a small device like a scanner cum motion detector.

The mood of the people was tense, their fear barely under control as they hurried past the Valtegan soldiers keeping their eyes averted. When one of the guards looked his way, he shivered, hoping not to be noticed. He heard a shot, and the Valtegan's scanner filled his view. It had started to emit a low beeping and on the small screen, he could see a flashing red dot some fifty yards away, going by the grid marks.

They were heading into the crowd now, pushing the Sholans aside with no regard for their safety. The fear was so palpable he could almost touch it. A small knot of Sholans saw them coming and began to run. Terrified shoppers ducked into the stores or plastered themselves against the large windows as the soldiers ran past. Shots rang out again, then the gun belonging to one of the soldiers was forced down.

"We want them alive!" said their leader. "Unit two, head them off at the junction!" he called into his communicator.

Fear so powerful it was making his own heart beat faster flooded through him as the soldiers closed on the three runners. The other unit came into view ahead of them as the remaining shoppers fled for cover, leaving the street empty of all but the three Sholans and twelve Valtegens.

He frowned as the guards drew closer— one of the Sholans, the female, was blonde, her hair worn in a mass of tiny beaded braids. She clutched at the dark-pelted male beside her. The male with them was armed, and pushing them behind him so his body shielded them, he started shooting at the guards. Their situation was hopeless but he intended to make their capture cost the Valtegens dear.

Hisses of pain surrounded him, then a single shot hit the Sholan. As he fell to the ground, exposing the couple, Kusac recognized who they were. The female started screaming and he was suddenly catapulted into the mind of the male— Rezac.

Rezac's mind was full of rage and fear in almost equal proportions as he launched himself at the approaching soldiers. He knew they'd no chance of escape, but that wasn't what he wanted now. He wanted a quick death for himself and Zashou.

The soldiers weren't gentle and as the blows fell on Rezac's body, he felt each one—the fist hitting him on the jaw, the knee in his stomach, the hands grasping his arms, claws digging into his flesh even through his clothing. Then they grabbed Zashou and her fear exploded in his mind as well.

*It's not real, Kusac, said a quiet voice inside him. It's a tape, an image from the past. You know it is.*

He tried to jerk his head to one side to avoid another blow to his head but only succeeded in almost choking himself on the neck restraint. Whimpering, he tried to struggle against his captors just as Rezac was doing.

*It's not real. It's a tape, said the voice insistently. Pull back from it, Kusac. Pull back.*

Confused, he shut his eyes, blocking out the images, but not the sensations as a booted foot hit his good leg. Flinching, he tried to remember who he was and that he was on Kij'ik, not Shola of Vartra's time.

*That's it. Pull right back, Kusac, said Vartra's voice.*

"Vartra?" he mumbled in surprise, his eyes opening again, expecting to see the God—or the person—standing in front of him.

He was in a room with Zashou now, seated at a table, being questioned. They held him on his chair while pulling Zashou to her feet.

"Leave her alone!" he/Rezac yelled, trying to fight off the guards as they began to fasten a metal collar round her neck. His rage burned brightly, fueled by the terror she felt as she began to howl.

He fought harder, winning free at last and hurling himself across the room to his Leska. Lashing out at the guards, he made them back off. Grasping hold of the collar round her neck, he pulled at it, forcing the not quite fastened clasp to part. He flung it aside as a rifle butt swam into view, cracking him hard on the side of the head.

His consciousness as Rezac began to fade— only for the tape to start again, but in the brief moment of respite, he heard Vartra's voice in his mind again.

*Close your eyes! Don't let the tape capture you again! You must go into a trance, Kusac, a healing trance like you did before. Only much deeper.*

Still feverish, he was finding it really difficult to work out what was real.

*I'm real, nothing else is. Focus on me, said Vartra. Now, before it's too late.*

"Now."

*Yes, now! Relax, let your mind go, let it fall into a trance, Kusac.*

The collar against his neck was sending small tremors of pain up and down his spine as he tried to reach inside himself.

*Then turn it off, you fool!* said Vartra scathingly.

That shocked him into action and he reached for the mechanism, trying to ignore the pain as it intensified and jangled his nerves. Suddenly it stopped, and he sagged against the restraints in relief, instantly regretting it as they cut into his neck and wrists.

*Now let your mind fall into that trance, said Vartra. Let go, I'll be there to catch you.*

It didn't make sense, but then nothing did right now. He could feel the tape sequence reaching the part about the scanner and shuddering at the thought of experiencing that again, he let go. He felt himself falling deeper

and deeper within his own mind, but there was no fear as he could sense he wasn't alone.

As his descent began to slow, he sensed Vartra urging him on.

*Deeper, you must go deeper, then reach for the healing there.*

*What?*

*Deeper, Kusac! Beyond me. Then reach for healing and you'll find it.*

*Makes no sense*, he objected, even as he obeyed. He felt divorced from everything now, the constant pain in his leg had faded to an unpleasant memory. Then even his awareness of Vartra began to fade and he felt more alone and lost than ever before. He began to panic, terrified he'd never find his way back, that he'd be trapped forever in this abyss of his own mind.

Biofeedback. A half-forgotten phrase said by Zayshul, or Kezule, that he remembered was important. He focused on the memory, turned it round in his mind's eye, examined it for more information. *There are glands you can access using biofeedback.*

Blue swirling tattoos and a voice— Naacha, the Cabbaran mystic— telling him to reach inside himself for what he needed. Healing, he needed healing, that he did know because Vartra had told him. He reached, and found it, a gland, alien in concept, but flesh of his flesh. He tried to access it but found he no longer had the energy to use it. He'd left it too long.

He sensed his heart rate falling and his consciousness shrinking. Around him the distant motes of light he knew were his thoughts began to fade. Thoughts of Shaidan, and Carrie and Kaid surfaced briefly and though he tried to hold onto them, they, too, eluded him. He didn't want this... then that thought was gone.

All that remained was the darkness that surrounded him. It was almost complete now. He could feel himself unraveling as the few remaining lights began to dim. A strange calmness settled over him.

*So this is death*, he thought as even his self-awareness began to shrink, slowly at first, then more rapidly till there was nothing.

## **The Tooshu, same day**

Kaid had just told Prince Zsurtul the news of the coup led by K'hedduk on K'oish'ik. He'd been hoping to do it before the needs of his Link day with Carrie were too great and had decided it was best to tell him alone, male to male. However, he'd suddenly discovered that Carrie had been right when she'd said the youth would need the comforting only a female could give.

The young Prince was sitting on his bed with his face in his hands, sobbing, when Carrie joined him in Zsurtul's quarters.

She ran to his side, wrapping her arms around him consolingly, rocking him and whispering what she hoped were words of comfort as Kaid quietly excused himself.

"There must be a mistake," he wept, clutching her and burying his head against her chest. "It can't be true."

"I'm afraid it is," she said, reaching up to stroke his head. She'd never been so close to him before and was surprised at the feel of his skin— cool, and slightly textured, but pleasantly so. His scent this close was more noticeable, too; he had a slightly musty smell, like soft leather.

"It was K'hedduk who did it? The Directorate? Then he'll have destroyed the hatchling, too!"

"I'm sure he wouldn't do that," she said uncomfortably, knowing in her heart that he was right.

"He would, and he'll want to kill me now!"

"He's not going to get near you, Zsurtul, I promise you that," she said firmly. "No one knows you're with us except Taizia and Meral, and they wouldn't tell anyone. Zsurtul, I'm so sorry this has happened, but you need to be strong now."



He raised his pale, tear-stained face. "You don't know what happens when a dynasty changes," he said, tears still overflowing from his large eyes. "The cushion on the throne... it was made from the skin of the last Emperor of the last dynasty... K'hedduk will have had my father skinned, maybe even alive!"

"Stop that right now," she said firmly, shaking him. "Your father would have been dead before they did that, trust me! Are you telling me he wouldn't fight so much that K'hedduk wouldn't get enough whole skin from him to make anything? I don't believe it, I know you, and your father must have been as brave as you are! He would have been dead, Zsurtul, honestly."

Zsurtul brushed his hands across his eyes. "Are you sure?" he asked in a small voice.

"I'm really sure," she said, hugging him close again.

"What about my mother? He'd have to marry her to have a claim to the throne."

Oh, Gods! She was right out of her depth here! "Then at least you know she's alive," she said. "K'hedduk isn't going to be allowed to keep your throne, Zsurtul. We know Kusac is with Kezule. We've been asked to see if he'll lead a coup against K'hedduk so you can reclaim it. The whole Alliance will be with him."

He pushed his head up again. "They'd do that for me?"

"We have a Treaty with your father, which I presume you mean to honor. Of course we'll help you retake your throne."

He dissolved again into tears just as Kaid returned with three glasses and a bottle of what she recognized instantly as brandy from Keiss.

Setting them down on the chest of drawers, he opened the bottle and poured some into each of the glasses then brought two over for her and Zsurtul.

"Come on, Zsurtul," she said. "Kaid's brought a drink to make you feel better."

She had to coax him up and when she had, Kaid handed him the glass with the most in it.

"Take this," he said, folding the youth's shaking hands around the glass. "I know this has been a shock for you, but you are now the Emperor of your people. They depend on you."

If possible, Zsurtul paled even more and gulped a large mouthful of the drink down. Carrie had to rescue his glass as he began to cough when the fiery liquid hit him.

"That's strong," he said hoarsely, blinking. He accepted the tissue that Carrie held out to him and wiped his damp cheeks with it.

"I didn't expect you to drink that much in one swallow," said Kaid, going back for his own glass.

As he sipped it more carefully, there was a scratching at the door. It was opened by Valden, who let Gaylla in then shut the door behind her. The cub was carrying a plate of pastries and cookies.

"I brought these for you 'cos you're unhappy," she said, carefully setting it down on Zsurtul's other side then getting up on the bed beside him. "I chose the best ones."

"That was very kind of you," said Zsurtul. "Thank you, but I'm not really hungry right now."

"You should eat," said Gaylla, picking the plate up again now she was settled, and holding it out to him. "Take that one," she said, pointing to a pink sugar-coated muffin. "It's really nice. Toueesut's cooks made them specially for us. Go on," she urged when he hesitated.

He took it and as they began to chat, Carrie got up and joined Kaid by the chest. *That was very kind of her. Gaylla's really quite unique, Toueesut*

*was right. I think she may well be an empathic healer— she can certainly make people feel better. Zsurtul shouldn't be left alone tonight, Kaid.*

*I think you'll find that's why Gaylla came,* he replied with a smile.

*So he's now Emperor Zsurtul. That's going to be as big a shock to him as losing his father. We can't take him with us on the Couana, we don't know how Kezule will react to him.*

*I don't intend to. He'll stay here with the cubs and Jurrel.*

*Not Haven?*

*No. We know he'll be safe with the Touibans. I suggest we tell everyone to continue to treat him as normal. It'll only upset him and remind him of his loss if we do anything else.*

"Carrie, please tell Zsurtul I can stay with him tonight. He's like me, with no one special to look after him," Gaylla called out to her.

"Of course you can, sweetie, if Zsurtul doesn't mind," she said. *You were right,* she sent to Kaid.

"See? I said they wouldn't mind," said Gaylla, already curled up in his lap.

*Bring him out of his room to be with the rest of us when you can, please, Gaylla. He needs all our company today,* sent Carrie.

*I will,* the cub replied.

*We'd better leave before our Link gets much stronger,* Kaid sent, reaching out to touch her cheek. *I freely admit that after the last few days on Haven, I'm looking forward to being alone with you.*

She smiled.

Kaid retrieved the empty glass from the Prince and they were about to leave when Zsurtul called out to them.

"Please, I'm not the Emperor yet," he said awkwardly. "I don't want anyone treating me like I am. I won't be until I'm actually crowned."

"We'll see to it," Kaid reassured him before they left.

"Your troubles aren't over yet," she said as they walked down the corridor back to the lounge. "Toueesut's determined to go with us."

Kaid sighed, looping his arm across her shoulders. "There's always something," he said. "I should be getting used to it by now. Still, at least I know it has to wait till tomorrow!"

### **Kij'ik, same day**

Zayshul had been appalled when Kezule told her about the punishment.

"Why don't you just execute him and be done with it? Or are you determined to make him suffer as much as possible first?" she'd demanded.

"I don't want him dead now," he'd said. "I admit I did at first. We have over one hundred and twenty people here, Zayshul, I need to keep to the codes of discipline that *he* helped set up. He must be punished for what he and his crew have done, and it must be now."

"Why, in La'shol's name?" she'd asked. "Why not in a few days when he's stronger, since you won't allow me to treat him? With that awful wound..."

"Ghidd'ah dressed it for him," he'd interrupted. "I'll allow no more. That wound isn't going to kill him, Zayshul. You've no experience of this kind of injury, but I have. I've seen many like it before on the battlefield. M'kou, take my wife and Shaidan up to the Medics quarters on the Officers level. See they stay there and that the vid com remains off."

Now Shaidan lay huddled in a ball of misery on one of the beds, refusing to talk to her, and M'kou sat opposite her on the sofa as they waited.

"Why did he have to do it now? Couldn't it have waited a few more days?" she asked M'kou in a low voice. "He's being cruel just for the sake of it!"

M'kou stirred. "You're wrong," he said. "The General has thought it through very carefully, don't you see that?"

She looked at him. "What're you talking about?"

"If anyone else had done this, the General would have had him executed immediately. It's only because of what led up to it that the Captain's still alive," explained M'kou. "An example still had to be set. By doing it today, the General knows the Captain can't possibly remain conscious for three hours. He's counting on him passing out. Justice will have been seen to be done, though. I haven't told you this, by the way," he added with a faint smile.

"Why? Why go to all that trouble?" she asked, utterly confused.

"It's his way of admitting some responsibility for what happened, Zayshul," he said gently, using her name for the first time. "He can never say so in words, but he knows your accusations were true."

"What about you? You were shot, too."

A shadow crossed his face. "I need to learn when to say no to my father, even if he is my commanding officer. I should never have agreed to find a female willing to do what the General wanted. This," he indicated his injured arm, "is my punishment for agreeing to help. As for the other, I like to think I'm of more value to him doing what I normally do here than being one of his commandos."

"I hope Kezule's learned something from this," she snapped. "Seems to me it's all the rest of us who pay the prices for his mistakes. Look at what it's doing to Shaidan!"

"I think you'll find he has. As for Shaidan, I agree he's innocent in this, but it has to be said that his father acted very rashly, with no thought of what could happen to his son if his plan failed."

Zayshul grudgingly had to agree.

\* \* \*

Once the Sholans had been returned to their rooms, while Q'almo and M'zynal continued guarding Kusac, Kezule had returned to the briefing room. The screen was still on but now it only showed Kusac inside the booth. On the table in front of him was a small monitor, twin to the one M'zynal had, showing Kusac's vital signs. The first hour was nearly up and his signs had remained the same as when he'd entered the booth.

Nothing must happen to Kusac—he could not live with the Sholan's death on his conscience. Emergency plans had been laid in case anything went wrong, and Zayshul being on this level was part of them. He knew he could depend on her to do everything possible for her Sholan in the event of anything going wrong. He reached for the water jug in the center of the table, picking it up and pouring himself a bowl of it, then stopped. With his low-grade fever and the fluid loss, Kusac would be desperately thirsty. Resolutely he pushed the bowl back beside the jug. If Kusac couldn't drink, then neither would he until this was over.

An alarm went off, shocking him to his feet. Kusac's vital signs were sinking fast.

\* \* \*

*Shaidan, I need your help,* said Vartra urgently, crouching down at the side of the bed.

The cub lifted his head and blinked at the Sholan in front of him. "Leave me alone," he said dully.

*You don't mean that. I need your help, not for me, for your father.*

"Where were you when he needed you?" he asked angrily.

"Shaidan, are you all right?" asked Zayshul, looking over the top of the sofa at him.

*They can't see me, only you can. Shaidan, you must help. Your father's in danger,* said Vartra, his tone urgent now. *Get them to take off your collar, you must link your mind to his, let him draw on you for energy!*

"What kind of danger?" After yesterday, he wasn't sure he completely trusted this male who only came when no one else was around.

*He's trying to heal himself. Shaidan, time is running out! You must trust me!*

"Shaidan, you aren't talking to yourself, are you?" asked Zayshul, getting up and starting to come over to him.

The cub sat up. "You can't see anyone?" he asked her, tentatively reaching out to touch Vartra's hand. When his passed right through it, he gave a yell of shock.

*Get her to take the collar off! They've turned it up so you can't feel your father, sent Vartra. He's dying, Shaidan! Only you can save him!*

"My collar! Take it off!" he yelled, reaching up and trying to pull it free. "Take it off!"

Zayshul was at his side in seconds, M'kou not far behind her. "What's wrong?" she demanded, reaching through Vartra to pick him up.

"Take the collar off!" he shrieked, struggling free. "He says you turned it up so I couldn't feel my father! He needs me, take it off now!"

M'kou reached out and scooped him up. "I'd do it," he said as the cub struggled vainly against him.

"Is it wise under the circumstances?" she asked. "Shaidan, calm down. There's only us here."

"He's only going to get more worked up if you don't."

"The Sholan by the bed told me," said Shaidan, pushing against M'kou's good arm. "It's urgent, he says."

"Stop struggling, Shaidan," she said, glancing over to the bed before reaching up to undo the collar. "Put him down, M'kou."

Shaidan collapsed into a heap on the floor, keening loudly in grief as a buzzer sounded.

M'kou froze, then grabbed hold of Zayshul. "Get to the assembly hall now! Kusac needs medical assistance!"

"What?" Zayshul couldn't quite take in what he was saying.

M'kou dragged her to the door, reaching down behind his chair to pull out a large medical kit. "Go!" he said, thrusting it into her arms, thumbing the door open, and pushing her through it. "I'll stay with Shaidan!"

She ran.

\* \* \*

"He's dead," said Q'algo, shocked, looking at the display. "No pulse, no heartbeat. Nothing."

"He can't be," said M'zynal, reaching into the booth and placing his hand on Kusac's throat. "Burn it!" he swore. "There's no reason for this to happen! It doesn't make sense!"

\* \* \*

M'kou watched in shock as Shaidan was lifted into the air by some invisible force and shaken till he stopped keening.

"I can do that!" said Shaidan, rubbing furiously at his tear-wet cheeks. "Put me down."

He blinked, staring at the cub as he was returned to the floor, trying to see the— something— that was capable of lifting him and talking to him. As he stared, he saw a faint darkness, like a shadow between him and the cub.

Shaidan hunkered down on the floor and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*



His father's mind was still and silent, but he knew a last glowing spark still remained. It was fading fast, and buried so deep that it scared him to think of going there. *Don't think*, he muttered, and reaching out for the spark, he let go of himself.

Darkness rushed in, surrounding him; he shrieked, clutching for the spark, begging for help, incoherent with terror. The spark flared, pulsing once, igniting something buried and forgotten. Seeing it, Shaidan clutched it, too, filling it with his terror-fueled energy.

\* \* \*

That energy surged through Kusac, searing and burning him.

\* \* \*

"Wait! I think I felt a heartbeat!" said M'zynal as he heard the General running across to them.

\* \* \*

On the *Couana*, Carrie fought against the enveloping darkness, trying desperately to breathe and cry out as her struggles became weaker and weaker. Suddenly the nightmare snapped, freeing her. She gave a hoarse cry as a terror not her own flooded through her.

"Carrie, for Vartra's sake, come back to me!" Kaid loomed over her, his hands on her shoulders, shaking her.

She reached a trembling hand up to touch his cheek, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the light in their bedroom. The look of fear on his face frightened her.

"What happened? You suddenly disappeared from my mind," he said, settling down onto his haunches, still astride her. "It's our Link day, this shouldn't happen."

Before she could answer, it came again. This time Kaid was with her as the terror pulsed through them both, dragging them deep into the other mind, linking all three of them together.

\* \* \*

"And another," M'zynal was saying as Kezule came to a stop beside them.

"I can see it on the monitor," confirmed Q'algo. "All the readings are rising, pulse and heartbeat steadying."

M'zynal sighed and stood back from the booth. "He's fine," he said to Kezule. "I don't know what the hell that was, but it looks like it's over."

"You're sure?"

M'zynal nodded. "See for yourself, General. He is unconscious, though."

Kezule stepped forward, pressing his fingertips against Kusac's throat. Beneath them his pulse beat slowly but steadily. Then he looked at the dressing. It needed changing already. He frowned. This wound was healing far faster than he'd expected. It could be his imagination, but unfortunately, unless he had one of the other Sholans look at it, no one apart from himself had any experience of energy weapon wounds.

\* \* \*

Kusac gasped again as pain and energy exploded in and around him, forcing him to expand. Briefly he felt the touch of gestalt, the three minds merging with his, then it was gone. Around him, the sparks were relighting in an ever-expanding outward cascade, each one a memory that demanded he not give it up.

*You have to heal, Father,* a small thought reminded him. Shaidan. He reached for his son, and the glands, and this time, he had the strength and more to spare.

\* \* \*

Kezule met Zayshul as she ran into the hall. "He's fine," he said, taking her by the arm and attempting to steer her out again.

"I want to see for myself," she said.

"No. Trust me, Zayshul, he is fine."

She searched his face then relaxed and nodded and let him take her next door into the briefing room.

"What happened?" she asked, sitting down at the table.

"He stopped breathing briefly," said Kezule, pouring her a bowl of water and handing it to her.

She took it gratefully. "You're not having one?"

He shook his head, sitting back down in his own seat. "When this is over," he said.

"End it now, Kezule," she said quietly. "Let him be taken to the sick bay."

"I can't," he said, rubbing his hand tiredly across his eyes. "Believe me, I can't take him out of the booth. He's unconscious, he won't be aware of the tape. This punishment has to be seen through to the end. Check on the cub, Zayshul, then you can come back here and sit with me if you want."

"Shaidan!" she exclaimed, jumping up. "I forgot about him! He knows when something is wrong with his father. They seem to be linked in some way. He was hysterical just before the alarm went off!"

"Go and see to him," said Kezule.

\* \* \*

M'kou was just pulling the covers over the cub, having placed him in the nearest bed.

"He's fine," he said hurriedly, seeing her anxious look. "I take it his father is too."

She nodded, coming into the room. "What did he do after I left?"

M'kou stood up, a puzzled look on his face. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he said.

"Try me."

"Well, something almost invisible picked him up and shook him as he got hysterical. Not exactly invisible," he added, "I did catch sight of a sort of shadow. Anyway, after that he sat on the floor for several minutes before falling over, apparently asleep. I'd just taken him over to the bed when you arrived."

"His father briefly stopped breathing," she said quietly. "They are linked somehow."

"That wouldn't surprise me," M'kou said, sitting down on the chair so he could keep an eye on the sleeping cub while she checked on him. "We know nothing at all about Sholan children, and even less about these hybrids. And they were all programmed on how to use their abilities with a sleep tape made from the Captain's mind."

"Would you mind watching Shaidan?" she asked. "I want to go back to the briefing room where the General is keeping a watch on the Captain."

"I can manage here," said M'kou.

\* \* \*

"What the hell was that?" Kaid asked hoarsely as he lifted his head up from the bed where he'd fallen beside Carrie.

"The gestalt," she said, sitting up. "Did you feel him?" she asked. "Was it Kusac?"

He shook his head, reaching up to draw her back down beside him. "I'd like to say I did, but I honestly didn't. There was a third mind, though, and it felt a lot like him..."

"But wasn't, I know." She sighed. "Then who triggered it? And why such terror?"

"Doubtless we'll find out soon," he said, nuzzling against her neck. "The terror stopped as soon as we merged. It could have been his son, you know. It felt immature. Maybe he was just having a nightmare. Is the gestalt likely to happen again?"

"No, it uses up a great amount of energy. Don't you feel drained? I do."

Kaid yawned, hardly able to keep his eyes open. "Now you come to mention it," he murmured. "You know something else? I'm not worried about Kusac anymore."

### **Kij'ik Outpost, early morning, Zhal-Mellasha 22nd day (February)**

"His vital signs are so low they're hardly there," said M'zynal as he followed Kezule into the cell. "They've been falling steadily since we began taking them after his punishment ended yesterday."

"But they are there," said Kezule, going down on one knee beside the still form lying on the floor.

"Yes," agreed M'zynal. "Ghidd'ah looked at the readings. She said he was in a coma and we should contact you."

The pulse was there, and though the rate was almost negligible, the beat when it came was strong. Moving slightly, he pulled back the covers and looked at the dressing. It had been changed after the punishment session, and again when they'd come to give him his evening meal. Once more it was saturated and the mess draining from it was seeping down his leg and onto the covers beneath him. He glanced toward the tray. The meal and

the water were untouched. He looked back at Kusac, noting how much thinner he looked.

All the signs were there, the slow body rhythms, the comalike state, the weight loss and the advanced state of healing. He thought back to the first time he'd gone into laalgo. It had scared him almost to death as it had involved, literally, a near death experience. The trance was so deep it came within a whisper of actual death and it was easy for those new to it to slip the wrong way. He'd been lucky, there had been an experienced officer there to look after him.

He no longer had any doubt that the Sholan was in their equivalent of a laalgo trance, how, he didn't know. Nothing he'd ever come across had suggested they were capable of this.

He got to his feet. "Disturb him as little as possible, but take him into the sick bay," he ordered. "And tell Doctor Zayshul to meet me there."

\* \* \*

"Thank La'shol, you've changed your mind!" she exclaimed as she hurried over to the nurses' station where he was waiting for her.

"Zayshul, stop and listen to me first," he said, gesturing to the nurses to leave. "I'm pretty sure he's in a deep healing trance like my children and I can go into. All his symptoms fit that. If that's the case, he must be left to get on with it. If you disturb him, you'll break the trance and that could be dangerous."

"Dangerous? How?"

"When he stopped breathing, I believe that was him going into it properly. The same thing happened to me the first time. Breaking the trance can cause that to happen again."

"But you're a Warrior-caste Valtegan, not a Sholan. How could he be capable of doing the same thing when the only reason you can do it is because of your extra glands?"

"I don't know, but you've seen for yourself how much weight he's lost—laalgo burns up the body's stored fats at a tremendous rate. We'll know for sure when we see the state of his wound."

"Kezule, I have to treat him! If nothing else we can surely give him fluids and some kind of liquid diet to fuel the healing process."

"Fluids, yes, not food. Doing that would be too invasive. His system should awaken him if his reserves are getting too low. You'll need to position him so you can dress the wound without disturbing him."

"We can use pillows to prop him up, and loose dressings."

He nodded and got up. "Then let's see what state his wound is in."

\* \* \*

"I don't believe it," she said, looking up at Kezule. "It's healing at more than twice the normal rate at least!"

"It'll heal even faster yet," murmured Kezule.

"If I leave it like this, he'll scar, quite badly. I need to clean it out and cut the rest of the dead tissue away, then we can leave it to drain on its own."

"Zayshul, everything you do to him increases the risks," he sighed.

"I understand that, but we're talking dead tissue here, Kezule, with no feeling in it. If I take out what I can without touching the living tissue...?"

"Just clean it out, no more," he said, getting up. "I won't be responsible for harming him, and neither should you."

"What about his crew? Are you still keeping them in their quarters?"

"They're being allowed in their lounge during the day now," he said. "I still have to decide what to do about them, and Kusac."

Kezule's communicator beeped and he excused himself, glad to be leaving the sick bay and questions he couldn't yet answer.

"General, there's an incoming message to the *N'zishok* being relayed to the bridge that you must hear," said Zhalmo.

"From the *N'zishok*? Who is it?" he demanded.

"Zhookoh. He's got bad news from the Prime world."

"On my way," he said.

\* \* \*

Kezule listened in silence as his son told him about the coup on K'oish'ik. "How many of you escaped?" he asked quietly.

"There are twenty of us here, and we think maybe five or six in the City. Khayikule's call was very brief because they were under fire," said Zhookoh from the bridge of the *Mazzu*.

"Any idea who led the coup?"

"We've been monitoring their transmissions and intercepted a message intended for Shola. It's K'hedduk, sir. He's assumed the Throne of Light and declared himself Emperor after marrying the Empress."

"Zhalmo will send you the coordinates for here. Make sure you can't be traced." He hesitated. "I'm glad you're safe," he said awkwardly.

"Thank you, sir, so are we. We only have four of our sisters with us, I'm afraid."

"I'll see you in a few days."

He sat there, staring at the now blank screen, until Zhalmo drew his attention back.



"Sir, how many survived?" she asked.

"Twenty, and maybe four or five in the City," he said. "Emperor K'hedduk rules now."

"K'hedduk?"

He nodded, getting up from his command chair. "Yes, K'hedduk from the Directorate. Seems he escaped after all." Fifty dead— that was half his offspring! His hands clenched at his sides as he walked toward the exit. He stopped to look at his bridge crew. "K'hedduk will not get away with this, I promise you," he said. "Say nothing about this, I'll announce the news this evening at an assembly. Your surviving brothers and sisters will be joining us in a few days."

He'd no love for the Prime world, nor any feelings of loyalty toward it, but no one could afford to leave K'hedduk on the throne! He'd have the females in harems already, and be sending word to M'zull of his coup, inviting them to ally themselves with him. The last thing Kezule wanted to see now was the return of the old days.

\* \* \*

They all looked up as the main lounge door opened. M'kou, flanked by Q'almo and M'zynal, came in.

Banner glanced over at them but said nothing, waiting to see what they wanted.

"Lieutenant, we'd like you to accompany us to the sick bay to see your Captain," M'kou said. "There's no need for concern," he added, "we just want you to see him for yourself."

"Where's his son, M'kou. He should be with us," said Banner, getting up. "You've no right to be keeping him from us."

"Shaidan is with his father now," said M'kou, gesturing toward the door. "You'll see him, too."

"We want him brought back here to live with us," Dzaou called out.

"That's enough, Dzaou," said Banner warningly as he went to join M'kou.

"Someone's got to call it like it is," he persisted.

He was glad when the door closed behind them. "No restraints?" he asked as the guards fell in just behind him.

"None," confirmed the young Prime, glancing at him as they turned right, heading for the main port to starboard corridor.

"You're not stupid, Lieutenant. You won't try to escape. All you want is to leave here safely with your Captain and his son, nothing more."

"What do you want, M'kou?" he asked on a whim as they stepped into the air lock junction. He pointed to the sling the Prime was wearing. "You were shot by Kusac."

"I know it was an accident, and the security tapes confirm it. As to what I want," he said, a closed look coming over his face.

"What most people want, Lieutenant, a long, trouble-free life, and a family, since I've already found a mate."

"And Kezule?"

"Peace," M'kou said shortly.

\* \* \*

Kusac was in a single room opposite the entrance to the sick bay. Banner glanced round the room first, taking in Doctor Zayshul in the chair by the door, and Shaidan, curled up in the easy chair beside his father's bed. Then he looked at Kusac.

He lay on his back, the bed angled so his head and his lower legs were raised. A sheet, held clear of his hips, covered him. Shaidan glanced up at

him briefly as he entered, and behind him he heard the Doctor getting to her feet.

"Kusac," he said, moving to the end of the bed.

"He can't hear you, Lieutenant, he's unconscious," said Zayshul quietly.

Banner nodded, walking down the other side of the bed from the cub.

"Hello, Shaidan," he said, looking over at him.

The cub flicked an ear but said nothing as he settled his chin more comfortably on his folded arms.

Banner looked at the display panel above Kusac's head before leaning over him.

"How long has he been unconscious?" he asked, reaching out to press his hand against Kusac's neck.

"Since we brought him here yesterday, after..." She left the rest of the sentence hanging. "Nearly a day."

He nodded, understanding there were certain things neither of them wanted to mention in front of the cub. Unbelievably, Kusac's pulse was as slow as the readings on the screen indicated. He stood up again, looking expectantly at Shaidan, then at Zayshul, and nodding toward the door.

"Shaidan, would you mind leaving us alone for ten minutes, please?" she said, going over to the cub and putting her hand on his shoulder. "The Lieutenant and I need to talk. Ghidd'ah is outside, she'll take you down to the mess to get something nice to eat."

The cub sat up, looking from her to Banner then back. "If he wakes up, you'll call me?" he asked, climbing down from the chair.

"I promise," she said. "Ghidd'ah will tell you immediately."

Tail hanging limply, he trotted out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"He shouldn't be here," said Banner. He was surprised Kezule had allowed him to leave the Command level at all.

"Perhaps, but he wants to be with his father. Don't worry, I won't allow him to stay here for too long."

"Why's he unconscious?" he demanded, moving round to the other side of the bed where Kusac's wounded leg was. "What happened to him in your damned punishment booth?"

"We think he's in a trance of some kind," she said. "A healing trance. We watched him lower his pulse to the rate it is now. Do your people do such a thing?"

"Trances, yes, but not specific healing ones." It was possible, he supposed.

"The Warrior caste do this when they're badly injured," she said. "They go into a comalike state and trigger glands in certain organs to promote rapid healing."

"Well, we don't," he said. "There's no reason for him to go into this kind of state except possibly to slow down fluid loss. But you've got him on a drip." He gestured to the fluid pack in the rack behind the bed. "Kezule said three hours of that booth could cause death or insanity— what happened to him? You do realize that he knew the Leska couple in that tape, don't you?"

"What? How could he?" she asked, obviously taken aback.

"Didn't you see the tape? You met them on the *Kz'adul*. Rezac and Zashou."

She clutched the end of the bed, looking very pale for a moment or two before making an obvious effort to pull herself together. "If you wanted a

reason for him to have gone into a trance, that's it," she said. "In that state, the tape wouldn't affect him."

Her logic was unarguable, he had to admit. "Apart from fluids, what treatment is he getting?" he asked, changing the subject.

"None. With him like this, we thought it best to let him heal naturally. The dead tissue has been cleaned away from the wound, but he is healing remarkably fast, which is why we wondered if telepaths had a special healing trance they could go into."

"As I said, not that I know of." He wondered how much Kusac had kept to himself. "He might have," he admitted reluctantly. "I didn't know he had his telepathic talent back. He should be on anti-infection agents, Doctor."

"Let me be frank, Lieutenant," she began.

"It would be a good start," he said dryly.

She flushed a deeper green but continued. "Kezule put him in the punishment booth when he did to be sure he was unconscious while the tape played. As you well know, his low blood pressure alone would ensure that. We don't know how or why, but Kusac's current condition exactly matches that of a Valtegan Warrior in a laalgo trance—a healing trance. His pulse, everything, is the same. If that's the case, we daren't interfere with it because it can be fatal to do so."

"He's Sholan, not Valtegan," said Banner coldly.

She flushed again, even darker this time, and looked away from him, moving back to her chair by the door. "When Kusac came up to the hydroponics level and demanded to leave, you must have heard him mention a scent marker."

"Yes, I intended to ask you about that at some point," he said, sitting down in the easy chair.

He listened while she explained how Kusac had been scent-marked and that it had altered him in ways they couldn't gauge because no tests existed that could detect the changes.

"You're a doctor and you knowingly marked him like that?" He couldn't believe that anyone in her profession would be so careless of the consequences of such an action.

"I told you, I have no memory of doing it," she said.

"And that's why Kezule organized sending that female to his room: to put her marker on him, then remove it completely, in the hope it would remove yours."

"Yes."

"And did it?"

"No," she said, looking away. "She put hers there, but Dzaou disturbed them before she could remove it. Only..."

"What?"

She looked up. "It didn't work. My marker is still there, and hers is not."

"Let me get this straight. He's absorbed something from your genetic makeup into his, and it's still there, like a drug that he's addicted to. That's what made him ill on the way back from Ch'almuth."

"Yes. It could have changed him in other ways, enabling him to go into a healing trance."

"You're not a Warrior, Doctor," he said cuttingly.

"No, but I carry the Warrior glands in me and can breed Warriors. It's a female thing, Kezule said."

A sudden thought hit him, making his stomach clench in fear.

She smiled slightly. "No, you haven't been scent-marked, Lieutenant, nor could just pairing with one of us cause anything like that to happen to you."

He stared at her, shocked even as relief washed through him that he couldn't have been scent-marked. "You're one of the Prime telepaths, aren't you?"

She nodded. "Your Captain was teaching me how to use my abilities so I could teach the other Prime females."

It just got better and better, he thought angrily. "Show me his wound," he said abruptly, getting up.

**Litany for Clear Thought**

*Vartra, grant me Silence*

*That I may hear the wind's whisper.*

*Vartra, grant me Patience*

*That I may watch the darkened waters clear.*

*Vartra, grant me Harmony*

*That I may sense the forces that shape all.*

*Vartra, grant me Direction*

*That none may unduly influence me.*

*Vartra, grant me Wisdom*

*That I may see the truth.*

*Vartra, grant me Clarity of Thought*

*That through the Silence, Patience, Harmony,*

*Direction and Wisdom granted by You,*

*The right action becomes known unto me.*

— Anonymous,  
from the Brotherhood's  
*Book of Pathways*



## Chapter 21

BACK in their lounge, Banner briefed them all on Kusac's condition.

"You said he's healing fast?" asked Khadui.

"His wound looks like it happened nearly a week ago, despite the fact it's only been two days," he confirmed.

"He's got a lot to bloody well answer for," said Dzaou. "Three weeks left and he has to go and pull a damned stupid stunt like that without telling anyone!"

"That's enough, Dzaou," said Banner sharply. "I can understand that finding out Kezule had him drugged and sent that female to his room was the final straw. I'm not condoning the Captain's actions, but they are understandable. Had he spoken to us about it first, his plan might have worked."

"But he didn't speak to anyone, did he?" Dzaou said angrily.

"That's the reason we're in this mess, because he didn't tell any of us what was going on, including the fact he's a blasted telepath again! It makes me mad, the way he treated us all like a bunch of idiots!"

"I said *enough!*" A growl underscored Banner's words this time.

"Enough be damned! I haven't begun yet," snarled Dzaou, hair beginning to rise. "You're no better than him! You lied when you told us he was keeping you in the picture! We could be stuck on this lump of rock for Vartra knows how long because of you two!"

Launching himself out of the chair, Banner went for Dzaou, sending the other two diving out of the way. Plucking him out of his seat, he pinned him by his throat to the wall behind.

"Are you questioning my authority, Dzaou?" he asked, his tone deceptively soft.

"What if I am?" Dzaou demanded belligerently, struggling to force him off. "You're as big a waste of space as he is! Neither of you is fit to run a jegget cull in a sealed barn!"

"That sounds very like a Challenge to me," said Banner, hitting his grasping hands away. "If it is, you'd better be very sure you can take me down."

"Lieutenant, if you wouldn't mind?" said Khadui from his elbow.

Surprised, Banner glanced at him then ducked quickly to one side as Khadui landed several hefty blows on Dzaou's side and ribs. As Dzaou doubled over, grunting, the older male gave him a final ringing thump to his ears.

Banner let him fall to the floor.

"You got anything more to say?" he demanded as the door burst open to admit M'zynal and Q'almo.

Dzaou lay there, gasping and rumbling deep in his throat. He stopped abruptly when Banner reached down to pick him up by the front of his jacket.

"Can we help, Lieutenant?" asked M'zynal, stopping just inside the door.

"Lock this trash back in his room. We don't want him in here," he snarled, thrusting Dzaou in their direction.

When they'd left, Banner turned to face the other two. "Let's get this straight right now," he said. "Kusac kept a hell of a lot back from us, and now we all know how much, but more importantly, why. A large part was because he was trying to protect us from the treason charges he faces if we found out about the cubs. He intended to come here alone, but we forced ourselves on him. At the end of the day, he's still the Captain, and while he's down, I'm acting for him. When he's fit, he takes over again. Either of you got a problem with that?"

"Not me," said Jayza immediately.

"Nor me," said Khadui. "What do we do about Dzaou?"

Banner relaxed and made his way back to his chair, picking it up and sitting down again. "I'm open to suggestions," he said.

"Have him left in his quarters instead of joining us," said Khadui, going back to the sofa. "If Kezule lets us go, lock him in a cabin till we get home and hand him over to Stronghold with a list of charges. Let them sort him out."

Jayza nodded. "If we don't, he could get us all killed by doing something stupid. He hates telepaths, we all know that, so he's even more reason to hate the Captain now."

"What about Shaidan? Did you tell them we want the cub with us?" asked Khadui.

"No. Here with us is no place for him right now, though I hate to admit it. He was in the sick bay with his father. No one's going to harm him, of that I'm sure. I should have guessed the cub was his— as soon as I saw them together, it was glaringly obvious, of course. He must have been using his Talent to hide that from us."

"How long will it be before the Captain's fit to leave the sick bay?" asked Khadui.

Banner shrugged. "No idea. With a wound like that, normally I'd say a month maybe, and even then he'd be lame in that leg for a couple more months at least."

"One good thing, though," said Jayza.

Banner looked at him. "What's that?"

"We needn't worry about Kusac's attachment to Shaidan any more now we know he's the cub's father."

"That's true," nodded Khadui.

## **Kij'ik, briefing room, Command Level, Zhal-Mellasha 27th day (February)**

"After we got Khay's message..."

"Khay?" asked Kezule.

Zhookoh smiled. "Khayikule's message, we stayed around for a few hours, picking up messages and transmissions so we could get a clearer picture of what had happened." He signaled to his sister J'korrash to start the vid.

"We picked up this one which was beamed out continuously from around 06:00 till we left two hours later."

The screen brightened to show an obviously edited version of the new Emperor K'hedduk's marriage ceremony. Murmurs ran round the table as those present recognized the leader of the Directorate.

"The new High Inquisitor is called Lufsu. He was M'zzik's right hand."

"Obviously a falling out of villains," murmured Kezule as they listened to K'hedduk proclaim his heritage.

J'korrash stopped the recording. "Observe at the foot of the royal throne, the skins and attached heads of two of the Sholan Ambassador's guards. We believe he may be holding the Ambassador and the other two guards as hostages."

When she restarted it, the scene cut to the Royal Herald's announcement of K'hedduk's ascension to the Throne of Light, citing the new Emperor's lineage as well as his marriage as justification.

"How did they overpower Khayikule and your siblings?" Kezule asked as that portion droned on.

"Sleeping drafts in the wine for the banquet, and the weak ale served to the guards and the barracks," said Zhookoh.

"The first custom that gets axed is the one of everyone, including the guards, drinking the Emperor's health," said Kezule. "It was always a disaster waiting to happen." He looked up at Zhookoh. "Where is the Enlightened One? Did he return home?"

"Thankfully, he's still on Shola, sir."

Kezule nodded. "Then there's hope for K'oish'ik yet." He saw the glance exchanged between M'kou and Zhookoh. "Remind us why we left K'oish'ik, M'kou," he said.

"You didn't want to be involved in a coup to put you on the Throne, sir," said his son with a slight smile to his brother.

The scene changed to show the central courtyard of the City, round which the heads of various officials and Courtiers were displayed, then it cut to show the main entrance where the late Emperor Cheu'ko'h's head was displayed.

"He culled them pretty well," said Kezule.

"That's about it for the vid— as I said, it repeats itself for about two hours," said Zhookoh.

Kezule turned his back on the screen to face them. Only three from the *Mazzu* were present, along with seven of his sons, the rest of the commandos were on duty and would be filled in later by those present.

"Have we detailed maps of the City and the Palace within it?" he asked.

J'korrash slid a buff-covered file toward him. "We have them on the *Mazzu*, sir. I brought a copy with me."

"Good," he said, pulling them over. "Educated guesses on how many loyal troops he has? I noticed he's got more of those thugs from outside the City."

"There's the twenty M'zullians the Sholans returned," said Zhookoh. "No idea how many altered workers he has. Then there's the original Palace guard—the fifty implanted Primes. They were serving on the Prime space fleet, what there is of it, and can be reprogrammed. Same with the hundred or so M'zullian ship laborers. Total, two hundred and seventy at least."

"Ships are detailed in the folder, sir," said J'korrash. "There's the *Kz'adul* and her sister ship the *Zh'adasho*, the frontier cruiser the *Shazzu*, plus three smaller cruisers, each with crews of thirty and capable of carrying forty troops. They were all called home, as we were, so they'll be berthed at the space platform."

"Good work," he said, patting the folder. "I'll study this over the next few days. You've been allocated quarters on this level because the one above is mainly civilians. It's now 12:30. Zhookoh, M'zynal will brief you and your crew on all aspects of Kij'ik in here in two hours." He got to his feet, gesturing to M'kou. "Meanwhile, settle into your rooms, get showers, a meal, find your way around. Maps of the station have been put in each of your rooms. But until you've been briefed, please remain on this level."

M'kou followed him across the corridor to his office. Kezule opened the folder and taking out the map of the City of Light, spread it across his desk. "Let's see what the possibilities are," he said, leaning over it.

"You intend to retake the City."

Kezule looked up at his son. "Yes. The last task of the Inquisitors before I disband them will be to flay K'hedduk alive," he said grimly.

"Ah. You're going to rule after all," said M'kou, sitting down.

He frowned. "No, that's for Prince Zsurtul— Emperor Zsurtul," he corrected himself. "But getting him back his throne will have a cost attached to it I think he'll gladly pay. Disbanding the Inquisitors for one, and reforming the Court— he needs to get rid of some of those pointless rituals, like the toast I mentioned. I'm fairly sure that's when the drug was administered to the guards, probably with the help of the Inquisitors themselves."

M'kou examined the fingertips of his injured arm. "Putting him back on his throne is going to be a little problematic when he's on Shola," he murmured.

"I don't want to hear this," said Kezule, a touch of ice creeping into his voice as he went back to studying the map.

"Shola knows we have Kusac and his crew here."

"I'm well aware of that. Concentrate on the matter in hand, M'kou. What's more important is the knowledge that K'hedduk is a M'zullian and brother to their Emperor. It's my bet that M'zzik thought he was helping K'hedduk regain the throne for his brother and K'hedduk double-crossed him. Which begs the question, why does K'hedduk feel confident in taking the Prime throne for himself? Has he powerful allies among the M'zullian Court or military? He must have, because he certainly hasn't enough people on K'oish'ik to mount a war against M'zull."

"He's ambitious," said M'kou. "And certainly has tactical skills, given we thought we'd destroyed his power base on K'oish'ik only four or five months ago. If he has enough support on M'zull, they could overturn their Emperor and at a stroke, those two worlds would be allied. Since the destruction of J'kirtikk, only one more world remains— Ch'almuth— and the M'zullians have been raiding it for breeding stock for generations."

"Whoever sits on the Throne of Light rules that Empire," said Kezule. "K'hedduk must be removed. Without him, they can't reform the Empire. M'zull would never accept Zsurtul as their Emperor."

"Would Ch'almuth?"

"No. They govern themselves," said Kezule. "Let's study this map."

## **Sick bay, same day**

"Hello, Captain. Welcome back."

"Uhhnn," he said, blinking as he tried to make sense of his surroundings. He felt decidedly light-headed and groggy. Someone— a female from her

scent— helped him sit up, taking his right hand and wrapping it around a bowl of water.

"Don't try to use your telepathic abilities. You're wearing a damping collar," another voice warned as, with the first one's help, he drank thirstily.

The water helped clear his head and as the empty bowl was lowered, he began to get his bearings. He was in the sick bay. Zhalmo sat at the end of his bed, and Ghidd'ah had been helping him.

"How do you feel?" she asked, putting the bowl on the night table then moving pillows behind him to prop him up. "Any pain from your leg? There shouldn't be, I gave you an analgesic shot about an hour ago."

They'd already said too much for him to take in. He picked what seemed most urgent.

"Welcome back?" he croaked, swallowing convulsively; his throat felt gritty and dry despite the water.

Ghidd'ah perched on the side of his bed, facing him. "You've been unconscious for five days since your punishment," she said gently, reaching out to pat his hand where it lay on top of the covers. "How do you feel?"

Five days! He reached up to push his hair back from his face— and found it had been braided out of the way. His belly began to rumble audibly, making the females smile.

"Hungry," he whispered.

Zhalmo got up and fetched a tray from the chair that stood opposite the end of his bed.

"You do need to eat," she said, going around the other side of the bed to put it on his lap. "You used up a lot of body mass when you were healing."



Body mass? Healing? Ignoring the food, he looked from one to the other.

"Look at your arm, Kusac," said Zhalmo.

He did, shocked to see that his skin hung loose and his pelt was dull and unkempt.

"The food's high protein. Eat it, you'll soon regain that weight," said Ghidd'ah, pushing a bowl of something creamy-looking at him.

His stomach rumbled again. Automatically he picked up the spoon and pushed it into the food. Lifting it to his mouth proved to be more difficult. His hand shook so much Ghidd'ah had to take it from him before it spilled.

"Let me help," she said, gesturing to Zhalmo to leave.

She waited till they were alone before she lifted the spoon toward his mouth. Frustrated, his ears flicked back flat against his head as he turned it aside; he didn't want to be fed like some helpless invalid.

"You must eat, Captain," she said gently. "You've been very ill. We thought we were going to lose you."

He looked back at her in shock. Wisps of memory were beginning to come back. She took advantage of his disorientation to spoon the food between his partly opened lips. He swallowed automatically. It was cold but very soothing as it slid down his roughened throat.

"How long?" he asked slowly.

"How long what?" She raised the spoon again.

Grasping her wrist, he stopped her. "Was I dead."

Startled, she began to stammer.

"How long?" he repeated hoarsely.

"About three minutes," she said.

He relaxed, letting her hand go. Not long enough to do any damage.

"I didn't think you'd remember," she said, offering him the spoon.

He opened his mouth, taking the food, knowing no answer was necessary.

"Shaidan's been in to see you every day," she said, obviously trying to make conversation. "He was very worried about you."

Shaidan was fine, he realized, aware that he could sense his cub's presence at the edges of his mind. Mechanically, he ate the food that was offered to him. When it was done, and she brought him more water, he attempted to raise both hands to take the bowl from her. She stopped him, holding his left hand down on the bed.

"We had to put you on a drip," she said soothingly. "Just accept my help for now. You'll soon be strong enough to do it yourself."

He drank. The food had certainly helped. Though still utterly exhausted, he felt less light-headed now, and his mind was beginning to function properly. Time to check his wounds.

"My leg. I need to see it," he said, struggling to reach across himself and pull the cover back.

"It's fine, you're healing nicely," said Ghidd'ah, trying to prevent him. "Leave it till tomorrow."

He locked eyes with her. "Now," he said firmly.

She hesitated and he reinforced his demand by sending a subliminal mental command. Sighing, she got up, taking the tray away before returning and carefully pulling the cover back, exposing his injured leg.

The overall swelling was dramatically reduced, and when she lifted the loose dressing, the upper wound looked healthy— far too healthy given

the time that had passed even though there was still an area in the center of the bright red new growth that was discharging a brownish ichor. His mind froze, unable to make sense of what he was seeing.

"While you were in the coma, you were healing very rapidly," said Ghidd'ah, breaking the silence as she replaced the dressing, then the bed cover. "The exit wound is almost closed too."

He didn't resist when she urged him to lie back against the pillows. Something began to nag at the edges of his mind, like a jегget scratching at the earth, trying to dig a hole.

"I'll let you get some sleep now," she said, turning to leave. "Call me if you need anything, I'll be just outside."

"Wait," he said, lifting his head. He knew he needed to finish the healing as soon as possible, even if he had no idea why. "My medical kit. Need something from it."

Obviously reluctant, she opened her mouth to refuse but he forestalled her. "Individual needs— vitamins— must take them." Again he reinforced the request mentally, this time less subtly because of his exhaustion.

He watched her frown briefly, then her face cleared and she nodded. "I'll fetch them for you now."

His head felt like it was being pressed in a vise as he lay back to wait for her. Something hard dug into his collarbone and he reached up to ease it away. A psi damping collar? The rest of his memories began to return, slowly at first, including the way Vartra had goaded him into turning the collar off. He shied away from that, as he did from any thoughts of how he'd managed to heal himself so quickly. Time enough to go over that when he was well.

\* \* \*

Left alone with his medikit, he'd pulled out the pack of Fastheal capsules and the one of vitamins and minerals he'd also need, when his nose alerted

him to the arrival of Giyarishis. Fumbling to conceal his drugs, he managed to send the medikit sliding off the bed onto the floor just as the door opened.

Giyarishis stopped, lowering his head to look at the kit, then raising it, the lenses spinning, to look at him.

Swearing under his breath, he tried to conceal the medication in a fold in the covers as the TeLaxaudin, draperies gently moving, began to stalk toward him. Stopping by the fallen medikit, Giyarishis picked it up, placing it on the bed at his side.

One slim hand snaked out toward his immobilized arm, plucking the two packs of capsules free.

Kusac snarled and, claws extended, swiped at the small alien, but it was a half-hearted attempt and missed him.

"Give them to me," he hissed, levering himself up in an effort to increase his reach.

"What these?" demanded Giyarishis, examining the packaging. "Treating yourself not allowed!"

"Supplements I need," he said, trying to stifle the burst of coughing that followed as he lunged for them.

Giyarishis moved slightly to one side to avoid him, then as Kusac's upper body began to overbalance, reached out and pushed him backward. "Still unwell. Resting is needed," he said, handing him one pack before reaching for the filled drinking bowl that had been left on the night table.

Eyeing him balefully, Kusac tore open the pack of vitamins with the help of his teeth, taking a tablet out and dropping the others onto the bed before reaching for the drinking bowl.

The TeLaxaudin steadied it for him as he sipped the water and took the pill.

Finished, he held his hand out. "The other pack," he whispered, annoyed at his weakness.

"What is Fastheal?"

"What it says," Kusac replied shortly, gesturing impatiently. Talking hurt his throat right now.

"Your wounds are healing faster than usual. This why?"

He was too tired for this. "You my jailer now?" he rasped. "Just give me it. Need to be healed."

"Yes, you do, but not harm self doing!"

"Keep it then!" he snarled, lying back on the pillows and closing his eyes.

There was silence for several minutes. "What else you need?" he heard the TeLaxaudin ask eventually.

He turned to look at him, cracking open his eyes again. "Feeding, while I sleep."

Giyarishis' mandibles clicked and his humming grew deeper. "This not harm you?"

He flicked his ears in a negative, then remembered and shook his head tiredly. "Not if I'm fed."

"How long?"

He began to calculate the dose needed to double his rate of healing, then remembered he'd already been doing that. If he could combine his newfound abilities with the Fastheal... "Three days— but they must feed me. They didn't before."

"I see is done," he said, handing over the second package. "Sedatives you need?"

"No," he said, ripping the pack open and taking out three capsules before the TeLaxaudin changed his mind. Leaning over the night table, he reached for the water. He'd barely the strength to lift even the half empty bowl. Putting all three pills in his mouth, he gulped the water down, almost choking on them, then collapsed back on the bed.

He could feel them hurting his throat as, solid as a hard lump of stone, they slowly passed down to his stomach. At last the sensation stopped and he was able to relax. He needed to reach again for the healing place within him, let himself fall into a deep trance again so the drug could work properly.

As he began to drift, it wasn't into the usual darkness. He seemed to be surrounded by a kind of twilight filled with the sound of faint murmuring. The barely conscious part of his mind might tell him that it was only because of the lights in the sick bay, but he wasn't completely convinced and strained his ears to make sense of the sounds even as he fell deeper and deeper into his trance.

\* \* \*

The monitor's alarm had only just ceased when Zayshul came running through the doorway to Kusac's side.

"What's happened?" she demanded of Ghidd'ah as she ran physical checks on him, matching her findings with those on the monitor above his bed.

"Ask him," said her friend, gesturing at the chair where the TeLaxaudin perched. "He says he gave Kusac some drugs from his medikit. Something called Fastheal, and some vitamin supplements. Says he's going to sleep for three days and we've got to feed him."

Satisfied he was in no immediate danger, she turned on the small alien. "You had no right to authorize any treatment for him," she said furiously. "He's my patient!"

"General not allow you here, how you treat?" the translator said. "He trained, carries own medication. Had when I arrived."

"How did he get the medikit?" she demanded.

"I brought it," said Ghidd'ah quietly.

"You did?" she asked, turning back to her friend. "But why?"

"He asked me," she said, looking as confused as Zayshul. "I really don't know why I agreed to fetch it, but I did."

"Knows what he doing," said Giyarishis, getting down from the chair. "You fix catheters and cannulas, feed him, clean him. He sleeps, heals. Need strong, must cooperate with General very soon."

Zayshul stared at him. "What aren't you telling me?" she asked quietly.

Indecipherable static filled the room as Giyarishis made a gesture of regret.

"Shall I..." began Ghidd'ah.

"Do it," Zayshul said. "I'm going to check with Lieutenant Banner about this Fastheal."

\* \* \*

"He's trying a sleep cure," said Banner when Zayshul had brought him up to date. "It's only used in field hospitals in an emergency. Can you wake him?"

She shook her head. "He's gone into another comalike state, but not as deep as the last one yet."

"Then you'll have to do as he asks. Fastheal really depletes the body's reserves. He'll need some kind of liquid food, plus vitamin and mineral supplements—you'll also have to keep him from dehydrating. In fact, I need to be there."

Zayshul stood up. "I'm sorry, that isn't possible."

"You gave me your word I could see him as soon as he woke," he said, ears flicking sideways in anger as he rose from the common room table. "I'm entitled to see him. You may be a doctor, but you aren't trained as fully as I am in treating our people."

She hesitated. "I'll speak to the General once we've got Kusac settled again," she said, turning to leave.

"You've no right to deny him proper medical attention," Banner angrily called out after her as she walked to the door.

"I'll speak to the General," she repeated as the door slid open. "Believe me, Lieutenant, none of us want him to come to any harm."

## **Kij'ik, Hydroponics Level, Zhal-Mellasha 28th day (February)**

"You not interfere!" said Hkairass angrily as he stalked into Giyarishis' quarters on the hydroponics level. "Leave Hunter to his rage, and sand-dweller to guilt you have engineered he feels. Better they deal themselves with it. You will not manipulate Hunter's dreams!"

"Leave," said Giyarishis, barely looking up from the small device he was calibrating. "Guilt now mainly sand-dweller's own. Concentration I need to accomplish the Camarilla's will."

"You will do as I command," said the older TeLaxaudin, advancing, his draperies rippling around his spindly legs. "I here, I see the true natures of involved. Better without them we are. Sooner they exterminate each other..."

"Enough!" Giyarishis interrupted angrily, looking up at him, lenses swirling rapidly. "Decision made by consensus. One individual will not override it. They will combine against reunification of old sand-dweller Empire!"

Hkairass snatched the device from him, examining it briefly before tucking it in a concealed pouch at his waist. "You will desist all activities



against me! Immediately authorize my attendance on Hunter to undo what you have begun, and cease preventing me from accessing Unity here! If not, action I will be forced to take against you," he said, the low humming that underscored his speech taking on a menacing tone.

"Abused Unity you did!" Giyarishis' voice thrummed. "Think I am unaware shooting of Hunter due to your control of guard?"

Hkairass' eyes locked on his and his constant movement stilled— even his draperies hung motionless. "Your time in field has softened your brain," he said at last. "Gone native you have, as I predicted. Renounce leadership of this mission to me and I will speak well of you to Camarilla when we return," he said, his tone more reasonable. "Your device for influencing Hunter I have. Accept defeat, as Camarilla will have to do."

"I think not," said Giyarishis quietly, looking away. "Unity you want? Then have, but not my command." The nanites in his brain responded instantly to his thought, sending signals to the Unity network, removing the block on Hkairass' personal mental pattern.

As he felt the older male's mind enter, he braced himself mentally, blocking his thoughts off from the other. He was well aware of the risk he was taking, and exactly what depended on the outcome. If the device that Hkairass had predictably taken from him failed to work, the backlash would have him committing a murder.

Suddenly it occurred to him, what if, now he was part of Unity again, Hkairass *didn't* try to deactivate the device? What if he relied on a battle of wills to force his hand? Before he had time to worry even more, with a thrumming sound of triumph, Hkairass reached for the small unit at his waist.

Thin bolts of energy, generated by his device, began to flicker and crackle across the older male's body, spreading out along his limbs. Hkairass let out a high-pitched squeal that rapidly ascended to an almost inaudible level that made Giyarishis wince before it was abruptly cut off. The energy continued to flare, branching into multiple lines until the TeLaxaudin was completely trapped in its web.

His limbs were drawn closer to his body and his head dropped to his chest as, slowly, he began to drop down to his haunches and fold up into a small, compact shape. With a final crackle and spitting sound, it died away to nothing, leaving Hkairass sitting motionless on the floor. Moments later, every pore on his body began to exude a milky fluid.

Giyarishis forced himself to move and darted forward to retrieve his device, making sure not to let the fluid come into contact with his own flesh. Shaking, he backed away until he reached the pile of cushions by his low table. The cocooning process would take several hours, by which time it would completely encase Hkairass and it would then be safe to move him.

He began to laugh, more in relief than with any humor. By the time Hkairass emerged from the cocoon, his gender would have changed and he'd no longer be male. He hadn't been completely sure how close to his change Hkairass was, which was where the element of danger for himself lay. Obviously his change had been close, otherwise it would have been impossible to trigger it prematurely. Then it would have resulted in the other's death just as surely as if the device had failed to work properly. At least he now had several weeks free of any interference from the leader of the Isolationists.

As he settled down to monitor the sand-dweller, it occurred to him he really ought to contact the Camarilla and inform them of what had happened, but he decided against it. The prospect of propping Hkairass helplessly in the corner of his bedroom for a week or two was too great—a small revenge, perhaps, but one he intended to savor.

## **The Couana, same day**

"Nothing!" said Kaid, tail swaying jerkily as he paced the common area room where he and those not on duty were gathered. "Three days we've been scanning this area, and there's nothing here!"

"We'll find it," murmured Carrie from her easy chair. "It's only a matter of time."

"We don't have that long before K'hedduk makes his move to ally with M'zull," said Dzaka as his father approached the low table again.

Squatting down on his haunches, Kaid again examined the star chart Toueesut had printed off from the database on the *Tooshu*. "It has to be there," he said, pointing to the colored dot. "Kij'ik they called it. It's the most logical place for it to be— near a gas giant and not too far from the system's Primary!"

"Have you accounted for drift in the last fifteen hundred years?" asked Rezac.

"Of course! It can't have drifted by that much," he snapped before instantly regretting it. Lowering his ears in apology, he glanced at the youth who was his own father. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Forget it," the other replied, getting up to fetch a snack from one of the wall units.

"Could it be masking itself?" asked Carrie.

"Not by enough that we wouldn't at least find some trace of it. We know he's got one cruiser class ship, we should at least be able to find that!"

"Not if it's inside the Outpost," said T'Chebbi, looking up from filing her claws. "We know it's bigger than Haven."

"It's not going to be that large," said Rezac. "Think of the cost of staffing and maintaining it."

"Cost is irrelevant," trilled Toueesut from his chair. "They had an Empire to fund it in their times, therefore cost would be a factor they were not considering in the least."

"He has a point," said Carrie.

"Irrespective of that, the Outpost itself would have telltale emissions we'd be able to pick up."

"Maybe not," said Rezac. "We know it wasn't at the heart of their network, in fact it was on the outer edges. That being the case, perhaps working out its purpose would help us locate it."

"We did all that on the journey out," said Kaid, pushing the map aside and getting to his feet to resume pacing.

"Then we've got something wrong," said Dzaka calmly. "Because if we had it right, it would be here. Its purpose this far out of the populated areas and the shipping routes would mean it was a reconnaissance base, one intended to remain undetected."

"If that's the case, we could cruise around this area for months and never find it," said Kaid bleakly, stopping to look at the view outside on the monitor screen that had been installed during the refit.

"The *Tooshu* contacted ship carrying Valtegan Ambassador and requested sending of complete data banks of information regarding old Empire," said Toueesut. "Unfortunately we will have to be returning to it to access this information and to be updating the *Couana* with it. Too much there is to be sending it to us— too large a chance of the transmission drawing unwanted attention to ourselves there is."

"Maybe drawing attention to ourselves is what we need to do," said Rezac. "If Kezule knows we're in this area, he may contact us himself."

"You don't know Kezule," said Kaid, turning away from the screen. "Unless he wants to contact us, he'll just sit it out."

"What about trying to search for him mentally?" suggested Rezac. "You've felt him once. We have three Leska pairs here." He gave a brief laugh. "A triad of Leskas! We should be able to scan for him and find him."

Carrie shook her head. "We've tried. L'Seuli said that Kezule's note specified Kusac was to bring no telepaths. Given he's got a telepathic cub there, and we know he hates telepaths, he's bound to have the place filled with psi dampers."

"Don't know that for sure," said T'Chebbi, inspecting the nails on her right hand. "Where he get them?"

"The cubs told us he had them wearing psi damping collars," said Kaid. "He'll have one on Shaidan, and if he's figured Kusac has his Talent back, he'll be wearing one."

They heard a rhythmic pounding in the corridor outside and as one, looked at each other.

"Ashay," smiled Carrie, glancing over at the door as the noise came to an abrupt stop and the door slid open.

"News is coming from *Tooshu*," said Ashay, the lips curling back from his snout as he ducked his long snakelike neck to enter the room. "Captain Shaayiyisis says they are sorting Valtegan data now. Big job it is being, will be day after tomorrow before it is being usable by us. We return then, *Tooshu* says."

Ashay stopped beside Carrie to settle onto the floor on his haunches, pulling his thick tail round his feet out of everyone's way. "Not be sad, friend Carrie. Finding them we will be," he added, gently resting one large clawed hand on her shoulder. "Detailed star charts of this region they be having is for sure. Then finding Outpost will be easier."

"I know we will," said Carrie, reaching up to pat the teenager's reptilian hand. "Maybe Kisha and you are both right, Kaid. We're getting nowhere here, and with detailed maps we can find out where all the star systems with gas giants are in this sector. We could well be at the wrong one."

Kaid looked at her in surprise, then, as he went over to her, the tension gradually left his body and face.

"Are you sure?" he asked, squatting in front of her. "I don't want you thinking we're giving up this site too easily."

She shook her head. "Call it a hunch, but I don't think we are in the right place." *I know that because of our differences over Kusac in the past you*

*don't want to be the one to say we should return to the Tooshu, Tallinu, but I think it's the right thing to do,* she sent.

He nodded, letting her feel his gratitude for her understanding. "Ashay, tell Captain Shaayiyisis to set course for the *Tooshu*, please," he said quietly, pushing his feelings of failure deep to the back of his mind where no one could sense them.

*We've all been cooped up here for long enough with everyone's emotions—ours particularly—running so high right now. We could do with losing ourselves on a ship the size of the Tooshu again.*

"Aye, sir," said Ashay somberly, propelling himself to his feet with his massive leg muscles.

## **Kij'ik, Zhal-Arema 2nd day (March)**

Kezule, feet propped up on the low table in front of him, was in his office on the Command level. The table itself was strewn with papers and several reader units, one of which M'kou, his arm now out of its sling, was still reading.

"What's your assessment?" asked Kezule when his son finally put the reader down. He was exhausted. The last few nights, what sleep he'd been able to snatch had been haunted by guilt over how badly he'd handled his relationship with Kusac and his crew, and visions of a future dominated by K'hedduk's Empire.

"Our defensive capability is adequate. The meson cannon here is now functional, and we have six of the twenty smaller asteroids fully armed and responding to the bridge. Our offensive force is the *N'zishok*, the *M'zayik*, the *Mazzu*, and twenty-five fully operational fighters, with the Ch'almuthians providing us with another two cruiser class ships, almost fully operational, and a third from their space station, but it needs work. Four cruisers, one destroyer and twenty-five fighters."

He fell silent and stared at his father until the General looked up at him. "We need the Sholans," he said quietly. "We don't have enough trained crew or pilots."

"I know," said Kezule, equally quietly. "And I'm unlikely to get their help now."

"Have you spoken to the Captain since his punishment?"

"I've been putting it off."

"May I offer you some advice, Father?" M'kou asked very quietly.

Kezule looked up at him, surprised that his son had chosen to address him so informally.

"Go ahead."

"Give him his son back, and tell him honestly what the situation is. There is no other way he'll even consider helping you."

"Even if he agrees, will his crew?"

"If they've any faith left in him after the lies he's been forced to tell them, yes, they will."

Kezule winced at the implicit responsibility his son put on him for Kusac's need to lie.

"You need to trust each other, Father. It is in the interests of his people to help us take K'oish'ik back from K'hedduk, and Kusac has as much reason to hate him as we have."

"I don't know if trust is possible after all that's happened between us," murmured Kezule, getting to his feet.

"Would you like me to come with you?" M'kou asked.

Kezule threw his son a grateful look, but shook his head. "I have to do this myself," he said.

\* \* \*

Kusac finished his stretching exercises then limped to the washbasin for a drink of water. The sleep cure combined with his trance had healed his leg to the point where the entry wound was almost completely healed, but the exit one was still open and giving him some pain. The exercises were necessary, though, to build up his strength.

Filling the drinking vessel again, he carried it over to the night table and placed it there before settling himself on his bed, his back against the wall and his legs folded in front of him.

He was beginning to wonder how much longer Kezule would leave him kicking his heels here. Since he'd awakened in the sick bay and been transferred back to his cell a couple of days before, he'd only seen Ghidd'ah when she came once a day to change his dressing and see if he needed pain medication. His only other visitors were M'zynal and one other guard at mealtimes. Ghidd'ah had been able to tell him little in the way of news about his crew, but she did keep him updated on how his son was coping.

This had given him plenty of opportunity to think about his time on Kij'ik, and his relationship with Zayshul. Facing the reality that they did have a relationship had not been easy, nor had the knowledge that when he'd discovered he could turn off the marker, he hadn't done so. However, he had modified it, so that it no longer made him ill if he was deprived of her company. Then there was his lack of honesty with Banner and his crew. He felt as if a veil had been lifted from his mind, letting him see clearly at last, and what he saw of himself was not comforting. There was also the issue of how he'd been able to heal so quickly, and the strange dreams that had haunted his subconscious during his sleep cure. Something else tugged at his mind, something connected with Shaidan and how his son had saved his life.



Closing his eyes, he recited the Litany for Clear Thought. When he was done, for the first time since he'd left Shola so many months ago, and trying to remain objective, he purposely turned his thoughts to his family. He counted up the days, remembering the celebrations he'd missed sharing with them. First had been the birth of Kaid's and Carrie's infant, their Triad child, then Kashini's first birthday, the midwinter festival, his own birthday, Carrie's birthday—the list was long. Then he remembered another: it was two years ago to the day that he and Carrie had Linked as Leskas.

He bowed his head, blinking back the tears that sprang to his eyes, his objectivity utterly gone as he was overwhelmed by his emotions for her, and Kaid. On its heels came what he'd been trying to remember, the memory of the gestalt that Shaidan's fear for him had triggered—a gestalt that had brought him back from the jaws of death, and bound his son to his Triad.

The sound of voices outside made him look up and glance toward the transparent wall. Kezule was standing at the desk talking to M'zynal. Hurriedly wiping his hands across his face, he braced himself mentally for the confrontation he'd been expecting for days.

M'zynal opened the door for Kezule, carrying in a chair which he placed by the bed before leaving them alone.

Kezule sat down and looked at him. "I'm glad to see you've recovered so quickly." Reaching into his pocket, the General pulled out a packet which he tossed over to him. "I thought you might like these. They were found behind seat cushions in the common area on the *Venture*."

Catching it automatically, he was surprised to find it was an unopened pack of stim twigs. As Kezule reached into his pocket for his smoking case and removed one of his brown cheroots and lit it, he took out a stim twig.

"I'd like to see my son," Kusac said, taking advantage of Kezule's apparent friendliness as he put the twig in his mouth. As the slightly bitter taste flooded his mouth, the familiar brief surge of light-headedness hit him.

"Your son is with Lieutenant Banner, as are his personal effects. He'll be living with you from now on," said Kezule.

He blinked in surprise, searching for something to say. "How is M'kou?" he asked at length.

"My son's arm is fine. Your drug had the desired effect, though," Kezule replied.

Kusac didn't miss the note of tension in his voice. "It was an accident. I didn't intend to shoot him. I only wanted to leave here with my son and crew."

"I know," said Kezule, interrupting him. "I saw it all on our security tape." He looked away for a moment. "About the female I sent to your room... I apologize. I had no right to do what I did," he said, obviously acutely uncomfortable. He looked up, meeting Kusac's gaze. "I only sent her in an effort to help us all, there was no other ulterior motive."

"You had no right to do it." Anger over that still smoldered.

"And you had no right to make illegal weapons," Kezule countered. "There was wrong on both sides. Though your reaction was understandable, you left me no option but to punish you. I did what I could to minimize it."

"M'zynal told me," he said shortly, sensing much in the way of regret over his own actions that the General could never say. "What did you do to my crew?"

"Nothing. Your crew weren't held accountable for what they did, only you were."

He nodded. As their Captain, it was only fair: he was responsible for their actions. "What happens now, Kezule?" he asked after a moment's silence.

"You're free to leave Kij'ik with Shaidan. I was hoping that you might stay."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"I... need your help." The words seemed to stick in Kezule's throat. "K'hedduk survived our attack on his base and has staged a successful coup. He's claimed the Throne of Light."

Kusac stared at him as he tried to make sense of this news and think through its ramifications.

"I'm asking for your help to retake K'oish'ik, and prevent K'hedduk from rebuilding the Empire," said Kezule, spelling it out when he said nothing. "K'hedduk is apparently the brother of the M'zullian Emperor."

"And if I refuse?" he asked at length when the General said nothing more.

"As I said, you and your crew can leave now. All I ask is that you consider what it would mean to the Alliance if K'hedduk succeeds in reuniting the Empire. We both need to let the past between us be over, Kusac, and start fresh."

*It will be over when I decide, not you,* he thought, but kept it to himself. "Why me? If you contact Haven, they'd help you."

"I trust you," said Kezule, taking a drag on his cheroot. "You kept your word over helping my people, despite... everything. I need you to contact your authorities on my behalf, and I want you to lead your people alongside me and mine."

Wisps of half-remembered phrases began to form in his mind, accompanied by an overwhelming sense of *dějá vu*. "You expect me to trust you?" he asked, hearing his voice as if from a great distance.

"No," said Kezule very quietly, meeting his gaze. "I wouldn't, if I were you. I'm asking for a chance to earn that trust. For what it's worth, I swear on my daughter's life that it won't be misplaced. I know why you were ill when we visited Ch'almuth, and that you fear you can't leave Zayshul. We'll get Giyarishis to work on finding some way to free you from the scent marker."

"What if he can't?" he asked, trying to ignore an insistent memory of Dzaou's mask at midwinter.

"Then you and your family, all your family, will be welcome— and free— to live here, close to Zayshul, if that's what you choose to do."

Frowning, he took the twig out of his mouth and put his other hand up to rub his forehead. That damned memory was plaguing him like a tune heard once on the vid channels that refused to be forgotten. What the hell had a mask of L'Shoh to do with this? He stiffened, letting his hands fall into his lap.

*You must make a pact with the Liege of Hell.* The words, originally said to Kaid by Vartra, came into his mind as clearly as if the God Himself was standing beside him. Despite the fact Kezule wore a psi damper, he reached out mentally for the Valtegan's mind. It took only a moment to bypass the device, and even less to penetrate, unnoticed, his natural shielding and read what was really in his mind.

"Let me see what resources you have," he said, holding his hand out for the reader he knew Kezule was carrying.

\* \* \*

Vartra sat on a prayer mat in the shadows near the altar, pleased that the message he'd placed with Kusac had been understood. As Ghyakulla had said, there was much he could do, especially if the Camarilla believed he was once again their mouthpiece. He could make sure that sooner rather than later, Kusac, the Hunter, became aware of their existence, and just how greatly they had meddled with and shaped his life. But first, K'hedduk and his brother must be stopped.

\* \* \*

"I'll need to speak to my crew," Kusac said, returning the reader.

"Of course," agreed Kezule. "Keep the reader. Show it to them. There's footage from K'oish'ik showing K'hedduk proclaiming himself Emperor."

"I want my son deprogrammed immediately and our collars removed." He indicated the metal band around his neck.

The Valtegan shook his head. "Yours remains," he said. "I know you have your mental abilities back, and I know, despite Zayshul claiming she did it, that you used them to kill the guard who shot you."

*So much for his trust*, he thought sardonically. "You'll take my son's off?" Shaidan's was the one that really mattered since he'd already neutralized his.

"It's already been removed," said Kezule. "And he's been fully deprogrammed as another gesture of good faith."

"We'll be free to go where we want on Kij'ik?"

"Within reason, if your crew will swear not to attempt to sabotage the Outpost or our common mission."

"If they agree to stay, they'll give their word," said Kusac, beginning to push himself toward the edge of his bed. "Get M'zynal to call Banner and have him meet me in our common room. I need to talk to him first."

"What about Dzaou?" asked Kezule, getting up from his chair.

"I'll deal with him," he replied.

\* \* \*

Banner got to his feet hurriedly as the door opened and Kusac limped in. Still gaunt from his rapid healing, there was an otherworldly look about him. It was enhanced as much by his braided hair as the very noticeable blue stud still in his ear.

"Father!" exclaimed Shaidan, propelling himself off the sofa toward him.

"Careful, your father's still weak," Banner cautioned as Kusac bent to meet his son's rush and pick him up.

"I'm fine," he said, looking at Banner over the top of Shaidan's head as he straightened up.

He nodded, watching his Captain limp over to join him at the table. He had the uneasy feeling that despite the psi damping collar Kusac wore, the intense looks on their faces meant the two of them were carrying on a mental conversation.

Kusac let Shaidan, his expression one of pure happiness now, climb down and scramble onto a chair adjacent to the one he took.

"I need to talk to the Lieutenant about something important," he said. "Have you something you can do for a few minutes?"

Shaidan nodded. "I have a book I can read," he said, getting down and going back to the reader he'd left on the sofa.

"What now?" Banner asked, sitting down again.

"We're all free to leave," he said, resting his forearms on the table, hands loosely clasped. "However..."

"Why am I not surprised there's a However," Banner interrupted, his instant elation squashed.

"I thought I was the cynic. There's been a coup on the Prime home world. K'hedduk is not only still alive, but he's taken the Prime throne— the Throne of Light."

"That's not our problem. Getting you and Shaidan home safe to Shola is."

"It is our problem. K'hedduk is the leader of the Directorate, and the brother of the M'zullian Emperor. For him to take the throne for himself, it's obvious he has a following on his world. Unless he's removed from power as soon as possible, we could see the old Empire reunited in a matter of weeks."

"Shit!" said Banner, with feeling. "Why did this have to happen now of all times?"

Kusac reached in his pocket for the reader and passed it across the table to him. "That's a list of Kezule's resources. He needs us now, as pilots and commanders. Beyond that, he needs me to contact Haven and request help to deal with M'zull. He's asked me to lead any Sholan troops that our government sends."

"This is just another of Kezule's tricks to keep you here. Does he know about your official status back home?" he asked, scanning the list of ships and personnel. The Ch'almuthian entries surprised him, but he said nothing as he handed the reader back.

Kusac nodded. "He knows, and like me sees it as a way of giving the Brotherhood and our Government a way of reinstating me without mentioning the cubs. We've been here, secretly training Kezule's people from the start for just such an emergency."

"He's just using you again, Kusac," Banner said. Lowering his voice, he asked, "What about Zayshul's scent marker? Has Kezule found a way to neutralize it?"

Kusac glanced down at his hands. "He's getting the TeLaxaudin to work on it," he said quietly.

"So we couldn't actually leave right now anyway. I told you this was just another trick! What proof of this supposed coup do you have?"

"We could leave now. I found a way to control the effects of the marker. As for proof, I read him, Banner."

Banner knew Kusac was lying again. With his empathic Gift, he could feel it a mile away. Leaning forward, he put his hand over Kusac's, gripping it hard until his Captain looked up at him.

"Dammit, Kusac! I will not work with you if you continue lying to me!"

Kusac's amber eyes regarded him steadily for a moment before he looked away again. "You're right. There'll be no more lies, Banner. I can remove the marker myself," he said quietly. "Only..."

"You don't know if you want to," finished Banner, feeling his friend's anguish at his inability to make a decision.

"No! I will remove it," he said, looking at him again. "I just don't know when."

Banner nodded, letting Kusac's hand go and sitting back. He could understand that the decision wasn't an easy one after what he'd been through. "And the proof there has actually been a coup?"

"I did read him, and if you scroll through the reader, you'll find a broadcast by K'hedduk from the Prime world proclaiming himself Emperor. In it you'll see he had two of the Brotherhood Ambassadorial guards killed and skinned. Their pelts are lying at the foot of his throne."

Banner closed his eyes briefly, then pushed his sadness at the deaths of two of their own aside. When K'oish'ik was retaken, then they could all mourn them. "Does Kezule know you can remove the marker?"

"He doesn't. I thought it better considering his paranoia about telepaths. That's between me and Zayshul anyway, and he agreed to that."

"We need to speak to the rest of the crew."

"Then you'll back me?"

He hesitated. Kusac had changed, and he wasn't thinking of the stark physical changes since he'd been shot. He'd always seemed slightly alien, but that had been because of his upbringing as a Telepath and his Link to Carrie. Now, there was something else about him, something that had more in common with Kezule than anything either Human or Sholan—even down to the way he'd gone into a healing coma like the Valtegans did.



"You don't trust me, do you?" said Kusac. "I can't say I blame you, considering how much of the truth I kept from you."

"Don't ask me that now, Kusac. From the start, I haven't agreed with what we've been doing for Kezule," admitted Banner. "You've yet to convince me that we aren't removing K'hedduk to replace him with a worse Emperor— Kezule."

"He doesn't want the throne. Prince Zsurtul is still on Shola, he says. He wants to put him back on the throne but reform the whole setup— make it a monarchy, not an Empire, and stop the City being walled off from the ordinary people. Ch'almuth is willing to form an alliance with K'oish'ik and let many of their people emigrate there so the world can be rebuilt in return for protection from the M'zullian raids. They're more advanced and populated than the M'zullians know, but they can't defend themselves adequately."

"I'll believe it, when I see it," Banner said dryly. "Just so you know, we were on the point of drugging you and removing you and Shaidan from here by force, except you came barreling up to the hydro level with that gun."

"And you were building weapons against my express orders," Kusac said, without rancor. "There's been wrong on both sides, mainly mine, I admit, but the safety of my son was at stake, Banner. We need to deal with the real situation on K'oish'ik, not squabble like cubs among ourselves."

"True, but you'll need to earn my trust back, Kusac. You kept one hell of a lot from me, including the fact you'd regained your Talent. You killed the guard that shot you, didn't you? And messed with Dzaou's mind. What have you done to mine?"

"My abilities have been returning in fits and starts. The guard was a matter of instinct, I did it to survive. No one was supposed to get shot. I don't have a rogue Talent, Banner. Look at the provocation I've had from Dzaou yet all I did was make him forget his plans to use the nitrate compound to make explosives."

"What did you do to my mind?" Banner repeated more forcefully, now convinced Kusac had done something to him.

Kusac's gaze didn't waver as he said, "On the way here, you worked out that my Talent was returning. I needed to hide that from Kezule so I had to make you forget it, that's all." He hesitated a moment. "And I blurred my appearance slightly when I was with Shaidan so none of you could see the resemblance between us."

Banner searched Kusac's face, nodding slowly. "I don't think you're a rogue, but your abilities *are* frightening. Just how did you heal yourself as fast as a Valtegan Warrior?"

"I'd tell you if I understood it myself. It may be something to do with the marker, or when Annuur and Kzizysus operated on me. They said they'd had to establish new connections in my brain because the implant had damaged the natural ones beyond repair."

"I didn't know that."

Kusac smiled wryly. "Few people do. Only my family, because we didn't know if it would be a success. Banner, I swear neither you nor my crew have any reason to fear my abilities." He reached out, his fingertips briefly touching Banner's jawline. "I told you there would be no more lies. I meant it."

He appreciated the gesture, knowing that by doing it, Kusac was apologizing for the past and showing a willingness to reestablish their friendship. Right now, though, he wasn't sure he could handle that.

"You've made a good start, Kusac," he said, getting to his feet. "Just make sure you keep it up. We'd better go and talk to the others. They're in the mess having second meal. You're going to have to deal with Dzaou. He got so bad while you were in sick bay that when Kezule gave us our knives back, I withheld his."

"I intend to. As soon as we're joined by any Sholan unit, I want him shipped out of here. Until then, let's all try to keep him under control," said Kusac as he rose to his feet.

\* \* \*

When they reached the mess, it was almost empty because the next shift had begun. Kusac did notice that among the four Primes present were two Security staff— Zhalmo and a male he didn't recognize. He assumed it was one of Kezule's sons who'd been off-world when the coup had happened.

Jayza greeted him warmly as they joined them at the table. He noticed the youth did a fair job of hiding the shock he felt at his altered appearance. He had no illusions about how thin he'd become, nor the state of his pelt. A shower was one of the first things on his agenda, if they were staying. Khadui's greeting was more reserved, and Dzaou's sullen glare was what he'd expected.

He briefed them on the situation, passing the reader round for them to see, and waited for their response.

"You've sold us out to Kezule just to get your son back," said Dzaou angrily, almost throwing the reader back at him. "At least now maybe the others can see you for what you are, a traitor!"

"Dzaou!" said Jayza sharply, glancing at Shaidan as the cub moved closer to Kusac.

"How can you ignore the facts?" demanded Dzaou, pointing at Kusac. "Look at him! He's wearing Kezule's collar! He's not free, none of us are! It's just another of his damned lies!"

Banner looked at him and frowned. He knew the other had just realized he was still wearing the collar.

"Kezule's paranoid about telepaths," he said. "When we captured him, Carrie had to force a mental contact with him to get the information we

needed. He's never forgotten that because to him then, females, especially pregnant ones, were feral. If you want to leave now, you can. Shaidan and I will remain, though, and contact Haven for reinforcements."

Dzaou laughed mirthlessly. "I can just see Kezule taking you to a comm unit to speak to Haven! I've been reading up on the Valtegens. We were their slaves, nothing more. That may be a psi damping collar, but it's also a slave collar!" He looked from Banner to Khadui. "Don't listen to him, he's nothing more than Kezule's pet, and his wife's! Look at what he's wearing if you don't believe me!"

All eyes turned to look at him, taking in the earring, the beaded bracelet he still wore that Shaidan had made for him, his braided hair, and the psi damping collar round his neck. Acutely aware of his son's distress and fear over the mixed emotions around him, he looked over to Jayza.

"Jayza, will you take Shaidan to Security?" he asked. "This is no place for him right now and they have psi dampers there."

"Sure," said the youth, getting up. "Come with me, Shaidan."

As Jayza passed him, Dzaou grabbed for his belt knife, pulling it free and pushing him aside as he leaped back from the table.

Fear raced through him, fueling his system into alertness. Grasping his son, he threw himself backward off the bench, rolling into the clear space by the serving counter and coming up in a crouch beside Zhalmo and her companion.

"Take him," he said, thrusting his son into her arms as she jumped to her feet. "Get him out of here! You," he said, pointing at her colleagues, "Stay out of this! It's a Sholan matter!"

Clutching the yowling and screaming cub, she ran for the exit as Kusac kept his eyes on the slowly advancing Dzaou. Anger at the fact he should have seen this coming was pushed aside as he glanced over to Banner and Khadui. They were on their feet now, circling Dzaou, trying to come between them. This time it couldn't be solved by letting them defuse the

situation. He had to deal with it now as a Brotherhood Officer and a Warrior Leader.

"Have you done mouthing off at me now, Dzaou?" he said mockingly. "Finally got up the courage to put your words into actions and Challenge me? Or are you just going to attack me when I'm unarmed?"

"Since they haven't the backbone to do it, yes!" he snarled. "With that collar on you, you can't mess with my mind again. The Blood Rite Challenge, Kusac! To the death, just as I promised you! Without you, Kezule can't succeed."

A commotion to his left made Kusac risk a glance at the counter in time to see Kezule come running out of the kitchen and stop dead on the serving side.

"Contain him," the General ordered his people as Kusac, senses now fully extended, caught a flicker of movement from Dzaou.

"Challenge accepted," he said. "Keep out of this, Kezule. This has been brewing between us for a long time."

"Dammit, you can't fight him, you're still injured," said Kezule angrily. "You've not even got a weapon!"

"I'll manage," he said. Looking directly at Banner, he sent him a mental request to borrow his knife, knowing he'd be able to pick him up.

Banner blinked, his jaw dropping slightly open as he automatically reached for his belt knife. Realizing what he was doing, he hesitated.

"None of that matters in this Challenge," smiled Dzaou, crouching down and shifting his knife from hand to hand. "That's the point of it. He's a traitor to Shola and deserves to die!"

Kezule lifted the countertop and took a step into the mess.

"You can't interfere," said Khadui sharply. "It's a legally issued Challenge!"

"Challenges to telepaths are illegal," said Banner.

"He's not a telepath when he's wearing that collar," sneered Dzaou, keeping an eye on them while still advancing slowly on Kusac.

He almost missed seeing Banner's knife come spinning through the air toward him as his Second finally committed himself. Only the fact that it seemed to be traveling at half the normal speed meant he could reach up effortlessly to catch it.

Flicking his ears in thanks, he crouched down, extending his tail for balance and flexing his injured leg, wincing when the bandage pressed on the wound and cut into his expanded thigh muscles. The analgesic was wearing off now. Ghidd'ah hadn't expected him to be doing much walking, never mind fighting a Challenge.

"Move the tables out of the way," ordered Banner, dragging at one of the benches. "Give them space to fight."

"Do it," Kezule ordered his people, moving toward the nearest table.

Dzaou glanced round at them, then rushed at Kusac, hoping to take him off guard.

He was ready, and sidestepped him, neatly blocking the other's knife arm hard with his own. Dzaou staggered back in slow motion, shaking his arm slightly to get the feeling back into it. His altered sense of time still seemed strange and confusing and he hesitated instead of following through. Not just that, but he was getting an echo of the pain he'd caused the other. Pushing it aside, when Dzaou turned on him again, he backed off, stumbling slightly as his full weight was taken by his injured leg.

It gave Dzaou the opening he wanted and darting forward, he slashed at Kusac's knife arm, just grazing the surface.

The shock jolted him back to reality. He wasn't mobile enough for this, and Dzaou knew it. This had to end quickly, one way or the other. Strengthening his shielding while still allowing his passive senses their maximum range, he waited for him to make another slash. This time, when Dzaou pulled back, he flung himself at the older male, knocking him to the floor, using his weight to pin him down while trying to grasp hold of the other's arms.

Dzaou was now heavier and fitter than him, and Kusac was hard pressed to remain on top as he thrashed from side to side, arching his body up off the floor in an effort to throw him off. His injured thigh took several blows against the floor, making him cry out in pain. Flexing his claws out, he sank them deep into Dzaou's arm and shoulder, managing to hold on, but he had to drop Banner's knife. Meanwhile, Dzaou was trying to force his own knife arm up and stab at his unprotected back.

Snarling his pain and anger, Kusac lowered his head, trying to sink his teeth into Dzaou's neck, but he'd dropped his chin to protect it. Snapping at his face to distract him, he bit down hard on Dzaou's right shoulder, shaking his head from side to side, causing the flesh to rip.

Dzaou yowled in agony, redoubling his efforts to throw him off. Claws raked their way down his side, but he ignored them because Dzaou had lifted his chin! Opening his jaws, he pulled them free of his shoulder then sank his canines deep into the exposed throat. A sudden sharp pain high in his side almost made him let go, but he ignored it and bit even harder. When Dzaou's blood spurted hot and metallic to the back of his throat, making him gag, he knew it was all but over. As Dzaou's body began to convulse under him, surreptitiously he reached for the knife still in his side and pulling it free, let it fall unnoticed beside the dying male.

He let go, spitting out blood as he retracted his claws and weakly pushed himself into a sitting position. Beneath him, Dzaou's struggles were getting weaker and he was making rasping sounds as he fought for breath. He sat back, legs still straddling his enemy, his senses swimming with pain and fatigue. There was one more thing he had to do. He was not leaving Dzaou to die by drowning in his own blood. He'd seen Kaid kill Ghezu that way, but he could afford to be more merciful.

Dzaou glared up at him, the hate and malice undimmed even now as blood sprayed from his neck and bubbled out of his mouth. With shaking hands, he pushed Dzaou's flailing arms aside and taking hold of his head and chin, gave a sharp twist. The crack of his neck breaking echoed through the room. Reaction set in, and his strength spent, he collapsed on top of Dzaou's lifeless body.

Banner reached him first. Carefully he was eased off Dzaou and helped to sit up. He had to bite back a hiss of pain as they pulled his wounded side. Dzaou's knife had penetrated almost to the hilt, but he was keeping that to himself for now. A wet towel was thrust at him and with trembling hands, he made an effort to wipe the blood off his face and mouth. He could see Kezule, his face almost white with shock, crouched in front of him, and knew the Valtegan was reliving the moment when *his* throat had almost been between his jaws.

"Sorry about the mess," he mumbled, trying to keep his breathing shallow as pain stabbed through his chest with every breath. He attempted to wipe his hands on the now carmine rag, hampered by Banner trying to inspect the shallow slash on his forearm.

On some deep level, he was aware that part of his mind was assessing the damage he'd taken and attempting to deal with it.

"Forget it," said Kezule, taking the towel from him and handing him another damp one. "Were you injured? We can't tell. You're covered in blood."

"He would be," said Khadui, holding a drinking bowl of water up for him. "He bit clean through Dzaou's carotid. Personally, I'd have let him drown in it."

He drank, grateful to get the taste of blood from his mouth, even if it meant swallowing some of it.

The shaking had almost stopped now as he accepted another towel and wiped his face and neck again. He couldn't leave here covered in gore—if his son saw him... He shuddered at the thought. Blood had got underneath



the metal collar and was sticking it uncomfortably to his pelt. Reaching up, he pressed his fingers into the recesses and giving a small mental push, he keyed it open, then thrust it at Kezule.

"It was never any use once I knew it was there," he said to the startled Valtegan. "I shut it down in the punishment booth. You can give me my torc back now."

"Your son has it," said Kezule, taking it from him, for once looking at a loss.

"Gods! It looks like a slaughterhouse!" he heard Zayshul exclaim in shock moments before she pushed Kezule and Banner aside and crouched down beside him. "You had no right to let him do this," she said angrily, looking up at them briefly. "And you're a fool, Kusac! You've been injured, again! Let me see to those wounds right now!"

"Not here. I'll go to the sick bay. Can you help me up?" he asked Banner. "Your knife, I had to drop it. Should be beside Dzaou."

"I'll find it," said Banner, taking hold of his arm as Zayshul moved back to allow Khadui to take the other. "It was a good kill, if a little messy."

He grunted as he struggled to his feet. As well as the wound in his side, he hurt everywhere. "I should have done it sooner. Which reminds me." He pulled himself free of Banner, looking around the room, seeing the other three Primes starting to pick up the scattered furniture. There was one last thing he had to do, one last debt to settle while Kezule's people and his own were here to see it. "Kezule."

"What?" asked the General, turning to look at him.

Kusac punched him hard on the jaw, sending the Valtegan reeling backward into a table.

"That's for sending the Ch'almuthian female to my room. *Now* the past between us is over," he said with satisfaction as Kezule staggered to his feet, rubbing at his cut and bruised mouth.

He felt the commandos instantly tense and move toward him but Kezule stopped them with a gesture. "Agreed," he said, glancing at the smear of blood on his hand before accepting the almost clean towel Khadui held out to him.

"Could you stand under a shower?" Zayshul asked him as he was helped toward the exit. "There's so much blood on your tunic and pelt, I don't know where to begin."

"Yes," he said. A shower would help ease the aches— and give the wound in his side time to close. He stumbled in shock as he realized what he'd just thought. What the hell had been done to him that he could heal like that?

\* \* \*

Once in the sick bay, Zayshul sent Banner and Khadui off to reassure Shaidan— and get his torc— then help get the mess cleaned up. She and Ghidd'ah fussed over him as they helped him out of the remains of his tunic.

"It's completely shredded down this side," said Ghidd'ah, holding it up to the light to see it better. "And there's a hole in the other side!"

"What?" asked Zayshul as she helped him limp into the nearest bed bay for the shower cubicle there.

"He's got a knife wound in his left side, Zayshul," she said, hurrying in to join them. "High up, near his armpit."

"I'm fine," he said, refusing to let her stop him to look for the wound. "Do you think I wouldn't know if I'd been stabbed?"

"Hold him still, Ghidd'ah," said Zayshul, forcing the issue and bringing him to a stop. "I'm checking you now. You're far too eager to get away from me, Kusac."

"It was only a prick," he muttered, twisting round to watch as she gently ran her hands over his side. He shivered at her touch, not from pain, but from pleasure.

She stopped, parting his fur carefully till she found it. "You're fine—now," she said, giving him a long look and letting out a sigh of relief. "It'll need a dressing, but it's not deep."

He reached down to touch it for himself, his eyes meeting hers. They both knew it had been a deep wound.

Zayshul ducked behind him, looking at his other side where Dzaou had clawed him. He winced as she probed at the slashes. "These are nasty," she said. "They'll need stitches to close them. A shower will help, though, get any dirt from the floor out of them at least. Now let me see your thigh. That dressing is as bloody as the rest of you."

\* \* \*

He checked his sides himself as he showered, trying to work out what had happened. The stab wound had healed to the point where it was only a shallow slice, but the slashes from the claws were unchanged. Could it be that his body was automatically responding to only life-threatening wounds, rendering them less harmful? It would explain his rapid healing of the last week or so, except that the blaster wound itself hadn't been that dangerous. He dismissed the idea as fanciful. It was far more likely that there was still some Fastheal in his system.

"Are you still alive in there?" asked Zayshul from outside. "You've been in long enough."

"I'm done," he said, turning off the water and stepping out to take the towel from her.

\* \* \*

Once he was clean and dry, his wounds, old and new, treated and dressed, Shaidan was brought to see him and be reassured he was fine. While Zayshul took his son off to join the other children on the Command level, he replaced his torc and rested on the bed, waiting for his crew to arrive. There was still the matter of whether or not they stayed to be decided.

"How bad?" asked Banner, eyeing the new bandage on his forearm as they filed in and settled themselves on the chair and the end of his bed.

"Superficial," he said, sitting up stiffly. He'd managed to scrounge something to eat once the two females had finished with him, and now the analgesic had begun to work, he felt a lot better.

"It looked like he gave you a good mauling," said Khadui.

He dismissed the other's concern with a small gesture, more interested in what they had to say. "Have you thought over Kezule's request?"

"We're staying," said Banner, glancing at the other two. "But I want to be with you when you send the message."

"Ask Ghidd'ah to call Security. Kezule's waiting there for our answer. He'll bring us a recorder, then take you up to the bridge to send it," he said. "He has his own message for our government which you will hear before he sends it. What do you want me to say?"

"Just tell it like it is," said Banner with a faint smile.

## **The Tooshu, same day**

Carrie looked up from the gaming console as Rezac came into the rec room. "It's not time for third meal already, is it?" she asked.

"No," he said, trying hard not to grin. "Captain Shaayiyisis let me leave the bridge to give you the news personally."

"What news?" asked Kaid, looking up from the book he was reading.

"Haven just called— with a message from Kusac and Kezule containing the coordinates for the Outpost. It is called Kij'ik, by the way, we were right."

"What?" asked Carrie unbelievably, swinging her chair around to face him.

"Where?" asked Kaid, putting the book down.

"About two days from where we were. We were very close, but in the wrong solar system. Kusac is asking Haven to request help for Kezule from our government. They know all about the coup and..."

"Can we call them back?" interrupted Carrie.

"No, but Kisha copied the message so you could hear it for yourselves," he said, passing a pale green crystal to her. "In it, Kezule claims Kusac was on an undercover mission, training his people for just such an eventuality. The General says he wants to retake K'oish'ik and put Zsurtul on the throne. L'Seuli said Kezule's statement about Kusac is just what's needed to add to the statement he gave you to get him off the hook and refute the charges of treason against him. He says Konis Aldatan has already contacted Lijou and Rhyaz about it."

Kaid grinned. "So L'Seuli sent the message to Konis, did he? And Stronghold has agreed to do it?"

"It's as good as done. L'Seuli says he'll send us a transcript of the press releases exonerating Kusac."

"Thank the Gods for that!" said Carrie with feeling.

"We're to go and help them, Kaid. And Haven's sending our own ships within the next seven days. They were all there on the message— Kusac, Banner, Jayza, and Khadui."

"Dzaou?" asked Kaid.

Rezac shook his head. "Khadui reports he's dead. He'd been acting mutinously for some time, even making attempts to trap Kusac in life-threatening situations, but nothing could be proved. Finally he Challenged him, and thankfully lost. It was witnessed by Khadui and Banner, as well as Kezule, who all vouched for Kusac's innocence during the message."

Carrie sat there feeling shell-shocked now that she knew that Kusac was safe.

"Before you ask, Carrie," added Rezac, putting his hand briefly on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, but the message was impersonal. There was nothing private for you."

"That's to be expected," said Kaid, getting up to join her. "It's going to be all right, Carrie," he said, squatting down on his haunches beside her. "He's safe, and obviously on top of the situation at Kij'ik. We'll be together soon."

"When do we leave?" she asked.

"Captain Shaayiyisis is getting the *Couana* prepped now," said Rezac with a large grin.

Between Darkness and Light

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