

# *Princess of Amathar*



*Wesley Allison*

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**By**

**Wesley M. Allison**

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To Victoria Allison and Edgar Rice Burroughs

# **Princess of Amathar**

# Chapter One: Transported to Ecos

I don't expect you to believe this story, but it is the truth. My name is Alexander Ashton. I was born in the heart of the American west. I have often been known to say that I was born either a hundred years too late, or perhaps a hundred years too early. It always seemed to me that I had the misfortune to live in the single most unexciting period of time the panorama of history had to offer. I don't say that I longed to be transported to another time or to another world, for never in my wildest dreams did I believe this to be possible. I was destined to be surprised.

I was born in a small city. I played as a child in a park that was once a dusty street where outlaws of the old west fought famous gunfights. When I was seven, my parents were killed in a motor vehicle accident. I really remember little of them. I was put in a state run children's home where I lived until I was eighteen, passed by time after time by prospective adoptive parents, primarily because I was too old. I hold no ill feelings about it now. If there is one thing I learned while I was a ward of the state, it is that no matter how bad off one may be, there is always some one worse off than you are.

After graduating high school and being set on my own by the state, I entered college at the local university. I became a voracious reader and excelled in athletics, but did poorly in my required studies. After two semesters of academic probation I was asked to leave. I walked down the street to the Army Recruiter's office and enlisted. There wasn't much to the army, since there was no war on at the time. While I was there, I did learn to shoot, and fight with a saber, and to keep in good physical condition, but otherwise I left the service just as I had gone in.

After finding a new apartment in my old home town, I happened to run into a fellow whom I knew from college. He was running a small grocery store, and doing quite well, since no large grocery chain was interested in such a small market area. He offered me a job, I took it, and we became pretty close friends.

My friend, the grocery store owner, was engaged to a nice girl, and they decided in time to get married. I was chosen to be the best man. The wedding was nice, and the reception was even better. I have never been much of a drinking man, but that night I made a name for myself in that capacity. I don't know why I drank so much. Maybe I was feeling sorry for myself and my lot in life, I don't know. I do know that in short order, I had worked myself into a staggering, slobbering, half-conscious stupor. How, when, and where I became unconscious, I cannot say, but at some point I did. And this is where my story truly begins.

I awoke with a chill in my bones. I was lying down in a small stream bed with icy water running over my feet. I tried to rise, but couldn't. My body was stiff and weak and its only response was to shiver uncontrollably. Around me was a thick forest, and I could see dark shapes moving around in the trees. I sensed then, on some deeper level, that I was in a place I had never been before. Then I heard a deep growling as I passed once again into unconsciousness.

When next I awoke I looked around to find myself in a small shack. I was lying on a cot made of animal furs, and I was bathed in a cold sweat. The walls of the small shelter were made from cut logs and a roughly fashioned wooden chair was the room's only furnishing. When the door of the shack opened, I truly believed for the first time in my life that there were life forms other than those I was familiar with on Earth.

The creature that stepped inside the door, and closed it after him, was most ugly. That he was intelligent was demonstrated not only by the fact that he had opened and then closed the door, but also by the fact that he wore clothing-- ugly clothing yes, but clothing nonetheless. He was about five feet tall and stood in a kind of perpetual crouch. His body was covered with coarse brown hair, two to three inches long, from his head to his feet, which reminded me of the feet of a dog or a wolf, although larger. He was somewhat wolf-like in every aspect, such as his protruding snout, but he also seemed somewhat baboon-like in his expressive eyes. I am comparing him to earthly animals, but this is really inadequate,

as the similarities were actually quite superficial, and he was totally unearthly in appearance. I remember most looking at his hands. He had four fingers not too different from my own, but his abbreviated thumb possessed a great, long, curving claw.

The creature, stepping slowly over to me, reached out a hand and gave me a piece of dried fruit. I was quite hungry and the fruit was quite good. As I began to eat, the creature began to bark and growl at me. At first I thought he was angry, but then I realized that he was trying to communicate in his language. I was too tired to respond and fruit still in hand, passed back into sleep.

The next time I woke the creature was sitting in the chair looking at me with his head cocked to one side. I pushed myself up on one elbow and he spoke to me again, this time in a more human sort of language. It seemed almost like French, but having learned a few phrases of that language in the army, I knew it was not. This language was so much less nasal. He pointed to his chest and said "Malagor" then he pointed to me. I said "Alexander". He smiled wide exposing a magnificent row of long, sharp teeth. My language lessons had begun.

It took a long time for me to recover from my illness. It seemed to me that I was nursed by the creature for at least a month. I slept many times, but each time I awoke I found light streaming in the window. Not once did I wake to find darkness, or even the pale light of the moon, outside the window. During this long period of time, my host provided me with food and water, took care of my sanitary needs and of course, taught me to speak his language. One of the first things that I learned was that "Malagor" was not the name of my companion, but was instead his race or species. He told me his real name, which seemed to be a growl with a cough thrown in for good measure. I decided that I would call him "Malagor", and he didn't seem to mind.

As soon as I was physically able, Malagor helped me to the door. I was understandably anxious to see the world outside because the presence of Malagor, and an indescribable gut feeling, both told me that the world beyond that wooden threshold was not the world into which I had been born. I stepped outside with my shoulder supported by the alien. For a moment I was blinded by the brightness of the sun, but after my eyes adjusted to the increase in light, I looked around.

At first glance the scene before me was no different than a thousand other views found in many scenic valleys on Earth. The small crude log cabin sat at the edge of a large beautiful golden plain near a lovely green forest. The horizon was formed in the distance by a line of low rolling hills. But as I let my eye roam toward the sky above those hazy hills, I found that there was something different and unsettling about the sky. It was as if the edge of the world blurred up into the sky. It was as if I was standing in a great bowl, with the edges rising up all around me. In reality I could discern little more than a greenish brown band above the horizon, but I felt as if I could, concentrating hard enough, make out more hills, more meadows, and plains and forests and the shore of a mighty sea, pasted on the edge of the firmament. The world, instead of disappearing over the horizon, rose up into the sky, actually becoming a part of the sky. And above it all, high above, stood the noon day sun.

I felt weak. Malagor steadied me and helped me back inside the cabin. He sat me down in the chair and gave me a drink of water from a wooden cup that he had apparently carved especially for me. Then he sat down on the floor.

"Tell me about this world," I said when I had finished my water.

"You are not from this world," he stated, matter-of-factly. "I thought this when I found you in the forest."

"No I am not. I am from a very different world," I replied, "but tell me of this one."

"The world is Ecos. That is the name. It is a great sphere. We are in the inside surface. What is outside, no one knows. The sun is in the middle of the world. It shines on all."

"If the sun is always above you," I asked, "how do you know when it is night time?"

"I do not know night time. What is night?"

"How do you know when to sleep?"

"One sleeps when one is sleepy." He gave me such a strange look that I had to laugh out loud.

"Your people live in Ecos?"

For a moment he turned away. Then he looked back at me. "Many different species live in Ecos. Many of these species are intelligent beings. I myself have seen many of these."

"But we are speaking the language of your people?"

Malagor opened his mouth wide and his tongue fell out the side. I had learned that this was his way of smiling. He replied.

"When I first found you I spoke to you in the language of the Malagor, but nature was unkind to you and gave you too small a mouth. So instead I taught you the language of Amathar which we now speak. I knew that you could speak it because you look somewhat like an Amatharian."

"How do they look like me?"

He smiled again. "They have funny little ears, no fur, flat faces, puny noses, and long feet."

I laughed. "How are they different from me then?"

"They are better groomed," he said.

I felt my face with its scraggly beard, and my dirty, sweaty, almost matted hair. I was indeed most poorly groomed. My clothing, the remains of a rented tuxedo, was in equally bad shape.

"If you take me back to the stream where you found me so that I can take a bath, and loan me a sharp knife, and help me with some decent clothing," I said, "I shall see if I cannot become more presentable."

Malagor agreed to help me, but it was several days before I was well enough for even the short walk to the nearby stream. I had taken a long time to recover from what I now believe to be the effects of my transportation from Earth to Ecos. I never found out what bizarre method that transportation was, and I suppose that I never will. When I had finally recovered, I went to the stream with my new companion, I made an interesting discovery. The gravity of Ecos felt different from that of Earth. I found that I was stronger here. I wasn't a superman, but it was a noticeable difference. I could now jump almost twice as far and twice as high as I could before. Then I tried lifting some fallen trees in the woods, and found that I could lift almost twice as much as the equivalent on my planet of origin. I impressed Malagor, who said he had never seen one as strong as me, and I must admit that I impressed myself as well.

After bathing in the stream, I used Malagor's knife, which was nearly razor sharp, to shave off my whiskers. I tried to trim my hair with it as well, but had less success in this endeavor. I did manage to get my hair reasonably clean. I washed my tuxedo too, but it was so poorly made that it practically fell apart in my hands. It was then that Malagor presented me with a set of clothing that he had made for me. The suit consisted of a hard leather shirt and a pair of pants made from the softer hide of several small animals, held up by a broad leather belt. There was also an excellently fashioned pair of boots with hard leather soles. He had dyed the entire suit by hand with berries and roots. The poor creature had terrible taste in colors, and the outfit could have blasted the eyes out of an onlooker with its contrasts of bright greens and purples and oranges, if only there had been an onlooker there to see it. It was a gift though, and one sorely needed, and I appreciated it. I felt as though Malagor were truly a friend-- a friend such as I had never had before.

Later, Malagor and I sat on the grass in front of his cabin, beneath the perpetual noon day sun, and ate our dinner of dried fruit and a small roasted animal that he had provided.

"You must know that this world is not natural. Planets do not form like this. Who created Ecos?" I wondered.

"I know no such thing," replied the beast. "If you had not appeared claiming to be from another world, I would never have given it a second thought."

I knew that he was baiting me, because I had described the Earth in great detail to him before, and he had accepted it, and I knew that he believed that I was not a native of Ecos.

"I do know how Ecos came to be though," he continued. "Many years ago the universe was empty. The only thing that existed was the great Goddess Bitch. She lived in the void for a long, long time. Then she became tired of the darkness and ate up all of the black and let the day come. She shed her fur and it became a ring around her and hardened into Ecos. She gave birth to pups and they became Malagor. She left her feces and it became the other races of Ecos. Then she curled up and went to sleep and became the sun."

"Do you believe this?" I asked.

He cocked his head to one side and looked at me for a moment. Then he smiled. "This is what my mother told me when I was a pup."



I smiled too. We sat in silence for a moment. Then I spoke again.

"Have you always lived here, in this cabin?"

"This has been my base camp while I have explored the nearby land," he explained. "I was making ready to leave this place and move on when I found you. Again I am thinking that I should move on now."

"If you don't mind," I said. "I would like to accompany you."

"I would like that," he replied, and then he said for the first time, "Alexander."

## Chapter Two: The Hidden Artifacts

After getting a good long sleep, Malagor and I began to pack our meager belongings for an extended journey. Our belongings truly were meager. My dog-like friend had only a few furs and some weapons and tools to his name, and I had almost nothing to mine. I was interested to observe Malagor's weapons. With the exception of his knife, which was obviously well-manufactured, they all seemed to be hand-made, and consisted of a spear, a bow, and a quiver of arrows. As soon as we had grouped the possessions into two bundles, we each took one and started on our way. There seemed to be no north, south, east, or west in Ecos, so we went in the direction that Malagor said he had previously been traveling. After we had walked across the plain quite a long ways, I looked back at the cabin. It was inching its way up toward the sky. It seemed a lonely place now. As we got farther and farther away, it would move up the endless horizon, though of course it would disappear from view before it got very high. I wondered though if, when we reached where ever it was we were going, it would be looking down at us from some point high up in the heavens.

While we walked along, I asked Malagor many questions about the world of Ecos, the fauna and flora, and the intelligent inhabitants.

"How big is Ecos?" I asked. I had thought that had Ecos been just a hollow planet, I would have been able to see far more of the horizon as it stretched up into the sky and that much more clearly than I could. It seemed to me that it was far larger.

"Two hundred twenty six thousand hokents," he replied.

This of course, led to my lesson in the measurement of distances in Ecos, which was common to the Malagor and the Amatharians, and a few other intelligent races. The kentan was the basic unit of measurement, and had apparently been derived from the size of an insect lair, as strange as this may have seemed at the time. Then again, I recalled that honey bees made cells in their hive that were completely uniform in size, no matter where you happened to find the hive, or what the bees were using as a source of pollen. I marveled that the kentan had come from a zoological observation such as this. As nearly as I could calculate, the kentan was about five and one-quarter inches. A kentar was ten kentans, or about fifty two and a half inches. A kent was ten kentars, one hundred kentans, or about forty three feet nine inches. A kentad was one hundred kents, or some eight tenths of a mile. And a hokent was one thousand kentads, one hundred thousand kents, or eight hundred twenty eight miles.

So when Malagor said that Ecos was two hundred twenty six thousand hokents in diameter, he was telling me that it was about one hundred eighty seven million miles in diameter. With a little mental calculation on my part, I realized that with a sun just under one million miles in diameter, this would put the surface of Ecos about ninety three million miles from the surface of the sun-- about the same distance that Earth is from the surface of its sun. If my calculations held correct, then Ecos would have a surface area of over three billion planet Earths. It was quite an astounding concept.

For a while I thought about the fact that the great plain we walked across, might well be larger than the surface area of my home planet, and yet be only a tiny fraction of Ecos. But after a while these types of musings can only give one a headache, so I turned my head to other thoughts. Looking around across the plain, I observed a marvelous collection of plains animals. I could identify the ecological niches of most of the beasts, by observing their similarities to Earth animals, and yet some of these denizens of the great prairie were completely unearthly. There was a herd of beautiful antelope-like creatures, with long spiral horns and stripes across their backs and six legs. There were beautiful flying things that looked like butterflies two yards wide. Whether they were birds or insects or something entirely different than either, I could not say. There was a large caterpillar creature thirty feet long, with a huge maw in front, that ate everything it came across, plant or animal, and there was a beast that preyed upon it that stood twenty feet tall and looked like a cross between an ostrich and a praying mantis. Some of these animals we hunted for food, some of them we gave a wide berth, and some of them we stopped and stared at in

amazement, because not even Malagor had seen the likes of them.

We walked, and we hunted as we walked, and at last I was sure we must have been traveling for a week. It is very eerie to do anything for a long period of time, and then to look up and see the sun in the exact position that it was in when you started whatever it was that you were doing. That's how it was for me. At last however, Malagor decided it was time to stop and sleep, so we cleared the grass from an area and made a fire. Malagor and I then took turns watching for beasts and sleeping. We each slept once, ate, then slept again, and then we started on our way once more. We followed this procedure many, many times over. We continued to hunt for food animals along our way, and at every small stream, we stopped to fill our water skins. I must confess that I never did know how long a journey our trip was, but it seems to me that it must have been close to a year. At one time I asked my friend how long he thought that we had been walking. His only reply was, "What does it matter."

At long last we reached the edge of the great plain. Before us stood a line of small hills which looked to be easily passable. On the lower slope of the hills grew many small bushes, profusely covered with tiny blue berries. Malagor picked one, smelled it, tasted it, and pronounced it good.

"We will stay a while here," he announced. "Berries do not grow enough places to warrant passing them by."

I examined the bushes closest to us.

"Some of these berries are new growth, and some of them are rotting on the plant," I said. "How long will the season last?"

"I do not know season," he said. "What is season?"

I then realized that in Ecos, beneath the perpetual noon day sun, with no variation in sunlight or length of day, there would be no seasons, at least not in the sense of the word I knew. I was walking around in an endless springtime. I wondered of the mechanics of such a weather system. It had to be completely different than that of a regular planet. I knew that there was weather, for I had experienced it myself, at least in its mildest forms. There had been some partially cloudy skies as we walked along, and even an occasional shower to help keep us cool. But I had not experienced a great storm, fog, or snow. I asked Malagor about this and he explained.

"There are many high places in Ecos, mountains and hills. In these places it is cooler. Low places, deserts and plains are warmer. There is much rocky land. The air above this is warmer. The air above the swamps, bogs, and other soft lands is cooler and wetter. The hot air moves up. The cool air moves down. Then they both blend together to make many kinds of weather."

As if on cue, we were suddenly darkened by the shade of a large cloud above us. Moments later it began to hail. We held our furs above our heads to shield us, and quickly scrambled around looking for a cave or an overhang in which to hide ourselves. I found a large overhanging cliff and called Malagor over. We sat down under it and built a fire from some scrub brush.

"I will cook the meat of our last kill," said Malagor. "You can unpack our furs and tools. This little overhang will make a good place for our base camp. When the hail stops, I will hunt for more meat, and you may pick some berries."

"You won't need any help hunting?" I asked.

"I have watched you, and have decided that you are not a very good hunter," he said. "Perhaps it is because your nose is too small."

"What does my nose have to do with hunting?"

"You cannot smell when an animal is ready to become dinner."

I laughed. "I must admit that before I met you I'd never hunted at all, and certainly not with a spear or a bow. I don't have the benefit of having hunted all my life as you have."

"I have not hunted all my life," he said. "When I had a home, I traded for my food."

"Tell me about your home," I said, but he only mumbled that he had to go hunting, and picking up his weapons, he left, even though he had not yet cooked our meal, and the hail had not completely stopped. I watched him head across the plain toward the roaming, grazing herds that wandered there. He was a strange and lonely figure. I sat down to unpack the rolls of furs that were our bedding, and tossed a few damp twigs on the fire. Then I began to look around the small overhang that was to be our home for

who knew how long.

The area beneath the cliff was about forty feet wide and fifteen feet deep. The ground was bare of the tall golden grass that reached from the plain, right up to the edge of the sheltered overhang. The area was completely clear of fallen debris, with the exception of a pile of small boulders at one end. I walked over, knelt down, and examined the stones. There seemed to be no place above from which they could have fallen. It looked as if someone had piled them there. I looked between them and saw only darkness. Using my newfound strength, I began moving the stones away from their resting place, setting them to the front of the overhang to serve as a wind break. In no time I had moved them all, building a suitable wind break as well as exposing a small tunnel leading back into the hillside.

I knelt down to look into the tunnel. Then I heard a noise behind me and turned to see that Malagor had returned, with the carcass of a small antelope-type animal slung over his ever-crouching shoulders.

"What have you found here, my friend?" he asked, setting down his burden.

"It is some kind of tunnel. It looks like it was dug by intelligent beings. At least it was hidden by intelligent beings with those boulders. They seem to have been placed here deliberately."

He laughed, and for a moment I did not understand why. Then he said. "You moved those boulders all by yourself?"

"With powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men." I smiled. "Shall we go inside?"

"It is your hole," he said.

I retrieved a burning twig from the fire, and kneeling down, began to crawl into the tiny tunnel. It was a tight fit. When I had made my way completely inside, Malagor followed. The tunnel remained the same for the first fifteen or twenty feet. Then it opened into a chamber large enough for me to stand up in. Raising the small torch above my head, I looked around. Even with the light, it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. It had been a long time since I had been in darkness of any kind. At last though, I began to be able to see around me.

The chamber was roughly round and carved out of the solid rock. I realized now that not only was the tunnel man-made, or shall I say life-form made, but the cave was artificial as well, for there was no evidence of water or any other natural mechanism for creating subterranean caverns. Placed around the room, apparently with great care, were a number of interesting artifacts. There were two rifles the likes of which I have never seen before. They seemed like some kind of laser gun from a science fiction movie. The metal parts were bright silver or chrome, and the stocks were made of some unknown wood and carved into beautiful but unearthly designs. There were several small square devices next to them which might have been batteries or rechargers. Sitting in a small stack, were a half a dozen cans with no labels. They were the only things made of metal in the chamber which showed any sign of rust whatsoever, even though the thick covering of dust made it plain that we were the first to enter here in a long, long time.

Also in the chamber were a number of interesting tools. There was a beautiful hunting knife. It looked similar to one that might be sold in a sporting goods store on earth, but the blade was carved in bizarre, alien designs of unequalled craftsmanship. There was a hammer, saw, screwdriver, and a shovel, all obviously designed to fit into a backpack or utility belt now long returned to the dust of the ages. Sitting in the back of the room were two swords.

The swords were the most incredibly beautiful blades that I had ever seen in my life. For you to appreciate this completely, I must explain that I take a great interest in swords. While I was in the military, I was given cursory training in fighting with a saber. I have always thought it unfortunate that in the twentieth century, such a civilized weapon should be discarded in favor of the assault rifle. I enjoyed sabers and joined a club of military officers and enlisted men who practiced their use and studied them. It was great fun. We went to many museums to see beautiful old swords, and I must say that in our matches staged purely for our own enjoyment, I became quite a good swordsman. So when I say that these were swords more beautiful than any that I have ever seen, you may see that I do not speak without some experience in the subject. There was a long sword and a short sword. They were somewhat similar to the Japanese samurai swords known as the katana and the wahizashi, with gentle sloping blade and two-handed hilt, but unlike the Japanese weapons, these blades had sharp pointed tips.

They too, were beautifully carved with unearthly designs, and the hilts were set with large gems, which sparkled in the light of the now fading ember. The sheaths, if ever there existed any, were long rotted away.

"Amatharian swords," said Malagor, looking over my shoulder. "An Amatharian warrior placed these here, and the other items, planning to return later. An Amatharian warrior would never leave his sword without good reason."

"These have been here a long, long time," I said, dropping the now short ember.

"Apparently," he replied, as the light went completely out. "The warrior died before he was able to return."

## Chapter Three: The Stummada

I crawled out of the tunnel into the bright light of the eternal Ecosian day. Malagor followed me. Between the two of us we carried the artifacts found in the inner chamber, with the exception of the rusty cans. I had a feeling they contained foodstuffs that were far from fresh. Besides, we didn't have a can opener. We set everything down, and Malagor skinned his small game animal, spitted it, and put it over our camp fire. I tossed a few more twigs on the fire and then sat down to examine the fascinating swords which I had found.

I hefted the long sword in my hand, and was surprised to find that though it had obviously been crafted as a two-handed sword, it was too light for that method of swordsmanship. I then recalled that here on Ecos my strength was increased, roughly doubling what it had been on Earth. If I had not had this additional strength, the sword would have been quite heavy and well balanced as a two-handed weapon. The blade was bright silver in color but strangely, neither the blade, nor the many small runes and designs carved along its length, reflected the sun. The hilt was carved of a material that looked like wood, but was much harder and did not show the great age that it must have been. It too, was carved with fantastic designs, and set all along it were fourteen beautiful gems. I guessed that they were quite valuable, though I suppose that the value of gems, like so many other things, really depends upon one's culture. I was never much for mineralogy, so I don't know if they were emeralds or sapphires or what, but they certainly were lovely. The short sword was almost identical to the long sword, with the exception of its length, and the fact that it was designed to be used single-handedly.

I looked up from my examination of the sword to see my dog-faced friend. He had finished getting dinner cooking, and now was devoting himself to an examination of the rifles. He drew one to his shoulder and looked down the barrel. I was somewhat surprised, because I had assumed that Malagor was from a low technology society. It had never occurred to me that he might be acquainted with fire arms, or in this case an even more advanced weapon.

"Do you know this particular weapon?" I asked.

"It is an Amatharian gun. They call it a light rifle," he said. "I have used weapons similar to this, but never one this fine or this powerful."

"Tell me something of these Amatharians," I said.

"The Amatharians are a most interesting race. They look much like you, and yet they are different. They are a race of honor. If you insult an Amatharian you must be ready to kill him or to die. They travel over a wide area, but live only in their great city of Amathar. It is said to be the greatest city anywhere. They are trained in war, but do not love war the way some other races do." He stopped for a moment as if trying to remember.

"An Amatharian warrior's soul is in his sword. If the sword sees the warrior turn from an enemy, the soul will be disgusted and will never be with the warrior again. If the warrior dies bravely, the soul leaves the sword to live in the sun, shining brightly forever. If a warrior gives his sword away, he gives away his soul."

He stopped and looked at me.

"These Amatharians are funny people," he said.

"Have you actually known any Amatharians?"

"When I was a little pup, a group of Amatharians came to our village. There were only six of them. The leader of the group was an old trader. He wanted the pottery and leather crafts that our bitches made. He traded us tools and interesting foods. The others were his assistants, all that is except the Remiant."

"Remiant?"

Malagor went to some length to explain to me what I suppose would be sort of a combined military rank and social status of the Amatharians. Most young Amatharians, he explained, were militarily trained. Even those that pursued other occupations within their society were also soldiers. After leaving military

duty, the former soldiers became explorers, scientists, or merchants. A beginning soldier was a warrior or remiantad. After glorifying himself in battle he became a swordsman or remiantar. When a swordsman became somehow complete, a true living weapon, he became a Remiant, something like a knight. To be a Remiant, was the ultimate goal of all Amatharians. Though there were ranks beyond Remiant, a Remiantad or captain and a Horemiant or general, these were only ranks for use in large scale warfare. In the context of social status, all remiants were equal. Yes, a Remiant was a knight. Malagor went on.

"The knight was tall, even for an Amatharian. He stood, back straight and head held high. On his tabard was the crest of his house. His swords were strapped to his sides. They were not as magnificent as the ones you have found, but it seemed to me that the long one shined with the light of the soul within.

"The merchant and his apprentices went into the house of our alpha male to discuss the terms of trade. The knight took his position outside the doorway. There were several of us, all small pups. We stood there watching him. He smiled at us. That is all that I remember."

"Was that a long time ago?" I asked.

"A very, very long time ago." He looked at me with his head cocked to one side. "It is a boring story."

"No, it is not boring," I countered, "but I wonder why the Amatharian left these swords here, and what happened to his soul?"

"It is possible that these swords have not seen use. They certainly appear to be in fine condition," said Malagor.

"You know a great deal about Amatharians and their swords considering you met one only when you were a small child. You must have studied them."

He just shrugged.

We sat quietly for a moment. Then the smell of the roasted meat brought our stomachs to life. We enjoyed our dinner and the last of the water in our water skins. After building up the fire we lay down upon our furs and had a long sleep. When we had both awakened, we left our new home to take a trek around our hill. Malagor brought with him the light rifles from the cave as well as the power sources. I slipped the swords into my leather belt.

As we circumnavigated the hill, Malagor explained the rifle to me. For all its unearthly beauty, it was quite terrestrial in method of operation. The stock and the barrel were designed much like those of an AK-47, with a trigger and trigger guard in the usual location, but instead of a clip of ammunition projecting just in front of them, there was a slot where the power source plugged in. The sights were placed along the barrel, just as with any rifle of earth. Malagor handed one of the weapons to me and together we practiced plugging in the power source replacements. Then we slung the rifles over our shoulders and continued on our way.

When we had reached the other side of the hill I had to stop and laugh. As far as berry picking was concerned, we had certainly chosen the poorer side. From where I now stood, the hills beyond were completely covered with the berry bushes. We were both in the mood for breakfast after having slept a long time, so we began wading through the thicket, picking the ripe berries and transferring them to our mouths. The little fruits were juicy and tart, and I am sure would not have been all that good if tasted at home with dinner, but here in the wilderness, picking them straight off the vine, they were delicious.

Malagor and I had moved apart as we picked. He was about thirty feet or so away, but there was nothing to be concerned about. We were two grown men, or in any case, two grown beings, in sight of one another. I must admit that I was not being all that watchful, and I suppose that Malagor wasn't either. Suddenly I heard a noise from him that I had never heard before. It was a lot like the startled yelp that a big dog makes when his tail is accidentally stepped on. Then a tremendous roar reverberated through the hills. I turned to a scene that made my pulse quicken.

There, standing above the berry bushes, a full fifteen feet tall, was the most frightening apparition that I have ever beheld. It was a huge beast. It might have seemed like a bear or a large ape at first, because it stood on its hind legs and had a shaggy but almost humanoid form, but it was neither bear nor ape nor any combination of the two. It was covered with long black fur, and it had a large head. Its eyes were large, round, multifaceted, insectoid orbs. It was obviously an omnivorous beast, having like humans a

variety of tooth types, but at the moment I was concerned with only one type-- the great long fangs with which it was attempting to impale Malagor. The creature held him in a tight grip and was attempting to reach his throat with those great ivory tusks. For his part, Malagor was struggling to hold back the giant head and at the same time find a spot in which to employ his own considerable canines.

If I had thought about it, I am sure that I would not have bothered trying to use the light rifle; because I was fairly sure that there was no way that the power source could still be viable. But the fact is that I didn't think. I just did. I put the weapon to my shoulder, took quick aim, and fired. The gun spit a thin stream of energy from its barrel. It was not like a laser or a beam. It was like molten sunshine that bubbled and churned as it flew through the air. It went past Malagor's shoulder and into the eye of the giant beast. Then with a big explosion, it blew a large hole out of the back of the thing's skull. The beast's head collapsed in a most disgusting way, and then it fell to the ground.

I ran over to where the monster had fallen. Malagor jumped up to his feet, as if to prove to me and to himself that he was all right. He looked at me with a blank expression.

"Finally, an animal I know," he said. "This is a stummada. It is not good to eat."

"I don't think he had the same opinion of you," I replied.

"No it did not. But it is not a he. It is a female. The mate of this one may come along at any moment. Let us return to our side of the hill."

We started on our way home. I would like to if I might, interject a small commentary at this point. As I tell this story it must seem that I was well versed in the language of the Amatharians. I must confess that at the time I was not, although I count myself now, to be quite fluent in that beautiful language. For example, in the previous conversation between myself and Malagor, we had a great deal of trouble at first with the Amatharian terminology for the animal's mate, but after examining the context of the word, and a little impromptu tutelage by Malagor, I was able to piece together the meaning. So it was with a great deal of the language that I learned during my time with my alien friend. If I do not fully detail every element of my conversational education, please believe me when I say that it is not an intentional effort to make myself seem more intelligent. Rather it is just that in looking back I remember the content of our conversations rather than the exact wording.

Malagor and I made our way back around the mountain to our cliff camp. There we slept and then went out once again to fill our water skins from a small mountain brook, and to hunt for our dinner. This time Malagor let me stalk and hunt the game. He guided me, carefully giving me helpful instruction. I eventually managed to bring down a small rodent-like grazer which proved to be quite tasty.

During what seemed to me to be a few weeks, Malagor and I went hunting frequently and he seemed to take great pleasure in teaching me how to track and kill animals of all types. After a while I became relatively adept. I began to notice that when we hunted, we did not follow a random pattern. Each time, Malagor would choose a direction just to the left of the direction which we had taken upon the last hunt. While we hunted, he was surveying the land around us in a very systematic way, dividing it up like a giant pie, with us in the very center of the search pattern. On one occasion I asked him what we were searching for, but he seemed to clam up, and become positively morose for the rest of the trip, so I didn't ask him again. He had been very good to me, and indeed we had become close friends, so if there was something that bothered him too much to talk about, I wasn't going to pester him about it. After all, I had nothing else to do in the world of Ecos. So if Malagor wanted to conduct a search while we hunted for our game, what difference did it make to me?

One time when we out were hunting, we began tracking a particularly large bird-like animal about the size of a cow. Neither Malagor nor I had any idea whether it was edible, but we were beginning to tire of our usual catches, so we decided to experiment upon the unfortunate creature. We were still outside bow range of the beast, crouched in the tall grass, when the hair on the nape of my neck began to stand on end. I glanced at my arm and found that the small hairs there were acting in a similar fashion. Then I looked at my friend and almost laughed. He looked like he had just been blow-dried, every hair sticking straight out.

Malagor was looking at neither me nor our prey however. Then I noticed a distant hum and followed Malagor's gaze to discover its origin. Sailing along above the countryside at an altitude of about a



thousand feet was the most remarkable vehicle that I have ever seen. It was many times the size of the largest modern aircraft carrier or battleship of earth, fully a mile long and nearly half that wide. It was only a few hundred feet tall over most of its span, but there was a tower rising a hundred or more stories from the top middle of the thing. The entire vehicle was painted black, and was bristling with weapons or instruments of some kind, and the closer it got, the more obvious it was that this was the source of the strange magnetism in the air. This was some kind of great cruiser riding through the air on a field of electrical energy.

"What is that thing?" I asked.

"It is a Zoasian Battleship," replied Malagor.

"You never mentioned the Zoasians," I pointed out.

His voice became low.

"The Zoasians destroyed my people," he said.

## Chapter Four: The Battle

Malagor and I crouched in the high grass watching the mile long Zoasian battleship hum along in the sky. The great dreadnought cruised to a point about four miles away from us, and came slowly to a halt. I asked my friend if the Zoasians might have spotted us, as there seemed to be no other reason for the ship to have stopped, but he did not seem to think it likely. I asked him if the ship was equipped with radar or sonar, but he had no knowledge of those devices. I tried to explain them to him, but since I am neither a scientist nor engineer, I didn't do a very good job. Malagor seemed to get the gist of it, though he said that such technology was unknown in Ecos, or at least the part of it known to him. He assured me that the only detection apparatus aboard the great vessel were powerful telescopes manned by Zoasian observers.

We continued to watch the ship from our location for a very long time. It might have been an hour, or it might have been a week-- there was just no way for me to judge. As we waited, I strained my eyes to make out every detail possible on the fantastic vessel. The weapons were massive and futuristic in design, though possessing none of the simple beauty of the light rifles we carried. There were numerous structures and housings along the top and sides of the ship, but it was impossible to determine what the purpose of any individual compartment might be. In the foreword of the vessel was what I assumed to be an airstrip, lined with bizarre looking aircraft. This was somewhat of an assumption on my part, since they did not look at all like earthly planes, but I was later to be proven to be correct. I could see tiny figures moving around on deck but the distance was too great for me to make out any detail.

I was drawn away from my careful observation when Malagor tapped me on the shoulder. He directed my attention by pointing off into the distance. At first I could see little except the green band where the Ecosian landscape reached up to become the Ecosian sky. After a moment though, I saw a dot in the distance which steadily grew in size. It didn't take long for me to determine what the object was. It was a ship similar in size and method of locomotion to the great Zoasian battleship, and it was zooming toward the black ship at over one hundred miles per hour. Of course the eternal sun of Ecos makes the measure of miles per hour almost meaningless in terms of long distances covered, but it seems the best way for me to describe the velocities involved.

I glanced at the first ship and saw that it was turning its weaponry toward the interloper. The airstrip on the upper deck began spitting aircraft into the sky. It turned slowly like some great black beast crouching for a spring. It presented all its teeth to the enemy.

The second ship was close enough to observe clearly now. It was roughly the same shape as the Zoasian vessel, and seemed to have a similar array of armament. Instead of being the hollow black of the battleship though, it was painted navy blue with bright silver trim and highlights. From all over the craft were hung colorful banners and bright waving flags. Along the bow was a great golden insignia-- two crossed swords above a flaming sun. This ship too began disgorging squadrons of aircraft.

"Amatharians," said Malagor. "The banners on the ship are the colors of her knights. The insignia means that there is someone important on board."

"Why would they fly into battle if they were carrying someone important?" I asked.

"If an Amatharian sees a Zoasian, he will attack. If a Zoasian sees an Amatharian, he will attack. These two things are as sure as the sun in the sky."

The two ships began to fire their weaponry almost simultaneously, as the squadrons of fighter aircraft began to engage in a huge and deadly dogfight. The Zoasian armament consisted of a broad range of weapon types, from missiles to powerful cannon to a particularly ugly black ray. The Amatharian weaponry appeared to be all of one type, based on the same principles as the light rifles, with their churning bubbling liquid sunlight, although the shipboard guns fired light streams anywhere from one inch to one foot in diameter.

The battle went on and on. It seemed incredible that ships of even that size could withstand the

punishment that those two did. Each took hit after hit from the enemy ship and its aircraft. Fighters were shot out of the sky right and left, and they dropped to the ground bursting into fireballs. Several of them crashed into the enemy ship, or into their own. Explosions rocked the battle-cruisers, and we could see tiny figures on the deck fighting fires and in many cases, losing those fights. After a while it seemed that most of the fighters were gone, victims of the ongoing conflict, but the two great dreadnoughts refused to give up. They kept pouring volley after volley into each other. As they did so, the battle began to slowly drift our way.

"I think that we had better find another vantage point." I said, as I started to gather our things together. "Wait, look," said Malagor, pointing at the conflict.

It seemed that both ships had been damaged to the point where they were no longer under complete control. The Zoasian ship began to slowly twist away out of control. It was the Amatharian vessel though, it was now obvious, which had taken the greater damage. First it listed slowly to one side, then tilted over more and more, until it appeared as though it was a toy hung from a string attached to its bow. Then, slowly at first, but with rapidly increasing speed, the ship dropped from the sky. As it plowed into the ground below, it erupted into flame as great explosions rocked the countryside. It reminded me of the old film clips of the Hindenburg disaster, though on a much greater scale, and I could feel the heat of the explosion upon my face.

As the victims of the great disaster ran from the explosive fire and destruction, their enemy took after them. Apparently the Zoasian commander was unable to lower his ship, or even turn it so that its weapons could engage his surviving enemies. Instead, dozens of long ropes dropped from the bottom of the great battleship, and hundreds of Zoasian soldiers slid down to attack their remaining foes. The Amatharians though greatly outnumbered did not flee. They turned to face the conquerors. My heart went out to them. Then as if to hurl insult upon injury, the few remaining Zoasian fighter aircraft swept down from the sky and began to strafe them with the deadly black rays. This seemed to me a most cowardly act, and it was something that I could not stand. Pulling out my sword like some quixotic fool, I ran down the gentle slope of the countryside toward the raging battle, with little regard to my own hide. I do not say that I am brave, and I don't like to think that I am a fool, but I must admit now that this particular action at the time was somewhat foolish, and perhaps somewhat brave, but it set into effect such a remarkable chain of events with consequences so important to my life, that I have never regretted it. In retrospect, I know that I heard Malagor calling after me to stop and to come back, but at the time my brain didn't consciously register him. I ran straight into the fray, and as I did so, I was able for the first time, to take in a great deal of information about the appearances of the Amatharians and the Zoasians, and though I did not ponder that information at the time, I will relay it to you now in the hope that it will enhance your appreciation for my subsequent actions.

The Zoasians were the further away of the two forces, but they were close enough for some important distinctions. For one thing they were large-- very large. They were about the same height as me. I am just over six feet, though they were more massive. They seemed to be about five feet wide at the shoulder, though I later learned that their clothing enhanced their width by about a foot. Even that day, at that moment, I had a sense that they were very, very heavy, a sense which was later to be confirmed. They weigh almost one thousand earthly pounds, too much for even my gravity-enhanced earthly muscles to lift. They were big and they were black. They were so black in fact, that at first they seemed to be nothing so much as great looming shadows, but then their features began to fill themselves in. They were reptiles, or something like a reptile. They were scaly, and slightly slower moving than humans. Although they had an upright form with two arms with two humanoid hands, and two massive legs with somewhat humanoid feet, they trailed behind them a thick powerful tale. At first I felt something vaguely familiar about their facial features, but I knew that they did not quite resemble the heads of a lizards. Then it struck me. Their faces were the faces of snakes, with the perpetual smile of the cold blooded killer. The Amatharians were, as Malagor had said, much like me, or for that matter much like any humans. They were human, and but for a few racial characteristics, they could have seemed at home anywhere on earth. Those racial characteristics however, were a bit unearthly. They were tall, ranging in the six foot to seven foot range. Their hair was universally straight and black. The men wore it cut straight across

the forehead and straight at the back of the neck. The women wore theirs in a variety of lengths, though in each case it was straight and evenly cut, whether at the shoulders or across the middle of the back. Facial hair was not in evidence, and I was later to learn is completely unknown among them. Their skin was blue in color, with a wide variation of shades. Some were as dark as the inside of a Teflon frying pan, while others were almost a baby blue. The clothing they wore was an interesting contradiction of utilitarianism and style. They wore a black body suit from their necks to their ankles, which was tighter, and of thinner material than the spandex biking pants that had been popular shortly before I left my home planet. Through the material, every muscle was visible as it strained to heft the swords which almost every Amatharian used in his defense. Over their body suit the knights of Amathar wore a tabard-- nothing more than a long strip of cloth eighteen inches wide, with a hole so that it fit over the head. It reached down to below the knees in front and in back, but was completely open on the sides. On both the front and back panels was emblazoned a great symbol, that was the coat of arms for that knight, and which was different from one to the other.

I waded into the closest skirmish where four Amatharians, two men and two women, were holding off a score of the Zoasians. One humanoid had drawn his sword and was cutting up the nearest foe. The others used their light rifles. The snake-men were using rifle and pistol versions of their ugly death ray. They didn't carry swords, apparently being too slow to use them effectively. With a great leap of my earthly power, I closed the gap to the nearest Zoasian. I swung my sword but it was deflected by the being's body-armor, a feature I heretofore hadn't noticed. It covered his body from neck to tail, and appeared to be made of some type of synthetic plasticized leather material. It was studded with horns and crests of bright metal, but was otherwise as black as the snake-man himself.

The Zoasian was evidently not hurt by my blow, the armor having absorbed the shock, but he was surprised. He opened his mouth wide and hissed at me with a great forked tongue. Then he brought forth his powerful hand with the ray-weapon in its grasp. I was too quick for him though, and with a mighty sweep of my sword arm, I removed his hand between the wrist and the elbow. He didn't cry out, but reeled backwards in pain. I should have finished him off quickly, but I didn't. Something instead caught my eye.

Just over the shoulder of my opponent, I spied one of the Amatharians fighting against great odds. It was one of the females. She was breathtakingly beautiful. Her hair was long and black and straight. Her skin was flawless and of a deep metallic blue color, like the steel beams of a building under construction. She was about six foot two and powerfully built, though not by any means unfeminine. Her black body-suit covered her from the top of her neck to the top of her shining black boots. Her white tabard was surrounded by gold braid and was emblazoned with the most beautiful crest-- two crossed swords over a flaming sun-- and the back of it trailed behind her in the wind like the cape of some fantastic comic book heroine. She had abandoned her light weapon and was using her sword, carving up several Zoasians at once like a butcher with a row of fresh steaks. With each stroke the sword blade seemed to glow with the pride and the glory of battle. I had decided to rush to the aid of this beautiful vision, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a looming form. It was the Zoasian with whom I had been previously engaged. Before I could turn toward him he slammed his remaining fist into the side of my head. I was tossed twenty feet by the force of the blow. I fell to the ground and everything went black.

I opened my eyes to look into the face of my friend Malagor. He opened his mouth and snarled at me. "You are not smart," he growled. "I teach you all that I know, and still you know nothing."

I pulled myself to my feet and looked around. Nearby was the Zoasian who had hit me, easily recognizable by his missing hand. Malagor had shot him with his light rifle before the reptile had the chance to finish me off. That I had been out for a while was evidenced by the fact that there no longer remained any living warriors of either race within a good hundred yards or so. Bodies, both human and reptilian though, were strewn everywhere. In the distance I could see the Zoasian armies being hauled by cable up onto the deck of their disabled battle-cruiser. Suddenly remembering the woman that I had seen just before being knocked senseless, I began examining all of the Amatharian bodies nearby. I could find none that matched the vision that I had previously beheld. I turned to ask Malagor if he had seen what had become of her, but something beyond him caught my eye. Malagor turned to see what I

was looking at, and we both became witnesses to a fantastic scene.

Standing in the blood of friend and enemy alike, was a single Amatharian knight. He was exceptionally tall and muscular-- the perfect specimen of the timeless warrior. He held high above his head that weapon that so epitomizes the Amatharian-- his sword. It was almost as highly crafted and ornate as the ancient swords that I had found, but it had something that mine did not. The blade of the weapon glowed. It more than glowed. It was actually lit up like a fluorescent light bulb. This was all the more fascinating for the fact that the metal of the blade seemed to be the same type as the unknown, but mundane metal, of which I found my own new blades to be composed.

He held his sword as if waiting for an enemy, and indeed he was. Bearing down upon him from the sky, at a speed equaling any terrestrial fighter jet, was one of the Zoasian fighter aircraft. It swooped down lower and lower, until it became apparent that the pilot was planning to fly right into the man on the ground, and splatter him on the front of the plane like a bug on the front of a Buick. It covered a mile in less than a second as it headed toward its intended target, yet the warrior on the ground did not turn or run away. It was the most heroically stupid and futile thing that I had ever witnessed, and it my heart filled with admiration for brave man. Then when the jet was no more than fifty feet from him, the knight dropped to one knee, still holding the sword high above him. The fighter continued on into the sword, but the sword was not ripped away from the man's hand, and it was not destroyed by the force of impact. Instead the sword sliced through the aircraft, through metal, plastic, fuel tanks, and pilot. The craft blew apart and a huge fireball replaced it on the battlefield. Both Malagor and I dropped to the ground to avoid flying debris. Moments later I was back on my feet, looking for the remains of the brave Amatharian. To my surprise I saw him rise to his feet, burned but not gravely injured. He looked at the remains of his dead foe, and raising his face to the eternal Ecosian sun, he cried out in victory and challenge.

## Chapter Five: Knight of Amathar

Slowly the victorious warrior scanned the battlefield around him, and as he did so, his eyes alighted upon Malagor and myself. He started slowly toward us. I did nothing but stand and stare at the alien knight. He moved slowly at first, but as he got nearer, he seemed more and more menacing, and when he was only several yards away, he began to raise his wondrous sword.

"Stop!" called Malagor, backing up his command by brandishing his light rifle. The blue-skinned man stopped and stared at us and particularly at me for a moment.

"You carry a dead sword," he said to me.

"I carry this sword that I found. It is not as marvelous as your own...."

"Just where did you find this sword?"

"It was in a cave, along with these light rifles," I replied.

"You took these weapons from the dead!"

"There was no body," I said, "only the weapons and some food items."

"You lie!" He took another step forward.

"He tells the truth," said Malagor. "Do not take another step, or I shall have to kill you."

The Amatharian looked carefully at my friend as if for the first time. "You are a Malagor?"

"Yes."

"My clan, long ago, dealt with the Malagor. They were a people of honor."

Malagor nodded his head slightly in acknowledgment of the compliment, but didn't lower his weapon.

"You affirm that this pale one did not desecrate the bodies of my people?"

"I swear it."

The Amatharian looked back at me, the fury of battle now fading from his eyes. He straightened his back, and then carefully sheathed his sword, which now appeared to be nothing more than a metal blade of the non-glowing variety. This fellow was a magnificent specimen. He was almost a head taller than I, at least six foot seven. He was muscular and handsome, and wore the typical Amatharian fighting clothing, the black body suit and white tabard. His own tabard was surrounded by gold braid and bore his insignia, a flaming sun with outstretched wings.

"May I see your weapon?" he asked.

I handed him the sword, hilt first. He carefully examined the blade and its edge. Then with something akin to reverence, he carefully removed the jeweled hilt and opened a here-to-fore hidden compartment in the base. He sighed. Then he carefully replaced the hilt, and handed the weapon back to me.

"I offer you my apology," he said. "A sword this fine was designed for a remiant, and yet this sword has never lived."

"I accept your apology," I replied.

I could feel Malagor breathe a sigh of relief. It was obvious that he didn't want to have to kill a brave man, especially over a misunderstanding. I certainly didn't want to force him to. The knight bowed his head.

"I am Homianne Kurar Ka Remiant Norar Remontar of the Sun Clan," he said. I later learned that he had given me his name as Norar Remontar, his rank as Remiant or knight, and his social status or nobility as Homianne Kurar Ka which literally means child of the overlord, and implies that one is a prince or princess. In Amatharian society the head of each clan is called Kurar Ka or Overlord and his direct heirs are his Homianne. Just below them in rank are the Kurar or lords, and below them the Kur or lesser nobles.

Malagor replied with his own name, which as I have previously explained, defies all attempts at transcription. It is a kind of a growl and a cough and he seemed to throw in something else, perhaps a title, though I didn't press as to what it might have been. I must confess that at that moment I felt somewhat inadequate in the name department, as I had neither a particularly long or eloquent name nor an impressive title.

"Alexander Ashton" I said.

The Zoasian ship was no longer even a dot in the sky. Malagor invited Norar Remontar to our camp to rest and recover, but he demurred saying that his first duty was to his fallen comrades. I didn't see what he could possibly do for them, as it was only too obvious that he was the only survivor, the Zoasians were quite thorough in their murderous methods, shooting even those enemies that were already down, and it would have been insane for an individual to contemplate burying all of the dead soldiers. The Amatharian explained to me that he was required by custom, to pay his respects to the dead and that he had an additional obligation to confirm the status of those members of his own family among the warriors. It seems that the military units as well as commercial concerns were organized around the concept of the family clan.

I began my own search through the bodies of the slain. I saw that Norar Remontar watched me side-long as I looked through the remains of his countrymen. Perhaps he thought that I had in mind robbing the corpses of their possessions. I of course had another, more pressing concern. I was continuing to look for the remains of the warrior goddess that I had seen during the pitched battle. She consumed me to the point that I almost thought, that if I found her dead I might take my own life, so that my body might lay beside hers. I knew in my heart that I had fallen hopelessly in love at the first sight of the beautiful Amatharian woman, and I was devastated by the thought that she was most likely dead. After what must have been a long time, the Amatharian knight concluded his business with the dead. He looked very sad, but he also looked somewhat puzzled. I too had concluded my search, but had turned up no sign of the woman of my dreams. It did seem almost as if she were made up of the stuff of dreams, so suddenly did she appear in my life, and then vanish into nowhere. I was about to explain my private loss to Malagor when Norar Remontar returned to our side.

"I cannot find the remains of my sister," he said, and I suddenly felt a knot forming in my stomach.

"What does she look like?" I asked.

He described her; her height, her flawless skin, her great strength, her flowing black hair, her beauty. I knew that he was describing the woman that I had seen, even before he mentioned the family crest emblazoned upon her tabard-- two crossed swords above a blazing sun.

"I saw her," I said.

I carefully recounted my brief experiences in the battle, and my inability to locate her body. I did not disclose my emotions toward a woman whom I did not even know, but I know that Malagor guessed my thoughts and I suspect that Norar Remontar did as well, for when I had finished my short tale, he looked at me oddly for a long moment.

"The Zoasians have captured her," Malagor said. "I saw her being taken, but was busy with other concerns."

I felt my insides fall away as I realized that I was that other concern.

"If that is so," said Norar Remontar, "it is my sworn duty to rescue her, or in the event that this is not possible, to avenge her. I would of course do this even if it were not demanded by honor. She is my sister."

"We will help you!" I declared.

"Yes, we will help you," agreed Malagor.

"Let's get our gear and go after them," I said.

"The closest Zoasian city is over twelve hundred hokents (about one million miles) away," explained the knight. "We must return first to Amathar. It is but fifty or sixty thousand kentads (forty or fifty thousand miles) from here. There I will gather together a fleet and we will attack the Zoasians and rescue my sister."

"We must start right away," I said.

"Let us return to camp, gather our gear, and rest," suggested Malagor. "Then we can start on our way toward Amathar."

We turned and started toward the camp which my dog-faced friend and I had made our home for perhaps the last few weeks. I pushed the pace and we made it in what seemed to me at least to be no time at all. We ate cold what last bit of provisions that we had on hand, sharing them with our new

companion, and then we lay down to sleep. I could not sleep of course, my mind being filled with the face of that magnificent woman. I tossed a bit and rolled over, only to find Norar Remontar watching me.

"My sister's name is Homianne Kurar Ka Remiant Noriandara Remontar of the Sun Clan," he said. "I thought that you would like to know."

"Thank you," I replied, and I promptly fell asleep, exhausted.

The three of us rose about the same time and began gathering our belongings together, and packing them. This did not take long, as none of us was possessed of noticeable material wealth. Malagor and I had managed to collect a substantial supply of animal skins and furs during our stay, and this allowed us to pick the very best from among them, and to offer Norar Remontar some as well. We gathered these items together and started on our long trek. Malagor seemed almost bouncy.

"I have always wanted to see Amathar," he said.



## Chapter Six: Prisoners of the Pell

Norar Remontar, Malagor, and I made our way across the vast interior surface of the planet Ecos. We had been walking for quite a long time. I cannot stress enough, the meaninglessness of time when one does not have the convenience of a day and night cycle with which to gauge it. Norar Remontar had occasion to discuss the concept of time at great length with me. Realizing that the Amatharian was from a highly technological society, I asked him if his people carried time pieces. I could see no watch carried openly upon his person. He didn't seem to know what a clock was and I of course tried to explain. "Yes, we have a device which we use in Amathar to note the time, but we do not measure it," he replied. "I find this idea of yours that time is a constant that can be accurately and evenly measured to be most improbable. My people are taught that time varies. As I talk with you, time moves quickly, and when I, at the end of our conversation, look back, I will see that we have traveled a great distance. When I am not talking to you, but am instead quietly thinking of home, time moves very slowly indeed, and when I look back after what seems to be an eternity, I find that I have not traveled that far at all."

I thought a great deal about Norar Remontar's statement, and I decided that in a world of eternal noon, it seemed to make perfect sense. There was certainly nothing that I could think of to discredit the idea. Time was of course not the only thing that we spoke of on that trek. So long was the journey in fact, that even if we had spoken but a small fraction of the time, our conversations could fill several volumes. Norar Remontar took great pride and delight in telling me all about the people and the culture of Amathar. Here is a brief synopsis of that history as he first recounted it to me.

"Long, long ago, my ancestors were savages. They lived in small tribal kingdoms, and they warred against themselves, as well as with other nearby races. The people knew nothing of technology, nothing of art, and most importantly, they knew nothing of honor.

"Into the land, came the man known as Amath. He was not one of the people. He was from a place far away. I don't know where. He united the people of the tribal kingdoms against their common enemies, yet he taught them to recognize their friends as well. He found the Garden of Souls and he organized the City of Amathar around it. He taught the people art, literature, love, and honor. He was the first leader of Amathar, and so the city is named for him. He chose the best of the warriors to be his successors, for he had no offspring of his own, and he founded the Holy Order to guard against the evils in the hearts of men.

"All of this was long ago. Amath has been gone two or three hundred generations, but all that we Amatharians are, all that we hold as truths, are due to his teaching and his guidance. Each of us carries his tome of teachings."

The knight produced a small book from an unseen pocket, and handed it to me. It was bound like an ordinary book one would find on earth, but the pages were some type of plastic. The characters on the page were tiny little animals and other recognizable shapes—the sun, a tree, a human hand. I handed Norar Remontar back his book and determined that some day I would learn to read the strange writing, and find out just what the teachings of Amath were.

Many times on our journey I pressed the knight to tell me about his city. On these occasions he would simply smile, and say that I would have to see it for myself. Of course my personal interests were constantly being drawn to the subject of his sister. I didn't want to arouse Norar Remontar's ire by accidentally disgracing her somehow, and truth be told, I was somewhat embarrassed by my single-minded desire to see this woman again. Of course being no fool, he saw through my efforts to artificially generalize the subject, but played along with me anyway. It seemed that in Amatharian society, both the men and the women were able to become knights and pursue careers in any field. The culture was a matrilineal one. The Amatharians passed on their family name from mother to daughter, but even more important than the family name, were the family crests, and these were passed from elder family members, to those children, grandchildren, and even nephews and nieces, who managed to achieve

knighthood. Norar Remontar and a cousin had received their crests from an uncle who was a war hero. His sister inherited her crest from her grandfather.

We crossed planes and hills and valleys and an occasional mountain range, and must have been some thousands of miles from the sight of the airship battle when we reached the edge of an immense forest. It stretched to the left and right as far as the eye could see. Of course as with all things of this scale, when we came up close to the edge of the woodland, we found that it was not one great forest, but a vast area of connected forests with small glens and meadows scattered here and there. We plunged into this new terrain and continued on our way.

The first several hundred miles of the forest land was lightly wooded. There were a great many open areas and we found many fruits and vegetables along the way to supplement our hunting. As the miles went on by though, we left the lightly wooded areas behind us, and entered an increasingly dark and forbidding landscape. It was the kind of forest that one might find in an old black and white horror movie, or one of those fantasy novels with pointed-eared goblins peaking out from behind large oak trees. In this densely wooded country, hunting became more difficult, but because of the urgency of our quest, we could not take any more time than was absolutely necessary in any one location. So it was that when once more we had to make camp, for the first time, we sat looking at one another over an empty spot on the ground where our food might normally be found roasting on a spit above a small camp fire.

"This is most discouraging to me," said Malagor. "It is not right for a Malagor to go without food."

"At least we have water," said Norar Remontar. "I am surprised that we have been able to stay as well fed as we have. Before this trip I had been hunting only three or four times with my uncle, and I mean no disrespect when I say that Alexander seems to be as unskilled as I am in this arena."

"He has led a soft life," explained Malagor. "I am guessing that even though you have done little hunting, your life has not been soft. You are a warrior."

"You are mistaken my friend," the Amatharian replied. "My life has not been a hard one. We in Amathar live well, and I as the son of a Kurar Ka have lived too well. I have never wanted. All my life I was provided for, was given everything that I desired, and was tutored by masters in every subject.

"When I reached manhood I set out to explore the distant lands of Ecos by signing on to my uncle's trading group. As a warrior and then a swordsman, I was required to fight pirates and monsters, and I did so without fear. I proved myself in battle; at least my soul thought that I had. I went to the Garden of Souls and I found my soul. Then on my first mission as a knight, in my first confrontation with the enemy of my people, I lose my ship and my sister."

"That wasn't your fault," I interjected quickly. "It was a tremendous battle and you fought bravely."

"It was my duty to protect my sister," said the knight. "She was conveying an important diplomatic mission for our grandfather. Beside, she is my sister." He lay down and then rolled over so that his back was facing Malagor and me.

Malagor looked at me, nodded, and lay down. There was a chill in the air, and the sky was becoming overcast, so much so that I almost imagined that the sun was going down. Of course it remained directly above, as always, but it did grow rather dark. I began to wish that we had built a fire, despite the fact that we had nothing to cook over it. I leaned back and prepared for my turn at watch. I was very tired though, and after a moment's reflection, as I have just recounted, that the thick green canopy above, in combination with the storm clouds rolling in provided almost enough darkness to remind one of night time, I fell into a state of half sleep.

The first thing that aroused me from my slumber was a low growl coming from Malagor. I rolled over and looked at him. He was trussed up tightly in some kind of white netting, and he obviously didn't like it. Suddenly I was knocked back onto my back by something large and black and hairy. I stared horror-struck at a big black spider, fully fifty pounds, and with a body more than three feet across, sitting astride my chest. With the strength of my earth-born muscles combined with a great rush of adrenaline, I thrust the creature away from me. It was quite an impressive push, for it flew about twenty feet and crashed with a splat into the bole of a large tree. I stood up, but before I could draw my sword or do anything else, I found myself being wrapped by strands of sticky white netting, and I looked to find a dozen more of the spiders encircling me and coating me with webbing silk. Scant seconds later, I fell

down onto my side, completely incased in a silk cocoon. Only my head remained exposed. My position on the ground put me face to face with Norar Remontar, and he looked at me and shook his head.

"You fell asleep."

"Yes," I replied.

"You were supposed to be on guard."

"Yes."

"Now you have killed us. These are Pell."

"We're not dead yet," I offered.

"You will be soon," a grotesque, high-pitched, squeaking voice said.

## Chapter Seven: Doomed to Die

I couldn't believe it. It was one of the spiders which had spoken-- a particularly large, ugly, and bloated individual.

"Soon I will bite you on your neck, and suck the delicious juices from your body."

"I hope you get indigestion," I replied.

"I won't. I have eaten many Amatharians. You are delicious. Of course that furry one is not fit to eat."

The disgusting thing pointed one of its front legs at Malagor. "We will lay our eggs upon it."

"You have killed us," Norar Remontar repeated.

"I suppose I've disgraced myself by my negligence."

"No. It was merely an unfortunate mistake."

"I don't have to kill myself to atone for it?"

"My people do not believe in suicide. If an Amatharian must make reparation for a wrong, he does it by doing service for the one he has injured. Besides, I do not think that you would have the opportunity to kill yourself."

The large ugly spider creature spoke again.

"You must remain alive. You must be alive when I suck your insides out."

Now it is not so much that I mind someone, or in this case I guess it was something, talking about sucking my insides out, but I had the impression that this thing was baiting me and trying to scare me. I was determined to put a brave face on the situation, if only to give Norar Remontar a good impression of me. So I spat right in the spider's face, or what I took to be its face. It screamed out in a high pitched whine that made my spine tingle, and actually made Malagor yelp out in pain. The spider jumped and danced around in a circle, whether in pain or in ecstasy I couldn't say, but after that it seemed to keep farther away from my face for which I was grateful. If you would like to get a real idea of my predicament, simply go out to the back yard and move some wood or a flower pot until you find a large plump Black Widow spider. Put the spider in a jar, and look at it through a magnifying glass. Now imagine that face right up next to yours talking to you, and you will see almost exactly what I saw there in the forests of Ecos, for the Pell, as the Amatharians call these creatures, resemble nothing so much as a fifty pound Black Widow, without the red hour glass marking.

For the first time since being trussed up, I looked around to take a real stock of our enemies. There were about twenty of the disgusting creatures around, and they all looked about the same, with slight variations of size. Then without so much as another word or shrill squeal, the spiders started off through the forest. Four spiders grabbed my cocoon in their vertical mouths and began to drag me across the forest floor. Malagor and Norar Remontar were subjects of similar treatment. It was neither a comfortable nor a dignified way to travel. We were dragged about a mile into a very dark and silent portion of the forest.

The Pell had taken us to their home. This settlement, if one can so dignify the place with that name, was nothing more than an immense spider web covering several hundred square yards, and rising high into the upper branches of a number of trees. We were taken to the center of the spider web, then long strands of silk were tied to our feet, and we were hauled up to hang upside down some thirty feet above the ground. I then noticed that the Pell numbered in the hundreds, ranging in size from about as big as a tarantula, to one individual, possibly the village elder, which was about the size of a large pony. All of these beasts climbed around the webbing, but their main residence seemed to be a large hole in the ground below us and a little to my left.

I have always hated spiders, and the experience of hanging by my ankles in a giant web, and being examined by arachnids close to my own size did nothing to strengthen my opinion of them. I tried to think of some way to free my hands, but they were wrapped tightly at my sides. I couldn't imagine things getting any worse than they were at that moment, but they really always can. Just then it started to rain.

I like rain. I suppose that it is because I grew up in the southwestern United States, where rainfall is relatively rare. However rain, when in conjunction with gravity, has an unfortunate effect upon an individual who is hanging upside down. It runs up his nose.

"You have killed me," said Malagor, and he stretched out his head and began a long low howl. This did nothing to improve my own state of mind. I looked around, blinded by the water running over my face, but desperate to find some means of escape. There seemed little hope.

"Can't you call on the power of your sword?" I asked Norar Remontar.

"What?"

"Can't you call upon the soul in your sword to rescue you?"

"I do not call upon the soul. It comes of its own accord. And it does not do so to cut bonds. It comes only for battle."

"That seems inconvenient," I replied. "I see no way of escape."

"There is no way of escape," said a high-pitched voice. "You are doomed to die, as am I."

I twisted my body around to look upon a Pell sitting nearby. It was about the size of a big dog, but otherwise seemed identical to all the other spider creatures.

"You are doomed to die?" Malagor asked. "Why?"

"I have angered the web-leader. I feasted upon food that was not mine."

"Could you get us out of this web and these cocoons?" I inquired.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Why not? You are going to die anyway."

"My death will not be as horrible as it would be should I release you."

"We are going to Amathar. If you were to come with us, you would escape death, and be welcome there." I was attempting to weave a web of my own as I talked. "He'd be welcome. Wouldn't he, Norar Remontar?"

"No," he said.

"Work with me here!" I pleaded.

"The Amatharian speaks truly. I have no place else to go. Amathar would not welcome me," the arachnid whined.

"What if Norar Remontar promised to protect you. You know Amatharians always keep their word. He could promise to find you a new home." The Pell's forelegs began to twitch.

"You'll protect him and find him a new home. Won't you, Norar Remontar?"

"No," he said.

"Do you want to live to see Amathar? Do you want to be able to rescue your sister?" I hissed. "Tell the damn spider you'll protect him if he'll let us go."

"No," he said.

"I cannot go far away," whined the Pell.

"Why are you up here anyway?" I asked him. "Why would you be sentenced to death for eating something that wasn't yours?"

"We eat any live flesh," he explained, "but thinking, speaking creatures are reserved for the leader and the hive elder."

"That hardly seems fair. Why, a fellow like you... what was your name?"

"Vvvv."

"Why," I continued, "I would much rather be eaten by a fine fellow like you than almost anyone else. What about you, Malagor?"

"Indeed," said my companion. "It would be an honor to be eaten by Vvvv."

"You must surely be the finest of the Pell," I said. "In fact, now that I think about it, why aren't you the leader?"

"I should be!" squealed the spider, puffing himself up larger. "I have always known that I should be leader! Even the lower forms can see it!"

"Just let us out of these cocoons. Free us from this web, and we will kill the leader for you."

"You must kill the hive elder too," hissed Vvvv.

"Of course we will," I assured him. "Won't we Norar Remontar?"

The Amatharian looked blankly at me. I continued.

"Then the rightful ruler of the Pell will be able to take command."

"You must hurry," said Malagor. "The rain is beginning to stop. Soon the other Pell will return."

"I will do it!" shouted Vvvv. "You promise to kill them both?"

"We will," I asserted.

The spider quickly crawled over to Malagor and using his vertical mouth snipped through the webbing. Norar Remontar was freed next and finally me. I was free no more than a second before I lost my balance, not being particularly arboreal. Flailing my arms wildly, I fell from the webbing, thirty feet down toward the ground, and landed in a sitting position right upon the back of the largest spider creature in the settlement.

## Chapter Eight: Pursued

I felt a crushing, squishing sound, as the life and the insides were crushed out of the giant spider upon which I had landed. Jumping to my feet, I found the hulking arachnid looking much like a very small one looks, after it has been stepped upon. The many other spider beings of the compound stood completely still for what must have been several minutes, enough time for Norar Remontar and Malagor to clamber down from the web. They were standing by my side, as was our liberator Vvvv, when the Pell began once again to move. They did not move toward us, or attempt to attack, but instead simply spun around in a bizarre dance as if they had lost their minds. Vvvv seemed immune to this behavior.

"Now would be a great time to leave," I said.

"We have fulfilled only half of our commitment," said Norar Remontar, and drawing his sword, leapt toward the Pell whom I had earlier enjoyed spitting upon. As he raised his sword above his head, it began to provide a lovely pale illumination, and as he sliced through the body of the monster, the body hairs and flesh sizzled as if the weapon had been a hot brand. The Amatharian moved quickly away from the arachnids and began a trot toward the forest. Malagor and I followed.

"It's all yours, Vvvv!" I called out, stopping to look back from the forest edge.

The Pell who had freed us positioned himself upon a large rock and began speaking to his fellows in the whistling language of their kind. Presumably he was presenting his credentials to be leader, or urging them to some sort of action. The other spiders listened for a moment, then with a swift and determined viciousness, set upon him with their stingers and their fangs. In scant seconds, the hapless Vvvv had been torn to pieces. Then the entire horde turned toward me.

I quickly took off after my companions who were several hundred feet ahead of me by now. It didn't take me long, with my gravity enhanced muscles, to catch up with them. I quickly relayed the events going on behind us, and we all redoubled our efforts to get away from the area. I of course, had no trouble in trotting along at quite a good pace, and Norar Remontar seemed to be quite the long-distance runner, but my friend Malagor, though he was quite capable of attaining great speed for short distances, was clearly not built for the long haul. We were forced to stop every so often so that he could rest. As soon as we perceived our pursuers approaching, we would be off.

"Perhaps we should simply stop and fight," suggested Norar Remontar, as we trotted along. "We are not asleep this time, and I feel quite certain that we could sell our lives dearly."

"I am not quite sure that I am ready to sell mine at all," I replied.

Just then however, the forest abruptly ended at the base of a tremendously high mountain. It was as if the ground had simply turned perpendicular to itself. There was no way to continue forward, so we cut to the left, and began to trace our way along the edifice. We jogged along at a renewed pace, but soon discovered that our detour had allowed our pursuers to reach us. Just to our left, several dozen of the Pell rushed out of the forest and toward us.

Norar Remontar and I drew our swords, Malagor pulled out his knife, and the three of us turned to face our foes. I could see from the corner of my right eye, the Amatharian's sword begin to glow with its unearthly light. Foremost in my mind however, was the spider that was directly in front of me, and the two others who were attempting to sneak around to my left.

Rather than wait to be completely encircled, I made the first move. Jumping up and to the side, I dropped down sword point first on one of the two Pell to the side of me. I quickly rolled over the top of the creature's body pulling the sword blade free as I did, and using the body as a shield from the other two who lunged forward. I swung the sword in a great arc and actually sliced through the bodies of both attackers. My appreciation of myself was short-lived however, for at that moment, I felt thick silky strands being sprayed upon me from behind.

I am sure that most can understand my feelings when I say that having once been encased in the cocoon of a giant spider-creature; I had lost any desire to be so encased again. I jumped straight up into the air,

my intention being to land behind the attacker who was at the moment behind me. The silk threads now attached to my back made this impossible. Instead I flipped over backwards and landed on the back of the spider. He was a large one. I drove my sword down into its body so hard that it stuck into the ground beneath him.

Jumping to my feet, I prepared to meet any additional onslaught, but the only other Pell near me was already beating a hasty retreat back into the forest. A quick glance at my two companions confirmed that they were relatively unharmed. Malagor, while practically covered with web strands, had managed to keep from being trapped. Several dead enemies lay around him, in some cases connected to him by the strands of webbing running from him to the spinnerets in their lifeless bodies. Norar Remontar stood amid a ring of dead Pell, their bodies still smoking from the effects of his fantastic sword. I resolved to learn as much as I could about the Amatharian swords and the souls within them.

It seemed to me that the Pell had gotten more from us than they expected, but Norar Remontar insisted we go some distance from the sight of the battle before we stopped to clean ourselves up. We followed along the edge of the seemingly impassable mountain for quite a while until we found a small pool of water collected from a spring in the rocks. It was twenty feet across, looked to be some eight to ten feet deep, and was crystal clear. We sat beside it and drank from it, washed, and then rested. We slept, taking turns at watch, and this time none of us fell asleep during our turn to stand guard.

When I awoke from my turn at sleeping, I found the other two bathing in the water. I was surprised at this, since I knew that Malagor was not much for swimming.

"We are not bathing or swimming," said Malagor when I questioned him on the subject. "Norar Remontar has discovered a passageway below the water. It leads four kentars back into the mountain, where it opens into a large chamber."

"I believe that we should explore the cavern," said Norar Remontar. "My people leave caches of weapons and food many places, much like the one you found before you met me. I believe that your swords were left along with the other supplies as an emergency cache some twenty or thirty generations ago. Perhaps we may find a similar cache here."

My friends had already gathered their gear. I had only my weapons. So after making sure they were secure; I plunged into the cool, clear water and dived down into the underwater passage. It was indeed a tunnel leading back into the mountain. I held my breath and swam into it. I am a fair swimmer, but not when fully clothed. Just as I was beginning to feel desperate for air, I reached the other end of the tunnel, and surfaced to find myself in a dark cavern. It was, just as Malagor had said, about four kentars, or seventeen feet from the outside pool.

I climbed out of the water, which on this side of the passage, was merely a round hole of about three feet in diameter. My Amatharian friend was looking around in the darkness with some type of small flashlight. It seemed strange that I had never seen the light before, until I realized that in all the time that I had known Norar Remontar, we had never been in darkness. The eternal noon day sun of Ecos had been our constant companion.

The cavern was roughly circular and quite large, some forty feet across. There seemed to be nothing in it, with the exception of the small pool from which we had made our entrance, and several large round boulders. However at the end of the room, farthest from the pool, Norar Remontar found something. I stepped over to where he was carefully examining a section of the cavern wall. Malagor followed.

In the beam of the Amatharian's small light was a patch of stone, which had been artificially smoothed. Within this flat area was carved a series of symbols. There was nothing about them that seemed in the least familiar to me, but then I was from another planet after all.

"This isn't written in Amatharian, is it?" I asked.

"No," replied Norar Remontar. "If I am not mistaken, this is an example of the petroglyphic writing of the ancient Orlons."

"I am not familiar with those people," said Malagor.

"The ancient Orlons occupied much of the area that we of Amathar now call our own. They were long dead in the time of Amath, but they left many ruins scattered around the area. We Amatharians study their remains in our schools. They existed for many thousands of generations, and in the last stages of



their civilization, the Orlons were quite technologically advanced, using aircraft and high speed ground transport systems. Of course their early sights are quite primitive by comparison. This certainly looks to be a very early example of their writing."

"Can you read it?" I asked.

"I am no expert in archaeology," Norar Remontar replied, "though I do remember a few of the symbols from my school days."

He carefully examined the writing for several minutes. There were twenty two symbols in all on the smooth section of the wall. The first was a simple triangle, but others were squiggly lines, circles with little pictures in them, sun symbols, and a thing that looked a lot like a cow's head. Finally Norar Remontar pointed to a square with a stylized arrow running through it.

"This is the only one that I recognize," he said. "It is the symbol for a door."

"Perhaps this is an indicator that there is a door within this chamber somewhere," offered Malagor.

"A doorway to where?" I asked. "Into the mountain? Maybe it's indicating the water passage we just came through."

"Why would some one put a message that there is a door, in the one place that a person would be in, in which they already know there is a door?" demanded Malagor. "Why put a 'door' sign on the inside of the room?"

"Maybe they are not pointing out the door," I replied. "Maybe they are saying something about it, like 'can you believe how hard it was to swim in through that door.' Maybe they are not talking about a real door at all. Maybe this is a burial sight and they are marking the 'great door to the afterlife'."

"I believe there is a hidden door here somewhere," interjected Norar Remontar. "As I recall, the Orlons were somewhat famous for leaving secret passages and hidden entryways in their constructions. Let's start looking around the cavern. Look for anything which does not look completely at home or entirely natural."

The three of us divided up and began to move around the chamber, examining the floors and walls. I focused on the walls to the left of the inscription and pushed every tiny outcropping and stuck my finger in every tiny hole. Suddenly the chamber resounded with a squealing sound that echoed around the room.

It was my stomach. I was hungry.

"It has been a long time since we have eaten," said Malagor.

"Why don't the two of you go hunting," suggested the Amatharian. "I will study this cavern until your return. If I haven't found the door, we will continue on our way."

"Fine," I replied. "We'll get something to eat and meet you outside by the pool."

Malagor and I made our way out through the underwater passage, and into the noon day sunlight streaming into the small clearing formed by the high and forbidding mountain and the thick forest.

Through all of our adventures, Malagor and I had both managed to keep our fur skin bundles with us. Each one contained a number of furs suitable for bedding. We also still had the Amatharian light rifles.

"Why didn't you use the rifle when we were fighting the Pell?" I asked him. After all, I had my swords, but he had only his knife and his claws.

"I did not think about it."

With little desire to expend our energy in stealth and forest craft, we drew our rifles and decided to blast the first thing we saw which looked edible. Off into the forest we went. It took us only a short while to discover a group of small forest-dwelling herbivores. These looked something like a small deer with white fur and a horn on the end of their noses. Unfortunately for us, the little creatures were very skittish and easily frightened. I missed my first shot, which sent them running off into the distant woods with Malagor and myself in hot pursuit.

When my alien friend and I had at last made a kill, skinned the animal, and cut off several select portions of meat, we found ourselves some distance from the cave where we had left Norar Remontar. We walked back, toting our food with us and stopped at the edge of the small pool.

"I will begin making a fire to cook the food," said Malagor. "You swim into the chamber and tell Norar Remontar that we have returned."

I did just as Malagor had suggested, but when I reached the chamber, I found it almost completely dark

and very, very quiet. When I called out to Norar Remontar, there was no answer.

## Chapter Nine: The Mountains of the Ancient Orlons

I swam back outside and reported the mystery to Malagor. He did not seem pleased. We left the meat cooking, and wrapped up a burning ember, some kindling and a couple of large sticks in a piece of fur, and swam back into the hidden room. Once inside, we climbed out of the water and onto the dry ground. The room was lit only by a dim glow from the watery passage. Malagor and I used the ember and kindling to start a small fire in the hidden chamber. I had my doubts about doing so, since there was a limited amount of oxygen in the room, and I had no great desire to die of asphyxiation. However once we had the little fire burning, we noticed a small flicker of flame leaping in the direction of the wall. From there it was only a small step to the realization that there was a secret door right by where we had chosen to build the fire. Even with this knowledge at our command, it took some time for us to figure out how to open the portal. In the end, Malagor and I had to press on the wall in two different places to force a perfectly disguised panel to slide back, revealing a darkened passage. I wondered that Norar Remontar had been able to do it by himself.

Malagor and I each took a burning stick from the fire, and entered the secret passage. It bears mentioning that you can't make a really effective torch with nothing but a stick. Having watched several hundred adventure movies in my formative years, I have seen many matinee heroes create torches with nothing but a flaming stick. In reality, it just doesn't work. One needs some oily rags or something. The two burning sticks that my friend and I carried offered little more light than one might expect from a small candle, and after what must have been only several minutes, mine went out completely. Malagor was able to nurse his flaming stick in a way that it stayed alive at least enough for us to see the ground where we were walking.

The passage in which we found ourselves was a rough-cut cave-like hallway that could have been natural except for the relatively smooth and level floor. It took us straight back into the mountain. Our footsteps made loud clomping sounds that echoed all out of proportion to the way we were carefully treading.

After we had gone several hundred feet, we noticed that the walls, ceiling, and floor became more and more smooth and uniform. After another four or five hundred feet, we stopped to examine the walls again, which by this point had become completely smooth, with nice square corners at the point where they met the floor or the ceiling. At that very moment Malagor's fire went out too.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

"Let's just wait a moment and see if our eyes adjust to the darkness," I replied.

I said this just to have something to say, because as anyone who has ever done any cave exploring can tell you, your eyes do not adjust to complete darkness. The complete absence of light precludes any vision what so ever. Nevertheless, when we had waited for a little while, Malagor and I were both able to discern the shape of the passage ahead. There was a faint and indistinct light coming from far away down the corridor. We continued on our way.

As the two of us walked along, Malagor had tended to follow the left side of the corridor and I the right. It wasn't long before we realized that we had moved farther and farther apart, and that the hallway was gradually widening. About the same time that we made this discovery, the surface of the wall changed abruptly from the smooth stone we had grown used to, to a bumpy soft material. It must have had a great acoustical quality, for I could no longer hear our footsteps. I was just thinking that the hallway had widened from its original five feet or so to well over twenty, when the hallway ended by opening into a huge room.

The size of this room was impossible to measure from our present vantage point. It seemed to be endless in any direction, and we could not judge the height of the ceiling either. I was standing there thinking about what to do next, when Malagor tugged at my sleeve. I asked him what the matter was, and in answer, he grabbed my head with his hands and turned it to my right. In the distance I could see a light. It was like a swinging lantern in the distance that blinked on and off occasional.

"I have an idea what that is," I said. "Let's go."

Even though Malagor and I were both inclined to move quickly toward the source of the distant light, we didn't move as quickly as we might have. The pervasive darkness was somewhat disorienting, and we could never know when there might be some obstruction that we might run into in the darkness. We managed to make a slow trot across this room, which now appeared to at least a mile across and possibly much larger. It didn't seem long before we got close enough to the moving light to tell that it was indeed just what I suspected it was-- the swinging sword of Norar Remontar battling some enemy. We managed to reach him just as he had finished striking down the only remaining foe. His sword began to fade into darkness.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"This is a band of Kartags," said Norar Remontar, turning on his small flashlight and pointing it at several prone figures. "They burst out of a hidden door while I was in the chamber alone, and knocked me out with a well placed blow to the head. I was lucky to regain consciousness before they were able to do whatever it was that they were planning to do to me."

I looked at the beings lying dead in the circle of artificial illumination on the floor. They would have been about five feet tall when standing and they reminded me of a large rat, at least as far as their faces were concerned. They had legs designed for upright locomotion, and two sets of arms on their upper torso. Their dirty, wrinkled skin was a dull grey color, and hairless, reminding me quite a bit of the way rodents look just after they are born. Though they wore no type of clothing, they did wear simple leather harnesses upon which they carried crude hand-made stone tools.

"The Kartags are well-known to my people," said my Amatharian friend. "They live by scavenging from more civilized beings."

"I kind of got that impression from looking at them," I replied. "It is lucky that you were able to rescue yourself. If it hadn't been for the soul in your sword, Malagor and I would never have found you."

"It may have been lucky for us that they attacked me. This subterranean passage may be a considerable short cut home to Amathar."

"If we don't get lost," I replied. "Right now I don't think I could even tell which direction we should be heading."

"If I am not mistaken," said the knight, "Malagors have a very highly developed sense of direction."

We both turned to Malagor, who grunted and pointed in a direction, presumably the right one. The three of us started off in the way indicated. The room seemed to go on forever.

"What possible purpose could this room have had?" I asked.

"I am certain that I don't know," replied Norar Remontar, "but this is not uncommon in Orlon sites, at least as far as I can recall from my schooling as a child. The Orlons created vast underground cities and cavern networks, with many hidden doors and strange rooms, but never any furniture."

"Have you ever seen what they looked like?"

"I could be mistaken, but I do not believe that there have ever been any remains or representations of the Orlons found-- no pictures, no statues, no tombs."

"Interesting," I said, though by this time I was far less impressed by the fact that an ancient race had left no trace of themselves behind, than I was by their ability to create a seemingly endless subterranean room with no visible means of structural support. We seemed to have traveled at least another mile in the room since Malagor and I had found Norar Remontar, though in the all pervasive darkness the distance might have been one tenth or ten times that distance. In that time we had not seen a pillar or brace for the ceiling. Of course we could have been passing them in the darkness without noticing them, but somehow I didn't believe that to be the case.

"I don't know about you two," I said, stopping, "but I need to take a rest."

Norar Remontar and Malagor both agreed to stop for a little while, though neither admitted to needing a rest themselves, so we sat down in the immense darkness.

"I am very hungry," said Norar Remontar.

"I am hungry too," said Malagor. "And what is worse, my dinner is roasting outside this mountain, and I will not be able to retrieve it before it is burnt to a crisp."

"If it is any consolation," I interjected, "I'm sure an animal has already made off with it by now."

"It is not any consolation at all," Malagor said.

Sitting in the endless darkness of the seemingly endless room, with only the Amatharian flashlight to brighten our surroundings, seemed to me like floating in the darkness of space, with nary a planet nor a single star to keep us company. But sit there we did, in relative silence for what seemed to be a long time. I recollected that this was the first time that I had seen real darkness since coming to this world. While the stormy weather and the overhanging trees had made the world seem dark when we had passed through the forest of the Pell, it was nothing compared to this.

As soon as we all felt we had rested enough, we resumed our journey through the darkness. We had traveled only another hundred feet, when we came to a wall. The wall was constructed of the same black material that had lined the end of the corridor through which we had entered and had the same type of acoustical quality. Norar Remontar and I felt comfortable following Malagor and his apparent direction sense, so when he turned right and began to make his way along the wall, we were content to follow.

The wall was straight and gave the impression in my mind of a square or rectangular room, but when a room is of this tremendous size, who can say what the shape of the other sides might have been. I was reminded of the story of the blind men who encounter an elephant. The first blind man, who feels the elephant's trunk, thinks he has encountered a snake. The second blind man reaches out to touch the legs of the pachyderm and thinks that he has found a tree. The third blind man, who feels the elephant's side, believes he has found a wall. The three of us, alone in the dark, were like three blind men. I thought how strange, interesting, and frightening it would be, if this great expanse of wall were in fact, the side of some great beast.

Happily, before I had much chance to contemplate this line of reasoning, Malagor located a doorway, and we entered another long tunnel. It might have been the same tunnel through which we had entered for all that I knew. It had the same tapered entrance, the same walls, and the same floor.

"At least," I thought, "if this is the same way we came in, we are on our way back to the food."

Any belief that we might have been retracing our steps was quickly laid to rest though, when after going only a few hundred yards, we began to notice a light in the distance. As we continued on our way, the light grew steadily brighter, until it was obvious that we were approaching a location with some sort of large-scale artificial lighting.

When we reached the doorway of the room, we entered with our weapons at ready. Norar Remontar and I had our swords drawn, and Malagor carried his light rifle. In fact, we had been carrying our weapons at ready all the way through the darkness, but as we had encountered nothing but black emptiness, we had not been called upon to use them. The chamber we now entered was like nothing I had ever seen before.

## Chapter Ten: Chamber of the Elder Gods

The room was large, though obviously not as large as the huge chamber we had visited before. The far wall was about one hundred fifty feet away, and the room was equally as wide. We had entered through a doorway in the middle of the wall, and there were no other entryways or exits visible. The room was well lit, though I could not determine the source of the light. Indeed, it seemed that the light came from everywhere, as though light were a thing that could flow around solid objects like the air. The walls, floor, and ceiling were smooth and dull grey, as were the fixtures in the room's center-- four large geometric shapes.

As the three of us slowly walked into the room, we were drawn toward the four geometric shapes in the center of the floor. They were each about the same size, perhaps twelve feet across. Closest to us was a sphere. The others were a cube, a pyramid, and a dodecahedron.

"What are these for, do you suppose?" I wondered aloud.

"Perhaps they are not for anything," growled Malagor.

"Why are you so grumpy?" I asked. "Still hungry?"

He growled again in confirmation.

"This is unlike anything I have ever seen relating to the Orlons," said Norar Remontar. "The lighting has an interesting quality."

He reached up and laid a hand upon the surface of the sphere, and a large portion of the wall to our left suddenly became a huge picture screen. A forty foot image of a great plain appeared, with tall grass billowing in the wind like waves on the surface of the ocean. Here and there, grazing herbivores roamed in search of a particularly interesting bit of flora. To the far right of the image, two stummada sat looking around lazily. At their feet were the remains of a large animal.

"Wow," I said.

"This is most definitely not an Orlon site," reiterated the Amatharian. "Their technology never reached anywhere near this level."

"I wonder what else these shapes do." I stepped around him to the cube.

I placed my hand on the surface, which felt warm to the touch, and marveled as another giant image appeared opposite the first. This image was of a beautiful green field, obviously cultivated. In the distance, to the right was the edge of a great forest of extremely tall coniferous evergreen trees. At about the same distance but to the left, one could see the edge of a strange and marvelous city. It was made up of ivory colored buildings with reddish roofs-- each roof topped by a craved animal figure. In the foreground, as well as around the city, were the inhabitants.

The people living in the strange city, playing around it, and working in the fields looked remarkably like a child's teddy-bear. They were covered with light brown fur, had very large round ears on the top of their heads, and large expressive eyes above their small snouts. They came in a variety of sizes, probably males, females, and children. Some of the small ones seemed to be playing tag just outside the city.

Larger ones were working in the field, pulling up green vegetables of some kind. Still others, of several sizes, were busy within the confines of the city, though just what they were doing was impossible to tell at the present magnification on the image. They were probably doing the same things that humans on Earth did in their own cities.

"I do not know that race of people," said Malagor. "I wonder who they are, and where in Ecos that place is."

"Or when," I offered. "For all we know, that may be a stored image of the ancient Orlons, or even their ancestors."

Norar Remontar and I were both fascinated by the images, and we began moving around the shapes, placing our hands here and there and watching the scenes produced on the three blank walls of the room. Most were of wild places with nothing but plant life and an occasional animal, though the locale of each

was noticeably different. There were scenes of deserts, of forests, and of jungles. Finally I placed a hand upon the sphere at a point as yet untouched and a picture of a hillside replaced an earlier scene on the wall opposite the door. Standing on the hillside were two Amatharian men.

"Bentar Hissendar!" shouted Norar Remontar.

"You know him?" I asked the obvious.

"He is a friend and kinsman of mine," the Amatharian replied. "He works within my uncle's trading group."

The two Amatharians did indeed look to be kinsmen of Norar Remontar. They were both handsome, with straight black hair and dark blue skin. They both wore black body suits and white tabards with crests upon them, marking them as knights. The first one, whom Norar Remontar had identified as Bentar Hissendar sported the crest of a flaming sun held by a stylized hand. The other's crest was that of a flaming sun raining light rays downward. They were picking up rocks from the hillside and examining them. Since there was no sound in the images, it was difficult to figure out what was going on. The other man said something to Bentar Hissendar, who laughed and punched the man playfully on the shoulder. Then the two walked off the edge of the image, leaving nothing on the screen but the side of the hill.

"That image at least seems to be of the present," said Norar Remontar. "I cannot say where that place would be though. Bentar Hissendar looks just the same as when I last saw him, and if I am not mistaken, that other fellow is Tular Maximinos, though I have not seen him since he became a knight."

"It seems amazing to me that there is no one here keeping an eye on this place," I said.

"Indeed," replied the Amatharian. "This is an important find. I am sure that my people will wish to have this chamber under Amatharian control."

"I think that the Ancient Orlons must have found this place long ago. That is the message in the little room," observed Malagor.

"They may have found it, but they did not create it. This is definitely far beyond any technology that they possessed."

"Then who did create it," I wondered, all the while continuing to press points on the geometric shapes.

I put my palm once again up to one of the shapes, this time the dodecahedron, but this time no image appeared on the wall. Instead a section of the wall disappeared, creating a doorway to a small anteroom. This room appeared to be a smaller version of the room we were in, with similar walls and similar lighting, but with two exceptions-- there were no large geometric shapes on the floor, and on the wall there was a black panel with a frame around it, opposite the doorway. The framed panel looked very much like a window.

I stepped into the room followed by my two friends. Crossing the small chamber, I pressed my face up against the black panel, but could discern nothing beyond the glass, if it was glass. I was about to ask if Malagor or Norar Remontar had any idea as to the purpose of the room, when the opening behind us disappeared, sealing us in. A fraction of a second later, I felt my stomach shoot upwards, as though I were standing in an incredibly fast elevator going down. There was no vibration, nor any other sensation of movement, but I knew that this must be what this was-- a highly advanced and very fast elevator.

"Ummph," said Malagor, as the air returned to his lungs.

"We are going down...fast," said Norar Remontar.

"Yes," said the furry fellow, "but where are we going down to?"

"That is a good question," replied the knight. "We are taught as children that Ecos is a great sphere, artificially constructed uncounted ages ago by a race known only as the Elder Gods. I don't think there has been conclusive proof on the subject, but it was always my impression that the shell of the world was relatively thin."

"It can't be too thin," I offered, "because this down-going room is still going down, and going down fast." The Amatharian term for elevator was 'down going room'. Evidently the concept was not used enough by them to warrant a shorter appellation. The three of us stood quietly waiting and waiting. It then occurred to me that not only must the elevator still be in motion, but that for us to feel the sensation that we still felt in the pits of our stomachs, the elevator must still be accelerating. I enlightened my friends to this fact, and they looked glumly back at me. I suspect the event had more of an impact upon them,

since for me it was really just a big elevator ride, while for the two of them it was more akin to a religious experience. The looks on their faces were the looks of men taking a speedy elevator to hell.

We waited in the down-going room for what seemed to me to be a good hour before feeling the effects of slowing down. We felt ourselves being pulled gently toward the floor, some parts like our stomachs, more so than others. At last we felt like we had stopped, though I was uncertain enough not to voice my opinion on the subject. Suddenly the pane of the window, for such it proved to be, became transparent, and the view which the three of us were witness to made us all gasp for breath.

We were outside the shell of the planet Ecos. The elevator had gone outward from the interior of the artificial planet and out to the tip of a tower on the outside surface. Looking out of the window, it was as if a great metal plain that stretched as far as the eye could see was lying upon our heads, and below us were the vast empty reaches of space. We stood looking breathlessly out the window for several minutes before it occurred to any of us to examine the outer surface of the planet. That it was an artificial creation, was more than evident. The outside looked like a construction project or a giant modern art sculpture. There were metal shapes and bars sticking in all directions. There were many different types of projections which looked like towers or buildings or bridges, but whose actual purposes were impossible to determine.

Suddenly all three of us began to talk, our words coming like water through a floodgate. We directed each other's attention from one feature to another, marveled at the apparent feats of construction, and waxed philosophical about the whole idea of constructing a world which completely surrounded a sun. Just as we slowed down our explosive dissertations to catch a collective breath and to absorb what the others had said, the window went opaque and we felt the elevator move upward, back into Ecos. We rode upwards silently, each almost mourning the loss of the magnificent vision to which we had been privileged. Once again the elevator seemed to accelerate to a certain point, where it began to decelerate and at last to stop. Then the doorway appeared and we stepped out. The room we stepped out into was not the same as the one from which we had entered though. The elevator had brought us to a different room entirely.



## Chapter Eleven: Out of the Darkness

Malagor, Norar Remontar, and I stepped out of the elevator and into a room lit just like the one from which we had left. This room had no geometric video controller in it however, and it was triangular in shape, with the elevator opening in the middle of one of three equal sides, and an open doorway on the wall to our left.

"This is peculiar," said Norar Remontar.

I nodded my head at the understatement.

"I would be willing to bet that this elevator, these rooms, the lighting, and the controls for the video images, are all artifacts of the Elder Gods, or whomever it was that created Ecos.

"I am inclined to agree," said Norar Remontar.

We looked around this new room for several moments, but found nothing of interest. Finally Malagor voiced the opinion that we really had no other alternative but to head down the hallway and see where it led us. I was toying with the idea of suggesting that we try our luck one more time in the mysterious elevator, but I decided that Malagor was probably right. It was time to continue on our way. That is just what we did.

The dark hallway beckoned us like a gaping maw, but I tried not to think of it that way. It really doesn't take too long to adjust to continual daylight. I think it would be much harder to adjust to continual darkness. Norar Remontar turned on his small flashlight; I unsheathed my sword, and the three of us with a quiet look between us, started down the long hallway. This time it continued straight for what must have been five miles before opening into any type of room what so ever. At last it did though, and as soon as we stepped into the room, I knew we were in for trouble.

A sudden wave of stench assaulted my nostrils. It was the smell of several dozen bodies which had not seen a bath in a long time, mixed with the smell of bodily waste accumulated over a period of several generations. I wasn't the only one to smell it. Malagor immediately began coughing and gagging, to the extent that I feared he would pass out. A look of disgust crossed Norar Remontar's face, but otherwise he remained characteristically stoic.

Malagor had just regained his composure, when a horde of creatures burst screaming toward us from the dark. There were a score or more of the short, bipedal, four armed rat-like creatures, and they attacked using stone axes and razor sharp teeth. Screaming like banshees, the Kartags literally fell upon us.

I skewered the first creature to reach me on the end of my sword, turned, and threw my shoulder into the next one, sending it flying backwards into its fellows. At that moment the entire room was lit up by the incredible brightness of the Amatharian sword unsheathed. It sizzled and sparked as Norar Remontar used it to cut through the bodies of three of the Kartags. At almost the same moment, Malagor let loose with a burst of light rifle fire which cut a nice round smoking hole in the chest of another rat. This display of destruction was all that was necessary to convince most of the beasts to retreat. I quickly lopped off the head of one who apparently was having difficulty making that decision.

The screaming inhabitants of the tunnels ran away into the darkness and it became once again like a tomb. The light from Norar Remontar's sword dimmed until it gave no light at all. I sheathed my own weapon, and followed the pale circle of artificial light as the Amatharian continued on his, and our way. I felt Malagor take up a position behind me.

The stench was just as bad now that the Kartags had gone, as it had been when they had been present, and we soon found out why. Continuing on through the room, the size of which, like the previous giant room, was indeterminable, we stumbled upon the camp of the filthy creatures. It consisted of nothing but a pile of filthy furs, most with pieces of reeking meat hanging upon them. Scattered between the filthy animal skins were chips of stone, obviously flaked from hand made tools, and here and there, piles of feces. I had been willing to give the Kartags the benefit of the doubt up until that point, thinking perhaps they were only attacking us because we were invading their territory-- that perhaps they were simply

misunderstood. I could not imagine any intelligent creature though, fouling its own campsite, when there were uncounted stretches of tunnels from which to choose a suitable spot for a commode.

The room turned out to be relatively small, at least in Orlonian terms. When we had gone about a hundred feet past the Kartags' home, and about two hundred feet beyond the scene of the short battle with them, we found another passageway continuing on into the darkness. Being more interested than ever to get out of the infernal underground, we trudged on.

The darkness was oppressive. But it occurred to me that I was luckiest of the three of us. I had spent nearly half my life living in darkness. After all, it happened every single day on my home world. Even though I was inclined to sleep through the night on most occasions, I was not unwilling to go out after dark to a movie or a restaurant. My friends on the other hand, had lived all their lives in a world where the sun never set, the moon never rose, and darkness never covered the land. I began to wonder if Amatharians or Malagor even made a habit of closing the window shutters or pulling the drapes so that the inside of their bedrooms were darkened for their sleep times, but I declined to satisfy my curiosity at the time.

The smooth hallway in relatively short order became a rough-cut stone corridor. Before I had time to contemplate the importance of this, the passageway ended with a stairway rising up beyond the reach of Norar Remontar's hand beacon. I thought that this was a promising development and said so, but Malagor was determined to put a negative slant on just about everything, and replied that this was probably just another way for us to reach our imminent demise. Without any comment of his own, Norar Remontar began the ascension. We had little choice but to follow him, not that we had any desire to do otherwise. There were exactly five hundred and fifty steps on that stairway. I know because I counted them to keep my mind off my growling stomach. The last step ended where the passage was blocked by a great boulder.

"I don't believe this can be moved," said Norar Remontar.

"You forget," replied Malagor. "We have with us the strongest fellow in Ecos-- Alexander the Strong." Quite frankly, I had forgotten my gravity enhanced strength, but when I put my shoulder to the great stone, with my friends beside me adding to the effort, the blockage was quickly moved, causing daylight to stream into the passage from above. We stepped out of the opening to once again find ourselves on the inner surface of the artificial planet Ecos. After waiting a moment or two for our eyes to readjust to the eternal brightness of the sun, we surveyed our surroundings. We stood on the side of a hill, with high mountains behind us, and a long slope down toward a great plain before us. At that moment, the three of us looked up into the sky to see a small aircraft. I immediately recognized its design as similar to those I had seen leaving the deck of the Amatharian battleship. I waved my arms above my head, but Malagor executed even quicker thinking, and fired his light rifle into the air.

The craft circled us for a moment, and then descended. Once on the ground, I could see the vehicle was a transport-- designed not for combat, but for moving men and supplies. It was shaped a lot like a 1952 Chevy, at least on the front, with a rounded snout. The back half of the craft was designed much more like a bus than anything else, squared off with several somewhat square windows. It had landing pads below rather than wheels, and it landed vertically, without the need of any runway. When it had come to a stop about fifty feet from us, a man-sized hatch opened in the side, and two Amatharians stepped out, each pointing a light pistol in our general direction. They walked cautiously toward us. They both wore the clothing of warriors, black bodysuits covered by white tabards. The first had the crest of a flaming sun held by a hand. The other had a crest of a flaming sun raining down rays of light.

"Bentar Hissendar!" shouted Norar Remontar, when the two had closed to a few yards. "What are you doing here?"

"Norar Remontar?" cried the Amatharian, with a startled look on his face that turned a moment later to a look of joy. "What am I doing here? What are you doing here? You are supposed to be dead!"

"I am alive." The knight stated the obvious. "And what is more, my sister is alive too."

Bentar Hissendar's face lit up even brighter.

"The Princess is alive! There will be rejoicing in the streets of Amathar."

"No rejoicing." Norar Remontar looked glumly at his friend. "She was captured by the Zoasians. I will

return to Amathar and take up a fleet to rescue her."

"The Zoasians do not usually take prisoners," Bentar Hissendar said. "Do you think they know who she is?"

"Who are these two?" interrupted the other Amatharian, who was still pointing his weapon at us.

Norar Remontar introduced us with a flourish, gesturing first to me, and then to Malagor.

"These are my friends-- Remiantar Alexander Ashton and the Malagor."

I realized that my Amatharian friend, in introducing me as a Remiantar, was telling these Amatharians that I was more than a simple savage warrior, that I was a civilized and skilled swordsman, and I was quite flattered. Malagor and I bowed slightly to the two men. Bentar Hissendar then introduced his companion as Tular Maximinos, who then bowed to us and holstered his pistol.

I had seen these two men before, in the images on the screen in the chamber of the Elder Gods. Bentar Hissendar was just shorter than Norar Remontar, with the same straight black hair and the same muscular frame. His countenance was slightly less serious than that of my friend. He looked like a fellow who spent much of his life laughing or smiling. Tular Maximinos was quite short for an Amatharian, though still an inch taller than my own six foot two. He looked younger than either of the other men, though there was wisdom in his eyes, or perhaps it was sadness.

"Do you have any food?" asked Malagor, interrupting my observations of the Amatharians.

"Yes, we are quite hungry," said Norar Remontar, to his countrymen. "I had almost forgotten in my pleasure at seeing you."

The five of us made our way to the transport. Bentar Hissendar stepped inside, and pulled out a large chest. Inside it, were a variety of containers looking very much like they were made of wood, but feeling and bending like plastic. Upon removing the air-tight lids, we found in each one, something different and delicious to eat. Tular Maximinos handed each of us a metal utensil, a sort of square spoon, and we dug heartily into our repast. My container was filled with a mixture of six or seven different types of vegetables, cut into bite-sized pieces, and covered with a sweet sauce the consistency of honey. It tasted wonderful beyond belief. Bentar Hissendar handed me a metallic cup filled with ice water. It tasted as good as the food.

"How close are we to Amathar?" asked Norar Remontar, when we were nearly finished with our meal.

"It is thirty four thousand, seven hundred miles," replied Bentar Hissendar. Of course he really said, "forty-two thousand kentads," but I have converted that number.

When we were done with our food, we boarded the transport. The inside was furnished much like a comfortable recreational vehicle, with two seats behind the controls in front, overstuffed chairs, several small tables, and storage compartments in the middle, and some sleeping bunks in the back. Malagor sat down in one of the comfortable chairs and immediately fell asleep. I waited until our two hosts had assumed the control positions and guided the ship to a takeoff. Then I moved to the rear of the cab and climbed into one of the bunks. Even though I was quite excited at the prospect of at last reaching Amathar, I fell quickly into a deep sleep.

When I woke up, the transport was still in the air. I looked out the window and saw the ground speeding by. The hills had given way to grassy meadows dotted with small forests of deciduous trees. I walked forward and found Norar Remontar sitting just behind the control booth, talking with the two other Amatharians. He looked as though he hadn't rested at all. When I sat down in an empty seat next to him, he turned to me.

"I have been relaying our adventures to them," he said.

"I particularly enjoyed the part where you let the Pell capture you," grinned Tular Maximinos.

"Yes, it was an unusual strategy," remarked his friend.

"Alas, I have been defamed," I sighed.

"It is alright," laughed Bentar Hissendar. "In all the great stories, the hero makes some type of mistake. It reaffirms his humanity, after feats of daring and trials of danger. Besides, it was funny."

"Yes," continued Tular Maximinos, as he continued to pilot the craft. "At first, I wondered that Norar Remontar would take up with two such strange beings, but after hearing his tale, I find myself liking you. Now if I could only get used to your ugliness."

"Ugliness?"

"You are quite horrible looking. You are short too, but that is not a major problem. I myself have a handicap in that area. But your skin is so pale and brownish orange-- most ugly."

"Do not let him tease you," put in Bentar Hissendar. "You are strange looking, it is true. However, I think that your very uniqueness will make you quite popular in the city, especially with the unmarried females. In fact, I would bet that Tular Maximinos's sister will ask you to a meal the moment she sees you."

The three Amatharians laughed.

"That does not mean you are not ugly," said Tular Maximinos. "My sister is desperate for a mate."

They all laughed again. I instinctively liked both these men-- Bentar Hissendar was a friendly and happy fellow, and Tular Maximinos had an engaging wit, and a way of delivering a funny line with a straight face. I wondered for a moment if he could do the reverse, and deliver a sad line while smiling.

"It was very lucky for you that you came out of that tunnel when you did," said Tular Maximinos. "We were just getting ready to leave the area."

"Yes," confirmed Bentar Hissendar. "We have been making surveys for the Hissendar Trading Group. They have been looking for new sources of edible plants and mineral resources, but the area where we found you turned out to have little promise."

"Is that your uncle's trading group?" I turned to Norar Remontar.

"Yes," he replied.

"Is he your mother's brother?"

"No, of course not," he said. "Perhaps I should explain the family structure of Amatharians. It will help you in your dealings there."

Norar Remontar spent a great deal of time explaining the family and restating particular points that I had trouble at first understanding. He was aided in his explanations by his two countrymen, who were amused by my lack of cultural knowledge. Here is a simplified version of the lesson.

In Amathar, couples married and lived together, much like one would expect of human couples on Earth. There was an old tradition of two or more wives being wed to the same man, but it was seldom practiced in modern times-- a holdover from an era when warrior men tended to be outnumbered by women who took care of the home fires. The only real differences that I could see between the Amatharians and my married friends on Earth, was that in Amathar, both the man and the woman kept their original names, and that once they became married, they stayed that way-- divorce was unknown in Amathar.

The way which these people had children and raised them, was not unlike one would expect, either physiologically or culturally. It was in naming the children where their culture became tricky. The given names of the children were provided solely by the father, without input or consent by the mother. The last name or family name however was inherited, from the mother, so that children had the same last name as their mother, their mother's brothers and sisters, and their maternal grandparents, but a different last name than their father.

Each family was lead by a family elder, almost always the eldest surviving son of the eldest surviving son. The elders of the most prominent families were known as Kur, the closest translation being "nobleman."

Family members worked and lived in close proximity. It was common for an extended family to live within a single conclave, and to be surrounded by related families. Among these family groupings, one family elder would occupy a traditional leadership position, and he would be known as Kurar, or "Lord." The position of Kurar tended to be passed from father to son, and was only lost to another related family when there was some incident of great dishonor. Families were collected into clans, each clan being made up of many families. The elder of the leading family would take on the title of Kurar Ka, or "Overlord."

The Kurar Ka would run the clan and all the clan's business interests like the C.E.O. of a major corporation, though the accumulation of wealth was well down the list of clan priorities, and in fact was a rather tricky idea, as I later learned. Much more important to the Amatharian clan would be the increase in honor associated with members of the clan making new scientific discoveries, defeating enemies of the Amatharian people, or bettering the life of all Amathar. In a way, the clans were in a constant contest to

see who could be the most altruistic. It was a fascinating foundation for a culture that struck a cord in my conscience, having been one who, in my youth, was sickened by the selfishness and the avarice found so often in my own land.

Confusing to me though, was the complex web of family relationships. There were several dozen clans, and every family in Amathar belonged to at least one. Most belonged to three or more, with varying degrees of family loyalty depending upon who was related to whom in that clan. But individuals within a family would pick one single clan from which to be a member. I was even more bewildered when it was explained to me that the Amatharians had a different word for every possible family relationship. There was a different word for the paternal grandfather, than there was for the maternal grandfather. There was a different word for uncle when he was the brother of one's father than there was when he was the brother of one's mother, and still a different word for one's uncle when he was your mother's sister's husband. This went on to such an extent, that there was even a specific word which meant fifth cousin twice removed, and that was different from the word for fifth cousin three times removed.

All of this made me wonder about Norar Remontar's title-- Homianne Kurar Ka, child of the overlord. He had told me himself that he had been working for his uncle's trading group. My friend explained that his paternal grandfather was Kurar Ka of the Sun Clan, the most powerful and respected of the Amatharian clans. Norar Remontar's father would have been the next Kurar Ka, but he had been killed in battle when still a young man. Thus, Norar Remontar had become Homianne Kurar Ka-- a kind of heir apparent. He worked, as was the custom, in the clan businesses, one of which was Hissendar Trading group, run by his uncle.

"So, you are related to Bentar Hissendar." I observed.

"Yes," he replied. "We are distantly related, and so is Tular Maximinos."

"It is not that distant," said Bentar Hissendar. "The sister of Norar Remontar's paternal grandmother's maternal grandmother, was married to the brother of my maternal grandmother's paternal grandmother. That is not a distant relation. Now, Tular Maximinos is a distant relation."

"That is not true," put in the subject of their discussion. "My paternal grandmother's paternal grandmother was the sister of Norar Remontar's maternal grandmother's paternal grandfather. And I am related to Bentar Hissendar in three different ways."

I smiled. It felt wonderful for me, an orphan who knew only two parents who had died when I was but a child, to look at these creatures of a civilization where family kinship had been taken to the level of an art form. I sat back and thought of just what it would be like, to live knowing countless thousands of relatives, and hundreds of close kin. I was interrupted in these musings by Bentar Hissendar.

"There is Amathar," he said.

## Chapter Twelve: Amathar

I looked through the forward view port and felt my stomach drop away. Since coming to Ecos, I had come to expect things on a grand scale-- seemingly endless plains, forests so dark and thick they seemed to block the sun, vast seas and broad rivers, huge flying battleships-- but nothing had prepared me for the city of Amathar. Ahead of us was a wall that stretched to the left and right as far as the eye could see. Seemingly held within this wall was a city, straining to be free of its confines. It was a city of tremendously high buildings, tall towers, and massive constructions of bizarre shape and ungodly dimension, painted with a rainbow of pastel colors from red to blue with bits of silver and gold. The city seemingly went on forever into the distance, rising up into the horizon until it became a part of the sky. "Just how large is Amathar?" I asked.

"The city wall is a circle two thousand five hundred kentads in diameter."

That information took several moments to compute, and at least that long to comprehend. According to my admittedly incomplete knowledge of Amatharian measurement, twenty five hundred kentads was the equivalent of two thousand miles. This seemed beyond belief, and I questioned it, but the three Amatharians confirmed my figures. Here was a single city that would, had it been located on my home planet, have almost completely covered North America.

The transport dropped lower as Bentar Hissendar guided in to a landing at a large installation just within the wall of the city. On a large tarmac, surrounded by several buildings, sat a dozen transports just like the one in which we were flying. When our craft came to a stop on the ground, a crew of Amatharian men and women ran out onto the field to service the vehicle. They were wearing bodysuits very much like those the knights wore, though these were light blue rather than black, and they were worn without the tabard over them. Bentar Hissendar turned and spoke to one of them.

"Send word to the Kurar Ka that we have returned with his grandson." He turned to Norar Remontar.

"It is best to send word before you go showing up at the door of your home. Give everyone a chance to realize you are alive."

Norar Remontar replied, but I was too busy looking around to pay much attention to their conversation. The wall over which we had passed to come to this airfield was about two hundred feet tall, and was constructed or at least covered by a copper-colored metal. It looked to be thick enough for a truck to drive over. In fact, as I stared at it, some sort of vehicle running slowly along the top of the wall, passed by. The way it sat on the top, hugging the sides, reminded me of the monorail at Disneyland, though this vehicle was a single unit rather than a train, and had no windows, so therefore did not appear to be a passenger craft.

"That is the automated sentry," said Norar Remontar, breaking into my observations. "Come, you have much to see."

Malagor and I joined the prodigal son of Amathar, as he walked across the tarmac to one of the buildings at its edge. Inside, we were greeted by more Amatharians wearing bodysuits in a variety of colors. I asked Norar Remontar about the difference in clothing, and he informed me that different occupations within the city had traditional colors associated with them. Among those colors were black for soldier, light blue for mechanic, white for food preparers or servers, grey for doctors, and red for record keepers. The tabard was essentially an Amatharian uniform, worn by none but soldiers. I was still thinking about this system of color coding, when the familiar black suit with white tabard appeared before me. A young woman, dressed in that very garb, stood with arms folded beside a desk just inside the terminal building. Her tabard bore the same crest that Norar Remontar's did-- a flaming sun with wings. When I looked up into her beautiful flawless face, for a moment I was in shock. She was my princess, rather she was Norar Remontar's sister. But the impression lasted only a moment. This young woman had much shorter hair, a slightly smaller nose, darker skin, and larger, rounder eyes, which made her look much less serious. Admittedly the only time I had seen the Princess was during the

height of battle. When the female knight saw Norar Remontar, she smiled broadly and reached out to grasp his hand.

"Word of your return precedes you, kinsman, though not by much," she said, in a melodic but surprisingly strong voice. "I have just heard the good news, and here you are."

"You are as beautiful as ever, Vena Remontar," replied my friend. He then turned to Malagor and me.

"This is Remiant Vena Remontar, my cousin." He used the word for mother's sister's daughter.

"I am soon to be related to you in other ways as well," the young woman said. "I have agreed to let Tular Maximinos announce our intention to marry."

"I am glad to hear it," replied Norar Remontar, "though I happen to know you both well enough to know that he is not nearly good enough for you. And I say this only half in jest."

Gazing upon the young woman, I had to agree with the prince, at least as far as the external was concerned, for the lady was exceedingly beautiful, so like her cousin, Noriandara Remontar. As I thought this, I began to feel a sadness deep inside my chest, and I once again felt the longing for the woman that I had seen only once in my life. I felt anger, frustration, and pain working its way up from my insides, clawing into my throat, until I was suddenly brought back to the present by my introduction to Vena Remontar, and Malagor's as well. The lady gave us the appropriate acknowledgment for her social inferiors-- a polite nod of the head.

"We shall go directly to my house," said Norar Remontar. "I hope that you and your betrothed come along later, for I have a service for you to perform."

The female knight looked intrigued.

"Indeed, kinsman," she replied. "I shall make a point of it."

Bentar Hissendar appeared at our sides.

"Tular Maximinos and I have some work to complete here at the airfield," he said to Norar Remontar.

"Your family should receive the word that you are safe well before your arrival. Why don't you go home and see them."

"I intend to do just that," he replied, and started toward an exit at the opposite end of the building, indicating with a brief gesture that Malagor and I should accompany him. I turned to look back at the female knight, but she had already resumed her post, guarding the terminal.

We walked out the front door of the terminal building, and found ourselves in a broad avenue. Lining the sides were buildings, large and small, painted in a variety of quiet pastel colors. In front of the buildings were large planters full of lovely flowers, and some with potted trees. There were no ground vehicles running in the street. In fact, there was no place for any such vehicles to run. Instead of a straight pavement like one would find on an earthly city street, there was a winding path made of something like cobblestone, making its way around small ponds, fountains, and life-sized statues.

We walked down the avenue for about a mile, encountering very few people. Those Amatharians that we did see were hurrying along on their own business. Most glanced at us with polite curiosity. A few nodded to us in casual greeting. We reached the end of the avenue, which opened into a broad intersection. The street running perpendicular to ours was wider and busier. Though it was lined with fountains, statues, and flower beds, the cobblestone path had been replaced by a pair of moving walkways, one going in each direction. We turned right and stepped onto the walkway, which was going about five miles per hour.

Once on the beltway, we continued to walk. I thought of the escalators on my home world, and looked around to make comparisons. No one on the Amatharian street stood on the belt and let themselves be carried. Every citizen I could see used the moving beltway to supplement the power of his own legs.

We continued along until we came to another intersection. The walkway ended in a small plaza, and continued with another belt on the other side. The cross street this time was an even larger thoroughfare. Instead of a single moving walkway going in each direction, this street had two, the outer going at the same speed that the single beltway had moved, and the inner one going about twice as fast. A passenger would be able to go from a standstill to the outer belt, and then step from the outer belt to the inner, effectively tripling his walking speed.

"Are either of you hungry?" asked Norar Remontar.

"Yes," replied Malagor, just before I was able to reply in the affirmative. The small meal we had eaten at the site of our rescue had long since been used up.

On one corner of the intersection plaza, was a small restaurant. It looked like a cafe one would find in New York or Paris. There were about ten tables, each with chairs, set up in a partitioned area on the corner, at an entrance to the building behind, from which several servers carried plates of food to seated patrons. The Amatharian knight led the way, and the three of us sat at a table near the edge of the restaurant. Moments later a boy, whom on Earth I would have thought to be about fourteen, arrived to set a metal cup of iced water in front of each of us. He bowed low to Norar Remontar, and then waited expectantly.

"Bring the daily special for all of us," directed Norar Remontar.

The boy nodded, and then asked. "Sun clan?"

"Of course."

"The value of our food will be reported back to the Sun Clan by the Air Clan, who owns this market," explained Norar Remontar.

"What type of currency do Amatharians use for trading goods and services?" I wondered.

"The rur is the measure of productivity and value," he replied, "though this is used only for transfer of value from one clan to another, or when trading goods with other cultures. We do not need currency among individuals, though I understand that there are other peoples of Ecos who use it. Our clan provides everything that we need.

"Don't you need to value each individual's contribution to the clan?"

"Each contributes to the best of his ability. To do otherwise would bring disgrace upon himself, his family, and his clan. The young man serving our food does so to the best of his ability, because to do so honors all. I fulfill my duties to the best of my ability. Because I am a knight, and he is a food server, my contributions are more highly regarded, and I have a more important place in my clan than he in his. Of course, he is still young."

The server brought our dinner and we occupied ourselves eating. The main course was a large piece of meat, a light brown in color and similar to pork in flavor. It had been grilled over open fire. Beside the meat were three vegetables-- the first of which looked like peanuts, but had the consistency and flavor of yams, the second looking and tasting just like carrots, and the third looking and feeling like a giant prune, but possessing the unfortunate taste of a beet. Each vegetable was cooked in its own set of spices and seasoning, and each was delicious, except for the prune-beet thing.

While we were eating, I looked around at the other diners. The little restaurant seemed to be about half full. A young Amatharian couple sat across from us looking into each other's eyes. Both were wearing the black bodysuit-tabard combination of a warrior, though neither sported the crest of knighthood. There was a group of four men in green bodysuits, which indicated they were farmers. Finally, there was an older Amatharian man wearing a long robe of gold with a small crest above the heart, depicting a cloud with a sword through it. Across from him was a being unlike I had ever seen. It stood beside the table, rather than sitting in a chair. It had to be because it had four legs, and was built rather like a deer or a goat. From its shoulders sprouted an extra set of limbs, with which it manipulated its food, and its face looked like the head of an iguana painted deep blue. The coloring faded slightly down its neck and its body to a light blue on its legs.

"What kind of thing is that?" I wondered.

"That is a Preemor," said Malagor testily. "I suppose you would refer to me as a "thing."

"That is the leader of the Bestamor Trading Group," Norar Remontar informed us. "I gather that he is concluding a trade agreement with the Preemor."

"It's just that I didn't expect to see any non-Amatharians within the city."

"I would imagine that at any one time," said the knight, "there are between one and two million non-Amatharians, as you term them."

Just as we were finishing our food, the young server brought out three stoneware mugs filled with a dark ruby liquid.

"This is mirrah," explained Norar Remontar. "It is the traditional drink of warriors, a blend of fermented



juices."

I sipped the concoction carefully. It was sweet and thick, and reminded me of a mixture of apple juice, prune juice, and honey. For a moment I wondered that the traditional drink of warriors would be so tame, and then I felt the kick. Suddenly my heart raced, my head pounded, and I had a great desire to run a long distance very fast. Looking into the cup, I confirmed that I had drunk only the top half inch of the liquid. I imagined that if I had downed the cup at once, I would have quite happily taken on an entire Zoasian battleship on my own.

"Perhaps we should have tasted this before dinner," suggested Malagor.

"If we had," explained the knight, "you would never have enjoyed the meal."

We stood up, and following the Amatharian's example, thanked our server, then continued on our way.

We did not take the larger of the two roadways, but continued on our original course for another two blocks. Here we entered a large building, and took an escalator down to a level below the surface of the street. Here we found what could only be described as a subway station. It was not quite like the subway stations I had seen on earth. There were no turnstiles, ticket windows, sleeping vagrants, or discarded trash. There were no wandering policemen, though there was a single Amatharian knight standing near the edge of the waiting platform. The entire place resembled more the lobby of an expensive hotel, than a transport hub. Everything was lit brightly by artificial light.

We waited only a very short time, at least from my perspective, before the subway ran into the station.

The train, if one may refer to it as such, had no engine that I could see-- just six cars, one behind the other. Each car was cylindrical in shape, with two oval openings. When the procession had come to a complete halt, the doors opened, and we, along with four or five others who had been waiting entered.

Norar Remontar, Malagor, and I had a car all to ourselves.

Just as the station was atypical of what I would expect of public transportation, so too was the train car.

It was furnished more like a living room, or a comfortable den, than a public transportation system.

There was a piece of furniture very much like a sofa, a small table in front of it, and a several very comfortable chairs. The sofa and chairs were covered with material that was patterned after animal skins, though it appeared to be man-made. Most surprising of all, there was a large bookcase against the back wall, filled with books. I stepped over to the small library once the subway had started into motion, and pulled one of the books from its place.

The book was very much like the book of Amath's teachings which Norar Remontar had previously shown me. It was a bound volume with a spine, and it had a cover made of leather. The pages were made of a material something like plastic. They were thin and they could bend like paper, but they had a strength far beyond any paper product. The entire book was written in Amatharian, which of course I was unable to read, but the lines and letters seemed to be laid out in a familiar fashion. As I had noticed, the characters resembling simple line drawings of stylized animals and other almost familiar images. After staring at it for a moment, I almost thought that I could see tiny predators ready to pounce upon their prey.

"Is this a private transport car?" I asked, replacing the book.

"This shuttle train belongs to the air clan," Norar Remontar replied, "though they make it available to anyone who needs transportation."

"I am surprised that it doesn't become damaged, or that the books and other furnishing aren't stolen," I said, noticing several small art objects atop the table, and hanging on the walls.

"Why would some one take something that wasn't his?" the Amatharian wondered. "Of course there is a great deal of wear because of the number of people who travel on the train. That is why we must all take extra care, to see that this property of others is not needlessly damaged."

I looked, but couldn't find any more wear and tear than one would find in the average living room.

Just about that time, the shuttle train came to a stop. It had been a nice quiet ride, though the sensation of movement had constantly reminded us that we were not in a private home, despite the look of the interior. The doors slid open and the three of us stepped out. This train station was very similar to the one which we had left, though decorated in a different color scheme. Like the other, there were no ticket windows, no advertising posters, no street musicians, and no pan-handlers.

We went up another escalator and stepped out once again into the warm Ecosian sun. The street we now stood in was like the one we had traveled before, with one exception-- people. Huge throngs of Amatharians were making their way up and down the street, walking, either along side of, or on the three moving walkways going in each direction. The street was filled with the colors of Amatharian clothing, as I looked around to identify doctors, record keepers, biologists, food servers, archaeologists, and the ever present soldiers. Once more, Norar Remontar led the way, as we moved up the busy avenue. We moved quite slowly because of the abundance of foot traffic, and this afforded me an opportunity to closely examine the architecture. This section of the city was dominated by very large buildings, large enough to be considered skyscrapers, if one were so inclined to those types of names. Some were over one hundred stories tall, though many were considerably shorter as well. Most were quite broad, completely filling a city block. Just like the edge of the city, structures here were painted in a variety of pastel colors, and were trimmed with silver colored metal. Though truly unearthly in design, all possessed a simple beauty that I always thought lacking in modern buildings on Earth. While the sides were generally flat and unadorned, the corners usually featured an intricate design. And ledges were common every few stories.

After a walk of some quarter mile from the shuttle train station, we turned and stepped through the large entryway of a massive structure, which completely engulfed a city block and rose to more than sixty stories. Once inside, we found the same type of lobby common to expensive hotels and luxury apartments on my home world. There was no doorman, or clerk, nor even a check-in desk-- just plush appointments and a large pair of escalators leading up and down. We made our way upwards in the customary Amatharian fashion, by walking on the escalator, to the second floor, where another escalator led upwards yet again. I knew that Amatharians had used elevators, since I had asked Norar Remontar about them after our experience below the mountains of the Orlons, so I was surprised not to find one in this building. I later learned that almost every building in Amathar possessed extensive escalators, but very few had elevators. Amatharians did not care for them it seems, and preferred to use them only when absolutely necessary, such as when large cargo needed to be moved from floor to floor. This time, the three of us walked up forty five flights of escalators to reach our destination.

"This is my home," said Norar Remontar, when we had at last arrived at the desired floor.

The hallways on this floor, like each floor we had visited on the way up, were spacious, and filled with small tables, and art objects, much like I would have expected in the hallway of a private residence, though it was clear from the doors lining the wall, that this was more akin to an apartment building. It was then that I noticed that there were no carpets on the floor, and I realized that I had not seen wall to wall carpeting anywhere in Amathar. Here and there was an occasional throw rug, designed to look like an animal skin in shape and texture.

The closest door was evidently Norar Remontar's home, since that was the one he chose to enter. I was expecting a "2B" or considering the number of floors we had transcended, perhaps "4502B", but there were in fact no numbers, nor any other characters or markings. The Amatharian knight slid the door open, for it slid from side to side rather than swinging on a hinge, and we stepped inside. His apartment proved to be a large and beautifully decorated home, with a central room that was two stories high. Several doors led into other rooms on the lower level, while a stone stairway led up to a balcony that stood against the wall just above the front door. Great shelves of books lined the walls of the upper level, and the wall across from the front entrance was one great two story window which looked out onto a magnificent courtyard. From this vantage point, I could see that the building was built like a huge hollow square, in the center of which was the courtyard which deserved the name forest more than it did that of park.

"I have a guest room through there," said Norar Remontar, pointing at a doorway just to our right. "We should get some rest before we do anything else."

As soon as these words left his lips, a great weariness overcame me, and I realized that we had gone a very, very long time without sleep. Malagor and I exited the main room through the designated portal, and found a large bed chamber. There were two beds, designed in what I later learned was typical Amatharian fashion-- sunken into the floor, rather than standing above it on legs. They were covered with

cushions and blankets, which like the rugs I had seen, were patterned in shape and style to resemble animal skins, though they were in fact man-made. Just beyond the beds, which occupied the center of the floor, was a large wash basin standing upon a stone pedestal. And against the wall was a kind of dresser, with open cubby holes rather than drawers.

I peeled off my leather clothes, slashed some water over my face, chest, and shoulders, and dived into the closest bed. I neither noticed nor cared whether Malagor followed suit, because I was asleep before my body came to rest upon the firm mattress.

## Chapter Thirteen: Lessons

I opened my eyes to find myself looking at the ceiling. For a moment I thought that I was back in my bedroom at home, on Earth, and that all of my adventures in Ecos were just a fantastic dream. Then Malagor leaned over to look into my face.

"I have slept, gotten up, explored the city, eaten, and slept again. You are just now waking."

"How very nice for you," I replied.

I sat up, and then climbed out of bed, noticing a distinct disadvantage to the Amatharian beds. Yet I felt so refreshed that my gravity enhanced muscles sent me bounding up onto the floor. I started toward the wash basin, but noticed the doorway just to the left. Passing through it, I found the bathroom. It was a huge room. The bath tub was a small pool, designed to look like a thermal spa, with water constantly flowing from a waterfall into the pool, and then out at the other end. The room also had the other features that one might expect, and they were similarly fashioned to resemble natural features.

I hopped up into the bath and floated in the hot water. The little pool was large enough for me to swim around in, and when I stood up, the water still reached the middle of my chest. Beside the inlet waterfall was a small shelf with a variety of brushes and cleaning agents. I found something that seemed close to shampoo and washed myself from head to toe. I hopped out just long enough to retrieve my knife from beside the bed, then hopped back in and relaxed in the water as I shaved my ragged beard. When I exited the bath a second time, I felt presentable enough for polite Amatharian society. Malagor was waiting for me with some new clothes-- a black Amatharian body suit, a plain white tabard, and a pair of boots.

"At Norar Remontar's direction, I got these from the clothier on the first floor," he said. "I had to have my own clothing specially ordered."

I was interested to see how the bodysuit was put on. I found that it had an open waist in the back. Still it took me several moments to discover how to get my lower portion in, and still be able to insert my upper half. Fortunately the material used by the Amatharians was extremely flexible. Once I had it on, it seemed not so much to stretch to fit, as to shrink to fit. It covered every inch of my body in a cool embrace. It was extremely comfortable. The tabard which I put on over it was, as one would expect, slightly encumbering, though no more so than a light jacket or sweater. It reached just below my knees in front and in back, but was open on the sides. Finally I put on the boots, and found them to be the most comfortable footwear that I have ever tried on. All that remained was for me to strap on the weapons belt beneath my tabard. Malagor had also seen to it that I had the appropriate sheaths for my swords. I looked like an Amatharian that had somehow been deprived of his beautiful blue skin.

"Where is Norar Remontar?" I asked.

"He left to see members of his family," replied Malagor.

Just then an ethereal voice spoke seemingly out of nowhere. "Nicohl Messonar is waiting at the door."

The two of us looked around the room expectantly for a moment, and then at each other.

"Must be a kind of doorbell," I offered. Malagor shrugged.

I walked out of the bedroom, followed by my alien friend, and opened the front door. Outside, stood an Amatharian woman. She looked to be in her early fifties, and possessed a more mature form of the beauty that was apparently common to all Amatharian women. Her silky black hair cut straight across her forehead, and reaching the middle of her back, was touched with grey, but her dark blue skin remained flawless. She wore a white tabard with a crest-- a flaming sun supported by a pedestal-- indicating that she was a knight. But instead of the black bodysuit of a soldier, hers was light lavender. She carried no swords, just a satchel slung over one shoulder.

Stepping confidently into the apartment, the woman looked me over, coldly, for a moment before speaking.

"I am Nicohl Messonar," she said.

"So I understand," I replied. "Nicole is a common name among my people."

"The name is Nicohl."

"Nicohl."

"Yes, and my name is Nicohl Messonar." She arched an eyebrow. "It is impolite not to use both names. That is only for husbands and wives, sharing an intimate moment."

"Well, that's certainly good to know," I said, looking sidelong at Malagor.

"There are a great many things you will need to know, if you are to continue to live among us," she continued. "That is why Norar Remontar requested my help in tutoring you."

She reached into her bag and removed a square touch pad, and handed it to me. Across the front of the device, were displayed a collection of the Amatharian letters, many of which I remembered seeing in the book on the shuttle train.

"Do your people have a written language?" asked Nicohl Messonar.

"Of course."

"Do they use a phonetic writing, or a pictographic one?"

"It is a phonetic system of writing," I explained, "though we have some anomalous words that maintain forms from long ago."

Looking at Nicohl Messonar, I was reminded of the word "tough", which sounds nothing like the way it is spelled.

"Good," she said. "That also precisely describes Amatharian writing. In your hand, you have a display of our alphabet. There are thirty six letters. Press that one with your finger." She indicated the figure that looked like a predatory animal. Almost all of the Amatharian letters resembled something recognizable. I have heard that the letter "A" is based upon the shape of a cow's head, though I have never been able to see it myself. Here were animals, and clouds, and mountains, and a sun, all clearly recognizable for what they were. I pressed the letter.

"Buh." The touchpad made the sound of a letter "B" in English.

"You will memorize the sounds of the alphabet and decipher these simple texts," the teacher handed me several plastic pages of Amatharian writing. "Have it completed by the time I return. I will be back in 10 city-cycles."

"City-cycles?"

I was then reminded that, in spite of Norar Remontar's assurances that there was no such thing as a uniform length of time, that the Amatharians did have a measure of time. Nicohl Messonar explained the system in more detail. Long ago they had discovered an electro-magnetic pulse that reverberated through Ecos. Later they had determined that it was a result of the artificial gravity in this created world. The Amatharians had digital time pieces throughout the city-- there was even one in Norar Remontar's main room-- which were all tied together and maintained a uniform measure of time. They used this time measurement for allotting work details and making appointments. However, once outside the city it meant little to them. The real difference between city-cycles and hours on Earth, were in how they were perceived by the people. If all the clocks of Earth were to go blank, hundreds of scientists would work weeks or even months, to find the correct time down to a fraction of a second. In Amathar, if the city-cycle were to fail, someone would take their best guess as to how much time had passed, and start it up again. As near as I have been able to pin-point it, the city-cycle is somewhere between two and four hours long. The Amatharians don't even believe that it is a regular interval, though I suspect that it is. So, after promising to, or rather threatening to return in ten city-cycles, Nicohl Messonar left. I was somewhat put off by her attitude, but then I recalled that upon first meeting, Norar Remontar had been somewhat stern, and in the interim we had become good friends. In any case, I threw myself into an examination of the Amatharian alphabet.

Since I already knew the spoken language fairly well, the sounds produced by the letters were familiar. They were the same sounds found in English, though they were represented differently. For instance, the sound of the letter "N" as it would be used in "north" was represented by one letter, while the sound of the letter "N" as it would be used in "song" had a different letter. I was so engrossed in my little toy, that I didn't notice that Malagor had left until he returned bearing a large meal for both of us. By that time, I

was beginning to master the letters of the alphabet and their sounds.

Malagor had procured food from a Sun Clan restaurant on a lower level of the building. These meals were centered around large flat cakes, which I thought at first looked like a pancake. Biting into it though, I found that it was a mixture of grated vegetables in batter, with a cheese-like filling. Beside the cakes were two small pieces of meat that looked as though they might have come from a small fowl, though they did not taste like chicken. They were more akin to lobster in flavor.

Once we had eaten, Malagor took off again, no doubt to explore more of the city. I was planning my own explorations, but I wanted to be ready when my new teacher returned. There might be a test. I used my touch pad to help me decipher the messages on the assigned pages. They seemed to be children's stories-- in fact they were nursery rhymes, though they don't rhyme when translated to English. The first was about a little boy and girl who wished to be swordsmen. The second was about a boy who went on a quest for a flower to please his mother.

I finished reading these little stories and realized that I was tired again. Looking at the city-cycle dial, and noting that I had over six cycles before my appointment, I popped back into the bedroom for a nap. I had been asleep long enough to satisfy my need, and was almost ready to wake up, when that same ethereal voice sounded again in the room.

"Vena Remontar is waiting at the door," it said.

I still had my Amatharian clothing on, but took a moment to smooth down my hair, and otherwise make myself presentable before going back to the main room and opening the door for the lovely young knight. She was still clothed in the uniform of her occupation, and she was even more beautiful than I recalled. Her hair was cut shorter than most women I had observed about the city-- just above shoulder length. This, and her large expressive eyes, gave her a friendly appearance. She looked me in the eye for a moment before entering, easy enough since she was almost my height.

"You look much better now that you have cut that hair off of your face," she said.

"Thank you, I think," I replied. "I am afraid Norar Remontar is not here to see you."

"I have already seen him in the company offices. It is you I am here to see." She walked in and sat down. "Norar Remontar has asked me to see that you learn of our city and our culture. He has an idea that you can become an Amatharian."

"Do you think I can become an Amatharian?"

"I'm going to withhold that judgment for now," she said. "There is a history of aliens becoming Amatharians, though they are few, and you almost look Amatharian."

"Thank you."

"With that in mind," she continued. "I have brought you this cream."

She handed me a small square box. I opened it and looked inside. It was filled with a pale yellow cream, which smelled of flowers.

"This is used by the Holy Order to maintain their traditional bald heads. You may use it on your face. One application will inhibit hair growth for a long time."

"Among my own people, facial hair is often considered a sign of virility," I informed her.

"Without the hair on your face, you have a certain unique charm," she said, with what I thought was a slight smirk. "With that hair on your face however, no Amatharian woman would find you acceptable."

That was all it took for me. I went right in to the bathroom, and used the depilatory cream to remove the stubble that had already begun to return to my beard and mustache. When I walked back into the main room to show Vena Remontar my cleaned up image, she reached out and touched my face with her palm. Her palm was cool and smooth, though hardened by calluses.

"Much better," she said, her eyes dancing. "I can already think of several young women who would be interested in meeting you."

"I can't waste time socializing," I replied. "I have to help Norar Remontar rescue his sister from the Zoasians."

"I am aware of that. For good or ill however, it is going to be some time before a fleet large enough to attack a Zoasian city can be assembled. The dispatches have been sent to rendezvous our ships, and the Sun Clan's newest battleship will soon be out of the shipyard, but until preparations are made, you and I

will both have to make good use of the interim. Now I wish to take you out to see the important sites of Amathar."

"I have a meeting with Nichol Messorar at 01023 city-cycles," I said.

"Well you certainly don't want to miss that appointment," the young woman smiled. "Nichol Messorar taught me to read, and I can tell you from experience, that if you keep her waiting, she can make your life very difficult."

"I can readily believe that."

"I will meet you here one city-cycle after your meeting with her," and with that she left.

It was still some time before my tutor was expected, so I climbed up the staircase and read some of the titles of the many books which lined the walls there. There seemed to be a great many biographies. Most seemed to be entitled simply "The life of..." with the appropriate name inserted. One of the thicker volumes was "The Life of Kennis Berrontar". I pulled the book from the shelf and sat down in a comfortable chair to peruse it.

I flipped through the book, reading the chapter titles, for I didn't wasn't proficient enough to engage much more of the text. Towards the center, I found a picture of a handsome Amatharian knight. It was the first photograph that I had seen since my arrival in Ecos, and it had an interesting three dimensional quality. When I turned the book slightly, I could look around the man and the structures in the picture. As I continued to look, the picture suddenly began to move. The knight turned to the left, and met another man who stepped onto the screen to speak with him. There was no sound, so it was impossible to hear what the two were saying. I looked at the page across from the video image, to read some of the text there. It mentioned something about Kennis Berrontar planning the construction of a building. I continued flipping on through the book.

Kennis Berrontar turned out to be a fascinating man. He was an architect and a writer, having apparently produced several plays and overseen the construction of buildings and public works. Of course, in the way of all Amatharians, he was also an accomplished soldier. He was a hero of several dozen campaigns. Then he planned and commissioned an expedition to explore an unknown portion of Ecos. He led the expedition as it left Amathar, and was never seen again.

I was so engrossed in the biography, that I was unaware of the passage of time, which is so often the case in Ecos, until the automated door voice spoke again.

"Nichol Messorar is waiting at the door."

I was so anxious not to keep my teacher waiting, that I fairly flew down the stairs and flung open the front door. There she stood in all her intimidating glory. She looked me up and down for a moment before entering.

"Have you completed your lessons?" she asked. I quickly recited "The Little Swordsmen", and "Boy's Devotion".

"Very nice," she said. "I see you have a book under your arm. Have you been reading?"

"I have been trying," I replied. "This book is quite interesting. It is a biography of Kennis Berrontar. He seems to have been a fascinating fellow."

"He certainly was," she replied. "He was also my father."

I didn't know what to say to this, but as I stood there not saying anything; it occurred to me that Nichol Messorar seemed just like the daughter of a great man. She probably grew up under his watchful eye-- his darling-- and became everything she could be just to please him. It seems that fathers and daughters are often so alike. It is a shame that on Earth, fathers tend to push their daughter away as soon as they reach puberty, or perhaps it is the daughters who push. Sons on the other hand, spend so much of their time trying to compete with, and then out-do their fathers, that the relationship is often lost. Not that I have any real insight into such matters, having neither a mother nor a father, nor sons or daughters for that matter. When I returned my gaze to the woman's face, I saw that she was looking at me with a half smile. She took hold of my arm, and guided me to the sofa, where we talked about Amathar and learning and family and books.

"Keep reading the books here at Norar Remontar's home," she instructed, just before leaving. "I will bring you some suitable literature when I return. I will meet you here every thirty city-cycles to check

your progress."



## Chapter Fourteen: City of the Amatharians

I had literally just closed the door after Nichol Messorar had left, when the disembodied voice announced that Vena Remontar had arrived. I am sure that the two must have passed in the hall, though I was not fortunate enough to witness it.

"Are you ready?" asked Vena Remontar. "Wear your swords."

I strapped my weapons belt on below my tabard and carefully sheathed my swords in their new holders. In spite of the fact that the swords were uncounted years older than the sheaths, they fit perfectly. We started out the door, and down the hallway. It was the first time I had been out of Norar Remontar's apartment since I had arrived, and it felt good.

"We need to stop here first," said Vena Remontar, as we stepped off the escalator onto the fifth floor. The lower floors had much higher ceilings and seemed more spacious than those of the upper floors. Here were located restaurants, shops, and other facilities used by the people in the building. We entered through a large doorway to find a large gymnasium. There were two young girls; I would have thought them about ten years of age, practicing their swordsmanship in a haphazard manner, at the far end of the room. As they noticed us, they stopped to stare at me and giggle.

"I wish to see if the title of swordsman that Norar Remontar laid upon you is warranted," the female knight said.

She drew her long sword and I followed suit. We nodded respectfully to one another. Then with a skill and speed born of battle, Vena Remontar charged at me, bringing her blade down directly toward my face. I raised my own to block the stroke, and just as quickly she swung two more blows. The only thing I could do was take the offensive, so as I blocked the third blow, I swung my weapon on around in a great arc toward her side. The woman was off balance from her attack, so the only way she could block the arc of weapon, was to turn her back on me, and swing her blade outward to meet mine. I expected that this would offer me a chance to attack her back, but it didn't. As soon as she had done so, she tucked and rolled forward, spinning as she rose to face me. This was a brilliant maneuver and would have put several yards between us, but I wasn't ready to let up. Using my gravity-enhanced strength, I jumped forward, almost landing on top of her. Vena Remontar thrust quickly several times. I blocked those attacks and countered.

"Not bad, thus far," she said.

"Thank you."

As I said this, I swung down. I knew that were we really engaged in battle, her sword would have glowed with power, and sliced through the mundane metal of my own, but for now, the soul was asleep, and we were on equal terms. Actually, I had an advantage of superior strength. She blocked my swing, but was unprepared for the added power, and it knocked her from her feet. Without hesitation, she swung toward my knees. I jumped up, and the blade passed harmlessly below me. The young knight rolled to her feet.

I could see by the half smile on her lips that she was enjoying herself. With a flick of her left wrist so quick that I almost didn't see it, she whipped her short sword from its sheath and grasped it like a dagger. I chopped down with my blade in an attempt to catch her off balance, but she wasn't off balance. She blocked my blow with the shorter blade and began to attack with the longer. Then she attacked with both swords, forcing me to defend, and I am sure, hoping to wear me down. Unable to attack for the moment, I began to leap quickly to either side, and then to the back, forcing her to chase me. I knew that it was I who would be able to wear her down first, and after several dozen parries, I could see in her eyes that she was coming to the same realization.

Here was the advantage I needed. I rained a series of blows at her head, and then swung with power at her side. Like she had before, Vena Remontar spun around with her back to me and swung her sword, tip down, outward to meet mine. I expected to have a quick shot at her exposed back and left side, but

even as she blocked my attack, she driven her short sword, in her left hand, straight back under her arm, and into my stomach.

"Umph!" I grunted in surprise. I expected that I had been cut through, but the tip of her sword merely pricked my skin.

Vena Remontar wiped the tiny drop of blood from her sword tip onto her tabard, and then sheathed her sword. With the drawing of first blood, the contest was over.

"I'm satisfied," she said. "I thought that perhaps Norar Remontar was being overly generous. But you are quite skilled."

"Still, you defeated me," I said, still holding a hand over my wound.

"It could have gone either way."

The two young girls were now staring at us in rapt fascination, though whether it was me or Vena Remontar who held their attention, I was at first unsure. My companion stepped over to a box mounted on the wall, removed something from it, and returned. She pushed aside my tabard, pressed her fingers through the small slice in my bodysuit, and applied a small adhesive bandage to the cut in my skin.

"I think you will live," she pronounced.

"I know I will live," I replied. "The question is whether I will enjoy it or not."

The two girls had edged close enough to speak to us. "Remiant Vena Remontar?" asked the taller of the two. "Is he an Amatharian or an alien?"

"You are rude, child," said the knight. "Direct your questions to the swordsman."

The girl bowed stiffly to me. "Please forgive me sir," she said, "but neither this ignorant girl, nor her friend, has ever seen a man like you."

"No harm," I replied. "What is your name?"

"Neela Esponar. And this is Nona Montendro."

"I am an alien," I said. "I have just arrived in Amathar. I'm staying with Norar Remontar."

"He is my fourth cousin," said Neela Esponar, excitedly.

"Perhaps you can come by and help me with my reading lessons," I suggested, as Vena Remontar began to lead me out of the gymnasium.

"We will," they both giggled.

"They find your pale color fascinating," said the knight.

"Do you?"

She moved her face very close to mine. I hadn't noticed that her eyes were so large. "It is cute," she said, "in an ugly sort way."

We walked out into the bright Ecosian day. The street was filled with people going about their business, either on the walkways, or beside them. Vena Remontar and I turned to the right and strolled along the flower lined cobblestone beside the moving sidewalks. It was warm, but a light breeze whipped across my face and tickled the leaves on the potted trees.

"My betrothed has related some of your adventures with Norar Remontar," she said. "It must have been quite exciting to battle the Pell in the forest, or the Kartags deep underground."

"It was frightening," I replied.

"I have seen only one action against the Zoasians."

"And yet you are a knight."

"I felt the pull of my soul at a very young age," she explained. "When an Amatharian reaches a certain level of skill, his soul calls out to him, and compels him to come to the Garden of Souls. Some go only to find they are mistaken, and their desire to become remiant made them think they heard their soul, when it was not really calling. Then they either die in the garden, or they return without a soul, and are disgraced. "When I heard my soul call, many thought it was my youth calling, that I was making a mistake, but I proved them wrong."

We reached the shuttle train station-- the same one at which Malagor, Norar Remontar, and I had made our arrival. Descending once again on the escalator, we found the lobby of station much busier than it was on my last visit. I once again marveled at the lack of discarded waste and graffiti. We had barely stepped off the automated staircase, when the train pulled in. The door slid open and the two of us,

along with about a dozen others stepped into the car.

Just like the shuttle train in which I had previously ridden, this car was decorated and furnished as if it were some one's den, rather than a mode of public transportation. The car shifted into motion, and the passengers took their seats. There were a variety of people-- of different ages, and different occupations, but all were well-groomed, attractive, and polite.

"There seem to be a lot of people out and about," I remarked.

"The shuttle train is always busiest near the fifth city-cycle," Vena Remontar explained. "That is when most Amatharians make appointments, or go to and from their duties."

"I was wondering about work schedules," I said. "Who decides when work is to start and finish?"

"Duties are determined by the leaders of the companies, whom you must remember in Amathar, are usually also relatives. In truth, most Amatharian duties are purely supervisory. In our society we have machines to guard our walls, machines to grow our food, machines to clean our homes, machines to keep our records, and machines to build and repair our other machines."

"You sound as if you don't entirely approve," I said.

"Don't get me wrong," she replied. "I am very pleased with the functioning of our society. Because our people have more free time, we have a great abundance of art and science, but I am glad to have Amath's teachings. He said "let no machine live in the guise of a man". I have heard of people far away in Ecos, who build machines that resemble them. That is a vile thing. Also, I personally have no affinity for machines. That is why I am a warrior. It is one of the few jobs that we still do with our own hands."

"Among my own people, there is a desire to dehumanize war," I related. "They have built aircraft that can be controlled by long distance. They build weapons that can destroy cities thousands of miles away, while the soldier firing it is safe at home."

"Disgusting!" she spat. "If you cannot taste your enemies' blood, how can you know the glory of bravery? If you cannot look into his eye, how can you know the horror of death? I can see that you have lived a deprived life among a perverted people. I will try to help you."

By this time the shuttle train had reached its destination, and we debarked. Here again was another station, very much like the others, with the exception of size. This shuttle station was huge-- it made Grande Central Station seem tiny. Once we had taken the escalator up from the platform, we stood at the edge of a huge room, many stories high. In this station dozens of shuttle train lines converged, as did other forms of transportation. Thousands of people with black hair and blue faces bustled here and there. Amid them, perhaps fifteen or sixteen aliens, me included, were easy to pick out.

"We will need to come back here, but I wished to stop and have something to eat," Vena Remontar said.

"Not a bad idea at all," I thought aloud.

I was led out of the great station by my beautiful companion. Outside was the city street plaza that I had come to expect, with its moving walkways, and its decorative pools, trees, flower beds, and statues. On the other side of the street was a great park. I could see buildings on the far side, but they seemed to be a mile or more away. It reminded me of my one trip to Central Park. Here however, there was no discarded trash, no beggar asking for money, no drug dealer selling controlled substances to children, and I suddenly realized, no one walking a dog.

"Do Amatharians keep pets?" I asked.

"Other races keep pets," responded Vena Remontar. "The Preemor have a small animal that lives in their fur to help keep them clean, and the Gloonor have an animal that chews their food for them. But apart from the micro-organisms that cover every living thing, and animals we keep to eat, we Amatharians do not need pets. I'm surprised you asked. Our physiology seems so similar."

"Not just animals," I tried to explain. "Pets. Animals that are kept for companionship."

She looked at me as if I had lost my mind. "Don't you have other people to keep you company?"

"Well, yes. But many of my people like to keep animals in their home. Older people for instance, tend to live longer, healthier lives, when they have a pet to care for."

"The children don't mind sharing the old people with an animal?"

"Often the children are with their peers. And many times the older people live in a special home for the aged."

Now Vena Remontar opened her mouth in shock. Her deep blue skin had actually attained a lighter hue.

"You segregate your ancestors?!" she practically gasped. "And the children let this happen?"

"Uh...I guess so. Amatharian children spend a great deal of time with older people?"

"Of course. Our children wish to be grown up. They are always asking to be treated as adults. How better to learn how to be an adult, than to observe the most adult people that they know. I have heard stories of what we were like before Amath came, but I never realized just what a horrible life we would have without his teaching."

"I guess I never really thought about this before either," I said, "having had neither a family, nor a pet."

"What do you mean, you had no family?"

"My parents died when I was a child."

"You lived with your grandparents? ...or your uncle?"

"No, I lived in a home for children."

"You mean strangers took you in as their son?"

"No," I elaborated. "There were adults there, but it was their job to care for us, it wasn't their home."

"You truly were deprived." She pursed her perfect lips and frowned. "Amatharians don't realize how lucky they are, to have their families, to have the wisdom of their ancestors, to not have to share their homes with animals."

We crossed the plaza and stepped into the carefully sculptured landscape of the park. There were walkways going here and there, around copses of trees, small fountains, and playgrounds where dozens of blue-skinned children jumped on large air-filled mattresses, dangled from high swings, and raced around obstacle courses. Just inside the park was an outdoor restaurant. Twenty tables with chairs were arranged in a rough circle under several large shade trees. I was wondering where the kitchen might be, when I saw a food server clad in white emerging from below ground by escalator.

All of the tables in the restaurant were full of patrons, but when we approached, several groups of people stood up saying, "Take our table, Knight." Vena Remontar nodded politely to all of them, and we sat down at the closest of the proffered tables. The previous diners had just finished their food, and the table was quickly cleared and cleaned by the restaurant worker, a young man with very dark blue skin apparently both busboy and food server, who then waited for our order.

"What is the special?" asked the knight.

"Rackamir fish."

The young warrior wrinkled her nose in a way that made her particularly cute.

"No, we don't want that," she said. "We have been playing." She used an Amatharian slang expression, which means playing when referring to children, but which has a more dangerous connotation, when referring to warriors.

"We have ruorman," offered the server.

"Perfect," she pronounced, as the waiter hurried away with the order.

"This is a very nice park," I said, looking around.

"Yes. I used to come here to play when I was a child. It was designed by Kennis Berrontar and is, I think, the loveliest of the Sun Clan's parks.

"Are all of the Sun Clan's properties on this side of Amathar?"

"No. Amathar is a great patchwork of the Clans. It was all laid out and designated in the Time of Amath, when the whole city was the size of this park." Vena Remontar explained. "In fact, it is that old portion of the city to which I wish to take you. The greatest monuments are there."

Our food arrived quickly enough. The main course appeared to be a breast of fowl about the size of a turkey breast, covered with a glaze, and lying upon a pile of vegetables. Upon tasting the meat, my mouth took flame. It was spicy to a degree that would shame any proud jalapeno. The power to bring tears to one's eyes was in the glaze, and so it dripped down from the fowl onto the vegetables so that there was no bite which provided respite from the fire. Of course, water was provided, and I drank several glasses. At last we finished eating, and left. It wasn't necessary to tell the waiter we were from the Sun Clan, as this was a Sun Clan establishment.

We made our way back to the station. This time instead of going down to the shuttle train level, we took

stairs to the upper level where a different type of train waited. This train looked very much like the bullet trains used in Japan and Europe, though this one, like the subway, had no discernable engine. All of the cars were similar. There was quite a group of people waiting for the doors to open, but we were ushered to the front, as allowances were made for Vena Remontar's rank.

"I don't see any other knights nearby," I commented. "I somehow thought that they were more common. It seems that every Amatharian I know has a crest on his chest."

"Only one in ten thousand Amatharians achieve remiant stature," she replied. "So there are less than a million of us."

The doors of the train slid open, and we entered, followed by several dozen others. The interior of this train was more conventional in design, with rows of seats rather than the homey atmosphere of the subway, though the seats were large and comfortable and spaced at a decent distance from one another. Most of the wall space was taken by the large windows, toward which the occupants were slightly turned. As soon as the train got under way, I understood the attraction. The train rode some thirty feet above ground on a raised rail, and the view of the city below was excellent.

Our train passed to the left of the park and ran toward the center of Amathar. I figured our speed to be near one hundred miles per hour, though the Amatharians around me didn't believe time to be a constant, therefore invalidating that estimation. The Amatharians had no words in their language for velocity, since they had no words for measurement of time. Of course Amatharians made distinctions between the speeds of different things. If, for instance, a new fighter aircraft was developed which was faster than the old model, they would refer to it as such, using a word which translates to "better at going".

I found the view out the window mesmerizing. Amathar was a beautiful city. Every single building was a work of art, carefully designed and skillfully constructed. I later learned that this was necessitated by Amatharian tradition. All buildings were designed and constructed to last forever. Demolition was almost unknown, only occurring if the building in question was falling down of its own accord, which they almost never did. The Amatharians spent much more effort and labor in maintaining older structures than they did in designing and building newer ones. Of course they did the same thing with everything else they used; appliances, clothing, and furniture were all repaired, when in my culture of origin, they would have been thrown away.

These marvelous buildings came in all shapes and sizes, and in most cases, I could easily determine their function. There were large apartment buildings and small family residences. There were food distribution sites which bore quite a resemblance to supermarkets, though in Amathar, no one paid for their food. There were sports stadiums, though they only offered free, amateur events-- there were no professional sports. There were offices and warehouses and processing centers. And there were many libraries. On one level, Amathar was very familiar. On another level, Amathar was quite strange. While there were distribution sites which looked like clothing stores, appliance stores, and grocery stores, there was no competition between them, and they were evenly spaced apart. There were no movie theaters or radio stations or television stations. This last fact was due primarily to a curious feature of Amatharian society. Amatharians loved the written word. Every Amatharian spends much of his free time writing -- letters, poetry, or books. It was rare for an adult not to have at least one book published. Libraries were everywhere. On the other hand, they seemed to despise the recorded or transmitted voice. They did not have radio or television-- either for mass communication or direct communication between individuals. When a flyer or a battleship left port, there was no word from that ship until it returned. There were no telephones in Amathar of any kind. I think that the very idea gave them the willies. The only communication to intrude into their home was mail, which was sent to every home in a pneumatic tube, the capsules of which were programmed with a tiny computer to find the correct destination from among the tens of millions of homes interconnected. Even artificial voices like the door announcer or my letter-learning pad, were used sparingly.

There were also no courthouses, jails, or police departments. Crime was all but unknown in Amathar. No Amatharian would think of committing vandalism, and there was no reason for theft since there was little want. Amatharians were incredibly polite and respectful, and seldom had disagreements. If however a situation arose in which a crime was committed by an Amatharian, it was such a disgrace that

it dishonored not only the individual, but his family and his clan. In those situations, the head of one's family became judge, jury, and quite probably executioner. There was nothing worse than dishonoring one's family in Amathar. Nothing.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Garden of Souls

The sky train sped above the seemingly endless city. Several times it stopped at stations, but we remained aboard. I continued to watch in fascination, the buildings passing by. Abruptly the color, style, and size of the structures changed. We were now crossing a region of huge, dark buildings, many of which were larger than the giant warehouses and sports stadiums which I had seen before. These were far less ornate and far more utilitarian than the other buildings as well.

"This is one of the industrial regions. It is a circle one hundred kentads (about fifty miles) in diameter containing nothing but factories and warehouses. This is where the majority of our manufactured goods come from-- this or one of the nine other regions just like it."

I acknowledged Vena Remontar's commentary, and then turned away from the window. Several food servers in the traditional white bodysuits were delivering tall glasses of ice water and trays of small appetizer cakes. The young knight, and I as her companion, were served first.

"There certainly seems to be a great deal of respect and privilege associated with being a knight," I observed.

"That is very true," Vena Remontar replied, with a slight smile, "but it is more than that in my case. The Remontar family name is well known, as are all who carry that name. In addition, my cousins are the heirs of the Sun Overlord. Norar Remontar and his sister are beloved of the entire city."

We busied ourselves eating the delicious cakes, which were filled with a ground meat and a variety of vegetables. In certain parts of the land of my birth, they might have been called pasties, though they were seasoned unlike anything found on Earth. The water was delicious. It seemed that water was the beverage of choice among the Amatharians, and they went to great lengths to see that any water found within the city was not only crystal clear and healthful, but tasty as well. With the exception of mirrah, and a few other fermented drinks, water was all that was available to drink in most city places.

We had just finished eating when the sky train made one more stop in the industrial center. After it began on its way again, we crossed out of the region of factories and complexes and began crossing a vast open cultivated land. I watched out the window as we continued on, and the buildings of the city grew distant behind us. Roaming the ground like huge grazing animals, were monstrous machines, planting, thinning, and harvesting a tremendous variety of vegetables and fruits.

"Have we left the city?" I asked.

"This is one of the five cultivation areas within the city," explained the knight. "Each is a circle two hundred fifty kentads (about two hundred miles) in diameter. Four are in operation growing our food, while a fifth lies fallow."

As we cruised along, our conversation did not lag. I had a thousand, no ten thousand questions for this lovely young woman from a very alien culture. She explained much about the hopes and aspirations of the Amatharian people, the day to day functioning of the clans and family businesses, and the many obligations and requirements. Even though I know that I learned much during the course of that lengthy ride, it is hard to remember the exact order of the conversation now.

We passed the far edge of the cultivation area and once again entered into the urban mass. This portion of the city was obviously of far greater age than the majority of the buildings I had seen until now, though these old edifices maintained the same style and ornamentation as the newer ones. I had come to think of Amathar as one would think of a city on Earth, a great urban realm, but this city was on an entirely different scale. Within the walls of the Amatharians' home were not only vast areas of cultivated fields, but mountains, lakes, and rivers as well. This older portion of the city, though still urban, was built upon a low mountain range.

The train stopped at a station upon a platform high in the air, and this time we stood up and stepped off the sky train. Vena Remontar led me down a great escalator so steep that it seemed I was walking straight down. Once at the bottom I looked around at a plaza some two miles across. Great statues of

stone, some as high as forty feet were interspersed with surging fountains, tall green hedge rows, and monstrous tile pictures. Two sides of the plaza were lined with large buildings resembling hotels. The third side faced a large park or wilderness area. Facing the fourth side was a fantastic stepped pyramid, more than a mile wide and more than two thousand feet high.

"That is the Temple of Amath," my blue-skinned companion said. "At the other end is the Garden of Souls."

"Wow," I said. "Of course I could very well be delirious. I feel like I haven't slept in a... well, in a long time."

"It was a long train ride," she agreed. "We will rest before we see the sites."

The beautiful knight led me to one of the large buildings on the plaza, and we walked inside. At a large desk was an Amatharian in a great brown robe. He had a shaved head which gave him a slightly sinister though still handsome look. He was the first man I had seen here who did not have a head of straight black hair.

"Greetings Remiant Vena Remontar," said the man.

"Greetings Templar. We wish a room."

"Come with me."

The bald man came out from behind the desk, and led the two of us up several flights of stairs to a room. I found myself for the first time in the Amatharian equivalent of a hotel, and in many ways, it was very like many hotels I had stayed in-- the bedroom was about the size one would expect, though the bathroom was proportionately much larger. The real differences were subtle. One did not pay for the room. There were no numbers on the door. There was no checkout time. There were no locks on the doors. The room featured two large beds of the Amatharian style-- embedded into the floor. I removed my weapons, boots, and tabard and placed them beside one of the beds, then lay down and stretched out. Vena Remontar did the same on the other bed. I believe that at that point in time, my body still had not adjusted to the eternal day, and I was not sleeping as much as I should have. When my head hit the pillow though, I was ready. Within only a few minutes, I had fallen asleep.

I awoke slowly, my mind gently drifting back to reality. I opened my eyes and looked around. I was alone in the room, though a moment later I saw Vena Remontar through the door, bathing in the bathroom. The bath was large enough to be considered a small swimming pool. She called out and invited me to bathe with her. One of the reasons that the baths were so large, though by no means the only reason, was that Amatharians often bathed together.

I stepped into the bathroom and self-consciously began to undress. I have never really been shy by nature, but that doesn't mean that I am in the habit of undressing in front of someone I hardly know, especially in broad daylight, which was all one had in Ecos. Vena Remontar was busy washing herself and seemed to take very little notice of me. I quickly pulled off my jumpsuit and climbed over the edge of the tub. That is when I noticed that she was staring at me.

"You are frighteningly pale," she said.

I quickly lowered myself into the warm water and could not help noticing that she was not frighteningly pale. Her dark blue shoulders poked out above the water and perfectly matched the dark but smooth skin of her face. I turned and busied myself soaping my face and arms and trying not to think of a frighteningly beautiful and frighteningly naked vision just a foot away, when I felt Vena Remontar's hands on my shoulder. She was soaping my back for me. When she had finished, I submerged to rinse off.

"I am done," she said, climbing out of the tub.

I could not help but notice the grace with which she did so, and the soft but muscular form which she presented on the way to her towel. She was really very...very... pleasant. She left the room to get dressed and I soaked for a little while before getting out myself. Once I had done so, and gotten dressed, the two of us made our way downstairs, stopping briefly at the desk, and then out the front door.

"That bald man seemed to know you well," I observed, remembering the day before.

"He is of the Holy Order," she explained. "It is his business to know everyone. This whole area is organized and run by the Holy Order from the Temple of Amath. They use the cream on their heads that



I gave you for your face. It is traditional."

We walked across the great expanse of the plaza toward the open end. A huge, ornately decorated, stone gate led the way into what lay beyond. From where I stood, it seemed that precious little lay beyond. It was a hilly scrub land, with stunted trees and large bushes. I could see no animal life. Vena Remontar and I reached the edge of the plaza, and stood watching, as a young Amatharian man stepped through the gate. A group of Holy Order Templars took note of his passage on small note pads.

"This is the Garden of Souls," said Vena Remontar. "When a swordsman has become skilled, he feels drawn into the garden. There he must go, and remain until his soul finds him.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

I nodded absentmindedly.

"Let's get something to eat." The knight started toward a nearby restaurant, not looking back to see that I followed.

I did not follow. I could not. From the moment we had stopped in front of the great gate, I had felt my muscles tighten and my stomach churn. It was as if my whole body was attempting to push me forward, through the gate. I tried to resist, but my own legs it seemed, were against me. For several moments I fought the compulsion-- I pushed back against myself. I wondered what could be drawing me toward the rugged landscape beyond, and then I remembered the story of the souls. What if my own soul were calling be from beyond the border of the garden. But how could this be. I was a stranger here, an alien in fact. How could I have a soul awaiting me here, in the middle of this strange city of Amathar. One last time, I attempted to push myself away from the gate, but I couldn't. I was drawn with a force that I could not understand, toward what could only be my soul, luring me to my destiny. What did it want? More specifically, what did it want with me?

I crossed the border into the garden, seeing in the corner of my eye that the templars took careful note of my passage. Suddenly I heard Vena Remontar's frantic voice calling from behind me.

"Alexander Ashton! Alexander Ashton! You don't understand!" she cried. "You don't know! Once you cross into the Garden, you cannot come out again! To come out without your knighthood, is the greatest disgrace!"

I waved to acknowledge her. I could see a kind of fear in her face, even at this distance. I have often jumped into something without thinking, and I resigned myself to the fact that this was probably just such an occasion, though it didn't quite seem fair that I should bear all the burden, drawn as I was without my consent. I was compelled beyond my ability to refuse. I saw that Vena Remontar stepped over to speak with the group of templars, no doubt to plead that I was only an ignorant savage. I didn't watch to see the outcome, but turned and made my way into the wilderness.

I had walked a mile or more, when I turned to look back. The gate was no longer visible, lying beyond a small hill that I had crossed without really thinking about it. In fact, I could no longer see the city in any direction, though I knew that it lay all around me. I didn't know how large the Garden of Souls was, but there was a small mountain rising up ahead of me, so I headed toward it. I know it must have been a number of miles, but it seemed that I crossed the distance and climbed up the mountain, in no time at all. When I reached the summit I looked down into a small valley surrounding a blue pool. It was not the most beautiful valley that I had ever seen, but it seemed a nice place to await my soul. I was unsure as to just what I was really waiting for. I knew that the Amatharians met their souls here, but just what was a soul? I could only think of the soul as a mystical force, as in the Judeo-Christian sense of the word, but I knew that the Amatharian soul was different. For one thing, not everyone had one. For another, I knew there was some physical manifestation. There was a force of some kind which made the remnant's sword glow and cut through anything. I had seen it myself.

I sat down on the ground, below a small tree, beside the blue pool. Try as I might, I just couldn't feel fearful about what I had done. Any sane person would, I suppose. I had stepped into a life or death situation without any thought at all. If I came out without a soul I would be disgraced and would be forced to leave the only friends that I knew in this world. If I didn't come out at all, I would die where I sat. Still, I wasn't sad or afraid or unhappy. I was fine. At least that's how I remember it.

A slight breeze picked up, and blew low clouds in to block out the sun. I leaned on my right hand, and

felt something smooth beneath my palm. Looking down to see what it was, I saw a partially buried skull grinning back at me. I slowly looked around, and for the first time noticed that the ground around the little pool was littered with bones, some with decomposing flesh still hanging upon them. Here were the remains of those who failed to find their souls. I suddenly felt my stomach sink and my loins tighten. Here was the fear that had failed to manifest itself up until this point. I should say two fears, for there were two distinct emotions, and I didn't know which was causing me the most anxiety-- the fear that I would die here, or the fear that I would prove unworthy and drag myself from the garden in disgrace. These thoughts were still occupying my mind when I noticed a small flame directly in front of me. Something on the ground had caught fire. The fire was the size one would expect from a freshly filled cigarette lighter or five or six wood matches lit together, though I couldn't quite tell what was on fire. Nothing seemed to be consumed by the blaze. Then the little fire hopped toward me, leaving nothing scorched in its wake, and stopped within arms reach. At the same time, I felt a tickling sensation on the surface of my scalp. I had the impression of thinking a thought, or smelling a smell, or reading a word which I could not quite identify.

"You are my soul," I said, a feeling of awe coming over me.

The little flame burned and I continued to have the tickling sensation in my head, which continued until it became an itching and then an aching.

"What do I do now?" I asked, though I didn't know to whom I had directed the question.

As if in answer, a vague thought penetrated my brain. "Open your sword."

I drew my long sword and carefully unwrapped the hilt, and opened the small compartment there. The soul hopped into the compartment and for a fraction of a second, my sword blade glowed the way that I had seen Norar Remontar's glow so many times. Then just as quickly, the sword faded, and the little soul fire shrank to a faint flicker.

"Close the sword." It came as almost a complete thought.

I closed and wrapped the hilt, sheathed the blade, and started back toward the great plaza. It took me far longer to get out than it had to get in, because I got lost. One cannot overestimate the importance of astronomical observation in guiding one's course. Unfortunately in Ecos, there was only one astronomical object, and it always stayed right above us. Finally, I found my bearings and reached the great gate at the entrance to the garden.

Standing at the entrance, looking quite unhappy, was Vena Remontar. As soon as she saw me passing through the structure, she began shouting and trying to push me back.

"You can't give up so soon!" she shouted. "Go back. You cannot accept failure so quickly."

"But I didn't fail," I tried to explain.

"Give me your weapon," said one of the templars, stepping forward.

I drew my sword to hand it to him. The way he lunged toward the sword though, made me realize that his was not a friendly act. Before I could move to defend myself the new soul in my sword sprang to life in a fantastically bright blaze of blue white. The man jumped back, eyes wide. His companions began to mutter to themselves and scribble furiously on their little note pads. The first fellow I must say recovered himself well. After making sure his hand was intact, he bowed low to me.

"Forgive me, Remiant Alexander Ashton," he said.

"How did you know my name?" I asked, nodding back.

"It is the business of the Holy Order to know who enters and leaves the Garden of Souls. You are requested to visit the High Templar at your convenience."

"I cannot believe it," Vena Remontar gave me a hug. "That is the fastest presentation that I have ever heard of. You barely entered the garden, and you are already back with your soul." She hugged me again.

"I am sure that it seemed a much shorter time to you than it did to anyone else," I asserted.

"Come knight," she laughed. "Let's get something to eat."

This she led me to the restaurant, and this time I followed. We sat and talked, though I recall nothing of what we said, and I don't remember what we ate either. There was a lot going through my mind. Here I was, a stranger in a strange land, and surrounded by millions of people from an alien culture, trapped in a

strange world, and in love with a woman I had never met. Now I was somehow attached to a tiny energy creature that had as yet unknown powers.

## Chapter Sixteen: The Temple of Amath

After we had eaten, we walked across the great plaza to the stepped pyramid which was the Temple of Amath. Vena Remontar told me that an invitation from the High Templar was something to be acted upon promptly. The great structure was most impressive. It was more than a mile wide, and was over two thousand feet tall. It looked as though it had been built by a giant boy playing with his blocks, placing successively smaller blocks one atop another until he had built a pyramid of steps. Each of the steps was over one hundred feet tall, and there were twenty one of them. The entire surface was carved in intricate designs, so finely detailed that not a single inch of blank wall could be found on the outside. Running up the front of the temple was a set of broad steps which led to the tenth level, where there was a large, dark entrance.

My friend and I walked up the many steps to the doorway. Waiting here was a small crowd of templars, each with his bald head. Some were writing in their pads, others were about other business. It may seem odd that the templars were engaged in so much writing, until one considers the extent to which Amatharians in general were fond of the written word. Amatharians had no telephone, but wrote letters every day, even to friends they were likely to see often. To a certain extent, the spoken language of these people was divorced from the written, and the written form allowed them much more freedom of expression.

One of the shaven fellows took charge, or had been left in charge, and guided us from the open greeting area, into a large chamber. It was much like one would expect a very large church or cathedral to look like, not that I'm an expert, but it had no rows of pews or any other seating. The walls were colorfully decorated and large bright banners hung from the ceiling. Of course huge numbers of templars buzzed here and there, taking notes, examining the scenes depicted on the walls, and staring at the shrine in the center of the hall.

The shrine took my breath away. Not because it was big, though it was that. Not because it was carefully inlaid with precious stones and highly polished gold and silver, though it was. It quite knocked the breath from my lungs because the symbol on the great shrine was an A. I don't mean it was an Amatharian A. It was an honest to god, Greco-Roman, American English, Times font type A!

"That's an A!" I shouted.

The entire population of the hall turned and looked at us.

"That's an A," I said.

"Show some respect, knight," growled Vena Remontar. "Keep your voice down."

"That's an A," I whispered.

"You are correct, knight." A voice came from behind us.

We turned to see an older Amatharian man dressed in the brown robes of the templars, and wearing a large silver medallion with the letter A on it. Vena Remontar bowed low and I followed suit.

"I am Kurar Ka Remiant Oldon Domintus," said the man, identifying himself as an overlord. "I am the High Templar."

"It is an honor to meet you, I'm sure," I said. "That is an A?"

"Yes, you are quite correct. That is an A."

"Well. How did it get here?"

"Before we answer any of your questions," the Overlord said, "you have a great many things to do for us."

Oldon Domintus turned and led the two of us across the great hall to a doorway opposite that through which we had come. Beyond the chamber was a great long corridor. This hallway was lined with pictures painted in the bright colors: pictures of Amatharian knights engaged in battles, pictures of templars performing rituals in the great plaza, pictures of great buildings being constructed in Amathar. The High Templar maintained the image of a man showing friends around his home.

"Has Vena Remontar told you about our temple?"

"I'm afraid she has not yet had time."

"This temple was built three hundred generations ago. Construction was begun under the direction of Amath himself. He envisioned a monument to his people where they could look for guidance. It was built here beside the Garden of Souls, so that those feeling the draw of their souls could reflect.

"You felt no need to reflect before entering the garden?" he asked me.

"I've always been a pretty spontaneous fellow," I replied.

"So it seems."

We finally arrived at our destination, which was a small room just off the far end of the corridor. The walls of the room were covered with warm comfortable colors, but the lack of pictures seemed odd, having been surrounded by them in the other temple rooms. One large chair sat at one end of the room facing six chairs at the other end.

"We wish you to undergo examination," said the High Templar.

"Oh?"

"It will not be painful."

"And what if I refuse?" I asked.

"No one is forced to undergo examination," he replied. "Of course, you should remember that yours is a unique position in our society. You are now a remiant, but you are an alien. You have no family to maintain your position in our culture."

"He has friends," said Vena Remontar, a frown forming on her face.

"Your loyalty does you credit," said Oldon Domintus, "but you should know that no harm will come to him."

"There is much we must learn from you," he said turning to me. "About where you come from. About who you are."

"I will be fine," I assured Vena Remontar. "Go back to the rest house, and I will join you when I'm finished."

"He will indeed," said the High Templar.

Vena Remontar stood where she was for a moment, staring into the eyes of the High Templar. Any other man might have melted under such a scrutiny, but Oldon Domintus stared calmly back. At last, she turned on her heel and left, though the frown remained on her face. She was a very good friend to be so concerned about me. Once she had gone, the High Templar directed me to sit in the solitary chair. Six templars entered and were introduced by Oldon Domintus, though I can't remember any of their names now. They sat down, and I sat down, and the High Templar left the room.

"What is your name?" asked the first questioner.

"Alexander Ashton."

"Where are you from?" asked the second questioner, before I was able to take a breath after answering the first question.

"The United States of America, Planet Earth."

"How did you come to Ecos?" This time the question came before I had finished answering.

"What did you do there?"

"Who controlled the army?"

"How many people lived there?"

"How are the children named?"

"Do they use a medium of exchange?"

"What dangerous animals live there?"

"Does everyone in Earth carry a sword?"

The questions came fast and furious. They gave me no chance to stop and think about anything I said. The questions were initially about my life on Earth, what Earth was like, and what society and organization on Earth was like, but then they led off into my adventures in Ecos, my thoughts and impressions of Amathar, and the friends I had met here. Finally one of the templars asked the last question.

"Who do you love?"

"What?" I asked.

"Who do you love?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"It is a question we wish answered."

"Well, I don't intend to answer it," I stood up. "In fact I don't intend to answer any more questions at all."

As if by magic, the High Templar re-entered the room, and dismissed the questioners with a wave of his hand. I felt as if I had undergone some sort of torture, so weak and tired and sweaty was I. By this time I had quite forgotten any questions that I might have had for them. All I wanted to do was go back to the rest house and fall into a deep sleep. My last sleep on the comfortable bed there seemed as though it had occurred a month ago.

"You may go for now, Remiant Alexander Ashton," said the Temple Overlord. "We shall call upon you again."

"Wonderful," I replied wearily.

"Have you given any thought to your crest?"

"My what?"

"As a knight of Amathar, you must wear a crest upon your tabard to identify you," he said. "Since you have no family, there is no crest for you to inherit, so you will have to choose one of your own."

"To tell you the truth," I said rather testily, "with all your people asking me questions, I have had little time to think of anything at all."

"I am sure that is true," he replied thoughtfully, and not at all insulted. "What letter in your home language begins your name?"

"That one." I pointed to the great A on the altar, for we had now entered the cathedral-like hall once again. "That is the first letter in both my first and last names."

"You may incorporate this symbol into your crest," he offered. "I know that you will never become one of the templars, but I believe that you will find you have a special relationship with the Temple of Amath."

"I will consider it," I said as we reached the massive entryway to the pyramid.

"Go with honor."

"Thank you," I replied.

To be quite honest, at that moment I was none too pleased with the Temple of Amath. They had been interrogating me for what seemed an inordinate amount of time. But, I reasoned, as I made my way down the seemingly endless stairway, at least they had let me go in peace. I was willing to forgive a great deal because I found the Amatharians so likable. They were polite. They were friendly. They were honest. And they were all quite handsome. Some like Vena Remontar were incredibly beautiful ...and like Noriandara Remontar too.

I walked across the plaza to the rest house, then stopped at the desk to confirm that Vena Remontar and I were still occupying the same room, since I was not sure of the procedures of the situation, and walked up the stairs to the appropriate hallway and the appropriate door. I dragged myself into the room and dropped down upon the bed. I was asleep in immeasurable Ecosian seconds.

"Wake up," Vena Remontar gently shook me awake. I looked into her beautiful face, and for a moment dreamed what it would be like to be awakened by her cousin, Noriandara Remontar.

"Do I have to wake up?" I asked sleepily.

"Yes, you do. We must take the sky train back to our district."

I nodded and slowly got up. I felt quite rested, but my stomach was growling.

"It sounds like a good thing that I brought you some food to break your sleep fast," said my lovely companion.

"Just as long as it isn't ruorman," I said.

She smiled and handed me a tray full of the small cakes which we had been served on the sky train. "I noticed that you enjoyed these."

"That was very considerate."

I got up and bathed, got dressed, and we checked out of the rest house. We walked to the sky train station and took the escalator up to the platform. The station was very busy, and even with the preferential treatment that was accorded to Vena Remontar, we still had to wait for the second train. It looked inside very much like the sky train we had taken here, with plush reclining chairs-- in fact, it may have been the same train for all I know. It began speeding away from the station platform, and I leaned back in my chair, closing my eyes, and reflecting upon the recent events.

The long trip was quiet and uneventful. I didn't feel like talking and so spent my time just looking out the window. Vena Remontar seemed to be of a similar mind. I had found her up until then, to be relatively loquacious. Between the two of us, we spoke less than forty words the entire way back to Norar Remontar's district. Every once in a while, I would catch her looking at me, but when I looked at her, she just smiled and turned away. Finally, I just went to sleep in my seat, and passed the last part of the trip that way.

At last, we reached the great transport center, and then walked to the shuttle train line we needed. We were the only two people in the subway car, so I turned to look at the city-cycle dial. It read 01067.

"Oh no," I said aloud.

"What is the matter?" asked Vena Remontar.

"I was supposed to meet with Nichol Messonar at 01053. I've missed the appointment by almost fifteen cycles!"

"I would hate to be in your place," replied my companion.

"You are," I said. "I am going to tell her it is your fault. I am new to the city and you dragged me off see the sites."

"I don't think she will excuse you," the female knight said.

"Somehow I think you are right."

We got off the shuttle train at our stop and stepped out of the station onto the street. Immediately something didn't seem right. The city was dark. The warmth of the ever-present sun no longer beat down on the top of my head. I looked up to see one of the great Amatharian battleships moving slowly above us. It dwarfed the huge skyscrapers of the city, and dominated the sky-- more than a mile long and nearly half a mile wide. On its belly were large openings for retrieving aircraft and taking on cargo, and it was painted dark navy blue, with silver insignia and trim.

## Chapter Seventeen: Plans

Looking up frequently at the flying marvel above us, Vena Remontar and I made our way back to the home of her cousin. The great battleship was not alone in the sky. Beyond it I could just make out two similar ships hovering above the city. I hoped that they were part of the fleet that Norar Remontar was preparing for his sister's rescue. Vena Remontar stopped at the entrance of the building, and said her goodbye.

"Thank you for everything," I said.

"It was my pleasure, knight," she replied. "We will meet again soon."

I made my way up the forty-five flights of escalators to Norar Remontar's apartment. No sooner had I entered, than my Amatharian friend appeared from another room.

"You are finally here," he observed.

"Yes."

"You are to come with me,"

"What now?" I asked.

"My grandfather wants to see you."

I nodded in understanding, and followed the tall Amatharian out the door and up three more flights of escalators. We entered a large entryway and waited outside a large navy blue door. This was a type of waiting area that one might find outside any large office. Had I been in New York or Los Angeles, I would have expected a secretary or a receptionist at a desk, but in Amathar they don't have receptionists and a secretary's job is a bit different than on Earth—more like a librarian. Visitors to an Amatharian office observe strict rules of etiquette, just as they would when visiting an Amatharian home. And those Amatharians who work in an office, are pleased to receive visitors themselves.

The door was opened and we were admitted to the room. Inside we found a magnificent hall, the center point of which was a great long table of carved wood, lined on either side by forty heavy wooden chairs. One entire wall of the room was glass, and looked over the courtyard that was the most impressive feature of the building. The other wall was lined with banners, each carrying the crest of a knight of the Sun Clan.

Four Amatharians waited for us within the room. The man who opened the door was the tallest man that I had yet met, something over seven and a half feet. Just looking at him frightened me. I could imagine how an enemy facing him felt. He was middle-aged, with streaks of grey shooting through his straight black hair. His hawkish nose and a large scar across one cheek, gave him the look of a predator. He was clad in the garments of a knight, though his tabard was fringed with gold trim; his crest was an eye with a flaming sun as its pupil. He was Reyno Hissendar, Norar Remontar's uncle, and the chief of the Hissendar Trading Group.

The second fellow was equally impressive, though not because of height. He was a formidably muscular man with a piercing gaze and a tightly set jaw. His tabard was fringed with gold, and his crest showed a flaming sun within a circle. His bodysuit wasn't black though, it was tan. I had seen Knights in other colors, Nichol Messorar for instance, wearing the colors of a teacher. Tan was the traditional color of archaeologists. He was Vandan Lorrinos, a highly respected member of the Sun Clan, and a fleet commander.

The third person in the room was a woman. She was a breathtakingly beautiful older version of Vena Remontar, or for that matter, of the Princess. She was just over six feet tall, with long straight black hair framing her beautiful dark blue face. She had the same stern look about her that I had found in Nichol Messorar, and the same ability to seemingly look into a person's heart. She stared at me with what I thought was a look of more than simple appraisal. She was the mother of Vena Remontar and the aunt of Norar Remontar, and her name was Mindana Remontar. She wore a bodysuit and tabard, but without the crest, indicating she was not a knight. Her bodysuit was dark blue, marking her profession as



biologist.

The final individual in the room was the man for whom I had been summoned-- the Overlord of the Sun Clan, Nevin Lorrinos. There was no doubt that he was Norar Remontar's grandfather, for he was tall and handsome, with the same prominent features and the same noble bearing. He wore a great black robe with a golden crest above the heart-- crossed swords over a flaming sun, the same crest that Noriandara Remontar had worn. I bowed low to him.

"Greetings knight," he said.

"Yes," said Mindana Remontar. "You have certainly wasted no time integrating yourself into our culture." "I was drawn to Garden of Souls when I came near," I said. "Of course I still have much to learn about Amathar, but I already know that I want to make a place for myself here."

Vandan Lorrinos grunted approvingly.

"That is one of the things I wish to speak to you about," said Nevin Lorrinos. "You are without a family, which is a great handicap for you. But my heir tells me that he thinks you are worthy and a good friend and I trust his judgment. For that reason, I would like to offer you a place in the Sun Clan."

"Thank you," I replied. "I already feel a strong connection, since all of my Amatharian friends are from the Sun Clan."

"Then it is done. The other reason for this meeting," he continued, "is that we are about to make an assault on the Zoasians."

"The fleet is ready?"

"We are awaiting the final squadron. There will be four such squadrons of twelve ships each. Vandan Lorrinos and Reyno Hissendar will each command one squadron, and Norar Remontar will make the third his first command. The fourth squadron, under the command of Ulla Yerrontis will arrive at 01096. We will leave at 01097."

"Are you sure that forty eight ships are enough?" I asked. "I would have thought that the city of Amathar could muster a larger fleet, and from what I could see, the Zoasians will be no easy conquest."

"The Sun Clan has four hundred vessels, and some of the other clans boast equally large fleets," Norar Remontar explained, "but Ecos is a very large place, and the ships are spread far and wide. It is an almost unprecedented event to have forty eight ships in one assault."

"As for the Zoasians," said Nevin Lorrinos. "Mindana Remontar assures us that this force will be sufficient. She is the foremost authority on Zoasians."

I turned to Vena Remontar's mother.

"The Zoasians have a very odd culture," she said. "They are obsessed with the acquiring of territory, as if territory could be possessed. They construct many small cities and place them strategically around this territory, and when they expand their territory, they build additional cities. Their forces tend to be even more dispersed than ours, for they constantly fear that a portion of their land will be invaded."

"The closest Zoasian city to the site of the Princess's abduction is Zonamis, which is one of the two closest Zoasian cities to Amathar. It is nine hundred fifty thousand miles away."

"That is a long way off," I said. "It will take a long time to get there."

"Yes," agreed Norar Remontar, "but since it is so far away, the Zoasian ship may still be en route. Considering the amount of damage it sustained, we may even arrive in Zonamis first."

"This brings us to another important point," said Vandan Lorrinos. "What was a Zoasian battle cruiser doing so close to the city of Amathar?"

"It is no doubt they were up to some mischief," said Nevin Lorrinos. "That is another reason we are only committing four squadrons to the assault on Zonamis. The remainder of our available ships will be sweeping a circumference of one hundred thousand miles, looking for any Zoasian attack. We have sent two battleships to the Mountains of the Orlons to secure the Elder Gods site you found, and we have alerted the other Clans to be prepared to protect the city."

I left the meeting mentally vowing to use my time in Amathar to best advantage. I went to see Nicohl Messonar to receive my next lesson in Amatharian reading. She was, as I had assumed she would be, moderately disgusted that I had missed the earlier appointment, but she still enthusiastically provided me with tutoring, and several talking pads with my next lessons on them. I told her I would seek her out on

my return to the city and continue my lessons. As I was preparing to leave, she pressed her cheek to mine, and bid me farewell.

Returning to Norar Remontar's apartments, I found my Amatharian friend waiting for me. He had assembled a large selection of Amatharian gear.

"What's all this then?" I asked.

"I realized that you needed some equipment for the expedition, since you have nothing of your own," he replied. "Of course, now that you are a member of the Sun Clan, it is the duty of our clothiers and outfitters to see that you have everything you need."

There were a dozen or more black bodysuits in my size, several new pairs of black boots, and a large duffle bag-like piece of luggage which Amatharians use to carry their clothing. Beside that lay a warrior's utility belt with many small compartments which had all been filled with the appropriate equipment. Among the devices designed to go into the belt, were tiny first-aid tool which miraculously knitted together skin, and covered it with a clear protective coating, a hand light very much like the one I had seen Norar Remontar use in the caves of the ancient Orlons, and a camera.

I could write an entire volume on the Amatharian camera, if I had either the expertise or the inclination to do so. The device itself was about the size of a business card or the calculators of the same size that are common on both Earth and Amathar. It had a square hole in the corner, which served as the camera's viewfinder, and a small button on the back, which served as the shutter release. Other than those two features, the camera seemingly had no other openings or mechanisms. Amatharians take pictures with their cameras, and then when returning home, insert the camera into a device which produces the final photograph. The camera could hold up to one thousand seven hundred twenty eight photographic images before it had to be inserted into the printing device. Once this was done, the camera was ready to be reused.

Although it was very compact and frankly neat looking, the camera was not the truly amazing part of the photographic process. Rather it was the images themselves. When an Amatharian took a picture, he would snap it just like he was using a still picture camera, and the print which was produced was a flat picture-- that picture though was an amazing example of three dimensional representation. Even more amazing than that, was the way that the image turned into a short video clip. When the picture was snapped, not only did the camera record the image that was in front of it, but it recorded the last ten minutes or so before the snap! How this was possible, I have no way of knowing. Perhaps it had something to do with the supposed lack of time in Ecos.

Also included in the utility belt gear were a small tool set and several recharge clips for Amatharian light weapons. Norar Remontar had included a rifle and a pistol version of these beautifully crafted weapons. About the only item of clothing not included within the great heap was a tabard. I asked Norar Remontar about this apparent oversight, but he said that the clothiers were simply awaiting my crest design. I took a sheet of the plastic material Amatharians use for paper from the stack I had been using to practice my spelling, and quickly sketched out an idea for a crest. Norar Remontar looked it over, then placed it inside the mail cartridge, and sent it on its way down the pneumatic tube that was the Amatharian postal system.

"We are expected at the Sun Clan warrior's feast at 01094," the Amatharian knight said, as he left about his own business.

I looked at the city-cycle dial and saw that it currently read 01092. I had a little time to myself, so I went to the bathroom, stripped off my clothing, and soaked in the pool. When I felt thoroughly waterlogged and pruned, I climbed out, dressed in one of the new bodysuits, and sat down to practice my reading skills. This time I chose a book on wildlife in the area of Amathar. I just happened to turn to the page on the stummada. When I had just finished that section, Norar Remontar returned, this time with Malagor in tow.

It seemed as though I had not seen Malagor in months, and his grinning face brought a flood of good feelings to me. Though we had both been staying in the same apartment, his path seemed not to have crossed my own. He had spent most of his time in Amathar site-seeing, but he had taken the time, as had I, to get cleaned up and re-outfitted. He now wore the bodysuit of an Amatharian, though it pushed

in his fur, and made him look much smaller than he previously had, and the explosion of furry tufts around his wrists made his hands look gargantuan. His bodysuit was light green denoting a trader, and I thought he must have taken this as a representation of what his life was under the Malagor, for I couldn't imagine him taking up a new profession at this point in time. He also had the blank white tabard of a swordsman, but his crouching shoulders made it hang a bit too high in the back, and a bit too low in the front.

Norar Remontar handed me a package. I opened the wrapping to find five brand new white tabards. Each one was carefully fringed with gold all around the edge.

"Why the gold fringe?" I asked.

"You are Kurar. You are a lord," he replied. "You are the head of your family."

"I am the only one in my family."

"Which makes you the head of the family," he continued. "It is not unheard of to be the only one in a family, though this is the only instance I can recall, of some one starting out that way."

I put the tabards down on a table, and lifting one from the top of the stack, unfurled it, and then put it on over my head. In the middle of the front and back was my crest in bright gold-- a flaming sun embossed with a large letter "A".

"I am proud to say that you are now my kinsman," said Norar Remontar.

"No one could be more proud than I," I replied.

"We could stand around here, puffing our chests out," said Malagor, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth, "or we could go get our dinner."

The three of us left the apartment, and headed down the flights of escalators to a great dining hall located on the fourth floor. It was a magnificent hall, filled with large round tables. There seemed to be enough room to seat five thousand. Already throngs of Amatharians in warrior black and white were feasting on great heaping servings of food, and tossing back large beakers of mirrah. They were being served by men and women dressed not just in white, but in a rainbow of colors.

"This is a chance for family and friends to serve the warriors before they go off to battle," said Norar Remontar. "There are more than a hundred parties just like this going on at the same time."

We stepped into the hall, just as an orchestra began to play. The musicians were seated to the far left in a semi-round annex of the room, I supposed for the acoustical qualities. Some were wearing yellow, denoting their devotion to art, but most were wearing other colors. This didn't surprise me, since most Amatharians seemed to be multi-talented, and quite a few could well be called renaissance individuals. The instruments of the orchestra were all unlike anything I had seen on Earth, not that I am an expert in the field. I could make out brass, woodwinds, and strings sections, but there were a couple of sections that I could not identify. The entire assembly made a hauntingly beautiful music that sounded vaguely familiar, though unlike any orchestra I had heard in my home land.

The three of us made our way around the great throngs of diners and servers, to a table at the far end of the room. Already seated were the radiant Vena Remontar, as well as a dozen other knights, swordsmen, and warriors whom I didn't know. We took our seats, and immediately three great platters were placed in front of us. I looked up to see the two young girls, Neela Esponar and Nona Montendro, serving our food. Both smiled at me. When a goblet of mirrah was placed before me, I was shocked to look up into the face of Mindana Remontar.

"Drink, kinsman," she said without smiling, and I got the impression that she seldom smiled.

"Thank you, aunt," I replied, using the term for mother's sister.

She cocked an eyebrow, and then moved away with her tray into the crowd.

"I don't think that she likes me," I said.

"She is worried that I will become enamored of you, and break my engagement to Tular Maximinos," said Vena Remontar. "Breaking a vow of betrothal is a disgrace."

"Do not worry," she continued, wrinkling her nose in a smile. "You have no such power over me."

"Where is Tular Maximinos? Where is Bentar Hissendar?" I asked.

"They are both at a party in Reyno Hissendar's building," she replied.

We enjoyed great food and fantastic music and what seemed like gallons of mirrah until I thought I could take no more of any of it. At last the music stopped and a single horn blew. That was the signal that the

party was over, and it was time to begin boarding the ships. I shook hands with Vena Remontar and the other soldiers at the table, and followed Norar Remontar and Malagor from the room. Just as I was leaving, Nona Montendro grabbed me by the tabard.

"Kinsman?" she asked, giggling.

"Yes?"

"Will you wear this token?" she stepped close, and pinned a small broach above the crest in the front of my tabard.

"Um, sure," I replied.

No sooner had I moved away from her, than I was approached by a woman whom I had never met before. She was quite attractive in the way of all Amatharians, though she was not the raving beauty of Vena Remontar or her cousin the Princess. She smiled at me and batted her eyelashes.

"Er, hello," I said.

"Kurar Remiant Alexander Ashton," said Norar Remontar, stepping to my side. "Allow me to present Tulia Maximinos. It is a shame we didn't meet you sooner, Tulia. Now we must leave for the ship."

"Too bad," she said, with a predatory look in her eye.

Norar Remontar hurried me from the room, Malagor trailing behind us. We made our way up to his apartment to gather our gear. A short time later, we were aboard the great Amatharian Battle cruiser.

## Chapter Eighteen: Toward the Zoasians

In many ways, life aboard the great Amatharian battle cruiser was much easier for me than it had been in the city. The ship operated on a fixed schedule based on its own version of the city-cycle, which was recalibrated each time the ship docked in Amathar. Each person on board was assigned a duty and worked three cycles, followed by six cycles off duty. I knew absolutely nothing about the ship or its procedures, so initially I was assigned to the security detail. Since I was a knight, I was given what was essentially an officer's rank-- command of ten swordsmen, each of whom commanded eight to ten warriors.

Amatharian ships didn't have names, though they did sport numbers. The battle cruisers were essentially all of the same class, though they had minor differences, and some were newer than others. Their importance was based entirely upon who commanded them, and what mission they were on. This ship was Sun Battle cruiser 11, and it was the flagship of Norar Remontar's twelve ship squadron, one of four squadrons making the assault on Zonamis. Like the other ships, this one was painted navy blue with silver trim. Like the other three flagships of the fleet, this one had a great crest across the bow-- in this case, a flaming sun with outstretched wings. And like all Amatharian ships, this one was arrayed with the banners of her knights. When I first saw my own banner, with a flaming sun embossed by the letter "A", flying among the many others, I was filled with pride. There were more than ten thousand soldiers aboard this one ship, and about one in a hundred were knights.

The accommodations on the vessel were far more spacious than I had expected. Every soldier aboard had his own cabin, and though they were very small in comparison to their homes in Amathar, they were far larger than I had seen on any ocean going vessels of Earth. Each was large enough to have a bunk, which was mounted to the wall rather than sunk into the floor as was the Amatharian fashion, a small table and two chairs and a closet. My own cabin had a large window looking out toward the landscape that rolled continuously past.

Now that we were finally on our way, I spent more and more time thinking of the woman I knew I was in love with, though I had seen her only one time-- the Princess of Amathar. Sometimes these thoughts would lead to remembrances of her cousin, Vena Remontar, and the friendship she had shown me.

Other times I just fretted over what might have happened to Noriandara Remontar since her abduction by the Zoasians. Even cruising at full speed, it would be a long time before we reached Zonamis, and I worried about all the things which she still might face. I figured our maximum speed to be between two and three hundred miles per hour, and so even accepting the more generous of the two figures, it would be the equivalent of four and a half months before the fleet arrived. It was a long time.

I tried to make good use of all the time I had available. I learned to pilot the Amatharian aircraft, both fighters and shuttles. It wasn't as difficult as one might expect. I imagine that any child capable of playing those fast action video games could easily manage it. The controls consisted of a joystick in the left hand to control the steering and a lever for the right hand which controlled lift. There was an automated training simulator on board which I used at first, but after it became apparent to me and to the pilots that I would probably not crash the vehicle, I was allowed to participate in some of the flight drills which were constantly leaving the battle cruiser and returning.

I improved upon my growing skill with the sword, which was in fact my primary duty aboard ship. As the leader of a security team, I did little but see to the watches around the vessel, and drill my troops with the sword and the light rifle. I must say that I had never seen men and women so devoted to duty as those one hundred or so Amatharians under my command. In that entire time, never once was a soldier absent from his duty because of sickness or anything else.

Even with all of the military activity in which I was involved, there was plenty of time for recreation and social activity. The swordsmen and warriors of my company enjoyed playing a kind of catch, in which they used an irregular shaped cloth bag filled with plastic-like beads. Another game involved the

skewering of various thrown objects upon a stick as the individual ran through a maze of obstacles. I gathered that this traditional activity once involved the use of swords, but now it was considered a great dishonor to endanger one's sword for a mere game. In addition, I spent a large amount of time in the ship's prodigious library where I read biographies of interesting Amatharians, novels of several different types, and a book of rather dark and morbid poems penned by Mindana Remontar herself.

I was lucky to have my friends present on the same ship. Norar Remontar was of course in command, and though he was busy with his duties far more than I was with mine, we still had time to discuss life, love, and duty over dinner. Malagor occupied the cabin right next door to me. He had been given command of eight warriors, and had been placed in charge of one of the ship's great light guns. Vena Remontar was aboard this ship as well, in command of all the squadrons of fighter aircraft. She seemed more and more beautiful each time I saw her. Tular Maximinos was there too.

After passing over the great plain beyond Amathar, our fleet split into its four separate squadrons and moved forward like the four prongs of a very large fork. We crossed over several large mountain ranges and a sea which was about a thousand miles across. Beyond that was an impressive forest, another sea, and still more mountain ranges, until it all became a blur to me. I enjoyed watching the wildlife through a telescope aimed at the ground though there was a large amount of bird life, or perhaps I should say flying life, as well. Once in the distance I spotted something extremely large flying, but by the time I had returned with my telescope, it was gone.

We had been zooming along for several months, by my own private calculations, before we came into contact with anything Zoasian. As we crossed yet one more mountain range, the squadron came under fire from ground-based missiles that proved to have come from automated stations. One of the missiles blew a large hole in the side of one of the other battle cruisers, but the rest of the weapons were destroyed by the ships' guns. The injured ship was left behind to search for and destroy any other automated defenses along the mountains.

I suspected that it would be only a short time until the Zoasians came to see what had happened to their missile sites, and I was right. Shortly after the missile attack, the squadron encountered two Zoasian battle cruisers heading straight toward us. When they saw our eleven ships, they peeled off to the right and tried to run back to their home base. Norar Remontar sent a command by signal light, and three of our cruisers took off in hot pursuit of the enemy. The five ships were only dots on the horizon, when the captains of the Zoasian vessels realized that they wouldn't be able to outrun their foes, and turned to fight. Though the distance was too great to see the details, tremendous explosions among the ships were clearly visible, and we could even hear the sounds of war. But the remainder of our fleet continued on toward Zonamis.

The warriors, swordsmen, and knights of the fleet moved to a state of constant readiness. The shift schedule was changed to two cycles on and one cycle off, so there was always a double shift at ready. Automated missile sites and manned weapons silos firing black energy beams became more and more common. Still the fleet pushed on. At last we crossed one more, great valley and approached Zonamis. It was an incredible city. If I had not been to Amathar, it would have been the largest city that I had ever seen, though Amathar was such that it really deserved a different word entirely. Zonamis was larger than Los Angeles or Mexico City, more than ten thousand square miles of urban buildings, factories, and power stations. It was built on and around an entire mountain range. Much of the central part of the city was carved from the mountain rock itself. I had the impression that installations went deep into the ground.

As soon as we had sighted the city, the city sighted us, and energy beam and missile fire began to shoot out from literally thousands of locations within Zonamis. Fighters began to streak into the sky from the ground and our ships began launching fighters to engage them. Shortly after the fighters began their three dimensional ballet of death in the sky, twenty great black battleships rose up into the air from behind the mountains and prepared to engage us. For the moment we were outnumbered, but I could see two more of our squadrons in the distance approaching at full speed. The challenge had been made and accepted. The battle had begun.



## Chapter Nineteen: The Battle for Zonamis

As flame and ordinance shot through the air all around the ship, I gathered my company together on the deck of the vessel, as did the five other security companies on board. Our squadron and the one commanded by Ulla Yerrontis were flying high above the city drawing fire, and engaging the battleships. Vandan Lorrinos was moving his squadron in low and attacking the ground installations with shipboard weapons, as well as landing thousands of Amatharian troops. The final squadron under Reyno Hissendar waited in the rear as reserves.

A huge explosion on a lower deck indicated that the cruiser had been hit by one of the Zoasian missiles, and it brought my mind away from previous plans and into the present. The missile had been fired from one of the battleships, and it moved toward us. Amatharian light guns from the batteries above and below us opened fire on the approaching enemy and explosions ripped across her bow but she still kept coming. For a moment, it looked as though the Zoasian would plow its squared front end into our side, but at the last minute, it pulled up and crossed above us.

Several dozen bombs dropped from the open decks on the lower portion of the black death machine, and ignited all around us, sending flaming metal and Amatharian body parts across the deck. Then two score or more long ropes fell from above, and hundreds of heavily armed and armored Zoasians slid down onto our ship. My team began cutting them down with our light rifles, but for every one we shot from his rope, two more landed on the deck unharmed, and ready to engage us in hand to hand combat. I yelled to my company to attack, and together we rushed forward to meet the Zoasians. I pulled my long sword from his sheath, and as I raised it high above my head, I saw it glow brightly with the power of the soul within. I brought it down upon the first enemy soldier and it left him two smoking halves of his former self.

These black reptilians were slower than we, but they were powerful. One picked up a large piece of jagged metal about ten feet long, which had torn loose in an explosion, and attempted to hit me with it, as though it had been a great bat. I ducked below it and jumped toward him, sword outstretched. For a moment, he looked down at the smoking hole I had left in his chest, and then he toppled over dead. Another security team from the other side of the cruiser arrived to help us repel boarders, and we began pushing the Zoasians toward the rail. A black beam shot past my head, scorching my shoulder. A shot from one of my men blasted through the body of the attacker. I bounded forward to meet another enemy, but there were none left. This group of Zoasians had been repelled.

"Look over there," said Tular Maximinos, suddenly at my shoulder. It was his company who had come to our aid.

I turned to see one of the black Zoasian battleships explode into a huge fireball and fall into the city below, setting off even more explosions. The battle seemed to be going well, and I could see three other enemy ships burning in the sky, as they spun out of control. All of the ships in our squadron were still in the air, though many had taken quite a bit of damage. I imagined that the squadron making the direct assault against the city was incurring even greater losses, but we had our reserves, and we knew what we were after.

Suddenly all the soldiers on deck were knocked from their feet, myself included. I jumped up to see another Zoasian ship grinding along our bow. The two ships had collided in mid-air, and the enemy was sliding down our side. As the black battleship moved closer to where we stood, it began to move away. "Come on," I shouted to my men, and taking a running leap into the air, I crossed the distance to the reptiles' airship. This wasn't really part of a plan. It just seemed like a good idea at the time to take the battle to the enemy.

Landing on the deck with a thud, I turned around to see how many of my company had made it across with me. About thirty others, including Tular Maximinos, had made it. One young warrior had not been able to make the jump, and was still falling the several thousand feet to the ground below. The remainder



of our small battalion had remained behind, being unable to cross the distance before the two ships had moved too far away from each other.

"Where now?" I called to Tular Maximinos, as there seemed to be no Zoasians on deck.

"To the engine room!" he called back, and the two of us rushed toward the back of the ship, followed by thirty or so men and women.

A wide path ran along the side of the vessel between the superstructure and the edge, giving us a metal avenue down the length of the ship. It was good that it was a broad space too, because there was no rail along the side, as there was on Amatharian ships. We had gone down about half the length of the mile long vessel when I heard weapons fire behind me. I turned to see over a hundred Zoasians at the bow of the vessel, where we had just been. They were firing at us, and had already shot two of our team.

I sheathed my sword, and whipped out my light pistol. The Amatharians with me did the same, and we soon had the hulking reptiles diving for cover.

"Swordsman," I called to a female Amatharian, "take five warriors and hold this position."

"Yes, knight."

I could see in her face that this young woman knew that she had just been ordered to give her life, but I could also see the fierce determination to complete her orders, and a strong desire to sell her life as dearly as she could.

Tular Maximinos and I led the other soldiers onward. At last we reached the rear of the superstructure, but there seemed to be no opening.

"We need to find a way inside." said the Amatharian knight.

"Well then," I said, putting away my pistol, and whipping out my long sword. "Let's go inside."

The blade of my sword began to glow even before my arm started its movement. I swung down to the deck, slicing with my sword, through the metal, like a butcher knife cutting through a soap bubble. With four clean strokes, I cut a large square hole in the deck. Tular Maximinos kicked the newly made door with the heel of his boot, and sent the square of metal flying downward. I whipped out my pistol and jumped into the new hole, landing some ten feet below and rolling to one side. A moment later, Tular Maximinos and the warriors of Amathar were beside me.

We were in a long hallway which seemingly stretched the length of the ship. It was brightly lit with artificial light. There were no Zoasians in sight. With a wave of his hand, Tular Maximinos signaled us to follow him, and we moved silently down the hallway toward the stern of the vessel. At each intersection of the hallway we glanced down the perpendicular shafts, expecting at any moment to be confronted by a large group of heavily armed lizard men. We ran across only one unfortunate Zoasian, whom Tular Maximinos sliced into three separate pieces.

After running literally more than a quarter mile down the hallway, we found ourselves at its end. The hallway opened up to a balcony overlooking a huge room full of machinery a hundred feet below. On the floor far below us, was the apparatus responsible for keeping the ship aloft. It looked something like a great turbine, though its hum was below the sound level of our own voices.

Almost immediately, we were spied by one of the enemy crew members on the floor, and seconds later we were engaged in a firefight with a dozen Zoasians below. Seconds later, two of my companions fell, wounds in their backs, and I turned to see a whole army of reptiles running toward us from the hallway we had just exited. I knew that the brave soldiers we had left behind had been overcome. I called out a warning to the others and fired several shots down the hall. But we were caught in a crossfire. A narrow catwalk led to the right or left of the balcony, but with weapons fire from below, and an enemy approaching from behind, it was suicide to attempt it.

"Good luck to you, my friend," said Tular Maximinos, smiling. He then jumped to the top of the balcony railing, and holding his sword straight out, jumped down toward the machinery below.

As Tular Maximinos fell, he carved his blade into the great machine. The mechanism began to sputter and spark and shriek loudly. The Amatharian's body continued to fall though, and hit the floor with a horrid crunching sound. I looked down to see him lying on the deck below, his legs a twisted mess of blood and bone. Before I could raise my own weapon in his defense, a nearby Zoasian pointed his ray pistol at the knight's head and shot him.

Like a streak of lightning, a blazing light burst forth from Tular Maximinos's sword. It danced around the room for a moment, and then blasted through the bodies of every Zoasian in the engine room. Finally it disappeared. Before my eyes had readjusted to the normal light levels, a huge fireball engulfed the room, as the massive machinery that the Amatharian had damaged, exploded.

"Come on!" I called to the brave men and women with me.

No enemy fire assailed us from the engine room, but the Zoasians behind were still coming at us from down the long corridor. I ran across the catwalk leading to the starboard side of the ship, and the Amatharian soldiers followed me. The catwalk ended in a hatchway that led to an interior hallway running forward. We followed this, those in the rearmost constantly engaged in a battle with the Zoasians behind. This hallway led to a staircase leading downward, and I took it.

The stairs were odd and difficult to transverse. They were taller and deeper than steps on Earth or in Amathar, and several times, one of the warriors tripped and had to be helped to his feet by his companions. I was able to leap down the stairs relatively easily thanks to my gravity enhanced strength, but once a Zoasian energy beam burned my arm as it passed me. The stairs ended in a hatch leading to an observation deck. We passed through the doorway and closed the hatch behind us.

The observation deck was a large square room. With the exception of a four foot walkway around the edge of the room, the floor had been removed, leaving nothing between us and the ground far below but open air. I call it an observation deck, though I am unsure of its actual use. Similar rooms on Amatharian vessels are used to debark troops, or to raise and lower supplies.

Suddenly there was a great lurch, and the ship began to drop from the air at a steep angle. Looking down over the precipice, I could see the buildings of the city below coming closer and closer. At the same time I could hear the Zoasian soldiers banging on the hatchway, trying to get in. One of the Amatharians destroyed the opening mechanism with his light rifle.

"That won't keep them out long," observed one of the others, a young woman.

As if on cue, the door on the far end of the chamber burst open, and Zoasians began pouring into the room, firing their black ray guns at us. We returned fire, but several more Amatharians met their deaths. No sooner had we engaged this enemy, than the door behind us blew inward with a blast. Now we were confronted by enemies on two sides, and had no cover what-so-ever. I could think of only one thing to do. Calling for my remaining companions to follow me, I jumped off the ledge and into the open air, falling from the bottom of the great Zoasian vessel without the benefit of a parachute.

I fully expected to fall to my death, and was surprised when I landed on the top of a tall building which was only about forty feet below the belly of the black battleship. The ship continued on past the rooftop, on a course which only seconds later sent it plowing into another section of the city, creating a huge explosion. I looked around and found that only five others from my ad hoc company were upon the roof with me-- one of those lay dead in a broken heap, and another had broken his left leg in the fall.

"Shall I send a signal, knight?" asked the sole female among us.

I nodded, and then knelt down to check on the injured soldier. He was conscious, but in shock. The woman fired a small signal flare into the sky, and moments later, one of the many transport aircraft of the Amatharian fleet landed on the roof of the building. Two crewmen jumped out, each wearing the grey bodysuit of a doctor. They rushed to the aid of the injured man. Then we all piled into the aircraft, which jumped back up into the sky.

The transport craft was similar to the one in which Norar Remontar, Malagor, and I had first arrived in Amathar. It was quite spacious, with plenty of room for the two healers on board to begin the work of repairing the extremity of their unfortunate charge, and for the rest of us to sit back and catch our breaths. I took the opportunity to look out the view port and survey the progress of the battle. It seemed that with Zoasian ship which Tular Maximinos had given his life to destroy downed, there were no longer any Zoasian vessels aloft, though a few fighters could be seen here and there trying to evade the victorious Amatharian aircraft. I thought I saw the remains of one Amatharian ship on the ground as well, though most seemed still to be aloft. Seven or eight hovered low over the city, dropping troops to the ground, while a similar number were circling at a distance, dropping bombs upon the all but vanquished reptiles. It didn't take long for our aircraft to reach its ship of origin, Sun Battle cruiser 106. As soon as it had set

down on the flight deck, I jumped out and rushed to the bridge of the vessel. This ship was part of Ulla Yerrontis's squadron, and was commanded by her brother Agar Yerrontis. When I stepped onto the deck, the commander nodded to me.

"We are proceeding to the mountain there," he said, without preamble, pointing to one of the mountains which made up the spine of the great city. "We have been informed that it is the location of the Zoasians' main prisoner detention center. There is a chance that our people are being held there. Report to the assault deck. There is a briefing in progress."

I jogged down to the assault deck, which was in the lower bowels of the ship. I had no problem finding my way, as this ship was quite similar to Sun Battle cruiser 11. The deck had a large open area, where literally hundreds of soldiers were receiving instructions for the assault. I joined the other knights in one corner of the bay. Plans of the prison installation were laid out on a table, and the officers were dividing up the assault duties.

"You will take this entrance," said the officer in charge of the operation, pointing out a symbol in a spot on the map, which I would have called the southeast side, had there been any true directions in Ecos.

"Follow the tunnels as far as possible. If our people are there, we want them found."

"I understand," I replied, and I did understand, for the woman of my dreams might be somewhere below that mountain.

It seemed to me that no more had I spoke those two simple words, than the great doors in the floor of the assault deck opened up, and dozens of long ropes were dropped from the bottom of the Amatharian battle cruiser. Each Amatharian soldier was given a repelling clip, which he attached to his utility belt, and then clipped onto the rope. He or she then slid down to the assault. The one hundred soldiers in my new command were assigned a position fairly far back in the attack order, but at last, we hitched our repelling clips to the ropes and dropped down to the alien city below.

## Chapter Twenty: Beneath Zonamis

Sliding down a three thousand foot long rope from a point in midair provides a rush that I am sure only skydivers could appreciate. Add to that, the pleasant sensation of being shot at, and the net effect is a feeling that even the largest of roller coasters could not inspire. It was a feeling however, that several thousand Amatharian soldiers were able to share with me, for that number of men and women were sliding down the ropes from the cruiser to assault the mountain prison of the Zoasians.

As soon as my boots hit the ground, I gathered my company of one hundred warriors and swordsmen together, and gave the orders to move toward our target. We covered the ground toward our assigned entrance, all around us, the smell of smoke and the sounds of bombing in the distance. We encountered no resistance until we reached the installations entrance, which was a great iron door. Part of my team was a pair of demolitions soldiers, who carried all they needed to penetrate the site. With several quite tiny explosive charges, they cut a rectangular opening through the door, which allowed us all to enter. As soon as we moved into the dark hallway beyond the portal, we were set upon by a group of twenty or so Zoasians whose duty it was to protect the hallway. Though they shot down two of my soldiers and delayed us slightly, we quickly overpowered them and continued on our way. The interior of the installation was a great dark maze of wide but low corridors, with small rooms and vestibules scattered here and there. The lighting was poor, probably owing to a destroyed generator nearby. Though we encountered numerous reptile men, most save those we had initially encountered, were in no mood to fight, instead intent on escaping the invading force.

We seemed to have gone through so much of the supposed prison, without seeing a single prisoner of any sort, or indeed of any barred cell or room, that I was beginning to suspect that the Amatharian commanders had been misled as to the nature of the place, when suddenly we came upon a barred door. Once the demolitions team eliminated the obstacle as easily as they had done before, we found ourselves in a great room.

The room was of brobdingnagian proportions, as large as any warehouse which I have ever seen. It resembled a zoo more than a prison or a jailhouse, for rather than cells placed into the walls, the room was filled with cages, each about twenty feet square and separated from one another by eight or ten foot walkways criss-crossing between them. The prisoners of this zoo had no shred of privacy, for their every action was visible from all four sides by their fellow inmates, as well as anyone who happened to be walking by their cell.

The place was like a zoo in another respect as well. Every occupied cell, and it seemed that very few were unoccupied, was the unhappy home to one of a huge variety of creatures. I was able to spot a few which housed beings of the same type, but there seemed to be scores of different species represented.

"Are these all sentient species?" I asked the swordsman at my elbow.

"I'm unfamiliar with most of these beings," she replied, "but of the ones I do know, they are all intelligent peoples."

"Break up the company into squads," I ordered. "I want all of these cages opened, and the prisoners set free." The word "squad" is something of a loose translation on my part, just as is the word "company", but they seem the closest I can come to the Amatharian terms. An Amatharian squad designates a group of eight or ten warriors led by a swordsman, and a company is nine or ten such squads led by a knight. The prison was of such great size, that it seemed hours before even ten squads of Amatharian soldiers were able to open all the pens. Many of the alien prisoners made a hasty retreat, glad for the chance to escape their confinement. A few stayed in their cells, apparently unable to accept the fact that they were now free. Some, particularly those who had previous contact with Amatharians, and who knew the Amatharian language, chose to follow our company. Finally, among the prisoners were two Amatharians, a man and a woman, who were brought to me.

"What are your names, and how did you come to be prisoners of the Zoasians?" I asked them.

They looked at me inquiringly for a moment, obviously never having seen an Amatharian of my complexion before, and then described their ordeal. They had been part of a mapping expedition and had been captured by the snake men. They were not part of the company we were attempting to rescue. The man introduced himself as Senjar Orsovan of the Earth Clan, and then introduced the woman, who seemed incapable of speech, as his sister Shenee Orsovan. The two of them were the sad specimens, obviously the victims of mistreatment by the Zoasians, and seemed even worse than they probably were because until now every Amatharian I had seen was in the keenest physical condition.

"We heard something of other Amatharians brought here," said Senjar Orsovan, "but I should not hold out too much hope of them living. The Zoasians do not recognize any other beings as deserving life or of having intelligence. We would have been killed long ago if not for the fact that the monsters wished to study us. Even so, they treated us... very badly."

For a normally stoic Amatharian to make such an admission was indicative that their treatment had been very bad indeed. I could see jaws set and eyes narrow in anger among my soldiers who had gathered to hear the tale of the unfortunate fellow.

I had paused for a moment in my interview with the man, when I looked at the small crowd of aliens that had gathered just beyond. For a moment, I thought I recognized Malagor standing among them, until I realized that there were three beings who looked just alike, and who resembled my friend. I moved through the soldiers and others to stand before them.

"You are Malagor?" I asked, as an introduction.

Two of the beasts looked blankly at me, but the third growled out in the language of the Malagor. It became apparent that while he was able to understand Amatharian, he was unable to speak it. I gave up any hope of gathering any useful information from them, and ordered a squad of my soldiers to escort all of the aliens, as well as the two Amatharian former prisoners back to the ship.

As they were freeing the inmates of the prison, the Amatharian soldiers had been scouting the great hall, and they reported three exits opposite of our entrance. Although I was loath to split my meager force, now only about eighty, into three parts, I could see no other way of covering all the possibilities. I split the company in thirds, and assigned two to my most capable swordsmen to a third part each.

I led my remaining three squads through the center most exit. It was, like much of the installation, a low and wide corridor, relatively well lit. I could only guess what the destination of this passage might be, since Zoasian installations seemed to be far less organized than the typical Amatharian facility. This hallway went straight back away from the "zoo" without any side passages or rooms. It finally ended in a poorly lit stairway which wound its way down to some undetermined lower level. We started downwards. The steps and the walls around us were uniformly white, and made of some concrete-like material. I imagined that it had been designed by an architect who received a straight C average in college-- dull and monotonous to such a degree that it quickly became impossible to tell whether we had gone down five flights of steps or fifty.

Our next encounter with the enemy came when we reached the bottom of the staircase. We surprised a group of six Zoasian who were carrying what looked like large plastic tubs. Though I would just as soon have captured them as killed them, the snake men gave us no choice, and even though they found themselves surprised and outnumbered, they still attempted to fight back, dropping their burdens on the floor and retrieving pistols from their holsters. In scant seconds, each of the Zoasians lay dead with a smoking hole through his chest.

The contents of the tubs the Zoasians had been holding were now dumped across the floor, and what was left lying there would have turned the stomach of the staunchest war veteran. The containers had been filled with a dark blue solution with a sort of foamy, sudsy quality to it, and immersed in this solution was an ungodly assortment of severed arms, legs, and even heads of Amatharian people-- people that but for their strange dark blue color, were humans just like me. The Amatharians were as stunned as I was, perhaps even more so, but after a moment, they forced themselves to examine the remains-- something I could not bring myself to do. None of the bodies was identified by name, though it was determined that the litter contained parts of sixteen different people.

The room where this grizzly discovery was made appeared to be a sort of waiting area for a number of

surrounding laboratories, all of which could be seen through open doorways on either side of us. My order that each of these rooms be checked, was quickly carried out, but neither Zoasians, nor the remains of any more Amatharians were found. We continued on our way, and discovered still more laboratories beyond. The entire floor or wing or whatever of the complex seemed devoted to examining the intelligent species of Ecos, and it was apparent that the Zoasians felt no need to receive the permission of any of the individuals involved. In some of the other rooms, we found parts of specimens from many different races. In one room was the entire legless body of a spider-like Pell.

In going from room to room, we seemed to have traversed the entire width of the mountain, when we came to one more laboratory room. The scene within made the hair on the back of my neck stand up, and this after all the other horrific visions I had witnessed in a very short time. The room was filled with bizarre and ugly machinery, the purpose of which for the most part remained a mystery. Some things unfortunately were less mysterious than simply hideous. In the center of the room stood a man, whom at first glance, seemed to be contemplating the room around him. He was not contemplating anything though. He was dead, and had been preserved by means similar to what is often euphemistically called the taxidermy arts.

"By Amath!" exclaimed the warrior next to me. "That's Ashean Seyeck!"

Ashean Seyeck was not the most upsetting thing there however. On a large table to the side of the room was a man-- or most of him. He was lying on his back, naked, with his torso almost split in two. He quite resembled the frog that I dissected in seventh grade. Most of his organs seemed to have been removed, and several huge machines were connected to him by forty or fifty tubes, through which passed a variety of liquids. The most horrifying thing of all though, was that he was still alive. He sucked in air and rolled his eyes, as he looked across the room at us. Followed by my two swordsmen, Terril Jennofar and Binsa Sherear, I stepped over to his side.

"Jamern Yerrontis," said the first swordsman. "We are from your second cousin's ship. We have come in rescue."

"I am dead," gasped the man on the table. "Remove these tubes."

Terril Jennofar looked at me. I nodded. He grabbed the tubes in both his hands and yanked them from Jamern Yerrontis's body. The poor fellow died immediately.

"I'm not sure what to do now," I said. "I'm afraid I'm not too familiar with the proper disposal of Amatharian dead."

"We no longer pay much attention to burial rites, and a memorial will be held when we return to the city," said Binsa Sherear. "The body is only a shell for the consciousness, after all."

"Still," interjected Terril Jennofar. "No Amatharian likes to see the body of his kinsman desecrated. Each clan has a traditional burial ritual, and this situation cries out for some form of ritual."

"What is the ritual for the Sun Clan?"

"Fire."

I nodded in understanding. It seemed appropriate that these individuals, who'd had their bodies so desecrated, should receive a ritual internment. The bodies of Ashean Seyeck and Jamern Yerrontis were laid side by side on the floor of the room, along with practically every wooden object from this or the surrounding rooms. Terril Jennofar poured a large bottle of the sudsy blue liquid over the pile, and using a small lighter-like device which is part of each Amatharian's tool kit, set the remains ablaze.

The funeral pyre was a massive mound of flame in mere seconds, and the surrounding room began to burn almost immediately. I knew that the entire complex would soon be burning, unless the Zoasians possessed better fire control systems than I was used to, and that was quite alright with me. The fact that this insidious installation would no longer be used for its previous function could only be looked upon as a blessing by intelligent beings everywhere.

I rushed on through the installation, leading my company away from the growing fire, and probably toward still more horrors, the variety of which I could only guess. I had in mind that we would exit on the rear of the hollowed out mountain, as the map I had seen on the ship showed a great many openings in that direction. The growing fire and resulting explosions behind us forced me to move along faster than I had expected. We rushed along taking the quickest and easiest route away from the conflagration, and

this took us deeper and lower.

We encountered few of the enemy along the way, until we passed through an open entryway into a huge hanger. Perhaps garage would be a better designation for the place, since there were no aircraft here, but rather two tremendously large wheeled vehicles. When I say tremendously large, it isn't just hyperbole-- the first transport was fully five hundred feet long, almost half that wide, and at least ten stories high. Its four massive wheels were each more than fifty feet tall. It was shaped something like a crouching animal with a raised snout. The second vehicle was just as long and wide, though not quite as tall. It had a more compact appearance that denoted more endurance and less speed.

The second transport had a large door open in the rear and a large group of Zoasian soldiers in black armor were marching a smaller group of Amatharian prisoners into the vehicle. I immediately ordered my men to fan out, seek cover, and attack. We began firing at the enemy and they returned fire and attempted to hustle the prisoners up the loading ramp even more quickly. For their part though, the prisoners began to fight back, even though every one of them was manacled with some strange constraining device around his hands, and good old-fashioned chains around their feet. I saw one of the prisoners swing her cuffed hands at a Zoasian, and for one brief moment I beheld the face that I had for so long been waiting to see-- an almost carbon copy of Vena Remontar. The snake-man she had attacked backhanded her and knocked her completely into the transport. I raised my light pistol and cut a smoking hole through his head.

Zoasians from around the massive hanger took up firing positions to counter our attack, and a tremendous firefight commenced. Several large guns on the taller of the two vehicles began firing, apparently not at all concerned at the damage to our surroundings. We were outnumbered at least four to one, not counting those large weapons, and there was little doubt that we would soon be wiped out if we stayed where we were. I shouted the only command that an Amatharian leader could make, under the circumstances.

"Charge!"

Rushing forward, I moved my pistol from my right to my left hand and drew my long sword. The entire company was right behind me. It was a glorious feeling, rushing toward the enemy with weapons firing all around. Of course the danger was quite real but it seemed at the time as though I couldn't be stopped, I was on the quest of a lifetime from which I could not be deterred.

At the same time, the Zoasians herding the prisoners onto the transport began to shove and kick their helpless charges. Some of the captive Amatharians fought back, and were shot down; others were knocked unconscious and were tossed into the great truck. Then the huge ramp-like door began to close, and the vehicle began to roll toward the hanger door which was slowly rolling upward.

By the time that my men and I had crossed the hanger the Zoasian vehicle had rolled out through a great door into the eternal Ecosian day. There was no way that I could follow on foot, so leading my men, I ran up the ramp into the other mechanical monster. Once we were all inside, Terril Jennofar slammed his hand down on a panel, and the vehicle's hatch began to close. I made my way toward the forward compartment, and took a seat behind the control panel. It was not all that different from sitting behind the control panel of a helicopter, or perhaps more like the controls of a semi-truck, since there was a wheel, though it was way too far away from the seat for my taste.

Not being at all concerned with the state of Zoasian automotive technology at the time, I simply grabbed the wheel, and started throwing switches until the great monster began to roll forward. The cab had just exited the doorway into the sunlit outside when Terril Jennofar kneeled down beside me.

"All the Zoasians on this vehicle have been eliminated," he said.

"How many of us are aboard?" I asked.

"Eight, counting the two of us."

"Is that enough to operate this thing?"

"It really doesn't take that much. The Zoasians are surprisingly good at automation. We need only the driver, and perhaps a gunner or two."

"Good," I replied. "We need a gunner to stop the other vehicle. "Noriandara Remontar is aboard it."

His eyes widened for a moment, and then he nodded and headed back.

The other vehicle was easily followed. It was not a matter of using a trail. The truck could be easily seen at all times just ahead of us. The difficulty was negotiating the smoking, burning, and occasionally exploding debris in the ruined path that had apparently been built just for these tremendous vehicles. The battle was over for the most part, but a few bombs still fell from the sky, a few missiles still flew overhead, and a few stray shots of energy weaponry buzzed in the air. It was far easier to dodge any ordinance though, than it was to dodge around collapsed buildings and fleeing pedestrians. Even though they were Zoasians, and technically enemies, I didn't feel right about just running over what appeared to be a civilian. A couple of Zoasians stepped out with ray guns aimed in my direction. Those, I ran over. Just about the time that I was really starting to get the hang of steering the monstrous device, we left the edge of the city and began crossing the desert that faced the far side of Zonamis.



## Chapter Twenty One: In Pursuit

The two Zoasian vehicles rushed across the sandy expanse of the Ecosian desert. At times, I was sure that I was gaining on the other transport, but then at other times there seemed to be a widening of the space between us. One thing was for sure. The Zoasian in control of the first craft was a far better driver than I was. I was continually flying out of my seat as I bumped over some obstacle, and I am sure that my Amatharian passengers were similarly troubled.

At that moment a missile fired from some section of my vehicle below me. Evidently Terril Jennofar had found a gunner, or was manning a missile station himself. The projectile impacted just to the left of the fleeing vehicle. Seconds later a second missile shot forth, and this one was better aimed than the first. It hit the right rear wheel of the fleeing vehicle. For a moment it looked as though there would be a great crash, but the Zoasian driver regained control of the now smoking, crippled truck and continued on, albeit at a slower pace. I was sure now that we would be able to catch it.

Just then a massive explosion from below racked my own vehicle. I was lifted completely out of the driver's seat, and hurled across the compartment, as the car turned first left and then right, and then began to flip over wildly. The cabin spun around and around, and my head was dashed against some piece of equipment, sending me into the darkness of unconsciousness.

When I came too, I was lying in the sand beside the great mass of bent metal that had once been the great Zoasian vehicle. A good half pound of sand was glued to the side of my face by a mass of dried blood, and my left arm was bent backwards at the wrist, obviously broken.

I pulled my tabard off and using my knife and my one good arm, cut several strips from it. I wiped the mess from my face as best I could with the rest, and then discarded it, keeping only the tiny ornament that Nona Montendro had given me to wear. I straightened out my arm with a great deal of pain and effort, and finding a straight piece of metal from the wreck and the cloth strips, splinted it. I then determined to set the break. I grabbed hold of a bar on the main part of the wreck with my left hand and leaned my body back as hard as I could. As blinding pain shot from my arm to my brain, I once again lost consciousness.

I don't think that I was unconscious very long. When I woke up, I was dismayed to find that my arm was still not set. I set about trying the same procedure again. I was rewarded with two barely audible snaps, as my bones found their proper locations. Though I didn't lose consciousness this second time, I was forced to lie back on the sand for several minutes trying to inhale and recover my wits.

Once my arm was stabilized, I began to look around for any other survivors of the wreck. I found two of my companions lying in the sand and another partially buried in the wreckage. All were dead. Near the rear of the mess was the body of Terril Jennofar. He was mangled almost beyond recognition, and yet when I approached, he opened his eyes and looked at me.

"I am sorry," he said. "It is my fault. I accidentally ignited the missile, as I was attempting to load it."

"It's not your fault," I said. "I will report you well."

"Rescue her..." Then he was dead.

I was once again all alone on the planet Ecos, but I knew where my duty lay. The path of the other vehicle through the sand was plainly visible, so I set off after it. It was tough going through the desert, as the sand was soft, which made walking a chore. It was not as hot though, as one might have anticipated from such a locale. It was a pleasant seventy five degrees, or there about, and had the situation been different, it might have made for a pleasant hike.

It didn't seem as though I had walked all that far, when I came over a rise in the ground to look on the wreckage of the second truck. It seemed that the damaged wheel had finally fallen off, and the driver had been unable to keep the vehicle from rolling over on its side. There seemed to be a relatively small amount of damage-- certainly nothing to warrant the array of bodies, both Amatharian and Zoasian, strewn across the desert floor.

I drew my sword and carefully approached, but there seemed to be no one left alive. Happily, the Princess was nowhere to be seen. So where was she, and were there any others missing? I began to look around to see if I could find any clues on the subject, when I came across the body of an Amatharian woman. She was dead, face down in the sand, but before she had died, she had scrawled something in the sand. It was "UURSH POCH."

I had no idea what Uursh Poch might mean, though it was written using Amatharian letters. Very near to the body of the woman though, I noticed strange tracks that seemed to lead away from the crash site. The tracks were about two inches across, and were round and deep. It was as though an army of pogo sticks had marched through this region. As I started off once again, I began to wonder just how many trails I would be forced to follow on my quest.

This trail was as easy to follow, if not easier, than the vehicle tracks, had been. The pogo sticks began to group together after awhile so that they formed a road of holes about ten or twelve feet wide. It went straight through the desert, and did not veer around plants or large rocks, but went right over them. It went up and down the banks of dry river beds, and across ranges of small hills. I followed along for what seemed like days. Still, the eternal Ecosian sun stayed high above my head. The Swiss cheese trail finally led across a stream bed which was not dry. It was no raging torrent either. There was a small trickle of a stream, maybe a foot wide and two inches deep winding its way through the forty foot wide stream bed. Here and there were pools of stagnant water and a few stunted trees.

I lay down on my stomach and looked into the tiny streamlet. There were patches of moss growing on the submerged pebbles, and a few tiny fish-like critters swam away from me, so I decided that the water was at least not poisonous, and taking a great gulp, I found it very tasty. I first filled my canteen, really nothing but a small flask which fit into my belt case, and then I filled my stomach with the cool, refreshing liquid. It was then that I noticed a reddish cloud spreading in the water, and remembered the bloody mess still on my face. Using a handful of wet sand as a cleanser, I washed the caked and matted hemoglobin from my face and hair.

Once my thirst had been slaked, I realized that I was in need of rest. I had been on the go for some time, and the effect of my injuries was to add to my weariness. I crawled over to the closest of the short, bent, ugly trees, and lying beneath it, went to sleep. When I woke up, for a moment, I didn't realize where I was. The curious thing was, that I did not imagine myself back on earth, but in my dreaming state had expected to wake and find myself in Amathar.

I opened my eyes to gaze into the three large eyes and seven small eyes of a large arachnoid. For a moment I thought I was once again a captive of the Pell, but this was just a small predator that had stopped to see if I were alive or food. He was about twice the size of my hand, and when I sat up, he scurried along on his way. Before I stood, I took stock of my injuries, to make sure that any wounds left unattended would not hamper my mission. With the exception of the head injury, now no longer bleeding, and the broken arm, which was beginning to throb like nobody's business, I was unharmed. I stood up and continued on.

A slight breeze seemed to be whipping up from behind me, and I began to worry that the pogo stick trail would be obscured by blowing sand. I reasoned though that I had some time before that occurred, as the holes were five or six inches deep. I needn't have worried anyway, as the breeze died down before I had gone more than ten miles past the little stream.

After another ten miles, I reached a line of strangely jagged rocks protruding from the ground. They were not the kind that I would normally have preferred to climb, even without a broken arm, but as they seemed to go off quite a distance both to my left and my right, I seemed to have little choice. I climbed up to the top of the strange jagged line with great difficulty and came face to face with the strange sight which lay beyond. I quickly dropped down onto my stomach atop the jagged rocks, cutting my knee in the process.

I now knew what made the pogo stick tracks. Below me were eight very strange beings. Each possessed ten long insect-like legs-- perhaps mosquito-like would be a better description, for the ten to twelve foot long extremities made these things look quite like mosquitoes. The rest of the creature did not seem at all like an insect however. The bodies were about the size of a man, with a covering of very

short grey fur. At the top or front of the body, were two "arms", at the end of which were two eyes, a gaping mouth, and an array of small feelers and tentacles. I surmised and was later proven correct, that though the arms held both eyes and mouths, the brain resided within the body of the beast.

I had no doubt that these creatures were the Uursh Poch. I had followed a trail, all too easily identifiable as theirs, from the site of the wreck, and besides, they had prisoners: five Amatharians, and one Zoasian. These six people, for I will include Zoasians within that term though I had learned to consider them enemies, were lying on the ground, their wrists tied with some type of cord.

At that moment one of the Uursh Poch grabbed one of the Amatharians, using the tentacles of both arms, then wrapping one of the arms around the hapless victim's torso, freed the other appendage and used the disgusting mouth there to take a huge bite out of the Amatharian's chest. The poor fellow let out a scream and I jumped to my feet.

Unfortunately I couldn't just run forward and attack. The side of the rocks facing the Amatharians and their enemies was just as jagged and sharp as the side which I had climbed. I began to climb down the knife-like obstacles as fast as I could. I did my best to remain as quiet as possible, though I yearned to shout out that I was on my way. I couldn't take the chance of the Uursh Poch attacking me before I reached level ground. Considering their legs, I am sure that they would have had the advantage.

About halfway down the rocks, I stopped momentarily to see what was going on below. The poor victim of the Uursh Poch was now halfway devoured, and others of the bizarre, long-legged monsters were starting to do likewise with the other hostages. I redoubled my efforts and quickly reached the bottom of the rocks. I crossed the distance from the base of the ridge to the horrifying scene in several quick bounds.

By this time, the victims had been devoured, with the exception of two-- the Zoasian and one last Amatharian. My heart leapt into my throat as I realized that the single remaining Amatharian was Princess Noriandara Remontar. The only thing that had saved her thus far appeared to be an argument between several Uursh Poch as to who was allowed to eat the relatively tender Amatharian, and who would be forced to consume the leathery Zoasian, and who would have to go without anything to eat at all. I was determined that her temporary reprieve should become a full pardon.

Reaching the edge of the group before being noticed, I whipped out my now glowing sword, and sliced one of the disgusting arms off of the nearest Uursh Poch. The others turned toward me, and seemed to mass together preparing for an attack. I jumped forward, and then dropped to the ground, rolling toward them like a log, but with my sword stretched out above my head. I plowed through the forest of legs, and then stood up to survey my damage. Two of the creatures had merely been knocked down, but three others had each lost at least one leg to my sword.

Another Uursh Poch jumped at me from the side, and I killed it with a thrust to the center of its vile body. The remaining six creatures, three now injured, began to move away. I jumped once more at them and sent them into full flight. It seemed as though the Uursh Poch were quite cowardly, and I had no doubt that all of their captives had been unconscious when they had first come upon them.

With the danger to her life out of the way, I dropped to the Princess's side, and gathered her up in my arms. I carried her to a nearby boulder and sat her up. She was still unconscious. I cut the bonds which were wrapped around her body. Then I chafed her wrists until she started to awaken. I gave her several sips of water from my canteen. She at last opened her eyes, looked at me, and spoke.

"What are you?"

I was momentarily taken aback. This was not exactly what I was expecting to hear as her first words, especially considering the adventures I had survived, the dangers I had faced, and the hardships I had endured in order to rescue her. Then I recalled that she had no reason to know me, and that after all she had been through, she certainly had a right to be suspicious of someone she had never met before, from a race of people, though quite like her own, which was unknown to her.

"My name is Alexander Ashton," I said. "I've come a long way to rescue you."

"What are you?" she repeated, rising slowly to her feet. "You are wearing Amatharian clothing, and you carry Amatharian weaponry, but you are not an Amatharian."

"Oh, yes. I am Kurar Remiant Alexander Ashton of the Sun Clan"

"You have made a mistake now, alien," she jumped back. "I am of the Sun Clan and I do not know you."

"Look," I said, now feeling quite indignant. "I just saved your life. Those Uursh Poch things were going to eat you, just like they did your companions."

She looked over at the scene of death, but seemed unconvinced.

"I have a remiant's sword," I continued, drawing my sword and cleaving the air. The sword did not glow, or evidence any sign of the soul living within. There was no enemy threat nearby.

"How did you come to be here?" she asked, cautiously.

"I came in the attack against Zonamis...with your brother's fleet."

"Norar Remontar is alive?" she stepped forward.

"Yes. At least he was when I saw him before the attack. He arranged the mission to rescue you and the others. He and the others-- your grandfather Nevin Lorrinos, Reyno Hissendar, and Agar Yerrontis."

"Well you do know a lot of Amatharian names," she still sounded unconvinced.

"I will gladly mention others to you," I said. "I will tell you how I have stayed with your brother in his home, how I was adopted into the Sun Clan by your grandfather, how I was tutored in reading and writing by Nichl Messorar, and of my friendships with Bentar Hissendar and Vena Remontar. But first, I must figure out what to do with this Zoasian."

The Zoasian, who was fully conscious and may have been for some time, was looking toward me. As if noticing my attention was now directed at him, the Zoasian opened his mouth and hissed at me. I walked over to him and looked down. The Princess followed and stood beside me.

"Leave him here," she said. "It is not honorable to kill an enemy that is tied up."

"I certainly would not have done that."

I pulled out my sword and held it out. The blade still did not glow. Reaching down with its tip, I cut through the bonds that held the Zoasian fast. The snake-man rose cautiously to my feet. Curiously, my sword still refused to glow. I took this as a clear sign and pointed to the distance with my splinted left arm. The reptile looked at me with his yellow eyes for a moment and then started off away, down the line of great jagged rocks.

## Chapter Twenty Two: The Princess

Noriandara Remontar, Princess of the Sun Clan, looked at me with what seemed to be a mixture of disgust and incomprehension. Even so, she was remarkably beautiful, with the same sharp features and dark blue skin that her cousin Vena Remontar possessed.

"Your friend the Zoasian will probably lay in wait to attack us somewhere along the trail," she said.

"Perhaps," I replied, "but I will not kill a defenseless enemy, and leaving him tied up out here would be just the same as running him through."

"Well, let's be on our way," she said, then pointed in the general direction from which I had come. "My soul calls me from this direction. I have to retrieve my sword."

"Of course," I replied. "Is it at the site of the wreck?"

"Possibly. The Zoasians were not quite sure what to do with our swords. They recognized the connection between the Amatharian and the soul, but were unsure how to deal with it."

"How many of you were taken captive?"

"Three knights, sixteen swordsmen, and eighty two warriors," she replied. "I wonder how many of us survived."

"I am afraid not many."

As we started climbing the rock barrier, I told her of the assault, and the many horrors which I had witnessed in the mountain installation of Zonamis, of the pursuit of herself in the gigantic truck, and the victims at the site of the wreck. By the time we had reached the ground on the other side of the rocks, I had finished my tale.

"Well," said Noriandara Remontar thoughtfully, "at least we can report them to their families."

We walked through the desert, which was still relatively cool and pleasant. We didn't follow the exact path that I had taken to find the Princess, following instead the mental message sent by her sword.

Nevertheless, after walking for some while, we came to the small streamlet, where I had napped before. We stopped to take a drink, fill my canteen, and rest for a moment.

By this time, the throbbing in my arm was so painful that I thought perhaps I would be unable to bear it. I also suspected that I had an infection, because I felt as though I had a fever. Then I remembered that I had a small packet of medicine in a belt compartment. It was a package of two capsules. I was hopeful that they would bring me some relief, though I didn't expect too much, as I suspected they were the Amatharian equivalent of aspirin. I popped the pills in my mouth, and swallowed them with a draught from the stream.

"Let's be on our way," said Noriandara Remontar. "We can rest after we find my sword."

We climbed out of the stream bed and continued on our way. As I had suspected, the mental connection between knight and sword led the Princess to the wreck of the Zoasian transport. When the vehicle came within our line of sight, we could see several large figures moving around. They proved to be, when we were close enough to see them clearly, predatory animals, feasting on the remains of the dead. There were four of the animals, picking clean the bones of Amatharian and Zoasian alike. They were about four feet tall, standing on two legs. Though they looked quite bird-like, and had beaked mouths, they were covered not in feathers, but with a wrinkled, leathery hide. Their forearms were only about a foot long, appearing quite useless, but had vestigial leather wings.

"We should be able to scare them off, don't you think?" I asked, now starting to feel much better, but not feeling like a prolonged fight with probably vicious animals.

"First, take a picture," the Princess advised. "I may well be the first Amatharian to see these beasts"

"We may be the first Amatharians to see these beasts," I corrected.

"That remains to be seen."

I pulled out my camera and snapped a quick image of the desert predators. Then I traded it for my pistol, which I had almost forgotten I still carried. Firing four quick shots, I killed three of the animals,

and sent the fourth running for its life. Walking over to the wrecked Zoasian vehicle and sitting down in its shade, I closed my eyes and dozed off.

When I woke up, of course it was still noon as it always was in Ecos, but some clouds had obscured the sun, and the wind was beginning to whip up. Nearby was the body of a Zoasian, with half a dozen large spiders, just like I had seen at the stream bed, feasting upon it. I just sat for a moment watching them.

Then Noriandara Remontar stepped up beside me.

"You have been asleep a long time," she said. "I roasted a piece of one of the animals you shot, but it is not very good."

"I see that you recovered your sword," I said.

"Yes. The Zoasians had it stored in the vehicle. Apparently they were afraid to separate the two of us. I can only imagine where they were planning to take us."

I took the piece of roasted meat that she offered me and took a few bites. It was really not that bad tasting, when compared to the bizarre life-forms that Norar Remontar, Malagor, and I had been forced to eat during our long journey, but compared to the delicious meals I had experienced in Amathar, it was quite grotesque. I set it aside largely uneaten, not because of its poor flavor, but because I did not feel like eating.

"So," said the Princess, "tell me your story."

I narrated the tale of my adventures from the time that I had found myself mysteriously transported to Ecos. I told her of how I had met Malagor and Norar Remontar, and how I had witnessed her battle against the Zoasians, and how I attempted to aid her. I did not relate my emotions toward her at the time. I told her of our journey to Amathar, of my friendship with Vena Remontar, and of my visit to the Garden of Souls where I became a knight.

"I am forced to believe your story," she said, when I had finished. "You know far too much of Amathar to have made it up. Still, it seems so strange to hear of Amathar from one so alien looking."

Now I have been told that I am a handsome fellow on more than one occasion. The truth is, that I have never really cared whether I was good-looking or not. A person's nature and actions should be the yardstick by which that person is measured: not how he looks. But I must say that my self-image took quite a blow when Noriandara Remontar deposited the words "alien looking" in my lap. I sat and thought for a moment about the fact that I had made all my judgements of her based upon her looks, just as she was doing to me now. She had to be a fine person-- all Amatharians were intelligent and honorable. But, did I... could I be in love with her, having never even spoken to her before.

"We should be on our way," she said, pointing to the mountain range on the horizon. "That is where the Zoasian city is, is it not?"

"Yes," I replied, "and the fleet should still be there."

We started off toward the Zoasian city, following the tracks in the sand made by the great land roving machine. The wind was whipping up quite a bit of dust by this time, which stuck in my eyes making vision difficult. Several times I tripped on small rocks or plants, because I could not see where I was going. Once I fell right on my left arm and almost passed out from the pain.

The wind became worse and worse until we were forced to stop, and climb down into yet another river bed, this one without any water at all in it. After a short while, there was so much sand in the air that the sky took on a strange eeriness. I could look directly at the sun, and were it not for the flying dust, could have done so without injury to my eyes. It was impossible to see beyond the edge of the stream bed. Noriandara Remontar sat down next to me, and taking off her tabard, stretched it over our heads like an impromptu tent to protect us from the storm. Despite all that had happened to her, she still had the confidence, poise, and grace that all Amatharians seemed to possess. Her black eyes held the look of casual unconcern that was the hallmark of her people.

"I have not yet thanked you for rescuing me," she said. "It is obvious that you went through a great deal of hardships. It is only too bad that you were not able to save the others as well."

"Yes, it is unfortunate," I replied. "But no thanks are necessary, kinsman."

At that moment, something heavy and hard struck the side of my head from outside the cloth covering, and everything went black.

"Alexander Ashton, are you conscious?" I opened my eyes to see the face of the Princess looking down at me. "I thought you might be in a coma."

"What happened?"

"Look and see, kinsman."

I tried to sit up, but found it difficult, since both my hands and feet were bound with heavy wire. I managed to look around me, and saw that we were on the floor of a large room. It looked familiar, but for a moment I didn't know how. I realized that this was a Zoasian land vehicle of the same general type which I had so recently driven, just as one of the aforementioned snake-men entered the compartment and pointed a large ray gun at me.

"Go ahead and shoot me, you cold-blooded bastard!" I shouted at the reptile. He just hissed at me uncomprehendingly, and then sat down nearby to guard us.

"It seems your thanks for the rescue were premature," I told my companion.

"I resigned myself to my own death when I was first captured by the Zoasians," said Noriandara Remontar. "The situation is no worse now. If anything, we can be happy that we have caused them so much trouble."

"I can't believe that they found us in the middle of that sand storm," I said, rubbing the painful knot just behind my temple.

"The Zoasians have an extra eyelid which they can close to protect from the elements, and still be able to see," she explained. "My aunt has made an extensive study of their culture and their physiology, though I dare say, I will be able to write quite a book on the subject myself, if I ever get back to Amathar."

"Yes, I know your aunt."

"She and I were always very close, at least after my mother died. In fact, I am closer to Mindana Remontar than her own daughter is. People always said that we were so much alike. Vena Remontar is much more like her father."

"I hope I get to see Vena Remontar again." I said.

"Why?" Her query caught me off guard. Why did I want to see Vena Remontar again? Because she was a good friend, of course.

"I have to tell her of the death of her betrothed." I said aloud.

"Betrothed? Was it Tular Maximinos?"

"Yes," I affirmed. "He was killed in the assault, but brought down a Zoasian battleship almost single-handedly."

"Curious," said the Princess, thoughtfully. "Tular Maximinos had been my cousin's companion for a while before I left, but I never thought they were particularly right for one another."

The great Zoasian land rover chose that moment to lurch into motion. The path the driver decided to take was very bumpy. And unlike the Amatharians, who seemed to employ interior decorators in even their most utilitarian war machines, the Zoasians made no effort to make anyone on board comfortable by padding a seat or the floor. The snake-man who was guarding us did not look as though he were particularly relaxed in his seat, and I, sitting on several exposed bolts in an armor plated floor, was certainly not. All in all, it reminded me of a trip I once took in an overcrowded helicopter for the United States Army.

It was a funny thought, but in almost everything except physiology, the Zoasians seemed more like the humans of my home planet than did the Amatharians. They lived in cities the size of New York or Mexico City, and the trash lying in the streets of Zonamis certainly did remind me of home. They seemed to have a military organization similar to armies on earth, and they expanded their territory just as every leader from Sargon of Akkad to Joseph Stalin had done on Earth. True, their science lab was more horrible than anything I would have expected from the U.S. Army, but I could imagine something similar in Nazi Germany.

"I wonder where they have stowed our swords." said Noriandara Remontar.

"I was just wondering the same thing," I replied. I was too. It was the first thing that any Remiant would wonder. It was something that pushed to the front of one's brain and refused to get out of the way.

"Thankfully the Zoasians usually keep them close to the knight, and seem afraid to damage them."

Thinking back to the death of Tular Maximinos and the destruction the soul within his sword inflicted upon the surrounding enemies, I could well imagine what they might be afraid of. Perhaps one of the Zoasian scientist had damaged one in the lab and caused just such a conflagration. Then again, the Zoasians had quite a bit of battlefield experience against Amatharian knights from which to draw. I felt very tired, so placing my shoulder beneath my head; I lay back down and went to sleep. I have had better rests in my time. The bouncing of the vehicle and the hardness of its floor were certainly not conducive to a comfortable rest. Yet the back and forth rocking of the truck and the hum of the loud, by Amatharian standards, engine did somewhat make up for it. While I passed in and out of sleep, I did not return to a full waking state until the land rover slowed to a stop, and I quite frankly have no way to tell how long that might have been.

Once a complete halt had been achieved, the entire rear wall of the great machine opened and formed itself into a ramp. The Zoasian guard, or it might have been a replacement for the first, as I have great difficulty telling them apart, stepped over to me and picking me up, slung me over his shoulder like a sack of whatever the snake men eat instead of potatoes. One of his fellows did the same thing with the Princess. They then unceremoniously deposited us on the ground beside one of the great wheels. Several Zoasians were preparing a camp: laying out sleeping mats, and setting up various pieces of equipment, the uses of which I could only guess at. I estimated that there were twenty to twenty five Zoasians total inside and outside their craft. While I might have been tempted to take them all on with my long sword, I didn't see much hope of engaging them with no weapon at all, and with my hands and feet bound.

One of the snake men tossed two foil pouches onto the ground beside us. I watched several of the reptiles open similar pouches and begin to eat the unidentifiable substances within. It seemed to be some type of freeze-dried food.

"Looks like the MREs we had in the army," I mused.

"What are they?" asked Noriandara Remontar, and don't think this didn't take some explaining, since in Amatharian, the words meals, ready, and eat do not start with letters even similar to M, R, or E. It took cooperation between both of us to open the foil pouches, because of our hands being bound, but at last we freed the block of Styrofoam-like food inside. I took a careful bite from mine and nearly gagged. While it was a dry wafer-like thing just out of the bag, when it combined with saliva or presumably any other liquid, it turned to a slimy ooze with the smell and taste of three week old catfish--and I mean three weeks without refrigerated storage, and dead.

"Try and eat it," suggested the Princess. "We both need our strength, and we are unlikely to get any better from our captors."

"Yes, of course," I replied, as I forced the vile mess into my throat against its will.

We ate and then sat in silence for a long time. Most of the Zoasians lay down on the sleeping mats and seemed to go to sleep. It was difficult to tell their actual state, since they neither snored nor breathed heavily, but they did close their eyes and refrain from movement. I could hear a couple of the snake men moving around inside the truck, but the only one outside who seemed to be awake was the one apparently assigned to guard us, and he never turned away and hardly ever blinked.

I remain impressed by the Zoasians' ability to remain completely still, watching something. I tried repeatedly to out stare our guard, but could not do it. He blinked perhaps once every ten minutes, and that was a slow leisurely blink, all the while, the rest of his body remaining completely motionless. I had just resigned myself to being continually watched, when without any apparent motivation, our guard got up and walked into the vehicle.

I was not about to waste any opportunity to escape, and as soon as he was inside, I reached down and began unwinding the wire which bound my feet. I urged Noriandara Remontar to do the same, and she went to work on her own bonds. I had just finished freeing my stiff lower extremities, when I noticed two Zoasian feet standing beside me. The guard had returned. I expected to be hit on the head, something to which I was not looking forward to with any pleasant anticipation. But it did not happen. The Zoasian placed the long box he had brought from the truck, on the ground beside me. Then he reached down, grabbed me by the arm, and pulled me to my feet. Then unwrapping the mess of wire, he



freed my hands. He then opened the box revealing its contents-- our swords, my pistol, and my belt. He pointed to the open box.

I first freed the Princess from her restraints, and then the two of us gathered together our weapons.

When I looked at the snake man again, he pointed off to the distance. I realized he was telling us to go.

It occurred to me then that this was the same Zoasian that I had freed from the Uursh Poch. He could have been picked up by that transport just before it captured us. I looked into his face to see if I could identify him as the same one, but I could find nothing in his black face and large yellow eyes to help me identify him. We didn't stay around worrying about it, but grabbed our gear, and left the Zoasian encampment at a trot.

## Chapter Twenty Three: City in the Sky

Noriandara Remontar and I put as much distance as possible between us and the Zoasians. We didn't stop until we were completely exhausted. Even then, we rested for as short a time as possible, and were on our way again. We journeyed continuously for what seemed to me to be about ten days, though beneath the eternal noon-day sun of Ecos, there is really no way to tell: at least we stopped to sleep about ten times. We had just crossed over a low rise of hills, when I spotted a cave on the face of a small cliff.

"That looks like a good spot to lie low for a while," I said. "I don't think I can continue this pace."

"I can't either," the Princess replied. "It's hunger that is taking toll upon us most."

We climbed up to the cave and found it to be nothing more than a scooped out chamber about six feet high, six feet wide, and perhaps nine feet deep into the hill. It was a place of shelter from unpleasant elements and any pursuers however, so we entered, lay down, and rested soundly.

I woke up first and looked at Noriandara Remontar. She was incredibly beautiful. Even after all of her ordeals, after wandering in the desert, after battles, captures, and flight, she still looked like the woman I had dreamed of for so long. Something about the Amatharians' hair seemed to keep it looking shiny and clean, when mine felt matted and dirty and in serious need of a shampoo. The deep blue of the Princess's Amatharian skin precluded any dark circles under her eyes. As I was looking at her, she opened those beautiful round eyes and sat up.

"Why did you follow me all the way to Zonamis?" she asked.

This wasn't really a conversation that I wanted to have now, if at all. What feelings did I have for this woman? Was I madly in love with her? I had followed her across the face of an alien world and had passed through numerous trials and tempted many perils to bring her within my grasp. Yet now as I looked at her, I didn't feel.... I didn't know what I did or didn't feel. I didn't know what I should or shouldn't feel. She was so very attractive, and yet I was not feeling that deep-down sense of need that I had always believed would be there for the woman I loved.

"From the time I first saw you," I answered slowly, "I couldn't stop thinking about you. I just had to see that you got back to Amathar safely."

"Were you in love with me?"

"For a moment I thought that I was," I confessed.

"Now?"

"I'm not so sure now."

"I do not know you," she said, looking intently into my face. "This has not been the best circumstances under which to meet someone. Perhaps when we reach home, we can become friends. Just remember. My first duty is to my family and to the Sun Clan."

"As is mine."

We decided to split up and search for food and water and to meet back at the cave. I started down the hill and around to the right, while the Princess went left. I felt somewhat uneasy about letting her off by herself, especially after I had spent such a portion of time as I had, finding her in the first place, but she was a grown woman and a knight of the Sun Clan. She was probably more capable of taking care of herself than I was.

I had my light pistol and had high hopes of finding some type of animal to shoot. I felt if I were able to shoot a creature in the head, then perhaps the remainder of the carcass would not be too damaged to harvest. The light weapons of the Amatharians were not designed for hunting, but for war. It was not quite as bad as duck hunting with a bazooka, but it was certainly close. Unfortunately for me, there seemed to be no animals larger than a good sized beetle around. A beetle about three inches long sat in the shade of a rock, and for a moment I thought about catching him for dinner, but I decided that I was not quite that hungry, yet.

As I was searching around for prey, I spotted in the distance, a gathering of rather large bushes. Observing that the only large plants in this Ecosian desert seemed to grow along the stream beds, I made for the brush in hopes of finding a source of water. As luck would have it, in the center of the bushes was a small fountain bubbling up from between the rocks and forming a small pool covered with moss and insect larvae. I brushed the extraneous matter out of the way and filled my canteen. Then I took a long drink. The water was bitter tasting, but otherwise fine.

What I had taken for bushes around this little oasis, were in fact five thick, but stunted trees. Growing upon them were fruits about the size of a pear, though dark brown in color. I picked one and tasted it. Not only did it taste very bad, it actually burned my mouth. Undaunted by this apparent failure, I cut the fruit in half with my short sword and found in the center, a marble sized seed. Extracting this seed and rinsing it off, I bit into it and found it to be, while very hard, actually quite tasty. I harvested several dozen seeds from the trees, rinsed them off, and headed back to the cave.

I arrived back at the cave to find it still empty. I decided to take advantage of the time and clean out the interior of some of the dirt and plant debris that had been deposited by the wind. I scooped it out with my hands and threw it down the side of the hill. In a short while, I had cleared the entire chamber. The cave was solid rock on roof, walls, and floor, and seemed very safe and secure.

Once my cleaning had been completed, I lay down and thought about my situation. While it was true that we were lost in the desert, I thought that things could certainly be much worse. I was alone in the wilderness with a beautiful companion, my arm was no longer throbbing though it was by no means as good as new, and we were at least temporarily safe from attackers.

I was just beginning to worry that perhaps my first instincts about letting Noriandara Remontar leave by herself were correct, when she climbed back up to the mouth of the cave. She had managed to capture a small animal, which looked to me to be a cross between an iguana and a horseshoe crab. I didn't make an in-depth examination of it, because the Princess had it skinned and spitted almost before I knew it. I did take a picture of it though.

Once I had created a small cook-fire just outside the cave entrance, Noriandara Remontar started the meat cooking. We shared the water and the nuts which I had procured and recounted the details of our excursions.

"This seems to be an untraveled area," remarked the beautiful woman, "which may be all the better for us. I think we should wait here until we are sure that we have thrown off the trail of the Zoasians. Then we can start on our way home to Amathar. It seems as though I have not seen it in a long, long time." I too, am anxious to return to Amathar," I said. "I was just beginning to make myself feel at home there." "Tell me what your world is like," said the Princess of Amathar.

I told her as much as I could think of about Earth, the United States, and my old home town. I told her of my childhood, my education, my life in the army. I answered her numerous questions just as I had done for Malagor, Norar Remontar, Vena Remontar, and the interrogation team at the Temple of Amath. It was really very therapeutic. I then asked Noriandara Remontar to reciprocate by telling me of the adventures she had faced she was captured by the Zoasians.

"There is really not too much to tell," she began. "I was knocked unconscious in the battle against the Zoasians. When I woke up, I was a prisoner on their ship. There were one hundred one of us, a tiny fraction of our crew aboard Sun Cruiser 9. We were all tossed unceremoniously into an empty cargo hold, with our hands and feet manacled. They kept us that way the entire trip back to their home city--chained up and in the dark."

"It must have been awful," I commented.

"Well, it certainly wasn't good for my physical condition," she replied, "but it could have been much worse, especially from the Zoasians. We had not been in Zonamis very long before the attack came. Though I didn't know at the time what was happening, I knew that something was going on. The guards forced us onto the transport. I don't know where they were planning to take us."

We sat thinking in silence for a while. At last I felt compelled to break the quiet with a question.

"How long should we stay here?"

"Long enough to get some of our strength back. I am certainly not up to my best, and I can tell that you

are not. That arm must be very painful."

"Actually," I replied. "I had forgotten about it until you reminded me."

We stayed in the small cave in the desert for what must have been about four days. We rested up, hunted and cooked small game, and harvested and ate a variety of strange but tasty seeds and roots. As it always did in Ecos, time passed strangely. In some ways it seemed as though we had been living together for months, and in other ways it seemed as though we had known each other but a moment. After we had slept one last time in our rock chamber, we set out once again across the desert.

During our stay, the sandy landscape had remained cool and dry, though several large clouds occasionally crossed the sky. Great square rocks were piled here and there as though they had been left behind by some cyclopean preschooler. A few large trees clung to life in the beds of dry rivers. The only other vegetation was an abundance of small shrubs which carpeted the land. Here and there, one could see large dunes of billowing red sand. It was quite a rugged country, but it was also very beautiful, and it reminded me somewhat of my childhood home in the American southwest.

Noriandara Remontar looked even better than when we had first met. The stopover at the cave had been a chance for her to recover from past ordeals. Fewer troubles now seemed to wrinkle her brow. I probably looked better myself, having benefited for the rest.

We had not walked too many miles when Noriandara Remontar called to me. As I looked up, she pointed to a large object in the sky. I thought at first that the object was an Amatharian or Zoasian battleship, since it was about the same size. It was not one of the air vessels. It was instead a floating city. While the bottom was far from smooth, with openings, windows, and protrusions, the top was a jagged skyline of tall buildings shooting up toward the noon day sun.

"Have you ever seen a floating city like that?" Noriandara Remontar asked.

"No," I replied. "You?"

"I have heard of them. They were built long ago by the Meznarks, contemporaries of the Orlons. They built hundreds of floating cities and sailed all over Ecos, until they angered a race of beings far away known as the Oindrag who hunted the Meznarks down and destroyed them. There are numerous artifacts from a fallen Meznark city at the Tree Clan Museum in Amathar, but I don't think anyone has ever come across a city still in flight."

"Are the Oindrag still around?"

"I believe they are also extinct."

"How far away do you suppose that thing is?"

"It is at least twenty kentads," she replied, indicating a distance of about fifteen miles, "but it seems to be moving toward us."

"Do you think there is anyone there steering it?"

"Our archaeologists believe that these cities were designed to float around at random."

We continued on our way, watching the floating city moving in our general direction, though not altering our own course because of it. There seemed to be no purpose in moving toward the city as there was no obvious way for us to ascend to its height. Likewise there seemed to be nothing to fear in letting it cross our path. The closer it came, the more abandoned and broken down it appeared. We were less than a mile away from the city in the sky, when we simultaneously noticed several hundred long cables and ropes hanging from the artifact, some dragging along the ground below.

"If we could climb up there," I suggested, "perhaps we could find some sort of steering mechanism, and use this as transportation back to Amathar."

"My feelings exactly."

We increased our pace to a slow jog, but it soon became apparent that the ancient city was not heading directly toward us, but would instead cross our path somewhat ahead of us. We changed our course to correct the discrepancy, and increased our pace yet again. It was very difficult to run over the uneven desert landscape, at one moment sliding in soft sand and in the next hopping over mounds of stones. If I had not had the benefit of gravity enhanced strength, I would not have been able to keep up with the Princess of Amathar.

At last we reached the shadow of the hovering metropolis, or rather we and the metropolis crossed

paths, since we had intercepted it. The cables were just ahead of us. But there was a problem. We were running out of land. The object of our chase was heading toward a huge canyon-- not as large as the Grand Canyon of Arizona perhaps-- but pretty big. If the city, which I estimated to be moving at about one to one and a half miles per hour, were to reach the canyon before we could climb aboard, we would lose it.

With an extra burst of speed, Noriandara Remontar and I reached the closest cable. It was long enough to drag along the ground. I grabbed the rope, which seemed to be made of a plastic like fiber, and the Princess started to climb up. I followed her, but could only climb a few feet from the ground with great difficulty. I realized that I would probably never be able to climb up the rope to the city with my splinted, broken arm.

My beautiful companion looked down and saw my predicament and dropped from her hand hold to the ground below me. She gathered up the slack rope below me and tied it around my waist, then climbed up beside me, just as we passed over the edge of the great canyon. It was almost a mile to the bottom, and it looked to me to be ten times that.

"I'll climb up and maybe I can pull you," suggested the Princess.

I looked up to the bottom of the flying behemoth above us. It seemed to me to be about six or seven hundred feet up. There was no guarantee that there was even a suitable entrance there, let alone a place from which the Princess could draw me up.

"I don't know about that," I replied. "Maybe we should wait until we are on the other side of the canyon and let it go."

"Don't be silly," she replied.

She started quickly up the rope, hand over hand. Climbing a rope had been one of the many fun activities I had gone through in Army boot camp. While I was there, I saw a great many men and a quite few women who could get to the top of a fifty foot tower at a pretty good clip, however none of them could match the climbing ability of the average Amatharian picked off the city street. I knew that Amatharians were on the whole, incredibly fit physically. I also knew that the huge amount of time spent wielding swords had to be a great enhancement to the arm muscles of warriors, swordsmen, and knights. Still, I was amazed at how fast Noriandara Remontar climbed up that cord.

I watched the Princess as she climbed, though I stopped periodically to look around at the canyon below, and to make sure that I was securely tied. By the time she reached the top; between the distance involved, the movement of the rope, and the size of the floating city, it was difficult even to see her. But moments later, the rope began to be pulled up, and me with it. It started up slowly, then stopped, dropped a bit, and started up again more quickly.

The rope's rise up toward the city, and by connection my own, was quite fast considering the fact that Noriandara Remontar had just climbed six hundred feet hand over hand. As I neared the end of my upward journey, I saw that the rope had been hanging from a ledge suspended below the belly of the flying city, but now it was being pulled up, but not by the Princess. It was being hauled up by a metallic creature with four arms and three glowing eyes in its face.

## Chapter Twenty Four: Among the Clouds

I stepped onto the ledge which looked as though it must have been a landing pad for some type of small air-going vessel. It was about sixty five feet square, and hung down about one hundred feet below the rest of the city. Standing at the edge were the metallic being who was now helping me onto the level surface of the deck, and Noriandara Remontar who was watching warily.

"I started to pull you up," she explained, "but this thing took the rope from me and did it for me."

"It looks like an automaton," I said, using the closest word in the Amatharian vocabulary to robot. The creature stacked the rope neatly near the precipice, and began rolling around on wheeled feet, picking up debris here and there which had blown on to the deck. "It looks like a maintenance man."

"That is not a man," she sneered. "It is grotesque."

"I thought Amatharians were more tolerant of other species. It is probably designed to look something like the Meznarks."

"Oh it is," she said. "The Meznarks had three eyes and four arms, just as this thing does. They have legs though and not wheels. It is not the Meznarks that I find so grotesque. It is this artificial representation of them."

"They probably made their machines look as much like them as possible so that they could feel more comfortable around them." I suggested.

"They should not be comfortable around them," replied the Princess. "It is one thing to have a machine as a tool, to enhance one's abilities. It is another thing entirely to have a machine as a replacement for a person, whether that replaced person is a companion, a coworker, a slave, or a master. It disgusts me."

I nodded. I had known people who chose to make machines their masters, and it was disgusting, whether the machine was a robot, a computer terminal, or a time clock.

"Perhaps," I changed the subject, "if there are machines still working here, then there may well be living Meznarks as well."

"Hmm," she said, still irked about the robot.

I began looking around for a way to the upper levels from the deck, and was rewarded with a platform on the side opposite where I had been lifted up. This platform was open on all sides but had a small raised control panel in the center of it, and another just beside the platform on the main deck.

"Looks like a down-going room," I said, using the Amatharian term for elevator.

"Down-going room," muttered the Princess.

"Shall we go on up?" I asked.

"Why don't you push this control and see if it works first."

I pressed a button on the control panel beside me, and without any warning, the elevator platform dropped from the deck in a free fall. We looked over the edge as the device plummeted far down into the canyon below, finally crashing to the ground."

"Down-going room," muttered the Princess.

We looked around some more, and finally located a rung ladder on the outside of one of the struts that held the landing platform by its corners to the main part of the city. We climbed up about sixty five feet to a hatch which opened with a large lever. The ladder continued on and after about two hundred more feet, a second hatch similar to the first led to the main city deck. We stepped out onto a broad avenue between tall buildings.

The temperature was somewhat lower than it had been on the ground, but it was beautifully sunny. We were near the center of the city, and had we not known that we were floating high in the air, we probably would not have been able to guess. There was still an eerie feeling pervading the place, though. The buildings were not in ruins, though they were in disrepair and in disarray. It was very quiet.

"How long do you suppose this thing has been deserted?" I asked.

"I don't know, but it doesn't seem to have been that long," replied Noriandara Remontar. "Perhaps the

Oindrag didn't attack this city. Perhaps they were killed by disease."

"Maybe we should reserve our judgment until we see one of the Meznarks."

The Princess nodded and started toward the nearest building, a large edifice with a series of steps leading up to the entrance. I followed her, and we both entered through a large square doorway. The interior of the building was a huge open atrium and in the center was a metal sculpture of what on Earth might be called modern art.

"What is that thing?" asked Noriandara Remontar.

"It's an art object," I replied. "It's an abstract."

"I don't understand," she said, and I recalled that all the statuary that I had seen in Amathar was of very realistic people.

"My people create art of a similar type. It represents some intangible thing-- possibly courage or love or beauty, or it is meant to invoke the feeling of looking at the ocean or of feeling the breeze in your face."

"I still don't understand," she said. "Wouldn't it be better to create a statue of a person who was courageous, or a person who was loving, or a person who was beautiful? And if one lived in a flying city, and one wanted to look at the ocean, couldn't one just fly to the nearest ocean. And if one wants to feel the breeze in his face, he has only to step outside this building."

"Yes, I suppose that is true," I conceded.

We looked around the atrium. There seemed to be no other objects of any importance there. There was no furniture, nor was there any clue to the function of the building. In the rear of the chamber were two open elevator shafts. Considering the incident earlier, we both felt inclined to avoid using them. We walked back outside and looked around.

"I don't know where to look for a control center," said the Princess. "If this were an Amatharian ship, I would head for the tallest structure, but one can never tell with the Meznarks."

"I'm starting to feel hungry," I reported. "Perhaps we could have a bite to eat before we searched for the control center."

Noriandara Remontar agreed, and we found a nearby building with a large covered entrance, sat down upon the front step, and ate the last of the nuts I had gathered in the desert. One thing which I had not thought about previously was our inability to gather food or hunt while flying around on a floating city. True, if we located a control mechanism, we might possibly be able to lower the city to the ground so that we could do so, but it seemed unlikely that we would even find the control room, let alone find it in working order.

As I was mulling this unhappy thought over in my mind, a high-pitched scream echoed throughout the ruined buildings. Noriandara and I jumped to our feet and looked around. Not seeing anything, we waited where we were until the sound repeated. The Princess pointed in a likely direction for the source of the noise, and the two of us set off at a jog. We crossed one pavement covered street and rounded the corner of another building before hearing the sound for the third time. This gave us an even better bearing on its location. One more turn and we were at its point of origin.

In the street ahead of us was an on-going battle. A wave of revulsion swept over me as I recognized six Kartags, the same creatures that had attacked Norar Remontar, Malagor, and me when we had traveled in the underground world of the Orlons. In full daylight, they were even more disgusting, if that is possible and resembled nothing so much as upright, human-sized rodents. These six Kartags were attacking four winged creatures. Each of the winged beings was about four feet tall, only slightly shorter than the Kartags, but were much more lightly built. Each was covered with feathers, two of bright green and yellow, and the other two of a rather plain brown variety. I noticed a fifth flyer, one of the colorful ones, dead on the street. The winged fellows each carried a sword made of wood, lined with tiny stone blades. The Kartags were armed with crude spears and nets.

As I have noted before, I am not well-known for planning out my actions, though I must say, that on the whole my intuitions have been proven right again and again. I will also admit that I held a prejudicial dislike toward Kartags both because of my previous dealings with them, and my strong distaste for their appearance. I didn't know who had started this fight, but I had a good idea who it was that was going to finish it. I whipped my sword from its sheath and rushed forward.

Just before I reached the combatants, one of the Kartags snared a flyer in his net. Two of the other Kartags immediately fell upon the trapped creature and began to kick him and poke at him with their spears. It was toward these fellows that I headed, and as I did so, my sword began to glow brightly with the power of the soul within.

The first Kartag was two Kartag halves before he knew what had hit him. The other two turned their spears to face me, allowing the flyer in the net time to disentangle himself and get away. The Kartags were no match for me, and in general they are not much in the way of fighters, preferring to sneak up on their enemies and ambush them. In a brief moment, my two remaining foes had been dispatched. I turned to see that the Princess had overcome the other three just as quickly.

The beings that we had saved were no longer to be seen, but their dead companion was lying upon the pavement. I bent down to examine him. His bright yellow and green plumage was not as lustrous as it had appeared upon the live examples of his species. Red blood and a yellowish substance trickled from his crushed skull. He was of very light build, and I estimate he weighed only fifty or sixty pounds, even though he was about four feet tall, or rather four feet long, since he was no longer vertical.

"What kind of being is this?" I wondered aloud.

"I'm afraid that I cannot say," Noriandara Remontar replied to the mostly rhetorical question. "I have never seen one of these creatures before. Take a picture of it."

The Princess was quite the fan of photography. I complied.

"Well, that solves the food problem," she said.

"How so?"

"I don't know about these flying creatures, but I am familiar with the Kartags. They are scavengers of the worst sort. If they can exist on this flying city, there has to be some ready source of food."

"Then on the other hand," I countered, "maybe the only food they could find were these feathered fellows."

"Hmm," she murmured, as if hesitant to accept any opinion but her own. "Still, we should find a location as high as possible and survey the area."

As luck would have it, a very tall building was just down the block from us. It was almost three times as tall as the building which we had previously entered, and it was one of the taller buildings, if not the tallest, in the city. It had a large entry, which though the buildings themselves were of a variety of shapes and sizes, seemed to be rather uniform.

Again we found two elevator shafts, and again we felt some natural anxiety about using them. Upon examining the walls of the room for several minutes, I was rewarded by finding a sliding panel, which once I had noticed it, seemed very obvious. Within was a stairway leading up. The stairs were narrower and steeper than I would have made them, but considering that they were the product of an alien culture, they were not all that unwieldy. Noriandara Remontar and I began climbing, and continued until I was forced to stop and rest. All in all, we stopped and rested about ten times on the way up, and I would estimate that we climbed two hundred flights of stairs. At last though, we were at the top. On the highest level of the building, we exited a panel door exactly like the one we had entered at the base of the stairs. It was clear that the stairs were intended to be used only in an emergency, and that the elevator was the primary means of transportation between levels.

This floor of the building was one great room. If I had found it in a building on Earth, or Amathar for that matter, I would have taken it for a ballroom, but here on this alien floating city, there was just no way to know what its original use might have been. Three walls of the building were entirely composed of large windows, which provided a striking view in three directions of the city far below and beyond that, of the landscape slowly floating by. Noriandara Remontar and I walked to the closest window and looked out. From here we could see the tops of many other buildings.

Like most buildings on my home planet, the tops of the Meznark cities were flat. Most of these buildings were covered on the tops with lush fields of green growing things. Even in the distance, we could see that these miniature fields were being cultivated by the small flying creatures that we had seen in combat against the Kartags.

"We can climb up to the top of one of those other buildings and ask the flyers for some food," said the



Princess.

"Maybe there is a garden just above us on this building."

"Did you not notice," said the Princess, "that this building is topped by one of those things you call an abstract."

"I didn't notice," I admitted.

"We shall go to that building," Noriandara Remontar said, pointing to a close, but not the closest, building."

"Why did you choose that building?" I asked.

"That one is large, with several different types of vegetation, therefore we have more of a chance to find something appropriate for our needs," she replied. "In addition, the area around the base of the building is shielded from view above, and we can approach without being seen."

"Maybe we could sneak up and take some of the food," I suggested.

The Princess gave me a withering look. "We are not going to start acting like Kartags. We will attempt to negotiate with these beings. Perhaps they will give us some food. If not, we will find something to trade."

"Of course," I replied.

We descended from our vantage point and made our way to the other building. Just as the Princess had described, most of the walk to the other location was protected from viewers above by overhanging balconies and walkways. We reached the other building and we found it just as empty and generally uninteresting as we had found the other buildings. This building had a hidden panel just like the one I had previously located which, since I now knew what to look for, was really not hidden at all. We climbed up the stairs, and though the building was about one third shorter than our lookout point, still required several rest stops during the ascent.

At last we reached the very top of the stairway and exited through a wide, rather short door. This time, instead of finding ourselves on the top story of the interior, the door opened right onto the roof from a small semi-floor annex. The landscape of this particular building top, which is not a word that is inappropriate, since it was indeed well-landscaped and quite lush, was covered with growing plants, each in a raised bed created from stone blocks around its edge. Shade was provided by a half-dozen large potted trees. All in all, the scene was quite reminiscent of a city park on a warm summer day.

I didn't have too long to reflect upon this fact, for almost as soon as we stepped out of the portal, we were approached by seven or eight of the flyers, all bright-hued males, and all carrying the stone-lined swords which I had seen in use against the Kartags on the street below. They crouched low, spread their wings out wide, and gave a hideous squawk, as they prepared to dice us into bird food.

## Chapter Twenty Five: Among the Flyers

I wasn't really in the mood to draw my weapon against the beautiful creatures that faced us with such threatening determination. For one thing, anyone who was an enemy of the Kartags was pretty much an ally of mine. If that sounds prejudiced to you, I advise you to wait until you are post-judice by having to fight them for your very lives in the bowels of some underground landscape, in the dark. Secondly, they were so colorful and lovely that it seemed a real crime to defile their persons with any sort of physical violence. And finally of course, they were only defending their home as all creatures are prone to do. I would fight to the death to protect Amathar from invaders, as I considered it already to be my home, though I had as yet spent a relatively short time there.

Just when it looked as though we would have no choice but to fight, another flyer came swooping through the air toward our adversaries and ourselves, squawking loudly. The avians facing us stepped back. The newcomer landed just in front of the Princess and myself and stepped boldly forward toward us. It stopped its squawking and began to coo in a very calming, soothing way.

"I guess he wants to be friends," I said.

"He was one of the flyers that we helped, by fighting the Kartags," replied the Princess.

"Now, how can you possibly tell them apart?"

"I recognize that patch of feathers he is missing on his shoulder."

I looked at the avians shoulder, and there was indeed a patch of feathers missing there. He had several patches of bare skin, and I wondered if it might be an indication of age.

The flyer advanced slowly and cautiously, cooing softly the entire time, as if he expected us to bolt in fright or attack. The Princess responded by stepping slowly forward to meet him. They both extended their upper extremities-- she her arm, and he his wing -- until they touched. I let out the breath that I had been unconsciously holding. Throughout my many adventures and close calls, I seldom feared for myself, but I was much more concerned when it came to the life of Noriandara Remontar. As soon as fingers met feathers, the other flyers smoothed down their own feathers and relaxed, and then they slowly moved forward to join their leader.

"Tell them we are hungry," I suggested.

The Princess glanced back at me, and then cupped her hand to her mouth.

The bird man immediately responded by whistling an order to his fellows, who in turn, rushed off in several directions. He then waved his wing toward a nearby tree, as if inviting us to go in that direction and then turned and led the way. Following the avian to the shade of the tree, which reminded me a great deal of a weeping willow, we found a stone bench placed carefully beside a large wooden tub of water. As soon as we were seated on the bench, the flyer stuck his beak into the tub and took a long drink of water. He then indicated that we should do the same.

Normally I am somewhat wary of drinking from another person's cup. I certainly am not in the habit of sharing my water with whatever creature should come along. In this case though, it was not my water but the creature's. The sharing of water, I reasoned could well be an important ritual in the establishment of friendly relations. Besides, if truth be known, I was really, really thirsty. I waited for Noriandara Remontar to drink, and then I stuck my face down into the water and drew in as much of the wonderfully cool and surprisingly fresh-tasting liquid as I could hold without drowning myself. A few moments later, the members of the original group who had all dispersed with their leader's order, returned bearing wingfulls of fruits and vegetables. These were laid before the Princess and me, and we dug into them. Some were deliciously sweet and some were sour, but all of them were entirely new to me. My favorite was a grapefruit-sized thing with the consistency and somewhat of the flavor of a green grape.

Once we had eaten, the head avian stood up, and again motioned for us to follow him. He led us to the edge of the building and hopped off. Looking after him, I saw him fly up and enter the side of the building through an open window.

"I hope he doesn't expect us to do the same," I said, but a moment later he reappeared from the opening and flew back up to our position, this time carrying a rope stretching out from the window. When he reached our elevation, he took the end of the rope which he carried, and tied it around the base of one of the potted trees. He then pointed over the edge with his wing.

"Shall we climb down?" asked Noriandara Remontar.

"I don't know how much more my arm can take," I said, attempting to remind her both that I had a broken arm, and that it had been broken in service to her.

"You are treating it like a mother's mother's elder sister," she replied, which was an Amatharian expression something along the line of "babying it"-- literally, treating it as you would treat a frail old great aunt.

I sighed, resigned to the knowledge that I would get no sympathy on the subject. It seemed that the Princess was, in general, an unsympathetic person. She quite reminded me of her aunt in that respect. Grasping the rope firmly, I stepped over the edge of the building top, and repelled down the side, twenty feet or so, until I reached the open window and entered. Noriandara Remontar was close behind me. I don't know what I expected-- perhaps a feather-lined nest, but I was pleasantly surprised by what turned out to be our accommodations during our stay with the flyers. The room was about fourteen feet wide, and about twenty-five feet long. It was clean, and it was empty with the exception of two large sleeping mats made of heaps of soft grasses covered with smooth white cloth. Before I had a chance to examine anything else, our friendly avian arrived, pointed to the beds with his wing, and then left. I didn't need to be told twice. I dropped down in the first of the beds and as usual had no trouble in dropping right off to sleep.

I suspect that I slept a long while, though as usual, I had no way to tell-- it was still noon when I woke. It was a very restful sleep though, and I felt much better. The Princess sat on her bed and cleaned her weapons.

"You sleep too much," she said.

"I have been told that," I replied. "I don't recall being a particularly heavy sleeper on my home world, but since I have been here in Ecos, I seem to require more sleep than anyone else around me."

"Mm," she replied.

"Do you suppose that my arm has healed yet?" I wondered. It was impossible to recall if it had been splinted for a week or six weeks.

"Probably." Noriandara Remontar rose and crossed the room. She removed the remaining bits of cloth holding the splint to my ulna, and tossed the makeshift splints aside.

"Can you move it?"

"I haven't stopped moving it since it was broken."

"It must not be that bad then," she replied unsympathetically.

I shrugged and started to clean my own weapons. The cleaning of one's swords, or if one is not a warrior, one's equipment in general, was a common Amatharian pass-time. It was a minor disgrace to have damaged or soiled equipment. It seemed that few Amatharians ever reached that state of disgrace, for Amatharian weapons needed little maintenance. Still the cleaning and maintaining of one's equipment was just what one did during periods of relaxation.

While we were still sitting upon our beds, a flapping noise alerted us to the arrival of the old flyer, who stepped into our room. He now had a sack, tied with string, slung over his neck. After peering at each of us intently, which I took as an avian form of greeting, he removed his burden and opened it up. Inside, he had a collection of fruit much like that which had been given to us on our arrival. We each selected one of the offerings for our breakfast, and the flyer watched us as we ate. When we had finished, he indicated that he should climb up the rope to the top of the building.

Once atop the skyscraper, Noriandara Remontar and I found ourselves in the company of a large group of flyers. It seemed the entire community had turned out to welcome, or at least to examine us. The flyers were divided up into two groups-- those who were brightly plumed and those who had relatively plain feathers. I still assumed that the brightly feathered ones were the males of the species. Several of these brightly colored individuals stepped forward and peered at us with what seemed to be a typical

avian stare. One of these had a nasty cut across his chest. It had been stitched together with white thread.

"These must be the fellows who were fighting with the Kartags when we came along," I suggested.

"I was just thinking the same thing," replied my Amatharian companion.

The elder came forward again. He pointed at the two of us with his two extremities, and then made a sweeping motion toward his fellows.

"He is either welcoming us, or inviting us to join the tribe," I said.

"I don't suppose that there is much distinction," replied Noriandara Remontar, "I doubt that they have many casual visitors up here on this floating little world of theirs."

Two of the brightly colored males came toward the Princess, and taking her gently by each of her "wings" and led her away, while two of the drab looking females led me in another direction. I wondered at this strange behavior. There seemed to be several possibilities-- either I was mistaken as to the identity of their sex, or they were mistaken as to ours. Any other sort of explanation was something that I didn't want to think about at the time. The answer quickly became apparent.

I was led to a part of the rooftop with a heavy concentration of the potted trees provided shade over a carefully cultivated area. Here in the cool protection of the shade were several beds much like the one I had been provided with, laid out upon the grass. On these beds were the offspring of the tribe. There were five children, ranging from an ugly, featherless little fellow about the size of a turkey, to an individual fully as large as an adult, but with an unkempt, hairy assortment of plumage.

I followed my two new friends past the nursery, to a nearby bed of fruit bearing plants, which sprouted from the ground in a small explosion of long, sharp leaves. The bird women began picking the fruit and with their actions, they indicated that I should do likewise. There seemed to be no real point in protesting their perception of my sex. I had never really considered certain jobs to be 'women's work,' and even those men in the army who had thought that way, I am pretty sure, had not consigned farming to that category. So I gathered up fruit until I had an armful, and then followed the girls back to the chicks. The females began the next step of their duties, which was to gulp a fruit, whole, into their mouth, and a few moments later, to regurgitate it down into the waiting mouths of their offspring. I was a little concerned that perhaps they expected me to participate in this endeavor-- something that I was sure I was not equipped for. Apparently though, they had already surmised my unsuitability for the task, for I was not asked to attempt it. We made several trips to the garden, for the children ate a lot. Then we endeavored to see to the other end of the chick. Each baby produced a fecal sack, which the mothers and I gathered and tossed off the edge of the building. It was, I imagined, much cleaner than changing diapers. Finally, when the offspring were fed and clean, they dozed off to sleep.

I followed the girls to a group of seats arranged in a semi-circle, beside the potted base of the largest tree in our little grove. Each of the avians opened a small satchel and pulled out a piece of clean white cloth. Each in turn held up their cloth and showed what was being made of it, to the approving whistles of her peers. One was making a satchel, another, a sort of hood. Still another was producing a bed cover. The closest of my new friends handed me a large piece of cloth and a leaf from the fruit plant. I watched as she pulled the sharp tip away from the leaf, taking with it a long string of plant silk, and ending up with a passable needle and thread. I realized that I was being invited to join their sewing circle. One couldn't help but be flattered.

Now that I think about it, I don't think that up until that moment in my life I had ever attempted to sew anything. When I was a child, there had always been someone to do all my sewing for me. In the army, one simply requisitioned replacements for damaged and worn clothing. Like many bachelors, once I had left the army, I simply bought a replacement for a shirt that lost a button, or a pair of slacks that became ripped. Now that I had the chance to do some sewing though, I took to it quite well. I cut the cloth into a smaller piece using my short sword, and in no time at all I had fashioned my very own bird man satchel. I had been so engrossed in the completion of my project that I failed to notice the arrival of seven or eight new female avians. This was the night shift, or what passed for the night shift in a world where it was always noon. I followed my girls, as we left tending the babes to the newcomers, and rejoined the males and Noriandara Remontar. The males bore with them several large woven baskets full of fruit and the

entire group sat down and enjoyed a meal together. I realized then that I was very hungry, and that I had been working for a day, or half a day, or at least a long time, without eating. This meal was both welcome and tasty. Afterwards, the Princess and I returned down the rope to our room.

"I haven't been this tired in a long time," reported Noriandara Remontar.

"What did they have you doing?" I wondered.

"We worked in the field, first planting one fruit bed, then weeding another, and finally picking the fruit from a third. What about you?"

"Much the same thing," I replied. "How long do you think we should stay here?"

"The city is floating in the general direction of Amathar. As long as that remains the case, we might as well stay aboard. It is quicker and easier than walking, and I doubt we will find a better method of locomotion. And since we are aboard the ship, life among these avians is infinitely preferable to eking out an existence by ourselves, constantly dodging the Kartags."

I nodded in acknowledgment. So it was decided that we would remain members of the avian tribe, falling into a routine, a cannot say a daily routine as their were no days-- Noriandara Remontar hunting and gathering with the males, and I taking care of the youngsters, sewing clothing, and repairing equipment.

I am always losing track of time in Ecos. I am sure that the Amatharians and the other races native to this artificial world manage to keep track of their doings with better ability than I, though I would point out that they never overtly paid much attention to the passing of moments. In any case, it was some time before the routine of the flyer's lives was interrupted. I had begun to think that with the Kartags safely on the ground level of this flying city, that we-- that is to say, the flyers-- had nothing much to fear as long as we stayed on our lofty perches. I was soon to find that there were other dangers.

I was following the typical flyer schedule, having had breakfast with all of the tribe and the Princess. As usual, the girls and I fed the chicks and sat down to do some sewing. I was working on the last stitches of a new tabard for myself, my original having been torn for splints and bandages along the way. I had previously completed one for the Princess. They looked pretty good, if I do say so myself, though they did not have the beautiful crests of knighthood emblazoned upon them. Just as I was inserting the needle into the cloth once more, I heard a scream nearby. I jumped up, dropping my sewing handiwork, and raced to the source of the commotion.

The baby avian farthest away from me was under attack, and though the females were attempting to protect it, it was clear that they were no match for the attacker. It was a great insect, five or six feet thick and fully thirty feet long. The bloated caterpillar like body, colored in bright blues and purples, undulated as it moved upon its many legs. On its front end was a hideous open mouth with several sets of ugly pinchers, and on its tail, which stood up like a scorpion's, was a stinger long enough to drill clear through the body of a man. The females were attempting to distract it from the baby who was wailing with fright. As I leapt forward, my gravity enhanced muscles carrying me high into the air, I whipped out my sword. It immediately began to glow with a white hot intensity as the soul within awakened and anticipated battle. I reached the baby in three steps, and on my fourth step, I hopped over the head of the insect and stepped squarely upon its back. The tail shot forward, its stinger heading straight for my chest. My sword sliced through the tail where it connected to the bloated body, sending green ichor flying. I then turned and drove the point of my sword down into the creature's body. It immediately began to collapse, spewing a fountain of green goo into the air and leaving a great green puddle reflecting in the sun. Two of the female avians rushed to the baby's side to see that it was alright. It seemed unharmed. The others turned and looked at me with what I thought was uncomfortable silence. They didn't act frightened, at least not overtly, but they didn't seem as social as they did before. I imagine that my display of an inordinate amount of power must have seemed quite unfeminine to them. They remained stand-offish the remainder of my shift. Back in our room, I related the experience to Noriandara Remontar.

"We should leave now anyway," she said. "We are close to the nearest approach to Amathar."



## Chapter Twenty Six: Feet on the Ground

When the Princess and I woke up from a restful sleep, we gathered our things together, including several new tabards and satchels which I had made, the latter filled with fruit which she had provided. We climbed up the rope to the top of the building to make our farewells to the tribe. The avians gathered around us, cooing and chirping softly. Even the females seemed to have forgotten their stand-offish behavior. They gave us many small tokens of their affection, such as necklaces of beads and feathers, pieces of dried fruit, small bags of herbs, and tiny containers of flower nectar.

I extended my hand in a wave to the flyers, and the Princess and I exited the rooftop haven using the same door through which we had entered it. By now I was feeling quite healed and healthy, my time spent sitting and sewing having served well in a recuperative capacity. The flights of stairs which had seemed so many on the way up flew by as we made our way down to the street level of the floating city. As soon as I stepped out of the front door of the Meznark building, I was forced to jump aside to avoid stepping in a large pile of fecal material left right there on the street. It was not the neat little bags that the avians left behind either, but a nasty pile much like I had seen below the mountains of the ancient Orlons. This alone was enough to remind me that we were now in the realm of the Kartags, though quite honestly, I never felt them to be much of a threat to my safety. Instead I wished to avoid them more for their unsavory nature and for their hideous smell. Still, we wasted no time in getting to the ladder which led down to the landing bay below the city.

Climbing down the ladder in the open air, to the landing platform two hundred feet below might have created problems for anyone with a fear of heights, but it was nothing compared to the trip from the platform to the ground on a strand of plastic cable. I am not prone to acrophobia, but was still unnerved. I thought for a moment that the city had gained altitude since we had come aboard, but quickly realized that this was not so, as the cables were still trailing along the ground at about the same length.

"I'll go down first," I said. "Follow me."

I wanted to make sure that if she fell, I would have a chance to catch her, and likewise if I were to fall, that I would not knock her off as well. She nodded, and I started down. The climb was much easier than I expected. I had gotten used to the effect that the lower gravity had upon me when I walked, ran, or picked something up. I had forgotten that the same principles would apply in this situation, allowing me to lift my own body with much greater ease than I would have had I been on Earth.

About half way down the cord to the ground, I stopped and looked up to check on the Princess's progress. She was some thirty feet above me and seemed to be having no trouble with the descent. I paused for a moment to look around and noticed for the first time that as we were climbing down one rope, something was climbing up another. About fifty feet away from our position, a creature was ascending. It was horrible looking. It was frighteningly ugly. It was the stuff of nightmares. I was thankful for the eternal daylight of Ecos, for to face such a thing in the darkness was something I had no wish to contemplate. About twice the height of a man, the creature was covered with slime-dripping green hair. Its upper extremities were half hands, half flippers and its lower extremities were even more flipper-like, with suction cups lining the interiors. Its face was nothing more than a large sucker with a stinger or a long tusk protruding from it.

"Amath preserve us!" cried the Princess, seeing the thing for the first time.

"Indeed," I replied, "Have you ever seen anything like that?"

"No, and I hope I never do again."

The creature stared at us for several moments with its malevolent yellow eyes drilling holes into us. It then looked up and down. Then it attempted to swing the cord it was climbing, as if to, Tarzan-like, propel itself over to us. Quickly realizing that it would not be able to do so, it turned its attention away from us and resumed its task of making toward the hovering city.

"I hate to think of that thing preying on our flyers," I said.

"Or the Kartags," said Noriandara Remontar, and I agreed. I wouldn't have turned that creature loose on a Zoasian.

"Should we climb up and hunt it down? It certainly appears malevolent."

"It does appear malevolent," agreed the Princess, "but, no. We are not familiar enough with the existing eco-structure of that flying city. For all we know, there may well be an entire pack of those things hunting in the lower levels."

I supposed that she was correct. I felt uneasy about even allowing such a thing to exist, so frighteningly horrible was it. The fearsome face of the stummada was nothing compared to the unnamed thing. Still, who was I to be judge of such things? Might not the beautifully feathered flyers have found me horribly ugly? They may well have, but were willing to accept me into their flock anyway. Oh well. The thing continued up to the city, and we lowered ourselves to the ground, dropping from the cables, and feeling the solid ground of Ecos beneath our feet.

"We shall sit and eat," said Noriandara Remontar. "It shall pay for us to lighten our load by transferring some of our fruit into our body. And I would like to watch the city for a while as it sails away."

Finding two large rocks to sit upon, the Princess and I watched the Meznark city sail into the distance as we nibbled on the various sweet fruits cultivated by the avians. For a long while, we spoke little. By the time that we had eaten all that we wanted-- and that was some time, for as you know, it is difficult to really fill oneself up with fruit-- our former vehicle was a dot in the distant sky.

Once we had finished our repast, Noriandara Remontar and I started on our way. The flying ship had taken us completely away from the desert and over the rocky badlands and mountain chains which had separated it from the great plains in which we now found ourselves. Unlike the great grasslands which Malagor and I had first crossed after my arrival on Ecos, which resembled the African savannah, these plains were more akin to a temperate landscape. The land here was covered with tall green grasses and seemed barren of large animal life with the exception of an occasional small herd of grazing beasts.

As I walked along, I looked at my Amatharian companion. She was incredibly beautiful, but there was something lacking in her face. She was so much like Vena Remontar-- perhaps a little more beautiful, in the classic sense of that word, but she did not possess that upward turn of the eyebrow. And when she smiled, the corners of her lips still turned down. Vena Remontar's lips turned up in the corners. She almost always smiled-- a happy smile, a sad smile, an enigmatic smile. I missed Vena Remontar's smiles, and her friendship-- and Malagor's, and Norar Remontar's. I missed being in the company of a person who cared about me. I had lived without that for the majority of my life, and now that I had experience that kind of friendship, I was not whole when I was without it. The Princess cared about me as one would care about a countryman or anyone to whom one owed her life, but she did not act as though she were my friend, nor as though she wanted to be. How I had longed to find her and to be with her. And now that she was here with me, what could I do to win her love? Did I even want to win it?

Such were my musings, when the Princess suddenly jumped forward and took off at a run. I immediately made chase and followed.

"Where are you going?" I shouted.

"Come on!" she called.

As she ran, she drew her short sword and took a great leap forward to land with both feet upon an animal, at the same time driving her sword point into its head. I came to a stop beside her, curious as to the cause of so great a burst of speed. The creature now lying dead on the ground was a large reptile about four feet long, and looked to be about half way between a monitor lizard and a crocodilian. Its mottled greenish skin had rendered him invisible to my eyes, but the Princess had noticed the large orange spots below his eyes.

"Is this for us to eat?"

"Of course," she said. "I killed it. You clean it."

Cleaning and dressing an animal carcass with a short sword is not as fun or as easy as one might think it would be, but I managed to do just that. When I had finished, I spitted the animal, started a fire over which to cook it.

"Reptiles are very good to eat," said Noriandara Remontar. Actually she did not use the word of reptile



at all, since the Amatharians don't have a word for reptiles. They do not classify animals the way that we do. Their classification system divides all animals into groups according to how many holes are found in their craniums, and subdivides them according to several other strange things, like the shape of the pelvis, and the type of nose. It doesn't seem to make much sense to me, but it works for them.

"You eat a lot of reptiles, do you?" I asked.

"A popular meat is *doir nyee*," she replied, then provided a perfect example of the Amatharian's strange animal classification system. "It is a small animal very much like this one—maybe a little larger, and with fur."

"I didn't have a chance to try any of that in Amathar."

"An unfortunate thing," she continued. "It is particularly good when cooked upon an open fire."

"Well then, this should be very tasty."

It was tasty too, when we at last ate the animal. I was amazed at how good it tasted to me, though this might have been more a function of not having had any meat at all while living with the flyers, rather than the choiceness of this particular beast. It seems that the flyers received all their nourishment from the plants they ate, and those same plants offered us sustenance while we were living among them, but the human desire for meat could not be overcome indefinitely. I am reminded of those individuals from my home world who have chosen to become vegetarians. I know that there are a variety of reasons why one would choose this lifestyle-- concerns for health or distaste of the sometimes cruel ways animals are treated, or the nonsensical idea that animals should have rights equaling those of human beings. None of these reasons seemed to me to justify the total abstinence from the meat our bodies were designed for. In Amathar, no one ever argued that non-sentient animals should have any kind of rights, though they all had a deep concern for the environment. No one was cruel to animals, nor to anything or anyone else. And no one was a vegetarian.

"On our way again," said the Princess, rising after her repast.

"Yes," I replied. "On our way again."

We walked across the great flat landscape, up to our shins in thick, dark, green grass. Here and there were large succulent plants, something like an aloe vera, but with little tendrils on the ends of its fat leaves. The air was moist and the sun was warm upon the tops of our heads, but not too hot.

Occasionally it would be blotted out by tremendously puffy clouds that rolled along in the sky above us, seeming to reach down toward us and at the same time reach up into the highest part of the heavens.

The Princess knew the direction in which Amathar lay, possessing that unusual power of direction that I had previously seen evidenced only by Malagor. It seems that all the beings living in Ecos have it to one extent or another. The Malagors are simply the most in tune with the sense. After a while, I believed that I was inexplicably gaining that power as well.

After we had traveled some time, and stopped to sleep several times along the way-- I was inclined to think of it as about two days, though of course it never got dark-- the land began to slope downward making it much easier traveling. The lovely grassland continued, but trees became more common, many reaching so high up into the sky that they seemed to be trying to touch those great puffy clouds passing by. Every tree seemed to be clothed in huge leaves, each bigger than my hand, and many of them had flowers upon them. When we stopped our journey to rest and eat, I was able to lie upon my back, and imagine that I was taking a nap on an early June morning, after having eaten a picnic lunch. It felt good to let the sun shine down and warm my body. The clouds moved lazily toward the direction from which we had come.

Shortly after leaving our rest stop, we topped a small ridge and looked down the slope to see a great body of water. It was large enough that one could not see the far side, though there is always the impression of something in the distance in Ecos, as it is the interior of a great ball. Likewise, it stretched out as far as the eye could see to the left and to the right. Though it took us some time to traverse the distance to the shore, what seemed to me to be about four or five hours, neither the Princess nor I spoke. We at last reached the shoreline and she knelt down to taste the still water.

"Salt," Noriandara Remontar pronounced.

I nodded.

"We shall have to cross it," she said.

I nodded again.

"Why don't we make camp here," she continued. "We might as well start looking for something to eat. You follow the coast to the right, and I will follow it to the left."

She stacked several rocks, one upon the other. "We can meet back here."

I nodded and watched her head away down the shoreline. I always felt uneasy when the Princess found it necessary to be separated from me. Then again, she was probably at least as able to take care of herself as I was.

Turning to start down the shore line in my own direction, I paused to look out upon the water of the sea. The air just above the water was evidently very still indeed, for I have seen back-yard fish ponds with greater waves upon them than were upon this quiet body of salt water. Instead of rolling in at my feet, the water slapped eight or ten inches of the shore, and the beach consisted on only two or three feet of very coarse sand between the water and the green carpet of the grassland above. As I walked, I saw no sign of jumping fish or any other aquatic animal. There were no flying creatures in the air above the water. I was about to conclude that this was a dead sea, when I came across a large piece of driftwood-- a log really-- which was encrusted with oyster-like shell fish. I gathered together every one I could pull off--which was most of them-- and returned the way I had come.

I almost missed the little stack of stones which Noriandara Remontar had left as a marker, not that this would have been much of a calamity. I simply would have continued on my way until I encountered her. I placed my collected shellfish in a small pile and sat down. When the Princess returned, loaded down with several types of fruit, I had been peacefully contemplating the sea for what seemed like quite a while. At no time did I see any splash or ripple mar its calm surface.

## Chapter Twenty Seven: Across the Silent Sea

The Princess of Amathar and I spent quite some time on that strange shore. It was probably just as long a time as we had spent with the flyers, though I will never know for certain. We utilized that time constructing a raft for the sea voyage ahead of us. It was nothing more than five large logs tied together with rope made of twisted grasses. It seemed unlikely that a sail would be of any use to us, as we never saw any wind on the water, though the clouds far up in the heavens continued to happily roll along in the direction opposite of ours. Instead we made several paddles-- one cut from a single long piece of wood, two made from smaller pieces of wood attached to poles with home-made rope, and one made of a long flat horn or antler that I found. Since I never saw the animal from which it came, I can't be any more specific about it.

While we were thus engaged as shipwrights, Noriandara Remontar and I continued to talk and get to know each other. I think she was beginning to like me. And for my part, I was finding myself less and less surprised by her gruffness. She was not at all like her brother or her cousin. She was quiet and somewhat taciturn and had a decidedly sarcastic side to her. Of course, like every Amatharian, she was reserved, and seldom spoke anything that wasn't either interesting or important. She had a way of making me with her feel about ten inches tall, whereas Vena Remontar had a way of making me feel ten feet tall. Maybe it was just me. On the whole, our time on that shore was quite pleasant and in some ways reminded me of my journey to Amathar with Norar Remontar and Malagor.

Of more concern to me than the raft, was the availability of food. On a sea without large waves or frequent storms, the stability and seaworthiness of a vessel was only of secondary importance. But, one must eat. And drink, too. We had spent twice as long foraging for food and making containers in which to store fresh water, than we had upon building the raft. We gathered many different kinds of fruits and vegetables, for the surrounding area was a lush garden of plant life. I even found a patch of the strange blue berries which Malagor and I had picked so long ago. Those and many of the other fruits were dried in the sun, as were strips of jerky meat made from a variety of animals. I would have liked to smoke some fish as well, though I could find none, no matter how hard I searched. The shellfish proved tasty when fresh, either steamed or raw, but I was unable to preserve them. At last I gathered a bunch of the oyster-like creatures and placed them in a loosely woven basket which I trailed over the side of the raft. In this way they were able to survive, straining the passing water for nutrients until at last they became my nutrients.

When Noriandara Remontar and I finally felt we were well provisioned enough for a relatively long sea voyage, we pulled the raft down to the water and placed all of our supplies on it. Then we climbed on. There was just barely enough room for us and our things, and it was impossible for both of us to lie down and sleep at the same time. It was planned that we would take turns paddling and resting. At first we both paddled to get away from the shore, and it was only after the edge of the water was only a dim line in the distance that we settled into our rotation.

The reflected sun on the water made the air a little warmer than it had been for us on the shore. At least that is my explanation for it, not being a meteorologist myself. It was by no means uncomfortable though. Indeed, if it had been a more comfortable vessel in which we found ourselves, I would have thought this the most pleasant of vacations. The water was cool but it was difficult to see down into it more than a foot or so. Perhaps this had something to do with the salt content. When the job of rowing became overtaxing, the Princess would remove her tabard and boots, and slide over the side of the raft into the water to cool off. I did this too on occasion, though more often I would simply scoop out a basket full of water to pour over my head. There was something unwholesome about an ocean with no fish. I had little problem swimming around in the Pacific Ocean near Catalina Island on Earth despite the fact that it is the summer feeding grounds for the Great White Shark-- not that I didn't think about them. At least there, they had plenty of sea lions and fish to choose from. Here in the fishless water, if some great

voracious creature decided it was hungry, it didn't have much from which to choose. The Princess and I were, not respectively, the main course and desert.

"How large do you suppose this sea to be?" I asked my companion.

"I do not believe it is much more than one hundred kentads (about two hundred miles)," she replied.

"We should be across it before our food runs low."

"How can you be sure?"

"I am not sure. But I have a sense for these things."

After we had been into our crossing about two days, I was lying on my side looking into the water, preparing for my turn at sleep. Just as I was about to close my eyes, I saw a shape pass below me. It was not a large shape, but it was startling to me because of the heretofore absence of any swimming animals. For several moments I tried to picture in my mind what I had seen, for the shape had passed by me quickly. It was not a fish shape, nor was it as lightning quick as a fish might be expected to be. It resembled a frog and was about the size of both my hands together. I dozed off moments later, but remembered to tell Noriandara Remontar of my observation when I woke.

"Are you sure it wasn't just something you dreamed?" asked my companion.

"Pretty sure."

"Hmm. This may be a problem."

"Why would it be a problem?" I asked. "I just saw one creature and it wasn't very big. It's not like I saw a crocodile or a shark."

"Crocodile or shark?" she wondered.

"Man-eating beasts," I explained.

She nodded and continued. "This could be worse. When I was a child, I went on a biological expedition with my aunt Mindana Remontar. We encountered an area of many great lakes. Each one was devoid of any but the most primitive aquatic life, with the exception of the Bloobnoob."

"Bloobnoob?"

"That is what the Preemor call them. It is an onomatopoeic word, derived from the sound they make. The Bloobnoob are a race of beings that live below the waves when they are young, and which upon adulthood invade surrounding regions and expand to other bodies of water. They are openly hostile and capture other beings for slaves and for food. They defile their own waterways, and devour all fish and aquatic life. Their very presence spelled demise for any other creatures nearby."

"Lovely," I replied. "And you think this might be one of these Bloobnoob that I saw."

"The description sounds right for one of their spawn. The Bloobnoob who we encountered lived in fresh-water lakes though, and not salty seas like this one."

This did not make me feel much better. I felt as though I was losing a paranoid fear of something grabbing me from below the water, and gaining a quite reasonable fear of something grabbing me from below the water. It did not seem to be a fair trade. We continued on, though. There was little else we could do, being in the center of an ocean. We persevered in our efforts with the paddles, and though nothing grabbed either of us from below the waves, I never stopped considering the possibility that something might.

I could try to place a measurement of time on our voyage across the small sea, but there is really no reason for me to do so. Suffice it to say that we arrived before we had completely used all of our provisions. At least we still had some food left. We had been forced to go the last several shifts rowing without fresh water. While this was not a true hardship, in that it did not cause us any permanent injury, it was nonetheless unpleasant. When we had at last stepped off the side of the raft and into the relatively shallow water near the far shore, the first thing that I wanted to do was to find a river, stream, or creek. This side of the little sea was very similar in temperature to our previous location-- if anything a little lusher and a little more heavily forested. We both reasoned that it would be an easy matter to find a river, and we were correct. A slow flowing river about one hundred fifty feet across was draining its slightly muddy but unsalted cargo into the broad blue expanse less than a mile from where we had put ashore. I took a long drought and filled all of our water containers.

"Let us rest for a while nearby," said the beautiful Amatharian woman.

"Fine," I replied, looking around. "Why don't we make a temporary camp upon that hill?"

Reaching up above a slight bend in the river was a small hill topped by five or six large, bushy trees. From the top, one could look around in all directions, with a great view of the river, and with the exception of some of the heavily wooded areas, a good view of everything else. Once at the top of the hill, we found a great spot to lie down upon, with the shade of the largest of the trees to protect us from the eternal noon-day sun. Though we were both tired, I volunteered to take the first watch. Even in a garden, one could never be too careful.

While Noriandara Remontar quietly dozed beneath the shady tree, I strolled around the base of the hill, scouting the area and looking for any possible sources of food. It may seem as I relate this story, that we spent an inordinate amount of time worrying about, looking for, or thinking about food, but anyone who has been alone in the wilderness, forced to live by their wits or by the hand of providence will agree that things like food, water, and shelter take on an importance that at other times seems out of proportion. This new land in which we found ourselves was not so well stocked as the one from which we had come, though I found some fruit on a tree which had been slightly nibbled at by some animal or other.

When I returned to the hilltop, the Princess was still sleeping, so I sat and watched her for a while. I had little opportunity to do so while paddling along in the water, and I had missed it, for you see, I cannot stress enough what an incredibly beautiful woman she was. This time though, as I looked at her, I couldn't help but daydream about her cousin. If only I could see my very good friend Vena Remontar again, all the adventures through which I had passed would seem trivial.

Shortly, the Princess returned to the world of the living and sat up. She inquired if anything unusual had happened during her nap. I related the details of my observation of the surrounding countryside, and I gave her half of the fruit which I had acquired.

"You may take your turn sleeping now," said the Amatharian woman.

"I don't know that I'm really sleepy yet," I replied, laying down and using a partially exposed tree root for a pillow. "Maybe you could talk a bit, and help me to go to sleep."

"What do you want me to talk about?" she asked in a tone that only confirmed my belief that she did not particularly enjoy casual conversation.

"Tell me about your visit to the garden of souls."

"I was already a grown woman, and an accomplished swordsman. I had been on many expeditions and seen many things in the world. I had many adventures. In fact, my cousin Vena Remontar had already received her soul, even though I was walking upright when she was born. My brother had gone to the garden to find his soul, and I was tempted to do the same, but I was also... hesitant. I went to reflect in the Temple of Amath, but it didn't seem to provide answers that I needed.

"I walked back to the garden entrance to see if Norar Remontar had returned. He had not, but a young swordsman from the Tree Clan emerged from the garden just then. He had been in the garden for a long time, but had not received his soul. Instead of dying as he should have, he had come out. His family and his clan were greatly dishonored. Every member of Tree Clan who was present in the courtyard, lowered their heads and walked away.

"I decided right then that I would not seek a soul. I would live my life as a swordsman and a scientist as my aunt did. I started to walk away. For some reason though, I could not control my direction, and I walked right into the garden. It was my soul calling me, but I didn't know that at the time. Once inside the gates, I knew that I could not come back out. There was no going back. I went deeper into the garden until I found my soul. Only then did I return."

Her tale told she slowly walked away down the hill. I thought about the fact that everyone has their own story and that what might seem so strange to one of us, would be so ordinary to another, and that what was an every day event for one, my be a traumatic event in the life of another. Then there were those events which would affect anyone, and affect them forever --like the young swordsman from the Tree Clan. My mind told me that this was the one thing in which the Amatharians were cruel and unnecessarily so. Yet another part of my body, some part which I could not quite identify, seemed to tell me that it was just and right that the Amatharians should spurn and cast out anyone who dared to return from the Garden of Souls without a soul of his own.

Thinking such thoughts, with two different parts of my body it seemed, I dozed off. I had become adept at falling asleep during the daylight hours, since that is all that there were in the world of Ecos, something that would have been, if not impossible, then at least unusual for me when I lived on Earth. I recalled that long ago I wondered if Amatharians closed their drapes before sleeping, and realized that I had not really paid much attention when I was in the city --but as it turned out Amatharians had no drapes. Bedrooms usually possessed no windows. Falling asleep was not really that difficult a task, as I am sure that many afternoon nap-takers can attest. I was beneath a shady tree, and the clouds above shaded the land around me with dappled sunlight.

I was startled awake by that unpleasant feeling of someone or some thing hovering over me. I opened my eyes to find that this was the case. A black dripping form stood over me. It had a rounded mushy body with a decidedly frog-like shape. It was difficult to tell where the head ended and the body began, but upon its head was a great drooping mouth and two huge googly eyes. While its body was pudgy, its arms were long and spindly with webbed hands. Its legs by contrast, were thick and powerful. It wore no clothing, and the only article of equipment which it carried was a long bone dagger. My mind had just enough time to register these facts, when the repulsive thing jumped on me.

## Chapter Twenty Eight: The Bloobnoob

The thing lunged down at me, intent on grabbing me with its long and relatively spindly, but no doubt strong, arms. I rolled back onto my shoulders and planted both my feet in the creature's chest, and giving it a great shove, I sent it flying ten feet into the air. With a single swift motion, I came to my feet, and was standing upright with glowing sword in hand when the grotesque amphibian came crashing back to the ground with a dull thud.

There were six more of the monsters standing around me, and they lunged for me as a group. I swung my sword through the body of the closest, while pushing the next back with my left hand. I recoiled as I felt the thick coating of slime which covered the thing's body. At that moment, three others rushed forward and I was knocked back against the tree. I began hacking with abandon, chopping here and there into the bodies of my attackers. This caused them to step back a few feet. At least those who were still able to step back did so. One was lying on the ground unmoving, and two others were flopping around as they tried to get back to their feet.

While they took a moment to decide who would be the first among them to die, I prepared myself for their next assault. When they lunged forward, I jump up, tucking and rolling forward, to land behind them. Then with a spinning cut, I decapitated two in one blow. When I say decapitated, I mean that I sliced off at least the top half of what I would call the head, for I repeat it was difficult to say just where the body ended and the head began. There was no neck. The single remaining unscathed amphibian turned toward the river, and it was with fierce satisfaction that I noted none of those who remained would ever swim again. I ran after the last remaining man-frog, the anger born of being taken from peaceful sleep into bloody battle hazing over my better judgment. I could have easily overtaken the flopping limping gate of the slimy entity, even with out my gravity enhanced speed.

Before I had gone more than two steps, I stopped in my tracks. Stuck into the ground was Noriandara Remontar's sword. I pulled it out of the ground and looked at it. It was quiet. There was no sign of the soul within, and I felt my heart ache, even though I knew this really signified nothing. The soul would have been quiet even if I had been using it in battle. The soul only awaked when used by its chosen knight. I put the Princess's sword in my sheath, and continued.

My scum-covered adversary was gone, but I knew approximately where it had entered the river. On the bank were a great many tracks. This was apparently both the point of egress and entrance. The water here was fast and deep. Before I could think too much about it, admittedly something that is usually not too much of a problem, I took a deep breath and dived in.

The water was not too cold, though the temperature was lower than the air had been. I swam deeper and deeper-- the river was far less shallow than I had supposed. I reached a level at which my ears began to hurt. The water was muddy though well lit by the noon-day sun. It seemed to me that I was able to hold my breath longer than I had whenever swimming on my home planet. Perhaps this was due somehow to the gravitational conditions of Ecos, or perhaps it just seemed that way because of all the adrenaline pumping through my system. Still, I was just at the point when I thought that I would need to surface for a breath, when I noticed an opening in the rocky bed of the river.

I swam down into the large hole and discovered a tunnel, which went downward some twenty feet and then turned. I realized that I didn't have enough air in my lungs to last much longer, so I returned to the surface and took several deep breaths. I then hyperventilated for ten or fifteen seconds to fill my blood with oxygen. Now I was as ready as I could be. I dived back to the bottom of the river only to find that I had been swept down stream. I tried to go against the current, but it would have been impossible even had I not been encumbered by equipment and clothing. In the end I was forced to swim to the shore and walk upstream to the place where I had jumped in and do it all again.

This time I went right to the bottom and into the submarine passage. At the bottom of the shaft, I gave myself a strong push off the wall and into the tunnel, and then swam for all I was worth. I didn't know

how long that passage might be, for I suspected that the creatures that regularly used it, while air breathers, were able to remain submerged for a long time. It was certain that they were far better designed for life under the water than I was. It wasn't long before I was wishing that I had taken off my boots.

As luck would have it, the tunnel went only about fifty feet before it opened into a great subterranean chamber filled with air. The air was warm but seemingly fresh, so there must have been some ventilation from somewhere. I don't know how this could be possible, as a vent to the outside air should cause the water from the river to flood the chamber, but then I'm no engineer, and at the time I had other concerns on my mind.

If this had been a T.V. adventure show, I would have found a nice ledge beside the water, on which to lift myself out onto dry land. As it was, sharp, craggy rocks, jutting from the water's surface were the only exit from the water, and by the time I had cleared myself of them and landed in a patch of spongy mud on the other side, my hands had been scraped and cut into a bloody mess. I was now glad that I had not left my boots on the bank of the river when I had jumped in.

The sloppy ooze beyond the jagged rocks filled the rest of the chamber, and I realized as I was examining this, that I could see pretty well. Even though there was no artificial light, the sunlight streaming into the chamber through the channel of water from which I had emerged, provided substantial illumination. The chamber had two exits, neither of which I could use without getting myself completely covered in the disgusting muck, and since such was the case, it didn't make much difference which of the two I chose. I took the left one.

I slopped along through the muddy passageway, constantly on guard against more of the frogmen. The slimy burrow was only about forty feet long, and opened into a large, roughly round room with no other exits. I turned around to retrace my steps just in time to find three more of the Bloobnoob sneaking up behind me. Again I made quick work of them, and I wondered that they were considered so dangerous, when I myself had now dispatched half a score. Back down the hallway I went, now completely covered with greenish black mud and blackish red gore. I turned to my left and headed down the remaining corridor. It was about twice as long as my first choice had been.

The destination in this case was a smaller chamber, but I was rewarded by finding Noriandara Remontar. She was being held down upon her back in the center of the room by five of the amphibians, and they had their hands full too. Standing above the beautiful Amatharian was a sixth creature, which held a stone bowl about twelve inches in diameter above his head. I couldn't tell what kind of sinister plan was intended by the fiends, but the entire scene was far too reminiscent of a ritual killing for my tastes.

I launched myself across the room, throwing my shoulder into the creature with the bowl. Letting out a groan as all of his air left his body, the slimy thing fell to the ground, kicking about in the mud. The others let go of Noriandara Remontar to turn their attention to me. This was a major mistake on their part. By the time they had all faced me; their former captive had regained her feet, and planted her right fist into the spine of one frogman, and her left boot into the spine of another. When the others turned to see what was going on behind, I began lopping off their heads. Only one had time to even try to escape, and he got no more than a single step away before I cut him completely in two.

"Not the brightest things," the Princess commented, reaching to retrieve her sword from my scabbard. Suddenly the chamber began to swim around, and I lost my footing. I fell into the mud and the blood on the chamber floor. I was folded over by a spasm of convulsive vomiting which lasted almost a minute. When I could open my eyes, I saw the Amatharian princess looking down at me as she sheathed her sword.

"Oh, I feel really sick," I gasped.

"I'm not surprised," replied the woman. "You are covered with Bloobnoob guts, and they are quite poisonous. Come on. We've got to get out of here."

With strength that most casual observers would never have guessed she possessed, she pulled me to my feet, placed a shoulder under mine, and began leading me toward the entrance of the lair.

"You'll feel better once this mess is washed off," she said.

If there were any of our amphibious foes remaining, they chose to avoid us, and we reached the hole



leading to the river passage without being molested. Unceremoniously, my companion pushed me into the water. As soon as the slimy bodily fluids began to wash off of me, I felt better. Dunking myself completely under, I washed my face, hair and hands.

"Those things poison everyone and everything they come in contact with," said Noriandara Remontar.

"They must have only moved into this area a short time ago, or the land around the rivers and this small sea would be devoid of life."

"Come on," I called from the water. "Let's get out of here and discuss it later."

The Princess dropped into the water beside me, and silently indicated with a nod, that I should make the journey first down the water filled tunnel. Hyperventilating again for several seconds, I pushed off and swam down the submerged tube for all I was worth. Reaching the end, I shot toward the surface and filled my lungs with a gasp as I emerged. Shortly thereafter, the Princess lifted her head slowly from the current, giving every impression that she could have spent twice as long underwater without even trying. Swimming to the shore, we found ourselves only yards from the hilltop upon which we had spent a few quiet, restful moments.

"I would prefer to get out of Bloobnoob territory as soon as possible," said the Amatharian.

"No argument from me."

We set off, without too much worry. It was relatively easy to determine that we were not being followed. We trekked over green hills and through small wooded areas. We didn't stop until the Princess expressed her opinion that we were probably beyond the territory of the disgusting frog-men. Even so, I didn't let my guard down completely, for the memory of the previous rest was still fresh in my mind.

I let Noriandara Remontar sleep first. She had been through a great deal. Once she had slept a long while-- I would imagine it was a good seven hours-- I took my turn. I must admit that I didn't sleep entirely soundly. I woke up periodically and had to reassure myself that all was well. When I eventually got up though, I felt quite rested.

Once our rest period was over, we started again across the landscape.

"So what happened?" I asked her.

"The Bloobnoob appeared suddenly behind me," she replied, instinctively knowing what I was talking about. "I called out to wake you, but you didn't respond."

"I must have been tired."

## Chapter Twenty Nine: The Wrecked Ship

Inland from the strange, silent sea, and away from the slimy amphibians, the landscape through which we walked might have seemed like something from a fairy tale. Though I had seen many temperate areas within Ecos, there was something completely unearthly about this locale. The grass was short and thick, resembling the front yard of a man whose lawn mower had been broken for a week or ten days. The trees, which were short but possessing thick, green foliage, seemed to be spaced evenly apart by design. And spaced periodically in clumps on the ground were patches of small white flowers.

As we walked along-- strolled might be a better word, since we were not moving at a very great rate of speed-- the Princess would grab some of the flowers as we passed and weave them together. After a while, she had created a little white floral hat which she put on her head. This was the first whimsical thing which I had ever witnessed from her, and I watched her for a moment. She caught me looking at her and smiled self-consciously.

"I was very worried when I found your sword," I said.

"I would imagine," she replied enigmatically. "I should thank you for finding it for me."

Something in her voice seemed strange. She was speaking a little softer than usual, and a bit higher as well. I looked at her carefully and it suddenly occurred to me that she was walking closer to my side than had been the case in the past. Her gait was more relaxed and she had a little swing in her step.

"You seem happier than usual," I said.

"I feel as though our return to Amathar is close at hand."

As we talked, we passed over a low rise and found sitting upon the other side, the remains of a crashed vehicle, which we hurried forward to examine. The wreck had once been a small air transport. From the looks of things, it had hit the surface with a great deal of speed and force. The metal frame had been twisted into a bizarre shape, and debris was spread over an area the size of a football field. The grim remains two crew members, and most everything else as well, were charred black. Still, it was possible to recognize some of the artifacts. This had once been an Amatharian shuttle. Both Noriandara Remontar and I began to scour the area, both for information about the vehicle or crew, and for anything which we could use. The first thing which I thought of was to look for the radio, but then I remembered that such devices were unknown among Amatharians.

"Look over here," said the Princess.

I walked to where she stood and she pointed out a small piece of the aircraft skin with Amatharian writing upon it. "This shuttle was from the Sun Battlecruiser 11."

"That is your brother's flagship," I said. "I wonder what this shuttle was doing way out here."

"I don't know," she replied. "At least this is an indicator that we are on the right path to Amathar."

"I had little doubt of that," I replied. "There doesn't seem to be anything we can make use of here."

"No," said the Princess, "and I fear that we won't be able to identify the body of the pilot."

"Once we have relayed the information of this crash site, hopefully his superiors can infer who the victim was."

"Let's get on our way."

Continuing on in silence, we crossed another ten miles before stopping to rest. I was beginning to get hungry. It had been a long time since the previous meal, but between the slimy creatures we had fought and the charred remains of the poor deceased shuttle pilot, I hadn't felt at all peckish. Unfortunately, by the time I decided I could eat again, there didn't seem to be any food available. Still, the rest was welcome.

When we continued on, after each taking a turn sleeping, I immediately noticed a change in the landscape. The almost idyllic park-like setting near the silent little sea gave way to more natural grassland. Unlike most of the grasslands I had been across in Ecos, or for that matter on Earth, this one had no large herds of grazing animals. It seemed to be generally devoid of animal life, though I did spot

some large insect-like creatures flying high up in the air. I turned to comment upon this fact to Noriandara Remontar, and found her looking down at something on the ground near her feet.

"What have you got there?"

"It's a piece of debris," she replied. "It couldn't have come from the shuttle craft though. We are too far away. Unless... we just happen to have walked along its exact flight line."

"That doesn't seem very likely."

"Stand where you are!" a voice shouted from nearby.

Out from behind a nearby shrub came an Amatharian warrior, carrying a light pistol which was leveled in our general direction.

"Put your weapon down," said the Princess. "I am Homianne Kurar Ka Remiant Noriandara Remontar."

"Of course you are, Princess," replied the warrior. "I recognize you now, as well as Kurar Remiant Alexander Ashton. It is such a great pleasure to see you. I am Remiantar Kolbin Perrenios."

I am not ashamed to say that I rushed forward and gave the fellow a great hug. It had been such a long time since I had seen any other person besides the Princess that I had almost given up hope of ever doing so. Kolbin Perrenios for his part, though he did not shy away from a friendly greeting to me, was far more interested in looking at the Princess. Not that I blamed him, she was incredibly beautiful, even having journeyed across the wilderness. She of course, remembered where she was better than either the swordsman or me.

"What are you doing way out here?" she asked.

"Our battle cruiser sustained heavy damage during the assault on Zonamis. We were forced to crash land a short distance from here. I have sentry duty in this area. Come, I will lead you back to the encampment."

It was not quite a mile from where we had been found to the site of the crashed cruiser. The great ship, its cannon still pointing skyward, lay upon the plain like a vicious dog who had been run over by the wheel of a car, its back broken but its teeth still curled back in a snarl. Around the remains of the vessel, in military formation, were numerous tents, and beyond those, fox-holes and make-shift battlements. Hundreds of Amatharians were going about their business in the camp, chopping wood, repairing mechanical equipment, stacking supplies, and cooking meals.

As soon as the crew members of the ship caught sight of Noriandara Remontar, they began to crowd around us, and by the time we reached the great mass of the battle cruiser, we had a sizable group of onlookers with us. Though they were clearly excited to see their princess, they became silent when Norar Remontar stepped from the hatch of the vessel and looked upon his sister for the first time since I had met him. The grandson of the Overlord rushed forward and lifted his sister in his arms and spinning her around in the air. Then, setting her down, he pressed his dark blue cheek to hers and began to weep. The scene was such a personal one, that I felt compelled to turn away, and when I did so I came face to face with the dog-like snout of my friend Malagor. I started at first, for his open maw reminded me all too much of a fierce beast. But of course, in this case, the fierce beast was smiling. I took hold of his shoulders and pulled him to me. I was so happy to see him that tears came to my eyes, and Malagor let out several small yips of excitement.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to see your ugly face," I said.

"I was just about to say the same thing to you," he replied.

Norar Remontar finished welcoming his sister and came to grasp my hand in a very earthly handshake. The Princess herself had already been taken away by a group of friends and well-wishers who wanted to ascertain for themselves whether she was in good health. Moments later, her brother followed them, leaving Malagor and myself momentarily alone.

"This feels a bit anti-climactic," I said to myself.

"You were expecting a parade and a festival in your honor," replied Malagor, without any apparent sarcasm.

"I guess I wouldn't have minded." I looked around, seeking a particular blue face among many, but I didn't see it.

"Are you hungry?" asked the alien.

"As a matter of fact I am," I replied. "Very."

"Come to my quarters. I shall fix you a feast."

Though I was doubtful as to how great a feast my friend might be capable of providing, since I had eaten his cooking before, and the circumstances in which we now found ourselves seemed less than ideal for culinary creation, I followed him as he led the way to the small tent which was his temporary home. The camp had been laid out around the fallen ship, but the tents had been spaced apart in case of enemy attack. Malagor's own tent was a short distance away. It was set up beside a large piece of the hull which had evidently broken away while still in flight. It would have taken a dozen or more men to move it.

Once inside the spartan little room, which was furnished with only a sleeping bag and a crate used as a chair, Malagor laid out an eclectic collection of gathered fruit and stored food from the battleship.

"I hope somebody has thought to feed Noriandara Remontar as well," I said.

"I do not doubt but that they are taking very good care of her," replied Malagor.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Not very long," replied Malagor. "We sustained several hits during the battle over Zonamis, but managed to keep in the battle until all the forces were withdrawn. When we reached this region, our power converter blew up, and we were forced to crash land."

"I didn't know you were familiar with power systems."

"I'm not, but I heard one of the knights say that this was what had happened."

"I almost forgot!" I said. "There were several Malagor freed by my men in Zonamis."

"I know," he replied. "In fact, they are here."

"That's great," I said, my mind beginning to focus once again on my own concerns. "Is Vena Remontar here?" I realized that I had been wondering for some time.

"She is in the camp."

"Where?"

"Even though you are an ugly alien," said Malagor. "I know you so very well."

"How so?"

"As soon as I realized that you had returned, I found out where Vena Remontar was. I knew that you would ask about her sooner or later."

"Why?"

"You are in love with her."

"I am?"

"Yes."

"But I told you that I was in love with the Princess."

"You may look like a pale Amatharian," replied my friend. "but inside, you are more of a Malagor. How could you love a female whom you had never even met, never talked to, never exchange devotions with?"

"Where is Vena Remontar?" I asked.

"She is serving picket duty on the far side of the encampment. Ask directions to post wind-23."

Without another word, I turned and strode out of the tent. Food no longer seemed important. I had to see Vena Remontar. Of course what Malagor had said, that I was in love with her, was not true. What did a strange dog-like, ape-like alien understand of human interaction, let alone human love? Still, I had to see her. I had things that I had to tell her. Yes, that was it. I had to tell her of Tular Maximinos, her fiancé. It was my duty to relate the events surrounding his death—to tell her that he had died bravely. I made my way to the far end of camp. Rather let me say that I arrived at the far end of camp, for I have no idea how I actually made my way through the tents, and wreckage and milling people. I don't even remember having stopped to ask for directions, though I must have. I simply found myself in the location that was designated as picket post wind-23.

Vena Remontar was standing alone with her back to me. I knew her immediately. Her black hair, cut short for an Amatharian woman, would have made her stand out, even had I not recognized the flawless form. I did. She was standing with her weight upon her right foot, with her right hand behind her back

and her left hand resting on the hilt of her long sword. The black cloth of her body suit amply displayed her muscular, yet feminine arms and legs, and her surprisingly white tabard hid a wealth of charms beneath it. Had none of these things revealed her to me, I would have known her by the golden crest upon her back, the same one she shared with her cousin Norar Remontar— a flaming sun with outstretched wings.

I stood and watched her for a moment, not sure what I should say. How should I begin the conversation? Which conversation should I begin? How should I greet her? In the end it was decided for me. She slowly turned around to face me. When her eyes met mine, she stopped and looked at me for what seemed like a long time. No expression showed on her face.

Suddenly she launched herself at me, grabbing me around the neck and knocking me to the ground. I didn't know what to do. I had no desire to fight with Vena Remontar. At the same time, I had no desire to be injured by her. I put my hands up in an effort to protect me face, but it was no use. She sat atop my chest as I lay sprawled upon the ground, and she bent her face, that perfect, beautiful face, down to mine, and smothered my mouth with kisses from her perfect dark blue lips. I thought for a moment that I would die of suffocation, and then I decided that to die in such a way was my destiny. I pulled her close to me, and let myself fall into the passion of the moment.

## Chapter Thirty: Vena Remontar

I had completely surrendered to the moment. There were few joys I had ever experienced which approached the pleasure of kissing Vena Remontar. At last though, my mind returned to the present, and I gently pushed her face away from mine, just far enough that I might look into her eyes. In their depths I saw nothing but joy at seeing me. How could this be? Was I delusional? Was I dreaming?

“Alexander Ashton,” said Vena Remontar, her voice a husky whisper. “I am so happy to see you, I don’t know if I should laugh or cry.”

I was at a loss for words. My brain was useless. My mouth assumed the dominant position in my body. “Um,” I said.

“Somehow deep inside,” the beautiful woman continued. “I knew that you were alive and safe.”

“Um,” I said.

She raised her head a little bit and looked at me.

“Did you rescue my cousin?” she asked.

Finally she had asked a question that seemed to take my mind out of the numbness in which it was mired. I at least had an answer for this question.

“Yes,” I replied.

A look of sadness came over her face.

“I understand,” she said.

She understood what? What did she understand? Was there something for her to understand? Why didn’t I understand? For some reason, at that moment, nothing seemed to make sense to me. Was Malagor right? Was I in love with her? It wasn’t like it had been with Noriandara Remontar. That had been something almost ethereal or magical. Vena Remontar was my friend. I liked her. Before I could sort out matters in my head, a voice spoke nearby.

“I have come to relieve you of duty, knight.” It was another Amatharian soldier, this one with no crest upon his tabard, indicating he was a warrior or a swordsman.

Vena Remontar stood up and then reached down to help me to my feet, a move that would have seemed strange had it been performed by any other woman.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you cleaned up and fed.”

I don’t know how she knew that I was hungry, having not eaten when I should have in Malagor’s tent, but it was obvious that I needed to be cleaned up. I probably still had the smell of the Bloobnoob upon me. We walked back toward the camp, the same trail which presumably I had used to find her, at first in silence.

“You have heard about Tular Maximinos,” I asked, at last.

“I was informed of his death,” she replied stiffly.

“He died bravely.”

“I do not need to be told that,” the beautiful woman said. “Tular Maximinos could have died no other way than bravely.”

“Of course,” I replied. I knew that Vena Remontar would have never said anything else of the man who had been her betrothed. And I knew that it must be true, for Vena Remontar would never have betrothed herself to a man who would act in any other fashion.

We reentered the area around the damaged Sun Battlecruiser 11, and she guided me back to Malagor’s tent. At the entrance, I could smell the aroma of meat being cooked over an open flame. Malagor had produced quite a feast for me, apparently sure that I would return. The Amatharian woman entered with me, and watched as I sat down to be served by Malagor, but then she turned and headed back out of the doorway.

“Eat,” she said. “I will see to a bath for you.”

I allowed the strange and mixed sensations of my reunion with Vena Remontar to fall into the back of my

brain as I feasted on one of the best meals that I had ever had. Malagor had evidently been given a great deal of help gathering together a hero's feast. He had flame broiled a large piece of the steak-like meat which often found a place on the Amatharian table, and he had been provided with several different dishes on the side made from fruits, roots, and vegetables which had been harvested around the area of the crash-landing. The food was delicious, but as I neared the completion of my meal, I began to think once more of my predicament with the two outstanding women in my life. But I was granted a reprieve from the mental stress.

Norar Remontar entered the tent and set up a folding chair beside me. He smiled warmly at me.

"I want to thank you for rescuing my sister," he said.

"No thanks are necessary," I replied. "We are, after all, kinsmen."

"That we are. And I am proud to say so," he continued. "I cannot believe what you have accomplished. I saw in your eyes that you had planned this all out, way back on the great plain where we first met. Now you have done it."

"I didn't really plan all that much," I confessed. "I usually just go along with what comes naturally, and sometimes it works out for the best."

"What do you want to do now?"

"I want to go home," I replied.

"To Amathar?"

"Yes. I am an Amatharian."

"You are," he confirmed.

At that moment, Noriandara Remontar joined us in the increasingly confined space of Malagor's quarters.

"I wanted to thank you for returning me to my people," she said.

"Our people," I corrected.

"Of course," she smiled, "I am happy to call you kinsman. Fair you well." Then she turned on her heel and left.

"So, what is going on around here," I asked her brother.

"We sustained heavy damage and were forced to put down here. We were already well off course from the rest of the squadron, as we had been chasing two escaping Zoasian ships." He grinned with grim satisfaction as he reported, "We destroyed them."

"As soon as we set down here, I sent several of the small craft back to Amathar to order an extraction unit for us."

"That reminds me," I said, finishing up my dinner, "we found one of your shuttles not far away."

"Yes. That was a messenger that we had dispatched to another ship during the battle. He was attempting to follow us and return to his ship. Unfortunately he did not quite make it. A lot of good warriors did not return. It was worth it though. It will be a long time before the Zoasians will be able to use Zonamis effectively as a base of operations in this area. And now we have my sister back as well." He smiled and stood up. "Now I must leave you to your rest."

As I watched the tall Amatharian knight leave, I realized just how much of a rest to which my body thought I was entitled. I was barely able to get up from my seat and make my way to the pile of blankets which Malagor was using for a bed. The blankets, which in the way of all Amatharian linens were man-made yet resembled animal skins, smelled like my alien friend. It reminded me of the time when I had first arrived in Ecos, and he had nursed me back to health in that small shack on the edge of the great plain. I passed into unconsciousness, and slept the sleep of the dead.

I awoke to a hand slapping me lightly upon the face, and my shoulders being shaken. I was groggy and my eyes did not seem to want to work, but at last I managed to come back to reality enough to see the flawless face of Vena Remontar hovering above my own. A look of deep concern upon her brow made her look, though not more beautiful for indeed nothing could, but more attractive to me.

"The Malagor told me that you often slept for long periods of time," she said sternly, "but I was beginning to worry."

I gathered myself and stood up.

"I didn't know it was a crime to sleep a long time," I said.

She smiled. "You may sleep again. In fact you need much more sleep. But there are other things you must do as well. You must be washed, and not just for cosmetic reasons. I have been discussing your adventures with my cousin, and you have been through much. Your wounds must be tended to, and we must make sure that you suffer no lingering effects of the poison you received from the Bloobnoob."

She led me out of the tent and to an enclosure a short distance away, made from stacked cargo boxes and large sheets of hull metal from the ship. Inside the penned-in area, the crew had fashioned a bath house, with several Amatharian bathtubs. On Earth, these could have been called bathtubs in only the wealthiest man's home. Anywhere else they would have been considered hot tubs, and quite large ones at that. In Amathar, one was to be found in every home, and even on the battleships, they were available, though not to be found in every crew quarters. All of the tubs were presently empty except one, which had been filled with steaming water.

Vena Remontar gestured that I was to get into the bath, and exited the make-shift bath house, leaving me alone. I shed my clothes and climbed into the warm water, letting myself float in the soothing warmth. Much of the tension began to flow from my muscles into the warm water. I closed my eyes and relaxed. Then I felt a hand upon my shoulder and looked up to see Vena Remontar rubbing liquid soap onto my skin.

"The color of your skin is so strange," she said.

"Strange bad, or strange good?" I asked.

"I don't know. Just strange."

"I think I wish my skin was the color of yours. Yours is so beautiful."

"You shouldn't wish something so silly," said the lady knight.

"I'm always going to stand out in Amathar. No matter what I do, I will never blend in."

"In Amathar," she said, "we spend much of our lives trying not to blend in— trying to stand out. Never be afraid of being different. Being different is being special."

"It makes me feel good to hear you say that, whether or not I believe it," I said.

"I have been talking much to my cousin," said Vena Remontar.

"Oh?"

"She doesn't love you."

"I know."

"Does that cause you pain in your heart?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

"Do you love her?"

"I don't think so," I said again. "Once I had found her, it was as though my desire for her disappeared. Perhaps I just needed to find her." I began to let my thoughts roam, but I continued to speak those thoughts aloud. So many things seemed to fall into place.

"Once I had found Noriandara Remontar, I stopped thinking of her, and thought of some...thing entirely different. Perhaps the only reason I felt so strongly attracted to her in the first place, is that she reminded me of something which I had not yet experienced. Perhaps she only resembled my destiny without being my destiny."

"That is a wise thought," replied the woman, "and it is good."

"Why?"

"Because I know what you want. I know that you are in love with me."

"How can you know that?" I asked.

"Because I know."

"I do love you," I admitted. "I think. But I know..."

"That is good," she said, caressing my cheek with her soapy hand.

"Why is that?"

"Because I love you."

"What?" I almost shouted.

"I love you. I have loved you since we went to the Temple of Amath. I want to be with you always. I



want to marry you.”

“But aren’t you mourning for Tular Maximinos?” I asked, shocked.

“Of course I am mourning him!” she said sternly, then her face softened and she smiled. “I cared about Tular Maximinos very much, but I had already decided that I could not marry him. I could not marry him when I was in love you. I told him of this before the assault on Zonamis.”

“He never mentioned it,” I said, “and he treated me like a friend till his death.”

“Tular Maximinos was a good man.”

“What now?” I asked, looking into her dark blue eyes.

“What now, is that I love you and you love me.”

I reached up and pulled her lips to mine, but before they reached me, she lost her balance and tumbled fully clothed into the bathtub with me.

“I am in love with a silly pale man!” she sputtered as she pulled her face to the surface of the water.

“Then kiss a silly pale man,” I said, pulling her to me, and smothering her face with kisses.

## Chapter Thirty One: The Malagor

After I had been bathed and bandaged and fussed over for quite a while, I managed to make it back to bed to continue the recuperative rest which my body so direly needed. I later learned that while I was asleep this time, my friend Malagor stood watch at the door and admitted no one, barring even Vena Remontar and Norar Remontar on the grounds that I needed rest. Thus I was able to let my body choose its own time of awakening, and though I had no clock by which to measure the time, nor no moving sun in the sky, I would not be afraid to speculate that it was well over fifteen hours before I lifted my body from the bed clothing.

When I got up, I found that almost all of my needs had been provided for. Several large pieces of fruit had been peeled and sliced and placed upon the table for me. Nearby, fresh clothing had set out as well. Someone had even gone to the trouble of searching through the downed vessel and finding some of my own clothing, including a fresh new tabard with my own crest upon it— a flaming sun embossed with a golden letter A.

I had just finished eating and dressing, when I heard a familiar hum and felt a familiar yet peculiar prickling sensation on my skin. I stepped outside the tent to see the eternal noon day sun of Ecos blotted out by a great ship hanging in the sky above us. It was quite obviously an Amatharian vessel, clearly distinguishable by navy blue color and silver highlights, as well as the banners of the hundreds of Amatharian knights aboard which were displayed proudly from the vessel's lines. This ship was far larger than anything I had ever seen before. It dwarfed even the battle cruisers which had destroyed the Zoasian city. I looked around and saw several of other ships of smaller size circling the area. Several large doors opened in the bottom of the sky ship hanging above my head, and long, thick steel cables, four from each of the compartment doors, were lowered to the ground. As soon as the cables had reached the ground, great platforms began being lowered upon those cables. They were akin to tremendously large elevators, each platform attached to a cable in each of its four corners. Once they had come close enough to the ground for me to observe them, I saw that each platform carried heavy equipment of all varieties, as well as hundreds of personnel, to the ground. It all seemed so strange at first, but the more I thought about it, the more normal it seemed. The Amatharians never threw anything away. They repaired or recycled everything, from their electronics, to their clothing. Of course they would leave nothing as valuable as a battleship lying around. They would take it home, and either repair it or recycle it.

It didn't take too long for the Sun Recovery ship 2, as I eventually learned it was, to completely disassemble battle cruiser 11, and load the pieces, as well as the crew, into its massive form. It seemed to me to be about eight days. During that time, no enemy molested the Amatharians in their work, and I was not really surprised at this fact. I didn't know precisely how far away from Zonamis we were, but I would not have bet on the Zoasian's ability to launch an attack from that site, and though I was aware, from my readings, that there were other powerful races living within the hollow sphere of Ecos, I had seen nothing of them, and tended not to think of them as a threat to an entire Amatharian fleet.

During that time period, if a specific time period did in fact exist, I returned to regular duties as part of the cruiser's crew. I stood my turn at picket duty, watching for enemies which never arrived, and I served guard duty for a mission into the nearby countryside to gather fresh fruit which supplemented the considerable stores of the ship. Though I saw Norar Remontar only once and his sister the Princess not at all, I did make time for long talks with Malagor, and I spent as much time as each of our duties would allow with Vena Remontar. Even the time I was not with her, I was thinking of her. It seemed more and more obvious that she was the key to my life in Amathar.

Once the recovery was complete, the crew of Sun Battle cruiser 11 joined the crew of the recovery ship and the monstrous vessel turned toward Amathar, as did my thoughts. Malagor and I were given a small cabin to share on the way back to the great city, and since we had no jobs of our own to perform on the

recovery ship, we spent time talking. I spoke of making a home for myself upon our arrival, and I questioned Malagor on his intentions. He didn't seem to want to talk of this, instead reminiscing about our journeys together.

Some time after our final trip home had begun, I was surprised to find myself, along with Malagor, summoned by messenger to the bridge. We went with all haste, and were greeted in the large control room by Norar Remontar and the Commander of the Ship, Desmon Hammerin. His tabard was emblazoned with his crest, a flaming sun with some type of tool, possibly a wrench, superimposed upon it. The light blue of his bodysuit indicated that his specialty was in mechanical engineering rather than warfare.

"I need your help," said Norar Remontar. "This vessel encountered an uncharted civilization on its way to our recovery. I think that the two of you should go along with me to make contact with this civilization."

"We'll be glad to help out," I said, "won't we Malagor?"

Malagor grunted noncommittally. I mused that he was wondering why, on a vessel as large as this, there weren't individuals more qualified to serve as ambassadors than myself or him, but he never asked. I had no such thoughts in my head, and I am in general not prone to thinking over details such as this. Besides, I had become accustomed to meeting strange new life-forms and bizarre new societies while I was on my long trek across Ecos. Here was some new adventure upon which to embark, not that I had been craving such, for on the ship I had not only been spending time with Malagor, but had also been enjoying many quiet moments with my newly professed love.

"Will we need an honor guard?" I asked.

"I think that the three of us will be able to handle the situation," Norar Remontar replied.

"Perhaps he is leading us into an ambush to get you away from his cousin," suggested Malagor.

I laughed at the joke. It was such an un-Amatharian thing to suggest.

"I am sure that if Norar Remontar had any such feelings," I replied, "he would simply kill me."

"That is correct," said the Amatharian knight.

Malagor and I followed Norar Remontar to the lower levels of the ship. I am reminded that on earth sea-going vessels, the lower levels are usually dark and close and full of machinery. While it is true that Amatharian ships maintain most of their engines and power equipment down below, you can also find hanger bays and loading docks which are open to the air below, and provide much more of an open feeling than one might think. When the three of us reached the base of the tremendous craft, a crew was ready to lower us to the ground on one of the descending platforms. This time, the down-going room, which could have carried an entire fleet of heavy equipment, lowered only myself, an Amatharian, and a Malagor to the grassy ground below.

As I stepped off the platform I looked around. We stood at the edge of a thick forest, with a broad sloping plain dropping several hundred feet to a large lake at our back. Much of the forest and a significant portion of the plain were blanketed in the great shadow of the ship above us. The lake, which was completely open to the noon-day sun, sparkled and shimmered as a slight breeze created a pageant of waves across its surface.

"I don't see any civilization," I said, "though this would be a beautiful spot to live."

"In the woods," directed Norar Remontar.

Together, we walked toward the thick, tall, robust trees which made up the forest. They were like large oak trees or some other hardy tree, for I am not a botanist. They had gnarled trunks and knobby protrusions, but their bark was smooth and would have made them easy to climb. They were the perfect trees in which to place a fantasy tree-house. I had just completed the thought when I spied just such a dwelling some fifty feet above the ground, then another and another. The entire top of the forest had been turned to a city of tree dwellings which would have been perfectly camouflaged from the air and were nearly so from the ground.

I felt the Amatharian Knight tap my arm and I returned my gaze to eye level. Walking toward us were three creatures. I have taken to describing so many beings with whom I have come into contact as 'unlike anything I have seen before'. This must cause many to wonder either upon the incredible vastness

and diversity of the interior of Ecos, or upon my apparent inexperience. This time I could not use that too often used phrase to describe my encounter, for this time the beings which I encountered were in almost every way just like my friend Malagor.

“Malagor?” I asked.

“Yes, they are,” replied Norar Remontar.

The three dog-like, baboon-like figures stopped before us, and in that strange coughing language that I had first heard upon my arrival in this world, they began to converse with my oldest friend in the world. Though I did not understand any of the words, nor did I know for that matter, if the language even used words as I know them, but I could imagine what the interchange must consist of. There would be introductions, and Malagor would say his name— a growl and a cough. Then there would be explanations— where had Malagor come from, who were these strange companions of his? I was just standing there letting this scenario unfold in my head when I was reawakened by Malagor calling my name.

“Alexander.”

“What?”

“Follow me,” From the testy tone of his voice, I gathered that he had called my name more than once. Norar Remontar and I followed the four Malagor deeper into the forest to a very tall tree, with a ladder attached to the trunk. The ladder led up to a large tree-house, about the size of an average home on earth, though much smaller than Norar Remontar’s apartment in Amathar. Within was a comfortable room, furnished with several great piles of furs which served the purpose of chairs. The six of us sat down and the growling and coughing continued.

“You knew that the Malagor were here,” I said to the Amatharian prince.

“As I said before, the recovery ship located them on its way to our crash site. Of course I also knew they were here from the seven survivors rescued from the Zoasians. The Sun Clan had extensive trade relations with them in the past, and there had been indications for some time that at least one Malagor city had escaped the Zoasians. Rumors here and there. Apparently new pieces of artwork which appeared to be of Malagor origin.”

At that moment, one of the local Malagor coughed loudly, apparently addressing us. When he had our attention, he began a series of barks, growls, and snarls which when put all together, was the most extensive example of Malagor language that I had yet experienced. When he was done, Malagor, my Malagor, translated.

“This is the alpha male of the city. He wishes to thank the Amatharians for returning the lost members of the pack to the true people. He says that the Amatharians have proven themselves to be friends of the Malagor in the past, and they continue to do so. His scouts have already informed him of the destruction of the Zoasian city, which has broken the back of Zoasian power in this region. Now is the time when this city can stop hiding from its enemies and can stand up proudly to face the sleeping bitch-goddess above.”

Norar Remontar smiled and nodded and acted as though everything had gone as he expected and that he understood exactly what was going on. I on the other hand didn’t have a clue. The four Malagor got up and climbed back down out of the tree-house. The prince of Amathar and I followed. When we had reached the bottom of the ladder, Malagor, that is again, my Malagor, turned to speak to me.

“This is not my family,” he said, “but these are my people. They have been hiding from the Zoasians for a long time. Now that the Zoasian, strength in this region is weakened, they can come out in the open, reestablish trade, and live prosperously.”

“Yes, I heard that upstairs,” I replied, somewhat testily. “Are you staying here?”

“They are my people.”

“Yes.”

“We will negotiate a trade and mutual protection treaty,” suggested Norar Remontar.

“If that is what my people want,” replied Malagor. “I will do my best to arrange it.”

I gave Malagor a friendly squeeze on the shoulder and turned to walk back to the ship. At the descending platform, several dozen tons of trade goods and supplies had been lowered. I don’t know

whether this was for bargaining purposes, or if it was simply a gift to the Malagor. Also on the platform were the seven Malagor rescued from the Zoasians and now being returned to their kind. Standing beside the platform, supervising the unloading were two incredibly beautiful women— Vena Remontar and her cousin Noriandara Remontar. They both smiled at me as I stepped up beside them.

“I missed you, pale one,” said Vena Remontar, as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“I have missed you too,” said the Princess. I must have looked puzzled at this, for she continued. “Even a great annoyance can be missed, once one becomes used to it.”

The three of us returned to the ship when the great elevator made its next rise to the surface. The ship stayed hovering near the Malagor city for quite a while, it seemed like two or three days to me. I assume that Norar Remontar was using that time to forge the proposed treaty with the dog-like people. At last, when the ship was ready to resume its course for Amathar, I returned to say good-bye to my friend.

“Keep yourself well and safe,” I said as I looked into that hairy, long snouted face.

“Do not fear, Alexander,” he replied. “We shall meet again.”

As I was lifted up into the air, I mused upon the fact that it is much harder to be the one being left than it is being the one who is leaving. Most of my life I had leapt forward into whatever adventure awaited me, and trusted that others would manage to keep up with me or survive on their own without me. Seldom had I been the one left behind. Of course, in reality I was still the one leaving, and Malagor was staying here, but in the more metaphorical sense, he was moving on with his life, and he was leaving me behind. I looked down at the ground below and saw him. He gave one last wave and turning, entered the forest city.

## Chapter Thirty Two: Return to Amathar

Shortly after leaving the Malagor city, I decided to relieve my ‘something sadness’ by going to the shipboard gym. There I hoped to practice my swordsmanship, and indeed I did, with an unexpected opponent. Noriandara Remontar was going through a series of warm up moves when I entered, and invited me to join her for a bout. I accepted. As we fought the mock battle, I compared her once again to her cousin. The Princess had as much skill and grace as Vena Remontar had demonstrated but tended to attack more fiercely and with less flourish. In the end, it was I who drew first blood ending the contest, when I scratched her shoulder with my blade.

“You are skilled,” said Noriandara Remontar.

“Yes, you have improved,” came the voice of her cousin from the doorway.

“I have had plenty of practice,” I said, as Vena Remontar walked up to me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Are you truly in love with this man,” Noriandara Remontar asked.

“Yes,” replied the beautiful form pressed against me.

“He is a good man,” continued the Princess, “but he is so pale.”

“Yes, I know,” said Vena Remontar, kissing me.

It seemed to be no time at all after we left the Malagor city, until we could spot the tremendous multi-colored landscape that was the city of Amathar. To say that it was a beautiful sight would be one of the more astounding understatements of all time. As we approached, the multi-colored pastel blur became separate sections of the city, then separate blocks, and finally separate buildings. By the time the mighty ship passed over the city wall, I could make out the individual people far below, and I could tell they were looking up at the monstrous vessel above them.

Sun Recovery Ship 2 slowed to a halt above an airfield. It looked much like the one on which I had first landed. It was a large tarmac with a number of small flying craft parked upon it and several small buildings placed around its edge. The ship prepared its huge elevators once again to debark passengers. The recovered battle cruiser would be offloaded in one of the city’s industrial centers. Vena Remontar and I, along with the Prince and Princess of Amathar were among the first to once again step onto Amatharian soil.

The four of us left the airfield and walked down the avenue, along with dozens, perhaps hundreds of others. Amatharians returning from an adventure first went to their home and made personal contact with family and friends, and only later filled out lengthy reports and records. We were no different. We were as happy to be returning to the great city as any citizen who had ever left it. Norar Remontar and his sister held hands as they walked along, with Vena Remontar and me following.

Though I felt some small melancholy due to missing my friend Malagor, I knew that he was where he wanted to be, and I certainly felt at home returning here. But like anyone facing the move to a new home in a new city, I had much on my mind. I had to arrange a place of my own in which to live and there were tons of things about living in Amathar and about being an Amatharian of which I still knew nothing. Then there was the whole matter of my new relationship. It all had to be sorted out as well.

We took a subway to our section of the city. This particular train was operated by the Clay clan, and was not as cozy and comfortable as others in which I have ridden, though it was nicely decorated and had several nice paintings hanging on the car wall. Compared to earthly subways— but then again, that’s really impossible. A better image might be created if you were to picture the waiting room in the office of an upscale lawyer. In any case, the vehicle got us where we were going— to the building in which all four of us resided.

When we arrived at that building— I still tend to think of it as Norar Remontar’s building, even though I know a great many people who live there— each headed for his own apartment. I followed Norar Remontar to his, with Vena Remontar’s good-bye kiss still warming my lips. I climbed into bed in the

guest room, which my friend had so generously provided me so long ago, and I fell asleep. The silky smooth sheets, though made in the style of animal skins, as is the custom in Amathar, felt oh so much better. There was none of the itchiness or smelliness which I shall always associate with sleeping on animal skins.

I didn't feel that I had slept a particularly long time, but when I got up, Norar Remontar had already left. He had his family to see, not the least of whom was his grandfather, the Overlord of our clan. I grabbed a snack cake, which is called a knalla and is not really too different from a doughnut without a hole, and set down at the desk to write out the reports of my adventures. Amatharians preferred to see everything written out. Families appreciated seeing details of their loved one's death in written form. Superiors expected to see lost or damaged equipment detailed in writing. This had nothing to do with liability or legality. An Amatharian's word was his bond, and material wealth was paid far less attention than I had been used to on another world. They simply preferred the written word in so many ways.

I had many things to write down. I had to write the family of Tular Maximinos and describe the details and the heroics of his last moments of life. I needed to write the families of those who had served with me and for me during the battle of Zonamis, whether they had lived or perished. It was expected. I had to write a detailed account of each new life form, plant or animal or whatever, that I had encountered. Finally I was impelled to write a long and detailed account of my entire adventure for Nevin Lorrinos. When I was done, my wrist and fingers ached. I looked down at my penmanship and was disappointed. The little predators and prey, which made up the letters in the Amatharian alphabet looked so inanimate. They looked as though they had gorged themselves and were no longer interested in hunting or in escaping the hunt. I carefully folded each, and stepping to the mail station, located on the wall next to the desk, I pressed the button which called an empty tube from the pneumatic shoot. I placed the first document in the tube, and spoke its destination into the microphone located on its side. Once the destination had been programmed, I placed the tube into the shoot, and with a "thwuck" sound it was on its way. I repeated this until all the documents had been sent.

"Nevin Lorrinos is waiting at the door," said the mechanical voice from seemingly out of nowhere—one of the few mechanical voices acceptable in Amatharian society. I hurried to the door, for it was a relatively rare occurrence that the Overlord of the Sun Clan arrived on one's steps. Opening the door, I beckoned him in with a flourish.

"Greetings kinsman," the Amatharian nobleman said. His dark skin and flowing black robe made him seem like a great looming shadow, even more so because he was a head taller than me.

"Overlord," I replied. "Please come in. May I offer you some refreshments?"

"No," he sat down on the Amatharian equivalent of a sofa.

"I just sent out my report. It should be arriving in your office right about now." I informed him. "I am afraid that neither my writing nor my penmanship will be up to the level of quality that you are used to."

"I am sure that it will be acceptable. In any case that is not why I have come to see you. You are a Kurar in my clan and you must have an appropriate place. You need not continue to live as a guest in my grandson's home."

"I was planning to find a place of my own, though I haven't really discovered how one is supposed to go about that yet," I admitted.

"In Amathar, our Kurar decides where we live. In your case, where you are Kurar, I shall decide a place for you."

"Alright," I said, rather hesitantly if truth be known. I didn't really know Nevin Lorrinos very well, and it seemed that he wouldn't be as good a judge of what type of home I would prefer, as one of my friends in the city. As if guessing my hesitation, he smiled.

"Come with me. If you do not like the place that I have selected for you, then you do not have to take it."

The Overlord stood up and led me out of Norar Remontar's apartment. I fumbled with the door for a moment, then noticing Nevin Lorrinos's puzzled look, I remembered that door locks were something completely unknown in Amathar. We took the escalators down the forty-five stories to the street. Stepping out into the sunshine, we walked to the end of the block, stepped onto the moving sidewalk and

doubled our walking speed. After traveling about two miles, we made our way down another tree-lined path between great skyscrapers.

The entire trip, Nevin Lorrinos apparently felt little compelled to pass idle conversation. Amatharian people as a whole, while not exactly tight-lipped, don't spend a lot of time talking about nothing, like so many people on Earth are wont to do. But the Overlord of the Sun Clan made no unnecessary conversation at all. We talked of neither the weather nor philosophy. Our only conversation consisted of whether I had received all of the material goods which were necessary for a knight— new clean tabards, replacements for equipment lost, etc. I for the most part, not being yet a proper Amatharian, had not yet even thought to look into those details. I was home. I had my sword and my soul. That was all I had taken care to see to.

"Here," said the Overlord, with a sweep of his hand, indicating the building in front of which we had paused. "I have decided that this is to be your family's building.

The building was fairly typical of those in this part of the city. It was about one hundred stories tall, and covered an entire city block at its base. In the way of Amatharian architecture, it was smooth over most of its surface, with the corners covered in highly detailed, carved stone. It had numerous balconies looking down on us. It was a rich coral color, and was just a shade lighter than the edifices to either side of it.

"Come inside."

I followed Nevin Lorrinos into the lobby of the building. There was quite a bit of activity going on around. The building was evidently just being finished. Workers in green-yellow jump suits were finishing walls, running thick wire cables through the walls, and painting ceilings. The escalators were operational, and we walked up them to the seventieth floor. By the time I stepped off the moving stairway, I was puffing a bit, but the old Amatharian seemed completely unaffected. He led me to a balcony looking out over the city.

"This is a fine building, is it not?" he said.

"It is beautiful," I replied truthfully.

"I ordered construction started here the day that I became Kurar Ka."

I had already come to understand the Amatharian fascination with creating things that last. In this great city, every building, every feature was planned to last an eternity. Perhaps it was because of the Amatharian's lack of understanding of time which made them so concerned with permanency. This building had been under construction for a long time, and now it was to become the newest addition to the Sun Clan and the city.

"Did you design it yourself?" I asked.

"No. This was the last architectural project of Kennis Berrontar. I knew that our fortunes would be expanding, and we needed additional room to grow. In fact, we have grown more than I had expected, and this is just one of several new Sun Clan buildings which I have added. Some of the others are smaller and, though they were begun after this one, are already productive parts of the organization."

"What is it that I am supposed to do here?" I asked.

"Live," he replied. "You will live here and when your family expands, they will live here as well. And whatever business concerns your family acquires will be run from this building too. I have already made arrangements for the shops and restaurants on the lower levels to be staffed by other families in the clan— your extended family. After several generations, your immediate family will be large enough to assume those operations." When he said 'my immediate family', I of course understood it to mean all of my descendants.

"Well, thank you for arranging all of this for me," I said, "and I do have to live somewhere, don't I?"

"I must get back to a meeting," the Overlord said, then pointed to a doorway just down the corridor from the balcony. "That is your apartment."

After watching him depart down the escalator, I walked toward my new home. Like all the doors in the great city, this one slid open to the side, and had no locking mechanism at all. It opened into a small foyer, which in turn, led into a beautifully spacious living room. It was even larger than Norar Remontar's, though there were some similarities. It had a high vaulted ceiling with a balconied upper



level facing a two story window which looked down upon the building's courtyard. I climbed the spiral staircase to the balcony, the walls of which were covered with book shelves, and I poked my head into each of the rooms adjacent to it. There was a study with a writing desk and a mail station. And there were two guest rooms, each with a large bathroom attached. Making my way back downstairs I found an immense kitchen and a formal dining room capable of seating several dozen. A hallway led to a lounge and four more bedrooms, again each possessing a bathroom as large as itself.

The last room left for me to examine was the master bedroom. After seeing the opulence of the rest of the apartment, I was expecting something particularly grand. In one way I was disappointed. To Amatharian eyes, the Kurar slept just the same as any other member of the family, and require no additional space. The master bedroom, if one may refer to it as such, was no larger than any of the other bedrooms in the home. It was just large enough to contain a wash basin resting on a stone pedestal, two Amatharian dressers with their open cubby-hole arrangements in place of drawers, and a large Amatharian bed, sunken into the floor and covered with faux animal skins. In a second, and more important way, I was not at all disappointed, for laying upon the bed, smiling warmly at me, was Vena Remontar.

"What do you think of my new home?" I asked her.

"More importantly, what do you think of it?"

"It's pretty impressive," I admitted. "I never imagined that I would one day be living in any dwelling as fine as this, let alone in the city of Amathar."

"It is an important home, as befits an important member of the clan," she said. "This indicates that you have achieved a high status among our people. Nevin Lorrinos thinks highly of you, and I know a great many other people who do as well."

"Are you one of those people?" I wondered.

"Which people?"

"Those who think highly of me."

She wrinkled her nose. "Of course not."

My heart sank.

"Still," she continued. "I have decided that I will have you."

"Huh?"

"I have decided that you will be my husband," she said, rising to her feet, walking toward me, and touching my face with the palm of her hand. "Who else would want you?"

"I don't care if anyone wants me," I said, "as long as I have you."

"And you shall."

## Chapter Thirty Three: Relations

Vena Remontar and I sat on the sofa in my new living room and talked for what I am sure were many long hours, though she insisted that it had only been a moment. I was not inclined to argue the issue with my betrothed. My betrothed. What a wonderful sound that had in my mind. I said it silently to myself over and over again. At last she stood up and announced that she was off to serve her turn of duty at the airfield. I smiled as I recalled that it was the airfield where we had first met. She kissed me tenderly, and all too quickly, was gone.

I fixed myself a bowl of fruit for lunch, or dinner, or breakfast, or I really didn't know what, and had just finished, when the disembodied voice of the door announcer chose to speak.

"Neela Esponar and Nona Montendro are waiting at the door."

I opened the door to find my two young kinsmen were waiting. Each was carrying a large clear crate full of assorted articles which I recognized as mine.

"Greetings kinsman," said Nona Montendro.

"Greetings cousin," said Neela Esponar. She used the term four fourth cousin once removed.

"Greetings to you, my aunts," I replied teasingly. "What brings you so far from home?"

"We are not very far at all," said Nona Montendro.

"We are old enough to go anywhere in the city," said Neela Esponar. "Besides, Norar Remontar instructed us to bring your things over."

"He must be in a hurry to get rid of me," I commented, causing both girls to start giggling.

"We are very glad to see that you made it home safely," said one of the girls, I forget which one.

"And that you performed bravely," said the other.

"Things worked out."

"Will you tell us some of your adventures," asked Nona Montendro.

"I will. But first I must tell you, I am sorry to say, that I lost the token you gave me," I recalled having it before my encounter with the Bloobnoob, but hadn't been able to find it since. I supposed I must have lost it in their lair.

"It was just a girl-pin," she said. I didn't really know what that meant at the time, and to tell the truth, I haven't researched it since. Young women and boys too, in Amathar, participate in special ceremonies to mark their passage through various stages of development. At these times, they receive small insignia which they proudly display. I believe that the "girl-pin" was one such childhood stage insignia.

After depositing my things in a corner, the girls sat down on the floor of the living room. I poured the three of us glasses of cold water, and sitting down, I began to tell the story of my adventures since I had seen them last. I told them of the aerial assault on the Zoasian city of Zonamis, and the pursuit of the Princess, though I left out the horrors of the subterranean Zoasian death camp. I related the events surrounding the rescue of the Princess from the Uursh Poch, and of our capture and subsequent release by the Zoasians. This in particular was fascinating for them, as they had spent much time in their lessons, learning of Zoasians. I told them of the ancient flying city and of living with the flyers for a time. I told them of crossing a small sea on a raft and of fighting the Bloobnoob in their tunnels under the river, of our discovery of Norar Remontar's wrecked ship and of our subsequent return to Amathar.

"Nicohl Messonar is waiting at the door," said the automated voice. Both of the young girls turned a lighter shade of blue.

"Are you two neglecting your lessons?" I chided, as I went to open the front door.

"It seems that I have three neglectful students, instead of only one," said my tutor, when the door had been pushed aside.

"Uh, oh," I said.

"We were just leaving," said Nona Montendro, pushing past me and the Amatharian teacher. "Farewell, kinsman."

“Farewell, cousin,” said Neela Esponar, and they were both gone.

“It is important that we stress the importance to our young people, of learning,” said Nichol Messorar.

“Of course...”

“That is why our young girls should be at their studies, and not spending all of their time with a virtual illiterate.”

“I... illiterate?”

“There should be a verb in that sentence.”

“Well, I’m doing the best I can,” I protested, finally finding my voice.

“That is not true at all,” the older woman replied. “You are doing remarkably well for some one virtually unschooled, and by all reports, not particularly bright, but you are not doing your best. I read your report to Nevin Lorrinos and it was the worst piece of writing by anyone old enough to walk that I have ever seen. There is not a single sentence with correct grammar in the entire paper, and do not even mention your penmanship to me.”

“I don’t think my penmanship is that...”

“I said not to mention that. You will reapply yourself to your studies.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You will meet with me every twenty city-cycles in the instruction room.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are Kurar now, and you have certain responsibilities.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nichol Messorar clasped my face in her hands, and kissed me on the cheek. “I am glad that you have returned home safely,” she said, smiling.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Farewell, kinsman,” she said, turning and heading for the door. “I will see you at our next appointment.”

I felt truly drained. I have never been one that could be called a social animal. People never came to my door, and certainly not in sequence, at least not before I came to live in Amathar, in the world of Ecos. In fact, now that I think of it, I never had anyone stop by my door when I lived on Earth. I never went to anyone else’s door either. The only time that I really visited with friends was at work. Of course, I only had the means to go visiting or have someone else over to my house a few times, and then for only a very short time. When I was in the army, it was not known for encouraging visitors. For that matter, neither was the orphanage. I had lived on my own in college and then again just before my arrival in Ecos, and in both of those situations together, I probably had fewer visitors than I had to my new home in Amathar that first day. And the day was not yet over. Of course the day never really is over here.

I stripped out of my tabard and jumpsuit and, walking into my own bathroom, slid into the tub. It was typical of tubs in the great city, and would have been called a Jacuzzi or even a small pool back in the U.S.A. It remained filled at times, through a constant flow of fresh warm water entered from a small waterfall at one end. After scrubbing myself, I stayed in, floating, until my fingers and toes were like prunes. Children like to stay in the water till they have prune-fingers; at least I did as a child, though I never had much opportunity. There was always someone else waiting for the tub. Here in Amathar, anyone would have felt like they were living in the lap of luxury. I certainly did.

When I climbed out, I dried off, and crawled immediately into bed. I felt a pang of guilt at not practicing my grammar before I dozed off, but I had little planned for the near future, and I reasoned that there was plenty of time for schooling. I was asleep in a moment and spent an undetermined amount of time in a magical garden where little flames danced around my betrothed and me as we ate a picnic lunch of fried chicken and baked beans, on a table cloth made from the skin of a large plaid animal. I woke up feeling rested and relaxed.

I lazily opened my eyes and saw my Vena Remontar standing in the doorway.

“Greetings,” I said, and suddenly realized that it was not Vena Remontar at all. It was Noriandara Remontar. I sat up and looked carefully. It was not Vena Remontar or Noriandara Remontar. It was Mindana Remontar, my future mother-in-law. “Um, hello.”

“Come into the living room,” she said, turning on a heel. “We need to talk.”

I stood up and realized with a certain amount of horror, that I had left not only my clean clothes sitting in the living room, but my dirty clothes as well. It was not so much that I minded Mindana Remontar seeing how casually I left discarded clothing lying around the house, although now that I started to think about it, that was not good either. It was that I had nothing with which to cover myself. I retrieved a towel from beside the tub, and wrapping it around my waist; I poked my head out of the bedroom door.

“Could you possibly bring me some of my clothes?” I asked.

She brought me a clean black bodysuit from the pile that the girls had brought me. As she handed it to me, she looked me up and down.

“You are horribly pale,” she said.

“Yes, I know.”

I slipped on the bodysuit and walked into the living room. There I put on my boots, and a fresh tabard, making sure that it was straight and that the braid and the crest were smooth. Then I sat down across from the most serious looking woman I have ever seen in my entire life.

“What is it you want to talk about?” I asked.

“I want to talk about my daughter,” she replied. “She intends to ask you to marry her.”

“She already has.”

“Well,” she said, looking decidedly unhappy. “That is it then. There is nothing more to say. You will be married to her.”

“What is it exactly that you don’t like about me?”

“I... have nothing against you,” she replied. “But my daughter is a knight. She is the grand-daughter of the Kurar Ka. She could do better.”

“I cannot argue that,” I said.

“Then you see my point,” said the woman. “I want nothing but the best for my daughter, and now I see her betrothed to an alien, who knows virtually nothing of our ways, or our laws.”

“Are you afraid that I might hurt Vena Remontar? If that is what you are afraid of, I can assure you that I will never hurt her.”

“I am not afraid of you hurting her,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “I am afraid of you dishonoring her.”

“You may stop right there,” I said, standing up and smoothing out my tabard, so as to show my crest to best advantage. “I am Kurar. I am an Amatharian. I may not be an Amatharian by birth, and I may not have achieved my position as lord through any real efforts on my part, and maybe I do have a tendency to screw things up occasionally, but, well, I forgot where I was going with this.”

“You are Kurar,” she offered.

“Yes, I am Kurar, and as long as I live, I will not do anything to intentionally dishonor my people, my clan, my family, myself, or most importantly my betrothed. And if through ignorance, I break some custom or social more’, I will do whatever is necessary to make the appropriate reparations.”

Mindana Remontar smiled. It was the first time that I had seen her do so.

“I welcome you to my family,” she said. “I was afraid that my daughter had chosen you only with her heart, and not with her head, but then you have seemed somewhat the oaf in my presence.”

“Uh, well alright, I guess.”

She stood up and walked to the door. I followed. I was at a loss of exactly what to say. I had tried being nice to her, and didn’t get any respect. Then I had stood up to her, but I didn’t receive the kind of response that I was expecting. There wasn’t really anything else that I could do. She was going to be my mother-in-law, a relationship that on earth was unfortunately close, and in Amathar even closer still. No matter what her opinion of me might be, I was just going to have to get used to her.

“Farewell kinsman,” she said, as she slipped out the door. “I just wish you weren’t so pale.”

The time after my return to Amathar and my move into new quarters, a period that I seem to recall as being of several weeks in length, was a busy time for me. I was the lord of my family, being its only member, and so I decided that my job would be to complete my lessons in Amatharian language, both written and oral, culture, and history. I spent every free hour writing, reading, and completing grammar drills. Nicohl Messonar was pleased with my progress. I began writing down everything that had happened to me since my arrival in Ecos— what eventually became this document.

There were also an unpleasantly large number of ceremonies to be attended— what on Earth would be referred to as memorial services. There was one for every unreturned member of the expeditionary force against Zonamis. I attended the ceremony for every soldier that I knew. They were emotional. I went to only two funerals on earth. One was for my parents and I really don't remember much of that. The other was for the grandmother of an army comrade. Most everyone at that funeral seemed relieved that she no longer had to deal with pain and suffering. I have heard some people say that when they died, they wished that their relatives would be happy and not weep for them. The ceremonies in Amathar were not like this. The people who attended the ceremonies were terribly, terribly wrought with sadness, and though most sat stoically and did not cry out, their anguish was evident. Sobs. Shaking. Tears. The ceremony for Tular Maximinos was a difficult one. I attended it and so did Vena Remontar. I had strange feelings about the whole situation. I had really liked Tular Maximinos. I felt as though I was stealing his woman, though I had never kissed her until after his death. Even though the feelings which my betrothed and I had for each other had nothing to do with him, I would always have an unsettling feeling in my stomach when I thought of the brave Amatharian who had given his life to take down an entire Zoasian battle cruiser. And they placed his statue on my street.

Tular Maximinos's ceremony was not the most difficult however-- at least not for me. I was not only required to attend the ceremony for Terril Jennofar, but because I was his commanding officer I had to speak. I had to do more than speak. I was forced to conduct the ceremony, much as a minister would do at an earthly funeral. Though I have no particular gift for oration and have never been known to excel in that area, I prepared well, and I think, performed adequately. My voice cracked a few times. I had not known the young swordsman very long, but in that short time which we had served together, whether it was minutes or hours, we had gone through things together that would bind us more closely than blood or even friendship. I reported him well. There was no statue in his image placed on an Amatharian street, because he was not a knight, but I would always remember him.

## Chapter Thirty Four: Revelations

It wasn't very long after the ceremony of Terril Jennofar, that while sitting in my home and continuing the writing of my journals, I had a most unusual visitor. It seemed that I had some time to myself for the first time, really, since I had returned to the city. Vena Remontar was at her duty station, and most of my friends, having already made a visit to my new home, were about their own business. I was finally looking forward to making a life for myself here. Then the door announcer spoke.

"Oldon Domintus is waiting at the door."

I hadn't thought much of the Temple of Amath lately, but the Overlord of the Templars had sought me out at home. It was with some trepidation that I went to open the door, remembering the unpleasant interrogation that I had experienced there. Still, he was the High Templar, and one couldn't very well leave him standing at the step. I suddenly realized the real problem with the door announcer. If there was someone there at the door that you did not want to see, there was no way that you could claim not to have heard a knock, or not to have known who was there.

"Greetings Kurar Ka Oldon Domintus," I said, letting the clean-shorn man enter.

"Greetings Kurar Alexander Ashton," he said in reply. He walked into the living room and sat down upon the sofa, seeming far too comfortable for my tastes. "I am pleased to see you again. You have done well. Your kinsmen think highly of you."

"That is nice to know," I said. "What can I do for you?" This may sound abrupt in translation, but it was quite polite in Amatharian.

"We have need of you at the Temple," he said. "It is a matter, though not of any urgency, of some importance."

"May I ask what this matter is in regards to?"

"It is not something I wish to discuss outside of the Temple of Amath," he replied. "I will be expecting you at 20175."

I looked at the city cycle dial on the wall beside the front door. It read 20154, so I figured I had about two days as I reckoned time. There really wasn't any opportunity for me to say no. Oldon Domintus was Kurar Ka so he outranked me, and though he was not of my clan, he was the High Templar, and that counted for quite a bit.

"Alright, I'll be there."

"Very good," he smiled. "I shall be waiting."

As I have indicated, I was not really too keen on the whole idea of visiting the Temple of Amath again, but I had little choice. On the other hand, Vena Remontar thought that it would be a nice little excursion and a chance for us to spend a little time together. Just as I was getting ready to go, my betrothed arrived at the door, with her cousin, the Princess, in tow. It was the first time I had really seen her since our return to the great city, and she was as beautiful as ever. She didn't even look as cold and uncaring as I remembered her. Yet next to Vena Remontar, she was like a portrait of a beautiful woman—a symbol representing what my betrothed really was.

"Look who I brought along," said Vena Remontar.

"Greetings kinsman," said the Princess.

"Greetings," I replied. "You look well, Princess."

"I am well. It feels very good to be home, and I stopped here to say thank you again for everything that you did. You helped my brother return home, set out with the fleet, searched through the Zoasian city and beyond, found me, and returned me to my people."

"Been following my career, have you?"

I was rewarded with a rare smile. "Thank you."

"You are welcome."

"My cousin is a lucky woman."

"I am the lucky one," I said.

The Princess did not go with us to the old district of Amathar, for which I was grateful. I wanted the experience to be just the same as the day that I had first spent with Vena Remontar, the day that I found my soul. Many things were the same. We took the shuttle train to the great station I still call "Grand Central." We had lunch, or dinner, or something, at the small cafe in Kennis Berrontar's park. This time, though I surprised my beautiful companion by ordering doir nyee, which turned out to be quite tasty. We took the sky train across the almost endless stretch of the two thousand mile (twenty five hundred kentad) city. And we finally arrived in the great central plaza, huge and majestic, lined with statues of stone, some as high as forty feet, and surging fountains, tall green hedge rows, and monstrous tile pictures. And two miles away, on the other side of the plaza, sat the great stepped pyramid Temple of Amath.

Almost immediately, we were approached by two of the bald templars, each in long brown robes.

"Greetings Kurar Remiant Alexander Ashton," said the first.

"Greetings Remiant Vena Remontar," said the second. "We will escort you to the temple of Amath, where the Overlord awaits."

We followed the two across the great plaza in silence. I had become comfortable being close to Vena Remontar in silence. We had passed the stage of awkwardness often experienced by a couple early on in their relationship-- that time when saying something, anything, was an imperative. The two bald heads in front of me, both of which exceeded the height of my own by a good four inches managed to make the situation uncomfortable. I felt as if I had to say something, and yet I could picture them whipping out their little plastic notebooks and copying anything I said.

"Alexander Ashton!" I heard from my right. I turned and saw Bentar Hissendar rushing toward me. I recognized his crest, a sun held by a hand, before I recognized his face. It seemed as though it had been an eternity since I had seen him. "Alexander Ashton."

I grasped the Amatharian knight by the hand, and then clasped him in a great hug. "Bentar Hissendar," I said. "It has been forever."

"Indeed it has been a long time for me too," he replied. "I saw you at Tular Maximinos's ceremony, but didn't have time to speak to you. You reported him well."

"What brings you here?" I asked.

He laughed. "That is the kind of question that only you would ask. I am here to visit the Temple and see the monuments."

"Oh,"

"We must be going," said one of the templars.

"The High Templar is waiting," said the other.

"He can wait!" I said, with far more vehemence than I meant. All four of the Amatharians seemed taken aback.

"I was coming to see you soon," said Bentar Hissendar after a moment.

"Oh?"

"My uncle is planning an expedition to the chamber you and Norar Remontar found beneath the Mountains of the Orlons, and I am to command it. I could certainly use the expertise of one who has been there before, and since Norar Remontar is otherwise occupied, I thought that perhaps you would be interested in going along."

"I would be happy to," I said, thinking of the excitement of once again setting off on adventure. "I will begin getting ready."

"There is no rush," replied the smiling Amatharian. "We will not be leaving until after the wedding."

"Wedding?" I wondered.

"Your wedding."

"I wasn't even aware that arrangements had begun in earnest," I said looking at Vena Remontar.

"I know that you are not one for details," she said, touching my cheek with the back of her hand, "so I have made the arrangements."

"I will contact you," promised Bentar Hissendar. "Farewell kinsman."

He hurried off toward some distant building, and we continued on our way to the Temple. Our two escorts didn't look particularly pleased with me, but I didn't care. I knew that I had friends here in Amathar, and didn't really care what the relatively cloistered group thought of me. We walked up the great flight of stairs in the front of the Temple and entered the great hall within. Continuing on, we were led further and further into the great structure. At last we were led into a large room where Oldon Domintus awaited.

"I am here," I said.

"I once promised you that after you had answered our questions," he said, "we would answer yours."

"I remember."

"Most of the answers you seek are here," he handed me a book. I looked at the title. It was, written in Amatharian, "Word of Amath."

"Thank you," I said. I realized that I hadn't seen this book in any of the many bookshelves I had scanned through, though I knew that every Amatharian carried a copy on his person. It seemed strange, but then many of the Amatharians' ways were simply different.

"But there is more," he said. "There is something more for you in there."

He indicated a door behind him.

"Vena Remontar and I will wait here till you have finished."

I walked to the door and pushed it aside, expecting some trap or terrible monster beyond, but there was neither. The door led to a small chamber, with a single chair and a single table. The table was actually more akin to a display case with a glass top. The chair had been arranged at the table/display as if to use it as a desk. I sat down in the chair and looked down through the glass top at the case's contents.

Inside the glass case were three single page documents on ancient parchment. They were obviously old, faded, wrinkled, and yellowed, but still legible. One sheet was written in German. I had seen enough of it in the service to recognize it immediately, even if the grammar and some of the vocabulary weren't identical to English. The second sheet was written in one of the romance languages. I would guess that it was Latin, as it obviously wasn't French or Spanish. It could have been Romanian. The third was in English. Even though I could truly only read one, I was pretty sure that this was the same document written in three different languages. It was a letter. This was the text.

Dear fellow man of Earth,

If you have made it to the point of being presented with this letter, then you have been accepted by the people, and I congratulate you. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a math teacher from Los Angeles, California, Earth. How I arrived here I do not know, but I believe that I am not the only one to make the journey. I believe that others have come before me, and if you are reading this, then you have come after. When I left my home planet it was a cold winter night in December 1939. I have never wanted to return. Though I had my career, I had nothing else there. I had no family and few friends. Here I have found everything that I have ever wanted. These people are my people. You know what a beautiful world this is. You know how wonderful these people are. You know the follies of our old world. Do not let those follies flourish here. Protect this world. Guide these people. Be my legacy. Be good and honorable.

"A math teacher," I mused. "A math... Amath... Amath."

I stood up, pushed in the chair, and exited the small room, sliding the door shut behind me.

Vena Remontar and Oldon Domintus were waiting. I gathered from their body language that had expected me to be much longer. They both looked expectantly at me, waiting for me to say something, but I was still thinking. At last, the High Templar spoke.

"What are you?" he asked.

"I am the legacy of Amath."



## Chapter Thirty Five: Destiny

That was a while ago, probably two months, if you believe in such things. Quite a bit has happened since. I still don't know what it means to be the "Legacy of Amath", but if there is a single Amatharian who is not aware that this is what I am, I would be greatly surprised. Oldon Domintus announced my new title, and by the time I reached my own home, there were several dozen letters wishing me well. So far the only duty that this new station seems to entail is the reading of The Word of Amath, which I have enjoyed. I suspect though that at a later time, this title is going to cost me.

Just after the great revelation, if that is what you call it, of my status in the Temple of Amath, Vena Remontar and I were married. The Amatharian wedding ceremony is quite dissimilar to the one which I had seen just prior to my leaving the earth. I am not all that familiar with ceremonies around the world, so perhaps it would be unfair to say that it was unearthly. It was less like a wedding than a parade. The couple starts out together at the home of the young woman's parents, and walk to their new home. Along the way, friends and well-wishers fall into line and hence the parade effect. I must say, that by the time we reached my new apartment, where Vena Remontar had agreed that we would live, we had a mighty throng of family, friends, and well-wishers following along.

The act of entering our new home was the ceremonial conclusion of the wedding, though we were obliged to send numerous written declarations of our new marital status to our parents, our family elders, the Overlord of the Clan, and the Temple of Amath. It wasn't just because of who were either. Everyone has to do it. But as we walked into our new home together, and I looked into the bright eyes of my new wife, I felt a joy that I had never known before. I was now a part of a family.

"Vena," I said.

"Alexander?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to say your name."

"Why?"

"It seems so strange to say a single name. It seems so intimate, almost taboo."

"It is intimate. And so are we."

I pulled her close to me and touched her face, marveling at the difference between the deep blue of her skin and my own kind of dusky, pinkish, peachy, well, I don't know what. You know. It's the color of those flesh-colored bandages. Anyway, it reminded me that I was the alien. I felt so at home in Amathar, that I had grown used to seeing so many handsome dark blue faces, that I almost surprised myself when I looked in the mirror each morning.

Vena and I settled right in, and it took very little on my part to get used to living in the same home as this marvelous creature. She no doubt had much more of an adjustment to make. It was the best time that I have ever had.

As promised, Bentar Hissendar found us and asked both Vena and me to accompany him on his expedition to the mountains of the Orlons. He had been given command of Sun Battle Cruiser 49, and with all the resources it commanded, as well as the two cruisers which were already at the mountains, it was a small effort to take charge of the ancient underground city and flush out the Kartags and other nasties that had made a home there. I had forgotten how unnerved I had been when Norar Remontar, Malagor, and I had traversed the subterranean passages so long ago, but there is a big difference between feeling your way along a dark passage by yourself, and invading an underground cavern with an entire army and thousands of artificial spot lights.

Of course, establishing the underground Orlon city as a protected base was the easy, and the less interesting part. What Bentar Hissendar was really after was the Chamber of the Elder Gods, that room which had been a holdover from the time that Ecos had been constructed by whatever strange beings had undertaken that enormous task. There was some difficulty in locating the correct passage, but at last the room with the mysterious elevator (or I should say rooms, since it was learned that the elevator opened

onto nine different locations) was found, and a team of Amatharian scientists set to work to examine every artifact. It was hoped that each article would reveal all of its secrets over time, with a great deal of study. This was to be a long term project.

Vena took charge of a company of warriors and busied herself flushing out every last unsavory creature that was to be found. There were literally thousands of Kartags in the lower passages, as well as a few Pell, and hundreds of disgusting predatory and scavenging animals. Once that was done, all of the exits were sealed to prevent re-infestation.

I on the other hand wanted to play the scholar for once in my life and investigate the secrets of Ecos's creators. I was put in charge of a piece of equipment for study. None of the Amatharians could make any sense of what it was, but I knew immediately. It was some sort of transmitter. I didn't know where it transmitted, or to whom, but the controls seemed so intuitive that I marveled that these learned scientists failed to understand it. Of course it was something that they could never have appreciated. No Amatharians would ever have thought of sending his voice to someone a great distance away. The thought was distasteful. Amatharians always dealt face to face or through the written word. I wrote out an extensive report of the device, but none of those who read it was particularly impressed with either my writing skill or the subject.

I decided that I could make use of the mechanism on my own. I took out my journal and rewrote it in English to be transmitted by the new discovery. This was really an exercise for me because I am sure that it will never reach anyone who could read it, and if it does, there is no one who would really care what had happened to me. Everyone who cares about me is here in this strange world. But I'm going to send my story on its way to who knows where anyway. Just a few more sentences, and I will press the transmit button.

I don't know what lies ahead. There is so much of Ecos to explore. I think of all the places that I never went while living on Earth, and then I remember that here in my new world, there is three billion times as much to explore. It boggles the mind. Whatever I choose to do, or wherever I choose to go, I now have somewhere to return. I have my beautiful wife. I have my many friends. I have my duties, my clan, and my city. I am an Amatharian now. That is all I really need. Now, or ever.

THE END



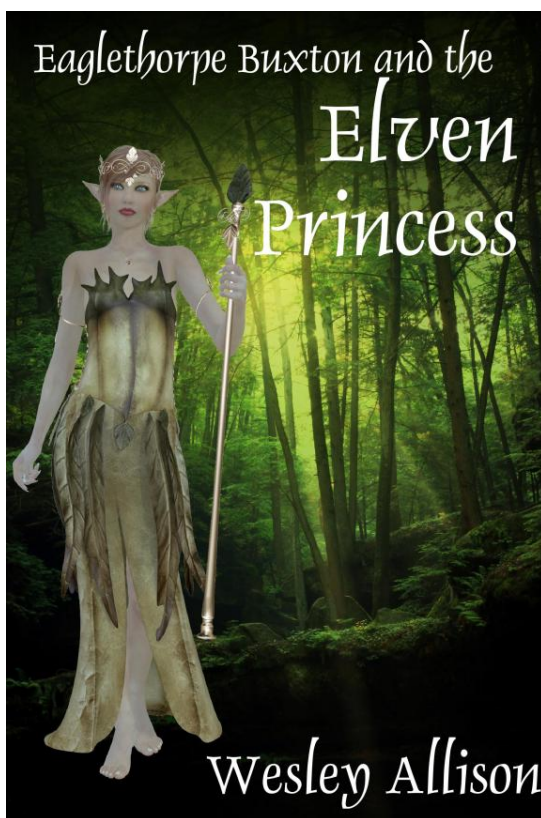
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wesley Allison lives in Henderson, Nevada with his wife Victoria, daughter Rebecca, and his son John. He has taught English and History at B. Mahlon Brown Junior High School for fifteen years. *Princess of Amathar* is his first novel.

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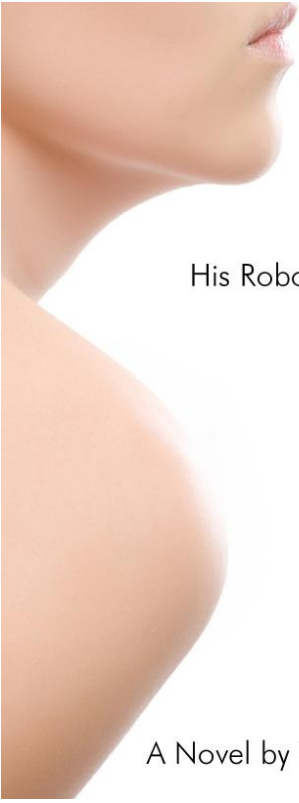
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