

# **ATANZI**

**by Vickey Brickle-Macky**

## **AZANTI--BEGINNINGS**

### **PART ONE--RUMNULSKA**

***Editor's Note: This is lovely science fiction story about a cat-like space-faring race. Most of the teaser/spoiler introduction has been removed, to allow the reader better enjoyment of the story as it unfolds.***

*For over ten thousand centuries, there was the loose-knit Confederation of planets deep in the heart of the galaxy. 700 years ago, a war began the ancient Atanzi and upstart Rumnulska. The Atanzi, a highly civilized leonine-appearing manlike race, had been one of the chief advocates for peace in the Confederation, until the savage Rumnulska lizard-men had been recently admitted. The Rumnulska took exception to the Atanzi in particular, policing them and began a campaign to seize control of all the things the Atanzi held dear. It started with attacks on small ships, then escalated to Confederation-exploring vessels on the borders.*

### **PROLOGUE**

"Asenti! I've got three Daggershops - closing in! ... coming in fast from sector one!" warned the young Atanzi officer

His eyes narrowed to slits of bright gold, as he looked up angrily from his sensor screen to his commander for further orders.

"They're attacking us?" The asenti asked incredulously.

"That does appear to be their intent, sir!" the navigator replied, as shocked as his commander was by the actions of the three ships closing in on them.

"But why? We're on our side of the zone - there is no reason for this attack - none!" roared the Asenti in fury. He cursed at the rapidly closing images of the Rumnulska ships on the wide viewscreen, frustrated that there was nowhere to run to. They were between him and Confederation space, cutting off any hope of retreat. They had him surrounded and outgunned.

"Damn! I wanted no problems from them this trip," he growled.

After evaluating the situation, he turned back to the navigator, "Acknowledged! Go to battle stations! Red Alert!" the Asenti ordered, frustrated that the lizards had pushed him into this situation.

Unconsciously, his split upper lip was curled back in a snarl revealing his prominent fangs. They now gleamed whitely in the red gloom of the emergency lights, which made the bridge appear to be drenched in blood. Somehow, that seemed appropriate now for the situation they faced.

Clawed hands tightly gripped the armrests of his chair, clenching and unclenching nervously. His black silky uniform seemed stuck to him, as the temperature on the bridge rose, making his high forehead bead with sweat. He leaned forward in his chair, quickly scanning the readouts racing across the screen. He frowned over what he saw displayed there.

"Get those shields up and turn us hard right! Evasive action if you want us to keep our hides intact. Tanz F'zasst!" he warned, watching one of the Dagerships break away from the pack and begin to close in on their tail.

He turned sharply around in his chair to question his communications officer, "Has ConFleet or the planet acknowledged our signals?"

"No, Asenti! The Rumnulskan ships are disrupting our signals - and those damn LIZARDS - refuse to answer us!"

"They're firing their weapons, Asenti!" reported the weapons officer. "Should we retaliate?"

"Negative! They have the advantage. I want an evasive course laid in to get us back to Confed space whenever we get an opening through their grid," the Asenti ordered, swearing under his breath. Meanwhile, he tried to maintain a semblance of calm, at least for his crew's sake as he tried to think of a way out of the ship's predicament.

The enemy's blasts on his tail section were causing their shields to collapse in several sections. It would not be long before they were all down. They would not be able to keep running and evading like this for much longer. Fleeing to safe space was no longer an option, he realized.

"Have they given any indication what their demands are, Tanz S'enalk?"

"They want unconditional surrender, sir." The communications officer replied solemnly, as he turned and faced the Asenti. His eyes were dark with the anger the rest of his hairless leonine face did not betray.

The Asenti knew his ship could neither out run them or out gun them. "Reply that we will surrender if they agree not to harm this vessel or its crew," he replied flatly, reining in his emotions. He did not want to surrender - but he had no choice.

But to the bridge personnel of the Atanzi science ship, the T'swaquill, on a survey mission along the edge of the Rumnulska Border, his decision to surrender his ship was startling. They would rather be blown away than be put in Rumnulskan hands. Rumors had made them keenly aware of what the lizardmen did to captured ships and prisoners - especially Atanzi prisoners. Why was their Asenti doing this to them, they wondered?

"Asenti?" the communications officer queried, shock and disbelief written upon his face that his commander would give in. That was the last thing he had ever expected the silver maned commander to do.

"You heard my order, execute it! There is no other alternative," he snapped back angrily, trying to cut off his officer's protest.

"But Asenti - the mission!"

"Tanz S'enalk, you question me too much," the Asenti's voice rose dangerously.

Even though he didn't have to give his communications officer an explanation, he did, so they all would know why he was doing this thing. He faced him with torment-ridden eyes to explain.

"If we can remain alive we can seek escape or be rescued and complete our mission. Our deaths will serve no useful purpose. But alive - we can learn why the Rumnulska want to risk breaking the treaty by attacking a Confederation vessel on this side of the border," he said decidedly, quelling all arguments.

Tanz S'enalk lowered his dark maned head in submission, "Understood, Asenti." Then through his headset came the enemy's terse but gloating reply. He passed it on, commenting, "Our message is being received. The Rumnulska are replying that they accept our terms. An official transmission from their ship is now coming up on the screen."

On the viewer appeared the Rumnulska commander of the squadron. His greenish-gold faintly-scaled

skin gleamed in his bridge's lights. Man-like features jarred with reptilian on his wide face. His large golden slit eyes were lit with triumph and he smiled evilly, purposely displaying a mouth full of double rows of razor sharp teeth, over which his long red tongue flicked nervously. His tunic decorated with tufts of scalp hair, small bones, and polished skulls, made clear how barbaric a savage he was. Across his smooth forehead, he wore the golden headband of command with three diamonds inset that marked him as a horturstraski, no small commander after just honor and glory, but one of their high ranking officers.

His counterpart wore the red-edged loose black tunic and pants of the Confederation. His silver shot dark shaggy mane was confined by a headband of rank like his Rumnulska counterpart, except his displayed four blood rubies.

The Atanzi race was very old. It was respected as the one of the main keepers of the peace, in a sector of space that extended in a pie-shaped wedge from the center to the rim of the galaxy. The Atanzi had been space explorers for over a thousand years, as well as scientists, thinkers, inventors, diplomats, artists, and writers, helping other races achieve stability and peace.

The Rumnulska were one of their failures. They were upshots, destroyers of the peace that held the fifty member races of the Confederation together. The Rumnulska had been in space for less than two hundred years, courtesy of the same Atanzi technology and help which they were not decriing as evil and seemingly spurning. Their ultimate goal was absolute control of the Confederation and the defeat and overthrow of the Atanzi. They had started wars and rebellions in every sector and then had blamed it on the Atanzi, offering convincing evidence to back it up. No one was sure who to believe anymore.

The two captains assessed and evaluated the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the other across their viewing screens. The Asenti had become cool and steely calm as he watched his counterpart surrounded by his all male crew savagely smile at him. The Rumnulska was secure in the knowledge that he now had his prey firmly in his grasp. That made him gloat more.

"Greetings to the Asenti of the Atanzi science ship, T'swaquill, from Horturstraski Hss'ranhi of the Imperial Daggership, Terror's Blood," the commander said with pompous formality. "You were wise not to resist the power of our ship. It was a very wise thing for you to do Atanzi-szzt. You are now prisoners of the Empire. Since you have violated Rumnulska space, you are to be taken in for questioning for your crimes. Prepare to accept a boarding party, Commander Hss'ranhi out."

The viewscreen blanked out and on the bridge of the T'swaquill rose in astonishment at the arrogance in the Rumnulska Commander's words - that lasted for only a microsecond and seething rage set in.

"Tanz S'enalk, did you get all that message?" asked the Asenti, keeping his own anger in check, his voice steady and calm while his brow furrowed in thought.

"Affirmative, Asenti," the officer answered, looking expectantly at his Asenti for further orders.

"Then send it and the ship's log in a message buoy and eject it as they transfer over."

His communications officer solemnly nodded, understanding his intentions.

Seeing that he was understood, the Asenti continued to let his bridge crew know his plans. "If the Confederation does look for us, at least we will have left a record-----providing that the Rumnulska do not discover that such a record exists before we leave this area."

"Their boarding party is transferring over now and the buoy is on its way," the communications officer informed him.

"Good. Now let's see what they really want from us," the Asenti replied. Then he turned from his crew to face the heavily armed Rumnulska soldiers now entering at a run to secure the bridge for themselves.

Golden sunlight pounded hotly down upon the heavy jungle foliage outside the tall windows of ConFleet Staff Headquarters on the home planet Atanza. It filtered warmly through the shades to fall on the back of the lone Atanzi male wearing nothing but a black silky robe, who sat before a common screen in the large, almost empty room.

Admi Asenti Ky'tulendu ha'fynna Trinox, commander of the heavy dutri-cruiser, L'wassen, the Sky Prowler, grimly read over the reports on Rumnulska atrocities. They were growing. So were attacks on Confederation vessels in all sectors. No one appeared to be immune from them. However, it did appear by the stats he was looking at, that most of the attacks were against Atanzi vessels and crews. Those seemed to be more frequent and more vicious.

The Rumnulska had over the last hundred years developed a particular dislike towards their Atanzi benefactors. They knew the Atanzi would not retaliate, and would keep the peace even to the cost of their own lives. But many of the younger officers were overthrowing this in-bred reluctance to fight and were demanding heavier weapons to defend themselves. He was one of them.

ConFleet did not see how it was being used until after the Rumnulska had gained the ability to escape the confines of their own planetary cluster. So far, they had not violated the terms of their treaty with the Confederation, but it had been close, very close. These reptilian barbarians were pushing his people to react in violent ways and revert back to their bestial natures.

He thought the Rumnulska to be almost as bad as the simian manlike races they had started to encounter among the edge worlds. His people had found them to be somewhat violent and aggressive, but they did seem to have the potential to be peaceful and productive members of the Confederation, with training and education.

Ky'tulendu prayed that the crew of the T'swaquill was safe. His young cousin, K'tull, was serving on it as a navigator trainee. He didn't wish to have to bring bad news home to his family. They had lost too many members of it in recent years.

In four hours, he would depart the homeworld with a crew of four hundred and forty-four. Of those numbers three-quarters of the crew was Atanzi while the rest were composed of scientific representatives from the member worlds of the Confederation. Most were specialists in many fields, on board to carry on experiments and collect data essential to the primary exploratory mission of the ship.

ConFleet had ordered his ship to investigate the disappearance of the L'okkca-based science ship the T'swaquill. The ship had been due to arrive at the planet Korzanna two weeks ago to deliver supplies to the colonists there, before the ship continued on its deep space mapping mission. The last known position of the missing vessel had put it near the Rumnulskan border. No transmission had been received from that area in almost three weeks now.

He had a feeling this mission was not going to go as ConFleet wanted it to. He kept having premonitions that he would never see the green jungle planet again. His dreamtime for the last few weeks had been filled with strange landscapes and even stranger people, with visions of himself growing older among them. He had not had dreams like these before, nor seen any landscapes that he recognized, but the dreams were persistent and vivid.

Their vividness promoted him to take new precautions and make unusual preparations for this voyage. Ky'tulendu ordered extra supplies and non-standard equipment put on board - much of it in the way of survival gear, non-powered hand tools, medical equipment, and raw materials. On his orders, he had the ship's library computers uploaded with ancient survival and living manuals.

He believed in following his hunches and inner promptings. They had kept his crew and ship safe many a time. He has also armed them more heavily than usual, despite the treaty and without

ConFleet's knowledge. He believed in being prepared for the worse, peace be damned.

His alarm on my clock went off, reminding him that it was time to check in for final boarding. He turned off the commcon and sighed as he got up from his desk. He was depressed about the reports and about leaving the home world. His time here always seemed too short, in some ways, and too long in others.

He had spent more time in space than on a planet since he had gotten his commission. Most of his personal belongings were still on board his ship. Only those things that didn't really matter were left here in this suite of rooms that ConFleet had kept reserved for him. This planet, like so many others, was just a stopping over point. He had no true home, no place he really belonged, nor anyone to make him want to stay put somewhere.

Ky'tulendu had devoted his life to serving the Confederation, as many in his family had. He had no close ties to anyone, nor did he want any, at least that's what he kept telling himself. He hadn't had too many females in his life, and none of them could keep his interest for very long, or win a place in his heart. He had begun to surmise that either he was immune to them, or the right one just hadn't come along.

Grudgingly, he had to admit that there really wasn't any room in his life for anyone. His career and his ship came first and always would, as long as he was able to stay in the service, and that was going to be a long time.

He quit his mental meandering. It was only making him more depressed. Undressing, he threw his heavy black robe on the bed. He lazily stretched before the full length mirror on the bathroom door and looked critically at himself, wondering where the years had gone. In the shiny reflection Ky'tulendu saw a mature, but still young male, looking back at him, with few scars to show for some of the fights he had gotten into. Too hot a temper at times, he chided himself.

He was tall, almost six foot four with a heavily-muscled body that was sparsely covered with short, silky, reddish-gold hair, except on his chest and forearms. His face was long with a squared chin, high cheekbones, and deepest slanted blue eyes, under high arched reddish-gold eyebrows. His feline muzzle was not as pronounced as most. His facial fur was just a faint dusting on his chin, and on the bridge of his wide nose. It was a handsome face, framed by a long mane of red-gold hair that swept back from his high forehead. His hair was one of his vanities, so he wore it longer than fleet standards allowed.

He took his shower and dressed in his black high-necked work uniform, with its knee-high boots, and a red leather weapons belt with clip-on stunner and communicator. His insignias of rank were arrayed in a circle on the upper right side of his tunic. He tied the black ranking band, with its three circles of red denoting his captaincy, behind his head and adjusted it so it went across his high forehead and kept his hair in place.

After he was dressed he packed his few remaining personal items, and tidied up. With his bags packed he was finished and it was time to go. Ky'tulendu picked up his bags and took one long look around checking to see if he had forgotten anything and left. The automatic controls in the room shut the lights off in the now empty room and the only thing that remained was silence.

### 3

The Azanti cruiser, L'wassen, left the edges of Confederation space following the original flight plan of the missing ship, the T'swaquill. Ky'tulendu hoped that by using his ship as bait, they could lure the Rumnulska out of hiding.

While they walked, they charted this still unknown sector of space, looking for a planetary system that had been overlooked in previous mappings. Their long range scanners did pick up some energy and magnetic disturbances within the confines of Rumnulska space, but the readings were indefinite and not worth investigating, so they continued on.

The ship maintained a green alert as they kept on the lookout for Rumnulsakan Daggershops to appear. For four long months the ship wandered and leisurely mapped the sector, hoping that its prolonged presence would draw attention to it. At the end of that time, ConFleet Control wanted it to scrap the mission, but the L'wassen insisted that it wanted to see the mission through. Control reluctantly agreed on one condition - if nothing had happened by the end of another month, then the mission was to be aborted, and the ship reassigned.

The Confederation High Council would have to accept that ConFleet had done everything it could at this time and declare the missing Atanzi crew as dead. Ky'tulendu did not want that, or to give up the mission.

They were nearing the end of the final month when they detected the remains of a ship in orbit around a habitable planetoid in the T-5s sector near the Rumnulska border. The sensors on the science officer's board were the first to pick up the ID signals. The blonde-haired Atanzi squinted at the readings, disbelief and then relief washed over her kitten-like face. The ship had been found before the deadline.

"Sensors picking up a light cruiser. It's ID echoes match that of the T'swaquill." Tanz D'jinse, the science officer reported with satisfaction as she looked up from her monitors.

"Positive ID?" the Asenti asked hopefully, swinging around in his seat to face the young officer.

"Yes, sir. There's no doubt. But life support and all systems are shut down. The orbit is in a crucial decay. I estimate that the ship will hit the atmosphere in six hours, unless power can be restored. Further, there are no life signs on the ship, nor do I register any bodies on board."

Ky'tulendu considered the possibilities. There were few. "Any life signs on the planet?" he asked wondering what had happened to the crew.

"Negative, sir. I register only low evolutionary forms, scale four types or lower, nothing higher," she replied frustrated, knowing the Asenti was too.

He nodded sympathetically as he sat back in his chair, stroking his chin as he pondered what could have happened to the crew.

"Tanz, continue to maintain wide field scans of the area. Has the ship's record buoy been recovered yet?" he asked.

"No, not yet. But from the condition of the ship, it appears taht the ship was brought here and abandoned, possibly with tractor beams. The crew were probably taken off before that happened, and transported elsewhere."

The Asenti decided to send a team over to gather data directly from the ship's logs. There might be clues in the automatic recorders and memory banks as to where and possibly why the crew of the T'swaquill had been taken.

He turned to his first officer, Sen Commd Vokolin, an older Tranril female. Her long white-striped tail was wrapped around her waist twitching nervously while her golden cats' eyes regarded him seriously as she awaited his order.

"Vokolin, I want a team assembled to go over to the ship in ten units. In particular I want a data revival specialist to tap into the automatics, pulling both interior and exterior scans, as well as event records. I will be going over myself to retrieve command logs and make an assessment as to the deposition of the ship. You're in charge," Ky'tulendu ordered getting up to let her take over the center chair.

"Understood, sirss. I will have a team awaiting you in the transport three ready room," she acknowledged, as she took the seat and settled in more cat than human fashion while getting comfortable.

The Asenti left the bridge and walked to the nearby transporter station. There were six of the stations

on board put near strategic location: the bridge, medical, engineering, science labs, ships supplies, and the military corps areas. The stations could transport up to ten persons at a time, or up to several tons of cargo.

Four officers awaited him in the room, Tanz Commd T'krissn, communications, Tanz W'rett, data specialties, MS B'tunku, medical, and Srt T'menton, security. They had all donned self-contained environmental suits, which covered them from head to foot, and field packs. They stood ready waiting for him to don his. Which he rapidly did.

"Ready Asenti?" B'tunku asked, picking up her medkit from the floor of the chamber. Only her silver colored eyes could be seen through the helmet of her suit, as she watched him make final adjustments on his.

"I believe so. Take your places," he told them and they arranged themselves on the transporter platform, then he nodded to the waiting technician. "Transport!" They were bathed in rainbow lights and when it stopped they were on the bridge of the T'swaquill.

The bridge was empty, and most on board systems were shut down either from the bridge or from engineering - but by whom? The crew or their captors? The doctor ran her scanner and reported that no life forms remained on board. At least the ship was not littered with dead bodies, always a possibility, due to the limitations of the ship's sensors in sensing for live versus dead lifeforms.

"T'krisan, W'rett, begin data removal from memory banks. I want everything uploaded from the sensors and logs - all departments. I'm going to the commander's quarters to retrieve his logs and ConFleet orders. Doctor, you check the medical logs. And T'menton run checks on the transporters, stores, and personnel," Asenti Ky'tulendu ordered, assigning them their tasks.

They were basically stripping the ship of its data banks. They had to. They couldn't have a prize like this with all its information on the Confederation and ConFleet to be picked up by the Rumnulska or any other race.

That the Rumnulska hadn't done so already was remarkable. And why had they not destroyed the ship, or taken it with them to salvage out the weapons and parts? Normally, after a ship was stripped of its data and usable parts, the standing orders by the Rumnulska as well as by ConFleet were for the ship to be destroyed. Why had this not been done?

Those were questions that Ky'tulendu wanted answers to. He just hoped he wouldn't get the ones that were going through his suspicious mind. He wanted them all to be on the lookout for booby-traps. It was all too clean and normal appearing for his taste. What were the lizards up to, he wondered. What indeed?

The layout of the ship was similar to his own, though his was larger and carried a larger crew. He had no problem finding the commander's quarters. The personal code he had memorized opened the door easily and he stepped into the spartan cabin. There were few personal mementos, either the Asenti had not had any, or he had time to leave with some, but somehow that didn't seem right either.

He keyed the computer console and began the job of retrieving the former Asenti's personal logs. As they came on screen, he locked them away in his recorder, paying scant attention to their contents until he could view them in private. He could have retrieved them from the bridge, but there was too much that was classified ConFleet business and none of the personnel that had beamed over had the concomitant status for viewing the files he now locked away.

He slowed his retrieval down to scan more closely the last entries into the system. The most recent ones gave him a clearer picture of what had happened in space and on board in selected areas, but he wouldn't know the full picture until all the data was in.

The Rumnulska attack on the ship and the choice the Asenti had to make between capture or destruction, was one that every ConFleet officer had to struggle with if the situation arose. And this Asenti had valued life over death for his crew. Ky'tulendu doubted whether he could have made the

same choices himself.

Wherever the Rumnulska had taken the crew of the T'swaquill, it was not to the planet below. Most likely they had been forced to go into their Empire - but for what purpose? If they had wanted information they could have gotten it from the ship. If they wanted the crew dead - they had had the chance. No, the crew had been taken for a definite reason, one he was not sure that he liked the answers to.

Unfortunately, the Asenti of the abandoned cruiser had not been informed where his people were being taken to. With luck the automatic sensors should have recorded the Rumnulska ships' departure, so that they would be able to determine their possible trajectory.

It was even possible that they might be able to negotiate for, or free the captives, if they knew where they were, but he was not going to attempt a rescue without armed backup, unless directly ordered by ConFleet. He had no desire to share the T'swaquill's fate. A fool, he was not.

When his recorder had drained the files of their data, he shut both machines off. Then he sat back in the Asenti's chair and thought over what he had viewed.

The best he could determine was that it had all been a routine mapping and exploring mission until the Rumnulska had showed up. This was not going to set well with the Council. Diplomatic ties were already strained and this might well be the incident that pushed some members to declare war on the Rumnulskan Empire. He didn't want to think in those terms, but given what he had read in the ConFleet dispatches, war might be closer than he thought.

He left the cabin deep in thought and almost ran over the doctor, as she stepped out of one of the crew cabins.

"Asenti, you startled me," she said leaning against the doorway as she stood gasping for breath from fright.

He offered her his hand, which she took gratefully. "I did not mean to scare you. I was not aware that you were down here," he apologized.

"There was some last minute data I had to retrieve that the main medcom computers couldn't pull. So I had to come down and do it manually from the science officer's cabin," she said explaining her presence on this level.

"Important?" he queried, too preoccupied to detect any falseness in her statement.

"Yes, it could be. The report had to do with a planetary survey they did in the T-9-L section."

"T-9-L? Isn't that rather far inside Rumnulskan territory for one of our ships to be?"

"Yes, sir, it was. Seems that they ran into a magnetic storm that fouled their sensors and the navigational computers. The storm blew them off course with its gravitational fields and they ended up in a small class Y star system. While they were there, they did a survey," he could tell she was hesitating.

"Go on," he demanded.

"It's inhabited, or at least two of its ten planets are. On both planets there have manlike, possibly simian types. Planet four seems to be more evolved culturally and intellectually than planet three. However, it's in the midst of a planet wide drought, due to a shifting of its orbit and shrinkage of its polar caps. However, planet three is a very lush planet similar to the homeworld, but smaller with a wider range of animal life and climatic zones."

"Do you think the Rumnulska are aware of this system?" he asked, his curiosity aroused.

"It doesn't appear that way. The T'swaquill detected no evidence that the Rumnulska had visited this system, or that they were aware of its existence. As soon as the ship had completed its primary survey it left and headed back for Confederation territory. They encountered no patrol in that sector,



so it is safe to assume that their visit was not noticed," the doctor replied.

"Then if their intrusion across the border wasn't noticed, then something else must have sparked the attack on this ship. When you get back on board, add that system's coordinates into our navigational log, and add the file to life sciences for later retrieval. Have you finished here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. That was the last. All data uploaded to the L'wassen."

"Good. I'm going to check on the others, you can join me or beam back to the ship," he offered, heading for the lifts.

"I'll join you if you don't mind. It's kind of eerie seeing nothing but empty corridors, when you're used to people," she added, falling in step with him.

His only comment was a brief nod of his helmet as they lifted up to the main bridge. It appeared that the techs were finishing up their jobs as he came on deck. They had a number of recorder data cartridges at their feet. The separate cartridges held information from the different systems, so they could be entered in his ship's computers to read.

"Everyone finished here?" the Asenti asked, walking to the center seat out of habit.

"All finished, sir. We'll be able to track the Rumnulskan Daggershops that took the crew. The flag ship left a clear trail." Srt T'menton from security replied positively.

"Oh?" Ky'tulendu inquired curiously, encouraging him to go on.

"Seems the Asenti here marked her with a stanz receiver, without the Daggershops's commander knowing it when the ship left. The on-board tracking had been monitoring her and we've got the codes to switch the tracking for our ship."

"Good, very good," Ky'tulendu said pleased. "If we're through her with our mission, we'll go back."

The group assembled and the Asenti spoke the transport orders into his communicator. "Five to transfer back."

The transporter took them and they went back in the bridge transporter station. The group stripped off their suits and put them back in storage then straightened their uniforms.

"W'rett and T'krisen, I want the analysis of the T'swaquill's data in thirty units." Ky'tulendu ordered when they took their data cartridges to the waiting techs while he kept his to look at in his office.

The two Tanzs acknowledged their Asenti's orders and went off to their stations.

The doctor hung back a little, waiting for the captain, after security had left following the techs.

"Asenti, a word with you in private?" she asked.

Ky'tulendu had had little interaction with the new ship's doctor, who seemed to be a fairly competent worker, even though this was her first ship's assignment. B'tunku was silver-haired, he noted, as he really looked at her for the first time, with matching large silver eyes. She was tall and sensuously graceful, with a beautiful triangular shaped face. Her eyes revealed immense strength along with a great sadness and wisdom in their mirror depths.

"If you wish - my briefing room or your office?" he inquired politely, trying to keep this as official as he could.

"Your briefing room is closer than my office and it won't take too long," she said. Her soft voice did not reveal anything, but she was looking far too serious for his liking. She made him nervous. He did not like to be nervous.

#### 4

B'tunku walked in front of him, and he couldn't help but notice how well her silky white uniform clung to the curves of her body. That wasn't something he normally paid attention to. Romance in the

command ranks only led to trouble and that was something he didn't need this trip. He mentally chastised himself to view her only as a fellow officer - what a waste - but necessary for stability aboard his ship.

She did have his curiosity aroused. "Can you give me a clue as to what it is you wish to discuss?" he asked, letting her go into his briefing room first.

The doctor got down to business the minute they were inside the quiet, comfortable, private room. Although she stood at ease, she was tense and nervous. She really didn't want to do this, but it was something that she must. He hoped he wasn't making her more nervous, but her voice was calm as she began.

"I don't mean to be mysterious, Asenti, so I'll get to the point. It involves the nature of our current situation with the Rumnulska. My Father was a diplomat assigned to Rumnul, so I grew up with a good understanding of the Rumnulska."

"So, what is your question?" he asked, not sure where she was going with this.

She looked at him seriously, and tried to phrase her question carefully. "How are you going to report this incident to ConFleet and the Council?"

He was taken by surprise on that. "Excuse me?" he sputtered, then his eyes narrowed with anger.

"Doesn't that fall under the heading of a command decision?" he asked in a deadly voice.

She hung her head for a moment knowing that she had overstepped her bounds. She tried again to make clear what she wanted him to know.

"Yes, sir, it does. However, if you report this incident truthfully at this point, it will cause an upheaval in the council that will put us on the verge, if not push us into actual war with the Rumnulska. Which is precisely what they want - an excuse to make war on the Atanzi, break up the Confederation, so that their Empire can come in to pick up the pieces."

Her assessment of the problem was right on the mark. He had been struggling with what to say to ConFleet, ever since he had left the Asenti's cabin. Personally, he was holding out on not saying anything until he had a better grasp of what had happened to the T'swaquill, but regulations and duty required him to report something soon.

He looked at her from under lowered brows. "You see the problem very clearly, Doctor. It is a delicate dilemma, where one must struggle between conscience and duty - and if one does what duty dictates, then one has to live with the consequences of the ripple effect that the report will cause."

She nodded, encouraging him to go on.

He continued, "I keep asking myself if I do report, as I must - will I be the cause of more, or less lives lost if this report encourages the council to declare war? Can I live with the knowledge that my words might send hundreds of thousands, or even hundreds of billions of beings to their deaths?" he asked rhetorically.

Moving away from her he sat down heavily in his chair at his desk. He mentioned her to do the same.

"Frankly, I don't want that on my conscience," he admitted to her, waiting for her to make the next move.

She remained standing, her hands clasped behind her as she kept her military pose, and kept her distance. However, her expression had softened, and he could tell she agreed with his reasoning.

"That is the difficulty. You're damned if you do, and damned if you don't. But the truth of the matter, is that the Rumnulska have been planning this for years. They want an excuse to invade the Confederation and take over selected planets," she told him.

"You know this for a fact?" he asked unnerved by her certainty.

"Yes, my family and I lived on their home planet for many years. My father was privy to certain state secrets, and had gained access to their overall war plans. He died sending that information on to the council. I'm sure the Rumnulska have modified their original designs, but I doubt if they have called it off," she explained, with an odd, bittersharp edge to her words.

Her silver eyes held a haunted look, as if she were seeing something beyond the limits of the room. Then it was gone and she eyed him intently waiting for his response.

He nodded agreeing with her. "No, I doubt if they have either. This incident seems to be too well planned to provoke a response from us. I don't think this will be the last of similar incidents all along this border, if war is their final goal."

"Which it is. Economically, socially, and politically they want this - need - have to do this. If it weren't us, they would find someone else to start a war with. Their survival as a race depends upon their declaring war against the Confederation and expanding into our territories. So what will you do?" the Doctor asked, regarding him somberly.

"Delay my report to ConFleet as long as I can, unless I get information that necessitates my reporting earlier," Ky'tulendu replied, stroking his chin as he studied her reactions.

"I do not want to go down in history as the Asenti who started a war between the Confederation and the Empire because he did not have all the facts. Nor do I want to see all the innocents who know nothing but peace get slaughtered by these animals. There must be a way for this never to begin."

"It's too late. I don't believe that the events that have been put into play can be stopped, but I admire your caution and your conscience," she said, upping her estimation of him.

He nodded. "Thank you. I do try to see the wider view when so much is at stake. Peace has always been a fragile thing. I have devoted my whole life to preserving it, but peace is forged by two parties that agree and are willing to make compromises for the benefit of both. It's a shame that the Rumnulska cannot see what they are going to be giving up. All they had to do was ask, and whatever problem they had could have been dealt with and solutions found."

"That is the problem - the Rumnulska do not think as we, or any other member of the Confederation do. We are weaklings in their eyes because we value peace and goodwill. They only admire brute force and seeing how cunning they can be. We have lost the savage mind set that they still possess. If you want more insight to the Rumnulska you might look at my father's report in the ConFleet Archives. it's File #256745 Lry'yrenn. Then you will know the depths to which these beings are capable of sinking to," she suggested.

He raised his eyebrow at the name and looked at her sharply. "Your father was Ambass Lry'yrenn of Gosslunn?" he asked incredulously. "I remember his murder almost caused a breakdown of diplomatic relations between the Rumnulskan Empire and the Confederation."

"Yes, I was there. I was eight when we were ambushed on the way to the shuttle. They started shooting and my father covered me with his body, so that I might live. I got the report smuggled out under my clothes. Yes, I know the Rumnulska - very well," she said grimly, looking away to sights only she could see.

Whenever she talked about it, all she could see was the blood - everywhere. There was a flash of her father's face, strong and proud in the search lights, as the beams caught him before the soldiers took him down with their lasers and their bullets. Feeling herself hit the rough surface of the concrete hard. His dead body falling on top of her - feeling like she couldn't breathe from the weight of him and from the fear.

She had not been frightened of death, or of dying, but of being alone. That thunderbolt realization, that all life and love were gone now, forever, had shaken her to her very core and that state of existence for her, was more terrible than any death she might have imagined.

With a supreme act of will, she made the images go away and forced herself to come back to the present, and became aware of the intense scrutiny that the Azanti officer was giving her. Had he seen her barriers drop, seen her naked fears, read what needs she kept carefully hidden deep beneath the surface of her mind? She wondered how much he had seen displayed upon her naked soul? B'tunku vowed she would not be so careless again.

He sensed her uneasiness and understood its cause because he bore similar pains and fears of being alone, or of allowing another to get close.

"I'm sorry to bring up old memories," he apologized respectfully. His words seemed to calm down the trapped animal look he saw in her wary eyes.

"I will read the file. In this current situation, we need to know all that we can. Doctor, would you be adverse to my asking your help, if we have further confrontations with the Empire forces?"

She shifted nervously as she considered it. "Only as an advisor from behind the scenes. I have too many enemies in the Empire that know who I am, and fear what I may know. If it were known I was on board here, you could become a target," she warned him.

"I see," he said, not liking the idea of his ship being a target. "But you were a child then. What you know could not possibly hunt them now?" he questioned.

"I saw their long range plans. I know who controls who, and I can identify individuals that threaten their Empire from within ... and from without..."

"Does ConFleet know this?" he asked, wondering if he had taken a time bomb on his ship.

"Only on the upper levels. I asked for this assignment to get away from my past. I even changed my name and my looks, so I would no longer have my past threatening me. At least as MS'B'tunku, I no longer have to look over my shoulder with every step I take," she said, hoping he would keep her secret.

"Doctor, I will not let what has been said between us leave this room, I promise. In the meantime, we both have duties we need to attend to," he added, judging that the reports from the T'swaquill should be finished by now.

Hearing the dismissal in his voice, she rose from her chair and got up. "Thank you, Asenti, for your time."

"Anytime, Doctor," he told her, not rising from his desk as he watched her leave. Then the door hissed shut behind her.

She had given him a lot to think about. She was indeed a hidden asset, one he might well need. He stared at the closed door for many long minutes, until the insistent beep-beep of his commcon brought his attention back to the reports he needed to look over. Squaring his shoulders, he flipped on the comm switch and answered the signal.

## 5

Ky'tulendu flipped the switch on the commcon and Tanz W'rett's image appeared on the screen. The tall, thin, brown-maned officer was on the bridge at his station. He looked grim, very grim.

"Asenti, the reports are ready. I've scanned them, but there are a few you better see for yourself," he advised in a tight voice.

"The boarding party records?"

"Yes, sir. I would advise that the crew be denied access to the reports," he suggested tactfully.

"That bad?" Ky'tulendu asked. A cold chill went up his spine in anticipation, or dread of what the report might possibly contain. Unfortunately, he had to view it no matter how bad or disturbing it might be.

"Yes sir," he replied truthfully. Unconsciously, his lip curled back in distaste showing his prominent fangs, even as he strove to keep his demeanor calm. He took a large breath and went on with his report like a good officer.

"You will be pleased to know that the stanz receiver is still functioning. Seems the ship is heading towards the Lebber cluster. There is a heavy elements mining facility there. The Rumnulska will probably put the bulk of the crew of the T'swaquill to work there. However, they will probably ship the techs and specs to other worlds in that sector," the data specialist relayed.

"Thank you, Tanz W'rett, good work. I will look over the reports and inform the senior staff we will have a briefing in my office in two units letts," Ky'tulendu replied. "Go give yourself a break. You need it." he added, seeing the young Azanti acknowledge command gratefully.

"Very good, sir. Tanz W'rett out," and his image blanked off the screen, only to be replaced by the first of the reports.

Ky'tulendu got up for a moment and went over and got himself a hot cup of klass, then settled himself in to read the reports and watch the visuals from the selected areas.

Everything about the T'swaquill's mission had been routine, up until they had been swept off course by the magnetic storm and thrust into Rumnulska space. Even their finding and mapping of a lone yellow star system had been routine.

They had done orbital scans of the planets, sent in some probes, and avoided contact with the natives on both planets. The third planet was at a more primitive level of development. No industrialization, just towns and trading in the more urbanized areas, farming and hunting in the rural ones. There was no centralized planetary culture organization. Just many separate groups who would occasionally cooperate and work together.

Mainly, the peoples of this planet seemed to constantly fight one another because of differences in their religion, politics, skin color, or over the occupation of certain territories or lands. He just shook his head over the considerable amount of intolerance these peoples had against their fellows.

When he had time, he would like to study these reports more closely. Primitive worlds like this always interested him. ConFleet regulations basically forbid him from interfering in such developing societies, but there was much that could be learned by just observation.

Planet four was higher on the evolutionary scale. In many ways its dominant, planetary-wide culture seemed as old, ancient, and dying as was its world. It was losing its water and its vegetation to drought and evaporation because of decomposition of its ozone layer. None of the measures its people tried seemed to help. Here was a world they could intervene in and help, if they could get ConFleet's approval once the T'swaquill's mission was completed.

The T'swaquill's report from the scanners showed that they had been attacked without provocation, as they went about the cross back over the Rumnulskan borders. Three Dagerships in formation had appeared out of nowhere and started firing on them without warning. They had suffered some secondary hull damage near the engines and bridge sections from the repeated attacks. The smaller ship had not retaliated, for fear of more severe reprisals. Then the commander of the squadron had ordered a halt, requesting their surrender when he saw that they were not going to fight. The Asenti had little choice but to comply.

He had sent a message buoy off as the Talon soldiers were transporting over, but he feared one of the Dagerships had detected it. Ky'tulendu agreed because his ship had not found any traces of the buoy on the way here.

The crew had been forced at laser points to transport over to the Rumnulskan ships. He watched the visuals of the crew's capture grimly, trying to control his rising temper over the rough treatment, and violence that was being shown the Azanti females, in particular, by the burly leering Rumnulskan guards. One female was actually raped before his unbelieving eyes.

The Azanti waiting for transport could do nothing but watch because of the guns trained on them. Their faces were as tormented as he knew his must be. He felt the helpless fury rise in his, while a very young female was slowly tortured and the rough scaled Rumnulska soldiers rubbed themselves across her bleeding body and exposed themselves to the watchers.

One young male officer tried to stop the Rumnulska, but he was literally cut in half as he leaped across the space that separated him from the guard. As the young officer lay dying, the Rumnulska did vile things to the Azanti's private parts while they laughed and smeared the dead male's blood over the young female's screaming face.

It was with great horror, that he recognized his cousin as the object of the lizard's abominations. He couldn't quite make it to the necessary room because he began to gag and throw up as he ran to it.

He barely made it into the room. Ky'tulendu's claws scraped across the metal surface of the toilet bowl rim as he gripped it to keep from collapsing on the floor. He was white and shaking when he quit his dry heaving and he sank heavily to the floor, no longer able to stand on legs suddenly unable to support his weight.

His commcon was beeping incessantly, but he ignored it. All he wanted right now was to be left alone, to get his grief-raked mind under control as well as his body. He was not succeeding at all, as the tears gushed down his face. He, Ky'tulendu, the iron-willed Atanzi that never cried, now blubbered like a child upon his own bathroom floor.

"Asenti? Asenti? Are you all right? Answer me - please!" B'tunku's raised voice could be plainly heard through the closed door. She banged loudly with her fist when she didn't get any immediate response from him.

He growled low in his throat - animal-like - out of reaction to being disturbed, but then he caught himself. It would not do for anyone to see him this way. Fighting his emotional pain, he pulled himself together enough to answer her, so she would stop that pounding. He could hear security out there as well. No one needed to see him in this shape - bad for morale, he thought and then laughed disgustedly to himself.

"Yes - I'm fine," he managed to say at last. "Go away! I do not require assistance, Doctor," he added with more authority than he thought he could muster.

"Asenti, as chief medical officer, I order you to let me in. If you don't - I will have security let me in!" she demanded, standing her ground, and looking back at the two questioning security guards waiting behind her.

It was a losing battle and he knew it. "Give me a moment, and send security away," he ordered.

Raising himself up on shaky legs, he stood and straightened his uniform. Then he went to the sink and he dashed cold water over his face, ignoring the haggard face in the mirror that looked back with pain-filled eyes. After drying his face off he opened the door.

"They're gone," B'tunku assured him.

He appreciated that she had sent security away - there was going to be enough gossip as it was over his collapse.

"Tanz W'rett was concerned when he couldn't reach you on the commcon. Vokolin tried next, then sent for security. When they heard you throwing up they called me," she said explaining her presence in his office.

"I'm sorry you were called for nothing, Doctor. As you can see I am perfectly all right," he lied.

She shot him a disgusted look. "That's a tzzt, Asenti! You look like hell and if the door frame wasn't holding you up, you'd be on the floor. Get over to that chair and sit down. You're too damn big to carry," she ordered him, but she hung on to one of his arms to support and guide him to his chair

where he collapsed on it.

He looked up at her with pain, mixed with an acute case of embarrassment and anger at his own weakness and helplessness.

"You can go now," he ordered.

"No - not until you tell me what happened! And not until I'm sure you're going to be all right. Right now you're sick and I'm not leaving," she said, planting herself stubbornly in front of his chair.

He growled warningly in his throat, then depression took over and he sighed disgustedly, and sunk deeper into the chair, looking up at her with red-rimmed blue eyes.

"You have a hell of a bedside manner, Doctor," he commented wearily.

"I've been told that, but you're evading my question, Asenti. Why did you get sick?" she asked again.

There was no way to get out of telling her, so he gave in and began to relay the horrors he had seen. "I saw my young cousin die - it was horrible! I reacted. I've seen death ... many times ... but the way he died..." Ky'tulendu's appalled voice trailed off as he saw the scene flash across his mind's eye.

"How did he die?" she asked gently, squatting down by his chair resting a hand on his.

"My cousin was on the T'swaquill. They cut him in half with a laser when he tried to stop them from raping one of the female officers. Then those - ...THEY... RAPED... HIM!" he sputtered, choking back the words as well as the tears, burying his head in his hands as the enormity of the terrible act hit home.

"Why did they do that, Doctor? Why?" he asked repeatedly, not understanding how supposedly intelligent beings could do that to one another. His voice was muffled as he kept his face buried, the hot tears falling heavily upon the red carpeted floor.

"I don't know," she replied truthfully, not sure what she could say to ease the pain.

His head snapped up at her unusable answer and he directed his anger at her for failing him.

"Why don't you know? You're supposed to be the Rumnulska expert, or so you say!" he snarled and she flinched back.

"I want answers - I want to know WHY that boy died! There has to be a reason!" he shouted. His powerful right hand snaked out and grabbed her arm and held it like a vise. He drew her closer so that she could feel his full pain and fury.

Her silver eyes grew wide with fright in fear she answered him crying out. "They don't reason - they just KILL!"

"NO!" he protested, his claws digging painfully into her arm. "There has to be a real reason!" he demanded of her.

She struggled trying to get away, she was getting very frightened of him, but she could not fight against his strength.

"Asenti, LET ME GO!" she yelled, begging him to release her.

"NO! Not until you tell me why - give me reasons - Please...," he now begged her, desperately seeking some kind of solace. Realizing what he was doing, he relaxed the iron grip on her arm calming down. He knew full well, nothing she could say would right the situation, but he could not let her go until she answered him.

In desperation, she tried telling him. "They don't justify what they do - they just kill because they enjoy killing for killing's sake - they want to make others suffer - they enjoy it!"

"No beings do that - only animals!"

"They are not like us - they do not care - even for the welfare of their own. They have no true feelings

or compassion. We and every other being in this galaxy mean nothing to them! I've told you all I can - please Asenti - release me," B'tunku begged him again, coming close to tears.

She had to reason with him, get him to hear her. "Asenti - Ky'tulendu - anger will not help you! I am not your enemy - the Rumnulska are! Hurting me will not bring back your cousin. Listen to me - please - you must let me go!" she demanded, trying to remain calm. Anger and fear only seemed to increase her danger.

It was as if a switch had been thrown. Sanity returned to his eyes and he relaxed - then realized what he had been doing.

Instantly, he let go of her, ashamed and embarrassed at his behavior. He lowered his eyes in shame.

"I'm sorry, Doctor ... I apologize. I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked, worried that he had.

She shook her head no, as she rubbed her now bruised left arm. "I'll be all right. I've had worse happen to me."

"I don't know why I acted like that ... I never have before," he continued to apologize, confused by his violent behavior and his rough treatment of her.

"The Rumnulska are great emotional button pushers ... They enjoy making others hurt. I know, I watched them as I was growing up. It's all a game to them. Their sickness knows no bounds. My father was taking me away from Rumnul before they could hurt me further, when they killed him."

"The Rumnulska hurt you?" he asked, forgetting his own pain.

"... in many ways. They killed both of my parents... and," she was finding it difficult to talk.

"And what?" he asked, curious and concerned now. "What did they do? Can you tell me?" he pressed gently.

She sighed deeply, and moved a ways away from him, struggling with the old memories flooding up, and began to pace back and forth feeling as helpless and trapped as she had then.

"It's hard...," she finally managed to choke out.

"I didn't mean to cause you distress."

"It shouldn't hurt but it does."

"If you don't want to talk..."

"I feel I must if you are to understand... to know why they killed your cousin."

"I want to."

"They are so different from us," she began. "They are truly animals whom we should have never given our technology to - or our TRUST. The reason I was leaving Rumnul, the reason my father was killed was ME. That my father knew their long range plans was secondary."

"Why so?"

"He had been smuggling out their war plans over the years and they knew that, or at least some of their inner circle nobles knew, but that wasn't the thing that angered them. He had made enemies by some of his remarks, stepped on some royal toes and caused several changes of internal policy - but I was the real cause. It was when I caused one of the royal families to lose face and that family decided to seek revenge."

"Weren't you just a child?"

"Yes, and I was friends with the Overlord's son and daughter. One day, I was playing with them and the older son of one of the inner circle families came by and started teasing them. He caused the Overlord's son to fall and break his leg. I told the Overlord how it happened. His children were too afraid of the older child to tell. The Overlord was enraged and had the child killed. He was that



family's only male heir. They then declared blood feud against my family and set out to destroy me and my family in any way they could."

He watched her pacing become more tense and nervous. Her pale face was becoming paler the more she talked about it. He debated whether he should let her go on, but she seemed to need for him to know so he asked, "What did they do?"

She took a deep breath and in a jagged voice replied, "... they kidnapped my mother and I... then a group of them raped us both - together. They tortured her, burned her ... flesh, beat her until she passed out ... She never woke up. They left her dead body with me for days in a cold-airless, dark pit of a room. I went mad. My father paid their ransom and they made him promise not to tell what had happened and to leave the planet. Then they returned me. I was nothing more than a walking shell that screamed whenever anyone touched me."

"But you said you were eight when your father was killed - they raped an eight-year-old?" he asked incredulously.

She struggled, "I was female, an Atanzi, and I had caused the death of one of their sons. My age mattered little to them or how I might feel. They kept me alive ... made me watch my mother ... die. My death would have ruined their revenge. You have no idea how much they hate us ... we are just vermin to them ... objects to be exterminated. They plan to take over the galaxy and put what survivors there are into slavery," she said slowly, painfully willing herself not to feel or see the past.

He had growing respect for this young Atanzi, to have gone through so much and not be overwhelmed by it.

"I'm sorry that they did that to you, and sorry you had to bring it up," he said, feeling her pain.

"That's okay, I told you so that you could understand the horrible depths of depravity and violence these creatures are willing to sink to and the pain that they enjoy inflicting on others. Your cousin's case and mine are not unique - and I fear it is only the beginning of much worse to come."

"You think so?"

"I know so," she said firmly, looking him straight in the eye. "What has happened are not isolated incidents, there have been many others over the years - which have been kept quiet to preserve the balance of peace and power between us and them."

"Why hasn't ConFleet or the Council told our peoples what the Rumnulska have been doing? I find it odd that nothing has been said, or done to defend our rights." Ky'tulendu asked, confused.

"Politics, the fear of going to war - the desire to preserve the peace - has always been the Confederation's overriding concern. We are not used to fighting. Most of our peoples deplore acts of violence towards another being, but these monsters have been pushing it - demanding that we either fight or just let them take over. In secret, ConFleet and the Council have been making war plans based on the information that my father sent them. Your ship is part of that effort," she said.

"My ship? What do you know of my ship and what ConFleet has planned? Who are you really, Doctor? A ship's doctor does not have such knowledge, despite your background, because it would be many years old and your knowledge is very current," he demanded, suspicious of her now.

"Check with Kass Malk Y'gressn, he will give you a full report. I can only say that I am here to observe what the Rumnulska are currently doing and to inform ConFleet of my findings."

"Then you're not a doctor?" he asked.

"No, I am that, plus I have other skills as well. I am an expert in many fields," she said modestly, glad that she could end her ruse.

He continued to question her closer. "And your true rank?" he asked, looking her over closely, studying her with all his senses, to determine if she was telling him the truth - and she was.

"I think it is time for full honesty here, B'tunku, if that really is your name."

"It is, now. My rank is that of Asenti Malk," she said quietly letting that register on him, "Yes, Ky'tulendu, I outrank you. I am also an independent agent, with full powers given to me by both the Council and ConFleet, to act in any way I may need, including taking over command of your ship, should a situation arise where that was necessary," she informed him, watching the shock on his face and feeling ashamed of her confessions to him now.

"Are you ... going to take my ship?" he asked, not knowing what to think now.

"No, Ky'tulendu. Not unless I have to. I am going to suggest that we not try to retrieve the crew of the T'swaquill. They are lost. We are one lone ship against their Daggships. This ship, for all its advanced design, cannot take on all the firepower that would be amassed against us, should we try to go after their transport ships."

"I agree with that. Before I saw the tapes, I did think retrieval might be possible - but not now. I know when the odds are against me. For the record, do I now call you Doctor, Asenti Malk, or B'tunku?" he asked, trying to get used to her change in status.

"Doctor will be fine. I would prefer that we keep this between the two of us and ConFleet. Unless things change drastically, I will continue to take my orders from you as if nothing has happened."

He disagreed. "Much has changed, Doctor. I no longer view the universe in quite the same way as I did. If it were not for the repercussions it would cause, I would go on a blood hunt to revenge my cousin. Even that is an odd thought because I dislike violence. I am finding myself pushed and pulled in directions I do not wish to take, but must," he told her, shifting in his seat to be more comfortable.

"What pushes and pulls on your mind, Asenti?" she asked, standing nearby with her arms crossed as she listened.

"The dilemma of what to tell ConFleet. It looks as if events are forcing me to be the one who does start the war between the Empire and the Confederation. For war it will be - these acts against our peoples have gone unrevenged for far too long," he said. "And would war be so bad, if that is what it will take to keep these monsters out of civilized space?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, because that is what is needed. Unfortunately, our people have not known war or conflict for many millennia. It will be hard for us to give up such peace."

"Yes, I dread what will come and how our peoples must change, or if some of them can change to meet this threat," he sighed and looked down studying his hands in his lap. Large hands, dusted with strawberry-colored hair where his black uniform sleeves did not cover. Long, powerful fingers that were topped with deadly claws that had never been used in the ways his ancestors had used them, nor had his long canine teeth. Reminders of what savage beasts his people had been before the CHANGE.

"It's ironic, Doctor, we were once as savage or more so than the Rumnulska, killing with our bare hands and teeth. The CHANGE came and we no longer fought one another and we became the peacemakers of the Confederation. Now these upstarts come and will force us to return to those savage ways. They make my blood boil and stir things long buried inside. All my reason and compassion seems to flee, and I hate them for doing this because I do not want to be a savage killing machine, or see our people have to use brute force and violence to solve problems."

"Sometimes brute force is the only logic that can be used," she said bitterly, looking his way with sad eyes to match his own, knowing how hard this was for him.

It was all on his shoulders if he reported it to ConFleet. War would be a certainty, not a maybe. If he kept silent, how many more atrocities would be perpetrated on Confederation citizens, without fear of reprisals as was the case now? Which was the lesser evil? Which way would save the most lives? And what was ConFleet prepared to do - if anything - when forced to confront this issue head on, as

he would have to now? Too many questions and not enough answers.

His silence was unnerving her. She had to know what he was thinking. "Asenti, before I asked you to delay your report, but now it is clear that you must report this," she told him.

He made a half-smile that came out more as a grimace. "I wish I didn't have to."

"I understand that - but you must."

"I do not want to be the one who starts this war," he said quietly.

"It is your destiny," she insisted and looked him boldly, telling him that he must do this, had to do this. There was no way out for either of them.

He met her gaze for a moment, then looked away, ashamed as well as frightened by what was being thrust on him. He felt trapped, and caged. This was something that happened in the text books - not in real life. If it was his destiny, then he'd better start making it work for him.

"All right, Doctor, I'll contact ConFleet after I go through the rest of the reports. There may be information as to where and why they've done this. I am not going to act until I do."

"Very good, Asenti, I can't ask for more."

"No, you can't, unless you pull rank on me - and I don't think you want to do that?"

"No, I don't, not unless I have to," she replied stiffly. "I'll leave now and be getting back to work, seeing that you are recovered."

"I am. We will talk later, Doctor, after I have tidied this up, understood?"

"Understood, Sir!" she replied, her expression unreadable.

"Dismissed," he told her and she turned on her heels and hurriedly left his office, the door hissing quietly behind her.

After she left, he got up getting himself a fresh cup of klass from the wall dispenser and sat down again to slowly drink it, while he pondered over their talk and sorted things out.

There was still the rest of the reports to go through. After he evaluated them he would notify ConFleet of the situation and also contact Kass Malk Y'gressn to verify MS B'tunku's identity, as well as his orders in regards to her now that her secret was out. ConFleet better have a good explanation for all of this. It made him wonder what else they were keeping secret from him.

This mission was looking more and more dangerous and he didn't like the role he was being thrust into. He could only pray that he was making the right decisions. Too much was now on his shoulders. It was not confronting to know that war or peace depended on him, and him alone. It frankly scared the hell out of him.

## 6

Back in her office in the medical section of the ship, B'tunku sat in front of her commcon going over the routine work of the day. But her mind wasn't on her work. She was still upset by what has transpired between her and Ky'tulendu. Her cover was blown and she had let him get too close to her personally. That was not like her.

She still could not understand how she could have lost her calm, let down her barriers even that much to let him see into her past. Maybe it was because she was attracted to him. He stirred something in her on many levels. Ky'tulendu was very handsome, very charming, and her equal in many ways, but deep down inside she knew instinctively that there was no possibility of a link between them.

Any relationship they might have would be as friends. If it even went to the physical, it would be without any real personal involvement.

Bonding and linking with another was too much a part of being a Azanti to be denied. Realistically,

she had to reject Ky'tulendu as a bond mate. If it hadn't been for the dreams for the last couple of months, she might not have.

She dreamed of a face framed with long black silken hair, and a flash of dark eyes against copper-colored skin. She wasn't sure, but she didn't think her dream male was even an Atanzi. That had bothered her at first, but not now.

Whenever he was, there were brilliant blue skies where odd-colored birds flew and white fluffy clouds danced across the skies behind him. She saw huge ancient trees along with lush non-tropical greenery surrounding him, as he moved almost naked through his dream world. In her dreams, she had seen strange animals and birds and equally strange people resembling him leading simple unhurried lives.

Nothing was too clear, like a picture seen through thick gauze. The images and scenes she saw were just flashes and impressions of objects and people. But when he spoke her name, or looked her way... fire raced through her soul. Was he just imagination, or was he real? She wasn't sure anymore.

She knew he was called, Roaring-Wings, a name as strange to her ears as his face was to her eyes. A face that sometimes was covered by a savage animal's face. In her inner soul, she felt that somehow, somewhere they would meet, and soon and secretly she longed for it to be soon, to end the hunger and loneliness she knew and hated.

She snorted in disgust at herself for not getting her job done and made a concentrated effort to plunge into her work. She had just begun to enter in the day's Ian reports when the red alert alarms went off. She jumped a foot startled at the sudden sound. Over the intercom, she could hear the bridge announcing that the ship was under attack and to go to quarters.

The Rumnulska had found them. She didn't know whether it was the same group or a different one. Had Ky'tulendu sent off his report to ConFleet or had time to? Did ConFleet know what was happening on the border? She was afraid no one did know. Unless they sent off a distress signal now, they would only be another missing ship and ConFleet still wouldn't know what was happening out here. She could step in but she wouldn't. Let him handle this. In the meantime, she had to get her medical area ready to receive the wounded that were to come.

## 7

Ky'tulendu raced to the bridge. Tanz W'rett had called him moments after the scanners had picked up the three Rumnulska ships when they shimmered back into normal space. The sudden appearance of three ships out of nowhere had unnerved everyone. This was something new. A new weapon never before seen and one that could be very deadly for ConFleet, for it meant the Rumnulska could get within striking range of any target before they could be stopped. ConFleet had nothing like this or any means to counter it.

He stepped out of the elevator when one of the ships fired across their bow. He snarled at the visuals on screen from the sensors. The ships were coming out of Empire territory crossing the border into Confederation space without provocation. They thought that they could take his ship and do what they had done to the crew of the T'swaquill. They were going to find out THAT was a very wrong assumption to make on their part.

Keeping his eyes on the screen, he sat down in his chair, strapping himself in. He turned to the communications officer, Tanz Commd T'krisen.

"Have the Rumnulska contacted us?"

"No, sir. All I get to our hails is silence and static. They appeared out of nowhere and began firing. Long range scanners showed nothing in the area. We are at a loss to explain it," he reported worriedly.

"Vokolin, do you have any explanation?" the Asenti asked.

"None, sir. ConFleet intelligence has not reported any new weaponry like this. They are completely invisible to our scanners and sensors. They're visible only in normal space. ConFleet must be informed of this," she told him, standing at her station.

"I agree. T'krisen, did my report get sent off to ConFleet?"

"Yes, Asenti, I had just completed transmission when the ships appeared. I sent it coded as you specified, but the Rumnulska could have picked it up. Do you want me to inform Confleet of our situation?" he asked, nervously watching the screen displays beyond the Asenti's head.

The L'wassen was evading the ships for now, but it wouldn't be long before they were captured in a three way vise.

"Do it!" he ordered. "This group means to destroy us, otherwise they would have contacted us to surrender. Request backup from ConFleet, but inform them that I will be taking evasive action and will be engaging the enemy.

"The war has started!" Ky'tulendu announced, and there was stunned silence on the bridge for many moments.

"Yes, Asenti," the young officer replied, and turned back to his boards, white-faced and shaken by the events they were being forced into.

"War, Asenti?" Vokolin asked in shock, her whitish face fur standing on end.

"Yes, WAR! We, the Confederation, have no choice because the Rumnulska wish it and want us to go to WAR with them!" he told her angrily. "This is not what I want, only what I must do to preserve what we believe in!"

"R'yjilln, are you continuing to hold fire?" Ky'tulendu asked his weapons officer, as he turned his way and cut off further discussion.

"Yes, Asenti. The three Daggershops are just out of range of our phasers and particle weapons. All systems are primed and ready to go at your command," he answered, his dark eyes eager for the fight to come.

"Good, wait until I give the signal then fire," he told him and the officer nodded in acknowledgement. "Tanz Commd N'isella, are we still running an evasive course back to Confederation space?" he asked.

"Affirmative. We should be entering Confederation space in three units," she replied, busy with her boards, as she pushed a button on one to show their current position and projected trajectory. This was superimposed over the larger starmap for this sector, which showed them in relation to their pursuers, and the known planetary systems within the Empire and Confederation territories along the border.

Something clicked in Ky'tulendu's mind. "N'isella, did you get the navigational upload from the T'swaquill?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, puzzled, wanting clarification.

"Punch in that info in relation to where we are," he ordered, and the new data appeared on the large starmap. He nodded approvingly to himself.

"Set us a course through the magnetic clouds that the T'swaquill encountered. When we get through, I want us to run like hell to that star system they discovered. There's no way we can reach any of our starbases in time, or get back up from ConFleet. Only if we run and hide do we even stand a chance of getting back alive. They may outgun us, but they can't outrun us," he told her and his bridge crew.

The navigator was still puzzled, but she did as she was told. The ship began to pull away from the pursuing ships but in a direction they were not expecting - back toward Rumnulskan territory and further out into uninhabited space.

Ky'tulendu punched buttons on his voice commcon, built into his chair. "Engineering?" he called.

"Engineering, Tanz Commd R'kerszn, here," came the deep bass voice from the speaker.

"I want full power once we clear the magnetic cloud fields. Are the engines up to it?" the Asenti asked.

"Yes, Asenti," came the reply. "They'll be a little sluggish when we first come out, but the ship will power up quickly once we are free."

"Good, stand by for my order. Ky'tulendu out."

"N'isella, begin evasive course to the clouds, and go to level eight point five on my mark. Now!" he ordered, and as the ship shot away, he watched in satisfaction as they left the Rumnulskan ships sitting far behind them. However, it didn't take the Daggershops long to recover. Almost immediately, they were accelerating to catch up with the fleeing Atanzi ship.

They got within firing range when the L'wassen entered the first layers of dust particles marking the borders of the magnetic cloud and began firing their weapons at his ship's retreating backside. Their shots were too close for comfort.

"GIVE US MORE POWER, ENGINEERING!" Ky'tulendu ordered, punching the buttons on his commcon savagely, as he watched the tactical displays on the big screen.

"I can't do it, Asenti," the voice came back, "the magnetic fields of the clouds are disrupting the equipment and shorting out some of the secondary systems. We're going to have to take it down to level five so that the mains don't go critical on us!" R'kersn replied.

"Understood, do what you can, Ky'tulendu out," he said cutting off the line. Then, sinking into his seat in frustration, he cursed to himself.

The Rumnulska were gaining, and he wished his ship had a longer weapons range. One of the Daggershops put on a burst of power and shortened the distance between them, firing their weapons as they came on. The edge of their weapon found a target burning a deep furrow along their flank near sciences. The L'wassen jerked and shook, scattering and throwing all those that weren't strapped in hard to the deck.

"Damage report!" Ky'tulendu barked to engineering and to the sciences section, as the big screen displayed the damage it had received on its hull.

Engineering came on line first, "Sir, the engines are undamaged, but we have a twenty-five percent drop in power due to the magnetic disruptions to the circuitry. The best we can give you is level six point seven-five and that only for a short burst," R'kerszn reported, apologizing that he could not coax the engines into more.

"That will have to do. Do it now while they think they have us. Get us out of that Daggershops's range!"

"Yes, Asenti."

"N'isella, go to level six point seven-five now and make us harder to hit!" he ordered.

His hands were shaking, he noticed, as he brushed a stray strand of his hair back that had escaped his headband. His hands were sweating too, as they slid across the slick leather of his chair when he reached for the button to call sciences. He willed himself to remain calm. This was the real thing and not a simulated battle. His stomach was tight and queasy, and he was hypersensitive to every sound and movement. He didn't like feeling this scared or unsure. He'd have to control his own fears or they all would be lost.

"Sciences, report!" he ordered, trying not to let his voice betray him.

They did not come online immediately. Finally, a young male voice came weakly through the speakers. "Tanz M'dokk, Terra Sciences Division Lab, here."

"What's your status?"

"Not good, Asenti. We still have hull integrity intact. But things are a mess down here. There is a fire in chemistry. Bio has lost several experiments and lab animals. For the moment, the seals are holding on their unit. Luckily, there are no serious injuries or deaths to personnel. Medical is sending help," the Tanz reported, and the Asenti could hear noises in the background.

"Anything further, Tanz M'dokk?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"Ship's stores are close by. I'm afraid that section is destroyed. They have a fire in there but security and maintenance are putting it out. The head of that division suffered a head injury getting his people out, so you'll have to talk to security to get a full report of the damage there."

"Thank you, M'dokk, carry on. Ky'tulendu out," he said ending the conversation on his end.

That was not good. They were a long way away from any support services or a starbase. Normally, his ship carried enough concentrated stores and food for a year. He hoped the damage wasn't as bad as he feared it was. Even if they made planet-fall, it was not safe to assume that the flora and fauna were compatible to their biosystems. Not everyone on his ship could eat or ingest the same substances. He would just have to wait for Security's report.

He kept a weary eye on the tactical displays. So far, their burst of speed was keeping their ship ahead of the still pursuing Warbirds. Then they lost one of the ships off the screen. He sat up straight in alarm.

"Y'grewn, where's that third Daggership?" he asked nervously.

"She went off our sensors. Can't get a reading on her. She just vanished, sir," the systems operator relayed somewhat mystified.

"N'isella, can you plot a probable course for that Daggership given her past trajectory, where she might appear in front of us?" he asked her hurriedly.

"Ahead of us, Asenti?" she asked surprised.

"Yes, I think they're going to try and ambush us. It may be that the cloaking gives them an added advantage in speed, that flying in normal space doesn't. It's best to assume the worse," he commented, studying the starmap. "How long until we break free of the cloud?"

"Seven units, sir," she replied. "Here are the possible course routes for the Daggership, on screen sir," she added, punching the data up in an eerie green color.

There were three definite possibilities and four probables. None of which intercepted their path to the planetary system. A system that the Rumnulka might not even be aware of. So far, so good.

"Thanks, N'isella, continue holding evasive course to system. When we come out of the cloud, go to level ten."

"But sir?" she protested. "The ship's not going to be able to take the stress."

"It's going to have to if we want to shake those ships. Their ships are good but not that good. Speed is the only advantage we have. Level ten is an order!" Ky'tulendu insisted, sitting back, trying not to see the worry in his navigator's eyes.

"Yes, Asenti," she replied, and turned back to monitoring her displays.

As they broke through the edge of the cloud, he could feel the engines power up and the ship begin to accelerate. Normally, one did not feel it but the speeds he was demanding from his engines were not normal. The entire ship began to shake and he heard the metal scream its protest.

The speaker by his chair began to beep for his attention.

"Ky'tulendu here," he answered.

"Asenti! We're getting red line on the engines - we're going to have to slow it down or they'll blow. The systems are too weakened by going through the magnetic cloud to take it," R'kerszn protested loudly, his nervous voice carrying to all on the bridge.

"I hear you, engineering. Back it down to level eight but we need all the speed we have to get to that system ahead of the Daggershops."

"You've got that, but if you try level ten it's going to blow, R'kerszn out," the head engineer warned still not satisfied.

"N'isella, drop to level eight and continue on course. Once we're in the system, go to five and begin braking. Our objective will be planet four," the Asenti ordered and noticed Vokolin frowning at him.

"What distresses you, Vokolin?" he asked.

She turned from her console and stared at him. "Sir, of the two habitable planets only three offers us a greater chance of survival. Four has very limited food and water. While three offers everything."

"That is true, Vokolin, but three is at a mere primitive level of development. The manlike beings that live there are barely past using sticks and stones. Four is more advanced and would be more receptive to our presence," he argued, and he saw her back down by lowering her eyes.

"Very well, Asenti, it's your choice, but as First Officer I still strongly recommend planet three, if we are forced to make planetfall," she said, still disagreeing with him.

"Your recommendation is noted, however, where we go will also depend on our pursuers. We may not be given any choice in the matter," he commented grimly, as his eyes turned back to the main screen and its multiple displays.

The Rumnulska were still following, though they were forced to slow too when they entered the confines of the star system and had to compensate for the gravitational drags exerted by the planets themselves.

The third Daggershops still had not appeared either, before or after them on the sensors. He could only hope that it had been forced to return to its base and was no longer a threat to them. The ships kept their relative distances behind his ship.

It was watching the Daggershops action's and their keeping to his ship's slowed pace, instead of overtaking his ship, that it dawned on Ky'tulendu that he was being forced into a trap.

"Vokolin, scan behind planet four's moons. I think we just walked into it. Any Daggershops there?" he asked tensely, sitting on the edge of his seat as far as his seat belt would allow.

"I can't scan through it, sir, our sensors bounce right off," she replied, comprehending.

"N'isella, swing us around, and head us for planet three - it's a trap! Go level eight if you have to, but get us out of here - NOW!" he shouted, ordering her to make the necessary changes as fast as she could.

She did, as fast as she could, but it wasn't fast enough as two, not one Daggershops came streaking from behind planet four's twin moon right on their tail. Level six then eight kicked in giving them a quick burst of speed, which they hoped would get them out of range of the Rumnulska weapons.

"Asenti, two more Daggershops entering the system from the star side!" Vokolin warned.

"HARD TO RIGHT!" Ky'tulendu ordered watching the tactical displays, he was dripping sweat now and his claws dug deep furrows into his chair arms. "DIVE UNDER THEM, AROUND - JUST GET US OUT OF HERE!!!!" he ordered the panic-stricken navigator.

"Yes, Asenti - I'M TRYING!" She yelled back. "THE OTHER SHIPS ARE COMING UP FROM BEHIND!" she warned.

"FIRING WEAPONS IN A WIDE PATTERN, SIR!" R'yjilln shouted frantically working his controls.



"DIRECT HITS ON TWO OF THEM BUT THE OTHERS ARE STILL COMING! FIRING AGAIN!!!! ONE SHIP DAMAGED AND THE OTHER ARE GETTING IN FIRING RANGE AGAIN!" he relayed.

The screen showed what the cameras were seeing. One Daggership had exploded, while another looked dead in space, but the other four still were coming.

"KEEP FIRING, MAKE THEM SCARED! MORE SPEED - ENGINEERING! N'isella, head for three's moon, it might offer some cover!" he ordered in rapid fire to his bridge crew.

Then he felt the deck sway and lurch. The overhead lights dimmed and flickered momentarily but then returned to normal.

"DIRECT HIT IN ENGINEERING!" Vokolin exclaimed, checking her monitors. "ENGINEERING! ENGINEERING - DO YOU READ ME? THIS IS THE BRIDGE!" she called down and didn't get an immediate response.

"Engineering ... here ... we've lost the left engine. It's down ... We're lucky it didn't blow. The damage is bad! I've lost a third of my crew and another third are injured. The hull's breached, and we're going to have to shut lifesupport off on decks thirty to thirty-eight!"

Ky'tulendu had not expected that. Without the left engine, their speed was cut in half, and already it was beginning to tell, as the Daggerships circled in for the kill. They were approaching planet three faster than he had hoped. Unfortunately, the moon was on its other side.

He was going to take a chance that they wouldn't follow his ship through the atmosphere. The Daggerships weren't designed for planetary landings any more than his was. If the engineers were right his ship could survive the re-entry, if they made the correct approach, and if they could land in water. A lot of IFs and not enough time to do it right, he grumbled to himself.

"N'isella, we're going to attempt planetary entry. Shallow approach, then a spiral to slow us down. Find us a landing site in water next to a landmass. I want to be able to get to shore. Can we do this with the left engine out?" he asked, hoping she wouldn't tell him it was impossible.

"Just barely, sir. We've lost a lot of maneuverability."

"I know - do it anyway! We can't stay up here, we have to go down," he told her.

She nodded, her fear very apparent as she bent to do her task. "Starting the landing approach now!" she warned him.

He barely had time to tell the ship's crew that they were going to land on the planet, before the lights went out, and he lost consciousness because of the explosion in the remaining main engine.

**PART TWO**  
**NEW WORLD LANDING**  
**CHAPTER ONE**

The cabin was bathed in blood, or so it seemed to Ky'tulendu when he tried to open his painfully swollen eyelids. It was only the red-colored emergency lights, he dimly realized, but darker glistening patches of red could be seen that ran in ribbons down the walls and consoles of what remained of the bridge.

Then he saw the mangled bodies - the ones who had not been able to get into their harnesses before the ship had hit the atmosphere. Mercifully, there were few of them. It looked like they had been support techs and had panicked when the ship got hit. They had been young, and unexperienced, probably first time out in space. He hadn't known them personally - pity they couldn't have made it.

He wished that feeling had not come back to his body. He hurt all over. He could move his head, arms, and legs - but the pain was intense. He gritted his teeth and made himself sit up and survey the damage to his bridge.

His first officer was still out, strapped securely in her chair at her console. The communication officer, navigator, and systems support appeared to still be breathing. However, the weapons officer, Tanz Comd R'yjilln was dead, his head hung at an unnatural angle, as he slumped in his chair.

He wished someone would shut off that damnable emergency alarm system. Its persistent beep-beeping was maddening, but so far he was the only one conscious. The alarm indicated that the shields were down. That was no surprise.

His last memory before he blacked out, was that the ship was beginning to enter the atmosphere of the planet and the Rumnulska had fired on his ship. They hadn't exploded, so the ship had been intact enough to crash land.

He was sure that they had missed the ocean. There was no tell-tale movement under his feet to indicate that they were floating. So they had managed to crash on land, probably inland on one of the large land masses he had seen on the screen.

That anything, including themselves, was intact was a miracle. Though he seriously doubted that his ship was in one piece. More likely, pieces of it were strewn across the landscape. Then he thought about the engines - Damn! He was going to have to get the survivors up and out of here as fast as possible before they blew. He was praying that they had jettisoned during re-entry over the ocean and weren't still attached to the rest of the ship, but he wasn't going to make bets on that.

Trying not to scream in pain, he worked his harness off his bruised body. At least there didn't appear to be broken bones. He forced himself to stand. He was dizzy at first, but he made himself walk to the ship's status console. He hung on to the edge, fighting to stay conscious while he checked to see if there were any readouts.

Most of the indications were dead, either the backup system wasn't working or the connections had been broken, or both. He couldn't tell if the engines were still attached or not. He tapped the indicator panels with his clawed finger - no response. Even life support was down.

The air seemed to be getting rather foul because of the smallness of the enclosed space on the bridge. Ky'tulendu's nose was reacting to the death smells hanging in the air. He must have been out longer than he thought, for it to have gotten so thick and hard to breathe.

He tried the bridge doors, no response. The manual override was useless. The doors were jammed shut. That left the two emergency escape hatches. The ship's designers had included them for unusual circumstances, of which this qualified. They were reached through the computer maintenance access hatches.

One was located behind the science station and the other behind weapons. Weapons was nearer. He moved the body of the dead officer out of the way, to find the manual switches which unlocked the access hatch. He reached under the console and felt for the hidden panel, slid it open and then felt the buttons click under his probing fingers.

The accessway door slid open revealing the bridge computer memory system for this side of the cabin. In the center was a metal ladder, leading upward into darkness. The emergency lights were off in this area. He'd have to find the hatch by feel and open it the same way.

He heard a couple of groans and muffled sounds behind him as he inspected the accessway. He turned to see that Vokolin, D'jinse, and N'isella were waking. Vokolin's eyes glowed strangely in the red lighting as she saw him.

"Asenti, do you require assistance?" she asked, trying to get up. Movement was as painful for her as it had been for him.

"No, stay there, and help get the others. Get them awake and on their feet, if possible. I'm going to attempt to open the emergency hatch on the hull of the ship. The bridge doors are jammed and manual override doesn't want to work. See if someone can get the science station access opened too, in case this way is unusable," he ordered, and she nodded in acknowledgement.

He turned back to the hatch and began the climb up the narrow ladder which was generally used for only routine computer maintenance. He made the long, several decks climb, solely by touch, in total darkness. Finally, he found the inner airlock. Going by feel and memory, he managed to initiate the unlocking sequence. The door hissed as he pushed it upward to bang against the metal walls of the airlock. Feeling the walls, he found the next ladder and continued on.

Another two decks' worth of climbing brought him to the outer airlock and its more elaborate unlocking system. It took almost ten units to complete the unlocking process, but a slow hissing finally started coming from the seals, then he could feel the pressurized air on his face as the two atmospheres tried to stabilize. The hissing stopped, and he turned the last crank to release the final lock. The hatch popped open, to his relief, making a loud clang against the metal surface that echoed eerily across the open spaces to the nearby trees and bounced back.

Above his head, he saw an intensely sunlit blue sky, where across it small white clouds raced. His lungs gratefully took in huge mouthfuls of fresh breathable air. The temperature was pleasant and comfortable, and he could feel a slight breeze of warm air against his bare skin.

Ky'tulendu blinked at the bright light and waited for his eyes to adjust, before he climbed the final distance to the surface of the ship's hull. He was not sure what to expect, as he cautiously raised his head to peer past the hatch door.

The ship had landed in an ancient forest, by the looks of some of the huge trees. At least they appeared to be trees, a little different from what he was familiar with, but similar enough to be called trees. Some of them were taller than some of the buildings in the ConFleet complex. The greens, browns, and golds of the heavy vegetation were comforting to see. At least they had not come down in a desert area. There would be raw materials for shelters and whatever else they would need.

He then turned and looked behind him, and his eyes grew wide with shock. He was appalled at the damage and destruction he saw. He really didn't want to believe, but he had to.

For a good five lisns the ground and everything around it was torn up and scorched black. The massive trees were scorched, pushed aside and upended like some giant's toys on both sides of the deep furrow his ship had made in the earth.

The only thing that had saved both the forest and the ship from the fire and heat of the re-entry had been a heavy rainstorm when the ship crashed. Around the perimeter of the ship, water lay in deep pools on the upturned ground.

In the distance, he could hear possible animal and bird sounds, and he found himself slapping at the swarms of flying, stinging insects that had suddenly discovered he was worth eating. Ignoring them as best he could, he climbed out of the hatch to stand on the hull of the ship to get a better view of the damage.

The slightly warm breeze ruffled his thick red hair so that he had to tuck it back behind his ears to keep it out of his mouth and eyes. Already, he was getting hot and sweaty under his black uniform, but that turned to cold sweat when he saw the damage.

The engines had been sheared off - and so had the engineering section. His ship had been split in two. Most of the sections towards the bridge were still intact, but beyond the mid-section, pieces were missing and crumbled, as if a giant hand had squeezed and twisted. The entire back section was gone.

Wires, rods, thick beams, pieces of multi-colored plastics, and sections of superstructure jutted into the air and were jammed hard into the ground, to be twisted and warped into shapes like strange

demented sculptures.

There were bodies, as well as pieces of the ship thrown across the chewed-up landscape, and not all of the bodies were intact. Around these forms and drippings out of holes in the ship on to the light tan to dark brownish ground was blood, staining it a dark red, spreading out fan-shaped in slick puddles in many areas.

Already the local scavengers were beginning to converge upon the scene as the death smells drew them in. Looking at just the carnage he could see from his position, he wondered how many of his crew had really survived, and how many more would not live beyond the next couple of days.

Sadly, he could see no one moving in the wreckage. The only sounds coming from his ship were those of metal cooling, popping, snapping, and shifting under its broken weights. Beyond that, only the birds and as yet unknown animal sounds could be heard in the forest surrounding the deep pit.

His heart turned heavy with grief and worry over what he knew lay ahead for his people. Ky'tulendu re-entered the hatch after one last look around to look for any movement on the ground. Seeing none, he started his return journey to his surviving bridge crew.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

"Asenti, you have returned. Did you get out? Can we get out?" asked N'isella. Her arm was in a crude sling made from the top of someone's uniform, as she stood shakily on her feet by her former station.

He smiled, trying to project a confidence he did not feel. "Yes, the way is clear," Ky'tulendu answered, his voice steady, while his sad eyes made a careful appraisal of his remaining crew.

"And the ship? How bad is the damage?" Vokolin asked him point blank, looking up from where she squatted bandaging one of the crew member's arms.

He looked away for a moment trying to find the words, but there were no words to minimize the destruction he had seen, nor should be. His people needed facts, for they would see the results of their landing soon enough.

"The ship is in pieces. Engineering and the engines are gone. The only sections that look intact are those near the bridge. The middle sections are in pieces. I don't have hope for many survivors. From looking around, I estimate that we have been unconscious for a day, maybe more."

He let the words sink in to his crew, but shock was written on everyone's face. A few even began crying, as the enormity of the situation sank in. He let them cry for a few minutes to get it out of their systems. Then, when they were calmed, he forced them back to reality.

"We need to force the bridge doors open and get the supplies from trans-station one. There are weapons in the outside storage compartments near the bridge doors. I want all possible instruments, recorders, and computers taken with us. We will be leaving nothing behind, even if it means making several trips to accomplish this. Our main order of business is survival. Salvage all recorder memory chips, including the new library files I had installed before departure. We are going to need all the help we can get," he told the shock-ridden survivors.

Tanz W'rett, Srt G'nur went to do as the Asenti had commanded, trying to force the Bridge doors open. Tanz T'hrissn also lent his strength, and between the strength of the three males, the doors were forced open enough to admit a person through.

Tanz W'rett went first. Cautiously, he slid his thin form through the narrow opening and just looked around in stunned silence. The smells from the fouled air drifted through the opening, making it difficult to stand by the doorway to peer into the dimly lit corridor.

"How bad is it, W'rett?" Ky'tulendu asked, trying to see past him.

"There are bodies, sir ... everywhere," the young officer said quietly, still in wide-eyed shock.

"All dead?" the Asenti asked, wanting confirmation.

"Can't tell, sir," he replied truthfully, taking in the blood splattered walls and the unnatural positions of his former crew mates. He didn't want to recognize them. He didn't want to see them this way. His mind was beginning to shut down and Ky'tulendu sensed that.

"Do you need a light?" the Asenti asked, trying to draw him out.

"No, sir," he said slowly, "the emergency lights are still on."

"Then proceed to trans-station one. That's an order, Tanz," he told him, trying to get him moving before he froze and refused to function.

"Yes, sir," he replied, not happy about having to go away from the safety of the open door and the bridge beyond. He didn't like the idea of having to walk through and over his dead comrades. But the young Azanti gritted his teeth and made himself walk forward to his destination, beyond the bend of the corridor.

They were not all dead, he noticed as he passed. He could see shallow breathing from a few of the persons he passed, but he didn't want to stop. He was not sure what to do for them and he was afraid. He concentrated on what he had been sent for.

He reached the transporter room after what seemed to him to be an eternity. The door stood open to the silent room, which was even more dark than the corridor, no lights blinked or glowed from the consoles. For all the damage to the superstructure of the ship, this room was relatively undamaged. A few of the lockers had sprung open on their own from the impact of the crash, their contents thrown across the floor, but most of them remained closed.

He went from one locker to another, loading up his arms with as many back packs and containers that he could comfortably carry. Then staggering under his load, he walked back to the waiting survivors on the bridge. He could hear low moans among the dead as he passed. He hurried, his fear spurring him forward.

"This is all I could carry. There is more in the storage cabinets along the walls," he said, handing the suits through the narrow doorway into their waiting hands. "Sir, there may be survivors. I saw a few breathing and heard a couple of moans," he added, after his arms were emptied.

Ky'tulendu looked pleased and relieved. "Good," he said with relief. "We need to see to their injuries and get them out of there. Do you think medical can be reached?" he asked.

"I couldn't say, sir. Probably have to take one of the maintenance access tubes to reach those levels - if they still exist. Medical was in the middle of the ship, near sciences and engineering, so the chances..."

"I know, aren't too good," Ky'tulendu finished for him. "From what I saw up top, we buried ourselves pretty deep. If there are people alive down there, we have to get them out." Ky'tulendu told them all.

He made a decision, "N'isella, Vokolin, help W'rett to check for survivors in these sections, then move them in here if they can be moved. Bring all the survival packs and weapons to the bridge. We'll all leave from there unless we can find another way out," he told the waiting personnel on both sides of the door.

"G'nur, you come with me," he ordered the middle-aged tech. It was a tight fit as Ky'tulendu squeezed his greater size sideways through the narrow opening and past W'rett waiting on the other side. He could feel his silky tunic tear across the back, as it snagged on some metal, but it couldn't be helped.

He hoped they could retrieve some clothing from the crews' quarters. None of them wore intact outfits, he noted. Judging from the vegetation outside, the climate on this planet was more variable than the homeworld's. These thin outfits they wore on the ship would not last long outside.

Before they had crashed, he remembered that there had been a fire in stores ... He had a sinking feeling that they had lost all the survival gear he had so carefully picked out for such an emergency

as this.

Ky'tulendu and G'nur left their crewmates to go down one of the side corridors to where the access hatch for engineering was located on this level. The door sprung open at their touch.

Inside, the lighting was dimmer than in the corridor outside. Ky'tulendu mentally calculated that the emergency lights would not last more than a couple of days before they failed completely.

The diameter of the access tube was not large. The two Atanzi's had difficulty getting in, but they managed and began the climb downward to medical. It seemed as though they climbed downward for hours, when in reality it was only fifteen units until they reached the medical levels.

Deck thirty's door was jammed, so they continued down, trying each level's door in return. By level thirty-six, they were almost losing hope that they could get access to these levels, but they kept trying and with their combined strength they kicked the door open to that level.

That the air was very foul on that level was the first thing they noticed as they stepped through. The lights were barely on, flickering off and on, making seeing difficult. The corridor was deserted and silent. They stood still listening for any sounds of movement and heard none. This level was mainly labs and offices, the infirmary was two levels above as was B'tunku's office. There was another engineering access tube further down the corridor. Ky'tulendu decided to try it.

As they rounded the bend in the corridor, Ky'tulendu pulled up sharply. The rest of the corridor was gone, replaced by a wall of dirt and rock blocking out everything beyond. It extended upwards and downward caving in that side of the ship.

"Come on, G'nur, we've got to go back the way we came. We can't get through here. Let's try the other hatch again and see if we can get to levels thirty-four and thirty-three. That's where we'll find survivors," Ky'tulendu commented grimly, looking at the dark wall in front of them.

"Yes, sir. I'm hoping some of them did make it, but looking at that ... we hit pretty hard."

"Come on, let's get going. The air's getting bad and I want to find as many survivors as we can before it gets impossible to search," the Asenti said, heading back to the open hatch they had left.

They climbed up and again tried the doors. The door on thirty-five would not budge. Number thirty-four they finally kicked open, and the smell was worse than on the lower level. G'nur found his stomach rebelling soon after they stepped out.

"Sorry, Asenti," he apologized, after he had relieved himself in a corner. "The smell just got to me."

"It's getting to me, too, but we have to go on. You take the right corridor, and I'll take the left," Ky'tulendu ordered. "Yell if you find anything," he added, as they moved away from one another.

The infirmary should be a short distance up the corridor, Ky'tulendu thought to himself. The quiet bothered him. It was beginning to look as if he and his bridge crew were the main survivors. He was hoping that B'tunku had made it. He really liked her and her skills as a doctor were going to be desperately needed.

He'd know soon enough, as he forced open the door to the infirmary. He stepped back two or three paces at the death stench that wafted through the opening. There were bodies. Most of them were on the examination tables strapped in. From their burns and injuries, they had been survivors from engineering, but without the benefits from the medical lifesupport systems, they had died anyway.

The med tech he saw sprawled on the floor had died when the ship crashed, he could tell by the way their limbs hung unnaturally. He didn't see B'tunku among them. Her office, he wondered?

He tried the door, jammed too. He found a long strip of metal to use as a crowbar and began to work on it. He was about to give up, when he heard answering noises from within. She was alive, or at least someone was! He redoubled his efforts and he was dripping with sweat when the door latch broke and he could slide it open on its track.

B'tunku burst through before he had a chance to open it fully and tackled him in a tight hug.

"Ky'tulendu, I knew it was you. I knew you survived. Thank you for finding me. I had almost given up hope because I couldn't get out," she told him in a rush, through her happy tears as she held onto him.

He stood there like a rock as he looked down at her unemotionally, and then looked around and past her into her office.

"I'm glad to see you too. Are you the only one alive down here?" he asked, feeling her calm down.

Sensing his distance, she looked up at him and relaxed her grip on his body, moving away from him to put on her professional face.

"No, there are five others with me. I have them knocked out with tranquilizers to save on the air and supplies I managed to get until we could get out. When I heard we were going to try to land, I turned my office into a crash chamber with all the padding and supplies we could get our hands on," she explained all business now.

"What about those techs that didn't make it?" he asked motioning towards the four on the floor.

"They were coming when the door slid shut in their faces. We couldn't get it open from our side and it jammed on theirs. There wasn't any way we could help them after that," she said with regret, stepping back from him further.

"Did you have any other 'crash chambers' made in this section, so that we can be looking for survivors?"

"If my orders were followed there should be two more. One on this level and one on the level above. I tried, Ky'tulendu, to get everyone that I could prepared for the crash. I'm just grateful that the Daggships didn't blow us up. How bad is it, or do you know?"

"We crashed pretty hard on land - where I'm sure yet. I got the emergency hatches open and have been outside. It's like Astar III, so we can survive here, those of us that are left. The ship is in pieces all over the landscape. The engines and engineering sections are gone, vanished. When we came down we buried ourselves, though I'm not sure how deep so far. Two levels below this G'nur and I ran into a wall of dirt half way down the corridor."

"How many survivors above?" she asked, calmly trying to assess the extent of the total damage from his statements.

"Unknown, we're still looking. Most of my bridge crew made it. I've got them gathering supplies and looking for survivors. We're not going to be able to stay on the ship. I want to move everyone that can be moved away from the ship, before the Rumnulka return and decide to finish the job."

"Yes, and they will come back to see if there are survivors. How long do you think we have?" she asked.

"Not long enough to get all that we need from the ship. B'tunku, get your people awake and they can help us search for any others. I also want you to get anything we may need out here. Basically, whatever you and your people can carry with you now. We may not get a second chance," he said calmly, but she understood his worry.

"Yes, Asenti," she said, "I'll get them on their feet. The other group is in the med lab office down the corridor," she told him, starting to go back into her office.

"G'nur is over there in that area. In the lab, you said, is where they might be. How many?" he asked.

"There should have been fifteen or twenty. They were mostly my lab staff, but there were a few from sciences up here before the crash, running some experiments. I hope they made it. The other crash chamber is on deck thirty-three in the animal behavior lab. Those were the only areas I could get through to before communications went down," she explained.

"You did your best," he said. "I'll see if G'nur has found them yet. When you get your group organized, tell them to go up the main engineering access hatch. That's the only way out for here for now. And B'tunku, I am glad you made it," he told her, relieved on many levels that she had made it.

"So am I," she replied, giving him a wan smile. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us. You go on, I can handle it from here."

He nodded and turned, heading out the door. She watched his broad back disappear before she re-entered her office and started waking up her people. There was too much to do and too little time, she felt, before their enemies returned. With luck they could get out of the ship and to safety before the Daggershops returned, but she wasn't going to hold her breath.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

A pair of dark brown, almost black eyes stared with wide-eyed astonishment at the huge shiny thing that had landed in the middle of the ancient climax forest. There was nothing In The Forest could even compare it to, in his experience, except the way still water looked when the sun shone on it. Though water or ice never formed itself into such strange shapes, or was covered by such odd designs in such brightly colored paint on some of its pants.

The size of it, almost twice the size of his village in both directions, and taller than the tallest tree, even though much of it was buried into the earth, amazed him.

It had sounded louder than the thunder of the worse storm, when it had fallen from the night sky and dug itself into the ground. Its impact had been terrible, shaking the air and the ground repeatedly like a earthquake for a long span of time with many heavy and loud booming vibrations.

He could tell that a great fireball had shot out from it on all sides by the damage. The fire had blasted the bark off the massive trees near it, scorching and setting fire to the tender wood underneath as well as incinerating most of the surrounding underbrush and leaves. Then it had scorched the bark on those trees further behind them in a quarter mile radius.

When the fire destroyed the surrounding thick underbrush, it also killed and maimed many of the hapless animals that had been unlucky enough to be in the area when the thing came down from the sky. The closer he approached, the more burnt carcasses he saw of rabbits, squirrels, birds, and other small creatures, as well as several deer and a bear. If it had not been raining heavily, most of the forest would have been destroyed. He was grateful that the fire had not spread and rains had put it out.

He was the first to investigate what had fallen out of the sky. His people were afraid, frightened, and wanted nothing to do with the strange object from the sky. He was afraid too, but someone had to see what it was and why it was here.

He cautiously approached the strange object, keeping to the shadows and what underbrush there was. The day was hot, and the insects were annoying, biting at this bare bronzed skin and buzzing around his head. Though twigs and small branches caught in his long hair, and sharp-edged sticks and thorns cut his bare legs and arms, his curiosity was too aroused to notice any pain.

It did not take long to reach the edge of the fire-blackened forest and the edge of the deep-ragged pit. He had seen no movements, except those of the small, furred scavengers drawn to the scent of death, and blood investigating the scattered remains. Even his nose could smell that metallic, and cloying sweet odor hanging in the hot summer's air, as he drew nearer to the upturned earth.

He broke from cover and crept cautiously to the pit's edge and looked down. His mind did not have words for what he was seeing. It had been a huge bird, like those of legend that carried people in their bellies, or some great sky canoe. These were the closest concepts he could come to. For he could see that the strange object had carried people - but people unlike any that had ever been seen before.



He would have thought them to be animals if they had not been man-shaped and wearing strange dark clothes. They looked vaguely cat-lion-like, but with little fur, except on their heads, and no tails that he could see from his perspective. There were even odder looking beings mixed among them, that he could not begin to classify, some of which wore the strange clothes of the cat-people while others did not. There were some for which he couldn't see how any clothes could be fitted on their misshapen, multi-limbed forms, at all.

He stared at them for many long minutes, watching for any movement, listening for sounds. Though he could see no stirrings from where he squatted behind an overturned tree in its shadows, he could hear an occasional low moaning along with other odd sounds from the settling of the shiny thing as well as normal bird and animal noises.

In The Forest felt there was no danger, but he was still undecided whether or not he should investigate closer. He wanted a sign, any sign, that would indicate what he should do. Before he had embarked on this journey he had asked for guidance from the spirits and they had guided him here. Now he wished for their guidance again to know if he should go or stay.

His right hand gripped his leather totem bag decorated with strange mystical patterns worked in colored seed beads, bits of bone, feathers and fur. Feeling its comforting weight from the sacred objects inside, he asked the spirits to surround him with their protections and to give him the courage and wisdom he felt he needed for this task. He hoped the ancient ones who protected the great forest would protect him from any harm by these strange creatures and from whatever spirits guarded them.

As he made his silent prayers to the Creator, his thoughts were interrupted by a shrill cry from a hawk overhead. He looked up to see a red-tailed hunter dive down and swoop across the vast expanse of the pit only to land on the highest point of the shiny thing. They stared across the distance between at one another, then the bird nodded to him, and it took off as suddenly as it had appeared, seeming to vanish as it disappeared into the deep blueness of the midmorning sky. It was an omen as true as any he had ever had. His path was clear. He must go down.

He stood up and then walked carefully down the sloping edges of the pit. The soft dirt and rocks were loose under his feet, and he slid more than he walked down to the bottom of the pit that rose many man heights above him. He walked around the edges of the object, studying it and the bodies surrounding it from a safe distance, before working in closer. That took a while to see all the strange objects the thing had contained.

The bodies seemed thrown out of the object. There were large dark openings at ground level and above. The closer he got to the strangers he could see that they were men shaped with five fingers on their hands as he had. The strong cat-like cast to their features marked them as alien beings and not of his world, or of any of the spiritworlds known to his people.

He moved closer, drawn to stop and to study one of the cat-people who was partly hidden under an overhanging piece of metal torn from the hull of the ship. The stranger was definitely female, he thought, as looked over her small, but well curved form. She lay in the shadows, sprawled out on her back. He could not tell if she had been flung there or had made it to this shelter on her own.

She was very beautiful, in an odd, exotic way. The tip of the narrow upturned nose and the split upper lip was different from his, but the oval face shape with its high cheek bones was similar to his own. Though she was mud-splattered, he was intrigued by her strange pale skin coloring and her softly curling hair that was the golden color of high summer's grass. Her slightly slanted, deepset eyes under high golden arched brows were closed.

There was a dusting of light colored fur on her nose, though there was none elsewhere on her face. He could see through the many ripped places on her clothes that she had little hair on other parts of her definitely female body. Which was smaller in size, but no different than any other woman's.

There was something about her that stirred something in him. Something that no woman of his village ever had. There was a pull there, strong and powerful in his body and his heart. He didn't understand

how, but he knew her, knew that she was somehow linked to him. Belonged to him and he to her, always.

Then it hit him - the dreams. The dreams he had tried to dismiss because they were so fantastic - unbelievable, because of the girl with the cat face who had haunted those rather erotic dreams - was the girl that lay on the ground before him. His eyes grew wide in shock because he could not believe she was real, yet seeing her still form he knew it was so. He could only pray that she was sleeping, not dead. She couldn't be dead - not now.

Some impulse prompted him to touch her face. It was warm! Warm beneath his touch and not from the sun. He put a finger under her nose he could feel warm air brush against it. She was alive, he realized with relief. Not dead, just unconscious.

Cautiously, he put a hand where he thought her heart, if she had one, would be. There was a heartbeat, odd, but unmistakable as was her breathing. He sat back on his heels to think what to do next.

He wondered how many of the bodies scattered around were actually alive, unconscious like her? Should he check them all, or just let them alone to wake up by themselves, or not wake up on their own?

The other females didn't seem threatening, but somehow the massively built males did. Both sexes had claws instead of fingernails and teeth like a wildcat's - but most of their teeth were like his. It was just their long pointed fangs that were different. His uncle had teeth like that, so they did not appear so strange to him.

They were not animals - that much he was sure about. Animals don't use and make tools, nor wear clothes.

This had been their flying bird, their traveling village through the skies, he decided, to have held so many of them inside. One part of him felt that he should leave them alone, but the other side, the stronger side, told him to help them despite his fears.

He had brought no water with him, but he had noticed some deep pools of fresh rainwater nearby. He found some bits of loose cloth in the wreckage and wet them in one of the pools. He had barely put the cool rag on the female's face when her bright green eyes popped open and she saw him and screamed. A very loud human scream to his ears at least.

He jumped back several paces and she jumped back too, warily regarding him, but not screaming. Her fangs were bared, and she growled low in her throat. He was confused now - was she or wasn't she an animal?

Then she spoke, or at least he thought it was speech. Her voice was lilting, musical with a slight lisp. "What are you? Human? Who are you? Where am I? Where are the others?" she asked him repeatedly in Atanzi, and several other galactic languages, to get only puzzled looks from the human male warily regarding her.

She had seen pictures of humans before in the library files, but never up close. She was frightened, scared, and unnerved by not only her surroundings, but by him as well. He had a very unsettling effect on her, that she could not name or define, like somehow she knew him, but that was impossible. She had never seen a human let alone met one before.

He shook his head at her words, pointed to his ears, and replied in his tongue, "tak-ta'nee, ka-kuh-ka-ta'tum?" 'I don't understand, what do you want?'

The exchange was frustrating to both of them. He tried again, pointing to himself, "Day'kay-ning, Day'kay-ning," which translated would mean 'In The Forest'. She stared at him dumbly for several minutes while he repeated his pantomime. Then comprehension dawned on him.

"It's your name! Day'kay-ning is your name!" she exclaimed, smiling happily. She pointed to herself.

"O'vettun, O'vettun," she said repeating it over and over.

"O-vett-un," he said finally, struggling with the unfamiliar syllables and looked at her for confirmation that he had said it right. She nodded. They had at least begun to communicate.

She studied him as he looked her over in return. He was young, close to her age, she guessed. Tall as an Atanzi male, but hairless all over except for his long almost waist length blue-black mane of hair, that he wore braided with leather cords in front and that flowed loose in back. His hair was then held in place by a red, black, and yellow beaded leather headband across his high forehead.

His face was handsome, with high-chiseled cheekbones, a long straight nose, and a set of full sensuous lips that held a hint of good humor over a square-cut hairless chin. His warm, dark brown slightly-slanted eyes were sparkling with intelligence and curiosity under heavy arched black brows.

The human's reddish-bronze skin was flawless. He was very masculine in a way that took her breath away and caused responses in her she hadn't known were possible. Her eyes couldn't help but roam admiringly over his powerful arms, legs, and broad chest, that were well-muscled and sharply defined. She hadn't known that human males could be this attractive or interesting. Nor had she been aware until now how closely they resembled Atanzi males. She somehow liked the lack of hair on his beautiful body.

In The Forest's only clothing was a narrow strip of plain, soft, dark brown leather between his legs held up by a thick leather cord that overhung to make a long apron of sorts front and back. She also noticed the hand-made stone knife he wore in its sheath, attached to his waist thong within his easy grasp. On his feet, he wore decorated low boots and around his neck hung a small leather bag decorated with clear stones and feathers.

He may not have been Atanzi, but he was definitely male. Normally, other beings didn't interest her, but this one did. There was a smoldering sensuality to him, that was bothering her more than she wanted to admit, upon a first meeting. Judging by the way he was staring at her, he was similarly affected by her.

O'vettun roused herself out of her thoughts and began taking stock of her surroundings. She looked around and saw the bodies. She couldn't tell whether they were alive or dead. Many of them she didn't know personally. She had worked in environmental engineering and had been sent to get some equipment from stores, when the ship had been hit. She still wasn't sure how she had survived, but she had.

She turned back to the waiting human who was watching her intently. "How long ago did we crash?" she asked and pointed to the sky and then ship and made sounds like an explosion.

He understood after a while what she was asking or at least he hoped he did. He held up his hands and pointed to the sun and made his arms arc in a circle from east to west.

She nodded, comprehending. A day then. The ship had been crashed for at least a day. She wondered if she was the first to wake, looking around and seeing only herself and the human. As she looked over the area she could see from the shadow of her shelter, she supposed she must be.

Her empty stomach was telling her that it had been a while since she had eaten and her mouth felt very dry. Food and water were going to be a problem for a while. She couldn't tell from the wreckage what part of the ship she was outside and where the ship's mess had been, providing there was any food that could be salvaged from there.

These were seemingly simple problems she and her fellows had never really had to cope with. Thousands of years of protected, pampered civilization had not given her people the skills to deal with what she knew lay before them. This was something that might happen to a ship, but only in theory, not actuality - wasn't it?

She sat in the dirt, just looking around blindly. Her arms wrapped around her knees trying to figure out

what she should do next. Should she try seeing who was alive and waking them, or try finding food and water, or try exploring the ship for other survivors? In her state of shock, she wasn't sure which alternative was what she should do first. There were too many possibilities, too many choices - it was just too damn overwhelming! She couldn't help it when the tears began to fall hotly down her cheeks.

She looked up, startled, when she felt the gentle hand upon her shoulder. It was the human. His eyes held compassion for her, like he really understood what the problem was.

"Thank you, I'll be all right," she told him. She could see he didn't understand her words, but he did understand the meaning.

He stepped back and pointed to the Atanzis still lying on the ground. He made gestures that seem to be asking if they should be wakened. He stared at her expectantly, waiting to see what she wanted to do. She nodded, and wiped the tears off on her sleeve then got up and began the task of going from body to body searching for signs of life, while the human walked among the bodies nearby searching too to help her.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

In The Forest watched the strange woman as she moved among her own kind, going from one to another after checking for signs of life. The majority of those in the pit were dead, as they soon discovered. It was a frustrating and heartbreaking job, made more so by the rising heat of the day and the swarming insects that had descended on them.

The strange creatures he saw among the bodies of the cat-people, he did not attempt to awaken or get near. A few were so unhealthy-looking, and alien to his eyes in color, shape, and oddity of limbs that he did not want to see such creatures walking around, regardless of how intelligent they might have been. Luckily, to his relief, none of the really bizarre ones had survived the crash, although he felt guilt for feeling that way, knowing that the Great Spirit would not be happy with such thoughts. All life was sacred, no matter what its outward form.

O'vettun noticed his hesitation in touching the more alien creatures. She understood. It took great nerve for her to do so herself, even though she knew the non-Atanzi members of the crew had been harmless and she had worked closely with several of the species she saw dead upon the ground. She took over to check the former scientists and specialists they found relatively intact.

When In The Forest found a cat-person that showed signs of life, he would call O'vettun over and have her awaken them. Already, he had found three to her one. Only a few were able to sit up and move around immediately. Though a few had revived on their own, when they heard her scream. From the other side of the ship, four of them had attempted to come to her rescue as soon as they were able.

They had arrived angry, upset, and disoriented, looking at In The Forest dangerously. O'vettun had planted herself in front of the native when the three burly males tried to approach him. It took repeated assurances from her to stop them from harming him, but finally she got through to them and they relaxed. They were still suspicious, but they allowed him to stay and help with the search for survivors.

Many of the survivors were like a young male they found, who looked around frantically at first when he saw where he was, and then talked rapid fire in the cat-person's language, gesturing, while the woman tried to calm him with both words and touch.

When he saw In The Forest, the male's golden eyes grew wide, and he seemed to repeat a word over and over, "Rumnulska, Rumnulska!" while the woman shook her head negatively, and talked persistently and firmly to him, until the wildness left his eyes.

Finally, the young male calmed, accepting his situation and the presence of the human. Although he watched In The Forest with wary, suspicious eyes, until he saw that the human was going to keep his distance.

When he had recovered enough, he too got up to help the woman search through the dead for survivors as well. It was long, hot, painful work, for all of them, going from body to body, for there were so many of them. It was like a battlefield after a battle, In The Forest thought looking over the carnage.

Stopping for a moment to wipe the sweat off his face, he looked over next to the front of the ship and noticed that several of the people were digging a deep hole in the softened earth using large curved pieces of the star canoe. Other persons had fashioned litters and were moving the dead to a spot near the edge of the hole. Those were actions he could understand. It confirmed his belief in their humanity. Though he did note that they had made separate holes for the very strange ones to be buried in, rather than burying all the dead together.

He wondered what had happened to bring them to this place and what the strange words that the young male had said meant, and why he was so afraid. Until he could understand their words, the answers to those questions would have to wait. The more the cat people talked in their language, the more he felt shut out and alone.

In The Forest looked up and saw that the sun was sinking lower and lower in the sky. They would not have long to look and there were still many bodies to be checked, as well as moved. It was going to take longer than they had light because the bodies were scattered. Too many, though, were so mangled and torn apart that it was difficult for many of the searchers not to get sick. Reluctantly, they all kept working despite the sun and the rising stench, to separate the living from the dead and to move the dead away.

He wondered how long it had been since they had eaten and what they did eat. He had seen no evidence of hunting weapons, or even of knives, on any of the bodies or in the wreckage. It was an odd thought that hit him watching them, did they even know how to hunt, or take care of themselves in the woods? If he did not understand the things he saw with them, did they understand his world and the creatures in it? He didn't think they did, by their amazed looks at the trees, the sky, and the birds flying overhead. They jumped at every sound they heard, whether it was bird, animal, or insect. Even the wind rustling in the trees gave them pause.

They had not seen anything like this place before, that much he was sure of by their reactions. Being out in the opened seemed to frighten them. As soon as the strangers were able to they moved to places where pieces of the shiny walls overhung the ground and huddled in the shadows looking fearfully at everything beyond their pitiful shelters.

He had felt their eyes upon him, watching him, covertly of course, when he wasn't looking. He understood he must appear as strange to them as they were to him. He had seen only a few peoples similar to him in the rubble although their skins were bluish and they had snow colored hair. They were all dead.

He wondered where O'vettun was and finally he saw her far across the pit, on the other side of a large shiny box that had thick colored strings and clear stiff things coming out of it. He followed her and saw her pause by a group of bodies by the burial pit. She must have known some of them by her pained expressions and her tears.

There was a note of tenderness and familiarity in her voice, as she spoke in a low voice as she stopped and squatted down by one of the dead males, a large one with reddish hair. She lifted the large furred hands and placed them across the male's chest. Her final act was to kiss the cheek of the dead cat-man, then she hurriedly got up and walked away, with tears streaming from her eyes. Her mate most likely, or almost mate, In The Forest thought, after she walked on going over to talk to three of the females standing in the shadows of the sky canoe.

Then it struck him what else was odd about these people. He had seen no little ones, no children, only adults. There were a few young adults, but nowhere were there any real children considering the number and types of strange people he had seen, nor had he seen any obviously pregnant females.

Most of the people were warm-blooded like him, and shaped like him, so they must mate similarly too, he thought. This was indeed a strangeness he could not comprehend because these strangers surely mated, but where were their offspring? Maybe they left them at home, like those that went on the warparties or long journeys did? Where their children were was one of a growing number of questions he was beginning to have that he wanted answered, when he could talk with these peoples.

The blonde cat-woman, O'vettun, continued to walk through the rubble, looking, touching, crying. Occasionally, she would call across the distances between her and the others, in tones that suggested she wanted them to do things. He would see some of them move and do as she had asked. It was becoming evident that she was only one in charge. None of the others seemed to be willing to assume that responsibility.

O'vettun ordered two males to go into in of the large gaping dark holes in the shiny thing. They did not return for a long time. When they finally returned empty-handed, shaking their heads, she then ordered them to try the other openings. Evidently there was something in there she wanted, but by their reactions when they returned, they could not get in.

He noticed several of the more able-bodied cat-persons beginning to search the wreckage more closely, lifting objects to get at things beneath. He looked up from checking a body when one of them yelled excitedly and held something up for the others to see. They were excited too. The male who had it smiled, then pointed it at one of the trees on the edge of the pit and a narrow beam of light sprang out and caught the bark of the tree on fire.

The power of the small object frightened In The Forest, and he sank down quickly to the ground in awe-stricken fear looking at the burning spot on the tree. They were Gods! They had to be! Only the Gods could call the lightning up from nowhere and destroy things like that, not men. He was now very confused because Gods didn't bleed red blood into the dirt, couldn't be hurt or be mangled, didn't die, and didn't feel pain from their injuries and their losses. Were these people Gods, or were they only mortal like himself? He wished he knew.

He heard O'vettun's furious sounding raised voice. She was storming over to the male, the anger plain on her face, and took the firestick right out of the surprised male's hand. He looked at her dumbly, and asked her something. Apparently, she did not like his response. She lit into him so much in such venomous tones, that he cringed away from her scolding. The other cat people tried to look away and he caught what he thought what must be laughter from them.

O'vettun made those who were able to get around to get up from where they sat and keep searching. One of the search parties that had gone into the shiny thing came out carrying several large bundles wrapped in dark shiny fabric of some kind. The waiting group stopped their activities and rushed to meet them.

O'vettun then went over and supervised the distribution of the packets. The cat people tore into them eagerly, manners and restraint forgotten as they gulped down the food and water rations inside the field packs they had found in one of the transporter chambers, along with extra suits and weapons.

The human watched from a distance, not wanting to disturb their meal. Their eating reminded him of his own needs. He would have to leave to go hunting and make camp for the night. Somehow, he was strangely reluctant to do so - the cat people were too interesting to leave. He decided to make camp on the rim of the pit, close enough to watch, and far enough away for safety. He didn't fear these people, but he didn't like taking chances either.

For taking care of his own food needs, he had noticed a nest of squirrels in one of the trees back towards his village, or he could snare a rabbit. He had left his bow and arrows hidden in a tree up on the rim. Deciding that they would be occupied for a while he started to leave. He was walking away when he heard running footsteps behind him. He turned and he saw O'vettun trying to catch up to him.

"Day'kay-ning, Day'kay-ning?" she called, running up to him, puzzlement on her faintly feline face.

She reached out and grabbed his arm, being careful not to scratch or hurt him with her claws.

She was stronger than she looked, he realized, for such a small thing, even though he towered over her by a head and a half. She was shaking her head no, and pulling him back towards her people. She wanted him to stay. Her eyes were soft and pleading, he found himself wanting to lose himself in those green depths but he knew he couldn't allow himself to, not yet.

He pointed to the trees making hunting and eating motions. She seemed to understand all but the hunting part. He then emphasized the eating part. Her eyes lit up and she smiled.

"Food, you want to go get food! Wait, we have some," she told him, hooking an arm around his and dragging him back with her.

He gave in and let her lead him to the watching group of cat-people. She let go of him, then went to where the packs were piled. Getting one of them from the small pile she put it in his hands. In The Forest looked at it dumbly, not sure what to do with it or even how to open it. There were no visible ties or bindings as he turned it over and over, looking for an opening. He handed it back. She looked hurt.

One of the women said something and her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. She must have been told that he didn't know how to open it. She showed him. It was easy once he saw her do it. Inside there were long round hard gray things, small square shiny stiff packages, and other strange colored and shaped objects, as well as what he recognized as one of the fire sticks which she quickly took away. He pretended not to notice, understanding her caution.

There was a suit like she wore on the bottom of the package. He touched it. It was soft like the finest skin and thin and very light weight as if it were made of feathers or spun cobwebs. If it was woven, it was finer than anything his people could do or imagine. He drew it out of the heavier strange sack, marveling at its compactness and the silky feel of it against his bare skin. There were two pieces - a top and a bottom, leggings - pants of some kind, he realized. It was too warm for clothes, so he set them aside. He studied the other objects, but he didn't understand them or the strange little symbols on them.

O'vettun took the round canisters and the square ones from the pack and began opening them by twisting on one end of them. He recognized food smells. He couldn't identify any of the foods by smell or sight, but they smelled interesting. He dipped a finger in each one, testing them. The foods were hot, as if they had been cooked over a fire. They were a bit spicy and salty, but edible, he decided as he sank to the ground to sit cross-legged to eat.

He ate sparingly at first, checking for reactions. There were none. It was some type of vegetable substance he decided, not meat, and it was filling and good. A thick yellow liquid in another container didn't smell right so he passed on it. There was a sort of long sweet roll, he ate that too, feeling more full than he had in a while.

The cat-people were trying to feign indifference, but he knew they were watching him as he ate, noting his reactions. In The Forest decided they were not being impolite, only curious. They wanted to see if he could eat their food and if he could, then maybe they could eat his. He smiled to himself. If I were in their moccasins, I'd do the same.

It would be getting dark soon, he noticed, the sun was setting quickly. None of them had made a move to prepare for the coming night, maybe they didn't know how to. He could see and feel the small group's nervousness, as they watched the darkening evening sky with some fear. Beyond the pit could be heard the calls and rustlings of the night animals as they began to stir and the sounds of the day ones as they prepared to settle down to sleep. They knew there was danger, but not how to cope with it.

There were thirty-five of the people, twenty-three males and twelve females including O'vettun. They huddled around and just inside one of the large gaping holes that opened into the interior of the ship.

They had gathered cushions and heavy woven coverings from the debris, making a camp of sorts. But none of them had thought to gather wood to make a fire.

For some reason they were looking to him and to O'vettun to see what to do next. He could tell she wasn't sure how to protect her people from the night, or even what to expect. No, they were not used to being outside like this. The more he observed, the more sure he was of that. This was all too new and strange for them.

For all the amazing things they had made and could use, the simple things of living were beyond them. They were as helpless in this world as a young child. They would need his help if they were to make it through the night. Before it got too dark to see they would have to gather wood for a fire.

Getting up, he gestured to two of the males to help him. "Kata'tee, Ka-ta'tee," he asked, indicating that he wanted them to follow him and help.

They looked at him, puzzled, and looked to O'vettun to see if she understood. "I think he wants you to follow him and help him with something," she explained to them. "He's been very helpful to us so far and seems to know what we need better than we do. I think he wants you to go with him to get something. I would."

"You think that's it?" the one called L'lplon asked suspiciously. He was a big male with a brownish mane and gold eyes, who had worked in security.

"Yes, this is his world, he knows how to survive in it - we don't. I think we should follow his suggestions," she replied, looking around at the blues, pinks, purples and golds in the sky.

"If I understand what he wants, I think he wants to help us build a fire. I don't know how cold the nights get, but the temperature is dropping and the predators are being drawn by our dead. A fire will keep them away and us warm," O'vettun suggested.

"Okay, O'vettun, we'll go with the human and help him, so far he acts all right." T'quttdun, a younger blondish male from technical data agreed, getting up from the ground. The two Atanzi males were larger in girth than the human, though height-wise they were similar. Their uniforms were damaged in many places, so that their greater hairiness was apparent.

The two Atanzi males walked over to where the human waited, and gestured for him to lead on. He led them up the sides of the pit to the forest where the wood was more plentiful. They soon caught on to what he wanted and gathered large armfuls of fallen tree branches and sticks as well as dried grass.

The human could tell that the forest unnerved them. The Atanzis jumped at every little sound and noise. Their eyes tracked the dark depths of the underbrush constantly and their hands would move quickly in reflex to their waists, where In The Forest suspected they carried their firesticks. Luckily, it did not take long to gather what they needed. Their arms were overflowing when they went back to the waiting people.

In The Forest directed them to put the wood down in a pile. He selected several pieces and some dry tinder then sat down cross-legged on the ground. He put a long thin stick on top of a fat flat one, he began to twirl the long stick between his hands making up and down motions very quickly. The friction from the sticks were causing the larger piece of wood to smolder and catch fire. As soon as he got a spark going, he quickly added the tinder and had a small fire going before the Atanzis' amazed eyes.

There were a few in the crowd that wondered why someone hadn't started the fire with one of their stunners, but O'vettun silenced them with a hard look and they quickly shut up.

"Tay'pee!" In The Forest announced proudly with a flourish at his handiwork. His generous mouth was lit with a wide smile. Then he sat back on his heels and waited to see what they would do.

O'vettun squatted down next to him asking, "Tay'pee?" as she pointed to the fire. In The Forest nodded approvingly, and repeated the word.



"Tay'pee, must be his word for fire," O'vettun told the others, trying to understand his words so they could talk. "Fire," she told the human. "Tay'pee - fire. Both are the same."

So far they had not been able to find any translating devices in the wreckage. The stranger would either have to learn their language, or they would have to learn his. So far, he was being the teacher, not them.

"Fire?" he repeated understanding that the strange word was their word for fire. "Fire - Tay'pee kweh!" he replied.

"O'vettun?" he asked, pointing to the other Atanzis sitting nearby. "O'vettun-wuk?"

That took her a minute. "I am O'vettun," she said, pointing to herself. "They - we are Atanzi, A-tan-zi," she pointed to her fellows sweeping wide to encompass everyone.

He nodded, "Atanzi. Lay'nee Lay-na'pay," he replied, pointing to himself and then beyond the fire to where his village lay.

O'vettun caught on and so did some of the others. He was not alone. There were others out there of his kind. It really hadn't hit them until then that he might not be alone. Where there was one human, there would be others.

None of the survivors around the fire knew the background of this planet, how primitive, or how developed its people were. But judging from this human, they were more to the primitive side. However, they were intelligent enough to understand what had been discovered over the millennia to be universal concepts and some advanced ideas as well.

The native had been smart enough to understand how much the Atanzis were out of their natural environment, and how helpless they were in his. Curiously enough, he was also treating them as equals, not like they were some gods or superbeings, as they might have expected. He was perceptive enough to see that they were people, just a little different from himself.

His people could prove useful. O'vettun knew they couldn't stay here in the wreckage of the ship. They needed more permanent shelter. They would be sitting ducks if the Rumnulka returned to finish them off. That was always a possibility. She needed to convince Day'kay-ning to take them back to his people or at least take them to a place where they could survive on their own.

She began by asking him how far it was to his people.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

"That's the last of them, sir," Tanz W'rett reported, as he helped the last person through the engineering access tube and he turned to face his Asenti.

"That's all?" Ky'tulendu questioned, as he counted the survivors gathered in the corridor outside of the bridge. The ratio of living to dead appalled and depressed him.

"Yes, Asenti, that's all. If there are any more we can't find or get to them right now," W'rett replied with deep regret as he helped the injured crewman to a place to sit.

Ky'tulendu just shook his head and looked over the remains of his crew. Out of a crew of over four hundred, only a hundred and fifty-three Atanzi had been found alive along with seven Tranrils, and five Soaetts. Luckily, there were few that were going to die because of injuries. B'tunku's medical crew had immediately gone to work on the worst of the injured and had the situation under control.

What Ky'tulendu feared most was that there were more alive in the bowels of the ship that they couldn't reach. They were finding too many corridors dead-ended because of collapsed superstructures and cave-ins, or discovering access ways welded shut either by the heat of re-entry into the atmosphere or by landing stresses. Then in the deeper levels, many of the corridors had been filled by dirt, rocks, and water.

He didn't want to think of those dying in some dark, airless hole within the ship and possibly within

reach, if only someone had had the time and equipment to get them out in time. He was thankful for every crewperson he did find alive, and he mourned each one he had lost or was going to lose. He wondered too how many of the bodies he had seen outside were alive or dead. As soon as they could get the living out, then they would begin burying the dead outside. He wanted the ship cleaned out so he could send in salvage crews to strip it of all usable wiring and components.

He had people hunting for usable equipment and supplies and they had turned up a wealth of it from the science and medical labs. He had also ordered that all personal cabins be stripped for clothing and bedding. With stores gone, they were going to need every salvagable item they could lay their hands on.

No matter where they had landed on this planet, they were going to have to rely on themselves and live in primitive conditions. He feared that few among his crew were up to that. Even with ConFleet survival training, he feared that most of them were too civilized and pampered to adapt to this uncivilized and primitive world.

He had the computer techs download every file they could access, before the backup power went off and the main computers went down completely. He had them put the downloaded files on data cartridges for later retrieval with the small record/scan units. What they needed immediately, he had ordered hard copies made of flexible synthetic sheets and bound into portable compact notebooks.

In particular, he had the file pulled on this planet and maps made so they could locate where they had come down. Remembering what he had read about the varying levels of development of the differing manlike civilizations spread across the planet, he sincerely hoped they had landed in one of the less civilized areas. If the civilized people were as intolerant as he thought they were, his people were in real danger once they stepped outside. He made sure everyone was armed with a stunner and carried a communicator. He wished he could have them all carry translators, but there weren't enough to go around.

He also had his crew retrieve and find every power cell they could get. He didn't think they could make replacement cells or devise alternate sources of power for the equipment. Without the ship and its systems intact, they weren't going to have the comforts they were used to, or their high levels of technology, after the machine died from lack of power or their components wore out.

He had no hope of rescue by ConFleet or the Confederation. They were alone, stranded on a primitive planet far within enemy territory, with a war starting that would block off all access to this sector. If his messages had gotten through before they had entered Rumnulskan territory, then someone would know what had happened to his ship and the T'swaquill. If they hadn't gotten through, then ConFleet wouldn't know to look for them here.

These thoughts he kept to himself. He would let his people think that help was coming and it was only a matter of time, while in reality they would be setting up a permanent long-time outpost on this planet. Probe reports had not indicated that the Rumnulskans were using this planet, or its inhabitants. He just hoped it stayed that way, so they could avoid detection.

Idly, he did wonder where they had come down. The planet was not as large as the homeworld, but it was closer to the sun. It had a wide range of climates and environments, more so than he was used to. His brief view outside showed a forest, not a jungle. The air had been almost hot, but the report he had seen showed that the temperature could vary from very hot to very cold, according to the season and where one was on the planet.

Their two main problems, once they left the shelter of the ship, was going to be food and water, and some sort of dry, warm shelters. Many of his crew had argued already that they could live in the ship, but he had to forcefully remind them that the Rumnulskans could melt this ship to molten slag, with them in it, at any time. That killed any further protests that might have been made.

"Sir, we're ready," W'rett said coming up to him. The younger dark-haired male had changed to a heavier uniform with jacket, field back pack, weapons, and hand tools dangling from his belt. He had

made all of the crew that could, change from their lightweight ship's uniform to landing party gear, on the Asenti's orders.

"All right, let's move out." Ky'tulendu ordered his people.

"Go in single file. Security personnel out first, followed by tech and computer services, then sciences, then all others. We'll assemble outside the ship. Stay together and don't wander off on your own. If you find survivors outside, help them. Do not use your weapons for any reason. The dominant intelligent lifeforms are humans, do not attempt contact - leave them alone. Does everyone understand?" he asked.

There were nods and a few yes' heard over the sounds of people moving themselves and equipment. They moved out, going up the two access hatch ladders. Ky'tulendu wished there was an easier way out, but so far none had been found as they explored the accessible levels within the ship.

Their harder tasks were going to be getting the injured and all the equipment out. After the personnel were out then they could burn an opening through the hull. He didn't dare risk it with his people still inside. Making holes in the hull was going to be the only way to get the heavier vehicles and machinery out, with the doors to the hanger bays frozen shut.

They had found three skimmers, two all terrain vehicles, and four long distance scout flyers so far that had survived the crash in one of the bays. The other bay could not be accessed. Judging from where they had encountered the wall of dirt in their explorations, he suspected both bays were partially buried. Ky'tulendu had ordered what portable diggers had been found to be taken outside after they were evacuated, so that work could begin immediately to free the ships and transports.

He had ordered all translators be found and distributed among the crew, especially with security, command, and some of the science and medical departments. He wanted to keep any possible misunderstandings in language and customs down to a minimum.

He remembered from the reports how touchy the natives were about perceived differences. Their appearance alone could get them killed in many parts of this new world.

"W'rett, Vokolin, do you think you can handle getting the crew out from here?" he asked, wanting to go out first to check out the local conditions and to organize the crew when they got out.

"No problem, sir." Vokolin replied. "The communications are working. I'll call if we have any problems here."

"Good, one of us needs to get things organized outside. It's going to be a long couple of days for everyone. Make sure everyone had a weapon, a communicator, and a survival pack with extra rations. Food and water are going to be the main problems after shelter," Ky'tulendu reminded her, checking his own gear, including an added knife and a climbing rope.

He entered the narrow access tube and began climbing, moving past the two security guards, waiting by the entrance to the outer hatch. They moved back against the sides to allow him to pass.

He could feel the cool morning air as he neared the opening, after the stuffy humidity of the ship, it was refreshing. The sky was a dark blue sprinkled with tiny points of light - stars he realized as he got closer to the top. It had been early day when he had gone above before, now it was night.

Had that much time elapsed since he had gone back below? More, he thought, because the sky was beginning to lighten in the east with streaks of pink and pale blue shades. He didn't want to think how long it had been since they had landed, but he guessed they were entering their second or third day.

The sounds of the nightbirds and other unknown creatures reached his ears. It was a magical moment for him, more so than when he had briefly seen what had happened to his ship. He stood in the hatchway for a moment, just taking in the impressions he was receiving of the new world. He should feel scared, afraid, instead he felt excited, anxious, and like he was already home in some strange way.

It was an odd feeling, one he had never had on any world before. It reinforced the feelings he had felt when he was given this assignment. That he was fulfilling some sort of destiny, or plan - that he was here for a reason yet unknown. Odd, very odd, he thought to himself, as he hoisted himself out of the hatch opening.

Ky'tulendu's hard-soled shoes rang loudly against the metal surface as he walked across the hull going towards the edge of the bridge section, to see the damage to the rest of his ship more closely and to find a way down. It was almost too dark to see much of anything even with his eyes.

He could hear security coming out behind him and across the wide brim of the hull, the other group was beginning to emerge from the other hatch. Security joined him as he walked along the edge.

There were several possibilities, but most required that someone do a number of jumps down and then find suitable materials to build ramps for the other, less able personnel to walk on. There was enough loose material out there to do the job, if they could get at it.

A strange arid smell whiffed past his nose, it took him a moment to recognize it - smoke - wood smoke, he decided. Someone had built a fire nearby! It wasn't a forest fire. That danger seemed to be over. The trees that he had observed burning earlier evidently had burnt themselves out, he noticed in relief.

His hopes rose with the smell of that smoke. There were two choices, survivors, he hoped, or what he didn't want to see, a delegation from the local population. He wasn't ready for that. If they could, he wanted to avoid the local humans.

"HELLO, IS THERE ANYONE OUT THERE?" Ky'tulendu called out, suddenly, his rich voice echoing loudly across the open glade and bouncing off the tall trees that ringed the crash pit.

His sudden action shocked the security guards, who looked at their Asenti like he had lost his mind. They were supposed to be keeping a low profile, weren't they? At least that's what the regulations had said on planetary landings in unknown territory. But their landing hadn't been regulation either ... and he was the Asenti.

Ky'tulendu stood there outlined in the pale blue light and just grinned at them. "It's the start of a new world. Thought I'd wake it up." Then more seriously he said, "If there are survivors out there, I want them to know that we're here. We need to find out who started that fire and where it's at."

"Want me to check, sir?" One of them asked.

"Yes, and find a way down. We can't stay here," he said, turning to take the time to watch the colors of this new world's sunrise through the trees. There was much he could get to like about this world, he thought contentedly to himself.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

Outside, huddled in a shelter made from pieces of metal placed around one of the gaping holes in the ship's side, O'vettun's group was still sleeping. The sky was just beginning to lighten in the east, with the promise of clear weather. The nightbirds and the early risers were beginning their contests of song in the cool air. The fire had burned down but was still going, having been fed occasionally by the two sentries that O'vettun had put on watch, but they too were asleep from exhaustion.

In The Forest woke up, his wildness bred senses suddenly on alert. He had heard noises coming from on top of the shiny thing - footsteps - someone walking on its surface. More than one somebody, with heavy moccasins like the strangers wore. He reached over and woke O'vettun.

"What?" she said, coming out of her deep sleep, not realizing who was shaking her.

"Leave me alone, I want to sleep!" she protested, trying to roll back over and bury herself into her warm nest of blankets.

But In The Forest would not let her. "I said ...!" then she stopped, seeing who it was.

The human was gesturing upwards towards the ship, and put his finger to his lips and cupped his ear in the direction of the ship, indicating that she should do likewise. She did, sitting very still. In the early morning quietness she could hear what he heard, many footsteps ringing loudly on the hull of the ship far above them.

She jumped when she heard Ky'tulendu's shout, asking if anyone was out there. The two camp guards jumped too, waking up suddenly, looking around frantically, and drawing their weapons on reflex.

"Don't! Put them away!" she told them both and they did, shame-faced at their reactions.

"Answer him, somebody. Let them know we're down here!" she quickly ordered them. "Get out where they can see you, fools!"

"Yes, sir!" one of them replied anxiously, running towards the edge of the pit where he could be seen by those on top.

"We're here! WE'RE HERE!" he shouted, waving his arms and jumping up and down to draw their attention. One of the guards on top spotted him, and waved back.

"O'vettun, they've seen me, now what?" he asked her, looking to her for directions. He was young and unexperienced at handling situations like this.

She walked to where he stood, her blonde hair very sleep ruffled, and feeling very groggy. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders for the chill. In The Forest was similarly clad, as he followed her to see the newcomers.

"Atanzi?" he asked in her language, pointing up.

"Atanzi? Yes, I hope so," she replied, nodding hopefully to him, as she tried to see who and how many people there were.

"WHO IS UP THERE?" she asked, shouting. Hoping her voice was loud enough to carry the distance. It echoed just like the Asenti's had across the hollow.

"ASENTI KY'TULENDU AND SUVIVORS FROM THE SHIP!" the Asenti shouted back. "AND WHO ARE YOU?"

"ENGINEERING SPECIALIST O'VETTUN, AND THIRTY-FIVE SURVIVORS PLUS ONE HUMAN NATIVE WITH US, SIR," she replied, feeling his shock. Although she didn't understand whether it was because of the small number of people with her, or because of the native, or both.

"THIRTY FIVE? IS THAT ALL THAT MADE IT OUT HERE?" Ky'tulendu asked, finally after a long pause.

"THAT'S ALL WE'VE BEEN ABLE TO FIND SO FAR, SIR."

"YOU HAVE A NATIVE WITH YOU? WHERE DID IT COME FROM?" he asked, not liking them having made contact so soon.

"UNKNOWN. HE FOUND US AND HE HAS BEEN HELPING US TAKE CARE OF THE SURVIVORS AND GET US THROUGH THE NIGHT. HE DOESN'T WANT TO LEAVE US FOR SOME REASON."

"I'LL ACCEPT THAT. WE'LL DISCUSS THE HUMAN LATER, SPECIALIST O'VETTUN. IS THERE A WAY DOWN FROM HERE?" he asked.

"NOT FROM THAT ANGLE, TRY GOING ABOUT THIRTY LSSNS TO YOUR LEFT. THERE'S SOME METAL BUCKLED UP THAT YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO USE AS A RAMP TO GET DOWN," O'vettun suggested, watching the small figures on the curved bridge hull move about, searching for a way down.

Meanwhile, In The Forest had been watching and listening to the exchange. He saw what they needed and went to find materials to make a ladder. He found some long and short lengths of heavy

pipes, material to make bindings from and began to start roping the makeshift ladder pieces together. One of the Atanzis saw what he was doing and joined him. When the ladder was completed, the two carried it to the side of the ship and held it up so that the people on top could grab it and pull it up to them.

"You were objecting about the human, Asenti?" O'vettun commented sardonically, with a raised eyebrow and a cross-armed stance, as he came down the ladder.

Ky'tulendu carefully looked from her to the red-skinned human and back. She was evidently the official leader of this group, with the native her second-in-command. The man seemed to understand their needs better than they did. That ladder was evidence of quick, original thinking.

He would have been cautious in dealing with this situation. This was not anything he had anticipated.

"So he found you, you said. Unconscious?" Ky'tulendu asked, trying to get a picture of what had happened.

"Yes, we all were. Day'kay-ning told me that we were out for at least a day," she replied, relaxing her stiff pose a little, but she drew her blanket closer around her to ward off the morning's chill.

"He - Day'kay-ning, told you? You have a translator?" the Asenti asked, looking the native over carefully and noting his almost naked appearance and his clothes made of animal skins. Ky'tulendu noted he was being assessed just as carefully, and he seemed to have been approved as acceptable by the native.

"No, Asenti, we haven't been able to find out. He talks in his own language and with gestures. We've been making each other understand. Did you find any translators?" she asked hopefully.

"We did. But you know ConFleet's regulations about interfering or showing ourselves to less developed species," Ky'tulendu reminded her.

She laughed, "Sir, his whole village heard and saw us crash. I sincerely doubt if we could keep our existence secret after that, nor are we likely to just blend in. We are rather different in physical appearance," O'vettun argued logically. "I'm frankly glad that the natives are friendly and helpful, or at least this one is," she defended.

"Specialist, I am your superior officer," he said, not liking her attitude. He needed to maintain discipline.

"I don't think that's going to count for very much here, sir, after we get settled, and we are going to be settlers. We won't be getting rescued, because no one knows we're here, right, sir?" she asked, watching his expression change fractionally.

"Yes, but I'd rather you keep that to yourself. Some of the crew is not handling the situation too well, but you, on the other hand, seem to have adapted quickly," he said harshly.

She smiled again, ignoring his anger. "I'm from one of the out-colonies. My family were farmers and our farm was surrounded by woods and lots of game animals. I grew up learning the old skills, hunting, fishing, and farmcrafts. This is more primitive than I'm used to, though some skills are adaptable," she told him.

He was pleased but surprised, because she didn't look like the outdoors type. "You're an engineer. How did you manage to survive when your department got destroyed along with the rest of the ship and the engines?"

She looked down embarrassed, "My superior had sent me on an errand when the Rumnulka attacked us coming out of the clouds. I was up near sciences when the final attack happened, so I buried myself in a closet to ride out the crash. I'm surprised as you are that I'm alive, sir," she reported truthfully, looking up at him with grass green eyes that had a wisdom and a strength beyond her apparent years.

Her size made her appear younger than she was. Everyone towered over her, or so it seemed, but she was not a frail female. There was an aura of authority about her that made people follow and obey her. She had made sure that her group was organized and taken care of with food and shelter, as well as safety.

As to her native friend, Ky'tulendu had been watching him out of the corner of his eye as he had talked to O'vettun. He had adopted them, and her in particular. He doubted if they could get rid of him unless the native wanted to leave on his own. We are too interesting to leave. The more he knows of us - the more he can tell his people, the Asenti thought.

"O'vettun, your friend can stay. I'll have both of you issued translators and see what we can learn about him and this area. Do you think he'll be willing to teach us?"

She nodded, and looked to Day'kay-ning watching the rising sun light up his chiseled features. "More than willing, sir. Unless we do something to make him want to leave us, he will be hard to get rid of. He did say through gestures that he is not alone and that his people are not far away."

"I thought so. Must be their forward scout, or he might have been the only one brave enough to see what made the big noise?" Ky'tulendu speculated out loud, the sunlight haloing his wind-rippled hair with gold.

"I think so. If you had not come, I was going to go visit his people and see if they would take us in."

Ky'tulendu nodded, agreeing with her thinking. "We may visit them, but later. First, we need to set up a permanent camp of our own away from the ship as soon as possible. With your thirty-five, we now number one hundred and eighty-eight Atanzi, seven Tranquils, and five Soaettos, out of the total ship's company," he told her, seeing her shocked reaction to the news.

"There may be more, but we haven't been able to get into many parts of the ship. Too much damage and debris in the lower sections of the ship. Medical survived only because of MS B'tunku's quick thinking," Ky'tulendu said as he noticed B'tunku coming their way, turning over the supervision of moving the injured to one of her assistants.

In The Forest looked up at the doctor's approach, studying her as she was studying him. Her heart almost caught in her throat, until she got closer and she realized he was not the one from her dreams, but he was very similar in appearance. She composed herself quickly, before she hoped anyone had noticed.

In a casual, but official tone she told Ky'tulendu, "Asenti, the wounded are being brought down now. So far the evacuation is proceeding without problems," she reported, coming up to them, wearing heavy field clothes and carrying scanner equipment.

"Good, we'll make camp here today. I'll send scouting parties out to check for new campsites further from the ship. So what do you think of the planet so far?" he asked, noting that her eyes were trying to take in everything and pay attention to the group too.

"Spectacular, sir. The reports did not do this planet justice. This is one of the natives of the area?" she asked, casually.

"He calls himself, 'Day'kay-ning' or translated it means In The Forest. He seems to like us, Doctor." O'vettun replied protectively, looking over with an encouraging smile to the tall, muscular, almost naked human male hovering near her.

O'vettun had bristled when the doctor approached. That bothered her, so she was trying to understand what was sending off warning bells in her about the tall silver-maned female who walked with such self assurance and an air of command. O'vettun had noted that, unlike the rest of the meds, MS B'tunku wore weapons on her belt. Was she even a doctor? She wasn't like any doctor she had ever met before in any situation.

B'tunku had never seen O'vettun before, but she knew that the petite female was checking her over

as she was doing the same. It was clear that the engineer had been born to command and lead, how she had landed in engineering instead of the command track would be interesting to know. Already, she was gaining followers, like the native.

O'vettun's comment had struck her as funny, for the female could not interpret the looks she was getting from the human. The human rarely took his eyes off the small blonde Atanzi. It was more like he likes you, O'vettun, than Atanzi's in general, B'tunku thought to herself.

"Does he understand us?" B'tunku asked. It was obvious that the human was getting frustrated at being left out.

"No, we were going to see about getting some translators for him and O'vettun," Ky'tulendu interjected.

"Do you have one?"

"Yes."

"Then give it to the human, so he can understand us," Ky'tulendu ordered as he handed O'vettun his own.

"As you wish, Asenti," she answered, reluctantly giving over her translator to the native, who took it, looking over the small black ovaloid device in the palm of his large hand carefully turning it this way and that as he examined the slick feeling, shiny, rock-box that tingled against his skin.

O'vettun reached over with a clawed finger and turned it on for him, showing him how to make it work. "You can now talk to us, In The Forest," she told him, aiming the tiny device at herself, so it could pick up her words as she turned on her own.

His face lit up with delighted surprise at hearing and understanding her words instantly. "I can hear your speech? We do not have to struggle to find words - signs to make ourselves understood? What magic is this?" he asked bewildered, looking at her then the device and then back again with wide dark eyes.

O'vettun smiled. "Not magic - science. Atanzi science, so we can talk to strangers and they can understand us. The little box makes it easy for us to talk now. Do you like?"

He smiled broadly showing many white even teeth. "Yes, this is much easier. I have many questions to ask, O'vettun. Many questions indeed," he told her in his deep rich voice, his dark eyes lighting up in anticipation.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

In The Forest was trying to sort out which questions he wanted to ask first. There were so many. He started with the one that was at the top of his mind.

"What are you? Men or Gods?" he asked O'vettun finally, after he had gotten over the wonder of the translating device.

O'vettun stated to laugh, but then thought better of it, because he had asked the question so seriously.

"People, flesh and blood people, just different looking from you. We come from very far away - from one of those points of light."

"Star people - yes!" he agreed, pleased that his assumptions had been correct. "I thought you might be. Why so far from home?" he asked.

"We were exploring the skies, seeing new worlds and peoples, when our enemies found us. They chased us here, and our flying ship was damaged and we fell and crashed." O'vettun explained simply, not wanted to go into too much detail, unless In The Forest demanded more, but he seemed satisfied.



"So, what will your people do? Go home, or stay here in this land and make new homes?" he asked her, hoping that they would be staying.

"We can't go home, our ship is beyond fixing. We will have to live here in your land somewhere. Will your people let us?" she asked, and everyone listened for his answer.

"I don't know, O'vettun. We will have to meet with the Council and Elders. They will decide if you can stay. If they don't want your people to stay, then you will have to go elsewhere or they will send warriors to drive you away."

"You have no say?" she asked, taking him over to where the Asenti and the doctor sat talking on one of the smaller chunks of the hull.

"Almost none. I am merely a hunter, not a warrior of great honors and deeds. Nor do I have my own household or lodge. In my tribe I have no status," he told her, not being altogether truthful though she didn't know that.

O'vettun understood his problem. There were similar social customs among her people. "The tall red-haired male is the Asenti - the leader of our people here, his name is Ky'tulendu. The female with him is the chief medical officer her name is B'tunku. They are our Elders. I am like you - I have very little status."

He disagreed that she had little status but accepted it. Watching Ky'tulendu and B'tunku he had to ask. "Are they mates?"

"No - there are very few mated couples in our company."

"I saw you cry over a male that you found dead. Was he your mate?" In The Forest asked, hoping he was not being too curious.

"No, he was not. He was only a close friend. I have never had a mate. My job didn't give time for me to have a family, nor was there any one I was interested in," she said quietly, trying to end the conversation.

She sensed that he knew she wanted to change the subject. She suspected that he, if not his people as well, were very empathic. He attracted her in strange ways and he was not unpleasant to look at. If he was only Atanzi, she wistfully thought to herself, but he's not. Then she heard him speaking to her.

"Why are there no little ones among your people. No children?" he asked.

His question took her by surprise, but she answered him. "Children are not allowed on exploration ships. It's not safe. Those that do have children, leave them at home and have wives or their families look after them."

"Like our war parties or the persons who go scouting?" he suggested, wanting confirmation that he comprehended.

"Similar, but our people don't like to fight. We like to live in peace with other peoples everywhere. Killing or hurting others makes us very sad," she tried to explain. "Unfortunately, there are other beings out there that look different from us, who like to kill and hurt people. We tried to stop them, so they became our enemies. They might even try to hurt your people because of us," she warned him.

"Will they come soon - from the sky?" he asked suddenly afraid, not knowing why her words chilled, but only that they did.

"I don't know when or if they will come. Your world is in their territory and it would be unlike them to leave us alone," she explained. "You are no more than an animal to them, as are we."

For that concept, In The Forest had to sit down and think on the ramifications of what that meant. When he had sat alone in the woods watching the night sky, thoughts like that had passed through his head. That he was just a dust speck in the larger cosmos outside his little world, and that there were other beings out there, ones that could be dangerous to his kind.

"I heard one of your people say the word, 'Rumnulska' several times and he seemed frightened. Is that the name of your enemies?" he asked, wanting verification.

"Yes. They are lizard-looking men with greenish-colored scaled skins. They are barbarians, savages, whose empire now takes over many star systems and they make all the people they conquer their slaves, if they don't kill them first. They are very dangerous to everyone. My people are trying to stop them, but I fear we might not be able to," she said sadly, looking away from him.

"Why?"

"They like to fight and my people and our allies don't know how. I fear many of our peoples will be slaughtered in the battles yet to come. We've been at peace too long and won't willingly hurt another, being no matter what they do to us."

"But your people carry weapons? I saw what the light did to the tree."

"That's a stunner. It was not designed to hurt, only to knock a being out without harming it. On the higher setting it can kill, or burn something up, but only at the highest setting. Our ship carried weapons like the stunner, but bigger, but they were only for defense not for offense - to attack others. It's very difficult to explain."

He nodded, but he had understood every word of her explanation. He wondered vaguely if it came to a fight between his people and hers, who would win, even if they weren't fighters, their stunners and their natural weapons would make them very formidable opponents. He had looked over the males in their camp and decided he wouldn't last very long against any of them, if it came to a real fight. No, it was much better being these star-beings friend than their enemy, he decided.

"I have a question for you, In The Forest," she said, feeling his dark eyes focus back on her, "Why did you decide to help us?"

He blushed under his bronze skin, and brushed some hair back from his face. "I was curious at first, at what the great shiny thing was, and then I saw the bodies of your people and that made me more curious. I saw you first. You did not look dead, only asleep, so I stopped to wake you. When I saw how helpless your people were, I could not go off and leave you."

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, we are that - helpless. We live ... lived ... in very safe, sheltered villages, where we didn't have to worry about food, or clothes or anything. Most of these people have never been outdoors in their entire lives. All this open sky and dirt is frightening to them, she tried to explain and his look was one of astonishment and incomprehension.

"No sky? No dirt? No trees? How can that be? Do you live in caves - what?" he asked, shaking his head puzzled.

"Big lodges, bigger than any of these trees, so that one never has to go outside. It's a long story, that I will tell you more about later. Right now, I think the Asenti wants to see me," she told him motioning towards Ky'tulendu, who was coming their way.

The sky was bright now. The two had talked for longer than they realized. She had never gotten that absorbed in a conversation before with anyone. Nor had he, by the looks he was giving to the sun's position in the blue-blue sky.

It was hard not to be attracted to the human. He was intelligent, practical, resourceful, very caring, and very good looking by any species standards. Except - why did he have to be human? She sighed, deeply. The first male I'm even vaguely attracted to, and he has to be non-Atanzi.

His male scent was as strong and as alluring as any of her fellows. That didn't fit with what she knew of humans ... she shouldn't be attracted to him on any physical level, mental maybe, but not physical. As far as she could remember reading, they were physically compatible, but not biologically. Viable offspring were not possible. So why was she feeling mating urges with this human? No, those weren't logical, rational thoughts she was beginning to have about him. That was bothering her.

In The Forest was having similar thoughts about O'vettun, but from his perspective, she was just a very exotic looking female. Genetics and differing biologies weren't even entering into his thoughts.

The mating urge was rising up in him as well, and he wasn't understanding why, any more than she was. When she spoke or looked at him, his heart leaped and he grew warm inside. Fires burned in him, where there had never been fires before. He knew they were different but it didn't matter to him. All he knew was that he wanted and needed her to make his life complete.

Then there had been the dreams he had discounted. Too much of this was too familiar to him, and shouldn't be. O'vettun most of all. She matched the images in his head of the dream girl with golden hair, that he could just barely see and hear. He was torn between wanting to believe and not believing. Though everything that had happened, so far, told him it was real and he had seen glimpses of the future.

But now was not the time to pursue the question of whether the dreams were real or not. Later, after they were settled in, he would come courting. He decided that after watching how her hips moved when she walked ahead of him. He could only hope that she was as interested in him as he was in her. Her shy glances at him, when she thought he wasn't looking, were encouraging.

"Oh, O'vettun, how you make my blood boil," he said to himself, as her unconscious movements stirred places in him, and he found he needed to excuse himself from the group temporarily.

"I need to go check something in the woods," he told her and walked quickly away, before she could stop him.

He ran up the sides of the pit into the woods like a shot. She stared after him puzzled, shaking her head. When he was out of sight, she joined the Asenti and the Doctor, who had also noted the native's retreat.

"I'm not sure what that was all about," O'vettun commented, very puzzled over the native's behavior, as she sat down by them, glancing occasionally towards the area that In The Forest vanished into with a worried expression.

B'tunku smiled. "I think I have an idea. Your friend likes you. He likes you a lot and your presence was getting to him. He'll be back when he's cooled down," she told the younger woman.

O'vettun looked surprised, then embarrassed. "That's what I was afraid of. What do I do? He's human and I'm Atanzi. We shouldn't be having this problem!" O'vettun protested, her hands restless in her lap.

The two Atanzi officers agreed. Interspecies problems like this rarely occurred, because the attraction wasn't there. But B'tunku had felt the draw from the human and had been discussing this problem with Ky'tulendu.

"No, we shouldn't. We shouldn't be attracted and he shouldn't be attracted to us. When we can get a lab set up, I'm going to run some tests. My scanners are showing that there are some differences between us in blood chemistry and some physical structures, but they are very minor."

"You're saying matings between us and them are possible?" the engineer asked, surprised.

"Physically, I can detect no incompatibility problems. As to the results from any mating, that is unknown until I can run lab tests. Even our bacteria and micro-organisms are identical in structure. We won't contract anything fatal from contact with them, or vice-versa, though I would suggest we keep up with the immunization programs until we have adapted fully to this planet's biosystems," B'tunku suggested.

"So we should keep to limited contact until all the tests are in?" Ky'tulendu asked, wanting to know the risks of physical contact with the native population.

"It would be wise. Casual touch should be okay. Normal interactions, but no physical intimacy until we

can determine it is safe for both us and them," B'tunku said, but it was an order nevertheless.

"My med techs are checking over your group now, O'vettun, and checking the bodies for any survivors you may have missed. You didn't find any medical equipment out here. Your people just field dressed the wounds with available materials?" B'tunku asked O'vettun.

"Yes, that's all we could do. We found some med supplies later after we got the injured moved and redressed the wounds with the new supplies, but initially we just cleaned them up with rainwater. I felt we didn't have a choice at the time," O'vettun explained, hoping she hadn't done anything wrong.

B'tunku didn't know whether to be worried or not. "I will need you to point out which of your people were field-dressed. We'll keep an eye on them for the next couple of days, to see if they develop any infections or fevers outside the normal range. So much of what we do, and how we survive here, is going to be a matter of trial and error."

Ky'tulendu agreed, "When In The Forest returns, I want to see if he will show us around the area so we can find a place for a permanent camp. I want us away from this wreck as soon as we can manage it. I don't want to be a sitting duck for the Rumnulska Dagerships."

"How long do you think we have?" O'vettun asked him.

"No way to tell. Though I'm surprised we haven't seen any of them before now. Maybe we got lucky and they recalled them because of the war."

"War? What WAR?" O'vettun asked, her green eyes widening in shock.

"It may or may not have officially started, but there's a very high probability that we have gone to war with the Empire over the acts they have committed against Confederation citizens and ships. If ConFleet received my last report, then the Council should have declared war by now," Ky'tulendu said sadly. Regret was heavy in his voice because it had been his hand that had tipped the galactic balance.

"War - how sad. If it comes to that, I hope it'll be short, but long enough to keep the Dagerships from coming back and destroying us. Do you want me to pick some people to go with us to scout out sites?" she asked, getting back to business.

"Do that. Let's keep it small. Have them carry hand scanners, field packs, and translators. We may be gone over night, so sleeping gear as well," Ky'tulendu told her.

"Ah, your friend is returning. I'll ask him while you get the squad organized," he added watching the human return, looking a lot more self-contained and carrying what Ky'tulendu recognized as a bow and a quiver of arrows on his back.

The human had the look of a person who had been doing a lot of thinking and who had come to some hard decisions. Some which he wasn't too happy about, but he had decided to live with. Ky'tulendu had suspicions that the human's thinking revolved around O'vettun, but he didn't know the human well enough to inquire what was on his mind.

Ky'tulendu got up as B'tunku went to check on her meds and O'vettun went to get a squad together. The tall Asenti walked up to the human who was following O'vettun with his eyes, like he couldn't get enough of her. The human had it bad.

"In The Forest, I need your help," Ky'tulendu said coming up. The leonine appearing male was a very imposing figure in his black field uniform. He could tell he unnerved the human, so he toned his natural air of command down.

"My help?" the human asked surprised.

"Yes. I want to try and find a better place for my people to stay. Can you show us around, help us find a place that would be acceptable to your people? One where our presence would not bother them?" he asked, seeing understanding in the dark eyes.

"Yes, I could do that. I can understand your not wanting to stay here. How soon do you want to do this, Ky'tulendu?"

"As soon as O'vettun has put together a squad. Or would you rather O'vettun stay here?" he asked, wondering if the female should be included.

"She should come. She understands what needs to be done. So few of your people do," he commented, with a slight upturn of his mouth, and saw the Asenti smile and nod in agreement.

"We have lost the ways of our ancestors and admittedly we are helpless in this world of yours. Though O'vettun does seem more capable most to cope with what is happening. But it's not just her woodskills and abilities you find interesting?"

The human smiled and blushed under his tanned skin. "You have noticed then. Does my interest in her cause problems?" he asked honestly.

"Not for me personally. I do not know her all that well. You must be aware we are different and it may not work between our peoples. Mating, if that is what you want with her, may not work and children may not be possible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I have thought that too, but it is worth the risk, if she is willing. I have never felt this way about anyone before, can you understand that?" In The Forest told him. "I have just met this strange female but I feel as though I have always known her ... and that we belong together - rightly or wrongly."

"I do, but I would suggest caution. We do not know your people, or this place, and you do not know us. There may be hidden dangers and problems beyond the obvious ones," Ky'tulendu suggested gently.

"True. I will not rush into things for the sake of both our peoples," In The Forest replied, carefully regaining his composure.

"Good. Do you have any places you think might be suitable for us to make a camp?" Ky'tulendu asked again.

"There are a few that come to mind that have good game and water as well as materials to build lodges from. It will be far enough away that my people will not have cause to complain about your presence," he said thoughtfully. "These places are nearby, so it will not be difficult to move your injured."

"That's even better," Ky'tulendu said pleased. Moving his people and their equipment was a large worry on his mind. He didn't think that anyone was up to a long trek through the wilderness he could see beyond the pit.

"Asenti Ky'tulendu, I will see your people settled first, before I talk with my people. It might be easier that way. They know that something large hit the ground here, but I was the only one willing to see what it was. Since I have not returned, there will be others coming to see what happened here, if they are not here already watching us. If they are watching and see that your people mean me no harm, then they will lose their suspicions and accept your presence here."

"That is a good idea. I will inform my people to be on watch for yours and not to make any hostile moves, no matter what happens. I am going with you to check out possible camp sites while my people prepare for the move. O'vettun is returning, are you ready to go?" Ky'tulendu asked, seeing the petite Atanzi leading a group of five huge security guards.

The native nodded abstractedly, already mesmerized by the sight of the young female coming towards him.

There was a smile on her face when she saw In The Forest, and the human was pleased that she was glad to see him. Ky'tulendu groaned a little inside. This was going to be an interesting trip. He could only hope that caution and logic would prevail between these two.

While they were gone he was leaving B'tunku and Vokolin in charge. He had told his second-in-command privately about B'tunku's identity. He hoped the two would work together and organize the camp for moving while he was gone. Already, he had seen work crews using the portable diggers along the sides of the buried ship to get the heavy equipment out of the hangers.

With the squad assembled he told them, "Move out, In The Forest, take the lead." The seven Atanzis and the human moved out heading for the green and lush forest beyond the pit.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

The leftover knee-high mists of the morning clung to their feet and legs, as they walked through the high golden grass of the clearing, only to leave ghostly streamers trailing in their wake. It seemed as though they walked on clouds, so dense was the fog close to the ground as they moved across the small open space before entering the deep shadows of the forest again. It made exploring their new world a magical experience for the seven Atanzi explorers.

On all sides of them was an ancient climax forest, where new growth struggled to thrust itself through the thick underbrush to reach the sun. In places where the shadows weren't heavy, shafts of sunlight speared down upon the carpeted floor like miniature spotlights in the greenish tinged gloom. Giant oak and elm trees, so large that it would take seven to ten large burley males holding hands to surround the girths of the ancient trees, imposed their massive presence on every side like silent guardians of this virgin forest.

They walked under a canopy of leafy thick tangled greenery that almost blocked out the blue of the sky. Everywhere they looked the landscape was a riot of countless shades of color with mottled greens, browns, and golds arranged in odd, yet somehow familiar shapes to their eyes.

Flowers both large and small bloomed and budded, in impossibly bright, but sometimes subtle colors, that contrasted against, yet sometimes blended into the denser green foliage. The strange floral aromas assaulted their already heightened senses with sweet alluring fragrances, which forcibly brought home to their minds the alienness of this new planet.

In The Forest told them to stay in his footsteps as they walked behind him. Beautiful as it was, the woods were not as harmless as they appeared. He kept his ears open to all sounds as they followed the ancient path, listening for warnings of danger from the squirrels and the birds. The same sounds that made him comfortable, made his charges jumpy and nervous because they had never heard such sounds or seen creatures quite like the ones that inhabited this area.

The native had a sheltered valley in mind for the Atanzi's new home. It had a large clear stream, a variety of timber for making lodges, and there was plentiful game in the area. Its sheltered position would keep the worse snow from burying them in winter. It also had caves that were good for storing food and supplies. A short walk would also take them to the ocean, where they could get fish and other seafood from its rocky shore. The site would be near his people, but far enough away to keep problems down.

By the time they arrived at his chosen spot, the mists had cleared. Through a small gap in the trees they could look down upon the small valley in all its bright promise. The Atanzis were pleased.

A wide, deep creek ran through the center and if one followed it long enough, one would end up at the sea, or in the opposite direction in the camp of In The Forest's people. Tall birch trees and willows lined it on both sides. Maples, oaks, and elms along with evergreens and pines, vied for growing room. There were blackberry bushes and grapes as hidden bonuses, as well as other fruit and nut bearing trees. The caves were on the other side of the creek and set into the hillside, hidden from their present view.

"Do you like, Asenti Ky'tulendu?" In The Forest asked, showing them the valley with a theatrical sweep of his hands.

"Yes --," he said opened mouthed at its beauty. He just stared for many long moments, trying to take

in the size and scope of it, before he could speak again.

"This place is for us?" Ky'tulendu asked still not believing the human's generosity. "All of this?"

In The Forest smiled understanding his wonder.

"Yes, all of this valley. Do you think this will be enough room for your people?" he asked with a laugh, knowing how immense this place must seem after the confines of their small craft.

"Definitely. This doesn't belong to anyone? Your people won't mind us being here?"

"No. They live a ways upstream in that direction," he told him pointing south. "There are only my people on this island and of them we have only three villages."

"Island? We are on an island?" Ky'tulendu asked, very curious now as to where they had actually landed. "How big of an island?"

"A very large one. It takes several suns crossing to walk across it. That way is the mainland, where others of our tribe live, as well as other peoples that we trade with," he replied pointing westward.

Ky'tulendu was getting an idea of where they were in relation to the surveys that had been done of the planet. The human's distinctive coloring and primitive appearance had already marked him as a native of the two large connecting land masses. There were several chains of islands along the coast of the northern continent, including one very large one near a bay. It just depended on how this human defined the term 'large', as to which island they were really on.

In many ways, it was a relief to know that they had landed among the more primitive peoples. The more civilized, light-skinned humans, as well as the brown and yellow-colored ones that lived on the other continents across the oceans, those were the ones that seemed to have no tolerance for strangers and were always at war with one another. The reddish-colored peoples were still warlike, but they were also more peaceful than their counterparts and tolerant of differences, or so Ky'tulendu hoped.

"If this is to be our land, In The Forest, what do you suggest we do first to start making it ready for my people?" Ky'tulendu asked seriously, not wanting to make any mistakes or break any local customs.

The Asenti's question took In The Forest by surprise. He almost laughed at it, but then realized that the Asenti was serious - he really didn't know what he should do next.

"If it were me, I would pick my camp site and then begin clearing the area so I could build my lodges," the native replied, looking over the area for suitable places.

"Since I don't know the terrain and the local conditions, would it offend you if I ask you to help us pick a good place? I haven't been outdoors like this before and wouldn't know a good spot from a bad," Ky'tulendu admitted, looking over the beautiful valley before him.

"Do you think O'vettun might have some input?" Ky'tulendu suggested, remembering that she had been raised on a farm and might be able to access their needs too.

"Possibly, she has said she had spent time outdoors. Call her," In The Forest replied, pleased that the Asenti had brought up the idea.

O'vettun had been in the rear of the party doing survey work as they walked. That amounted to scanning the woods around them, picking up life signs and cataloging the lifeforms and their habits. She was also doing surveys of the plant life as well, to determine what could be used for building materials and which were edible or usable in other ways. This preliminary data would then be cross-checked in their files, then when possible they would check with the natives to see how they used the local materials.

O'vettun looked up from her scanner when she heard her name called by Ky'tulendu. She told one of the security guards who was doing similar work to continue, while she went ahead to see what the Asenti wanted.

"You wished to see me, Asenti?" she asked coming up.

In The Forest stood a little way off, looking down into the sun-lit valley, watching a small herd of deer walk across an open glade far below. He tried not to take too much notice of her.

"Yes, I want you to accompany In The Forest to look for a camp site. He thinks this valley will be perfect for our people. Since you have experience in this type of terrain and know what is needed, I will let you two pick the site. I will remain here and check back with Vokolin to see how things are progressing at the ship. Especially with getting out the heavy equipment."

"Yes, Asenti," she replied, a little doubtful, but she did have to admit she was more qualified.

She left the Asenti and walked the short distance to where In The Forest stood waiting. His attention was now focused on her.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He nodded, and led the way along the edge of the hill looking for a safe way down. The rocks were loose and treacherous just below the brim. He directed her where to put her feet, so she would not slip and fall.

"Yes, come this way. The path does not seem as steep," he said finally, finding her an easy way down the slick leaves and loose small rocks covered hillside.

"Have you been here before?" she asked, taking in the tall trees and large rocks they encountered along their path, noting that the rest of the group was already out of sight.

"Many times. It is a good place to hunt for deer and other game. There are few bears or wolves to bother you," he said casually, as they walked.

She looked at him, wanting to question him about the strange words he used but she didn't want to interrupt his talking. There was much to be learned by just listening.

"The creek is good for fishing, and the water is fresh and sweet. On the other side of the creek, there are caves that go down very far into the earth, so deep no one has dared to go. My people do not like this spot - they say it is too lonely, but I have always felt comfortable here."

"It does feel lonely, but it also feels good too. Like it has been waiting for something - or someone to come," she said letting her senses stretch outward and draw in impressions.

He looked at her, surprised. "You can feel that? Feel the earthsongs and the spirits?"

"In a way, I guess. My people can sense and feel things. Under the right conditions, we can connect ourselves with other people, so we are almost one with them. Sometimes, we can see what is going to happen, or know when there is danger."

"Like my uncle, the shaman, he can do that, as well as some others in our village. I, too, have the gift. I had not told you before, but I saw your ship come in my dreams and ... also ... you. Other persons saw your people too. That is why I was not afraid. I knew you before I saw you," he told her and watched the play of emotions across her face, as shock and surprise at his words hit her.

She didn't know what to think or how to respond to his revelation that his people had psychic abilities, or had seen them in dreams.

"That is ... amazing," was all she could manage to stammer in a small choked voice.

"The Gods sent you here - sent you to this place - to me - O'vettun. You must accept this truth. Just as they showed me the picture of this valley in my mind, when your Asenti asked me where your people could live. They have also showed me pictures of your people and mine living together as one people, in time. You will be my wife, and I, your husband, the Gods have decreed it to be so," he said firmly, his certainty of the situation evident. He did not look at her to see her reaction, when he stopped to study an expanse of flat ground ahead of them.



"Excuse me - don't I get a say in this?" she asked angrily, a little taken aback at all this talk about the Gods decreeing their future life together. She had stopped too, feeling the rage building up in her because of his presumptuousness regarding her.

"No!" he said flatly, not moving, his back still towards her.

"NO?" she questioned. "I may like you - but you are a human and I am an Atanzi. That is a big no! We are too different and we cannot - should not mate!" she stormed, backing away from him.

"The Gods and my visions say differently," he disagreed, turning around to face her, his eyes ablaze with desire.

His feelings were plain and they frightened her. Roughly she defended herself.

"Maybe they do, but I don't. I am not ready to try and find out. Take me back to the others!" she demanded, growing more and more afraid of the tall primitive human steadily advancing on her even though she knew in her heart that he meant her no harm - she still feared getting close to him.

"No. Not yet. We have not finished our talk, nor have we found your new home as your Asenti ordered you," he reminded her, coming closer all the while as she backed away.

"O'vettun, I mean you no harm, nor do I mean to scare you," he told her, stopping. Her intense fear of him finally registered in his mind, chilling his inner soul. He did not want her to be afraid of him.

"You are doing a good job of it," she said raggedly, as she backed up against a tree, her green eyes wide with fear, and she felt as her heart was pounding so loud that he even could hear it ten paces away.

"I frighten you that much?" he asked sadly, frightened himself by her reactions, so much so that he was unnerved as well.

"You do - did," she said breathlessly, hoping that he would stay where he was and not come closer.

She felt the roughness of the bark pressing sharply into her back, as she tried to flatten herself against the tree. In her ears, she could hear the hum of some flying insects close by. Their presence did not comfort her. Though what made her more uncomfortable was the drenched feeling she had from perspiring because of her nerves and the heat of the hot sunlight beating against her black uniform. She hoped her fear would make him back off and just leave her alone for awhile - she just wasn't ready for this yet.

It was like hearing him through a barrel, as he tried to explain. "I never meant to frighten you. I want you, but I want you to come to me of your own free will, not afraid, but loving me as I love you. You misunderstood my words and my intent. We will be together, but only when we both are ready for that to be, and not by force," he tried to explain to her how he felt, being very careful, not knowing how his words would be accepted.

Foremost though, he wanted her to be comfortable around him. Her fears cut him through his heart like a sharp knife and it pained him to see her wanting to run away from him. It gratified him to note that his words did calm her down, and she relaxed finally, still leaning against the tree.

She flushed with embarrassment, and lowered her eyes.

"I am sorry, In The Forest, for misunderstanding you, but these feelings - this pull we have, should not be. Then you tell me that the Gods have decreed that we should mate. It was a little hard to handle on top of the last couple of days."

"I understand that now. I push when I should not. O'vettun, I keep forgetting how new you are to my home. How strange all of this is for you. Are we still friends?" he asked seriously, wanting her forgiveness and her trust. His dark eyes were sad with worry and regret for making her so frightened and uncomfortable.

"Yes, we are that," she told him and he relaxed.

"I think I found a place to build your lodges," he told her, changing the subject to a less dangerous one.

"Show me," she asked, trusting him enough now to move from the tree and see what he wanted to show her.

He did show her, pointing out the almost level area to the left of them. It was far enough from the creek that the camp would not be in danger from the spring floods. The heavily forested area looked like it would be easy to clear with the proper tools and the tall, straight trees would make excellent logs for building. The trees weren't as massive as the ones they had passed to get to this small valley. They could salvage parts of the ship for roofs as well as use the native materials.

The open glade, beyond the trees where they stood, would work for what crops they could grow. She wondered if any of their botany samples had survived and if any of the edible ones be adapted here. She would have to ask him to see samples of the native domesticated plants. If they had survived, it was even possible that they might be able to crossbreed some of their domesticated food animals, now in embryonic storage with native ones, if there was enough compatibility between species. Her mind was awl with plans and ideas now.

"You look happy," he said, noticing her smile and her eyes bright with excitement.

"I am, I guess. Yes, it is going to work. I can see it all in my mind. Thank you, In The Forest, for showing me this place. My people will be happy here," she said, walking then running across the landscape, laughing with the happiness she felt as she took in all the wonders of this new world.

Her senses were overwhelmed. It was all so beautiful! The green canopy of leaves above. The tall waving plumes of bright green and gold grasses and with fallen leaves on either side of the natural pathway while under her feet on the tan colored ground were small pebbles and stones of rainbow hues.

Then there were the scents ... the smell of moist leaves and sweet flowers warmed by the sun ... even the very air itself. It felt so good, especially the feel of the hot summer's sun on her flesh, beating on down upon her clothes. There were too many things to experience all at once.

She watched the bright lights tinted green, as it filtered through the trees, sparkling as it danced across the ripples created by the stones half-submerged in the stream. Everywhere, she could hear sounds of strange animals and birds calling across the open spaces, filling the seemingly empty place with their hidden life and natural music. All of this made her feel so alive.

"Are you all right?" In The Forest asked, watching her dance across the glade, so childlike and innocent in her enjoyment.

"Yes - I'm all right. I have not felt like this since I was a child, when I used to go out with my father and brothers to hunt for ceeps and flassons," she said laughing, sitting down in the middle of a tall stand of wild grass to stare up through a gap in the trees at the blue sky and the wisps of white fluffy clouds floating by.

"Ceeps and flassons?" he asked confused and puzzled, his translator not helping him with those words, as he sat down nearby.

"Ahhhhh ... they are small animals like those ...," she said pointing to some rabbits and then some deer across the glade, "But a little different."

He accepted that and did not question further. "Are you hungry?" he asked, the rabbits reminding him that it had been awhile since he ate.

"A little," she admitted, taking off her backpack and looking through it for her field rations. She drew two tins out and handed him one. He took it reluctantly and opened it, then began to eat. It was not bad, but he wished it was rabbit instead.

"Tonight we have rabbit," he told her making himself finish the meat dish. "Your food is good, but I wish you to know my food. The food you will have to eat, if you wish to live on this world," he commented truthfully. "Do your people have much of this food with them?" he asked, holding up the now empty metallic container.

She thought about it for a moment and shook her head. "I don't know how much is left. When we are flying, we don't eat these. We have machines that make us whatever food we want. These are only for times we are away from the ship," she tried to explain and she could tell he didn't understand it all. He just looked at her blankly, and shook his head, mumbling about 'magic' again.

"Machines? I do not understand that word. Things that make food? Your people do not hunt or grow food? Or send others to find it?" he asked trying to understand their ways.

"Machines ... those will take some explaining ... it will probably be better to show you what the food machines can do when we get back. But we have many kinds of machines, some are like this thing I carry, but it doesn't make food - it sees things at a distance and tells me what they are, or what they are like," she told him and saw his skeptical look. "Just believe that is so. We can make our food from raw materials, like this grass or that tree, make it anything we want it to be."

"Magic!" he exclaimed determinedly. It was his only rational explanation for those things that were beyond his knowledge and comprehension.

She shook her head. "No - not magic - science again. To you it would be magic, but it's just simple rearranging of different elements - things, to make something useful."

"Still magic," he argued stubbornly, still not convinced because the idea of changing things so they could be something else was a magic concept. There was no science or concepts to explain such changes among his people.

"No, it's really not. When you have been around my people longer, then you will begin to understand. You can do things my people can't do and we do things yours can't. We will teach each other and learn from one another. The key is not to be afraid of the unknown and let yourself learn."

"That I can understand. I want to learn your ways so I can tell my people to not be afraid of your strangeness. Like this translator - it is a good thing to help us talk. It is easier than our trying to learn each other's words like we did yesterday. So much was not getting said. Today we can talk - this is much better," he said, still marvelling over the small box that made their words so easy between them.

"Yes, it is better, but there may come a day when the translators no longer work. We will still have to learn each other's languages," she told him, trying to face the realities that would be confronting her people all too soon.

"They won't work forever?" he asked.

"No," she said shaking her head. "Eventually it will run out of power - the magic that makes it work. Let me show you," she said taking it from him and opening a small panel on the back. Inside he could see strange small colored things. "That is a power cell. It makes the translator work. When it loses its power, then it won't work," she tried to explain as she handed it back.

"Too many strange words, ideas, O'vettun. I will just accept that what you say is true. I will ask you later about power cells and your machines," he said, shaking his head over all these new concepts and ideas that he had no reference for.

"My world is ... was simple. We are born, and we live as the creator and the gods have decreed, then when it is our time, we die and go join our ancestors in the spirit world. To live we must hunt, or grow what we need, no more no less. When the seasons change, you make yourself ready for the changes, and the animals do the same. Our world changes very little - we live as our ancestors did. Your people bring changes. It will be difficult for both peoples, and many on both sides will resist

these changes," he commented truthfully.

He pulled upon a plaintain plant, idly stripping it of its leaves and green seed head as he thought about the changes her people were going to be forced to make. Then he used it as a toothpick to clean his white teeth.

He heard her speaking to him.

"Yes, I know. All peoples want to cling to the safety of what they know and what has been. It will be difficult for everyone until a balance is reached, if it ever can be," she said looking forward into the future.

"Nature ... the world creates ... makes all of us live in balance, so that harmony is maintained for all the creatures of this world. My people are the preservers of that balance that the creator made. I hope the creator will look kindly upon your people and welcome them," In The Forest said, hoping his words were true. He did not want to think of the consequences, if the creator or his people did not look kindly upon them.

She did not see the unease that passed across his face and blithely went on to tell him. "You are a surprisingly deep thinker, In The Forest," she commented suddenly, admiring the mind she was finding behind the intelligent brown eyes. His people may have been primitive compared to hers, but in many ways they were more complex and more in tune with themselves and their environment.

He looked embarrassed, a blush under his bronze skin. "Sometimes too much. But these thoughts I have shared with you must be voiced, just as I told you what the Gods had decreed."

"I appreciate your honesty. I am the one having the trouble with the concept of Gods telling you what will be. But in the legends on my people, such things will happen. We, too, once had Gods to guide us, showed us what to do before the Change."

"The Change?" he asked.

"Not now, later after we have helped my people settle, then I will explain the Change and what it meant to my people," she said, not sure whether she could explain this to him at this point in their understanding of one another.

"As you wish, O'vettun," he said giving in, not wishing to say anything that would mar these moments with her. He was enjoying her company more and more.

The sunlight on her golden hair was a marvel to him, as was her slightly feline profile. She was so beautiful, even though she tried to hide her beauty under those shapeless clothes she wore, her femaleness was apparent. He noticed she was sweating, the sun was very hot on his skin and he wore only his loincloth, so he knew she must be miserable under her heavy clothes.

"Are you hot?" he asked.

"A little," she admitted.

"We could cool off in the creek," he suggested.

"Swim? I don't know how," she confessed, it was not a sport she had cared to learn, nor had she any need to.

"I could show you," he volunteered, not thinking any less of her for her lack of skill.

"I should be calling the Asenti, telling him about this place and that we can begin to start moving our people," she told him, feeling guilty for enjoying this freedom from her usual duties.

"Why haven't you?" he asked, knowing why she hadn't.

"I ... I don't know," she said, puzzled then she confessed truthfully. "Maybe, I was enjoying myself too much. There's all this open space to see and enjoy. I guess I didn't want to share it yet."

He smiled and nodded. "It's been a long time since you have played under an open sky like this," he suggested with a smile, his eyes bright with humor.

He had caught her. Yes, that was it. She was playing like she had when she had been a child. No responsibilities, no duties, just playing and enjoying the moment. When she checked in with the Asenti, he would call the ship and they would start coming here. Then this place would be changed, transformed from what she saw now. She wanted to enjoy it in all its wild beauty before the others came and she knew it. She knew it was terribly selfish, but she wasn't ready to share this yet.

In a small voice she answered him. "Yes, it has been. I want to do my duty - but I don't want to let this end either."

"Then play for awhile, let yourself be free. Then you can go back to your duties," he suggested, feeling selfish too in not wanting her to go back to her duties and her people, wanting her beside him for these few private moments.

"Come, swim with me ... just for a little while before you have to call the others," he asked her, his deep voice begging her to let them have this time alone. He stood up and motioned for her to follow him to a sheltered place he saw by the wide creek.

"I shouldn't. But it's been days since I took a bath or felt clean. Remember, I can't swim, so take me where it's shallow," she told him, getting up and following him.

He took her hand and lead her down the grassy slope to the creek. It felt strange yet right to do this they both thought, not really understanding what was happening to them. Where they touched their skin tingled and shot pleasant feelings throughout. When he let loose her hand, there was a empty hollowness, that he quickly dismissed to get caught up with the thrill of the adventure.

The creek was lined by willows trailing their long leafy branches to meet the ground and water. White birches with peeling strips of bark, and tall elm and oak trees, crowded close to the babbling stream as well. He chose a sun dappled spot that had many large flat rocks to walk across and to sit on. Below this spot, large tumbled rocks made miniature waterfalls and created large pools as the water raced down stream.

Drawing closer, she spotted strange thin animals swimming in some of the deeper pools, fish she realized. On the surface skimmed long-legged insects with wings and colorful winged creatures flew by dancing with other strange winged creatures. There were so many new and different forms of life here. It would take the specialists many long years to even begin to figure them out.

The water scent was alluring as she drew nearer and the air temperatue seemed to drop a couple of degrees. She started to go in and then realized she still had her field pack and uniform on. She let go of his hand and he stood there waiting with a crooked eyebrow, wondering what she was going to do.

"Are you going to wear your clothes in?" he asked, walking over to a large rock by one of the large pools in the creek, and he sat down to wait for her.

"No ... I guess not," she replied, somewhat afraid and embarrassed. as she realized she didn't have anything but her clothes or her skin to swim in. "You go in, I'll join you," she said, trying to maintain her cool and to find a safe, dry place to put her clothes.

"I won't watch," he said casually, feeling her need for privacy. He removed his weapons and carefully placed the translator next to them. Then he turned his back and removed his soft leathery loincloth, folding it into a pile to set it on the rock, before he entered the water to wait for her. He had no false modesty to preserve, but he sensed she did, like many of the young women of his village, so he respected her needs.

Finding a high dry spot on another rock, she set her backpack on the boulder and then sat down next to it as she removed her boots and socks. Standing, she undid the simple fastenings of her uniform and slid the pieces off.

How many days had she been in these clothes, or rather what was left of them? The ankle length black pants came off first, then the black tunic top. She left on her underwear while she resisted the urge to scratch all over. It did feel good getting out of those dirty clothes. She'd change into a clean uniform once she had finished. She almost forgot her head band, but she remembered to place it, her translator, and her communicator safely on her backpack before she strolled, now almost naked to the water.

Supposedly, In The Forest had not been watching her, but she knew he had been watching her undress, nevertheless. He was as curious about her as she was about him. She was not used to wandering around without clothes. The idea that he might have been watching her made her blush crimson.

She knew she was blushing, but with great dignity she strolled to the water and waded in, letting the cool water surround her and cover her hot flesh to her shoulder blades. She splashed experimentally, enjoying the feel of the cool wetness on her skin. Closing her eyes, she dunked her head under and got her hair wet, letting the water work the tangles out. She was beginning to feel clean again as she scrubbed her hair and sweaty skin with her hands.

In The Forest started to say something, then realized that the translator was where he had left it with his weapons. They would have to go back to talking with their respective languages again - a frustrating experience for both of them.

"O'vettun, hey." He told her hello as he came up to her, admiring how the sunlight made her body appear golden all over.

With her hair slicked back from her high forehead, she looked more cat-like, with the slanted deepset green eyes, the arched eyebrows, and her slight muzzle with the split upper lip. The limbs he saw revealed in the clear greenish-blue depths of the pool were very human looking and decidedly female. If he had been expecting a tail or pointed ears there were none, nor were there extra breasts as a true cat or she-wolf would have had.

It was the type of perfect body that would have attracted any male's attention, no matter what his species. The water revealed and concealed her parts in such a tantalizing way. He could not help, but want her, despite his good intentions not to make any attempts at seducing her.

On her side, she was having a hard time trying to maintain her objectiveness. His body was lean, but well-muscled in all the right places - arms, legs, and thighs - along with his broad chest that she yearned to be dared not touch.

She had seen almost every part of his body because he wore so little. His body was so like an Atanzi male's, except for the lack of hair, she was having a hard time not thinking of him as an Atanzi. His sheer masculinity took her breath away every time she got near. It was getting harder and harder to keep her distance and maintain an air of non-interest.

"Ka-yah'kweh! Shee'kee-hkway!" In The Forest told her, his eyes lighting up as he looked at her, trying to tell her how happy he was, and that she was a fine, pretty woman.

She shook her head, not understanding. "We need the translators."

"No ... no translator, nee'hkway," he said, smiling down at her from his greater height possessingly, while he called her his woman.

O'vettun saw his look, but she wasn't sure she was interpreting it correctly. His range of emotions was similar to an Atanzi male's, but she wasn't going to take anything at face value. If the look meant what she thought it did, then she was going to have to call this swimming adventure off quickly. before he got too many ideas in his head.

He smiled, liking this game. He pointed to her. "Hkway. K'nay-Hkway." Then he pointed to himself saying, "Nee'. Nee'." and indicating that the word meant it was not himself as a person, but he was

indicating it meant a possession of his ... namely her.

Comprehension dawned on her, followed shortly by outraged shock and anger, after he repeated his words and signs.

"Woman - your woman? You think I am your woman? You don't give up, do you?" she said angrily at his presumption, then she started to turn away and get out of the pool.

He looked at her, trying to understand the last part of what she had said. Her words eluded him, but her anger he did understand, along with her wanting to leave. He quickly crossed the short distance between them to grab her arm, holding her so she could not run and flee from him. This time, they were going to discuss this!

"Ma'ta, ku-les'ta! Ma'ta at'ta-ay-kay-san!" he told her seriously, begging her not to go and to stay.

"Let me go!" she said indignantly, looking down at his hand on her arm and at him with dagger eyes. "I want to go back."

"Ma'ta! K'pet ching-weh-hih, nee'hkway!" he said, drawing her closer to him, not wanting to listen to her protests, thankful for the language barrier that made him appear ignorant of her words.

"In The Forest, I am not your female!" she protested, trying to get loose from his iron grip that was drawing her in closer to him. They were almost chest to chest.

"K'way-Yes, kay'hay-la-you are!" he said as he smiled down at her, her shouted protest falling of deaf ears as he bent his head down bringing his full soft lips down close to her to kiss her.

She started to bring her free hand up to slap him - but he was faster. He grabbed the hand before she could do anything and used it to draw her closer to him, as he held her arm firmly down close to her side. She was frightened, but excited at the same time, as she felt his hot breath and lips touch her unique mouth gently, but with ever increasing, insistent pressure.

She didn't want to respond, but her body had a mind of its own. As he deepened his kiss, she yielded to it and kissed him back, as she felt the fires in her begin to stir.

She found her small lithe body molding itself to his. There was no mistaking his interest. He released her hands and she felt his gentle touch upon her flesh, exploring her carefully as he held her close. His gentle hands glided across her petting her, calming her down - yet exciting her too with his touch.

She found herself drawn to do the same with him, wanting to touch and be touched by him, as he continued to kiss her lips, her cat-like nose and the sharp planes of her angled face. She offered no resistance as she found him exploring her long white neck, rounded ears, and throat with his lips and tongue, as well as with gentle nipping from his human teeth.

No Atanzi made her feel this way. She felt weak-kneed and helpless before him. He nuzzled her ears and neck, trailing burning kisses down her throat, while sparks of fire shot through her passion aroused body.

The water surrounded them only intensifying every sensation they both felt. She almost swooned with pleasure at what she was experiencing.

She rained kisses and small nips upon his body with her long canine teeth while her hands roamed the hard muscles of his massive body. Not being able to control himself any longer, he swept her up in his muscled arms. Her weight was nothing to him as he carried her to shore and then to a thick patch of fresh summer grass for them to lie on while he continued to rain kisses on every exposed part of her.

She was still frightened, but passion and the longing for him overrode her fear. This would be her first time with a male of any species. How would she make him understand this? Was it the same for his people as for hers? She tried to get his attention.

"Day'kay-ning, Day'kay-ning, ma'ta! Ku-les'ta!" she said hoping she was saying "In The Forest, No!

Listen to me!"

"O'ho?" he asked stopping and looking down at her, wondering what she wanted.

"Hkway-first time - you - me," she tried to explain with gestures to him and to herself. She held up one finger then two putting gestures of him and her together as one, then repeating it until realization dawned in his eyes.

His mouth became a round circle of surprise, and he cooled his passionate assault. Keeping his weight off her with his arms, his soft brown eyes regarded her with compassion and understanding. She was a virgin and had never been with anyone before, that was something he really had not expected. He would have to be gentle and show her the ways of love.

"At'ta hkway, a-kee!" He said gently, letting her know he did understand and that it was up to her to do or not do this act of love. "Ka-kuh-ka-ta'tum?" he asked her, the love and the concern he felt shining in his eyes, overriding his passion.

She did want him as much as he wanted her, but the fear of the unknown was strong. Her body still tingled with such heightened senses that her insides as well as our outsides felt on fire. She couldn't ignore it - it had to be quenched some way - soon. She felt his fire like hers, too, close to a bursting point.

She made her decision. She brought his head down to her lips and kissed him - hard, and wantonly - drinking his essence in, letting him know in no uncertain terms how much she wanted him, while she moved suggestively underneath him as well.

"Kay'hay-la," she told him, hoping she had the right word for you, or agreement, and letting her willing body tell him the rest, as her hands wandered and explored portions of him that she had never dared dream to touch.

He had half expected her not to go ahead with it. "Kay'yah'-kweh!" he murmured happily in her ear. Then he renewed his gentle assault against her lips, then rained his passion laden kisses upon her body once again, stroking their mutual fires even hotter. The underwear vanished.

She surrendered completely letting him enter her gently, carefully. Her pain lasted only for a brief flash as her desire for him took over. They fit as if they had been made for one another. There were no differences between them. They were one, as if this moment had always been meant to be.

She never wanted these feelings flooding her to stop. With some delighted surprise, she could feel him too, beside her, with her in her mind. In the way that only an Atanzi male would have been able to be with her. That should not be. They were bonding, a thing unheard of between supposedly different species such as they. Did this happen between his people? By his surprise she thought not - but he didn't fight it, he welcomed this new intimacy as she did.

He flowed with it as she did rising higher as their bodies sought and found new and more intense sensations. Then it was over in one intense soul-binding flash of incandescence light. Then they began spiraling slowly down through layers of their feelings, until they were earth centered again.

"Kweh! Nee'-hkway-ju!" In The Forest murmured in her ear, when he was able to talk again as he lay limply across her spent body, trying to bring his mind, body, and soul back to the real world. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

She looked up at him, "Yes, I am yours now. Is this what was supposed to happen, or was this just us?" she asked, realizing that she could understand his words and thoughts more than prior to their joining. Her mind went click.

"In The Forest, can you understand me?" she asked.

"Kay'hah' - yes - more than I did," he said slowly, realizing he was talking and thinking in both their languages, without a translator. "What? Is this magic or your science?" he asked somewhat fearfully



raising himself up to look at her with wonder.

"Neither I think - Atanzi biology - our mating - we bonded."

He looked at her strangely and nodded with wonder and growing understanding. "Yes, we did that. Came together somehow in our minds and souls, so that we can understand one another better?" he asked, puzzling over this. "Never heard of making love being the powerful - this deep. It is as if we had become one, O'vettun. How can this be?" he asked, wanting, needing answers to calm his fears.

"It happens among my people with - or without - mating, but mating makes it stronger. It is said one can feel another across the fabric of space, if the bond is deep enough," she told him, full of wonder in her eyes for him.

He understood that, and looked down at her with tenderness, calmness replacing his fears.

"Nee'hkway, I did not hurt you?"

"No, there was no pain, only joy when we joined. But, what do we do now? I do not think my people or yours will accept our mating quite yet," she told him, and he was very thoughtful as well.

"Yes, we will have to keep this between us until we can get your people settled," he said seriously, touching her face, marveling at her unique beauty.

"Do you think we can ... after this?" she smiled, still glowing.

"... it might be difficult, but I think it is possible. We will find ways to be alone ... and together, I promise," he said, smiling as he moved off her. "I think we need to swim again, we seem to have gotten more dirty than before we went in."

She laughed, feeling the twigs and leaves in her semi-wet hair. "Yes, I noticed. Now you can teach me to swim."

They raced back together to the pool, no longer shy with one another, jumping in and feeling the cool water against their still hot skins.

It was wonderful and refreshing as she dived through the water, getting the hang of this swimming. Playing tag through the rocks and watching how the sun dappled both their skins in golden spots of light and dark. Time and the worries from without their private world ceased to exist for both of them, as they just simply enjoyed their new found love and life.

Neither O'vettun nor In The Forest wanted their magic moments to end, but reality and their mission here intruded suddenly, with the persistent beep-beep of her communicator lying on her backpack.

"What is that?" In The Forest asked, jumping up from where they lay together in the tall sun-warmed grass unnerved by the tinny beeping sound he did not recognize.

She tried not to laugh at his reaction to the noise, but a small smile crept across her features as she patiently explained. "That's my communicator. It's a device that I can use to talk across long distances to another person with. Someone is calling me. Most likely it is the Asenti wondering why I haven't reported in before this," she said, feeling her duties beginning to hang heavy on her once again.

"How do you stop it chirping like a bird and talk to you?" he asked, still puzzled over the concept of being able to talk to another far away. More magic.

"I will show you if you will go get it for me, I feel too good to move from this spot," she said smiling.

"Do you have to answer?" he asked going over to her pack to pick up the still beeping device and bring it back to her.

She loved watching the way his muscles rippled as he walked and tried not to be too distracted as she answered.

"Yes, I have to. I really don't want them coming here and finding us like this. It would be difficult to explain," she said, sitting up now and taking the small triangular device from him.

"It might, but it would also be obvious what had happened too," he said with a shy smile, sitting down next to her.

"Oh? How is it so obvious?" she asked, wondering if somehow she had been magically transformed or changed by their lovemaking.

"You glow, O'vettun. I have heard of such things, but never believed it. But you do. You wear your happiness like the sun," he said proudly. He cupped his hand under her chin and made her look at him and see the happiness he felt reflected in her eyes.

"So do you," she said taking his hand and kissing it. "But if we are to have any happiness, my love, we will have to keep it secret from both our peoples for a time. I don't know how your people will feel about me, but let us say ... my people have a long history of staying within their own kind. Mixing with others, especially those of a different tribe or kind, is not a good thing in their minds. They will not understand our love or accept this rightness of it ... yet," she said carefully.

He nodded. "I do understand, O'vettun. There are similar fears and angers when two from different tribes get together. Yet, it might be more so, since in outward ways we are so different in appearance. You may look like a cat but you are all woman - as female and more so than any that I know."

"Oh, you have known other females before me?" she teased, kissing him.

He smiled down at her, and shook his head. "No, there have been no other before you - like this. Your body is like those of the women of my village that I have only seen bathing. You are my first and only one, O'vettun, and my mate for now and for forever until we are no more."

"And I am yours now and for forever, Day'kay-ning, my mate," she said kissing him with the passion of their bond singing in their souls.

He released her after a long moment and smiled tenderly down into her upturned kitten face. "I know what we share will not be understood by either of our peoples so, I will promise you to be cautious until it is safe to declare our love openly," he vowed to her. He then pulled her towards him to kiss her one last time before he released her.

She gave into the kiss and felt their bond strengthening. They knew that no matter what happened in the days to come, they would be together even if they were not physically together and they could endure whatever might happen.

The communicator still stubbornly beeped at her so it was with great reluctance that she said seriously, "In The Forest, I do need to answer that or they will come straight here."

He sighed and let his wandering hands fall away disappointed, as she flicked the receive button on. "O'vettun here," she said reporting in, becoming a ConFleet officer once again.

"Specialist, where have you been? We have been signaling you for a number of untis. I was just about to send F'rgett and S'poptun to your position to see what had happened," Ky'tulendu replied angrily, his voice betraying his displeasure.

"Away from my pack, sir. It got too hot to carry it," she replied almost truthfully. "But we have found a suitable site for the camp, with plenty of water, timber and open areas for farming. We can begin moving people as soon as you like, sir," cutting him off from any further questioning of her behavior.

"Very well," he grumbled, mentally telling himself he would get an explanation from her soon. "Relay your coordinates and I will signal for the set-up teams to start moving in your direction. You will be remaining there to direct them in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I will stay here. The coordinates are coming up on your screen now. Anything further, sir?" she asked before terminating the conversation.

"You can start a sample collection for the science techs coming in the first wave. They will do a site analysis and make recommendations as to any changes we need to make to the environment, in

case we have to adapt it to our needs."

"Sir?" she said becoming alarmed.

"What is it, O'vettun?"

"You plan to change the environment? Not change us or make us adapt to it?" she asked.

"If need be, specialist. Why?" he asked puzzled.

"In view of our circumstances, don't you think we should be the ones to adapt to this planet. We don't have the resources to make it fit us. Besides, this place is so beautiful - it would be a shame to shift the balance that already exists here," she said, probably more forcibly than she meant to.

"I will take that under advisement," Ky'tulendu told her after a long pause, where he seemed to be thinking her statements over. "That will be something that will have to be decided after the science techs do their surveys and the reports are studied," he replied. In his mind, he still planned on following the procedures handed down by the Confederation Planetary Development Division that had been used for colonizing virgin planets for many generations.

"But sir," she protested. "ConFed procedures were not meant for emergency situations such as we have. They do not cover crash landing on a planet with a viable existing culture, who may object very strenuously to too many environmental changes being made within its territorial perimeters. Especially, when the native population outnumbers us and we do not have the backup forces to enforce our claims," she warned.

There was a long silence on the other end of the communicator before the Asenti spoke again. "I see your point, Specialist. However, we still need to do surveys and studies to determine what is safe and unsafe in this environment. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I also think that we should get input from In The Forest on what his people use and eat and then do cross checks for compatibility with our peoples," she suggested.

"Agreed, I am waiting for the skimmers to arrive to pick me up and bring me to the site. In the meantime, prepare to receive two tech teams in twenty units or less. I will let you direct them in their studies and coordinate their efforts. Is that agreeable with you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, that is. You mentioned skimmers? They got some of the heavy machinery dug out? Were there any more survivors?" she asked hopefully, becoming excited with the news from the ship.

"Twenty-five more near the hanger decks, but they are not in good shape at present. Check with B'tunku for their status. Is that all, Specialist?"

"All I can think of."

"Good. Asenti Ky'tulendu out," he said and then went off line.

In The Forest came up to her. He had been listening to her conversation with her commander. He wasn't sure he liked the sound of change the environment to suit their needs, any more than she did. The thinking of his people was that you made as few changes to the land as you could. You gave back more than you took and left more than enough for future generations to enjoy and preserve as well.

"Your people will be coming here soon?" he asked putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Too soon, I'm afraid. I need to be dressed and properly clothed by the time they arrive. Did you hear? They found more people and they got the heavy equipment out," she said bending over and reaching into her pack.

"Nee-Hkway, don't do that. It makes my blood boil and tempts me into ..." He started to say, and noticed a large bird - the likes of which he had never seen circling over the clearing looking for a landing spot. "What is that?" He exclaimed in wonder, pointing up.

She followed his gaze and his pointing finger. She squinted against the sun and then recognized what it must be.

"It is one of the Soaetts!" she cried, having forgotten that some had survived the crash. "The Asenti must have sent the flyer to check over the proposed site from the air."

"Soaetts?" he asked, still not comprehending.

"Winged people. They have huge bird wings and can fly. They are scouts. I wasn't sure any survived. I'm glad to see they did. They are a bit arrogant and opinionated, but they mean well. Damn, I better get clothes on in a hurry. If they are here, then the skimmers won't be far behind."

"Skimmers - fly too?" he asked, wondering when her people would run out of marvels to show him.

"Yes, but a skimmer is a flying machine, not a person. Five to six people can ride in them. They can skim the ground and fly as high as the treetops or higher. They are no good for long range flying, or for flying in bad weather conditions," she tried to explain, as she found her clean tunic and pants and drew them on.

"Shouldn't you be dressing too, my mate?" she asked looking down to certain uncovered portions of his anatomy.

He smiled, and slipped his loincloth on. He then strapped on his knife along with his bow and quiver of arrows. "Now, do I look presentable?" he asked.

"Quite!" she said smiling, admiring his body gleaming in the sunlight.

"The bird-person is landing, O'vettun," he said point out into the field.

"We should go greet him. Hopefully, he will have news to tell us," she said, strapping on her other gear as she walked quickly through the grass to where the bird-person waited.

The Soaette's feathers gleamed brightly in the sun, in a shade of white almost too intense for this world's color spectrum. His large liquid lavender eyes regarded the approaching Atanzi female indifferently, but those same eyes sparked as he intensely scrutinized the tall nearly-naked human male that walked a few steps behind the Atanzi.

The bird-man noted with interest that the human showed no fear, only curiosity, as he looked over the taller winged being. The Soaette was a foot taller than the human and the huge blue-tinged wings rose up behind him a foot higher than that.

The head of the being was a mixture of both bird and human elements. He had feathers instead of hair all over his body, with high stiff crest of long feathers running from his high forehead to the back of his neck. He had a short flexible, yet sharp-edged beak where a human's nose and upper mouth would be, but the being also had teeth, unlike the birds In The Forest was used to seeing.

The Soaette wore a short backless black tunic with ConFleet insignia, leaving the rest of his body bare except for this shiny black form fitting knee boots which had open toes that revealed three long talons jutting from the front and one from the back. Around his narrow waist was a red equipment belt, on which hung a stunner, a recorder and a communicator unit.

He waited patiently with arms crossed across his chest for the two to come up to him, then he spoke first.

"You are Specialist O'vettun?" he inquired in his oddly accented high pitched voice.

"Yes, and this is In The Forest, a native of this area and my guide," O'vettun replied, introducing In The Forest. The bird-man inclined his head slightly in greeting. "The Asenti did not say were you were coming, so your appearance here is somewhat of a surprise. And you are?" she asked.

"Tanz Commd Covenn h'zz. The Asenti did not send me, Senz Commd Volkon did. I was to meet up the with Asenti and offer my services, but I picked up your transmission and homed in on it. This is

the site that has been picked for the new camp?" he asked, looking around approvingly.

"Yes. In The Forest has assured me that our living here will cause no problems with his people, and it has sufficient resources for all our needs," she replied, wondering what his true business here was, since the Asenti did not send him.

The Soaettes feathered eyebrows rose a little at the mention of other humans. "His people are nearby? How many? What tech level?" he asked briskly, almost demanding an immediate answer.

That made O'vettun bristle. Even In The Forest looked uncomfortable at the probing questions and looked to her for guidance.

She gave the bird-man a nasty look. "I don't know. I haven't asked. But by the reactions I've been getting to our technology, they are not beyond the hunting and gathering stages. We're magic users to him," she said in a low tone to the scout, and added with meaningful looks to In The Forest. "We'll discuss this later, Govern h'zz."

The scout nodded in quick understanding, also noting the translator in the native's hand and the intent way he was watching him. The human might be primitive maybe, but he was not stupid and understood more of what was happening than his appearance would lead one to believe he could, the Soaette thought to himself.

"Now that you've seen the site, are you going to go see the Asenti, Govern h'zz, or stay here?" O'vettun asked, wondering what the scout's plans were.

The scout looked thoughtful for a moment before he answered. "I will join with the Asenti and report that the site seems suitable. How far are our neighbors, by the way? He will be interested in knowing that," he asked carefully.

O'vettun did not like his interest in In The Forest's people, but it was a fair question, that would have been asked anyway. "Ask In The Forest, he can tell you better than me where his people are from here," she said, indicating that he should ask the native directly instead of ignoring him.

The bird-man looked embarrassed, but quickly regained his dignity and approached the man who had been standing there, watching and listening to the exchange with amusement. The man did not shrink back in fear, but held his position boldly as the bird being walked over and towered over him.

"You wish to know of my people?" In The Forest asked, not waiting for the Soaette to question him.

"Yes. I want to know how many your people number and where they are from here, so I may tell the Asenti and the others. It is good to know who and where your neighbors are," he said carefully, hoping he was phrasing his words in a non-threatening manner.

"Yes, we have a similar thought among my peoples. My people are peaceful, just simple hunters and guardians of the Creator's land. I hope that the Atanzi, and your people, and the other strange ones that survived, will feel the same way about this land we give you to use as we do. Your peoples are very powerful, with strange devices, wondrous knowledge, and abilities that I can barely comprehend. I see how easily these things could crush my people without a fight and it frightens me. But if I do not help, and make peace with your kind, then the only alternative would be war and my people would not win, I know this for a fact. I am no fool," the native stated eloquently.

No, you're not, the Soaette thought to himself, there are great depths here of philosophy and thought. If he is a typical example of the population around here, then we will have to be very cautious in our dealings with these peoples.

"I meant no offense, In The Forest. Meeting new people is always difficult. Our peoples wish peace with your people. We are here because our enemies wanted war instead of peace. Peace is all our people have ever known, until now. We also value the land and wish to make few changes, if any, to it, so it can last beyond our lifetimes for the ones to follow. Once we have settled, we would be glad to share our knowledge and skills with your people, if they wish to know it," Govern h'zz relayed.

"I will take your offer up with the Council when I see them. Only they can decide whether our people should know your ways. That is the proper thing to do. As to your questions, my village numbers fifty lodges, possibly we number a hundred and sixty two people altogether. There are two more villages on this island, both of which are many times larger than mine," In The Forest stated carefully, watching the bird-man's reactions. There were none.

"I see," the Soaette replied. "And where are they located so my people can avoid them for the time being?"

"My village lies a half day's walk from here in that direction," he said pointing in a northeasterly direction. "The other two are in that and that directions," he finished, pointing due north and then due west. "Both of them are many days travel away."

"By foot or by riding?"

"Riding? We have no things to ride upon and no animals would carry us, even if such a thing were possible," the native replied, surprised at the question. "If we wish to go somewhere we walk, or the strong ones among my people carry those who cannot walk."

"Do you have pets? Animals that you have tamed and call as friends?" O'vettun asked, wondering if they had any domesticated animals, or if that skill was lacking in his culture, since they seemed not to have tamed any animals to ride or carry things.

"Yes, some. Mainly dogs that guard the camp and help carry small packs. Some of the hunters have trained birds to help with their hunts. We do not interfere with the wild ones, unless they cannot help themselves and wish our help. Why do you ask?"

"To understand your people, so that we can understand how much they know and don't know. Some things are common among all intelligent peoples, but if some skill or some knowledge has not been developed because it was not needed due to environmental or cultural omissions, then we need to know that too." O'vettun tried to explain, but she could see she was confusing him more.

"You understand the concept of riding something but you've never ridden anything because you do not have animals big enough to carry a man, right?" she asked.

"Yes, and no. There are some big enough to ride, but I would not want to. Too dangerous," he commented, trying to understand their questions and why they were asking. "It would be interesting to ride to places, but my people do not miss what they have never known."

"There is not much I can say to that, In The Forest," Govenn h'zz replied. "We will try to be careful in what we do here in this new land, but we might make mistakes, and there might be misunderstanding until we get to know each other better. Will your people be understanding of this?"

"I will try to get them to understand that and that you are new to the ways of this world. I know you will want to use your machines, and your magic things to help you, because you are familiar and at ease with them. But I must ask you to try my peoples way of doing things. O'vettun has told me that one day your magic things will quit working and you will not be able to make them work. When that day comes, you will be as I am without your magic. But my people can show you how to live without the magic, so that when the time comes you will not be helpless in this world," In The Forest suggested, hoping they understood what he was offering.

The bird-man laughed, his arrogance overriding his good sense. He had decided that the native was ignorant and beneath him because he was at such a low technological level. He also could not foresee a time when the survivors would not have their machines and technologies right at hand. He expected for life in this new world to go on as it had aboard ship with few changes. He did not see the need for the survivors to adapt to the environment, rather he saw the environment changed to fit their needs. He was a fool who could not see the larger, long range picture and realized that there was no escape from this world.

In The Forest was puzzled by the Soaette's laughter. He had said nothing to laugh about. He looked to O'vettun to see what she thought, and he saw her getting angry.

In very cold tones she asked, "I think you need to report to the Asenti, Govenn H'zz. You have seen the site, so your mission here is completed. Do you understand?"

He looked at her with surprise, his laughter quickly burning away. "You're dismissing me?"

"Yes, I am in charge here. I think you need to do some rethinking before you create problems."

"What?"

"You heard me. This is not a colony operation. WE crashed here. We have no back up, no one is going to come to our aid, rescue us, let alone find us. We are alone in the middle of now enemy territory on an unknown planet, with an unknown native population and you want it to adapt to us? How long do you think our machines and weapons are going to last without replacements and parts, let alone power? Not very long. And we do not have the means to make those replacements," she told him coolly, forcing the Soaette to see the reality that they had to face.

"But ... but ... surely someone will look for us," he protested.

"Yes, the Rumnulka. That's why we are evacuating the ship. When they do return, and they will, the ship will be vaporized into nothing. If we are lucky we might get all that we need off the ship before they come back, but it will be a long time until we are capable of making replacements for many of the things we take for granted. To survive here, we will have to live off the land and learn the native technologies because our own will be useless. Do you comprehend?" she asked him sharply, almost getting right into his face.

He gulped, embarrassed. "I do, now," he replied in a small voice.

"Good, now you may go, and it wouldn't hurt for you to relay the nature of our problem to any others that you see, that may think that we are going to create the homeworld here. This is not the homeworld and never will be. We are visitors here - guests. As guests we will go by the existing rules and adapt ourselves to them," she told him, emphasizing her words carefully. "So go, leave my sight," she yelled at him, waving her hands at him, indicating that he should fly off away from her.

Gathering his wounded dignity as best he could, the Soaette made a running leap and took off into the sky, his great wings creating a back draft in his wake, but the two on the ground took scant notice of it.

O'vettun was still shaking from the confrontation. She was not prone to anger such as she had just displayed, but the bird-man had hit a sensitive nerve in her with his attitudes and his belief that they were going to turn this unspoiled place into another colony planet. Not if she could help it.

Colony planets were shaped and warped into whatever the colonists wanted them to be regardless of the existing natural resources, and they had no native intelligent populations to object to changes made. Colony planets also depended on the Confederation for supplies and technical assistance. None of these conditions existed in this situation. They were all alone here. Which meant that they would have to adapt to survive or die.

She saw In The Forest looking at her. He had understood the confrontation, or at least most of it, and he worried for her, for her people, and for his own. He hoped that there were not many among her people who felt as the bird-man had - that all they had to do was recreate the world they came from. That they would be all right regardless of the impact their technology and reshaping of the environment would have on the land, the animals and the peoples close by. Even though those technologies would cease to function after a time. If this was the attitude of most of her people, then there would be problems for all concerned. Even war, if her people pushed their ways upon his and the land. All this they would have to wait and see and hope for the best.

For the moment, In The Forest gathered her slight form to him and just held her as she cried over all

that had gone on, and to wipe the anger and frustration from her soul. And when she had cried herself out, he made her lie against him under the shade of a tree and rest, while he waited for the rest of her people to arrive, and pondered what he was going to say to them.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

"O'vettun, In The Forest, this is truly a remarkable place," Ky'tulendu remarked with satisfaction, climbing off the skimmer and coming over to where they stood in the middle of what would be the landing field.

She smiled. "I'm glad you approve, Asenti. I think you will find that this site is perfect for our peoples' needs, without having to make major changes in it, " she emphasized.

Well, yes - that we will have to see. So far I don't think we will have to," he replied carefully, and saw that this answer pleased both her and the native. Good, he thought to himself, maybe I can defuse this situation before it has a chance to build up.

The Soaette had reported everything that had transpired between the scout, the native and the specialist immediately to his superior. That was why Ky'tulendu had decided to come here rather than return to the ship, as he had originally planned.

He was extremely interested in the views of the native and wished to keep goodwill going between his people and the native's yet unknown people. He had seen too many diplomatic missions fail because the first contact group had failed to take in the indigenous population's desires and wishes. There were too few of his people to put up a heavy resistance and they were without backup.

"Where do you recommend that we begin constructing living units, and out of what materials?" Ky'tulendu asked of both of them.

They both looked surprised and flattered that he wanted their input. It was In The Forest who spoke first. "Up above the creek line, starting at those second stand of trees. In the Spring, the creek floods and that will be high ground when that happens. Any closer and you will lose what you have built. The trees there will also give you shelter from the winter storms, as will the bluff."

Ky'tulendu looked to where he was pointing and had to agree with his suggestions. They would be close to fresh running water, but not too close, and the ancient trees surrounding the new growth in the center of the glade would act as wind barriers. The younger trees could be used for building materials after they were cleared. The huge flat stones in the area could be used to make foundations and floors.

He was glad they had found some anti-gravs still functioning in the hanger, along with the other heavy equipment. Their tools would make the building of this settlement easier and faster.

"Yes, it will work," Ky'tulendu told In The Forest. "I'll have the work crews begin clearing the younger trees out immediately, and keep the old ones intact. What other trees and materials would be good for our shelters?" he asked, estimating that even utilizing all the young wood in that glade, there would not be enough to build more than a few small huts of very simplified design.

In The Forest caught on quickly and pointed out other stands of hardwoods that would be suitable for their purposes. Then he pointed to the beech trees growing along the creek. "That peeling bark is what we use for roofs and to make large things waterproof. We also use it to make boats, after we have stretched it around a frame of willow branches. We also weave willows branches and heavy grasses together to make mats and large sections of walls, but you do not have time to do that. Will you be using pieces of your ship to build with instead?" the native asked, understanding the urgency of getting the people settled.

"Yes, to make temporary shelters for some of the people until new can be built," he replied. "We will salvage all that we can from the wreck, tools furniture, clothes, and food. We want to be as self-sufficient as we can and not overuse the natural resources here."



In The Forest nodded in understanding. That was one thing he had worried about. That these people could deplete within a short period of time the immediate food supplies of this area, if they didn't have enough of their own initially. As it was, the harvesting time was soon approaching, and winter. They not only had to get their shelters built for that coming time, but they would also have to start laying in food and supplies. Did they even know how to do that? He thought not.

"That is good, Asenti Ky'tulendu, to take care of your own, but you must hurry and not take long in building your camp. There are many more tasks you and your people must do if you are to survive here in the coming days of the cold time," he told him.

The Asenti looked puzzled, wondering what he meant. "Cold time? Winter? Ahh - you have seasons, hot, cold?" he asked.

"Yes, seasons. This is the hot time but soon it will begin to cool and the days will grow longer, and the grasses and trees will change color as the world prepares for the cold days. And it gets very cold here, Asenti," he warned.

"Thank you for the warning, In The Forest. I will try to get my people prepared for that. How long until the cold time is upon us?" he asked, hoping he would be able to understand the answer.

The native looked thoughtful, wondering the same thing as the Asenti was. How to be understood, but he could only phrase it in the same terms that he had always understood. He pointed upwards where the ghostly shape of the planet's single moon hung in the daylit sky.

"That is our time keeper, along with the sun. Normally, you see the white Ka-hay'sa-na only in the night sky but sometimes she shows herself in the day. When she has gone from full to thin and back to full three times the cold time will come. There will be cool days before that, mixed with warm, but after the third moon there will be very few warm days at all for three to four moons after that, then it will warm again and new life will appear in this land."

Ky'tulendu listened and made a mental note to have sciences check the lunar and solar patterns, so that they could have an accurate account of the days and seasons on this planet. He hoped some of the preliminary survey files survived the crash, otherwise they were going to have to reconstruct all this data from scratch. There was too much to do and learn, all at the same time, and not enough time to take it all in properly.

"I think I understand, In The Forest. My world's seasons were very minor. We had no very hot time or very cold, just very warm all the year round with some cool for a short period," the Asenti replied, seeing the native was having a hard time with that concept.

"When there is more time, I wish to know about your world, Asenti. It sounds so different from mine. I take it not all worlds in the sky are like this one, since you and the Soaette's are so different from myself?" he asked.

The intelligence of the native was astounding him more and more. His people will probably score very high on original thinking and reasoning, once they had a chance to do careful, discrete testing. These seeming men were unlike any that had been encountered elsewhere in the galaxy. They definitely merited detailed study to find out why they were different.

He brought himself out of his thoughts to answer the native who was waiting expectantly for a response to his question.

"You are correct, there are many worlds, each of which are unique and different in their own ways. What the planetary conditions determine are the type of beings that evolved there," he said, as simply as he could, not adding that there were many worlds that had been apparently seeded with life, because the dominant lifeforms could not have evolved there on their own, without help. Even his homeworld was suspect as a seeded planet, but that was still a thing that was hotly debated among the scientists.

"That is what I have always thought, Asenti. It is good to find out that my thoughts were correct," he said smiling, pleased that he was understanding the ways of the larger universe outside his small planetary sphere.

"Look, more of your people come in skimmers and a bigger box carrying bit, shiny things between them," he said excitedly pointing eastward where the ships could be seen topping the great trees that surrounded the landing field.

The skimmers and the small transport ship were guiding the anti-grav units carrying the construction equipment and the fabricating units. Some containers held hand and powered tools for various jobs, a portable medical unit, field sciences lab, food, clothing, and weapons.

The ships were to unload and go back for more loads of equipment and supplies and transport personnel to the site as there was room. The injured would be coming on the second and third waves, as shelters were erected. Only able-bodied beings who could help with the work were being shuttled here for the moment.

The Asenti left O'vettun and In The Forest, and began directing his people where he wanted them and in what order. Soon the quiet forest was filled with the noise of lasers cutting down trees, earth moving machinery, power tools, and shouted orders.

By sunset, three large, long, multi-story log cabin-type structures had been completed by the crews, each complete with its own power unit, mess, and self-contained environmental and sanitation systems. Six smaller units were being completed as the sun dipped finally below the horizon.

The structures had self-polarizing windows of unbreakable clear materials, that could be regulated to let air flow in and out but not small insects or animals. A low level forcefield surrounded each structure, which would allow ship personnel to come freely and go through it, but not alien life forms.

They had not had a chance to recalibrate for In The Forest's bioform when they installed the units in the structures. It was a shock to one of the techs who had set up the unit, to see the native walk through the forcefield with no ill effects. He shouldn't have been able to do that because he was an alien and not programmed into their sensor screens. The worried tech then reported the news immediately to the Asenti, who took it with a great deal of shock as well.

"There's no mistake? The unit was on and fully functioning?" he asked again, not wanting to believe what he was hearing. He shifted restlessly on his feet, as he waited for an answer.

"Yes, Asenti. I tested it with specimens we had captured during the construction. The field stunned them. The indigenous life forms are repelled as they should be - but not the human! He should be repelled like the animals because no changes have been made to any of the units nor have they been tampered with," the young female Atanzi tech reported with wide eyes.

"Thank you for your report, Tanz U'kalli. You may go back to your duties. I'll handle it from here. Please don't mention this to anyone until we get more data on the humans here," he requested, filing the information away.

"Very good, sir. We have five units now ready for occupation. Are the skimmers bringing people from the ship now?" she asked, hoping to be reunited with her mate, who was back at the crash site.

"Yes, they've finished loading and are in the air now. They should arrive within ten units," he told her and saw her relax some of the tenseness out of her body.

"Thank you, sir. I'll be going to the landing field to meet them," she said happily, dismissing herself and going over to the brightly lighted field.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

In The Forest and O'vettun stood at the edge of the field watching for the skimmers to come in. He wanted to accept without fear what she so casually took for granted - the new buildings, the rush of

people, the night made into day by their great lights that were not made of fire - but it was difficult. It was all so much powerful magic to his eyes, even though she claimed it was only simple science that did these wonders.

Science was a word that had no real meaning for him. It was and was not beyond his comprehension. Magic was the only word in his vocabulary that could explain their wonders to him.

His mind still fought over whether they were gods, or if they were mere men like himself because of the tools they had to use. He could see that their magic came from devices and not from within their physical beings, as a true god or magician would call forth from themselves. Without their tools they were as helpless and powerless in the world as he was, and that amazed him.

Still, to create such tools ... that was wonders beyond imagining ... they had to be near-gods. If they were not, why then could they do things beyond what even his gods could do? he asked himself, over and over.

Seeing their powers and their magics, he doubted if his people could stop them, if they wished to conquer them and make them their slaves. He was sure that was not a concept that these ones knew, and he was glad. In his heart and mind, he could not help but worship these cat-like beings and their strange companions with awe and respect.

That one of them consented to be his mate was a miracle. He still held O'vettun in awe, for all his brave front. He was falling deeper and deeper in love with her as their time together increased, and she with him. Though they were very careful to keep their interactions around others impersonal and business-like, it was hard not to keep their shields from leaking, and reveal the truth of their relationship.

All day they were inseparable, partly because of the work on the camp and because they chose to. They had gotten many curious looks from her fellows, but the other Atanzi soon accepted his presence by her side as part of the job they were doing, supervising the placement of the buildings and advising on construction materials. As a team they worked well together.

Standing on the edge of the field, they were tired from the long day's and previous night's events. They both wished they could go off somewhere alone, eat, sleep, and possibly make love again, but neither wanted to dare chance it. They were too visible a pair to be able to slip away unnoticed into the night. They would be missed and search parties would be sent to find them, but it was so tempting a thought.

"Where will you go tonight, my love?" O'vettun asked him in a low voice, so they would not be overheard.

"I do not know. I would feel very strange sleeping in your new lodges. When it is warm like this, I like to sleep among the stars. Inside is too confining," he commented, wishing he could touch her and hold her close to him.

"I begin to understand. The stars are beautiful and before my people lit the darkness up and made noise, it was peaceful and quiet here. I will always treasure the memories of last night and seeing the stars that first time," she said in a wistful voice.

"We could always make our own camp away from all of this," he suggested.

"I know. It's tempting, but I have been assigned to stay in lodge one and oversee the newcomers coming in tonight. We all will be sleeping on the floors until the techs can make enough bed units and create room partitions, so that everyone can have their own room," she said, wishing she didn't have so many duties.

"This is what your people wish, separate little lodges within your big ones? You do not share much with one another, like my people do."

"I guess not. We like our privacy and too, there are not that many couples among us. Most of my

people here are unmated and until they do mate, they wish to be alone, or at most share a room with one of their own sex."

"That is different from my people. We do not wish to be alone. Rare is it that someone does in a camp. Each lodge is a family unit, of man, his wife or wives, and their children."

"Wives? As in more than one?" she asked, not sure she had heard him.

He smiled. "Yes, as in more than one. A good hunter can have many wives, as many as he can take care of and their children. Most men have only one or two but some can have three or four, even five if he is great hunter and well respected," he explained, watching the shock on her face.

"Four - five? And they all get along and accept this situation without protest?" she asked, not believing.

He looked up, thoughtful for a moment before he replied. "Sometimes ... most times, because that is our way and it makes the work easier if there are many to share in it, instead of burdening just one woman with it all. We take care of one another, watch over those who can not do much. Each person is valued as a special being and cherished, especially the children, for they are the most valuable asset for everyone in all the tribe. They are our hope for the future," he said with pride. "I hope that the creator will bless us too with little ones."

That thought suddenly chilled her, but he was dead serious and she knew it. She wasn't ready for children, not yet, not now, maybe even never. Not that she believed that anything would come of her mating with In The Forest. It was too much an impossibility. He did seem sincere in his wishes to have children, how could she answer him and not hurt his feelings?

"What if that were not possible?" she asked carefully.

"There is no if, only when. Because we'll have strong sons and daughters, I have seen that in the dreams," he told her assuringly.

"The dreams again. I don't know whether to believe you or not," she said, trying to determine if these dreams of his were really real, or just maneuvers on his part to get her to go along with him.

"So far the deams have not lied to me or to you. When I saw it will be so, believe that it will be. My dreams have shown me dangers, and they have also shown me great happiness and wonders as well. But I can only reveal parts of what I have seen and only in their allotted times to be known," he told her mysteriously.

"Be that way then, don't tell me. But you are sure we are going to have children? When?" she asked, suddenly both curious and afraid.

"By late Spring, we will have a daughter," he said, his voice strangely hollow-sounding, while he looked off into the distance, seeing visions only he could see before his eyes.

She wasn't sure what to say to that, but he was so positive that this was going to take place, that she half way began to believe that he might be right. They had only made love one time - surely that could not make it happen. No, it was just a fantasy on his part, wishful thinking that anything could come of their mating. Let him have his dreams. They made him happy, she thought to herself. She would have the reality.

"We can only wait and see, In The Forest, what will be. Let it lie at that. It is too soon, and there is too much to do and think about. To think about us having a family and children so soon after we have just met and gotten together, I am not ready to do that," she said gently, hoping her words would not anger him.

"You are right, O'vettun, I am pushing - trying to make things happen as I wish them to be, not as they should. It is too soon to think of family and little ones when our love is yet so newly made. Are you sure you can't slip away for awhile, at least for a walk? I know a place where we could be alone for

awhile without anyone seeing. Then I could bring you back before it got too late?" he asked, his low deep voice gently pleading with her to come with him.

She looked up at him, her arms wrapped around her sides, considering, debating the risks. She wanted to, she really did, but the need to do her assigned duties warred with that desire. What were those duties? To help settle in the newcomers to the camp and watch over them. Something anyone could do as well as her, if not better.

She was tired and she had put in many long hours finding this site and helping set it up, did she also have to people it? Being with In The Forest was becoming more pleasurable than being around her own kind she was discovering. She made a decision.

"I will go with you, but we must be careful and not be seen to leave together," she said.

He agreed. "Go as if you were going to the creek, where we went to swim. I will meet you there in a little while. And leave your communicator behind," he suggested, already understanding that they could be tracked by its noises and magic.

"I will meet you there. In the meantime, I will get someone to cover for me and greet the new arrivals then take care of them. Go, I will see you later. The Asenti is coming this way," she warned, seeing Ky'tulendu coming her way.

In The Forest did as she asked, and swiftly backed away out of the small crowd gathering by the field, only to start vanishing into the deepening shadows of the forest, where he was quickly lost to sight if anyone had been watching. He had plans for this night and he went to make his own private camp ready for his mate.

O'vettun watched In The Forest vanish into the crowd and turned to meet the Asenti walking up to her.

"In The Forest has left for the night?" he asked, sounding somewhat disappointed.

"It appears so. I think he wanted to find some real food. He's not too taken with our canned rations," she lied.

"I don't blame him. I look forward to checking out the local offerings myself after everything has been cleared by sciences and medical. I did want to ask him, since we are getting things in hand here, when he would like to take a group of us over to meet his people. I'm sure they must be aware of us by now. We made enough noise to announce our presence in this area."

"That we have, sir. He should be back tomorrow. I'll ask him to talk to you as soon as I see him," she told him.

"I see that you and he have come to an understanding."

"Sir?" she asked confused, and wondering what he was referring to.

"Don't be so alarmed, Specialist. I just noticed that the two of you weren't so tense around each other after we started landing the equipment and started making camp. I take it you two talked it out and reached an understanding?" he inquired.

"Isn't that a bit personal, sir?" she asked, trying to maintain her calm.

"Yes, it is, but you and the native seem to have some kind of rapport. We need him and his knowledge to help us survive, so I look upon yours and his relationship as a keystone to our survival here."

"I see. Yes, we have come to an understanding, but what that is, is between him and myself. However, he will help and advise in any way that he can, regardless of how things go between him and I," she said assuring him.

He nodded, feeling that he was not going to be able to take this conversation any further with her.

Whatever had transpired between the native and her, she was not going to say. As long as it didn't interfere with her duties, she could do as she liked. So far, she was proving to be almost as valuable an asset as the native was.

"Where are you off to?" Ky'tulendu asked, noting that she seemed to have somewhere to go.

"To find someone to look after the newcomers and get them settled. I don't think I'm up to it, Asenti. It's been a long day," she admitted flatly.

"Yes, it has. I don't think I've more than took a couple of short naps in the last couple of days, and by the looks of you, I'd say the same was true for you. Take the night off, O'vettun, and get some rest. Who was the fool who assigned you this extra duty?" he asked.

She looked embarrassed, and keeping a straight face replied, "I believe it was you, sir."

"Ouch, sorry about that. Probably chose you because you were qualified to handle it. Go get some rest, I'll take it from here. The skimmers are coming in."

"Thank you, sir," she said, beating a hasty retreat and breathing a sigh of relief.

Her tiredness fell off her in waves as she almost ran across the camp to the creek. The nearer she got to where In The Forest waited, the happier and more light-hearted she felt, like she had earlier in the day when they had had all of this to just themselves. She just hoped no one had seen her leave. She took out her pocket recorder and scanned the immediate area just to be sure.

There were two sentries downstream and two up, but none in her immediate area, or was there? On the screen of the scanner she was getting strange readings ... Atanzi and yet not Atanzi?

Whomever it was, they were getting closer, and she looked up as In The Forest appeared in a gap in the underbrush across the creek. She shook the small device to see if it was working properly. It was. The readings were the same. She checked off the device and pondered the abnormality she had just seen.

Atanzi and not Atanz readings would explain a great deal as to why there was attraction between them and their bonding. Somehow tomorrow, she was going to get him to medical and sciences and have them run some checks on him. She had to know what he was.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

In The Forest emerged from the cover of the willow tree branches that overshadowed his side of the creek. Taking off both his moccasins and loincloth, he began walking across the stream to her side. She watched him expectantly, wondering what he wanted her to do. Soon he was close enough to be heard without shouting and attracting attention.

"Come, O'vettun, I want you to come over to this side of the creek, I have a surprise for you," he said carefully navigating the slick bottom rocks.

"Do you want me to wade out to you?" she asked, on the bank of the creek, still unsure what he wanted her to do. It was dark but with her night vision she could see him plainly as he came towards her in his unadorned glory, his desire plain.

"The water is still warm," he commented, making it seem to be an invitation to join him in the water.

Thinking that was what he wanted her to do, she shrugged and began peeling off her clothes and equipment. She then wrapped them together into a tight bundle that she could carry across the stream. The water was cool when she first entered, but she soon warmed up as she got used to it. A second bath was not a bad idea, after the hard sweaty work she had done that afternoon and evening, moving equipment and supplies at the camp.

Meeting her at the halfway point he told her, "I had not meant for you to take your clothes off to meet me, my mate, but I do not object either." He was very delighted to see her this way.

She blushed. "You didn't tell me not to undress," she told him, coming to where he waited in the middle of the waist deep stream. "But the water does feel good, and I think I needed another bath," she said laughing.

"I did, too, after making my camp ready for us. It has been awhile since I have used it. There was more to do than I thought because of many small visitors in my absence," he said, taking the bundle of clothes from her and carrying it.

"Small visitors?" she inquired, as they swam more than waded across the stream, letting the almost warm water cleanse and refresh their bodies and spirits.

"Mice, probably. They tore up and got into a few things I had stored away, but it was all salvagable. I hope you like turkey. I left it cooking on the fire along with other treats for us," he said casually, as he helped her out.

"You cook too? That's good, I haven't since I was a young girl at home," she told him, then she began to shiver. "It's gotten cold," she complained, as she began to feel cooler night air brushing against her wet bare skin.

Setting down her bundle on the ground, he quickly put his moccasins and loincloth back on.

"It is a cool breeze, and you have wet skin," he agreed. "You are not used to the differences in temperature yet and you have nothing to cover you. We will go back to my camp quickly, it isn't far. Put your arm around my neck and I will carry you and keep you warm," he offered, trying not to get aroused by the sight and nearness of her.

She did as he suggested and felt herself lifted up into his strong muscled arms. In her arms she carried her clothes and they helped protect her against the coolness of the night.

To him, she was light as a feather as he carried her with ease nestled against him to his private camp site in a cave hidden behind a stand of thick shrubbery. The entrance lay half way up the hillside by the side of the creek.

From the outside, no one could see the entrance, so thick were the leafy bushes covering it. In The Forest moved the scratchy leaves aside with one hand. He then stepped through the tall narrow opening in the rock wall with his burden.

As they got past the entrance, and past a short narrow tunnel, a huge rock walled room was revealed to O'vettun's unbelieving eyes. She had learned about caves in general, but this was the first time she had ever seen one.

The huge main chamber was brightly lit. The torches he had set into crude holders along the walls flamed with golden lights, creating dancing patterns and shadows where the light caused the crystals in the limestone rocks to sparkle like miniature suns and rainbows.

He carried her down the natural steps that led into the main chamber far below the level of the outside opening. Here at the bottom he had made his campsite. It looked as though he had been here many times before, from the variety of personal items that lined the walls and floors of the large chamber.

There were large piles of animal skins of various types, in different stages of being worked on and shaped into objects, she noted as they went down. She also saw many containers and baskets holding foodstuffs and supplies. The cave had a very settled look.

"I take it you live here?" she asked, looking around after he set her carefully down upon a fluffy bear skin, near his large cooking fire in the center of the room.

"At times," he answered. "When I am hunting in this area. Sometimes over the winter I come here and stay, just to be alone and to think without my family trying to play matchmaker with some of the young women of the village. They will no longer have to do that," he said, grinning down at her.

"No, they won't," she agreed, and then she blushed, terribly aware of her nudity and his. Being mated was still a strange experience for her and especially to this unknown non-Atanzi. There were adjustments that needed making on both sides, that neither had ever dreamed about.

It had all happened so fast, everything - the crash, his finding her in the wreck, helping the survivors, and realizing what little had survived as far as people and supplies. Then they had gone off to find the new camp and help set it up. This was in-between their whirlwind courtship and mating. It had happened so fast, yet naturally, but all without a chance to think things out. They were going to do much more talking, if it was going to work out between them beyond the physical.

In The Forest gave her a soft deer hide to wrap in, since she was beginning to shiver with the coolness of the cave air. She wrapped it around her gratefully and waited for him to make the next move.

For the moment, he busied himself with other duties. He went over to check what seemed to be a large lump of dried dirt buried in the deep coals of his fire. There were several other containers nearby, that when he stirred them gave off unfamiliar, yet delicious smells to her sensitive kitten-like nose. She then realized how hungry she was.

"Whatever you are cooking smells good. Is this what your people usually eat?" she asked, curiously.

Wrapping the deerskin around her, she went over to where he crouched by the cooking fire, turning over the large clay covered object in the coals. Standing nearby, she was fascinated by what he was doing. She had never seen anyone cook before, at least not like this. No one she knew cooked over open flames. It was a skill all her people were going to have to learn as well as how to prepare food.

"Sometimes. It depends on what we catch or find in its season. Not everything in my world is edible, or safe to eat, so that is why we cook it. This is one of the things I and my people will teach yours, if they wish to learn," he said thoughtfully, looking up at her after he finished turning the package.

"What's in that large thing you keep turning?" she asked, trying to learn.

"Our chil'kun-num, turkey, stuffed with parched corn or soo-toy'yo, wild onions, herbs, and nut meats. I wrapped leaves around it and covered it with wet clay to cook in the fire," he said, straightening up to stand in front of her.

"More language lessons?" she asked, noting that neither of them had their translators nearby, but they were still understanding each other.

"Yes, I have been doing much thinking on that. You and I are somehow able to understand one another without your devices, but not always. I have no word-pictures in my head to comprehend much of what your people say, nor do you have the word-pictures for many things in my world. There are large gaps," he said, talking with his hands and spreading his arms to indicate what he meant.

"Yes, I am just starting to see that," she agreed. "And our talking, you speak in your language and I in mine but we don't really hear the words with our ears, we hear them inside our heads. We talk without talking!" she realized with a start.

He nodded. "You begin to understand now," he said without moving his lips, but she heard him nevertheless. "What I discovered when I carried you to this place. I almost dropped you when I realized I could hear your thoughts when we were close to one another. This is strange magic you bring to me, O'vettun," he said seriously. In his voice there was not fear, but wariness.

She was frightened too, because this was beyond her experience as well. She knew that such telepathy was possible, or had been possible in the past between couples, but no one she knew of had had such an experience as this.

"In The Forest, this is as strange for me as it is for you. This is not science, like other things have been that you have seen from my world. This is something I cannot explain. I think this is good thing. I hope it will be for me, for our peoples."



"I do, too. Your people will take much getting used to by my family. When I was making this place ready for us, I thought a lot about this and where you and I would live together as man and wife."

"I have thought about that too. I am needed here at this camp with my people, but I want to be with you, go where you go, but where you want to live ... but I'm afraid, too, I don't know if I could fit in among your people," she said. It was difficult to envision his home and being surrounded by non-Atanzi.

Looking down at her leonine features with her grass green eyes, her face coloring and her golden hair that he loved so much, he did understand her fears. Even as a fair-haired and fair-skinned human, she would have caused a stir with her appearance among his dark-haired, dark-eyed, and bronze skinned peoples. With her cat-like appearance, there would be talk about him lying with animals more than about her coloring.

"Sadly, nor do I, my O'vettun. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, but I see you with lover's eyes. To know how my people will react, I must try to remember how shocked I was when I first saw you. They will fear your people, and fear is not a good thing. You will be seen as animals and not as true men, animals that mock the gods and the ways of the creator. Then they will try to destroy your people. This is why I warned that your people should be careful in what they do to the land. My people will be watching for excuses to destroy the animals that walk like men, who are invading their land," he said seriously, taking her small clawed lightly-furred hand in his large smooth one.

"Do you see me as an animal that walks like a man?" she asked, her green slanted eyes regarding him intently.

"No, never. You are all woman in every way. I see but don't see your differences, and I like those differences. And how do I look to you, a hairless male since your men are so furry? Does it bother you that I do not have claws and teeth such as you do?" he asked, not sure how she did see him.

She was thoughtful for a moment. "At first, you were a shock too, all bare skin shining in the sun, but I love your body, its hardness and its softness. Your hair is beautiful, long and silky, while mine feels so coarse and wild. In every way you are like my men, and better," she smiled shyly.

"Better?" he inquired, with an upraised black eyebrow.

"You won my heart, and made me your mate. None of my men could. That is what intrigues and puzzles me - our attraction and bonding. Then there are the strange readings I took when I was waiting for you by the creek. Until you showed yourself, I thought you were another Atanzi."

"Me? One of your sensor devices like you used earlier on the trees and plants told you I was an Atanzi?" he asked, confused.

She nodded. "Yes, and no. Atanzi and yet non-Atanzi. I plan on checking its circuits out to make sure it was functioning correctly, but the readings were very strange. Will you be willing to let my people run tests, to see what differences there are between yours and mine?" she asked.

"Yes? I think I would like to know myself. Will it hurt?" he asked, a little fearful of what they might want to do.

"No, it won't hurt, I promise. But I will talk to MS B'tunku tomorrow and see if she can run some tests, so we can figure out what is happening," she said.

"That will be good, O'vettun. There is too much unknown about why and how this love between us can be, when it should not," he said, his eyes sparkling in the reflected firelight.

"But we will find the answers, I'm sure of that," she said, her green cat-like eyes staring into the depths of his black endless ones. Then she reached up and stroked his silky blue-black hair, marveling at the texture and beauty of it as well as him.

"O'vettun, do not start what must be finished," he warned, getting aroused by her touches and looks at him. "I hunger for you, but my empty stomach also calls. Are you hungry? Our supper is almost ready," he told her, trying to distract her and change the subject.

She smiled and drew her hand back. "I am. Food sounds good, I want to see these wonderful smelling things that you have cooked."

He led her back to her bear skin rug and made her sit, while he went back to the fire and carefully started pulling out the buried cooking containers. He put the main course on the floor of the cave and with several quick taps, cracked it open on top and began pulling it apart to get at the meat inside. Mouth watering smells came from the thick steam rising out of the container.

He found two large low walnut bowls and put generous helpings of both meat and stuffing within. From other containers he ladled other foods to where both bowls were almost overflowing. Then he brought them over to where she sat and handing her hers, he sat down as well.

She looked at the strange steaming foods in puzzlement, not knowing where or how to start, or if there were any customs they must observe before they began eating. She decided to let him take the lead and show her his ways. He saw her waiting for him and wondered why she was not eating.

"You do not like your food?" he asked, dipping his fingers into the stuffing and putting it into his mouth.

"It looks great. I wasn't sure if you had rituals or certain ways of eating your food," she said.

"Sometimes, but not for everyday meals when we are both as hungry as we are. Just eat, and enjoy tonight," he replied, continuing to eat.

"Do you have something to eat with?" she asked hopefully, not wanting to really have to eat with her fingers.

He looked amused, and embarrassed. "I apologize. I was so hungry that I forgot. I will get you a em-hawn'is to eat with," he said, getting up and bringing her back what was in her language, a wooden spoon. She took it gratefully and began to eat.

It was wonderful, or else she was that hungry. She wasn't sure. She probably should have run a discreet analysis on it with her recorder, to make sure it was safe to eat. So far, their physiologies had been similar enough for him to eat her food without ill effects. She hoped that the same held true for her. She would know one way or the other within the next couple of hours.

"Do you have anything to drink?" she asked, getting halfway through the meal.

"Water, or some blackberry juice?" he offered, realizing he was thirsty too. "I've never had guests before, so I forget things. At home my mother and sisters take care of guests, I just stay out of the way," he added, apologizing.

"Then this is not your home, this place here?" she asked.

"No," he said, getting up and finding a container of juice for them to drink, "this is just a place I use when I'm out hunting. In my village I live with my parents, and sisters. I don't have my own lodge yet. One does not get a lodge until one finds a mate and wants to have their own family. Although one must be able to provide for their own lodge by being a good hunter and warrior," he explained, handing her the clay jug after uncorking it.

She sniffed it experimentally, it was pleasant, but strange. She took several small sips. It was sweet and tart. She liked it, drinking more. It made her tingle all over after a while, and feel good. She began to giggle and laugh. He looked at her strangely, then sniffed the jug and realized what had happened. The juice had fermented and been made into wine.

"Oh, O'vettun, I am sorry, I should have checked that before I gave it to you."

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

"Excuse me, Tanz H'lentzz, have you seen Specialist O'vettun this morning?" Ky'tulendu asked, as he called the cabin where O'vettun was assigned quarters.

"Sorry, sir, no one has seen her since last night when she was seen going towards the waterway. The sentries have not been able to locate her on any of the sensor either. She's just vanished, sir," the officer on the other end of the commcon reported, her voice worried too.

"Has anyone seen the native, In The Forest?" he asked, hopefully.

"No sir, not since early last evening before the skimmers came in. He left the camp alone, heading for the heavier woods. It has been assumed that he either went home or made a camp away from ours," she relayed, wondering what the interest in these two were.

Ky'tulendu was evaluating the information he was getting and putting his impressions of the two missing persons' behavior together and coming up with some ideas of his own. Absentmindedly, he tapped his fingers rhythmically on his desk as he thought. He took another sip of klass from his cup, and made a grimace as the pieces fell reluctantly into place.

The static coming over the line made him realize that he was leaving the officer waiting for his response, finally he said, "Thank you, Tanz H'lentzz for your help. If Specialist O'vettun reports in or is seen, please have someone call me, and the same with the native."

"Understood, sir," she replied, puzzled but not questioning his orders.

Ky'tulendu cut off the transmission, and sat thoughtfully on the edge of his bed in the new command center barracks. He wasn't sure how to handle this very delicate situation. This was beyond his experience, or his peoples'. Interspecies attraction and possible mating were virtually unknown among his people, even with similar genotypes. His talks with both the parties appeared to have fallen on deaf ears. Prohibiting them from seeing one another would not work, that was the surest way to keep them together.

He had no doubts that they were off together somewhere close and hidden from the sensor probes. He didn't see how that was possible, but certain types of minerals and elements could disrupt or block the sensing signals and a life form reading could not be picked up. Oddly enough, the sentries on the perimeter had reported two Atanzis leaving camp separately last night and meeting by the creek. Then the two had vanished from their screens, as if the earth had swallowed them up. The sentries' equipment was still being checked for malfunctions. So far nothing had shown up.

B'tunki was anxious to get a hold of the native and run tests on him. The attraction between the engineering specialist and the native had bothered her too. There was something decidedly odd about these humans, if they were true humans, which he was somehow beginning to doubt. He hoped there would be answers to their questions soon.

Resolving to change mental gears, he began thinking about his other problems. He still had more crew persons to move from the ship and get settled here. Only half of his people had been moved over so far. There were still many more loads of equipment and supplies they needed to come over, before the ship was completely stripped of all available materials.

They had determined that most of their stores were gone, sheared off with the bulk of the engineering section. Only the way the compartments had been constructed and located had saved what they did have. News had come in that they did have some of the hand tools and survival gear he had brought aboard. Some clothing had been found, along with bedding and personal use items, but the heavy weapons were gone, and backup power units for the heavy machinery, some replacement parts and other items to repair the machinery were in short supply.

There was a good supply of light weapons and power units for them. They could last a couple of years or more with careful use. The power cells to run the commcons and communicators, as well as the recorders, could last several years beyond that, but then, too, they would fail. He didn't see any way they could duplicate the technology to manufacture power cells from scratch. It was beyond their

now limited resources and technical capabilities.

They would have to adapt to the local conditions and figure out substitutions for items from the available resources. It was going to mean a lot of re-education for his people because they needed to learn primitive survival skills, technology - and their old way of life would not work here after the machines died.

They could not view this world as a colony planet. Their circumstances were not the same, nor could they treat this planet as they would have a colony. Already, he had heard too much talk in passing that suggested that they were already taking that attitude. That was something he was going to have to head off immediately, as soon as he had all his people from the ship in camp.

Their new home on this planet was rapidly taking shape. By nightfall tonight they would have five more large buildings completed and at least ten smaller ones. The next day, the construction of the sciences and medical buildings would begin, using both native materials and salvaged pieces of the spaceship. Right now their priorities were to get living units constructed, along with the mess and a hospital unit to take care of the injured from the crash.

There was a knock on his door. He threw on his clothes and went to answer it. Opening it, he saw B'tunku standing there. Her hand poised to knock again. She did not look pleased.

"Sorry to disturb you, Asenti, the last of the injured are coming in now on the skimmers. They'll be taken directly to the med unit to be checked over and to heal. You wanted to know, sir," she reminded him, her manner still military efficient and brisk.

"Thank you, B'tunku. What personnel are left over at the ship?" he inquired, inviting her in, acutely aware of his semi-dressed appearance and disorganized quarters. "I apologize for not being on top of things this morning. Last night was the first real sleep I've had in several days. I'd been trying to sort out priorities for our people and wake up," he said, pouring himself another cup of klass from its dispenser. "So go on with your report," he said, motioning her to go on.

"Vokolin had had three salvage units going section by section through the ship. They are still under orders to look for survivors, but their main priority is to let us know what equipment and supplies survived the crash. So far, they have found three more Ritolans, but none are expected to make it. They cannot handle the gravity and planetary conditions here."

A look of pain went across his leonine face as he looked out the window, as he listened to her report. "That's a shame, but it would have been more difficult for them to adapt here than us. How are the other non-Atanzi species doing. I understand that only the Soaettes and Tranrils are holding up, and some of them are having problems," he asked, walking over to his bed to sit down and put on his heavy boots.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as she stood stiffly at attention to give her report, "The Tranrils have very little resistance against some of the microorganisms native to this planet. They all have fevers, headaches, chills, and are developing upper respiratory distress. Nothing in their immune system can combat what is attacking them. None of the standard remedies work and my medical staff is unable to come up with anything to help them," she reported sadly, feeling that failure personally.

"They are all going to die?" he asked, point blank.

"Yes," she said, nodding her head, "within the next two weeks if not sooner."

"All right," he said, accepting that information. "And the Soaettes, what of them?"

"Only five have been found out of the ten on board, and one of the females is in critical condition. She may not recover. The other female was bonded and her mate died in the crash. She will not accept another in his place. So far, the microorganisms that are affecting the Tranrils are not bothering the Soaettes. However, the local insects are finding them quite an attraction. They keep coming in with

massive insect bites, and those are starting to get infected from the wounds. They are also starting to lose their feathers from the stress of their situation."

"So what you are telling me is that within the next month or so, the only survivors from the ship will be Atanzi, if we don't develop some problem adapting to this planet's biosystem," he asked carefully.

"Yes, sir, you are correct. So far, we have found very little that is not compatible with our needs. In fact, this planet seems tailor-made for us. But to the non-Atanzi lifeforms among the crew, this is a deadly and hazardous environment," she commented.

"Do the Soaettes and the Tranrils know this?"

"Not yet, but they will. I feel for them, I really do. But there is nothing we can do for them except help them die in peace," she said without emotion.

"I understand. I just hate to lose any of my crew, especially this way. It would have been kinder if they had all died in the crash. Do what you can to make their ends painless," he said, trying to dismiss her.

"I will, but I came here to see if you had seen the native. I wanted to get him in for tests. I heard the report that the sentries gave about the two Atanzi leaving camp and then the two unknowns disappearing from sensor sight. I got some odd readings from the native when we were still at the ship, but I thought it was equipment failure too."

"What kind of odd readings?"

"The native read like an Atanzi male on the bioscreens, with very minor differences in blood typing, and chemistry," she said carefully, watching his expression change from surprise, then to one of growing satisfaction, as separate bits of information clicked into place.

The Atanzi was still puzzled about one piece though, "If his bios read like ours then why does he look like one of the simian-humans instead of us?"

"Adaptation to this planet, maybe. Maybe his people were engineered for it, like ours were. What if they went through their own version of the Change? By the same ones that did it to us, using the same genetic stock? It would explain the similarities between us."

"That's too easy an answer."

"Sometimes the easiest one is the correct one."

"If I believe you're right, then you are saying that the natives here are really Atanzi in human simian forms, instead of our own?"

She nodded seriously. "I believe the tests will prove that to be the case.

"Then we can interbreed with these humans?" he asked dumbfounded.

"There seems to be no physiological barriers to prevent that. The only differences between us are in our facial structures, with variants in some of our teeth, our claws, and our hairiness. However, the thought has occurred to me that this compatibility might not hold true across all the human population on this planet."

"Some of the humans might not be Atanzi variants?" he asked.

"Possibly. We've only seen the one specimen. He may not be a true example of his people. As far as he and the missing specialist are concerned, the attraction and mating compulsion between them is now explainable. However, I've never seen one develop so quickly, or so strongly between individuals before."

"Nor have I. I have no doubts that the two are together somewhere. It will be interesting to see if they are capable of true high level bonding, or if this is merely a physical attraction between the two," he commented, trying to imagine what has been taking place.

"They will try to hide the fact of their relationship. I cannot see them being open about it."

"Yes ... reactions from our people and possibly from his," he said, thinking out loud. "Should we appear not to notice, or let them know, we know?" he asked, getting up and pacing.

"That I cannot say. Asenti. Just let it be and see what happens. Even now, if they want to disappear for a few days, I would let them," she suggested.

He flashed her an angry look as he stopped his pacing. "She's one of my crew, an officer! Discipline must be maintained," he protested, his anger rising because she was suggesting just to let the crewperson go on with being disciplined for leaving camp with the native.

His anger was not bothering her. It rolled off her as if it had never been, he had to face the facts. Carefully she told him, "True, but the ship is gone. The duties we had are gone. That life is gone. This is a new world with new priorities and imperatives. We will be able to hold the discipline of the ship together for a while, but eventually we will find ourselves presiding over a community of individuals, where artificial ranks won't matter, only skills will," she said, slipping reality in on him.

"Yes, I have had thoughts along that line, B'tunku. I plan to gain those skills, so that I can continue to lead my people." He was warning her that he was not going to allow himself to be replaced.

"I had no illusions about that, Ky'tulendu, nor do I want your job. I have enough to do with mine," she defended, and made to leave, passing his desk. "Your commcon is beeping," she told him, casually noticing the blinking light on the screen.

He went over, flipping the switch and answered it. "Ky'tulendu, here. What is it?"

"Sen Commd Y'kkenn reporting from the outer perimeter. Specialist O'vettun and the native have just passed our position heading into camp, should we retain them?" he asked.

"No, let them pass and don't announce your presence. Did you see where they came from?" the Asenti asked.

"No sir, they just appeared out of nowhere up on the hillside on the other side of the waterway. One minute there was nothing on our screens, then suddenly there were two blips, both reading as Atanzi. That confused us, sir, because we are supposed to be the only ones in this sector. We then did a visual check and realized it must be the missing officer and the native. We still haven't figured out why the native showed up as one of our people. He sure doesn't look like one," she commented, confused.

"We're working on that Sen Commd. Continue at your post and let the two come into camp on their own. However, have someone inform the officer that we want to see her and the native in my office as soon as possible."

"Very good, sir. I'll relay that down the line. Sen Commd Y'kkenn out," he said shutting off transmission on his end.

"So They've emerged from their hiding place? Judging from the time, I bet they overslept. The specialist probably hoped to sneak back to camp early and hope she wasn't missed." B'tunku commented, halting in her forward rush to the door, her anger having evaporated.

"No doubt. Now it only looks as if they've been off exploring. We'll see what explanation she has when she arrives. You are staying, aren't you?" he asked, offering her a seat, as he straightened up his rumpled bed and himself.

"I had duties, but this I don't want to miss. Do you have any of that klass left?" she asked, her silver eyes sparkling as she held out her empty cup and she sat down in his chair to wait.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

The sun was nearing the mid-morning mark when O'vettun and In The Forest emerged from their cave. She looked up at the blue sky and the sun high in the heavens and groaned.

He looked at her strangely. "What troubles you, my mate?" he asked, helping her down the hillside.

"Look at the time. We overslept. I needed to be back at camp many hours ago. They have to know I've been gone all night. I'm in deep trouble," she said worriedly, trying to watch where to put her feet down on the slippery loose shale.

"It is my fault for letting you. You were so tired from the last days, I just let you sleep. I also enjoyed lying with you, and having you close to wake up to. You purr in your sleep," he said with a smile, catching her as she almost slipped.

"I do not," she defended. "But you take all the covers," she complained.

"I am sorry. That comes from not having anyone to share covers with. I will make sure there are many covers, so you won't ever get cold," he retorted with good humor.

When they got to the creek, she pulled out her recorder and scanned the area. Two sentries were downstream and two up, as before, but neither made a move in their direction.

"They are staying put," she told him, putting the device back into her pocket. Then she sat down and began to take off her boots.

"Why are you doing that?" he asked, watching her.

"So I can wade across."

"Put your boots back on, I will carry you. You have so much more to take off than me, and the water will not hurt my clothes," he said.

He waited until he had put her boots back on then he reached down and she wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her up. Snuggling against him, she enjoyed this nearness to him. He carried her high in his arms, so the swirling water would not splash her clothes. The slick bottom rocks made keeping his footing difficult, but he managed to get her to the other bank without mishap.

He saw her looking at him with bright eyes, and felt her kiss his cheek. He turned his head and bent it to meet her lips. Tenderly, he kissed her and felt their bond sing in response. He wished they were still in their hidden cave, together and alone, so he might be able to respond to her more fully. She broke their contact, and looked up at his dark watching eyes.

"I think you can put me down," she suggested rather breathlessly, not really wanting to get down.

"There is no way we could spend the day together in my world?" he asked suggestively, still holding her close to him in his muscled arms.

"I wish there was, I really do. I don't want to go back to my duties."

He smiled. "I feel that, my mate. Nor do I want to share you with others, either. Not now. Is this part of this bonding - to feel this way?" he asked, his voice full of wonder.

"I think so. The first few days are described that way in old books," she said. "But I must go back, In The Forest, please put me down," she requested.

"Books?" he asked, unfamiliar with the word and concept. He did set her down, but not without another lingering kiss that threatened to make her legs weak from the passion of it.

Recovering somewhat she looked up at him. "Thank you for carrying me across. I've got to hurry and get back to my cabin. What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I have no real plans. You said the Asenti wants to see me. I will see him after I make sure you get to where you are going."

"If you want. I just worry that people will talk about how much time we are seen together," she said as they entered the borders of the newly-formed camp.

"Let them. I am bursting with the happiness of my love for you and our being mates. Let them think

what they will," he said proudly, without shame.

She stopped in her walking and looked at him with worried eyes. "I feel the same way too, my mate. But there are many who are not yet ready for the sight of our love or you. For both of our sakes, we must keep to the promise we made, to keep our love secret for the time being. Please?" she begged.

He stopped too and looked down at her, and nodded. "I will do what you wish, O'vettun, but it will be hard. My feelings for you are strong, and I want nothing more than to tell all the world how I feel. If this frightens you, then I will keep silent, so that your heart will stay at peace. Know that I will try to do nothing that will cause you sorrow or pain," he said, looking deeply in her eyes. Taking her hand, he kissed it gently before letting it drop to her side.

Gradually, they became aware of the sounds around them, songbirds singing across the open spaces of the small glade, small animals scurrying through the underbrush, and in the distance the sounds of hammering, wood being cut, and machinery, warred with the peace of the forest. The spell between them was broken as they heard the approach of booted feet coming along the stony natural path. Reluctantly, they broke apart and resumed their walk into the rapidly growing village.

Already crews were at work on a number of cabins and outbuildings of various sizes. In The Forest was amazed and impressed with how fast the camp was going up. Yesterday, this had been a quiet virgin forest, today it was taking on the shape of a large village, larger than any he had ever seen. People and vehicles came and went with a speed he never dreamed was possible.

Everywhere he looked, he saw the Atanzi magic. How they could do so many things was still beyond his comprehension. The human could only stare at wonder after wonder being performed. O'vettun took it all in stride, but she understood how all this must appear to him how wide the gap was between their two cultures and technological levels. To do what her people had done in a few short hours would take his people many days, weeks, or months to do - if they could even duplicate them.

She knew, as he did, these wonders would be short-lived because the magic would run out and never work again. For now it worked and he was fortunate to see it happen, and he would be able to tell his people how this place had come to be, because he had seen it with his own eyes and helped sometimes with his own hands.

It took awhile to get to O'vettun's cabin, as they dodged construction vehicles and machinery. It was getting harder and harder to recognize the glade they had seen yesterday. Finally, they arrived at her doorstep and he was about to say goodbye when they were interrupted by the arrival of a large burly Atanzi in field garb carrying a laser rifle slung over her broad shoulder. She looked them both over curiously, the human most of all before she spoke.

"Specialist O'vettun, Asenti Ky'tulendu wants to see you and the native in command quarters as soon as possible." The sentry informed her, as the specialist tried to enter her cabin.

"Understood," O'vettun replied.

The sentry having executed her duty, left. The couple stood on the steps of the building and watched the sentry walk off before either one spoke. In The Forest waited for O'vettun to speak, wondering what she was going to do. She looked panic-stricken, and very afraid. He did not like the wave of fear he was feeling from her. He wasn't sure that he understood the cause.

"O'vettun, what is wrong?" In The Forest asked, touching her arm, wanting to hold her but daring not to.

"The Asenti want to see you and me in his cabin."

"I understand him wanting to see us, but why this fear? You have no cause to be frightened."

"I know, it's silly. They probably know I've been gone all night. I expect to hear about leaving camp without permission. He did ask me last night to ask if you would take him to your village to meet your people. I probably have no reason to be apprehensive like this, none at all," she told herself, trying to



calm her nerves.

He could feel her trembling. She had so many fears - it was not good, he thought, wishing he could take her away.

"O'vettun, I will not tell you what to do. You must decide," he said gently, making her come to a decision and face her fears.

"I must report in, get it over," she said, her green eyes sparkling with determination to not be weak, as she willed herself to face the Asenti.

"I will be there with you, my mate, by your side. You are not alone. You will never be alone again," he told her, giving her arm a gentle squeeze as he turned and led the way to the commander's quarters across the compound.

The new command quarters was in one of the smaller two story buildings. A passing Atanzi gave them directions to the Asenti's rooms as they entered the building. The building smelled overpoweringly of newly-cut cedar logs, mixed with machinery. They followed the long central corridor up to the back steps and went up to the second floor, where the Asenti's rooms were in the back quarter of the building.

Her hard-soled boots echoed eerily in the near empty hallways on the wood floors, while her companion's steps were almost silent. Long narrow windows lit both ends with pale sunlight, but the upper story was gloomy like the ship had been. They found the right door and she knocked twice before she heard footsteps coming to answer.

"Come in," Ky'tulendu invited them both as he opened the door wide to let them come in.

"Thank you, sir," O'vettun replied, and then noticed the doctor sitting at the table beyond.

The doctor's presence bothered O'vettun, but she didn't know why it should. She nodded to the doctor, acknowledging her presence and then stood loosely at attention, waiting to see what the Asenti would say first.

"I understand that you were gone from camp all night and just returned. I also received a report that last night the outer sentries saw two Atanzi leaving the area who then disappeared off their sensor screens. Can you explain this?," he asked, wanting answers and doubtful that he would get them.

O'vettun exchanged quick glances with In The Forest. Through their bond he reassured her, encouraging her to go on and answer her commander.

"I was gone from camp last night, Sir," she admitted. "As to the report of two Atanzi leaving camp, I can't explain that," she told him truthfully.

"I see," he said, stroking his chin, as he looked down at her. His greater height made him appear to tower over her. "When you returned earlier, the sentries also reported two Atanzi appearing suddenly on the hillside and then coming across the waterway into camp. A visual check identified these Atanzi as being you and In The Forest."

A look of shock went across both O'vettun's and In The Forest's faces. "Are you sure about that, sir?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"They double-checked their equipment when they saw it was you and the native. Other readings have also shown In The Forest as an Atanzi male, when logically he should be registering as a true human on our sensors," he told her carefully, watching both hers and the native's reactions.

"Sir, you're not serious?" she asked, still not believing.

"He is, Specialist. I have taken my own reading on In The Forest and you. There is no doubt. The bioscans say he is an Atanzi male who had recently been bonded. Your own scans confirm that a true bond between you has taken place and you have been impregnated," the doctor told them both.

In The Forest had heard everything perfectly through his translator, which he wore on a thong around his neck. He lifted a dark eyebrow in amusement, as well as satisfaction. "You did not believe my dreams, O'vettun. Do you now?" he asked, in a low voice.

It was almost too much for her. "So our secret is out. We had wished to keep our relationship private because we are aware of the problems that it could cause between our peoples, both mine and his," she said, not sure what was going to happen.

"O'vettun, we all have been aware of the attraction between the two of you since the start. The bioreadings make clear why the mating compulsion was so strong, even though there were outward physical differences. When actual blood and tissue samples are run, we will learn more. I noted that the tension between you two was rather high before I sent you to find a site for the camp, but when I met up with you later, it was defused."

"It was that obvious, sir?" she asked.

"Yes. I had hoped our warnings would deter you, but the mating compulsion was stronger."

"It was ... on both sides. Then we have achieved true bonding?" she asked, still unbelieving, even though she could feel the growing links to In The Forest.

"The scans say that there are no doubts. The Atanzi bonding process to a life-mate creates certain biological and physiological changes within both the male and female bodies, especially within the synapses of the brain. The scans I just made leave no doubt that this process is beginning," B'tunku told them, tapping the small screen of the recorder for emphasis.

"What is happening to O'vettun and myself is very strange. Few of my people have ever had such a thing occur between them," In The Forest commented.

"But it has happened?" she asked.

"In a few couples of the old blood line, not those that have mixed with the tribes on the mainland. My family is of the old line. We go back to the beginning, in an unbroken line to the First People of our legends. My line is that of the shamans, the medicine men, and chiefs of our tribe," he said proudly.

B'tunku nodded in understanding. Much of what he was telling her was clicking into place and creating more theories and thoughts within her head.

"Your bonding may prove to be important to our survival here on this planet. It may even help to cement relationships between our two peoples. Especially, if viable offspring result from unions such as yours," Ky'tulendu told them, thinking of the future.

"You have begun the process and we will not tamper with that. In normal society, a couple is left alone for two weeks or more to strengthen the bond. However, under our current circumstances we need both of you and your skills to help with setting up the camp," B'tunku told them seriously.

"So what do you want of us?" O'vettun asked.

"We need to make contact with your people, In The Forest, as soon as possible," Ky'tulendu suggested.

"All right, how soon?" he asked, folding his arms across his chest and regarding the Asenti seriously.

"Today or tomorrow. Whenever you want to start. But I want a briefing from you on customs. How to greet them, whether gifts should be brought, how to talk, basically anything you can tell me so that we can get off on a smooth foot with your people. If we are to be neighbors, I want us to be the best neighbors we can be," Ky'tulendu replied, seeing the native smile and agree with his thinking.

"You ask to know important things. It is a good plan, Asenti. You and my father will get along very well, I think," In The Forest said in a satisfied tone.

"Your father? Who is your father?" Ky'tulendu asked, with anticipation.

In The Forest smiled more, and stood up straight as he relayed in proud tones. "His name is Thunder Arrow, chief of the Round Foot or Wolf band of the Lay'nee Lay'na'pay. A chief is our equivalent to an Asenti. I am his only son, but I have three younger sisters. My uncle, Roaring Wings, is our shaman, and holder of many great and powerful magics."

B'tunku did a sharp intake of breath when she heard Roaring Wings' name spoken. He was a figment of her dreams. He couldn't be real, or this was just a person with a name similar to that of her dream person's. She started to ask him a question, then she thought better of it. In any event, she was going to go to the native's village, and put this dream to rest.

"So, your father is the Asenti of your tribe? Is that why you were sent to check what fell from the sky? Why did no one come with you? I still find it hard to believe that you had no escort," Ky'tulendu asked, wondering about his coming to the crash site and his help with the survivors.

"I volunteered to come because I had visions of your coming. Visions of O'vettun and our life together. I knew she had to come from the stars. When your ship trailing fire came down, I had to see, No one could stop me from coming. Two of my friends came as far as the ridge overlooking this valley, but they would not come closer because of the fire. I don't know what they did after I went on alone to your ship," he answered truthfully.

"Do you know if your people have been watching us?"

"I don't know. I have seen no signs, but it would be unlike them not to. If my friends stayed, they would not have approached the ship or me while I was with any of your people. My staying with you is probably confusing them because they cannot tell if I am a prisoner or not," the native's answered, worried what garbled reports his father might be getting.

"Asenti, we must go to my father's village as soon as we can, before he thinks I have been captured and made your prisoner," In The Forest added quickly.

"And if he thinks you are our prisoner, what might he do?" Ky'tulendu asked, trying to evaluate the situation.

"Attack this place, regardless of the odds against him. He will not understand that you have weapons beyond anything dreamed by my people. He will see you as animals that walk like men and think, if you are animals, you will be easy prey for his warrior's weapons. This is not a good situation for either side," In The Forest said truthfully.

"Then what must we do?" Ky'tulendu asked, the tension in the room building as all parties realized the potential danger.

"Meet him in peace, bringing gifts, and understanding. He is an old man, but very proud and set in his ways. In his day, he was a great warrior turning back the invaders from the mainland and keeping our lands free. Now he and the other elders sit and do nothing but talk of the past. He will see your people as invaders too, and as a chance to win back his glory, so he may leave this world as a true warrior instead of a shriveled old man. I can talk to him, reason with him to leave your peoples in peace. But you must do as I suggest, so that he will believe that your intentions are honorable and just," he told the Asenti.

"I hope you can, In The Forest. My people have been through enough these past days. In a war, your people would lose. I don't want either one of our people's to lose. So how do we approach your father?" Ky'tulendu asked, sitting down and asking the native and O'vettun to do like wise as B'tunku leaned in closer to hear the plans being made.

### **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

The interior of the lodge was dark as the night, except for the red glowing embers of the small fire in the center of the floor. The smoke smelled of strange flowers burned on a still odder fire, so what drifted out the vent hole was yellowish-green and hung on the air for a long time before dissipating

finally. A tall misshapen figure crouched over the fire, chanting and beating on a small hide-bound drum made from a beaver's skull filled with special small pebbles and dried seeds, so that when it rattled with rhythmic sounds whenever it was struck.

The misshapen appearance came from the wolf skull headdress Roaring Wings wore on his own dark head. It was tied down with boneless legs and paws. The fur skin from the huge silver white wolf covered his shoulders and back like a ghostly cloak in the dim lights. Yellow crystal rocks carved to fill the empty eye sockets, and dark green crystals and jet black ones were inset in each center and flickered with hidden lights. The long teeth of the wolf snarled from the skull as they had in life.

He wore the skull so that his face looked out of the wolf's mouth giving the impression that the wolf had eaten him. On top of the head were woven bright feathers and charms into the fur, then eagle feather earrings and beads dangled from the large tufted ears of the wolf.

Roaring Wings was the most powerful shaman of all the wise men on the island and for many leagues distance on the mainland. The strange garb was necessary for his people to believe in his magics. It had always been so from the time of the beginning to now.

His own tall reddish-bronze body was lean and wiry with long strong legs and equally long muscled arms. He wore his own long blue-black hair braided with leather thongs. His slanted wolf's eyes were almost black with serious and somber depths, that few could bear to have look at them for very long. His long thin face was handsome, except for his long hooked nose that had been broken in the struggle to get the headdress and the parallel scars that ran down the left side of his face almost closing his eye. Thin lips hid canine teeth that were almost too long for a human mouth. Even the fingernails on the long fingers on his large powerful hands were not quite the same as other men's.

These differences set him apart as did his lineage. His uncle, and his grandfather's brother before him, all the way back to their dim beginnings, for generation upon generation had been shamans, keepers of the old knowledge. Their siblings had been leaders, chiefs and great warriors.

In his medicine lodge, he was performing magics to far-see. The shaman had been doing this every night since the night of the flaming star when the dreams had started full force again. The visions of the silver haired cat-woman, with the eyes like polished mirrors, who had filled his nights for many, many moons with a joy and an impossible wanting that no woman of his village could ever hope to quench. He hoped his prayers would bring her to him now. They must, before he went truly mad!

In his heart, he knew she was real, and not made of moonbeams, or brought forth from one of his potions. She had come from one of those points of light that dusted the heavens at night. He had seen her among her people, traveling in their strange shiny bird that flew through the blackness where the gods dwelled.

In the dreams, she walked beside him in his world and he became like a young boy. He was showing her all there was to see, sharing the mysteries he alone knew that he had never shared with anyone. He was only just past his prime in real-life, but she made him feel young, alive, as he had never felt before.

He had thought her to be an animal in human form, a man-it'to spirit, or a chee'pai-hkway because of her pale coloring. At first he thought her to be a totem spirit sent as a guide from the invisible world, but he soon discovered she did not act like a proper spirit. It was most distressing. Then the dreams began of the two of them together. He began to live for the dreamtime he shared with her. It was his private vice and obsession.

When his nephew had come to him shortly after the dreams began and told him of the dreams he had of another cat-woman, who had hair like the sun and eyes the color of spring grass. He began to believe that these were visions of things yet to be. Even his niece, White Deer, had seen the cat-people. Her dreams were of a cat man with hair the color of flames and eyes the color of the sky who wore strange black clothes. Roaring Wings could explain their visions no better than his own.

There were others in the village who had these dreams too, each of a different cat-person of the opposite sex. All that saw these visions were unmarried, and alone. The ones who dreamed stopped pursuing marriage plans. They might have had to wait for their dream person, for all were sure that their dream mates were real and would appear to complete their lives.

The non-dreamers were concerned about these strange events and attitudes developing in the people, especially when carefully arranged alliances were broken off because one of the parties had a dream-vision. It was most distressing to the elders of the tribe.

When In The Forest had refused to marry the daughter of the Owl Band's war leader, after both fathers and tribal elders had held lengthy discussions for days, exchanged many gifts and tokens of good faith, Thunder Arrow had banished him, until he decided to come to his senses and marry Little Snowbird.

In The Forest had chosen exile, rather than give up his hopes of a life with his dream woman. His father had not yet forgiven him for that. Many persons had chosen to leave the tribe, rather than be forced into marriages they did not want because of their beliefs. It was rapidly becoming a serious situation that no one knew how to solve.

The elders had approached him to find a way to stop the visions. They suggested that the shaman make some potion or medicine to give the dreamers, so that they would return to normal before the tribe lost most of their young people to this strange belief of mates from the stars. He told them he would calm their fears, while he kept silent about his own dreams.

He made the potions as he had been ordered. The dreams stopped, but the memories of those dreams could not be erased. So he was asked to make potions to make the memories fade, and he did. He didn't wish to do this - there was no choice if the tribe was to survive.

For himself, he found potions and drugs to enhance his dreams to where he and his cat-woman could talk and hear one another in the dreamscape they made. It was during one of these potion enhanced dreams that he saw the battle of the silver ships and felt her coming closer to his world. He saw her hide and prepare for a terrible danger, then there was blackness that knocked him out as well. After he awoke, he was told of the great flaming star that fell to the earth and was burning the forest close to the sea. He knew then she was here, and the dreams would become real.

His concentration was shattered by a persistent banging on the drum hung outside. Someone wanted to see him urgently, by the frustrated tapping they were making. Reluctantly, he shut down his magics and returned to the real-time to greet his visitor.

He noted the light streaming in from his vent hole that it was almost mid-afternoon. He had been under the effects of his potions longer than normal, but he had seen nothing.

He stretched, then he walked to the entrance and threw aside the heavy bear skin door covering to reveal his visitor. His older brother Thunder Arrow stood on his doorstep looking agitated.

"Come in, my brother," Roaring Wings invited, surprised to see him, for rarely did he come to his lodge.

"I would prefer to stay here in the sunlight. Your rooms make me uneasy," he said nervously looking up at him.

"As you wish," the shaman replied folding his tall frame down to sit in the doorway. He still was on an equal level to talk with him sitting down because of the height of the lodge from the ground.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

"The scouts have been reporting strange happenings where the flaming star came down. They report seeing talking animals that walk like people, shiny things that fly and make terrible noises, trees being cut down by beams of light, and a whole village of huge lodges being built in the far valley overnight. They also report that my son walks among these beasts as a friend to them, especially with one of

the females. They were seen going last night to his cave and not returning until late morning," Thunder Arrow said angrily.

"You banished In The Forest, so what he does should not concern you," he reminded him. "But tell me more of these strangers. Has anyone seem them up close?"

"Only from the edges of the forest and from high in the trees. They have not dared to get closer. There seem to be three kinds, two of which are not many of, while the third kind is the most numerous and seem to be the leaders."

"So what do these animal men look like?" he persisted.

"One of them have huge wings like a bird and feathers, but they are man-shaped and wear clothes. They appear to be their scouts and can fly great distances. One of them almost spotted Running Water and Spotted Tail, when they were trapped inside the strangers camp."

Roaring Wings nodded, digesting this information. "What are the other two types?" he asked.

"There are small cat-people with tails, claws, and colored fur that walk on their hind legs. There aren't too many of them. The main type in the new village walk like men, have no tails, little fur on their faces and bodies, but do have claws and cat-like mouths and noses, as well as strange teeth. They also wear black clothes that cover all their bodies. Around their waist are belts with several small boxes that make noise, and they look at and speak into these boxes a lot. Some of these boxes shoot out bright narrow lights that when pointed at a tree cuts it like we do with an axe. Those same boxes can make rocks melt and go away," he reported, with awe and fear in his voice.

Roaring Wings was excited, but he kept his demeanor calm to hear more the scouts' reports. "What else do they know?"

"They talk. They all talk in strange words. My son can talk with them somehow. He was seen wearing one of the boxes around his neck. Maybe it helps him to understand their words and for them to hear him. They do not act like animals but like men. They build and use tools like men. They laugh. They cry. They bleed like men and can be hurt. This is important. At first, the scouts thought these people were gods until they watched them more and saw that they bleed and feel pain as we do. Gods cannot. But they use great and powerful magics."

"Magics? What kinds of magics?" Roaring Wings asked, very interested now.

"The lightening boxes for one. They have shiny boxes that fly like birds in the air, that carry people in them and on them. Things that make heavy things light like clouds, so they can be floated above the ground and moved where they want them to go. They can also lift people up to reach high things and stay there for a long time. They have boxes with round moving circles that move on the ground to carry people, and some of these have long shiny arms that can dig into the earth, or pick up whole trees in their claws. And this is only a part of the magics they can do."

"Are you sure the scouts really saw all these things?" he asked, not totally believing everything he had heard. But in the back of his mind he saw the strange things he had seen in his visions and was not so sure.

"Spotted Tail and Running Water are no liars. They are experienced scouts. Much of what they saw the cat-people do, they have no words for. One thing they are sure of is that these strangers are building a village on our hunting lands and my son is helping them," he said disgustedly, folding his arms to his chest.

Thunder Arrow was mad about his hunting grounds being taken over by these animal men - they had not even asked or given gifts in exchange for the use of it. Ordinarily, he would have led his warriors in a war party against these invaders and driven them from the land. The weapons and magics that they had made him hesitate against taking action. These were no ordinary foes. Caution was advised here until they could learn more and see if they had weaknesses.

Roaring Wings was lost in his own thoughts. He wondered if In The Forest had found his cat-woman among these people. If he had, then maybe his was there too. He must be cautious in his questions now.

"Thunder Arrow, did the scouts describe the female In The Forest was seen with?" he inquired carefully, his dark eyes shadowed to hide his growing excitement.

"They did."

"And?"

"She is smaller than the rest of her kind, my son is two heads taller. She is pale with long thick hair the color of ripe grass. Without her clothes, she looks like any other female, except for her face which has a nose and mouth split like a cat's. Her eyes are slanted and her eyebrows angle up. On her hands she has claws. He made love to her in the grass and now they act like husband and wife. I want no cat-woman as a daughter-in-law. He can stay with these strangers, I want no part of him now," Thunder Arrow said bitterly with great anger in his voice.

Roaring Wings was shocked, but not overly so. In The Forest had found his dream woman as he had described her to him. That they had made love after just meeting was what shocked him. They had not waited, exchanged gifts, vows, or sanctified their union with the proper rituals. The spirits would not be pleased, nor would their union be recognized by the tribe. What had prompted his nephew to act out of all tradition and honor, he wondered?

"I can understand your sorrow, brother. In The Forest has done our tribe great shame by joining with this strange woman, whom we do not know and without the sanctity of the marriage ceremony to bless it. He was the only male of our line, since I have no children to carry on our blood. We can only hope your daughters marry wisely and give you fine grandsons."

"Yes, they are my only hope now. But it is not too late for you to find a wife and have sons," he suggested.

Roaring Wings laughed. "I have tried, my brother. But this scarred face frightens any that might want me. And my magics make those who could overlook my flaws be afraid. I will marry, and soon, when my bride comes to me," he said mysteriously.

"I hope so. It is not good that you have lived alone since Yellow Fawn died with your son. She was a good woman," he told his younger brother.

"She was. I miss her, but life goes on," he said looking away and trying to change this painful subject. "So, what will you do about the strangers and your son?"

"Get a party together and go to their camp to see these strange men for myself and their magics. I want you to come too."

"Me? Why? I am no warrior," he protested.

"You understand magic. You can tell us if we can fight theirs, if need be. You have knowledge none of us have. For the sake of our tribe, you must go," Thunder Arrow told him.

Roaring Wings had been trying to figure a way to see the cat-people on his own. Now he was being handed the means. It was all he could do to hold back the eagerness in his voice.

"If you put it that way, then I must, my brother," he said, trying to sound reluctant to go, but his heart was leaping with joy and excitement at the prospect of seeing whether his dream had been true or false.

"We leave within the hour." Thunder Arrow announced with satisfaction. "Cheer up, you've been complaining you never have adventures anymore. Now you will," he said patting his brother on his arm and then he turned and left to make ready for the trip.

Roaring Wings watched him leave and let a slow smile cross his features. Then he roused himself

and began to pack for his meeting with the strangers.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

"Is everything secure back there?" Ky'tulendu asked, turning around in his seat to check his passengers.

"Everyone is buckled in, sir," O'vettun told him and settled back in her seat.

She glanced over at In The Forest, who seemed frozen in his, and patted his hand reassuringly. The native had wanted to know what it was like to ride in one of the great metal birds that flew - now he was getting first hand experience. Sitting inside the dimly lit interior, he wondered if his curiosity had been a good thing.

The Atanzis were used to their magic machines, but for him the ship was filled with strange smells, lights, and sounds. There was so much to take in at once, and he was trying very hard not to show his fear, especially to his mate beside him.

They were still on the ground he saw. He looked out the window watching. Atanzis moving supplies from the landing field, on the small things that flew without people, to the camp. They were always working, doing things, some he could understand while there was much he didn't.

He was finding these people to be more complex than he had thought. Was it going to be possible to bridge all the gaps he saw between his and O'vettun's worlds? Was he going to be able to explain the Atanzi to his people? He hoped so. Survival for both peoples rested on his head.

Only four people were going on this peace mission. Adding more observers would not be wise. He and O'vettun, the doctor, who had somehow overridden the Asenti's objections about going, and the Asenti, himself.

In The Forest understood that the doctor was not the second-in-command, but she acted like it and Asenti gave in to her wishes. They were not mates. They didn't even act as if they were friends. According to what he understood from O'vettun's explanations of the hierarchical structure of the survivors, the doctor was not an officer in the chain of command. However, she did insist on being included in all the plans made about the camp, and was, much to the other officers's surprise. Everyone was confused, but no explanations were forthcoming from either B'tunku or Ky'tulendu.

Ky'tulendu and B'tunku were doing final checks before they took off. He and O'vettun sat and watched the final preparations. There was much to do to make these machines go, In The Forest realized. He sat behind the Asenti to help guide them to the camp, even though they would use their far-seeing devices his visuals would be to confirm their readings.

The ship rose into the air, leaving the ground far behind. Soon they hovered above the tops of the tallest trees. It was several hours walking distance between the two camps, but it took no longer than ten minutes to cross the distance by air. It was that quick. He began to realize how they could travel through the stars if their big ship had been that quick or quicker.

He was acutely aware of everything around him. He hadn't acquired the ability to shut out all the sensory sensations impacting on his mind and body. He could feel how strange the material of the chair he sat in felt against his naked skin, smooth and slick, like leather that had been oiled too much.

The hard, rough textured straps crossing his chest chafed him. They were uncomfortable, but O'vettun had told him he had to wear them, as they all did. The air in here was cooler, almost too cool for him without coverings, causing his skin to have goosebumps. He was glad that the journey was nearing an end.

"In The Forest, I believe we are approaching your village. Can you see if anything looks familiar?" Ky'tulendu asked, pointing with a clawed finger towards the window. Below the ship lay a large village spread out along one side of the large creek, surrounded by forest, beyond which were fields of ripened corn and vegetables ready for harvesting.



"That's it, Asenti. Do not land in the fields. The corn and beans are ready to be picked and your ship would hurt them. Can you land by those trees?" he told him pointing to a large flat piece of barren ground.

As they made a pass over a clump of trees a large group of brightly colored and elaborately decorated men came out of the thicket undergrowth to cross a small clearing. They were heading in the direction of the Atanzi camp and they had a purposeful air to their actions. Ky'tulendu noted that they were very heavily-armed. A friendly visit was not what they had on their minds.

"Who is that group of people down there? They look like they were going to our camp," the Asenti asked, making adjustments on the control panel to take them lower.

"I cannot see them clearly from here. Do you have magic to see them better?" In The Forest asked, straining against his seat to look out the window. He was squinting against the bright sunlight trying to make out the features of the tiny figures below. He couldn't, too far away.

Ky'tulendu looked surprised at the request, but figured that In The Forest had seen such a device used, and understood its usefulness.

"O'vettun, tie your viewer into the ship's sensors," Ky'tulendu told her.

She did as he asked and the picture from outside appeared on her screen. She handed her recorder to In The Forest, who stared at the small images.

He shook his head. "Can you make people bigger? They're hard to see," he told her. She bent over and touched some of the controls and the images got bigger.

"More. A little more," he requested, turning the controls himself as he saw her do, then nodded with satisfaction as he recognized the people and how they were garbed.

It was a group of about thirty warriors on foot. They were decorated in their best, not as a peace party but as a war party. He had come at a good time before they could get to the Atanzi camp. With the images now enlarged and the viewer going from person to person, he could see their faces clearly. It was not a happy sight.

"It is not good, Asenti Ky'tulendu. That is a war party with my father leading them. I told you he was an angry man. No doubt his scouts have been watching you and reported back about the new village and my part in it. My uncle has come with him too?" his voice held surprise at that, as he noticed the shaman in full regalia trailing the group.

"My uncle never leaves the village except to go on holy quests to seek visions. The other men are our best warriors in their finest battle clothes. They were not coming to talk peace with you," he said, embarrassed for his people's intentions.

"I might have done the same if I had been in your father's place. We can meet them now on neutral ground in that field they were about to cross," Ky'tulendu replied, steering the craft that way and beginning the landing sequence.

The ship set down vertically from the air in a large cloud of blowing yellow dust from the dry ground. The warriors stopped their forward motion and began coughing and wiping their stinging eyes, as well as saying uncomplimentary things about this strange silver bird.

The ship landed and the dust began to settle. The warriors recovered and began dusting their bodies off. They were not in a good mood. Their fine outfits were covered with dust. They were angry about the strangers on their land, and they were wary and frightened of the strange bird-box that had landed in their path. None of the men dared bolt from their place, lest they be thought a coward by their fellows. They knew that this bird had to be from the strangers because of the scout's description of similar things, but it was still a thing beyond their wildest imaginings.

When the dust settled, a humming noise started and two wide seams appeared on their side of the

beast. Where the seams had been became a wide door that fell down loudly on the ground as a ramp into the thing. Colored lights blinked off and on, and odd noises as well as voices came from the darkened inside.

From within the belly of the beast, In The Forest walked. He stood on the ramp arrogantly with his arms folded across his broad chest, regarding his fellows who just stood there open-mouthed gaping at him. He had a good idea what was going through their minds and he was now playing it for all it was worth.

With a theatrical flourish, he turned and offered his hand to O'vettun who came down the ramp cautiously to stand beside him. Ky'tulendu and then B'tunku appeared and walked out to stand behind them.

Before they had left the ship Ky'tulendu had agreed to let In The Forest conduct the preliminary talks, with him stepping in if necessary. The four of them wore translators around their necks, but the natives would not. That way they could keep their conversation private but they would be able to understand what was being said and have In The Forest act as translator.

"Greetings, Thunder Arrow, my father," In The Forest said raising his hands in peaceful greeting, as he stepped forward alone to meet his father in the center of the field.

His father came forward dressed in his full headdress of turkey feathers, his long gray hair braided with brightly colored leather straps and small feathers throughout. He was not much smaller than his son, and his massive frame had lost none of its hard muscled firmness under the badger skin cape he wore.

His dark eyes under heavy gray frowning brows held contempt and suspicion, as his son neared him. His lips were taut in a thin line. His weathered face showed deep character lines and the strength of his courage and convictions. For all his fears, he kept his expression calm, trying to maintain his dignity in the face of these multiple assaults upon his emotions and mind. In respect for the visitor behind his son, he took two steps forward but no more. His warriors took three backward, so that the two were left alone before their respective groups.

"I see you, In The Forest. You are not welcome here," his father said, after a long silence before he spoke. "What do you want and why do you bring these animals?" he asked, contempt and disgust in every word.

A momentary flicker of pain and anger crossed In The Forest's features, but he refused to be pushed into hasty actions. He faced his father, his features and mind steely calm now.

"I come to talk, my father. To make peace before there is war. I bring the leader of the new people to talk to you and offer their friendship. The two females are here as witnesses to these talks and are also mighty warriors of their race," he said carefully.

"Warriors, humph!" his father said contemptuously and spat on the ground next to his son's foot. "Females, even if they do have claws, are not equal to any man and cannot be warriors," he said letting his own prejudices cloud his mind to new ideas.

"Nevertheless, they are, Thunder Arrow," he said, defending his statement and then motioned Ky'tulendu forward.

He did, coming to stand where In The Forest motioned him to. They had discussed this carefully before leaving camp, but anything could happen, or go wrong, and they both knew it. Already the reception that Thunder Arrow was giving them was not as they had anticipated. What had the scouts reported to have him so hostile to In The Forest?

"This is Asenti Ky'tulendu, chief of the Atanzi. That is the name they call themselves. They come from one of the lights in the night sky. They wish to be our neighbors and I have showed them where they can stay."

"Yes! I am aware of this! Who gave you permission to give away our sacred hunting lands to animals-that-walk-like-men? Who? You are not a warrior, a man of honor, a man of our tribe! You had no right! BOY!" he shouted at him, getting redder and redder in the face, as he exploded and launched a fiery attack upon his dumbfounded son, who backed up a pace from the fury of it. Even the watching warriors looked uncomfortable because of their chief's anger.

"Who gave you permission, BOY?" he asked again, coming forward with a raised fist.

"No one. It was the right thing to do. You banished me. I went to my hunting lodge in the caves. I have claimed that land as my own, since none of our people use it but myself. The strangers needed a place to go, so I gave them one!" he said, calmly defending himself.

"They can go back to where they came from! I DO NOT WANT THEM HERE!" he shouted, his anger getting hotter.

"They cannot. Their ship, the thing that brought them here is gone - destroyed when it fell. It can never fly again. They are here. Will be here. There is nowhere for them to go," he told him truthfully.

"Yes there is! OFF OF MY LANDS!" he yelled. "I want them to go away, far away. I want no animal people here with strange flying things and magics. And we have heard about the magics. THEY ARE BAD! EVERYTHING ABOUT THEM IS BAD - INCLUDING THEIR MAGICS! THEY GO!" his father ranted, gesturing angrily.

"NO! They are not going and their magics are good, very good. They can help us so much. Teach us things, wonders that you could never have believed possible to exist..." In The Forest tried to explain.

"Hah!" his father said, cutting him off and slicing the air with his hand to indicate no more talk. "They are not of the People. They aren't even people - look at them, if you still have eyes and you are not blinded by their magics. They are animals," he yelled contemptuously and sniffed the air.

Ky'tulendu was getting hot under the collar himself, but had held his tongue. He was trying to see the old native's viewpoint. It was difficult when the native's point of view was that his people were the animals and not true people to them. He decided to speak.

"Excuse me, Thunder Arrow, but I am not an animal," he told him and watched the look of shock on the native's face.

"It speaks! I cannot understand IT, but it spoke!" he said with wide brown eyes looking at the Asenti with fear and apprehension.

They had forgotten the natives wouldn't be able to understand them without the translators. If they couldn't understand them, then they couldn't prove to this one that they were people. They had to fix that.

Speaking quickly Ky'tulendu told the native. "In The Forest, give your father our translator, quickly, so he can understand my words," he ordered.

"But Asenti, then I won't be able to understand you," he protested, looking at him with a mixture of pain and uncertainty. He wanted to hear the interchange.

"Do it. He's not going to believe we are people unless I can prove it to him. He isn't believing you, and there is too much friction between the two of you now," Ky'tulendu told him.

In The Forest had to agree to his logic but he also hated being parted from his translator. He wanted to know what was being said. Reluctantly, with a sigh, he began to lift the small device from around his neck and almost had it over his head when he heard the doctor come up behind him.

"Wait! Ky'tulendu, he needs his. Here, take mine. I'm not necessary for these negotiations but he is. He needs to know what is being said by everyone, I don't," B'tunku told them both when they turned quickly to look at her.

The silver-haired Atanzi held the translator out to In The Forest, who took it gratefully while his own

fell back into place. He handed her device to his father who took it, looking over the smooth black oval shaped device, turning it this way and that as he minutely examined it. It was not stone, nor wood, nor anything the old man had ever seen or felt before and it purred ever so slightly against his skin.

"Put the translator around your neck, Father," he told him in their language and indicated he should wear it like him.

The old man hesitated, afraid of the strange object and having it next to his skin. Would it bite? Would it hurt him? What would it do to him? If he did not do it, then he would be a coward in everyone's eyes. His pride would not allow him to be a coward, not now! With trembling fingers, he took the black device and made the cord slip over his headdress and down until the translator rested against his throat. Then he waited with wide eyes to see what would happen to him.

"Can you hear me, Thunder Arrow?" Ky'tulendu asked, waiting patiently for the old native to get used to the translator and letting the device adjust itself to its host's brainwaves, so that he could hear and comprehend what was being said.

"... Yes ... I... can... hear you," Thunder Arrow said slowly, with looks of both wonder and terror crossing his usually immobile features.

His black-brown eyes stared straight ahead, wide and unbelieving of what he was experiencing. The device was trying to calm subliminally and reassure him that everything was all right, there was nothing to fear, nothing would hurt him.

"Good, now we can talk," Ky'tulendu said, satisfied, but he kept his tones neutral. "Since you and In The Forest are having difficulties, I thought I might try to help you know me."

The old warrior came back to himself, recovering from his shock and glared at the Atanzi who presumed so much. "You may talk though I may not listen, cat-man," he said, making obvious his contempt of these unwelcome visitors.

"My different appearance bothers you?" he questioned.

"Yes! You are not of the People. You are animals. You mock true men like me. You are abominations in the eyes of the Creator and of the People. For you are not Gods. Gods could appear before me like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "Gods do not have to use strange objects to help them fly, or make talk," he said, daring the Atanzi to tell him differently.

"No, we are not Gods, nor do we claim to be Gods. We are people called Atanzi. We are from far away across the stars. We came here seeking sanctuary from our enemies who damaged our ship, so we cannot return to our homes. We can never go back to our home, because our ship is beyond fixing. We came to you asking for help and to ask if we may use your lands. In exchange, we will help your people in any way that you chose, share our knowledge, our skills, or give you tribute if you wish. We can help one another, Thunder Arrow, and make each other's people have good lives. We desire only peace and the chance to live full, rich long lives, in harmony with your world," Ky'tulendu said carefully watching the chief for reactions to his words.

Thunder Arrow listened, considering the cat-man's words, trying to judge the truthfulness of his statements. He could not detect any falseness, but he was still suspicious of the device that hung around his neck. He wondered whether it was somehow altering the outcome in some subtle way.

"Your intentions seem honorable, cat-man from the stars, but how do I really know what is in your heart? How true are your words? This translator - this is of your making. Can it not make your words seem reasonable to me, make me hear what you say so I believe you, when in truth you may be telling me many lies? I do not believe you because it is too easy to," he said in rebuttal.

Ky'tulendu almost looked at him dumbfounded, but he had been on too many diplomatic missions to show his surprise at the chief's logic. He saw the direction he needed to go. "Truth can be that easy if

the person speaking has no falseness in his heart," he said quietly.

"Yes, that is so. But whether your intentions are honorable or not, you are on my people's land, destroying what was very good hunting grounds and forest. You build your lodges and do not ask if it is all right with us. You bring strange magics to our land, maybe strange sicknesses as well, as it has been told that some of your people are very sick. We fear you giving our people sickness we cannot fight."

"I understand your fears and they are good ones. Your son showed us where we might build and also told us that we would need to talk to you about using your lands. We needed to move our people from our ship as soon as we could. We have enemies that might come back and look for us. They will see our ship, and when they get through nothing will remain. I wanted my people safely away from it. Would you not do the same if an enemy was looking for you?" he asked.

He shrugged. "I might. I do not like the idea of you having an enemy that might come to destroy you from the sky. If he can destroy you, what is to stop him from mistaking my people from yours? I do not want your enemies here. We have done nothing to make them mad except to allow you to live. The more I hear the less I like you, Atanzi!"

This was not going well at all, Ky'tulendu realized. The more they talked, the more the chief was determined that they were a threat to his people. Unfortunately, he was right in many ways. They were a threat to the natives. He couldn't really deny that.

Ky'tulendu tried again. "Great chief, our enemies may or may not come back. They will see our ship and think that we are all destroyed because of how badly damaged it is. Then they will go away and leave both of us in peace. They will not come here on the ground and search. They do not like leaving the safety of their ships. Once they have searched, they will forget us and never bother this world again," Ky'tulendu told him, hoping that this would be the case.

"But they will come?" Thunder Arrow questioned.

"They will come," Ky'tulendu admitted.

"You will hide, not fight?"

"Yes. We do not have the weapons it will take to fight them. Those weapons are gone with the ship and cannot be fixed. What we have will not do any damage against their ship, only to individuals if they come seeking us out," the Asenti explained carefully.

"I have heard of your firesticks and what they can do and you say they are not powerful enough to hurt your enemies?" he asked, surprised.

"No, they are not. True, they are more powerful than anything your warriors carry, but they cannot reach where our enemy's ship will be, far up in the sky. They can be up higher than the highest cloud in your sky and still destroy us and we would be able to do nothing to them."

Thunder Arrow was having a hard time with these conceptions. A bird-box that could fly higher than the clouds, weapons that could reach that far, and the powerfulness of such weapons. "How would they know it was you if they were up so far. How can they see that far?" he asked, frightened now.

"They have devices, machines that can see us and find us from very far distances. We have similar devices with us, so that we will know if they are coming and can escape before they come," he said, appreciating the mental jumps this primitive was having to make.

"This is becoming too much for my head to understand, cat-man," Thunder Arrow complained, wheeling from all the information that he could barely begin to understand.

"Yes, it is a lot at once, great chief," Ky'tulendu admitted.

"Much of what you have said must be heard by the Council. I am chief, but I am not the only voice of the People. I cannot make by myself the decisions of whether your people can stay or must go. We

need to return to my village and have talks, cat-man. My son, and your females may come, but they may not be allowed to speak unless the others say they can," Thunder Arrow decided.

It was getting too hot to stand there in full costume to talk. They were all getting tired, hot and thirsty. They needed to sit and smoke upon all that had been said and hear what was yet unsaid by the strange ones. He was still hostile and suspicious, but he was not a fool. There were as many of the cat-people as there were of his own people and they had firesticks and magics. They would have to work this out.

"Come, we go," Thunder Arrow announced abruptly, motioning that they should follow him and his warriors back to the village.

"Wait, chief. We wish to bring gifts and close up our ship so that animals do not get in while we are gone," Ky'tulendu requested.

Thunder Arrow nodded. "Gifts would be good, and your ship does not need nosy visitors. You may do that. We will wait," he agreed, standing with arms folded.

"Thank you, chief. We will hurry," he said, thanking him and then motioned his group to follow him. In low tones he gave orders to them in Atanzi. "B'tunku, O'vettun, and In The Forest, get the gifts we had planned to give them and secure the ship. In The Forest, how many people sit on your council?" he asked the native as they were entering the ship.

"Ten, maybe fifteen, sometimes more, depending on what the council is to be about. This will be a big council, Asenti, as everyone will want to hear you," he said, puzzled.

"How many translators do we have on board?" he asked B'tunku.

"Thirty, including what we carry," she said, replacing hers from their supplies.

"Good, bring them all," he ordered.

"I thought only we were going to use them?" she questioned, her silver eyes narrowing.

"I changed my mind. I want our stay to be peaceful. If we cannot explain our situation then it won't be. They will not go for In The Forest acting as an interpreter as we wanted. Only our speaking as equals is going to work, so we need all the translators we can lay our hands on. There will be time later for everyone to learn each other's languages," he told her as he helped her look. They gathered all the communications and put them in a box to carry. "Do we have everything?" he asked, seeing that they were all loaded up with backpacks and carrybags.

They nodded. "Then, let's go," he told them, as they left the ship and closed it from outside with a punch button code. They then walked over to join the chief who looked curiously at all the bundles and then motioned them to follow him.

## ***CHAPTER FIFTEEN***

The village was further than they thought. It took a good ten minutes to walk to the outskirts of it. The three Atanzis received many curious looks from the natives as they passed them at their work, both from their leonine features and their strange silky black uniforms. Even In The Forest was gathering strange looks because his closeness to O'vettun and his separation from the other warriors that accompanied the group.

Roaring Wings had kept silent at the earlier meeting, staying in the background, just listening and surmising what he could from the way his brother and the tall red-haired male acted as well as by the tone of their words. He was surprised to hear his brother speak as one of the cat-people, after he put the small black thing around his neck, but he quickly caught on to the strange object's function.

Some of the cat-people's words they spoke were haunting familiar and yet different. He was going to have to meditate to find the answers to why they were. They shouldn't have been.

He now believed fully in the dreams. There was no doubt that they had been showing the dreamers

their futures. There was no doubt watching the subtle interplay between In The Forest and the small golden-haired cat-woman that walked beside him, that his nephew had found the mate he had seen. Had the cat-woman had similar dreams about him? He hoped they would be able to tell him. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, so much to learn from these strange star-people.

He hung back deliberately to watch the other female. He had no doubt it was the woman of his dreams, not with that odd silver hair and silver eyes. He did not think there could be too many like her among the newcomers.

She didn't recognize him. He was sure of that because of his ceremonial garb hid his features. The dreams would have shown him as just a man, not as a shaman, but she had sensed his interest in her. He had caught her looking, evaluating him as they walked. She was also searching the crowd as if she was looking for something she could not find, that made him smile to himself.

B'tunku had noticed the wolfskin clad native, that the other natives kept a respectful distance from, as they walked. In The Forest had indicated before they left the ship that the wolf headed man was his uncle, Roaring Wings. That was the name from her dreams. She was certain of it. It was hard to reconcile the images in her mind to the real man by that name she saw a short distance from her.

Covered in animal skins, feathers, decorations, and war paint on long naked limbs, he did not look like anything she wanted to get near, let alone make love to. The whole group of natives smelled of rancid animal fats and flowers which had gotten rather vile in the hot sun, but he smelled the worst of all with sulphur and other chemical smells trailing him. The prospect of all of them packed in a lodge for the talks did not thrill her.

Worse of all, he gave her the creeps the way he stared at her through the open fang-tooth mouth of the wolf skull. His shiny black eyes were intense, probing, trying to see into her soul and heart.

Had he had the dreams and was trying to determine if she was who he was to meet? Too many of these people and places were familiar to her unbelieving eyes already. She had never believed in dreams or visions before, but the evidence was getting too overwhelming to be dismissed. If he was the man of her heart, why then did he frighten her and make her want to run far away?

They entered the village proper and she concentrated on what was transpiring ahead of her with In The Forest, Ky'tulendu, and Thunder Arrow. Turning up the intake volume on her translator, she could hear what they were saying. It did not sound good.

The old native chief had not calmed down any on the trip to the camp. Listening to him, he was more hostile than before, especially to his son.

"But - Father, listen to the Asenti. He tells the truth," In The Forest protested to his father.

"Listen to an animal - I find it difficult to believe they are any sort of man. They wear clothes only to hide the fact that they have tails and fur. I will not be deceived by such tricks!" he shouted at his son, gesturing to the clothes that all the Atanzis wore.

"Must they be stripped naked to prove they are not animals and are men just like me?" In The Forest yelled back, losing his control as his anger rose at his father's stupidity.

"That would be a start," he shot back smugly, daring them to do so.

In The Forest flushed, his hands clenched tightly by his sides as he just stared at his father. Coolly he asked, "You would ask our honored guests to strip so that you may see that they are worthy to talk to?"

"Yes."

"Then you are a fool, Thunder Arrow," he told him, and turned his back on him to walk away.

"Stop, In The Forest! If removing our uniforms will convince your father that we are men like him then I will. I have complied with stranger requests before. I am not ashamed of what I am," Ky'tulendu told

him seriously.

"Asenti, you should not have to do this. He would not make other visitors to our village do such a thing. I am ashamed that he asks you to prove your worthiness, and in front of the entire village," In The Forest replied, feeling angry and helpless as he looked from Ky'tulendu to his father and back.

"There is that. I would have liked more privacy myself, but this is his village, his show, and his rules. I can see no way else to prove that we are men and are telling the truth," Ky'tulendu replied, taking off his backpacks and setting them on the ground.

"The females, too," Thunder Arrow said, seeing that Ky'tulendu was complying but they weren't.

"No!" both Ky'tulendu and In The Forest protested at the same time.

"I do not care what you may think of me, but I will not order the Doctor or the Specialist to disrobe. My being on display is enough," he said turning to Thunder Arrow, scowling with his lips pulled back in a snarl to reveal his fangs. It was not the best thing he could have done but his anger was rising too.

Thunder Arrow was getting unsure what to think as he saw Ky'tulendu's transformation and anger. That the male was willing to comply was good enough - for the moment. He was afraid to go too far with these strangers.

"All right, the females do not have to remove their clothes - but you do," Thunder Arrow ordered imperiously, as he pointed haughtily to the Azanti standing in the middle of the village.

Ky'tulendu shrugged and calmly stared at the chief as he began removing his weapons belt, setting it down on the packs. He undid the fastenings on his tunic and pulled it up over his head, shaking his long thick hair out as the shirt was off. Then for effect he flexed the powerful sleek muscles on his back, shoulders, chest and arms. There were several gasps from the admiring female audience who were avidly watching the proceedings.

He took his long black boots off, then his socks to stand barefooted in the dirt. He was magnificent standing there in the late afternoon sun. The golden light filtering through the leaves of the trees surrounding the square enhanced the red in his mane and on the hair on his chest, and forearms. The pants slipped down and he stood clad in only his form fitting black briefs. The finely chiseled leonine profile blended perfectly with the athlete's body drawing admiration from many quarters.

He started to remove his briefs.

"Halt! That will be enough. I am convinced," Thunder Arrow said. The skin tight briefs left no doubt to the cat-man's claim that he was a man like himself.

The chief could hear the giggles of the maidens and the almost rude speculations coming from some of the older women who had avidly observed this. The chief glanced around and saw his own daughter, White Deer, entranced by the sight of the Atanzi. He also saw a look of shock and surprise on the Atanzi's face, as he noticed the beautiful dark-haired maiden in white buckskins looking at him. The chief didn't even want to imagine what was transpiring between them. One child enamored of the cat-people was enough.

"You may put your clothes back on, Asenti Ky'tulendu. You have passed my test," he said briskly, trying to cover his own embarrassment at failing to prove that the strangers were really animals.

Ky'tulendu nodded and smiled to himself, satisfied that he had called the old man's bluff and won. He put his clothes back on, noting he had been cooler with them off. They might have to make clothing adaptations to survive the climate here. Uniforms were not really going to be necessary now.

Glancing up as he put his boots back on, he watched the native girl in the white decorated skin dress he had spotted in the crowd. She was unbelievably beautiful for a human, he thought to himself, and the interest seemed to be mutual

Then he caught himself, realizing what was happening and suddenly got very alert. This pull between



them and the natives was incredibly strong, more than Atanzi to Atanzi he was afraid.

Judging from the fineness of her outfit, she was no ordinary person in this village. No doubt she was some official's daughter. He just hoped she wasn't Thunder Arrow's. He didn't want to visualize trying to court the girl, if he was her father seeing how the human disliked them so.

He finished dressing and looked to Thunder Arrow expectantly.

"Come, we go to the Council lodge. Already the elders and warriors are gathering there," the old man announced, leading the way down the wide streets of the village.

The council lodge was bigger than the other structures near it. It sat above the ground as did all the lodges on high foundations of creek stones and sturdy logs. The outsides were covered with both birch bark and woven mats over log frames in a long oblong shape. Their roofs varied from gabled, to arched, to dome-shaped and covered with either thatch or bark. Wide wooden steps led up into the buildings, whose door coverings consisted of animal skins that were flung aside to enter.

Ky'tulendu entered the council lodge after Thunder Arrow, followed by In The Forest, O'vettun and B'tunku. It took a minute to get used to the dim light inside because of the lack of windows. There was a low fire burning in the center of the room, its smoke rising up to a hole in the roof. Around three sides ran an almost waist high platform upon which a group of elderly men sat watching the strangers as they entered.

"You may sit here," Thunder Arrow said indicating places on the mat covered floor, facing the elders while he took his own seat on the platform next to them.

Behind them, they heard other people entering and finding places to sit. They could feel the intense scrutiny of everyone in the lodge and it was making them uncomfortable. The old men on the bench looked them over carefully. They gave no indications of what they were thinking as they watched the people file in. When everyone settled down, one of the elders looked to Thunder Arrow and the chief began addressing everyone in the lodge in his own language.

"Great honored ones, these strangers have come to our land from far away and wish to talk with the council. They wish to live on our land as neighbors and have already begun building their village in the valley where the deer run swift, and wolves sing to the moon."

The old men looked shocked at that.

One of the elders, a white haired man with eagle feathers on the back of his head spoke up angrily, "They did not ask before they did this?"

"They asked In The Forest and he gave them our hunting lands," Thunder Arrow replied.

"Humph! But they did ask this council?"

"No."

The white haired elder glared at the young warrior sitting among the Atanzi. "In The Forest, by what right did you do this? You were banished because of your refusal to marry Little Snowbird. You are no longer of this tribe and can not give away what is ours to strangers, especially to these cat-that-walks-like-men."

"Honored Walks In Silence, there was no choice. These people had many injured, and needed shelter. They could not go far. No one lives on that land but myself. I saw no harm. We were on our way to talk, when we met my father and his warriors going as a war party to the Atanzi village. The Atanzi, that is the name they called themselves, wish only peace with our people. They bring many gifts and wonders to seal the pact of friendship between us," In The Forest said, carefully trying to judge how his words were being accepted.

The elders looked among each other, nodding and murmuring over his statements. There was approval and disapproval both.

"They wish to live in peace? Why are they here and where do they come from? I have never heard of a tribe called the Atanzi before," Walks In Silence asked suspiciously.

"They came from one of the lights in the night sky in a flying thing they call a ship. They were escaping from their enemies. Their ship was hurt and fell to the ground near the great waters. Many of their people died, and many are still hurt from their ship falling to the ground," In The Forest tried to explain.

"Ship? Fly through the air like birds. Come from the stars? What lies are these, young one? You tempt my patience. I want the truth now."

"This is the truth, oh honored one, as I have told you. They have machines ... big shiny boxes that fly through the air. Even my father has seen that," he protested.

"Is that so, Thunder Arrow? Boxes that fly?" Walks In Silence questioned.

"It is so. And the scouts have seen many of these boxes in their camp and the huge one that fell from the sky," he admitted.

"Are we in the presence of gods then?" the elder asked, afraid.

"No. They do not claim to be gods, only men like ourselves that look different from ourselves. I am still not sure that they are, but they do resemble us and act like men," Thunder Arrow told him.

"Do they talk? Will they talk now so that I can ask them what they want?"

"Yes, you can ask them anything you want," In The Forest told the elder, who looked back at him, surprised. "Walks In Silence, this is Asenti Ky'tulendu. He is their chief and will talk with you," he said introducing the Asenti who had been watching and listening to everything.

"Honored one," Ky'tulendu began using the titles the others had used. "First, I must give you a gift so that you may hear what I say better," he said handing the elder one of the translators.

The elder had not understood what he had said and was puzzled by his strange sounding words. He was equally puzzled by the small black box the cat-man was holding out to him in his hairy clawed hand. He looked to Thunder Arrow for an explanation.

"Take the small black box and put it around your neck. They gave me one so I could understand their words. It's magic but it won't hurt you," Thunder Arrow explained, showing him his own device.

"No! Let Roaring Wings see this thing. He knows magic. If he says it has good spirits then I will touch it. I do not wish to die from strange evil magics," the old white haired man snapped back, not wanting to touch the device in Ky'tulendu's hands.

"Roaring Wings, come here and look at this magic from the cat-people," he ordered.

The shaman bestirred himself from where he was sitting by the door. In a rustle of fur and feathers he walked over to where the chiefs sat, careful not to step on the visitors. He faced the Asenti who still held out his hand and cautiously the shaman took the translator from the Atanzi's upraised bare palm.

The shaman performed the sensing, touching rituals he used on stones and other elements and was confused and frightened. It wasn't anything that he had ever touched before, or knew of. He looked at both In The Forest and Thunder Arrow, who seemed to wear them with no ill-effects, but he was still uncertain.

He had heard his relatives and the cat-people talk in the cat-peoples' language along with his own. Somehow, it did help speakers understand one another. For that, it must have a good spirit inside. He wanted one for himself to study. Would they give him one, he wondered?

"Have you one for me, Asenti Ky'tulendu, so that I may know whether this is a good thing with a good spirit inside?" he asked, looking down at the red-haired cat-man.

Ky'tulendu nodded, and pulled another one out of his pack and gave it to the shaman who looked at

the identical objects. That was his second surprise, to see that they were the same. Rarely, had he seen identical objects before because most things in nature were not. This was high magic in itself.

Satisfied that no harm was going to come from these things, Roaring Wings turned and handed one of them to Walks In Silence. He then took a seat by his brother, so he could observe the strangers more closely and see their magics. He unfastened the fabric cord of the translator and tied it around his neck and indicated to the elder he should do the same, which he did cautiously.

Ky'tulendu then brought out more translators and began passing them out to be distributed among the people in the council lodge. Soon everyone present who needed one had one. Three that didn't had their friends translate anything they didn't understand. With the acceptance of the translators things began to go more smoothly for the Atanzi group.

When all had settled down and the newness of the devices had worn off, the elder began the meeting in earnest asking for silence with up raised arms, he began.

"Now Asenti Ky'tulendu, tell me about your people and how you came to my people's lands," Walks In Silence asked, his dark penetrating eyes boring into Ky'tulendu's sky blue ones.

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

It was getting oppressively hot and stifling in the tightly packed lodge. The smells from dozens of hot sweaty humans, with their animal fat based paints, herbal and floral scents, and other mostly unidentifiable odors, was almost overwhelming to the three Atanzi trapped in talks in the dimly lit smoky council lodge. They could not leave until they had come to some basic understandings with the natives, if they wanted to live in peace with them.

To live in peace with their new neighbors was what they wanted, not be conquerors or be conquered. There were, however, some very large cultural, technological, and physiological gaps between them that would have to be worked out, if harmony were to be achieved on both sides.

"You want our help? You want us to teach you skills to live in this land? Why? You have great magics. Can't your magics do these things you ask?" Walks In Silence was asking Ky'tulendu, his puzzlement evident.

"Our magics will fail - not work in time. That is why we ask for your knowledge. To do the right things - not wrong things."

"I find that hard to believe. You are so powerful."

"For the moment, honored one, not always. There are many limits to our magics. Without them we are men just like you."

"Hah! I look at you, cat-man, and see your teeth and claws. You are fierce warriors who don't need weapons. You carry yours always," he said, noticing how the claws on Ky'tulendu's hands resting casually in his lap reflected the firelight.

"My people have not been true warriors for many, many of our lifetimes. Once we used these claws and teeth to kill, but no more. We were changed to abhor such killing. Now we are people of peace. We do not like to fight or kill other beings, even those who wish to be our enemies. It is not our way."

"How can one be changed from what they are? I do not understand Asenti of the Atanzi, explain." Walks In Silence requested, very interested.

"We are not sure ourselves, great one, but in the legends of my people, we were once primitive, savages who did nothing but kill and fight each other both with these," he said, holding up his hands for all to see and then opening his mouth, displayed his deadly looking fangs.

"We fought for territory, for mates, for power, riches and glory, or for causes we don't even understand anymore. A great burning sun came to our world and the people and animals were made to sleep. How long we don't know. When we woke up, the strange sun was gone and we found we no

longer wanted to fight one another. It caused us great mental and emotional pain to do so because we could hear each others' thoughts and feelings, as well as those of other creatures. We could also learn and speak in ways we had never done before. It was a miracle that saved my people from destroying themselves by their own violence. We call it the **Change**," Ky'tulendu explained.

"That is an interesting story, cat-man. We have a similar legend among our own people. Can you still read thoughts and feelings of others?" Walks In Silence asked.

"Not as well as my ancestors could. If I concentrate very hard - but it is still difficult. We have been losing that ability over the centuries since we have been in space."

"Then are you able to be warriors if you have to be? Can you kill other creatures or men?" he asked, wanting to know if this Change prevented them from hunting or defending themselves now.

"I don't know, Walks In Silence. It's never really been put to a test until now. Some of my people might be capable of doing violence to another creature to survive, but I fear there are many in my camp that the commands of the **Change** will be too strong for them to override. Many of my people have never even eaten the flesh of a once-living being of any kind. I don't know whether they could."

"Never eaten meat? Of any kind? What do your people eat?"

"Vegetables mainly, fruits, synthetic protein substitutes."

"Huh? What are syn-thet-ics?" the old man asked.

Ky'tulendu scratched his chin, trying to figure out how to explain this one. "Things made out of other things to be like something else."

"Huh??????"

The Asenti looked upwards, trying to get an inspiration to explain this concept that his people took for granted. O'vettun had been listening and saw that the Asenti was having problems. She gently pulled his sleeve and with her eyes asked if she could speak. He nodded.

"Great One, if I may speak?" she asked Walks In Silence.

He motioned her to do so with a flick of his hand.

"Our people do eat strangely to you. Many of us have never eaten real food because the places we come from cannot grow it and it is made elsewhere by other people. Most of our food is based on things like your corn, or beans, with other vegetables or fruits mixed in. To eat the flesh of a living being is very terrible thing to most of us, no matter how little it thinks or reasons," she said, trying to find the right words.

"If it lives, breathes or makes more of its kind, we cannot eat it. Some of our people have problems even eating plants or fruits because they see them as living beings, so we have made foods out of things we find in rocks and dirt. Make them into food through our magics. But as the Asenti told you our magics and those foods will run out and cannot be replaced."

The natives seem to grasp what she was saying they noted in relief. They had a hard time with the idea of people not eating what they did, but they had to accept it.

Walks In Silence looked thoughtful, "So what will you do, will your rock eaters do if they will not eat the bounty of the Creator?"

"We don't know. We hope we can get them to eat foods like your people do. Some of us are able to hunt and eat meat. I come from a world where my father taught me to hunt and how to eat real foods."

"That is good. Are there more hunters and eaters of real food among you?" he asked.

"I - we don't know yet. We are still recovering from the landing and don't really know who survived and what skills or knowledge they may have. There were very many of us, now there are less than

half that number of us. Then some of those may not stay alive."

"That is sad, cat-woman. How many do your people number?"

O'vettun was not sure, she looked back at B'tunku and then to Ky'tulendu.

"I believe there are one-hundred-eighty-eight of us, four Soaettes and five Tranquils. We are expected to lose both the Soaettes and the Tranquils because they cannot adapt to the planet and almost ten of the Atanzi have injuries that are beyond my medical teams knowledge and skills to fix and will die," B'tunku said, speaking up.

"What are Soaettes and Tranquils?" Walks In Silence asked.

"Other peoples different from us. One looks like a great bird shaped like a man and the other is more cat-like than us with tails and fur and smaller. They are just other kinds of men," O'vettun explained. "But they will not live long because this planet makes them sick and they are dying."

"But this place doesn't hurt your kind?" he asked, surprised.

"No. We have found that we are very much like you. There are few things here that can hurt us by touching, eating, drinking, or breathing your air. Inside, we are people no different from you."

The old man nodded and studied them carefully as well as In The Forest, who had been watching O'vettun with pride as she spoke to the head of the council. He had heard the scouts' reports of what In The Forest had done. He was not approving of it either and that was another item that needed to be discussed. The old man looked over at Thunder Arrow and bade him to speak now.

"My son seems to believe that." Thunder Arrow said, looking intently at her.

She looked embarrassed and confused at his words, wondering what he knew. She kept her silence, waiting for him to continue. She was not kept in suspense long.

The chief scowled as he looked down at her from his seat on the bench, and in an anger-laden voice he told her, "My scouts saw the two of you together in the woods, not once but twice making love like animals. My son was banished from this village because he refused to marry Little Snowbird, the daughter of the chief of the Turtle Clan. Instead of coming to his senses, he mates with you CAT WOMAN!" Thunder Arrow spat at her nastily, his hostility plain. "Do you deny this?" he asked, his eyes boring into her.

"No," she said in a small voice, looking up at him with fear in her eyes.

The chief was glad to see the fear. He knew he had her where he wanted her. He pushed on. "Good! There have been too many witnesses to this unholy union. I want my son back and for him to do his duty to his tribe by making a strong alliance with the Turtle Clan. I want you never to see him again or him, you. Unless these things are done, there will never be any peace between us. You may have your land. We will even send hunters and warriors as well as other skilled persons to show you how to live and eat, but you must never see my son again - never! Is that understood?" Thunder Arrow demanded loudly looking at her, enjoying making her cringe.

"Yes," she said meekly, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall and she sat with bowed head before the council.

"NO!" In The Forest yelled, jumping up and raising his fist to shake it in his father's face. "I refuse to allow this! I will not leave O'vettun, I love her and she loves me. We are married. She is my mate, my wife, now and for always. I will never marry Little Snowbird. I told you that Father - never!" he yelled.

His father was nonplussed and quirked a satisfied smile at him. "You will, my son, if you wish for these precious cat-people of yours to remain alive and safe from my warriors. I will make war on them if you do not marry whom I say. Since banishment will not bring you to your senses, then maybe the risk to the lives of these newcomers will. You and the cat-woman are not married. There has been no ceremony to sanctify it, so you are still free to be wed to whom I say you will!" he said with finality,

sitting back against the lodge wall with his arms folded stubbornly across his chest and glaring at his son, daring him to make a wrong move.

In The Forest was almost beyond anger now, while O'vettun was in tears and afraid to speak up. Ky'tulendu and B'tunku were in shock from this, unsure what to say, while the people in the lodge looked on waiting to see what would happen next.

"Father," In The Forest said calmly now, his mind and heart cold and bitter to his parent. "I cannot marry Little Snowbird, O'vettun and I are mated, bonded in the eyes of the Creator. To make us stay apart will harm us both. How could you do such a cruel thing to me, to O'vettun and to Little Snowbird? It will hurt her deeply to find she is mated to a man who can never love her and who only thinks of his true mate. Even Swimming Otter would be angry at you for such a match for his daughter," he tried to argue using logic.

"True, but it is for the benefit of both tribes. This match has been planned ever since you two were born. It brings great honor and wealth to both. It must be!"

"There will be no honor in it if I cannot be a true husband to Little Snowbird. My heart is with O'vettun and always will be," he told him stubbornly, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Then you have signed the cat-peoples' death warrant. By their own admission, they are not warriors and know not the ways of this land as we do. Do you think they will last long under a constant siege from my warriors even with their magic to protect them? Do you want the blood of both people on your head?" Thunder Arrow asked not backing down.

"No, but..."

"Stop! Stop it, both of you!" O'vettun yelled, jumping to her feet and standing between them with outstretched arms to hold them apart.

No one moved.

"I can't take it any longer. This must stop. In The Forest, you must do as your father says, there is no other way," she said seriously, looking up at him with torment ridden tear stained eyes.

"O'vettun, I cannot!" he protested.

"You can! You must!" she shouted at him, making him back down.

"I will not be the cause of bloodshed of either your people or mine. Your father is not going to back down and let us be together. He is chief like an Asenti. His word is law. You must obey it. If this will give our peoples peace and safety then I will do it, regardless of how I feel for you. We must always think of what is good for all, and ourselves second."

He looked at her unbelieving, pain written in every feature. "No! The heart is the only thing that must be obeyed!" he protested, begging her to listen.

She shook her golden head sadly, "I wish that was so, my love, but we have duties to others, commitments to help them, we cannot let our love cause a war that neither people could win."

"What about our commitment, our bond? Remember B'tunku's words about the bonding?" he asked seriously, not wanting to let her go. "And our child?"

She hung her head, "I know. The bond will never be broken, we will always be connected. If you do this thing, then our child will be safe. If you do not I fear that ...," she could not say it as the tears overwhelmed her.

"See, even your cat-woman agrees with me that you should marry Little Snowbird," his father gloated from his seat.

"Father....!" In The Forest warned, shooting him black looks as he tried to comfort O'vettun with a gentle touch to her shoulder.

She didn't feel it. "No, In The Forest, my mind is made up. You must stay here and do your duty to your tribe and secure the peace for both of our people. This is what I want," she told him, looking up with a calm and steady gaze.

Then she turned to Thunder Arrow. "Do you give your word that if In The Forest marries Little Snowbird that my people will live in peace, and yours will help mine learn the ways of this world?" she asked, her voice steady now as she looked at the hard-hearted native.

"I give my word, cat-woman. As long as my son does not see you, and you him, there will be peace between us, and we will help yours. On the blood and spirits of my ancestors I swear this," he said solemnly and made a cutting gesture with his right arm from his chest signifying the vow was sealed.

"Good. Now I must go back to the ship. Goodbye, In The Forest, may your life be long and happy, and you find peace with Little Snowbird," she wished him, and turned to walk away, her duty done.

"O'vettun, no! Don't go." In The Forest begged, trying to grab her arm.

"I made a deal with your father. I must go. It is over between us. We each must walk our own separate paths now. Goodbye," she told him coldly, shutting her mind and heart off to his pleas.

"What of our child? Our bond?" he asked desperately frightened of her coldness.

"The bond will fade because we did not complete the bonding. As to the child, I don't know what I will do. It is too soon to think of that. There may not even be a child to worry about. That might be better than it being an outcast of both peoples. Please, In The Forest, I must go. I have work to do," she said determinedly breaking free of his arm and running out of the lodge.

They watched her go and no one tried to stop her fleeing through the village to her ship. In The Forest just stood where she had left him. His heart, mind, and soul in agony, feeling only emptiness where love had once bloomed brightly. He felt so very lost and hopeless now with his mate gone. He sensed that she would not go back on the deal with his father, nor could he now. He was being forced into a marriage he did not want, for the sake of his people. He wanted to die but did not have the courage. Blindly, he sat down in a heap and lost himself in his sorrow.

His father smiled in satisfaction that his plans were going so well. He had not expected such a victory as this. Now he could send runners to Swimming Otter's village and prepare for the wedding, which he would make sure happened within the week. Even if he had to drag his son to make him go through with it.

He had overheard the talk of a child, but he dismissed it as only a vague hope between the two. There was no way that they could have a child. These people were animals. True people could not have children by animals. It was against the will of the Creator and nature. Soon, he thought no more about it as he listened to the council meeting resume.

"Asenti Ky'tulendu, you have heard the pledge that has been given, do you swear to stand by it as well?" Walks In Silence asked somewhat embarrassed by Thunder Arrow's deal. It had been set up, so the only thing left was to make it binding to all parties.

"I do. I will make sure that O'vettun and In The Forest have no contact within the borders of my village," the Asenti answered not liking it any better. He decided though to negotiate further. "What types of aid and helpers do you plan to send to my people?"

"We will send warriors to show you the way of the hunt and maidens to show you the ways of the farmers. We will also send you Roaring Wings, to help you understand our ways and beliefs and for him to learn yours, so there may be understanding and peace maintained."

"That is a very good idea, honored one. We do wish to know your ways. Many wars have been fought over misunderstandings of what each tribe believed or did differently from another. This is very good. Is Roaring Wings agreeable to this?" Ky'tulendu asked, not sure how the shaman felt about being sent off.

The shaman stirred from his perch in the corner when he heard his name mentioned. "This is agreeable. There is much to teach and much to learn. I am not so old that I cannot learn with an open mind. I wish to see these strange magics I have heard tell of for myself. Only a fool turns his back on opportunities such as this," he said.

Ky'tulendu nodded in agreement trying to read the underlying eagerness he had heard in the shaman's words. Maybe it was a thirst for knowledge, or the chance to show off his own, that sparked that. He wasn't sure, but something was up.

Beside him B'tunku kept silent and tried not to feel the watchful eyes of the shaman upon her. Every time she looked his way, he was looking at her. It was getting under her skin. He wanted something from her, but what it was she didn't know. She wasn't quite sure that she shared similar views. She wasn't too sure she liked the idea of his spying for his brother. She was sure that was the real reason behind his wanting to come.

Did Ky'tulendu know? Did he care? Ky'tulendu was too willing to let them in on their secrets. They didn't know these people, or that much about them. She hoped they weren't all walking into a trap that would see them all killed. Too many years on Rumnul had made her suspicious of people, no matter what they looked like or acted before an audience.

So far, she could detect no dishonesty in the actions or words of these natives. The notable exception was Thunder Arrow, who made warning bells go off in her head. Him they could not trust. He hated them with a passion and made no attempt to hide it.

She was going to make sure they did not relax their guards under the illusion of peace, until it was solidly proven that peace did exist. There was much they were going to have to discuss when they got back to either the ship or to camp.

She heard Ky'tulendu talking, "So when do you want to send your people over, Walks In Silence?" he asked.

"With you when you leave. I have already chosen who will go. They only need to gather their things and they will meet you at your ship," he said, seeing she had taken the Atanzi by surprise.

Then he smiled. "Now we shall smoke the pipe, and eat. And you will tell us of your strange journey to our land," he added, signaling that the feast for the guests should begin.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

O'vettun did not return to the village even after she saw that Ky'tulendu and B'tunku were not coming back until late, or in the morning. She wanted to be alone to think things out in her head.

For many long hours, she sat in her seat in the darkening interior of the ship, just crying, letting all that had happened wash over her. It was a cleansing that she needed, to face what lay ahead. When she was finally all cried out, she just sat and stared out the window, unseeing of the nightscape around her. In her mind images raced, warring for supremacy.

The plans and dreams of the last few days with In The Forest were shattered, nor would she even want to resurrect them. She had to stand firm and end it, even if it meant closing off her heart and their bond.

Wasn't there an old saying that it was better to have known love once than never to have known it at all? She was not so sure. She would have rather never found love than to have known it for such a brief time. Now only the ache of loneliness remained in its place. Why did being apart from him have to create such pain? She had no answers, nor did she think she'd find any.

Finally, she slept after finding a blanket to wrap around her. She curled up into a small ball on the floor of the ship. Her dreams were filled with him and the life that could have been, but wasn't to be now. At least here in her mind they were together, she thought contentedly as she slept.



It was near dawn when she was awoken by the opening of the hatch from outside. She sprung up quickly, looking around frightened and wide-eyed from her not too comfortable bed. It took her a moment to realize where she was because her dreams had been so vivid.

"O'vettun, are you here?" B'tunku's voice called in through the open hatch.

"I'm here," she replied, gathering her wits and sitting down in a seat a little on the shaky side.

"Good, we were worried about you after you ran off. Everything okay, no problems?" she asked concerned, as she stepped in to view and stood in the doorway.

"Yes, just had to be alone for awhile. I expected you and the Asenti to be back sooner. Is it morning already?"

"Almost. To negotiate the fine points of the peace treaty, we stayed for the feast they gave us and to smoke their terrible smelling peace pipe. The feast and talking with the elders took most of the night. They finally went home so we could," she explained.

"Is the Asenti with you?"

"He's coming. He's walking with Roaring Wings, who is coming back with us, along with five other representatives from the village to start teaching our people how to hunt, do food preparation, and other skills," she told her.

"They're flying back with us? In here?" O'vettun asked.

"Yes. Ky'tulendu agreed to that. I know it's going to be a tight fit but ..."

"I know, orders are orders," O'vettun said looking around, trying to figure how they were going to get nine people on an eight person vehicle. Somebody was going to have to ride in someone's lap or they put the seats up as if they were carrying cargo. "Lets start getting the seats up or someone rides double."

They went to work and got all the seats but the pilot and co-pilot ones stored away. From outside they could hear voices coming and O'vettun looked out to see their guests and to welcome them aboard.

Ky'tulendu was exhausted from the lack of sleep, though he was happy with the progress that had been made so far. He was finding that Roaring Wings was not like his brother, Thunder Arrow. He was an observer and thinker, preferring to study a situation before acting on it. He was not a hothead, preferring to keep his emotions under tight control as well as his words. When he did speak it was after much reflection and with great eloquence. Ky'tulendu was really getting to like the tall thin shaman and looked forward to many long talks with him - after they both got some sleep.

Ky'tulendu led them up the metal ramp. The two female natives were unsure of the great bird ship, but they followed the five males into the lighted interior. One of the women, Falling Leaf, was the wife of one of the warriors, Leaving Fox Tail, while the other was White Deer, daughter of Thunder Arrow, niece of Roaring Wings and sister of In The Forest. The other two warriors were Fights Like Cat and Hidden Knife who were unmarried men in their mid-twenties, related to Falling Leaf. They were picked because of their specialized knowledge in the ways of their people and could teach these skills to others.

O'vettun and B'tunku had put padding and coverings on the floor to make their guests' trip more comfortable. They then directed them where to sit and store their belongings. The natives did as they were told, and soon everyone was settled and the hatch closed. Ky'tulendu had Roaring Wings sit in the other seat so he could observe the take off and landing. B'tunku and O'vettun sat on the floor with the natives to help keep them calm and to be alert for problems.

"Everyone set back there?" Ky'tulendu asked doing final checks.

"All secure, Asenti," B'tunku replied, and told the natives to hold on to the flying straps that hung down from the walls for situations like this.

"We're taking off," Ky'tulendu warned, as the ship started rolling forward then leaped up in the air to fly both vertically and horizontally over the tops of the forest.

Roaring Wings was spellbound at the sight and sensations of being up in the air like the birds. From his seat, he could see his village and the forest around it. Ky'tulendu took them higher, close to the clouds, and things began to look small.

In the far distance, the shaman thought he could see the ocean but he wasn't sure. Even the colors had changed to mottled browns, golds and shades of green while the wide streams had become ribbons of blue. How far one could see from up here, he thought. How large their world really was. It was hard not to be a child full of wonder again.

"How are you enjoying the ride?" Ky'tulendu asked him.

It took a second for him to realize the Asenti had spoken to him. He recovered quickly.

"It is wondrous. To see so much so far. To touch the very clouds like the birds do. This is fine magic. Will you teach us this?" he asked, sincerely hoping this would not be his only trip into the sky.

"Yes, after you have learned more of our ways. Flying one of these machines is not as easy as it looks. It took me many years before I was allowed to fly alone. Even longer before I went to the stars and flew in a starship," he answered.

"Starship? Ship like this that flies across the stars?"

"Yes, but bigger, many, many times bigger. When you see what is left of the one that brought us here then you will understand how big."

"Good, I wish to see this ship. To understand," he said agreeing with the idea. "Did your father teach you to fly?" He asked.

Ky'tulendu shook his head. "No. My father died when I was very young. I never knew him, nor my mother. I was sent to school to learn to fly and learn many things. I was seven, I think. I never saw too much of my family after I was sent to school. The service has always been my life," he said in a sad tone thinking of his childhood that really wasn't one.

"The service, school?" Roaring Wings asked about the unfamiliar words.

"That'll take some explaining. It is where we go to learn how to fly ships, learn machines, skills, how to deal with people, many things. There are no families, just individuals living together according to rank and position, as well as age, but somehow we became a sort of family because we have things in common. We are like a tribe, but a specialized tribe, because very few of our people go into the service or go into space."

"Yes, it is very complicated Asenti Ky'tulendu and sad."

"Sad, how so?" Ky'tulendu asked, turning to look at him.

"To never know family, only the company of strangers. That makes you a lonely man. It is not good for a man, even such as you, to hold themselves apart from people," Roaring Wings said quietly.

"No, it's not. Sounds like you know something of that," he commented.

"I do. I lost my wife and my son many years ago. It has been very lonely since, but men in powerful positions are often lonely. That seems to be what the Creator wishes," Roaring Wings said, his dark eyes behind his mask studying the red-haired Atanzi.

"Saying of your people or something else?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"One of my own from studying the ways of the world. You are not as old as you first appear, Asenti."

"No, I'm not. I was one of the youngest Asenti's to ever command a duri-cruiser. A starship like mine was. That puts distance between you and people."

"Being youngest and in a powerful position is always difficult. I know. I've been in such."

"You?" Ky'tulendu asked surprised.

"Me. You think me old, but I am not much older than my nephew. My parents had me late. My brother is almost thirteen years older than myself. Then from birth, since I showed all the signs, I was trained to be the shaman to take the place of Ghost Walker, our uncle who was shaman before me. He was very old when I was born and even older when he died, when I was but thirteen summers old. That was thirteen years ago. I became a man before I was a man, because my people needed me. Duties to others make us old before our times," Roaring Wings said, seeing sympathy and comprehension in the soft blue eyes.

"They do, that they do, Roaring Wings," Ky'tulendu agreed with him. Then turning to the window, he told the shaman. "If you look that way to the right, you will see where our ship crashed down. I wanted to fly by, to see the damage from the air and to see if I could find the missing pieces." Ky'tulendu explained, pointing out the window towards the large gap in the thick trees.

Roaring Wings looked where he pointed and grunted to himself. The closer they got, the more he could see. It was a wonder that anyone had come out of that mass of metal below.

The wreck had cut a bigger swatch in the earth than Ky'tulendu had thought. Looking beyond the ship to the sea he found the engines. Parts of them were sticking up from the waters of the shallows close to the shore. From there was a long trail of charred and twisted metal parts as well as dead bodies strung out across the landscape. He saw no movement, nor did he expect any but he would send people to check just in case.

Was this day four, or five, or six, since this had happened? He wasn't sure anymore. Too much had happened in too short a time to all of them, and this was just the beginning.

He also found stores or what was left of the missing cargo. The supplies he had so carefully gathered also lay spread across the wilderness. Hopefully, they were salvagable. He really didn't want his people to be reduced to living the way the natives did, but they would if they couldn't keep their technologies going, or at least some of them.

Too many decisions, not enough time to do everything he wanted, the way it should be done. The damage to his ship was unbelievable, as was the damage to the surrounding landscape. Fire had damaged huge sections of the forest and torn up the ground for a very long distance.

The ship he could see now was three-fourths buried. After they were through using the earth moving equipment at the village, they would start work on excavating the ship. He knew that the buried portions contained more equipment they could use, if they could get at them.

"Your ship was huge, Asenti!" Roaring Wings agreed, awe struck by the sheer size the ship represented, almost five times the size of his village and more.

"People like yourself built such a thing? Thought of it and made it work?" he asked.

"Yes, many people from all over the galaxy - the clusters of stars you see and don't see - helped make it with their minds and labor. I only ran it, gave orders to those who actually made it go. I know nothing except the very basic ideas of how it all went together and how it moved," Ky'tulendu explained, lest the native thought he could fix it.

"Like chief or elders who tell workers or warriors what to do. So you can never leave this place and your people will not come to look?"

"No, we lost contact with our people and the only ones to contact are our enemies. Who we don't want to find us. We are here to stay. This place will be our place for as long as we live." he said, quelling any hopes that they would be gone soon.

"Until I saw your ship, I did not truly believe your story that you came from the stars. Now I do. I also

saw the bodies of your dead and believe you are not gods. These are things I needed to know for myself, Asenti, to know that your words are true. I ask your forgiveness," Roaring Wings said very seriously.

"For what?" Ky'tulendu asked confused.

"For doubting, believing my brother. Believing that you came from somewhere close you could return to. You are truly alone here, you and your people. Do they grieve for their homes and their families?" he asked.

"Some do. We all miss our homes, people like ourselves. Reality has not yet set in for most of my people yet because of the shocks they have been through, but soon, very soon, when they have had a chance to sit and think, then they will mourn, we all will mourn," Ky'tulendu said, knowing that this would soon happen, if it wasn't already happening at the camp.

"You have such heavy burdens for one so young, Asenti. But I sense the strength in you that makes you able to shoulder them. You are a good man, with a good heart. Your people will prosper under you," he complimented, meaning his words sincerely.

"I hope so, Roaring Wings, I really do," he replied, and then pointed out the window to the North. "You can see our village now. What do you think?" he asked.

"It is magic. To do so much in such a short time," he said staring at the huge village and the multi-story buildings as well as the roads and bridges that had also been put up.

Even to Ky'tulendu, it was almost magic how fast their village had been constructed and completed. All that was left was furnishing and supplying it. It was like the ship, efficient and well organized. It was all too new to look lived in, like the native's village was. Hopefully, in time, it would look that way.

Now it just looked like a primitive Confederation outpost on a colony planet with its regulation streets, and regulation houses and buildings. It was almost too orderly and defined. It was not a part of its setting and by its very lines it looked alien, and stood out clearly from its backdrop.

Roaring Wings was silent, and Ky'tulendu was silent as well as he flew the shuttle craft closer in and began landing in the now blacktopped landing field. He almost felt he should apologize for the changes made. He could sense sorrow and disappointment from the man, as he looked with wonder, yet disapproval, at all he saw.

Their ship landed and settled smoothly to the ground. Ky'tulendu began shutting down the engines and popping the hatch. The ramp went down and daylight streamed into the inside. They could leave at any time. Ky'tulendu got up and stretched, while Roaring Wings remained seated.

The man sat staring out at the strange black surface that he had remembered fondly as once being a field of wild flowers and tall grasses. Gone, all gone, he thought sadly, as was the grove of oaks and elms that had become the strangers' houses. They had left precious few of the great trees for shade, or for the squirrels to hide in. It shocked him to his very soul to see all this land so transformed and badly warped from the Creator's ideals.

He did not blame In The Forest for giving them the land - it had been the right thing to do - nor could the boy have known that this would happen. No one could have dreamed of such buildings and things as he had seen on the ground as they came in from the air. It was beyond anything in their experience. He just hoped the creator would forgive them all for this raping of his world.

He could not in good conscience blame the strangers. They didn't know what they had done. They had built to fit their needs and as they knew how. If only he could have gotten here sooner and been able to guide these lost ones. He was here now and he would do what he could to repair the damage to the land, and pray he did enough to appease the anger from the gods and spirits.

He felt Ky'tulendu's concerned eyes on him and roused himself at last from his thoughts. He looked up studying the cat-man and saw the worry there in the solemn blue eyes. Yes, he did understand,

but not all that he could.

"My people and I will rest first and then we will talk on what we need to teach yours, Asenti. I see there is very much to talk about, but we are both tired. Can you show us the way to where we are to stay?" the man asked, his voice very quiet and neutral.

"Yes, we have prepared a large lodge for you. If your people need more room let us know. The doctor, B'tunku will take you there."

"You will not accompany us?"

"I have duties I need to see to. The Doctor can show you everything and answer your questions. She will soon be my second-in-command."

"She isn't now?" he asked, regarding the silver haired female of his dreams who now was helping unload their passengers.

"No. My real second-in-command is here, but very ill, dying. This planet is not good for her kind. She is not Atanzi," Ky'tulendu explained.

"Will I get to see these beings that are not Atanzi? Maybe I know a medicine that will help them."

"That's a generous offer. You can ask the doctor. I leave medical matters to her. I know nothing of such things. I will see you out, then I must go and do some things," Ky'tulendu apologized for not being able to personally give him a tour of the village.

"I understand, Asenti. You have many duties, many people to worry about and you are only one man. I will talk with the doctor. Maybe we will find we have much in common, like we are finding, huh?" he commented in a half laugh, a secret joke to himself.

There were tones and nuances in the shaman's last statement that Ky'tulendu couldn't quite fathom, but he let it pass as he followed the man out to meet the rest of the group at the bottom of the ramp.

## ***CHAPTER EIGHTEEN***

"Asenti, I am going to my quarters if anyone needs me," O'vettun told her commander, excusing herself from the group. She wanted no part of the grand tour, only to be alone, and get away from these people who reminded her of In The Forest. Most particularly she wanted to be away from his sister and his uncle. It was too painful to be near them right now.

The Asenti nodded his agreement and she left as fast as she could for the safety of her bunk. She had no difficulty finding her quarters, but much had changed in the camp since she'd left yesterday afternoon. They were finishing up a few of the buildings, but for the most part the camp was completed, paved streets and all.

At least they left a few of the older trees, she thought, as she walked down the busy roadway and felt the hot unfiltered sun upon her head. There were going to be more than a few cases of sunburn because they had stripped the forest of its huge trees and leaving big gaps because of the tall two and three story buildings in the compound.

Even the tall grass she and In The Forest had run through was gone, sheared to the ground. Over the creek, where they had played and made love, a wide wooden bridge now spanned.

It was so very neat and in military order. No piles of dirt, no tall grass, just concrete and regulation this and that everywhere she looked. She hated it. She could just imagine what the natives thought of all this. This is not what she had envisioned when she had first seen this place. This was not what she thought her people would do to the land.

They've ruined it already and made it into an imitation colony world town. The only thing missing is the bar and space drifters. She was so angry, she wished she could take a laser and level it to the ground and start over.

She doubted if Ky'tulendu had known this was going to happen either. He had looked shocked and surprised at the village when he got out of the ship and really saw it. She wished she knew whose idea it had been to make this place like this.

She couldn't bear to go to her barracks as she had intended. She felt alien, out of place here. She had to get away from all of this. Only one place remained that she could truly call home, that felt like it, In The Forest's cave, providing it hadn't been found and was still safe from the intrusions of her fellows.

She headed for it and was relieved as she got closer that nothing had yet been done on that side of the once peaceful creek. The bridge crossed further downstream from the cave. She had just begun to cross when a voice rang out.

"Stop! Where are you going, officer?"

She stopped dead in her tracks and looked around and spotted the sentry sitting under a shade tree close by. He looked at her curiously. She was rather ruffled from her trips and sleeping in the flyer.

"I needed to take some samples of some of the plants on this side. Tanz Commd H'Igradd sent me," she lied, using the name of an officer she knew worked in bio-sciences.

"Can I see your pass?" he asked coming up to her. "I see nothing on the current duty roster about such a request. Command had posted this area off limits without proper authorization to do field work," he said formally.

"She just gave me the orders. Probably hasn't gone through the central commcon yet. Check your listings again for a Tanz T'saasser," she told him using the name of one of her friends that had died in the crash.

He bent over the small screen of his recorder scanning for the name, while he was occupied she casually turned and drew out her stunner from her inside pants pocket. She had never turned hers back in and had been carrying it ever since.

The heavysset older dark haired Atanzi looked up to see her standing there with the stunner pointed at his chest. His mouth dropped open in surprise.

"What the...?" he managed to squeak out before the beam hit him and he fell to the ground unconscious. He would be knocked out for a good four hours at the setting she had used.

She took his weapons, field pack, and recorder as well as his communicator. O'vettun scanned the area and to her relief saw that there were no other Atanzi nearby within scanner range. He was too heavy to move, so she left him where he had fallen and ran across the bridge. With luck he wouldn't be noticed until she had made it to the cave.

When she had been growing up, she had spent a lot of time in the woods around her parent's farm, where she had learned some outdoor skills. She looked and found the landmarks she had picked out to find the cave again on her own. She kept scanning the area for more sentries. Her luck was still holding when she ducked through the bushes covering the cave and slipped inside. Just as she did, she made one more sweep and saw that two people had arrived at the sentry's post. Where the cave was on the hillside, they would have seen her had she arrived a little later.

She watched them searching for her on the recorder's small screen, as she sat behind a large boulder that stood in the entrance chamber to block any scans by them. After a while they left, taking the still unconscious Atanzi with them. Even after they left, she did not feel safe from accidental discovery. She'd just have to hope no one came this way.

It was dark beyond the gloom of the doorway. All of In The Forest's torches had either burnt out or had been put out by him. She saw some dried sticks by the door and changed the setting on her stunner to use it to cause the ends of the sticks to burst into flame. Quickly, she found one of his torches and lit it from her own. The resin-oil coating caught and she walked further into the cave

lighting torches as she came to them and took them with her to find the path down to the main chamber far below.

She found his supply of dried wood and quickly had the dead cooking fire going again. Then she sat back watching the flames and making plans for her future.

One thing she was sure of was that she wasn't going back to the camp for a while. She knew that made her a deserter. She would be missed eventually and with the sentry's description there would be no doubt that she had assaulted him to leave camp.

The cave was almost too close to the camp. She knew that, but there was no other sanctuary for her, except maybe the native village, which was now off limits too. If she stayed here she would be cut off from supplies and food from the camp. Which meant she would have to live off the land using her wits and available resources. Which were what, she wondered?

In The Forest had stocked the cave well with food and necessities, if she could figure out how to use them. With the scanner she could analyze how some of the manufactured items had been made and try to duplicate them, but as far as cooking the food, that was going to have to be trial and error.

Right now she was not in the mood for trial and error. Taking the field pack off, she found the sentry's rations and ate. As she ate, she took stock of her surroundings, seeing more of the cave than she had before. She had been really too preoccupied to notice too much of anything but her mate the last time she was here.

The cave was many times larger than she first thought, with five possible tunnel entrances opening off it. Their dark silent openings made her aware of how alone she was. The quiet of the cave was strange to someone used to constant undercurrents of sound and people. The only sounds she could hear were the dripping of water and a kind of low gurgling sound. Taking one of the torches she decided to explore its source rather than sit and worry about it.

It was coming from one of the openings that was twice her height. With the torch in front of her she cautiously explored the smooth walled tunnel, noting that the sound was getting louder with each step she took. It took her fifteen minutes by the timer on her recorder to reach the end, only to find that the tunnel opened upon another large chamber that was lit with golden light from an unknown source.

The sound was from a huge waterfall whose source lay in the darkness above. It was creating a shallow river that was overhung by white mists that obscured where it led off to beyond her vision. She stood upon a wide ledge above the river and to her right she saw a natural path that led down to a sandy beach covered with rocks. She found her way down to the beach and checked the water with her recorder. It was fresh and safe for her to drink. It was also cool, but not unduly so. She could wash in it if she wanted. By the falls though were hot springs, that was even better.

This solved one problem of where to get water and to bathe without going outside. There were even fish, and other creatures that her recorder said were safe for her to eat. She had stumbled on to an underground paradise as rich as the one outside. Seeing the natural available light she wondered about moving to this cave and abandoning the other. It would be safer and she would have water and food. She decided to sleep on it.

While she still had torch light, she went back the way she had come to the main cave. Lighting more torches, she started examining In The Forest's stock and supplies to plan out her future alone.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

"The runners have been sent and returned. Little Snowbird and Swimming Otter and the elders of the Turtle Clan will arrive tomorrow. The ceremony will be that night." Thunder Arrow told his son, as he sat down for dinner in the chief's lodge.

His son just glared at him and turned his back towards him. They were alone. His mother and two sisters were visiting with another family while the two men talked about In The Forest's future. The

talks so far had been anything from pleasant on both sides. Anger ran high, as the father stubbornly went forward with his plans and ambitions for his only son.

Thunder Arrow ignored his son's gesture and continued to talk. "Sulking will do no good. You are pledged and must carry through this time with the marriage. As we speak your new lodge is being built to have it ready for you and your bride."

"I thank the tribe for its generosity but you know my feelings already. Little Snowbird will be my wife in name only. You'll have no grandchild to sit on your lap from her," In The Forest coolly told him.

"I'll accept none from that abomination that you insist you love."

"She carries my child."

"HAH! You cannot know that, nor can she, so soon."

"A machine that the Atanzi doctor carries told us before we came here. They can see things we cannot, know things before it is possible to know."

"Lies! All lies or else magic. I say there is no child between you and her. There cannot be because she is not one of the people!" Thunder Arrow argued.

In The Forest spun around ready to hit his father, so hot was his anger, but he kept himself in check and turned cold once again.

"I do not lie and neither do the Atanzi machines. We will see who lies when O'vettun swells huge with my child and Little Snowbird does not," he said quietly between clenched teeth. Then he got up and walked quickly out the door, before his father could stop him.

"You cannot run, In The Forest, the guards have orders to keep you here. Nothing will prevent this marriage from taking place - nothing!" His father shouted after him, now standing in the doorway to see him walk down the street to his uncle's now empty lodge.

"Is this the way a great chief acts, yelling down the street?" his wife, Sees Far, asked coming up the steps. "What will the people say to hear you bellow so?"

She was almost as tall as her husband, her plump figure still attractive under her buckskin dress that was tied together with a woven belt. Her grey streaked hair was braided into two thick braids and decorated with bits of sea shells strung on the leather strips. Her face was round, age and laugh lines seamed her still attractive face with its narrow nose and generous mouth and slanted dark eyes. She was a good woman who gave him good advice, and who tried to be comforting, and loving to him, and their four children.

"That I am trying to talk some sense into our son. He does not realize how important this alliance is. It will secure the peace for the entire island and bring great honor to us."

"For you. But what does he get out of this? Little Snowbird succeeds him and he will only be her husband, without any great power among her people," she told him, drawing him inside so the neighbors would not be privy to their words.

"He could become their War Chief!" he suggested, letting her lead him to his couch of skins raised off the floor.

"Him a War Chief? He has no inclination for war. He never volunteers to go on raids or trips with the other men. He is a loner who would rather hunt, or spend time with old men or Roaring Wings than fight."

"Yes, that is so. He is a skilled hunter and knows the ways of the forest and its spirits, but that is all. I had wished he would follow in my footsteps and be interested in the craft of war. He will fight, he is no coward, but the bloodlust is not within him. If only he was like Kicking Wolf," he sighed with a heavy heart.



"I know you wish Kicking Wolf had been your son. He is not. Our son is a warrior, and the best hunter. He is bowing to your wishes and marrying Little Snowbird, what more do you want from him?" she asked, her eyes patient and non-judgmental.

"For him to give up this cat-woman in his heart. To forget her," he said seriously, hoping she would understand.

"I don't think he can, my husband. I have seen the signs upon him," Sees Far said sadly, shaking her head and making her heavy braids sway as she kneeled in front of him, her hands resting on his legs.

"Signs? What signs?" he asked not noting anything different about In The Forest.

"The spirit sight has shown me that he has bonded to this stranger. The golden thread stretches tightly between them and he is surrounded by the golden light. There are few among our people now that have this with their mates, or when they do it is very pale and weak. His shines like the sun. I also saw a thinner line from him to her as they sat in the Council Lodge and noted where it lay."

"You speak in riddles, woman. Gold lights, gold threads. What does this all mean?" he asked puzzled by her speech.

"He spoke the truth, he is mated to this strange one. They are one now for always. They can feel one another no matter where they are. She will always be the wife of his heart. Then there is the child..."

"Child? There is no child! You believe his lies too?"

"I saw the golden threads. He did not lie. She carries new life within her from him, my sight was clear. It does not lie," she said daring him to disprove her vision.

"You and Roaring Wings, if I did not know better than I would say you were his sister. These visions and dreams you claim to have. I have no dreams and visions," he protested.

"Your mind will not allow it, my husband. There is too much anger there. Our children have the ancient powers, or at least two of them. My line goes back to beginning, as does yours. Once our people could see and feel more of the invisible world than they do now. Our blood has mixed with too many outsiders, so we have almost lost our abilities. So few among us have the sight and can hear the heart as well as the mind of another," she said with regret, as she rose from her seat.

He had been listening and was not happy with what he sensed from her. "Then you approve of this cat woman?"

"Yes, because it is a true and beautiful thing to behold. It is love in its purest form because they can never lie to one another or be false. They will always know the truth of their feelings," she said looking down at him and sighing, wishing that she could know such a thing.

"Even you turn against me, everyone has. Am I the only one who can see reason and what is right?" he asked angrily, his eyes flashing as he glared up at her.

"I have not turned against you, my husband. I have only told you what my eyes have seen. I pity you for your blindness and ambition, for it shuts out your heart and the wisdom that goes with it. If you make our son go through with this, it will cause great damage to all concerned. That is all I will say," she told him turning to leave.

"You are going?" he asked seeing that she wanted to leave.

"Yes. You need to be alone, to think."

"I have not asked to," he said.

"It is what you need to do. I have work to do before nightfall."

"Then go! I see the way things lie. I will not back down. In The Forest will marry Little Snowbird and nothing anyone has to say will make me change my mind," he said, sitting back against the wall folding his arms against his chest disgustedly.

"That is your decision. But think long and hard on what you are forcing on these young people and how they hurt and will be hurt if this marriage takes place. Can you live with all the pain you will cause? I thought you had a heart, but I see you do not," she said, and quickly turned and went out the door before he could stop her.

He did not stop her. Her anger at her words was too great. He felt he was right and they were all wrong. His stubbornness would not allow him to back down. How could he now? The wedding party was on its way. There was no turning back, they could only keep going forward. In his heart though, doubts had begun to creep into his soul as he sat in the darkening lodge alone. And those doubts began to gnaw at his soul.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

B'tunku and Roaring Wings walked down the wide neat streets to what would be the native's quarters while they stayed in the camp. Even B'tunku was amazed at how fast the camp had been put together. She was oblivious to the things that were bothering the natives about the encampment. She had been in too many towns just like this to comprehend that a problem with the stark barren streets and tall buildings that stood shadeless in the hot sun.

Roaring Wings was in shock. The more he saw, the more angry he got. His sense of wonder had been replaced with a growing outrage at what had been done to this once beautiful spot. He could feel the others' roller coaster emotions as well. This town offended them all.

He looked over at B'tunku, who was continuing her careful explanations of what this or that building was for. He could tell that the stark bareness of the small yards around each building was pleasing to her, as were all the buildings lined up in straight rows. It was all sameness with no individuality, no diversity, no life.

What trees there were stood alone, offering little shade or protection from the sun or elements. Maybe in time they would add plants and flowers to relieve the coldness he now felt from this place. Even grass around these buildings would help. Where there was not concrete or that shiny black covering, there was only bare dirt raked smooth.

"You have not said much, Roaring Wings," he heard B'tunku say to him, tearing him from his dark despairing thoughts.

"There is not much to say, Doctor," he said formally. not slowing down.

"Something displeases you?" she asked, not sure of what was wrong.

"Much. I will wait and talk with the Asenti about it."

"Why? I would be interested in knowing what is on your mind," she said, stopping and making him stop.

"It is not your concern, Doctor."

"All that happens here is my concern, Roaring Wings, including the thoughts of visitors to our village."

He considered that, thinking it over, not sure whether she would understand. He had seen displeasure on the Asenti's face when they had entered the village, but none from her. Would his thoughts find sympathetic ears? He was not sure.

"I am not pleased with what has been done here. My people are also distressed. Where are all the trees, the tall grasses, the animals that dwelled in this once quiet place? The Creator will be angry for what has happened here," he said patiently, keeping the anger out of his voice.

"I don't comprehend. Angry for what? The trees were used to make the houses and buildings. We paved over the ground to make it easier to walk and for our vehicles. The grass will grow back. Where the animals went, I couldn't say. All is as it should be," she replied, shaking her head trying to figure what had him upset. It was all orderly, clean, not like his village.

Then it struck her hard - not like his village! These homes stood out sharply, where theirs blended into the environment. The natives were a part of the land; this place stuck out. What had In The Forest told them about how his people viewed their relationship with the land? She remembered quickly and realized they had problems, big problems. Yes, this could be big trouble unless it was defused quickly.

Roaring Wings watched the thoughts race across her exotic features. Good, she could see what he was saying. What had been done was done. It could not be undone. The point was to keep it from happening again. They had built on this land in the ways they knew, as any people would. They needed to be taught and taught quickly, that their way was wrong and harmed the land.

Finally she spoke, ashamed now of what had happened. "I apologize for all of us. We did not think. Our need was so great to get our people moved to shelters away from the ship, that we made this village like the ones we were used to on our worlds," she said sincerely, looking downcast.

"I see that. Your intent was good and you knew not what you were doing. I accept your apology. I wish I could have been here sooner, before you built, but it is done. Now we are here and will teach you the ways to make the Creator pleased with you, so you may yet live in harmony with our world," he said seeing her relax.

"And I promise you my people will learn. The Asenti and I will make them listen and change," she vowed to him.

Her silver eyes were deeply sincere as she looked up at him while they stood on the now offensive walkway. She had given up trying to see what he looked like behind the mask. He was mystery itself with his deep, musical voice that was both silken and gravel. The wolf's head mask still made her uneasy, or was it the man behind the mask? Why did the eyes behind it cause chills to run up her spine when he turned her way?

It bothered her that he was tantalizingly familiar in his movements and gestures, but she dared not hope. Would he always stay hidden behind his mask, she wondered?

She heard him talking and roused herself to pay closer attention to his words. "It will be good if your people take our advice. It will not be easy. Yours are a good people. I can tell by what they do and how they move," he said, indicating that they should continue their walk.

"You can tell that?"

"Yes, I can see more than you know," he replied.

She accepted that. "Then it is good that you will have no false illusions of how it will be. My people are an ancient race with many thousands and thousands of years of history behind them. Their pride comes from that, but they can be reasonable and change if they need to."

"That is good too. I cannot say how ancient my race is because keeping track of the past is not as important as living fully in the present and for the future," he told her.

"What else is important to your people, Roaring Wings?" she asked interested.

He smiled behind the mask. She was curious. That was good and meant hope and the possibility of change. So far, he was finding these ones open-minded and reasonable. He was very pleased.

He continued. "For us, it is more important to love, to laugh, to find and know joy and happiness, as well as find peace within ourselves, than to worry about what was. Life is too short. We do not try to create great works, or build monuments to ourselves. We just try to be the best human beings we can, and be worthy of this life," he said, telling her a little of their philosophy.

"Your outlook is interesting. Some of what you say parallels ours, but not all. Our people have always been driven to know, to learn, explore, to teach and pass on our knowledge and skills to others. It does make us monument builders, but we wish to give so much too. Sometimes too much to those

who are not ready for the gifts we come bearing," she remarked, a touch of sadness in her voice.

"I hear sadness in your voice. What are you thinking? Did your people have problems with their gift giving?" he asked.

"Yes. We have made mistakes. Our biggest one was when a very savage race took our gifts. Whatever we gave them was never enough and they turned on us, to become our enemies. Fleeing from them brought us to this place to crash upon your world," she said carefully, not sure how much she should tell him about them.

He sensed her reluctance to talk further on this topic, so he dropped it as they were nearing what was to be their new lodge. The natives were being given a two story house similar to the one that housed the command quarters, which was three buildings down. Medical labs and the hospital were next door, with B'tunku's quarters a building beyond.

B'tunku and the group of six natives walked up the broad field stone steps of the building and were entering through the wide door, when three of the natives cried out in pain, rebounding from the door. Roaring Wings, White Deer, Leaving Fox Tail, and B'tunku looked at them, puzzled trying to figure out their source of pain.

"What is wrong?" Roaring Wings asked them, coming back to the door and looked around. He could not see anything to have caused them pain or distress. He looked at B'tunku to see if she had answers. She was bewildered too. She took out her communicator and called control.

"This is MS B'tunku at Building Eight, some of the natives are experiencing problems entering here. Are there any force fields on or other energy fields?" she asked.

"Control here. The only system currently on is the bio-field to keep the local wildlife from entering. I thought it had been determined that the natives were immune to the field," a puzzled female voice replied.

"I thought so too. Control, as an experiment, turn the field off," she requested.

"Field off," the voice said complying.

"Roaring Wings, have your people try entering again," she asked, watching them carefully.

He motioned the three to enter and they did with no ill effects and waited nervously in the entry hall.

"Control, turn it on again," B'tunku requested.

"Field on," the voice replied.

"Roaring Wings, will you and Hidden Knife try to leave?" she asked.

The shaman nodded and motioned the warrior to follow him. Roaring Wings passed through with no difficulty but Hidden Knife jumped back from the doorway in pain and terror. Roaring Wings came quickly back inside.

"What is it, B'tunku, why can Hidden Knife not pass through the door, but I do with no problem? Why should there be differences between us?" he asked, coming up to her where she stood stunned at the implications of this.

"I'm not sure yet, Roaring Wings. All of us should have passed through the bio-field without problems. It was set up to keep insects and small animals from entering. It shouldn't affect you because In The Forest could walk through them and his readings told us that he was no different from an Atanzi. I need to run tests to find out why they can't walk through," she told him in a low voice.

He thought he understood what she was saying. Somehow the three that couldn't walk through the field were different. They didn't look, act, or seem different in any way he knew of. The only way they were was that some of their parents and grandparents had been from tribes on the mainland. While he, Leaving Fox Trail and White Deer were of the old blood, which had never been mixed with

mainland bloodlines.

He looked at B'tunku gravely. "Yes, you run tests. See what you find. Then I tell you what I know. We see if it matches. In the meantime, we find ways to let your people know when mine want to leave. Your bio-field is good idea to keep pests out. I approve. Turn it on, my people will be resting for awhile," he said.

"All right, I'll have them turn it back on," she agreed, and speaking into the communicator. "Control, you can turn it back on. Be advised I need a crew to set up an entry system on both the inside and outside. That way the natives can come and go when they want," she ordered.

"I'll have to get authorization on that from Sen Commd Vokolin," the voice said cautiously.

"Sen Commd Vokolin is flat on her back in the hospital. Look to your duty roster, you'll see my ranking. Carry out my orders and have that crew over here within ten units. Is that clear?" she snapped at the voice.

"Yes, MS B'tunku. Sorry I didn't realize there had been a change. The crew will be over as requested. Control out," the frightened voice said, getting off the line as soon as she could.

"You do have much power, doctor. You scared that female," Roaring Wings said to her, as she put her communicator away on her belt.

"She was used to the way things were, not they way they **are**," she replied. "Come, let me show you to your rooms and get you settled."

He inclined his head and motioned his group to follow her down the hall and up the stairs to the second floor.

"This whole floor is yours. I am not sure about sleeping arrangements, or who wanted to stay where, so I'll let you decide among yourselves. There are two bathrooms, complete with towels and other necessities. Each room has its own commcon unit. Downstairs is the building's kitchen and dining room where you can eat. It is already stocked with food and supplies," she explained and saw blank looks on every face.

"What are bathrooms, kitchen, and a commcon?" White Deer asked speaking up.

It was B'tunku's turn to get blank-faced and realize these were things they had never heard about or seen. The quick and easy tour to get them settled was going to take longer than she had anticipated. She took them on a tour of everything and showed them how, to them marvels of her world, functioned and how they were used.

The bathrooms in particular were an experience for both her and the natives. It took a while to explain the double concept of what was done in the room. Not having to go trekking out to find bushes was met with sighs of relief. Especially since they had all noted how far the forest was from the camp.

The bathing functions of the room was appreciated too. The natives generally washed at least once a day, normally. No long walks to the creek now. They were fascinated with the idea of water that came from pipes that could be turned on at a touch. Water that could then flow almost endlessly into fixed bowls and huge metal boxes, only to run down holes and disappear.

They liked the indoor waterfall. She showed them the soap and shampoo and other necessities, but they weren't sure of them. They would rather stay with their own natural soaps and cleansing materials.

At first they were frightened by the mirrors on the doors because they had never seen themselves clearly except in pools of water. Once they realized the purpose of the shiny sheets, they were delighted, especially the two women.

The lights that turned on with the push of a button amazed them, both the overhead and the individual ones. She showed them the basics of how to use the commcon to get her office, Control, and the

Asenti. Roaring Wings grasped the concept quickly, as did White Deer. The others were too frightened of the device to use it.

Downstairs, she showed them the kitchen with its instant cooking of the prepackaged Atanzi food. She showed them where to find eating and cooking utensils, and where to put things after they ate. The kitchen did not meet the two women's approval because there was no way for them to prepare their own foods as they were used to.

"What do you need?" B'tunku asked Falling Leaf after the native had examined the kitchen and complained loudly that it was no good.

"Need to make firepit outside with racks for cooking, stone shelves and platforms. Need table, or platform to prepare foods on. I will show after we rest. Your kitchen nice, but no firepit or smoke hole. Can fix many things inside, but most need to be outside where there is room to work. Cannot dress deer in here," she said with finality, and the other natives laughed and agreed.

"What is a deer?" B'tunku asked innocently, and she was greeted with gales of laughter.

Roaring Wings explained, then told her what happened after it was killed, especially how to prepare and cook it. B'tunku had a hard time with his explanation because it seemed so savage and cruel, but to them it was the most natural thing in the world. Hunting and the preparing of animals for food was going to be a serious problem for her people, if her reaction was typical. Her people would have to learn to hunt and cook, or starve when their supplies ran out.

"You look ill, Doctor," Roaring Wings said, after he finished his explanation about the deer and other animals. His voice was gentle, concerned, at her reaction.

"Your preparation methods are going to take some getting used to. One does not realize how wide the gaps are between our peoples until we talk and question one another on the fine points of our lives," she said sincerely, feeling a little lost.

"At least we do talk, try to understand each other. That is good as well as wise. You have many marvels in your world that make it easy for you to live better. Maybe between our two peoples, we can devise ways to simplify yours and yet keep what is good and useful for both. Like your bathrooms and the lights that turn on at a touch, without fire and smoke. Those are wondrous," he complimented and then grew quiet as he looked down at her, studying her.

## ***CHAPTER TWENTY ONE***

The others had gone upstairs during his description of field dressing an animal. She could hear giggles and laughter as the natives made use of the Atanzi marvels.

B'tunku and Roaring Wings stood alone in the sunlit hallway. She leaned tiredly against the doorframe of the kitchen door, while he stood nearby. He glanced up at the sounds of feet running and many accompanying thumps and thuds. He shook his head, and she thought she heard him laugh to himself.

Then he found his attention back on her. She was very aware of his scrutiny and it made her uncomfortable.

"Why do you stare at me?" she asked finally.

"You would not understand."

"Try me. You have been staring at me ever since I got off the ship to meet Thunder Arrow and the war party. I want to know why. It bothers me," she complained, her silver eyes flashing.

"You fascinate me, silver one. So strong willed, no ambitions, and determined, but I see other sides to you as well. There is a hunger in you, a wanting that has not been fulfilled, but you want no one to get close enough to fill those needs. You put up walls to keep others out, to make them keep their distance, which is a pity because you have much to give," he said quietly, his resonant voice making

her shiver.

"That's not answering my question," she said frightened of him, but not knowing why.

"I thought it did," he shrugged.

"No, it doesn't because you have not told why you watch me. The real reason, Roaring Wings, not a profile of my character as you see it," she said angrily. "And don't you ever take that damn mask off? It's unnerving not to see your face," she snapped, then realizing she might have overstepped her bounds moved back more against the door trying not to show her fear.

He laughed, and shook his head. She wasn't sure what she had said that was funny and had amused him. Now she was truly puzzled.

"So much of the time I have to be the shaman, the man of mystery for my people. I forgot that I am also a man. My people expect me to talk to them as Wolf Walking As A Man. I forget how not to hide," he said slowly, the head turned her way the sunlight making the jeweled eyes glow strangely.

"I forget B'tunku, that when friends talk, they want to see the other person with whom they speak. Forgive me, Doctor for my absent-mindedness. I will remove the damn mask if that will ease your fears of me," he apologized for putting barriers between them.

"That is up to you," she told him.

He laughed again, but she could not understand why. Then he reached up and began untying the fastenings of his headdress. When he was done he eased the head carefully off his own and shook his long black hair loose around his shoulders. Then he turned to her and saw she stood staring unbelieving at the face now revealed.

It was a shock seeing all the scars, especially the claw marks that almost closed his one dark eye. The broken nose was odd, as were the chiseled planes of his face, but it was the slanted cat eyes that caught her attention, as well as his teeth when he smiled at her.

"It's you!" she gasped finally.

He debated whether to play innocent or not. He knew full well what her words meant. It would not be fair to lie - he had all his answers now with her recognition of him.

"Yes, it is. The Dreams worked both ways if you know me," he said watching her carefully now, not making any sudden moves lest she run off. She was very close to doing that he noticed.

B'tunku couldn't move. She was paralyzed. She was finding it difficult to breathe, to think, to act. She wanted to run but couldn't. This couldn't be happening! Not to her! He didn't exist! This was a dream, she was asleep dreaming all this. The shipwreck, the natives, him! No, No...! She yelled in her mind, fighting the reality she saw before her.

"It is not a dream, B'tunku. I am real. All of this is real, as were the dreams you had on board your ship of us. Do you want me to tell you what happened in those dreams, so you may believe?" he said carefully, his dark eyes compassionate and accepting of her fears and disbelief.

"Yes - No! I don't know," she said, finally getting her voice back. Her mouth felt dry and her tongue like sandpaper, and cold sweat seemed to cover her body under her dark uniform, making it cling more tightly to her. And was it too warm or too cold in this lonely hallway, she couldn't tell.

"You asked why I stared, B'tunku. Now you know. I had to be sure it was you. The more I saw you, heard your voice, the more sure I became, but you could not see me. In fact, I noticed it was difficult for you to stay near me. I will not ask why. Am I as you expected?" he asked.

"Yes - no. The scars. You had none in the dreams. The rest is the same, even your voice without your mask to change it," she replied, gaining control of herself. "When I first heard your name I thought I must have been mistaken, the images didn't match. I never saw you as a shaman, I saw you only as a man," she confessed.

"I wondered. I was right to be patient and wait until we could talk alone. You are everything and more than I hoped. However, we are not the only dreamers," he warned her.

"We aren't? Who else? And why is this happening to us?" she asked, worried what forces were doing this to them.

"In The Forest and his mate were one. My niece, White Deer, and many others from my village, came to me about their cat-people dreams. There may even be others from the other villages."

"Who will also be drawn here in time?"

"Yes, I believe so, to find their mates if they exist."

"Then you do not fight it like your brother? You accept the visions?" she asked.

"Yes. At first I resisted. You were all alien, so unreal. Then I grew to know you through the dreams and I no longer saw the differences. I am sorry that you could not see me as clearly as I saw you. I am repulsive, am I not?" he asked knowing how horrible he must look.

"The scars will take some getting used to, though your face .... it's more Atanzi looking, even your teeth," she commented, studying him.

"I have been seeing that looking at your people. The ones from my village that have the dreams, look, are different too."

"How?"

"Just subtle differences. The main difference is that they have the old blood that goes back to the beginnings of our people here on this island. As to why we are different and why this is happening, I can only guess we are being led to mate and create a new people, or reinforce the old one that existed once here. Beyond that I have no answers," he said, holding his headdress carefully in his hands.

"We will find an explanation for this. I feel like I am being manipulated and I don't like it."

"Nor do I. I could say it is the will of the creator and be done with it, but I am not that naive," he told her his dark eyes serious.

"No, you are not," she told him.

"Am I more intelligent than you have thought I could be?" he queried, putting her on the spot.

"Yes," she admitted. "Educated somehow."

He smiled. "It is the old knowledge hidden from my people, as secrets passed from shaman to shaman. There is a book that I cannot read in a cave that holds even more secrets," he told her. "It could be a key to why we were sent the dreams. But no one is to know of it. This is a secret, a trust between us, B'tunku. Can you keep this?" he asked.

It was all so much at once, shock upon shock. Books, secret knowledge, what next? she wondered. He was asking her to keep his secrets. Should she, could she? There was very much at stake now. She found herself agreeing to do as he asked. "I will keep your secrets, Roaring Wings. I promise."

"Good," he said satisfied. "Now we need to discuss us."

"What is there to discuss?" she asked recovering quickly.

"Much. You and I are not children, nor have we never known the touch of a lover. I believe in the dreams and so do you. The dreams have not been tested in reality yet. We also have duties, responsibilities to our peoples, and cannot act like two lovestruck children."

"So far I agree with you, go on."

"Nor do we know one another. Dreams are one thing, reality is another. I do not wish to rush into anything and will not. I wish to know if you had noticed that the pull between us is very strong? I felt it



the moment I saw you. What do you feel? I am curious," he asked frankly, his dark eyes watching her clinically.

"Pushed and pulled by forces I don't understand. I felt the pull in the village, and when we toured this place, but it was not as strong until you took off the mask. I'm not sure yet how I feel. How I want to handle this," she said, bewildered. Her silver eyes met his and felt the electricity spark between them.

"Nor do I," he admitted lowering his eyes. The pull was almost too powerful.

"Maybe it would be best to let us get to know one another better. We are both tired. It's been almost forty hours since I slept. I don't know about you," she suggested.

"More tired I think. I agree though. Let us be friends first, regardless of this pull. That is the sane thing to do," he said, "You go home and we will talk later on this."

"All right. Call me on the commcon when you wake," she requested, moving from the wall.

"I will. I hope we have made a good beginning," he said, standing near her, resisting the pull that was growing stronger the nearer she came.

"I think so, Roaring Wings," she said, feeling the pull too. "I will go before our resolve breaks down. Get some rest," she told him and before he could reach out, she was quickly walking away and out the door.

He watched her go, and felt relief when she was out of sight. The effect of her nearness was unbelievable. There was nothing he could even compare it to. If this is what his nephew had experienced, then he understood why he and O'vettun had been unable to wait.

It was going to be interesting to see how long they could hold out against this pull, very interesting for both of them, he thought to himself, as he went upstairs to rest.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY TWO**

The persistent beep-beeping noise would not go away no matter how deep Ky'tulendu tried to bury himself under his pillows. He growled loudly at it, fighting to stay asleep, not wanting to come back to consciousness quite yet.

Damn, he cursed, waking up more and more. Who the hell is calling me and why? I'll have their hide for this! No one was supposed to disturb him until ... Then he looked out from under his pillow and saw the darkening sky.

"Damn, it is dusk," he growled angry and surprised.

"All right, you win," he yelled at the persistently beeping commcon on his desk.

He threw the covers off and went to it, savagely punching it on. Leaning over the chair at the desk he glared into the brightening screen. He didn't care what he looked like at that moment. He hoped he did look like hell, so whoever was on the other end would go away and leave him alone.

"Ky'tulendu here. What is it?" he snapped, hoping his not too pleasant attitude would get his point across to the party on the other end, as well as his bare chest, and no doubt very bloodshot eyes.

The female on the other end was shocked, and put off balance. "Sorry sir, I forgot you were sleeping," B'tunku apologized and flushed red, but she needed to tell him her news before it got too much later, so she plunged forward. "I hate to bother you but I think we have a problem," B'tunku told him.

"You think we have a problem? All right - so what is it that merits waking me up, Doctor?" he asked, sitting down and turning on the klass warmer. It didn't look as if he was going to get back to sleep any time soon.

"Specialist O'vettun is missing. She never went back to her quarters after she left us on the landing field. Someone said they saw her going towards the creek side of the camp. Then I've got a report from the sentry posted at the bridge that he was stunned by a short blonde female wearing field

clothes. She acted real strange when he asked what her business was there. Seems she gave him false names and told him bio-sciences had sent her. His description, however, leaves no doubt that it was her," she told him.

"I see," he said slowly, trying to wake up and take it all in. "Let me get a cup of klass, and wake up a little more, Doctor. Any idea why she might have run off besides the obvious?" he asked, getting up and pouring himself a cup of the hot liquid.

"No. I imagine that she is still pretty upset about yesterday. She's going to have more than a few psychological and physical problems because of the bonding cycle being interrupted. So will In The Forest, come to think of it," she replied remembering what she had read about it.

"Great. And our treaty with the natives depends on the good behavior of those two," he said disgustedly sitting back down.

"Yes and no. I think Roaring Wings might have some influence if they can't stay apart. He is going to prove a very useful ally," she said carefully not meeting his gaze.

"How so?"

"I'm not prepared to say yet. So far I have found him to be a reasonable person and willing to give and take. He is very intelligent and likes us," she said cautiously.

Ky'tulendu nodded, agreeing with her. "Those are my impressions as well. So the tour went well?"

"Yes. It was educational for both sides. I have several crews installing things to help the native's stay here easier."

He looked blankly at her, so she explained.

"I am having a firepit built behind their quarters for cooking, and then installing controls to turn the bio-fields on and off at the doors."

"Why on the bio-fields?" The cooking pit he could understand but why there should be a problem with the bio-fields, when In The Forest had shown it didn't affect him, confused Ky'tulendu.

"That's what's interesting, Sir. It seems that three of the natives receive severe shocks if they attempt to enter while it is on. The field doesn't bother Roaring Wings, his niece or another warrior. Roaring Wings said it might be because the ones who can't cross the field aren't of the old blood lines and their ancestors mixed with the mainland natives," she told him.

"Old Blood lines? What old blood lines? I wasn't catching too much of that talk earlier."

"It has to do with their origins which I suspect are different from those on the mainland. We'll have to question Roaring Wings on what he knows. As shaman, he is the keeper of all their legends and folklore."

"This is not going as simply as I would have liked. I had hopes of just settling, having no real interactions with the natives and living our own lives in peace. It isn't going to be that simple, is it?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

"No, it's not. Somehow, somehow, we are linked to these natives. Then there is this bonding between us. In The Forest and O'vettun are probably not going to be the only Atanzi-native couple to want to bond," she warned.

"What makes you say that? What do you know that I don't?" he asked, getting another cup of klass for this one.

B'tunku looked embarrassed, not sure where to begin or what to say, or whether to warn him.

"Ky'tulendu, you and I ...," she started to say.

"What, Doctor?"

"Damn, this isn't going to be easy to explain ..."

"Try me," he ordered, serious now.

"Roaring Wings told me that there were many in his village that dreamed of our coming before we crashed. They saw themselves with their Atanzi mates in those dreams. I was dreamed of by Roaring Wings and it seems that you were dreamed of by White Deer. He is convinced he and I will mate, as will you with White Deer, as well as others."

Ky'tulendu turned pale, and sat back stunned. He ran a hand through his thick red mane, as his mind raced over her news. His blue eyes were getting a rather unfocused look the longer he sat there. B'tunku looked at him worriedly, wondering if she should have kept this news to herself.

"Ky'tulendu, are you all right?"

"You said, White Deer, the pretty one in the shuttle?"

"Yes."

"I was afraid of that," he said with a sigh. "I had dreams on the ship that I never told anyone about. I saw a native, but she wasn't too clear. It was like looking at her through gauze. I had rather erotic dreams about her, but I put that down to wishful thinking and loneliness, nothing more. Then I saw White Deer in the crowd at the village. The pull was unbelievable, but I fought it. The trip back with her on the floor behind me, watching me, was no fun. That was one reason I excused myself for the tour," he confessed.

"I had wondered. So you believe in the dreams, now?"

"How can I not? It was really a shock to realize the girl in my dreams was real. Then to find out she is the daughter of Thunder Arrow, who hates us. I can't let myself get involved with her. There is too much at stake," he said seriously.

"I know. Roaring Wings and I have talked about it. We are trying to take this slow and easy and use our heads. Damn this biology of ours," she cursed, not happy about how it was forcing normally sane and rational persons into dangerous situations.

"Is there anything you can give us to numb the pull, so we can get through this and use our minds instead of thinking with certain portions of our anatomy?" he asked her hopefully.

"I don't know. I'll see what the medical and science files have, provided they survived the crash. Surely, there has got to be a way to control this. Otherwise, we have a potentially very dangerous situation brewing here. I'll even ask Roaring Wings if his people have any native remedies for this too."

"You think they might?" he asked.

"The mating-bonding is not unknown to them within their tribe. However, it has been less and less frequent a happening in the last couple of generations. The same has been reported in Atanzi culture. It is almost a myth on some planets and not taken seriously," she told him, remembering what she did know off the top of her head.

"Work on it, Doctor, so both of us can function at our jobs."

"Right. Ky'tulendu, what do you want to do about O'vettun?"

"Does anyone know where she is?" he asked.

"She's on the other side of the camp. Probably wherever In The Forest had his camp would be my guess. The only thing we know is that she is and the native disappeared off the sensor screens, which means it has to be a place that blocks the scans. There are several known substances which will. Do you want me to have security locate her and bring her back?"

"No, not yet. Let her be for the time being. She has a lot to work out." he said, feeling sorry for the

young female. "Is there anything else, Doctor?" he asked, hoping she was through.

"If you feel up to it, Roaring Wings would like to talk with you, either in your quarters or his. But that's about it."

"Thank you. I'll see after I've eaten and cleaned up. Goodnight, Doctor, and get some rest. You look like hell," he commented.

"And thanks to you too, Asenti. Goodnight!" she said indignantly and shut off on her end.

He shut off his commcon and leaned back in the chair to stare out the window at the deepening sunset through the trees. He wished he could have more than a few moments here and there to enjoy the beauty of this world. It all had been happening too fast, in too many places, with too many people. He hoped it would start slowing down and things would begin proceeding at a quieter pace, so he could enjoy this world.

His stomach was growling. How long had it been since he last ate? Sometime early last morning, he thought. Maybe food and a shower would help. He was too wound up to go back to sleep now. B'tunku had done a very effective job of waking him up.

Unlike some of the other quarters, he had his own bath. Privileges of rank it was called. He stripped the rest of the way and took a long hot shower letting the hot running water relax him. He felt much improved when he stepped out. He toweled off and was getting clothes out of his locker when the commcon started beeping again.

"Damn!" he cursed, as he wrapped the towel around his waist and walked over to the desk to lean over and punch it on.

"Ky'tulendu here, what is it?" he asked, as the screen brightened.

"Roaring Wings, Asenti. I apologize. Am I disturbing you?"

Ky'tulendu shook his head. "I was just starting to dress and go get something to eat. The Doctor said you wanted to talk to me?" he inquired, trying not to stare at how scarred the native's face was without the mask.

"I do. Is there somewhere we can meet? I thought you might be wanting to get something to eat. May I offer you some food here? White Deer and Falling Leaf have made more than enough for everyone if you would care to join us?" he invited.

Ky'tulendu started to say no, then changed his mind. He was beginning to like the native foods and it would give him a chance to talk at length with the shaman. As long as he kept his distance from White Deer, there shouldn't be any problems.

"I accept your invitation, Roaring Wings. I'll be over in fifteen units - as soon as I dress," he said.

"Good. I'll be looking for you, Asenti."

"All right, Ky'tulendu out," he said and shut off the commcon.

He just hoped he wasn't making a mistake by going over there, but he needed answers to a lot of questions and Roaring Wings could supply quite a few.

He dressed quickly, throwing on his tunic top, pants, and knee boots. He ran a brush through his thick hair and tied his ranking band across his forehead.

Somehow, he had been forgetting to wear that the last couple of days. It didn't seem that important or necessary. They were going to have to decide what this world was to them. Were they a stranded ConFleet crew, or were they simply colonists on an alien world?

He took the headband off and threw it on his bed. No, rank really wasn't important anymore, he thought to himself as he looked down at it, not anymore. Just what you could do and how. Then he turned and walked out the door.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"Asenti Ky'tulendu, welcome," Roaring Wings said, meeting him in the broad hallway of building eight. "You have come at the right time, the women are just about to serve," he said, guiding him down the hall to the dining room.

"I see you have already adjusted to your new lodge. I hope our lodges aren't too strange for you?" Ky'tulendu asked, as he walked through the broad doorway.

"A little, but the Doctor was very good at explaining your people's customs and how things worked. It has been very interesting for my people. You have created many useful things that I wished my people could have," Roaring Wings said, entering behind him.

The shaman had become just a man now, without his headdress and formal ceremonial garb. He had tried out one of the indoor waterfalls and felt much better after his shower and a brief rest. He was dressed simply in a long fringed buckskin loincloth and leggings. On his feet were soft moccasins. His smooth chest was bare, but he wore woven armbands on his upper arms and a leather medicine pouch on a braided thong around his neck, as well as his translator. His long blue-black hair hung in two long braids without decorations.

He was younger than Ky'tulendu had first thought he was. They were close in age, if the human lifespan was similar to the Atanzi one. His facial scars were unnerving and detracted from his once handsome face. It was his teeth, though, and his eyes that drew his attention the most. They were more like an Atanzi's than a human's. It was hard not to stare.

"You begin to understand, Asenti," the native said mysteriously, noticing his staring and the source of it.

That shook Ky'tulendu. "I don't understand. You look almost...," he started to say.

"Atanzi?" The shaman finished with a grin. "Yes, I know. I noticed that from the first, as did many of my people. That is one of the things we will talk about. Come sit here with me," he said guiding him to some cushions on the floor.

Ky'tulendu went with him willingly, still amazed and confused by what the implications of this meant. He already knew about their bioscans being similar, but here was the first physical evidence to suggest an even closer relationship between the two peoples. He could tell that the shaman wanted to wait on their talks, so he just sat and let him lead.

Ky'tulendu noted that the natives had been making adjustments in their environment to get it compatible with their needs. They had moved the chains and tables back and pushed them to the walls, to leave room to sit by the windows that overlooked the compound grounds. Cushions and mats were now upon the floor, arranged like they would be in one of their lodges, for eating and socializing. The few officers quartered in the building would probably not approve, but he wanted his guests to be comfortable. If this gave them a sense of home, then so be it.

From where he was sitting on the floor Ky'tulendu could see where the other natives were, outside by the firepit that had been built for them. The three men were sitting on the ground watching the women work, their weapons nearby. They must have gone out and killed dinner, and brought it back. He could see bloodstains on the ground and leftover pieces of animal carcass and skin on a wooden platform that had been built. There were some basic sanitation problems they would have to work out, he saw.

"I see your hunters have been out already," he asked.

"Yes, my people tried your food in the kitchen and were not impressed. So we went out and got a deer to cook. I hope you do not disapprove?"

"No, I want your people to feel at home here. It will take mine some time to get used to your ways, but that is why you are here for them to watch and learn. I look forward to trying the deer," Ky'tulendu

replied politely. "So you are getting settled? Do your people need anything?" he asked, getting comfortable on the cushions.

"We are getting settled. Tomorrow we will start showing your people what we need. We will all begin learning the ways of nature, together," he said. "Ah, the food is coming," he said looking up to see the women carrying in steaming bowls of wonderful smelling foods, with the men trailing behind them. Between the three, they carried the whole carcass of the cooked deer on a heavy pole.

The men set the deer on the table, while the women brought the bowls over to place in front of the two seated males. They went to the kitchen bringing empty bowls, plates, and large spoons. The three warriors sat down by Ky'tulendu and Roaring Wings and the women began serving them all.

Ky'tulendu had to keep reminding himself that the sexes had specific roles in their society. That he had quickly grasped watching people interact at the village yesterday. B'tunku had been treated graciously, but not like he had. Few of the elders had spoken to her and most of the long night she had been ignored. They had also seen how the women served the guests and their subservient manner of walking and talking to the men. That was hard for the Atanzi to accept, when their society was equal in all things.

He followed the lead of the natives and did what they did. He took generous servings of the food served. From last night, he recognized squash, corn, and a cooked green leafy vegetable dish, plus flattened corn cakes. The venison was good, even if it was not salty enough for his taste, and the other foods were good and filling, if bland. They would have to introduce the natives to Atanzi spices and find local equivalent, he decided.

Falling Leaf served him and Roaring Wings, while White Deer served the others. He suspected this was deliberate, either by her request, or was it Roaring Wings showing caution to keep the tension down? He was relieved. He really wasn't ready to deal with that situation too.

When the men had been taken care of, the two women retired and went off to the kitchen to eat. Ky'tulendu's eyes could not help but follow White Deer's lithe and sensuous form, as she moved around the room.

She was beautiful for a human, with her long black hair falling in braids down her back. Her low necked decorated buckskin top and slit long fringed skirt showed off her narrow waisted, long legged form. It was her soft liquid dark eyes that drew the Atanzi the most, as they had in his dreams. He also wondered what those full almost pouting lips felt like, as well as her silky skin against his.

Many times he had to force himself to eat during the course of the meal and tear his eyes off her. He caught her looking at him shyly too, from under lowered lashes. When she smiled it was like she was transformed and his heart took giant leaps. Her sweet throaty voice sent chills up his spine and aroused other interests.

Being around her for any length of time was going to be extremely difficult. He could hardly breath, eat, talk, or think when she was near. He knew what was happening intellectually, but his body and soul were ignoring him. Damn, he wanted her, but he couldn't allow himself to have her. Hell, he hadn't even spoken to her, and he wanted to carry her off. He was very grateful when she did go with Falling Leaf to the kitchen, so he could relax.

All this had not been lost on Roaring Wings. He had been watching it all with both amusement and concern for both of them.

"I see you like White Deer, Asenti," he said finally, after the women left.

"Yes," he admitted. "That I do. It frightens me, because I can't allow anything between us. She is Thunder Arrow's daughter and the peace we have worked out is too fragile to allow me to take interest in her. This need to bond with her is very strong. Is there nothing I can do to numb it? If I can't, I might have to ask you to send her back to your village for the sake of peace between our people," he told him seriously.

"I understand your problem. I share it with your doctor. She and I will find some medicine to relieve this strain. I cannot send White Deer back. It would be an insult for one thing. Neither you nor her can in the end deny your destiny. She is your intended mate and you hers."

"Then there is no way out of this? We are locked together no matter what?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Just as the doctor and I are, and my nephew and O'vettun."

"A part of me hoped there was a way out."

"There is none. Accept it. This used to happen to many of the people in the beginning. Not so much now, not for many generations. I have heard from B'tunku that it is the same for your people?" the shaman asked.

"Yes. When it happens it is not so overpowering or so strong. I find it difficult not to take off with her and make her mine this moment. It is very embarrassing. There is so much at stake, so much that needs to be done here, to learn. I have too many duties to my people, before I can allow myself the luxury of love and a mate," he said, trying to explain his position.

"Yes, we talked about that before, Asenti. The loneliness that comes from being in a high position and the responsibility we bear to the people we serve. The pull we feel to a mate makes this all the more difficult for us."

"Yes. It is an impossible situation. What will Thunder Arrow's reaction be? What is yours?"

"I cannot be too critical about my niece or nephew, when I find myself in the same position. Thunder Arrow has plans for White Deer. The chief of the Wildcat Clan has asked about her for his son. My brother is very ambitious, and thinks that through these marriages he will soon control all this land. I do not approve of this. I see our proud line being diluted. That may be why you were sent here to prevent this," he speculated out loud, looking at the Atanzi Asenti strangely.

"Sent here? By whom Roaring Wings? What happened to us was pure chance. It could have just as easily been another ship out on patrol. The same with the fight with the Rumnulska and our crashing here. Everything was an accident," he defended.

"Could be, but consider maybe the possibility of there being a higher hand guiding our steps. I told the doctor something, maybe I should tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"My line is very ancient, more ancient than the people on the mainland. I have a book that has come down from the beginning of our people, that no one can read now because we have lost those skills."

"A book? What does it look like? Where?" Ky'tulendu asked, excited now.

"They are hidden in a safe place underground, that only the shamans of my tribe know of. What they are made of I am not sure, I have seen similar looking things from your ship, but I am not sure if they are the same," Roaring Wings said carefully studying his reaction.

"I'm not sure what to say. I do not want to appear eager or overly curious. But that book of yours may give answers about not only your people but possibly both our people, and explain why this is happening."

"That is my thought too. I will show you and the doctor the book in a few days, after we have organized our peoples and started them on what they are to learn."

"That sounds reasonable," Ky'tulendu agreed, taking a sip from his drink that had similarities to klass he noticed with pleasure.

He noted that White Deer had returned with Falling Leaf and they were gathering up the dirty dishes as well as cleaning up. She tried so hard not to notice him, but it was apparent she too was having difficulty being in the room near him. He felt sorry for them both. Drawn by a biological imperative that

neither could deny or ignore, it reduced them to animal level instead of rational beings. He wanted to know her mind and spirit before he knew her in any other way, or was it going to be possible under the circumstances at all?

"Roaring Wings, I must be going," he said abruptly getting up. "I think you know why. If you wish to talk later come to my quarters. I'm going back there to catch up on paperwork."

"I am sorry to see you go, Asenti, but I understand. I might come over later, alone," he said getting up. "Let me walk you to the door," he suggested.

"Thanks, but I'll see myself out. Thank Falling Leaf and White Deer for the wonderful meal. I did really enjoy it. Goodnight, Roaring Wings," Ky'tulendu said rapidly, making his exit.

"Goodnight, Asenti," the shaman called after him, watching the Atanzi's hurried pace out of the room.

White Deer walked up to her uncle after Ky'tulendu left, with sad eyes and a frown. Her hands were full of the supper dishes but she had to speak to him.

"I had hoped that I could speak to the Asenti," she said, disappointed.

"I know that child, but he is not ready for that. He is having a hard time coping with the pull he feels for you. He had to go think."

"Is this such a bad thing for us to feel this?" she asked, wondering.

"Yes, and not because of who you two are and the situation. If you were not Thunder Arrow's daughter and him the chief of this village, it might be easier. He fears for the peace because of your father. Look what your brother is being forced to do. Your father had similar plans to marry you to Fighting Bear," he reminded her.

"Yes," she said bitterly. "I am aware of his plans. I like Fighting Bear, but I never wanted to be his wife, even before the dreams. What can I do, Uncle? I burn for this red-haired one. It shames me that I do. I must be his wife, or die," she said seriously, looking up at him.

"He burns for you as well. You cannot give into that burning, not yet. I am going to the doctor to see if we can devise a medicine to relieve this," he told her.

"I hope you find something. I will ask Falling Leaf to lock me in my room. I do not trust myself being so near him now," she said.

He smiled, sympathizing with her, "At least you are honest, child. I will tell Falling Leaf to help you."

"Thank you."

"I am going to the Doctor's before it gets too late and return as soon as I can. Do not wait up," he told her.

"Very well, Uncle, I won't. But do you think it is safe for you to go around the Doctor, considering you have the same problem as myself?" she asked with a smile.

"White Deer, I am many seasons older than you and I think the Doctor and myself are mature enough to handle this. We had no problems this afternoon when we talked, nor do I anticipate any now. She and I will find a medicine to curb this," he told her.

"Good hunting, Uncle," she told him, with a gleam in her eye, then she quickly turned and hurried off to the kitchen with her burdens, leaving Roaring Wings staring after her.

"Fighting Cat, I am going to the Doctor's to talk. Guard White Deer and keep all secure until I return," he told the warrior, as he passed him in a low voice.

"I will, Roaring Wings, I do not trust all this yet. I am going to keep watch anyway tonight. You will be all right walking alone in this strange village?" he asked concerned for the shaman.

"I should be. There is no reason to fear these Atanzi. They want peace as much as we do. I will be



fine," he said straightening up.

The warrior nodded and went back to eating another helping of his supper. He had no intentions of letting any of this food go to waste. Roaring Wings grinned, his people would be in good hands the warrior would let no one get near them.

Feeling that everything was secure, Roaring Wings left and walked the short distance between buildings to see B'tunku.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR**

"MS B'tunku, there is a native downstairs to see you. Do you want me to let him in?" the sentry on duty asked her skeptically, her tired and boxed image coming over B'tunku's commcon.

B'tunku looked at the unfamiliar sentry blankly for a moment, and ran a hand through her sleep ruffled hair, while her bloodshot eyes tried to focus on the screen. She was in no mood for visitors, any crisis or anything. All she wanted was to sleep! There must be something in the rules that said officers weren't allowed to get any.

It had to be Roaring Wings, but why she wondered? What time was it she wondered looked at her timer? A little after nine ... so why was he here?

"Sir, do you want me to let him in, or not?" the plump sentry asked again getting impatient.

"Let him in, Tanz. Tell him which room. He hasn't been here before," she told her, straightening up and glancing at how messy her room was.

"As you wish Doctor, Tanz M'tynn out," the sentry said, with a disgusted note to her voice as she shut off.

B'tunku found her robe and put it on. She had fallen into an exhausted sleep two and a half hours ago, after making her rounds at the infirmary and leaving orders for some experiments she wanted sciences to run. That had been on top of almost forty some odd hours without sleep, the trip to the native's camp, talks, then the trip back and the catching up on reports. She had made herself eat and take a shower, then she had laid down and fallen into a dreamless sleep.

A visitor was the last thing she needed or wanted. If Roaring Wings wanted to see her, then it must be important.

She was just finishing picking up and stuffing dirty clothes into her locker, when she heard a knock on her door. She opened it and found she had caught the native with his hand poised to knock again. He looked a little embarrassed.

"I was not sure if you had heard me," he said lowering his hand quickly and smiling, which made the edges of his mouth draw up and expose his fangs. On an Atanzi that was one thing, on a human it was ... unnerving.

"I was picking up. As much as I have been out, it's already gotten messy," she apologized motioning him to come in which he did. Then noticing his careful looking over of her in her clinging robe and his nervousness, she wondered if he had a legitimate reason for being there. "So, why are you here?" she asked coming directly to the point.

"To ask your help," he said, not being put off by her bluntness.

"Help for what?"

"To find a medicine to help control the effects of this mating urge we are experiencing. Not so much for myself, but for the Asenti. He is having a very difficult time of it, as is my niece. Intellectually, they are aware of the problems inherent in their bonding at this time, but physically it is very uncomfortable for them," he told her, seeing her nod.

"I can imagine. I am not finding it too thrilling myself. This was not a good idea for you to have come

in person. You could have discussed this over the commcon."

He nodded, his head lowered not looking at her. "I am aware, but I came to offer my assistance. Have you found anything in the books of your people?" he asked, staying on the subject.

"Not much, and nothing to stave off the effects."

"I was afraid that would be the case. My people let it run its course. Can you think of any - what is the word, ah ... tranquilizers ... that might work?"

"Nothing so far has worked. I know, I've been testing some."

"So have I, if it is any consolation. None of the usual herbal remedies I have used for pain blockers, or relaxers have worked for any length of time, even in massive amounts."

"Great. I had hopes."

"As did I. There is a possibility that combining elements from our medicines with those of mine might work. If I understand you correctly, your scanners have been cataloging the plants and other elements in this area, so they are aware of what is available?" he asked carefully.

She looked at him surprised, he was grasping more than she had given him credit for. "Yes, but only on this island and what the preliminary planet scans picked up of selected sample areas."

"I see. So your knowledge of plants and other elements is not very extensive yet?"

"No, within the next weeks we will be going farther and farther afield on the skimmers, to do surveys of different regions. I realize that doesn't help right now. Do you know of something we should be looking for?" she asked tiredly.

"There are some plants that grow in the far west that I have only small amounts of left. I got them from the old shaman, who had gotten them in trade with mainland shamans. What I have is much reduced in strength and effectiveness, also there is not enough to make more than one or two doses."

"So what does it do? Does it need other things to react to it?" she asked, interested now.

"It had good numbing effects by itself, while keeping the mind alert. It had generally been used in a drink for the shaman during the ceremony of the sun, because it numbs certain portions of the male anatomy."

She grinned. "I think we might be able to synthesize that plant if we cannot locate it, if you have samples of it for analysis. How does it work on females? Does it have to be combined with other medicines?" she asked getting interested.

"It had never been tried on females because it was reserved for shamans to use. During the time of the dreams, I had devised sleeping potions to help the dreamers sleep, but it didn't help during the waking hours. During the daylight, I used other medicines, but they numbed both the body and the mind. Have you located all the affected Atanzi yet?"

"No. Some of our people have come forward. I need an accurate count from you so we can make sure we have located all these people and can help them understand the situation, before trouble erupts. So far none of my people have tried to leave camp to go to yours, but I see it only as a matter of time."

"Yes. Thunder Arrow does not believe in the reality of the dreams, or the urges accompanying the bonding cycle. The mixed couples will have a difficult time in my village."

"I am aware of that. I am not sure of the reactions here myself. O'vettun's and In The Forest's romance sparked a lot of heated debate among some of my people. I don't know whether the Asenti being affected, or myself, will ease or escalate these feelings," she said seriously. "That is one reason why we must find something to control this until we can build up acceptance of this problem."

"I agree. I did bring samples of the medicines to let you see if your scanners could locate them or find

substitutes," he said, lifting the medicine pouch from around his neck and opening it. He drew out a small skin-wrapped square and held it out to her.

"This is the sample?" she asked. "Does this have a name?"

"Yes, it is called way-ma-tay-gun'is-an'go-on," he said.

"Fairy blessing?" she asked, starting to question him why it was called that, saw his translator around his neck, then she realized she wasn't wearing a translator, but had understood everything he said perfectly. She looked at him uncomprehendingly, and a little afraid.

He saw her look and was confused himself. "What is it, Doctor?" he asked.

"I just realized I'm not wearing my translator. It's laying on my desk over there. It's scaring me that I have understood every word you have said, including what the native name for the plant you gave me is. I shouldn't," she said, alarmed.

He frowned, a little afraid himself. "No, you shouldn't. Our speech words and concepts are very different. You have heard and understood all my words?" he questioned, with a lifted black eyebrow, his gaze intent.

"Yes, like I was wearing the translator. Just you wearing it will not account for my hearing you. Both people have to wear it to hear and speak," she told him, frightened now. "Roaring Wings, let's see what happens when you take yours off."

"Yes, I was going to do that," he said, taking his off and laying on the desk away from him. "Yoh, ku'les'ta, Maytay'oo-hkway," he said, quirking an eyebrow.

"You said, all right, Doctor, listen," she told him and saw him nod slowly, wide-eyed with wonder. "It's not as clear as when you wear the translator, but I can understand you without it. I shouldn't, but I do," she explained, crossing her arms as she thought this over. "Is this a function of the bonding cycle unique between us?"

"Tak-ta'nee, ay'ko-han," he said, thinking as well. Then he picked his translator back up and put it back on. "Ah! Better!" he exclaimed. "So many of the things I need to say are not in my language."

She nodded and reached for her translator as well. He put his large hand over hers stopping her.

"There is no need, Doctor. I am going to go back to my lodge," he told her, not removing his hand quite yet.

He looked at her with a penetrating look that made her insides hot and flushed and her legs feel weak. He took his hand away and the skin tingled where it had been. Then he tore his gaze away and started to turn to leave. She didn't want him to. She wanted him to touch her again, look at her again.

"Must you?" she asked, afraid to move, afraid of the thoughts she was getting in her head.

"Yes, and you know why. I wish to keep it that way," he said, seeing the look rising in her eyes.

"I too."

"Then I must leave. We are too vulnerable to this pull."

"Yes, go before I try to stop you," she warned, feeling her resolve crumble as her wanting him increased.

"B'tunku ... I want you," he said with hunger in his eyes as he stood with his hand on the doorknob, trying to make himself open the door.

"I know. Just go, Roaring Wings, please. Neither one of us is ready. Once we start the cycle, it cannot be stopped. Neither one of us can afford the time or are ready for that kind of commitment," she warned, backing away.

"That is true, B'tunku, we're not," he agreed, lowering his eyes, to block her from his sight.

"Goodnight, Doctor," he told her, as he quickly turned the door handle, opening the door and exiting as fast as he could, before he lost his resolve and stayed to do as he wished he could.

The door closed and she let out the breath she had been holding. It had been close, almost too close. But they had managed to fight it and not give in. She was going to have to find some remedy, otherwise they would not be able to stay or work around one another. When they had a remedy then they could relax.

She wondered about the other affected Atanzi and natives out there that didn't understand what was happening to them. She was going to have to interview all the survivors and find out who was also suffering from this.

So far only three persons had come forward and identified themselves. There were many more in the camp, she knew that. They really didn't need this on top of their other problems of getting the camp set up and salvaging the ship. So much for minimum interaction with the natives, she thought with a laugh.

She went over and locked her door, then took her robe off again after shutting off the lights again and crawled into bed. It took her a while to relax enough for sleep. There was too much to think about, as well as calm her body down from being so close to Roaring Wings.

She didn't think a cold shower was really going to do too much, but just laying there wasn't working so maybe it would. Anything was worth a try to get some much needed rest, she told herself, and got up to try it.

## ***CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE***

Ky'tulendu walked back to his quarters, noting with some disappointment that he couldn't see the stars or the night sky because of the compound's lights. It had been nice to see the natural beauty of the new planet. His people's improvements prevented that now. The lights were for their safety, to help them find their way around the compound and to keep the local wildlife at bay. Still, it would have been nice to have seen the stars.

The dinner with Roaring Wings had been good, both the food, and the company. He was grateful that the shaman was a reasonable man who had the interests of both peoples at heart. Especially in view of how closely they were going to be related.

This was a strange and bizarre situation for them all. It was nothing that could have been foreseen when his ship left on this mission. Who would have thought the dreams had any real significance?

He wondered if their crashing on this planet could have been prevented? He did wonder what would have happened if he had made a run for Confederation territory instead of towards this particular star system. Would they still have ended up here, or never at all?

He sighed and stepped inside the building, noting how quiet the place was. They were building more quarters than were necessary, so that they would not have to expand for many years and each crew person could have privacy, if they wished. Only three officers shared this building with him. Tanz W'rett, Tanz D'jinse, and Sen Commd H'treet. All of whom seemed to be out, or else sleeping, because he heard no noises except his own footsteps echoing hollowly on the wooden floors.

It was good to get back to his room. Maybe this time he could get some sleep without interruption, he thought as he entered his room.

Turning on his lights, he went over to his commcon to check for messages. Looking over the list, he groaned inwardly. He was going to have a very full day tomorrow. His two second-in-commands had insured that. Vokolin may have been sick but she was no less efficient, even if she had to work from her hospital bed.

He needed to get over and see her. He had been so busy and then exhausted from his trip, that going over and seeing her had slipped his mind. She was a good and loyal first officer. However, B'tunku

was already filling the gap that Vokolin's illness left.

That did bring to his mind whether they should continue with the military ranking and command. They were no longer part of ConFleet, they were now individuals living together in what he hoped would grow into a community, a town. Shouldn't they be changing their ruling structure to something more compatible to the way their lives would be? That was not something they needed to do right away, but when they were ready for a change.

Ky'tulendu undressed, throwing his uniform over in the corner on a chair. He stretched for a moment, then turned off the lights and got into bed. The last thing he remembered was the sight of the full moon through the trees as he closed his eyes.

He had not had the dreams since before they had engaged the Rumnulska. It was a shock to have them again. They weren't the same as what they had been on the ship, though. They were crystal clear and bright. The gauze had been removed from the lens of the mind's eye. White Deer was as he had seen her in reality, as he had seen this evening serving dinner at the native's quarters.

Then she came to him in the night, in his quarters, to his bed. Offering herself to him in all her unspoiled glory. She came to him with the moonlight illuminating her form in his darkened room. She stood there looking at him, not saying a word. Then she reached up and undid the ties that fastened her top and let it slide off her arms to fall to the floor beside her, exposing her large and softly rounded breasts. Her skirt was next as it slid down her hips, and long shapely legs to join her top upon the floor.

She stood there naked before him, revealing all her charms. He could not see her features but her eyes sparkled from the reflection of the moonlight. There was hunger in those eyes for him. Hunger he had never seen before, and innocence as well as fear for what she was feeling, and wanting from him, from herself.

She walked sensuously from where she stood, her hips moving with a promise he was afraid she would deliver. The long legs hiding and revealing her treasures. She spoke no words, none were needed, her body said it all, as she climbed upon his bed and sat up on her knees offering herself to him.

She took his hand and placed it upon her full breast ... waiting. And when he did not react, she moved it for him and felt her warm silky skin shiver and move and the dark nipples harden and stand erect waiting for more.

When he still would not respond, she moved closer to him and he could smell her fresh grass smell, and feel the almost red-hot warmth of her body, as she lowered her face to his and began kissing his face and neck, while her full breasts brushed against the fine long amber hairs on his bare chest. He was finding it difficult to breathe, to think.

Was this a dream or was this real? He couldn't tell. He reached up and took her in his arms pulling her down closer to him and his mouth sought hers, hungrily. She nuzzled with her mouth at his lower lip, teasing it, then sent her tongue questing to find his as he parted his unique split lipped mouth. He was lost in her touching and probing tongue, as he deepened their kissing until there was nothing but a liquid fire between them that left both of them panting and wanting more.

He pulled back, with a little moan of disappointment from her, so he could see her face in the pale silvery moonlight. The beautiful high cheek-boned face was transformed and made even more beautiful by the passion he saw there for him. The dark slanted eyes were luminous and ached for him, while the full lips looked even more fuller and luscious, as they pouted in invitation to be kissed more and do more kissing upon him. She smiled at him, opening her mouth and showing white even teeth, then ran her tongue suggestively over her lips, as she threw a long leg over his thigh as she rubbed herself against him.

His eyes were pleading with her not to do this, as he felt his iron control begin to crumble under the

onslaught of her body moving ever so slightly against his, rousing him more and more. He was feeling more and more helpless to resist her, but he had to. He couldn't let them do this, not yet. With a burst of iron will he pushed her away and moved to sit up. When he did he woke up and found himself alone in his bed in his moonlit room.

It had been a dream, he sighed with relief, as he woke up fully and saw he was along tangled in his sweat covered covers that were twisted around him. He laughed out loud in relief, then threw himself back against his pillows, happy that it was all a dream. But damn, it had been so real, realer than anything he had ever experienced, even in life.

It really made him think and worry how long he was going to be able to hold out. He hoped Roaring Wings and B'tunku could find something to numb this and to help him get some sleep. It was going to be a while before he got any more tonight, he figured. Disgustedly, he threw off his covers and turned on his lights. If he was awake, he might as well get some work done, he thought, as he turned on his commcon and settled in.

Across the way White Deer wasn't getting any sleep either. The same dream that Ky'tulendu had experienced, she had too. It was quite unsettling to have been aroused that much only to be rejected and then brought back to wakefulness. She sighed, and reached for the medicine her uncle had left her and then made herself lay down and go back to sleep, and hopefully not to dream anymore that night.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY SIX**

The runner stood outside the lodge of the chief, trying to catch his breath, as Thunder Arrow came to the doorway. "They are here, respected one. Jumping Frog is taking them to the guest lodge even as we speak, so they may rest from their long journey."

Thunder Arrow was overjoyed, "Excellent, I will see them shortly. Go and rest now," he told the man, dismissing him.

Thunder Arrow re-entered his lodge calling his wife and son. "I have just been told that Swimming Otter and Little Snowbird have arrived, along with the rest of the wedding party. The ceremony will be in four hours, after they have rested and Little Snowbird has had time to prepare herself," he announced happily.

He did not see enthusiasm from either his son or his wife, but his two remaining daughters brightened considerably at his news.

"That's wonderful, Father," Sweet Berry said, her round face lighting up with a smile as she sat up in her bed.

"I look forward to having Little Snowbird as a sister," Fairy Flower said, getting up as well.

"Then you marry her!" In The Forest shot back angrily, not rising from his bed. "I won't!" and burrowed further under his bearskin.

"You will not argue with me!" his father ordered angrily, debating whether to kick him. "You will marry her, and you will be happy to do so. Is that clear, In The Forest? I will not have you disgrace us in front of her father or this tribe," he ordered angrily. "Get up and begin your preparations. Lost Owl will act as shaman with Roaring Wings away."

"Father, I do not want to do this," In The Forest protested, gritting his teeth to keep from losing his temper and saying something.

"We have already discussed this. There will be no more talk, just doing as is your duty. I command you as your father and as your chief."

"Very well, Father," he said slurring the word to get his point across. He then rose with great disgust, and threw his cover off to glare up at his father standing above him.

"Go see Lost Owl NOW!" his father ordered pointing his arm in the general direction of the sweat lodge for emphasis.

"I am going and I am doing this only to keep the peace for O'vettun's people. No other reason, because I do not care what happens to me, or to this tribe, or to this family. All is dead to me without my mate, and Little Snowbird will NEVER be that," he said in parting, as he stormed off to the sweat lodge beyond the village.

His mother watched him go and worried greatly for him. She had helped him sleep these last nights with special medical teas that his uncle had left for him, but even with the drugs, he had restless nights and called out frequently for O'vettun in pain. The pain he was feeling was real because of his separation from the cat-woman.

She remembered the old stories about the ancient ones that had been bonded together for life and how the least separation in the beginning caused intense physical pain to the individuals. If one of the couple was killed or died, the other would soon follow. Those who had their mates stolen, went after them or grieved themselves to death. Already she could see the signs of that.

She felt as helpless as her son because she could not talk to Thunder Arrow and convince him that what he was doing was wrong and killing his son. She also felt sadness for Little Snowbird, who would suffer too. It was a terrible tragedy that had no solution.

Sees Far heard her daughter' laughter as they straightened up the lodge and prepared the family breakfast. She knew that their joy would be short-lived when they found out their father's plans for them. They would be married off to chiefs on the mainland within the year. Ones that their father had decided would make good allies, and offer him access to the wealth on the continent. She had argued about diluting their bloodlines with outsiders, but he had told her she took too much stock in legends and myths.

Little Snowbird was not pure-blooded. Her father had married a mainlander, as had many in the Owl Clan tribe. Their shamans were concerned too because it meant the old powers would die off, as well as the ability to use the old knowledge. Knowledge that had kept their tribes strong and safe for many generations. Too many of the old laws were being disregarded or ignored, including the ones regarding mixing of their blood with outsiders.

Thunder Arrow was interpreting the old laws in his own way, seeing that Little Feather was acceptable to the laws because of her father was chief of the Owl Clan while the cat-woman was a seeming outsider. In her heart, Sees Far, knew the cat-woman was somehow of the blood and would straighten it not weaken it. If she were not, why then did the golden threads she saw exist?

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard her husband speaking and went to tend to him.

## ***CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN***

In a dark mood, In The Forest walked obediently to the sweat lodge. He debated many times along the forested trail whether to just run and go off to his cave, but too many knew where that was and there were few places he could truly hide on the island, large as it was. Like a condemned man, he walked with leaden feet and heart to his appointed place.

"I am here, Lost Owl," he announced at the entrance to the lodge.

"Yes, I heard the wedding party had arrived, so I was expecting you. You do not look as though you were to be a bridegroom within the day. What troubles you, In The Forest? Tell me while we prepare," the tall, thin man asked, his gentle eyes in his horse like face were compassionate, inquiring as he helped the young warrior strip.

In The Forest looked sharply at him, surprised, "You had not heard? You do not know why this wedding is taking place?" he asked incredulously.

"No, sorry. I had been out gathering supplies for your uncle when a runner found me and asked me to

come back to the village to act as shaman in Roaring Wings place. He said something about cat-people visiting, and a lot of other things that didn't make sense and then he left. Afterwards, I came straight here and began preparing the sweat lodge," he replied.

"Then you do not know I am being forced into this marriage by my father?"

"I had only heard that you had agreed to do it, since it had been put off from earlier. Why is your father forcing you?" the thin man asked.

"He wants an alliance with Swimming Otter to gain power. He will go to any length to get it."

"Yes, that sounds like Thunder Arrow," he agreed, and looked at him quizzically, "Little Snowbird is a pretty one and would make a good wife and bear many children. Why does this sadden you?" he asked, starting to scrub him down with soapweed.

"Because I love - I am bonded to another as in the old legends. To one of the cat-people who have come to our world from the stars. Her name is O'vettun."

"Cat-people from the stars? You are not serious. When I heard the tale from the runner, I thought he was sick, out of his head, but you say there are such people?"

"There are. A whole tribe of them. They fell to earth in a great sky-canoe and are stranded here. I found the one that had haunted my dreams these many months. We mated and are now bonded as in the old legends, Lost Owl. The legends are true," In The Forest said seriously, with a catch in his deep voice.

"Does your father know of you and the cat-woman?"

"Yes! That is why he is forcing me to marry Little Snowbird. If I do not, then he will declare war on my mate's people. There would be much blood on both sides. I cannot allow this."

Lost Owl looked at him carefully, looking beyond the surface with the old sight and seeing what Sees Far had seen, the golden threads that led off out of sight and stretched tautly to some unknown others. Others, he questioned, because he saw two distinct threads not one. He was confused.

"My eyes see the truth of your statements. You are bonded as the legends say. I can see it, but I see two threads not one," Lost Owl told him with wonder, as he continued his cleansing of In The Forest's naked body.

"The second belongs to our child. I will be a father, Lost Owl."

"I have not been out in the woods that long, my son. The cat-people have not been here that long and it is impossible for you to know this already."

"The medicine woman of her people told us. They have things called scanners that can see inside you or anything and tell you what is happening if they ask it."

"They are Magicians?"

"They claim they are not. They call what they do science, but it is magic just the same."

The shaman shook his head. "This is almost too much for this one's head to take. Your cat-woman agreed to let you go?"

"Yes, it was her idea. She told me to marry Little Snowbird so there would be peace. I worry about her, there is so much sadness in her. The pain she feels because we are separated is as bad as my own," he said looking off into the distance where he knew she was.

"It is a very sad and tragic story. Does Little Snowbird know of the cat-woman?" Lost Owl asked.

In The Forest shook his head, "I don't know. I don't know whether she knows or not. I don't know whether it'll make any difference. There is nothing that will call off this wedding."

"Except the will of the gods and the spirits, if they can hear your pleas," Lost Owl told him, finishing up



and bidding him to enter the sweat lodge for the rest of the ceremony.

In The Forest nodded and bending down went in and took his place while the shaman began his chants. In The Forest was supposed to be meditating, while his body sweated, but his thoughts were not on the ceremony, they were on O'vettun, far away from him.

### ***CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT***

This was the first night O'vettun had ever spent alone since she had been a girl. It was an odd experience for her, not feeling other people nearby, but she did it. Part of it was feeling In The Forest's presence in the cave from his belongings and from the carrier wave they had forged, even if that wave carried pain and sorrow. He was in pain, physical pain, more than she was from their forced separation. She dared not reach out to him through their link. She could reach him if she wanted to, but that would only make it harder for both.

She lay on the bearskin that they had made love on, smelling the faint traces of him that still lingered. It both comforted and saddened her. Her uneasy sleep was broken often by strange sounds heard at the edges of her consciousness, and from her dreams of him.

She knew he was reaching out to her through their dreams, when she would not respond through the link. She made herself wake up, cutting him off. He had to be free to marry the girl his father had chosen. She could not hold him, would not break the peace treaty, no matter how much she wanted him lying next to her.

She wouldn't go back to either village. This would be her home now, separate from both, so that she would not have to deal with either. Would he come here again, she wondered? She hoped not.

Fear of discovery by her people and by In The Forest was heavy on her mind. She needed to move to the waterfall cavern - it was too exposed here. The cavern offered her everything she needed, water, light, food, and safety from accidental discovery, though foraging trips would have to be made to replenish her supplies of other types of food, but that would be a while in the future.

Giving up on getting more sleep, she started packing and beginning the hard job of moving everything to the other cave. Several hours later she finished. Her last trip had been one to remove any obvious evidence that someone had been staying there, in case the sentries did start looking and their scanners did find the entrance to the cave. To her eyes it looked like someone might have sought shelter from a storm down there, no more. She had even removed traces of her footsteps in the dirt of the cave's floor with a broom made of rushes. Finished with hiding her trail, she returned to her new home and started making it into one.

### ***CHAPTER TWENTY NINE***

"May all the spirits bless this union. In The Forest, Little Snowbird, you are now husband and wife, go now in peace." Lost Owl said, waving his hands over them in the sacred signs of blessing sanctifying their marriage.

Little Snowbird was smiling and beaming with happiness, as she looked in awe at the tall handsome warrior beside her who was now her husband. She had admired him from afar for a long time. To actually have him as her husband was a miracle that she dared not question lest he vanish into mist.

She was a simple girl, not overly bright or smart at a lot of things, but she was kind and very loving. Her prettiness did not lie in her actual physical beauty, but in her carefree, child-like attitude towards life. She was more like an overeager puppy, than a supposedly mature woman, wanting to please everyone.

She was a little towards the plump side, and a head shorter than In The Forest. Her broad face was round, with a wide upturned nose, large brown eyes, a generous mouth and rounded chin. Her waist length black hair was worn loose this day caught with a blue, yellow, and white floral-patterned beaded headband, to match her elaborately-beaded white deerskin dress and moccasins.

In The Forest was somber, smiling little, and saying even less. His eyes held pain, because of what he was being forced to do and the physical pain he was experiencing from being separated from O'vettun. Lost Owl had given him something to ease it but it was having very little effect.

Lost Owl had wanted to call this off, but In The Forest had told him they had to go through it. The shaman had even tried pleading with Thunder Arrow before the ceremony, but it had not done any good. The two men went through it, knowing it was wrong but having to do it anyway. So now In The Forest was joined legally to Little Snowbird. The peace for the Atanzi was now secured.

Thunder Arrow came towards the couple standing before their new lodge, but In The Forest turned his back on him and Thunder Arrow stopped then turned back to talk to Swimming Otter and the other elders who were going to the Council Lodge for the wedding feast. Little Snowbird was confused by her new husband's behavior, but she accepted it, as she accepted everything that happened to her without question.

She looked up at him expectantly, "Should we go in, my husband?" she asked shyly, even though she looked up at him with anxious liquid brown eyes.

"Yes, we need to talk, Little Snowbird," he said in a very dispassionately tone of voice, his expression neutral.

She was confused. "Talk? Today we are married and you want to talk? Not make love?"

He nodded, not giving her a second glance. "Talk," he replied tonelessly, and ushered her quickly into the lodge before their conversation was overheard.

"May I serve you some food or drink, husband, before we talk?" she asked suggestively, wiggling her rear provocatively as she moved closer to him once they were inside.

"No, nothing, Little Snowbird. Sit please, we have much to talk about," he requested, indicating that she should sit.

She looked at him strangely and shook her head. Her confusion was growing more and more acute. She sat down as he had asked and waited expectantly for him to speak. He sat down a little distance from her and when she tried to scoot over and join him he held his hand out motioning her to halt.

"No, stay there. It will be better," he said gently.

"You do not like me, do you?" she asked, realization dawning on her.

He sighed loudly, trying not to look at her. "No, that is not it. My heart belongs to another, Little Snowbird, and always will. We were married because my father wished it, not me. I was forced to marry you."

She was shocked. "Why did you not tell my father? He would have understood."

"I couldn't. My father wanted this alliance between our tribes. I had no choice to marry you because if I didn't, my father would start a war with the people of the woman I do love. I married you to ensure their safety."

"She is not of this tribe? She is of the Turtle Clan?" she asked.

"No, she is different from you and me. She comes from a place far, far away. Have you not heard of the strangers - the cat people?" he asked carefully, not sure what she knew or had heard since her arrival this morning.

"Your sisters told me a little about them, but it was all so strange sounding I didn't believe them. Cat-people from the stars? Your people have great imaginations."

He smiled. "They are quite real. They live a half-day's journey from here, or a very short one in one of their flying machines. They look a little like cats in their faces, but they are like us in their bodies and they talk and walk like us."

"I do not believe you and even if I did, what has that got to do with us now?" she asked, getting frustrated.

"I am mated, bonded to one of the cat-people. Her name is O'vettun. She was why you and I did not marry before. I saw her in my dreams before she came. When her ship crashed, I found her and it was not long thereafter until we were as one. She is my wife, in all things except name," he told her holding nothing back now.

"NO! You lie! I am your wife! How could you lie with an animal?" she spat disgustedly, angry and hurt at his confession.

"O'vettun is not an animal, she is a woman just like you. Only her features are different. I love her. I will always love her, and she carries my child."

"No! You are cruel, In The Forest. You tell me all of this on our wedding day. How can you expect me to love you after knowing all this?" she asked. As tears welled up in her eyes she looked at him.

"I don't want you to love me - ever. That is the other thing I wish to discuss. I will not sleep with you, Little Snowbird - ever! I do not want you to touch me or try to make love to me, nor will I ever touch you," he told her firmly.

"No! Don't say that! How can I be wife if we do not make love? What am I to do?" she asked, confused with pain and heartache.

"That I don't know. I don't care what you do or don't do. I want nothing from you. I will sleep alone. Do not try to crawl into bed with me - you will not be welcome," In The Forest told her and got up.

She watched him as he stripped off his decorated shirt, and fancy leggings, leaving only his loincloth on. He picked up his bow and his quiver of arrows by the door and started to walk out, without saying a word.

"Where are you going?" she asked angrily and frightened.

"Out!" he said coldly, not looking at her.

"Where?" she pleaded. She started to get up and follow him, but he made a sharp downward cutting motion with his hand, telling her to sit down which she did obediently. She looked up at him with tear-stained eyes like a puppy that had been kicked.

"To hunt. Do not concern yourself with me. I will return when I do," he said coolly, then added, "You may stay here, or go join my mother and sisters at the feast. I do not care." Then he was gone, disappearing past the door covering which flapped angrily in his wake.

Little Snowbird looked after him, stunned by all he had said. She sat on her knees wringing her plump hands together, as her tears fell and stained her white buckskin clothes. All these months she had looked forward to this day. To have its joy and meaning taken away, was more than she could bear. She could go to her father and tell him, but it would only make bad feelings between the tribes. This alliance was important to her father too. In The Forest's mother and sisters would not be of any help.

She did not think she could change her new husband's mind about her. He would never love her or make love to her. He had said so. She believed him. What good was she if she could not fulfill her duties as a wife and mother? She knew that her husband could not give her away to another because that would shame both tribes, nor could she find someone else to wife. She was stuck in a nightmare situation.

There was only one honorable way out - death. Making up her mind, she willed herself not to retreat. It must be done before he returned, she decided, so there would be no more painful scenes between them. Her resolve set, she began looking around the newly-furnished lodge for a means to accomplish this task.

The only things that were suitable were some knives for cutting meat and skins, but their stone blades

were neither sharp or long enough for the task. In a corner, she spied In The Forest's hunting lances tipped with long, sharp flint blades for taking down deer or bear. Taking one of them from the stack, she braced its shaft end in a gap between the rough planking of the floor and angled it towards her heart.

She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer to her ancestors to forgive her, as she then leaped forward, throwing herself upon the blade. She let out a cry of pain when the blade impaled her heart, as her forward motion and weight ran the shaft all the way through her. She fell to the floor of the lodge lifeless. Her body spasmed for a few moments then it lay still, as her life's blood pooled out underneath her.

Beyond the door laughter could be heard and the sound of happy voices and singing, as the wedding feast went on into the deepening dusk of the evening. None of the party goers suspected what tragedy had transpired yet. They went on enjoying themselves, as was the custom. The newlyweds would not be looked in upon until morning, when the groom's family would take them breakfast and show off their blood stained bedding to the tribe. That would be many long hours before Little Snowbird's body would be found.

In The Forest had left the camp unseen by the sentries, who were more interested in the merrymaking going on, than in their duties. He wandered far from camp on the trail of a fine seven prong stag he had seen when he stopped to take a drink of water downstream from the village.

He had no inkling what had happened after he left the lodge, so he went on following the faint trail of the stag through the dense forest growth until darkness overtook him. He made camp and cooked a rabbit he had shot along the way. Soon his tiredness overtook him and he slept until the morning birds woke him at dawn.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY NINE**

The commcon keep-beeped incessantly, waking Ky'tulendu up. He groaned, opened an eye, noted it was at least morning, threw off his covers, and staggered over to the machine to answer it. He turned the klass on before he pushed the on button, answering the commcon and killing the noise.

"Ky'tulendu here, what is it?" he asked as the screen brightened showing him a young female Tanz on duty at Control.

"Tanz C'lyssun here. Asenti, I am getting an audio report from sentry post three at the waterway. Do you want me to patch it through? It sounds important and needing your input," she said, nonplussed by his lack of uniform.

"Do it," he ordered coming fully awake and sitting down after he got his klass.

The screen blanked to be replaced by the ConFleet insignia since no visible signal was being sent. "Ky'tulendu here, come in sentry post three," he asked.

"Tanz Commd K'ffer here, I have a delegation of natives from the local village who want to see you. Their leader says his name is Thunder Arrow, and he is wearing one of our translators around his neck. He says he is looking for his son In The Forest. He thinks we may have him hidden at our camp. Says his son has gone back to one of our people, so he is breaking the treaty."

Ky'tulendu came fully awake at that. "Tanz Commd K'ffer, give your communicator to Thunder Arrow, let me speak to him, now!" he ordered.

He heard background sounds and fumbling of the equipment as the device was passed to Thunder Arrow who he could tell was turning it this way and that examining the strange thing.

"Here, hold it this way and talk into this place," Tanz K'ffer's voice said. Ky'tulendu could hear the sentry explaining to the native over the open channel.

"Hiyah?" Thunder Arrow's voice hesitantly asked, with much crackling and movement sounds from

the speaker.

"Ky'tulendu here, Thunder Arrow, just talk into the place the sentry showed you and I can hear you," he patiently explained, as he took a sip out of his k lass and waited. "What is this about you wanting to break the treaty? Why?" he asked.

"You have my son. I want him to leave that cat-woman of his and come home. His wife had been found murdered and we want to question him," the old man said, angrily shouting into the speaker.

Ky'tulendu cranked down the volume on his side, and moved back from the commcon. "Thunder Arrow, as far as I know In The Forest is not here. Specialist O'vettun is not here. She has been gone on an assignment since she returned. I do not think the two of them are together. The peace treaty was too important to all of us for them to violate it. What is this about Little Snowbird being killed?" he asked, concerned now.

"She was found dead on the floor of the wedding lodge. She had been dead all night. It looks like she fell on a spear. Suicide, maybe, but for what reason no one knows. In The Forest's bow and arrows were missing but nothing else except my son. Our sentries didn't see him leave, but there was much celebrating going on in the village last night," he relayed.

"She killed herself?" Ky'tulendu asked surprised, wanting to verify what he had heard.

"Yes, Lost Owl thinks so by the way the body was laying when it was found. It did not have the look of someone killing her."

"How did she die?"

"She ran a spear through her body. I want to find my son and find out what he said to her to make her kill herself," Thunder Arrow fumed.

Ky'tulendu could think of a lot of things In The Forest might have told the girl, least of which was the truth of why he was being forced to marry. He could tell her that Thunder Arrow was not going to accept the truth that his actions had caused this tragedy to happen. He was going to have to proceed very cautiously.

"Thunder Arrow, could In The Forest be hunting somewhere by himself?" Ky'tulendu asked, hoping he might have some clues where he was so they could get this potential threat cleared up quickly.

"Possibly, no one saw him leave but his hunting gear was missing. Some of my warriors are out scouting for him."

"Good. Do you still want to meet with me?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"Yes, I also want to see this village of yours and visit with my brother and my daughter. Are they well?"

"Yes, as far as I know. I have not seen them this morning. I just got up, myself," he told him and he heard a grunt on the other end. "Hand the communicator back to Tanz Commd K'ffer and let me talk to him."

He heard the chief telling the sentry that he wanted to talk to him and then the machine was passed over with accompanying noises.

"Tanz Commd K'ffer here, Asenti. You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, I want Thunder Arrow and his party escorted to the camp and brought to command quarters," Ky'tulendu told him.

"I can't, sir, I don't have any relief down here," he protested.

"K'ffer, you can be spared away from there as long as it will take to get them to camp. We are not on board ship. Nothing is going to happen, is that clear? I am ordering you to bring them here, understand?"

"Yes Asenti, I understand," the sentry said meekly, but he was not happy about leaving his post unguarded. "Tanz Commd K'ffer out," he said signing off.

He then turned to Thunder Arrow and his group of ten warriors that had accompanied him and motioned them to follow him.

Ky'tulendu shut off that transmission and then punched in the code for Roaring Wings' quarters. The commcon buzzed for several long moments until the screen brightened and Ky'tulendu found himself facing White Deer who smiled delightedly at seeing him. Ky'tulendu was tongue-tied for a moment, but quickly regained his composure.

"White Deer, is your uncle there?" he asked, very conscious of the way she was staring at his bare chest and sleep tousled hair.

"No, he is outside with the others talking to the doctor about what we need to start teaching your people hunting skills. Do you wish me to get him?" she asked, smiling at him as she leaned forward.

She was wearing a loose, low-cut sleeveless top of buckskin that was tied only at the shoulders and the sides, which left much of her light bronze skin exposed. On her hips, she wore a short fringed apron-type skirt that tied on one side showing off her long legs and exposed hip. He also noted the knife she wore in a sheath slung on her hip too.

It was hard not to stare and keep his composure but he managed. "No, that's all right. But I do want you to tell him that your father and some of his warriors are on their way to the camp to see him and me."

"My father is coming here? Why?" she asked, frowning.

"He is looking for your brother for one thing. In The Forest hasn't been back to camp, has he?" he asked cautiously, his blue eyes serious as he studied her.

She shook her head, "No one has seen him. Is there trouble?"

"Maybe. Little Snowbird killed herself after the wedding and your brother is missing." Ky'tulendu told her gently as he could not, knowing how close she had been to the girl.

"Little Snowbird is dead - killed herself? I am not surprised. I feared it might happen when I heard the wedding was still going to happen. Poor girl. My brother probably told her the truth and she took the honorable way out. What a waste."

"Yes, it is. You thought this would happen? Why?"

"She couldn't live with the truth that my brother couldn't love her or be a husband to her. This is all Father's doing. He made In The Forest marry the girl and then she found out he would not be husband to her. I see it all too clearly. Does In The Forest know?" she asked, her voice bitter because of the tragic way her sister-in-law had died.

"I don't think so. Your father had warriors out looking for him. He thinks he may have gone off hunting alone."

"Not with his O'vettun?" she asked, wondering whether he had gone off with her.

"O'vettun is not in camp. She went off as soon as we returned and has not been seen by anyone. But I do not think she has gone to see him or they are together somewhere. The peace treaty between our people meant too much to them," he said.

Her dark eyes flashed anger. "Yes, that treaty that my father forced upon us all. I am ashamed Asenti Ky'tulendu that that man is my father. To separate two such as them that were in love and already bonded in the highest way, and to make them forever live apart because of some whim of his! That is terrible, Asenti," she said seriously, fingering her translator nervously.

"I did not approve, White Deer, but they made the decision on their own."

"What would you have done if it were you and I, Asenti? Would you have so willingly bowed to my father's wishes?" she asked, looking at him, her intent clear.

"White Deer ...I do not want to talk about this," he said, trying to figure out what he could say.

"I can see, Asenti. I will not press you, but you will have to find an answer to that question because it will have to be answered. For now we prolong and put off our destinies because the needs of others come before we can give into ours, but that will not be for long," she told him, warning him that she was doing as everyone wished only for a short time. "The call is strong in us, Asenti, remember that."

"I know, White Deer, and that is why we cannot answer it. You do not know me nor I, you. I want to know you as a person before I know you as a woman or a mate," he told her honestly, grateful that there was a screen and several buildings between them.

"I am glad it is not just my body you seek. I would like to know your mind as well. Maybe we can just talk. That would be good," she said, smiling warmly at him, partly because he wanted to know the person she was. "I will tell my uncle that Father is coming. Will you be there too, soon?" he asked.

"Yes, shortly, after I dress and eat something."

"Good, then I will see you outside. Goodbye, Asenti Ky'tulendu," she said cutting off the transmission.

He shut his end off too, his mind still reeling from his conversation with the girl. There was a mind there, a very sharp mind, even if it wasn't educated by his standards. She wanted just to talk and know him. She was not just pure animal lust and wanting without a mind, as he had feared.

He would see if she was interested in learning to read, and get an education. He got the impression she might like that. There was much he could teach her and she in turn could show others. There was so very much they could do on this world to help and raise the people's standards of living. However, her people were here to show them how to live simply. Somewhere, they had to find compromises that kept the good of both worlds.

He poured himself another cup of klass and then got up and began dressing. He looked his uniforms over. The ones he had worn were already getting ripped and torn in spots because the fabric got caught by sticks and other objects. The heavy black cloth was too hot for the warm temperatures they were experiencing. The long sleeves on the tunics had to go too.

He took one of the uniforms that had been ripped on the sleeves by going through the forest that first day on the planet, and began ripping off the sleeves. They came off raggedly but easily. He put the now sleeveless tunic top on, leaving its collar unfastened. His pants needed no alternations, except to be heavier or less able to catch at things. He put them on, then belted the top. He sat down to put on some heavy socks and boots. When finished he looked himself over in his mirror, shook his head and shrugged. It wasn't great looking but it would be cooler.

Finally, he added his weapons and communicator to the belt, and his translator around his neck. As an afterthought tied his ranking headband on, more to keep his hair out of his eyes, than to show who he was. He finished his klass in two gulps on the way out as he left to go meet Thunder Arrow and Roaring Wings behind their quarters.

Under the group of shade trees that had been spared behind the native's quarters, Roaring Wings was conducting his first class of the day on hunting principles. He was not dressed as a shaman today, only as a warrior, as he explained the principle of the hunt to some young Atanzi males and females that had come to attend this informal class. B'tunku in standard field garb, sat on the ground with the rest of the class, listening intently.

White Deer walked to the group with a very purposeful expression on her bronzed face. She made for her uncle and motioned for him to stop for a moment. White Deer approached him and whispered in his ear. He frowned momentarily, and nodded but then went back to his class. Then White Deer left and joined Falling Leaf, who was showing some students how to prepare the deerskin from last

night's dinner on a newly-built stretcher frame of willow branches.

Shortly thereafter, Ky'tulendu came from around the side of the building to join the group. His people looked shocked at his new uniform, with his bare muscled arms showing, as well as a good portion of his bare chest. White Deer smiled in admiration but then went back to work trying not to look his way again.

B'tunku quirked an eyebrow at him. "Dressing rather casual, aren't we, Asenti?" she asked, looking him over.

He shrugged as he sat down next to her on the bare ground. "It's too damn hot for long sleeves and tightly-fastened tops. I give permission to any that wish to follow my example and be cool to do so. It's too easy to get a heat stroke out here," he commented. "In fact, I want someone to see about designing some warm weather clothes that hold up under the rugged conditions we will be encountering."

"You might ask the natives for suggestions. I foresee our uniforms being replaced by leathers, furs, as well as native materials for cloth. Falling Leaf has been showing me samples of their woven works. They use the fibers from several different plants and make mats and other items. They have not developed true looms yet, but I think they would be receptive to them," she told him.

"Have the survival and technical manuals been found yet?"

"Some, not all. I still have two crews doing salvage work on the ship. The computers are almost out of emergency power. We are getting all that we can but much of the data is going to be lost to us. I have two people from data specialties working on a catalog of what we have downloaded and what has been translated to hardcopy. I expect that by tomorrow or the next day. These activities are draining their power cells more rapidly than was estimated."

"Hardcopy as much as we can. We can't allow ourselves to lose any data. We have to start making machines that use alternate forms of energy, so that we can at least keep half the equipment here at camp going."

"I know that, but we are also running out of materials to put the hardcopy on. Many of the data sheets were destroyed in the fire when the ship got hit in stores. I am working on substitutes, but there's too many problems that have to be solved at once," she said sadly.

"And not enough personnel to go around," he added. "Then we do the best we can, Doctor. The reason I am here, besides learning some of these skills is to tell you Thunder Arrow and a group of his warriors are in camp and coming here."

"Thunder Arrow, why? What for?" she asked, not sure whether to be pleased or not.

"He's looking for In The Forest, who seems to be missing. He thought he might be here with O'vettun. Then it seems Little Snowbird killed herself right after the wedding, and he's not sure who to blame."

"Great! We really needed that hot head here. I suppose you want me to give him the grand tour and find out what is on his mind?" she asked.

"Precisely. I can't think of anyone else I can give the job to."

"Thanks, and speaking of trouble, here he comes. Notice that Roaring Wings and Little Deer aren't pleased about his visit either," she commented, as they watched the pompous chief stride up to his brother and give him a hearty greeting.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY NINE**

Brother, it is good to see you. How do you fare among these strange ones?" Thunder Arrow asked, as he hugged his brother in greeting.

"Very well, my chief. What brings you here?" Roaring Wings asked carefully, letting his brother do the explaining.



"To seek that son of mine and bring him home. His bride killed herself and he cannot be found. I thought he might be here with his new friends," he said, with little remorse for the loss of the girl.

"No one has seen him. You said Little Snowbird killed herself. How is her father Swimming Otter taking it?" Roaring Wings asked, worried about possible repercussions from the Owl Clan.

"He is grieving. I left him with Sees Far."

"He did not choose to come with you to find In The Forest?"

"No, but I left warriors to watch him in case he decides to go on a revenge hunt. It was too bad his daughter was that unstable. Never thought she was that type," Thunder Arrow commented, missing the dark looks his brother was giving him.

Roaring Wings' class had moved away and had gone over to where White Deer and Falling Leaf were working the deerskin. Ky'tulendu and B'tunku remained where they were, watching the two men. They wanted to keep themselves ready to step in if need be.

"Since I am here, I wish to see this village for myself. I want to see these wonders and magics that the strangers and my son talked of. Maybe even do some trading for some of their magics," he hinted, with a grin. "Is there someone who can show me around?" he asked.

Taking the cue, Ky'tulendu and B'tunku got up, dusting their pants off from the dirt of the ground, as they came up to the two men.

"Greetings, Thunder Arrow, I see you made it safely here," Ky'tulendu said, welcoming him with a bow.

"Yes, except your man was not too informative as to what things were as we passed," he complained.

"He may not have known. Not all my people are informed about how things work here in camp and can answer questions. The man who brought you here was a security guard. He knows weapons and just general level information, no more."

"I see. Then who can explain your wonders to me?" the chief asked impatiently.

"I was going to let the Doctor whom you met the other day give you a tour. She can explain everything to you," Ky'tulendu said indicating B'tunku.

He laughed. "Hah! A woman who knows everything. You are a strange people, you Atanzi. Women who knows things," he said, laughing even more.

B'tunku was finding it hard to control her rising temper at the stupidity of Chief Thunder Arrow's attitudes, but as an officer, she knew she must control herself, so she gritted her teeth and smiled sweetly at him. "Chief, I assure you I can answer all your questions. I took Roaring Wings on a tour and he and his people were very impressed."

"I am harder to impress, cat-woman. But I will let you show me this camp of yours. Would you care to join me, brother? I have some family matters to discuss with you and this seems like a good time," the chief requested, but it came out more like an order to be obeyed.

"I will join you, but first let me leave Spotted Cat in charge of my class," he requested.

He excused himself and went over to the three warriors he had brought with him and explained the situation. Spotted Cat nodded and went over to the group watching Falling Leaf and began getting the hunting class back together with the other two warrior's help. Roaring Wings then rejoined his brother.

"Asenti Ky'tulendu, are you coming with us?" Thunder Arrow asked hopefully.

"No, I have duties to see to. I will join up with you later in the day. Enjoy the tour," he told them and walked away.

After Ky'tulendu left, Thunder Arrow turned to B'tunku. "All right cat-woman, show me this place of

yours. I wish to know everything about your people and their magics," he said with a slow smile, while his dark eyes took in all that he saw greedily.

### **CHAPTER THIRTY**

Ky'tulendu had left the group with a plan forming in his head. He needed one of the Soaettes for it though, and he hoped at least one of them was still capable of flying. The surviving members of both the Soaettes and the Tranquils were housed in the infirmary because of their illnesses. He had planned to see Vokolin anyway, so this accomplished two tasks at once.

His nose wrinkled in distaste as soon as he stepped into the building. The smell of chemicals, medicines and sickness hung heavy in the air. Even the fans and filtering systems couldn't eliminate it all. He asked the med specialist on duty where Vokolin was and she gave him directions.

It was a shock when he opened the door and saw his once healthy and vivacious first officer. She had lost massive amounts of weight from her already thin form, making her fur, what there was of it, appear stretched tautly over bones and nothing more. Her once luxurious fur was gone in great chunks from all over her body revealing a pale, and spotted skin beneath. Her eyes were huge and feverish, and her body jerked spasmodically as she had another coughing spell as he entered. IV's were hooked up to both arms, one with blood, the other with unknown medicines.

"Vokolin ... I didn't know it was this bad," he said, stunned at what he saw. He felt rooted in the doorway with his hand upon the knob just staring at the sight before him.

She looked up, startled and embarrassed for him to see her this way. "Asenti, I did not hear you come in. I did not want you to worry about me when you have so much more to worry about," she said in a croaking whisper.

"B'tunku said you were ill, but I never dreamed."

"I asked her not to tell you. She will make you a good second-in-command, maybe even a wife. Too bad I will not live long enough to see what you make of this world, Asenti," she said, trying to smile as she laid back against her pillows.

"Vokolin, don't talk that way. Sciences will find a cure."

"In time perhaps, but not in the time I have allotted. I will not be here much longer. Already this morning, three of my kind have gone to the ancestors. I will be with them soon. Do not cry for me, that is the way of it. I do not fight what must be."

"I wish I could say something ... apologize for bringing you here," he said, feeling his tears threatening to escape.

"You had no choice but to come here. We could have all died in space or on some other world. Here your people have a chance. This world was made for your kind, not mine, or for the Soaettes. We accept this and feel no bitterness. At least we got to see its beauty for a little while. And it is a pretty world, Asenti."

"Vokolin, is there anything I can do for you? Anything at all?" he said feeling helpless just standing there, watching the slow painful rise and fall of her chest, and hearing the rattling of her breathing.

"Just take good care of your people, and guide them in the ways of this world as you have been. You are a better Asenti than I thought you would be. You were so young when you came to me. You have surprised me, and I am proud to have served under you, sir."

"Thank you, Vokolin, I will try. Should I leave you to rest now?" he asked, wondering if he was overtaxing her.

"Yes, I feel the need to sleep. Go, Asenti Ky'tulendu and be well in all things," she said dismissing him.

"And you," he said softly, as he backed out of the room and closed the door gently behind him.

He leaned against the wall for several long minutes, composing himself. He knew his second would be dead by nightfall. There was no doubt. It was still hard to accept. They had served together for seven years. She had always been there, knowing what report he needed, scheduling his appointments, running interference for him at ConFleet, and making sure everything on the ship ran efficiently. He had looked up to her for her wisdom and the incredible knowledge she could call up at the touch of her fingers. He found it hard to reconcile the images he had of her with the skeleton in the bed he had just seen. He was going to miss her more than she would ever know.

There was nothing he could do for her, he realized, except do the best job he could with his survivors. He had to make this into a viable community and not just a collection of individuals. He was responsible for them all and in a way responsible for the natives that were coming under his influence. He had not just one group to guide, but two. He could no more divorce them from the natives than cut off his arm. They were going to be linked too closely for that.

His biggest obstacle to peaceful relations was going to be Thunder Arrow. The old man was one of the most self-centered, arrogant, and dangerous persons he had ever encountered. At least he had few followers among his people and his son and brother were both reasonable intelligent men. Somehow, they had to get his attitudes turned around before he caused more damage to his people and possible to the Atanzi.

Ky'tulendu had to find In The Forest and let him know what was happening. He doubted that the man knew his bride had killed herself. Ky'tulendu knew he might be interfering in tribal politics by what he had in mind, but something had to be done before Thunder Arrow did more damage.

He went back to the desk and asked where he could find the Soaettes and what their conditions were. They were only in marginally better shape than the Tranquils. Only Gov'nn was able to still fly. That was good. The flyer knew In The Forest on sight and might be able to locate him. He went to see him.

He found the flyer outside looking up at the sky. He looked over as the Asenti approached, curiosity in the lavender eyes.

"You come to finally see us, Asenti?" he asked, bitterness in his high pitched voice.

"This is the first chance I have had Sen Commd. I have had many duties."

"Yes, I have heard about your trip to the native village and that some of the natives have come here to visit. It goes well with these humans?" the bird man asked.

"I believe so. We have found that certain of the humans have bio-readings like Atanzi. We have been finding that there are very little differences between us, except for outward appearances. The natives have been brought here to teach our people how to live of this land. Hopefully in the future we all will be able to work together."

"That is good that your kind will survive and make friends with these humans. What of the native and the specialist I met. How goes it with them?"

"There have been problems with his father, who is the Asenti of his people. He has made them split up. That is why I have come to you to ask for your help, if you are up to it," Ky'tulendu said, feeling him out.

"What do you wish from me?"

"To locate the native, In The Forest, and bring him back to camp. Can you carry anyone or is that too much for you?" he asked solicitously.

"I can still carry. I have not lost all my strength yet. When do you want me to do this?" he asked.

"As soon as you can leave. I need to talk with him. He is off hunting by himself in the woods around his father's village. His father has sent warriors to find him but I want him found before they do and

brought here."

"I understand. What if he does not wish to come?"

"Tell him that his father is here looking for him, and that Little Snowbird is dead and O'vettun is missing. That should interest him," Ky'tulendu said. "You can also tell him I will elaborate on all of this when I see him, but I must see him."

"As you wish. The specialist is missing? Is she with him?"

"I don't think so. If she is, let me know by communicator and I will make alternate plans."

"Very good, Asenti. I will leave as soon as I get my equipment. I will report back to you through central control when I have located him."

"Thank you, Gov'nn."

"At least I can end my days doing something useful, Asenti. Dying is not an easy thing to accept for my people. Rather it be fast and quick than this slow wasting away," the bird man said sadly.

"I wish it was in my power to do something for you and the Tranquils."

"But it's not. And these are the risks I knew I might face when I joined ConFleet," he sighed. Then seriously he added, "I will bring your native back. Goodbye, Asenti, and thank you for visiting my people."

Then the bird man walked away into the building leaving Ky'tulendu staring after him, and admiring him for his courage. After a moment, he bestirred himself to walk in the opposite direction, hoping to join up with Thunder Arrow and B'tunku and see how the tour was going.

### **CHAPTER THIRTY ONE**

The bright blue sky was becoming cloudy, and off to the sea side of the island, dark clouds were gathering on the horizon. A storm was starting to build. He could feel it in the gradual dropping of the barometric pressure. The wind was picking up too, he noted in the higher levels of the atmosphere. Better find that human and get this mission over and done with before it his.

Govenn h'zz flew over the broad treetops in a low angled search pattern looking for the human, In The Forest, as the Asenti had ordered.

He was getting very impressed with the variety of both flora and fauna he saw as he flew. This was truly a rich, unspoiled land. He hoped it could keep most of its wild beauty. It was too beautiful and unique a world to lose to normal Confederation colonization practices. Unfortunately, that was something he would have little say in because he wouldn't be here to enjoy it too much longer.

He would enjoy as much as he could until then, by doing the things he was best at. Tracking like this was a challenge to all his skills. A challenge he needed. It felt good to be out away from his fellows whose depression and illness were wearing on his nerves. He was the only one who still felt like flying. They had given up all hope, all will to survive, but not him, not yet. If they wanted to die, then so be it. He wanted to live and do it to its fullest.

He was the youngest of the survivors, maybe that accounted for some of his determination and will. But he had always been more independent, resourceful, and chafed under any restrictions imposed upon him. He had bowed to Lenn j'zz's leadership on board, and Runna k'xx's on the ground, but she was dying and Tollk m'zz was too near in age to listen to seriously.

Tollk m'zz wanted them all to crawl into their nests and never fly again. Not him. He needed the wind in his feathers, the cool air, and the feeling of freedom he never got on the ground. Soon he would be the last of his kind here, but that really didn't matter, as long as he could fly free.

His sharp eyes picked up the trail of the human from where he had left the village. He was glad the humans wore foot coverings. It made them easier to track because of the distinct patterns that they

left behind. He also noted where the other warriors were. They had a ways to come yet. He nodded in satisfaction, he would still get there first.

He found an opening through the thick tree branches of the primal forest, a small clearing directly in front of where In The Forest would emerge. He landed and found a huge fallen oak log covered with moss to sit on as he waited for him. He amused himself by watching how the sunbeams filtered down to the carpeted floor to lit up sections of the deep shadows like spotlights on a stage. And on those stages, he watched the various lifeforms perform their ritualized behaviors, ignoring him. It was a very pleasing show.

In The Forest was still tracking the buck he had spotted last night. It came as a shock to him to see the Soaette in the sunlit clearing he was skirting. So quiet was the winged man that he mistook him for a ghostly illusion, a trick of the light and his eyes. This was the last place he expected to see one of the winged ones.

"Govenn h'zz? Is that you?" In The Forest called out breaking the quiet of the glade with his voice that echoed off the ring of massive ancient trees.

Getting no immediate response, he cautiously came over to where the bird man sat on the huge log. The blue tinged feathers were bright white in the sunlight that filtered through the trees, making it clear that this being came from different skies. No earthly bird was ever that shade of intense white.

The Soaette waited a while before speaking, because he had been lost in his own thoughts. He looked up and his large lavender eyes looked the human over and saw his silence had worried him. "I heard you. I've been waiting for you. I am sorry that I did not respond. I was distracted," he apologized.

"I wasn't sure whether you were real or not, Govenn h'zz." In The Forest said coming closer now and relaxing.

The Soaette beamed happily and cocked his head to look at the human better. "I see you remember my name. Yes, it's me, human, Govenn h'zz. I was sent to find you by the Asenti. He wishes to see you," he said coming down to business.

"Me, why?" In The Forest asked coming closer. He was suspicious and wary now.

"I do not know all the particulars, but it seems your father has sent some men to look for you. They are following your trail and will be here shortly," he warned him, and saw In The Forest look quickly back the way he had come. Then he turned his attention back to the bird man.

"Maybe they are, but that's not answering my question. Why does the Asenti want me and now my father? I have done nothing but go out hunting. I am hurting no one," he protested, concerned that people were looking for him.

"That may be so. All I know is that I was asked to bring you back. The Asenti also told me to tell you that Little Snowbird is dead and your O'vettun is missing," the Soaette relayed, knowing full well this would get him interested.

In The Forest felt like he had been pole-axed. "Dead? You said Little Snowbird was dead? How? Why? She was fine when I left last night. Crying about what I had told her, but she was alive. He is sure about that?" he questioned him intently. He was becoming frightened now.

"I told you I don't know! I wasn't given any details. The Asenti said he'd tell you when you got back to camp, he told him calmly as he stretched and plumped his feathers to relieve some of the aches he was feeling.

"All right, but you say that O'vettun is missing? I do not understand what is going on," he told him, feeling very confused and upset.

"Nor do I, human. I am only repeating what I was told. Are you coming then?" he asked with a lift of a

feathery brow as he cocked his head to watch the man struggle with the revelations he had been hit with.

There was only one decision he could make in the face of this news, he gave the Soaette his answer. "Yes, I will see the Asenti. But how do I get there?" he asked not seeing the airship.

That amused the bird man and he cawed and chuckled, "I am to fly you back if you are brave enough to let me carry you," Govern h'zz said, daring him.

"Hah! You don't look strong enough for that. I must weigh almost double what you do," In The Forest said, looking over his delicate appearing body and wings.

"You probably do, but I am stronger than I look and have carried more than your puny carcass weighs some very long distances many times," he clipped back proudly, as he stood up to his full height which made him tower over the human more than a foot.

"All right, if you say so," he replied skeptically looking up at him now, trying to contain his fears.

"When do you want to leave?" In The Forest asked waiting.

"I would suggest before the other humans get here," he said, cocking his head suggestfully in the direction from where In The Forest had come. Then he noticed the bow and quiver of arrows he had slung across his broad naked back. "You're going to have to leave those behind They'll get tangled in my wings when I fly," he told him.

"All right, but I hate to. These were my best set for hunting big game. You're going to owe me a replacement for them."

"We'll see, we'll see," Govern h'zz teased, as he waited with folded arms for the human to do something with his weapons.

In The Forest grumbled as he took off his weapons and stashed them near the base of the log to retrieve them in the future. "I hope they don't get damaged before I can get them," the native told him as he returned to where the bird man stood waiting.

"You will get them back, even if I have to come back myself and retrieve them," he said pleasantly.

"What I want now is for you to put your arms around my neck and hold on tight. I'll support your body in my arms if you don't find being this close to me offensive," he inquired.

"Why should I? I see you as a man, just a little different from myself. I have no reason to fear you," he said bravely coming close and doing as the Soaette had requested.

The human out his muscled arms around his neck, ignoring the feel of the bird man's feathers as they scratched him. He felt his body lifted up by arms that were thinner, but seemed more powerful than his own. It was a strange sensation. He had not been held like this since he was a child. He was a man, fully grown and this being was now going to carry him as if he were a mere babe.

"Got a good grip? Remember to hold tight and not look down if you are afraid of heights," Govern h'zz warned, as he took a couple of running steps and bounded up in the air, his great wings flapping mightily as he fought gravity and they became airborne.

This was different than riding in the air ship. He could feel the wind rushing against his face and the feathers on Govern h'zz's chest whipped and ruffled in fast time against his nose and mouth, tickling one one hand and stinging on the other, as their air speed picked up. In The Forest opened his eyes and watched in wonder as they rose above the tree tops into the freedom of the open air, where only clouds and birds had dwelled.

The view was similar to what he had seen out of the window of the ship, but it was more personal now because he could feel the cool air rushing past him. It made him shiver, but he ignored it as best as he could. He could feel and hear the beating of the bird man's heart, and the tremors caused by the beating of the great and powerful wings as they pushed against the wind.

"How are you doing, human?" Govenn h'zz asked him, as he caught an air stream to glide on and ease the strain on his wings.

"I am enjoying this. I envy you that you can do this any time. It is beautiful up here," In The Forest said candidly.

"Yes, it is. Your planet is quite nice. Nicer than many I have seen. Keep it this way. It deserves it. My people didn't and now my kind wanders far, seeking new places to live and grow. It is a pity that my people could not adapt here. It would have been good for them," he said with a touch of sadness.

"Your people won't be living here?" he asked confused.

"No, we are dying from something in your world that doesn't like us. So are the Tranquils. Only the Atanzi will survive and thrive here, not us," he told him, his voice without rancor and hate for the will of fate.

"I am sorry to hear that about your people and you," In The Forest said, wishing he knew what else he could say.

"Don't be sad, human. That is the way it is. I will fight my fate for a while and soar on the winds of this world, as long as my wings will carry me. I will go out as a warrior and flyer of my people, proudly and with dignity. I will accept nothing less."

"Those are good thoughts, Govenn h'zz. My people have similar feelings on what it means to be a man and a warrior and it is a good way to die."

"You interest me, human, there are great depths in you. After we get back to camp, one day I would like to discuss these thoughts and philosophy of your people. I want to see what points are similar. It is a hobby of mine," he said.

"I would like that too and to learn more about your people, so I may tell mine and my children and my children's children about the bird people that once flew in our skies. This will be the stuff which legends are made of," In The Forest said wishing he knew a way to keep a record of his adventures.

A thought then struck In The Forest. "Govenn h'zz, do your people and the Atanzi have ways of making sure information never vanishes, so that others can know what you knew without telling them face to face?" he asked.

"Yes, it's called writing. We have symbols for the words we speak and others can read what is written. Your people don't do the same?"

"Only a little, they draw pictures of things, but these pictures cannot tell all and it takes a story teller to interpret them. Most of what we know is passed by talking or showing. We talk, tell stories, and if the stories are not repeated, and the story teller dies, the story dies with them. The same with old knowledge. I have heard from my uncle that one time long ago we knew much more than we do now, and had great and powerful magics. They are lost to us because the knowledge was not passed down, if I understand what you mean about writing down things. We had written some down in books, but one one can read them now."

"Your people had books, and a written language. Do any of these books still exist?" Govenn h'zz asked, very interested now.

"My uncle could tell you. I don't know. Why?"

"There might be information in them that could help your people, tell them about themselves. I would like to see them and so would others. We might even figure out a way to read them, so everyone would know what was in them," he said, becoming excited now.

"That might be good. Govenn h'zz. I will ask my uncle about them. In the meantime, how can I learn to read and write so that I might know the world of the Atanzi better?" he asked seriously.

"That is something I do not know. I would ask the Asenti or the Doctor, they will be able to help you.

You constantly amaze me, human," the bird man said, looking down at him.

"Why, because I want to learn and be more than I am?"

"Yes, that. I had not anticipated such curiosity when I first met you. Are all your people like you?"

"No, just some. A small number really," In The Forest told him.

"That is good, though, that others want to know and learn as you do. We are coming to the camp and will be setting down in a few moments," Govenn h'zz announced, as they passed the newly built bridge and flew over the outer borders of the camp.

"O'vettun is neaby, I can feel her," In The Forest told him, with awe in his voice as they passed over the cave. His eyes now wore an unfocused look as he tried to pinpoint what he was feeling and from where.

"You can feel her?" the bird man, asked incredulous at this previously unsuspected talent of the human.

"Yes, when she is close. I can sense her dimly when we are far separated, but the closer I get the stronger I feel her, can hear her thoughts and feel what she is feeling," he told the Soaette.

"Human, what other surprises do you have for me?" the bird man said, beginning his landing by the native quarters.

"Surprises? Me? I am only a simple man," he said, as they touched down and he felt the Soaette relax his wings.

"Hah! We will talk later, human, but for now you can let go, we are on the ground," he told him, as he let go and let the human stand up.

In The Forest let go of his neck and looked around. He was close by the area where Roaring Wings had been conducting classes earlier. No one was around. It was lunch time and the students had gone off to eat. The natives that had not gone with Roaring Wings were inside.

"Where do I go?" asked In The Forest, looking for his people or the Asenti.

"Let me call the Asenti and see where he wants to meet you," Govenn h'zz told him as he got his communicator out and punched it on. "Asenti, this is Govenn h'zz. The native and I have returned to camp and are outside the native quarters. Where do you want him to meet you?" he asked.

"You found him? Good. I am with his father now. Can you take him to my quarters and I will meet him there. I would like to talk with him alone first," Ky'tulendu said, his voice very low.

"Understood, sir. Will do. Govenn h'zz out," he said and shut the device off. Then he turned to In The Forest. "You heard our conversation."

The human nodded. "Yes. I would like to talk with the Asenti first, too. I am not ready to deal with my father yet," he said, not looking forward to that encounter.

"This way then," the bird man said, directing him towards the command quarters further down the row of buildings.

They walked, passing a few Asenti on their duty rounds, but none of the natives. In The Forest entered the building and remembered where he was.

"I can take it from here alone, Govenn h'zz. O'vettun and I were here before. I can find my way and wait by myself. You look tired, go get some rest," he suggested.

"I am a little tired. If you will be all right, then I will go on back to my quarters near the infirmary. You can visit me there if you like," he told him, leaving an open invitation for the human.

"I will soon as I find out what is going on. Thank you, Govenn h'zz, for the ride and the talk. They were both very enjoyable," he said, patting him on the shoulder.



The Soaette looked at him curiously, shrugged and did the same to the human. "Goodbye human, until we meet again," he said in parting, then walked off towards his quarters.

In The Forest entered the building and went upstairs and sat down in front of the Asenti's room to wait. He knew he could have gone in and waited. But a man's lodge was private and off limits, until invited in by the owner. He was not sure if this was the case among Atanzi, but he didn't want to take any chances. So he sat and he waited.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY TWO**

Ky'tulendu put the communicator away, and rejoined the group of natives and B'tunku who stood nearby waiting for him. He was going to have to come up with a polite way to excuse himself and go see In The Forest, providing he could get away from Thunder Arrow, who had made himself his own personal tour guide, ignoring B'tunku altogether.

They had just finished going through the heavy machinery shed. The natives, especially Thunder Arrow, were very impressed with the flyers, floaters, and the ground vehicles of the Atanzi. The anti-gravity floaters that could lift many times their size and weight were marvels. Ky'tulendu and B'tunku were beginning to wonder if this tour had really been a good idea. They could see that Thunder Arrow was taking it all in very, very intently and coming up with his own notions of how some of these machines could be used for his benefit.

With all this intense interest in their technology, the Asenti decided not to give him a tour of the armory. They did however, demonstrate the uses of a stunner so that the natives would understand that they were more than capable of defending themselves from attack. Thunder Arrow was very subdued after that demonstration for a long time.

The data retrieval center met with mixed reactions. Roaring Wings was impressed and requested that he would like to learn to read and write in Confederation standard. His eyes were filled with awe and desire to be able to know what lay behind the covers of the growing stacks of hardcopy printouts from the ship. To Thunder Arrow, this was all very interesting, but there was nothing he could see a practical, immediate use for. He dismissed the books and knowledge in the room with a wave of his hand, as being nothing a warrior needed. Ky'tulendu, B'tunku and Roaring Wings just looked at him and shook their heads and went on with the tour.

Ky'tulendu found a way to excuse himself before they went onto the science labs, and did so leaving B'tunku to once again deal with the pompous chief as best she could. He was grateful that Roaring Wings was along on the tour, to keep the two from each others' throats and to smooth out things. B'tunku and the chief were not getting along at all. He knew that when this was over, she would have quite a bit to say to him on the subject of the chief and his attitudes towards them.

He found In The Forest asleep in the hallway, leaning against his door when he came up the stairs. The native woke up quickly at his approach. He looked up sheepishly at the Atanzi commander standing over him.

"Must have been more tired than I thought," he yawned, apologizing for falling asleep that way.

"No need to apologize. We are all running a little short of sleep nowadays. And I apologize for dragging you away from your hunting, but we have some things to talk about."

"Govenn h'zz told me. Tell me what you know, Asenti Ky'tulendu," he requested, as he got up from the floor with a bound and stood next to him.

"Inside will be better to talk than here," he suggested and let them both into his room. "It's a bit messy, but find a place and sit. No one will disturb us here," he added, apologizing for the mess.

Ky'tulendu explained what he knew from Thunder Arrow, as he fixed them both a cup of klass.

"I see. No, I know nothing beyond that Little Snowbird did not take my explaining of our marriage to her very well. I couldn't bear to spend the night with her, so I went out hunting to think. I may have

been too harsh and unfeeling in what and how I told her, but I never expected her to take her own life. It is not something that happens too often among my people. I feel much sorrow that she did such a thing. I just wanted her to accept the fact that I could never be a husband to her the way she wanted, that's all," he said truthfully.

"Will her father do anything? Start a war, maybe?" The Asenti asked concerned for both their peoples.

"I can't say. I don't know Swimming Otter that well. But he is a reasonable man, unlike my father. He has other daughters, but Little Snowbird was his favorite. My father was not too bright going off and leaving him at our village, alone with his grief. That will not set well with him or his people. Hopefully, my mother, Sees Far, can keep him calm."

"I hope so, too. I would not like to see your people have a war over this tragedy that your father created," Ky'tulendu said sincerely.

"Yes," In The Forest agreed with a sigh. "What is this about O'vettun being missing? Are you sure?"

"She has not been seen since she arrived back here. She was seen going to go to her quarters but she never went there. The last report we have of her is her knocking a sentry out by the bridge, but from there all traces of her vanish. We have been searching, but none of the scans of this area have picked up anything," Ky'tulendu told him.

In The Forest smiled to himself, as he took a sip of his klass. Ky'tulendu saw his smile and was puzzled.

"What is it, In The Forest? Do you know where she is?" he asked.

He nodded, "I think I do. I have a hunting lodge underground in the caves across the creek, that I have been using for the last couple of years. I took her there the night you could not find her. She said something about the scanning devices not being able to see through the rocks of the cave. She is probably there," he said, then wondered if he should have told him.

"The scanners can't see through certain types of minerals and elements. Caves you said? How large?" Ky'tulendu asked interested.

"Very large. There is a huge main chamber with many passages going off into the darkness. I have only gone down a few of them because I didn't want to get lost in the darkness without torches. In one chamber, there is a waterfall and an underground river with fish and shellfish in it. It is also lighted by a golden light that comes from nowhere I can see."

"Fascinating," Ky'tulendu replied thoughtfully, storing the information for further use in the future. "Do you think O'vettun might be there?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"It seems likely. The cave was very well stocked with food, weapons, skins from animals I had killed that I was working on to make clothes for the winter. She would have everything that she might need for a long time," he said.

Ky'tulendu considered all this then asked, "What do you think I should do about O'vettun?" he asked carefully.

In The Forest looked startled at the question, he had not expected that. "I don't know, Asenti. What do you want to do?"

"I am not sure either. On one hand it is not good that she left camp, assaulted a fellow officer, and is hiding out, but I do understand her not wanting to stay. However, I do not like her being off alone, capable of taking care of herself as she may be."

"Nor do I. There are many dangers in the woods around here, and dangers in the caves as well. She is very much a stranger still to this world of mine. I am torn between wanting to be with her and not sure whether I should. There is my father, and the treaty."

"Yes, there is the treaty. Though consider whether with Little Snowbird gone, are you still bound to stay away from O'vettun, or are you now free to join her?"

"Logically, I should be free of all obligations, since Little Snowbird is dead. However, my father may not see it that way."

"True. Your father has much contempt for us and he may have more plans for you," Ky'tulendu suggested.

The native nodded, his head down as he considered all the possibilities now open, "Yes, he may decide to marry me off to someone else's daughter. He does not accept my bonding to O'vettun. I wish I could disappear completely, so I would never be made to do what he wants. Unfortunately, I will be chief someday and cannot just leave and start life anew somewhere far from him. I have to think of my people. If I do not become chief, then Kicking Bear will and he is more of a hothead than my father is," In The Forest told him, explaining the dilemma he faced.

"That does not sound good. I have met Kicking Bear. He would not make a very good chief, I agree. So what do you want to do?"

"See my father, I suppose. Find out what he wants and go from there," In The Forest said rising.

"Are you sure?" Ky'tulendu asked. "You don't want to see O'vettun?"

"No, not yet. I don't want to get either of our hopes up until I know for sure that we can be together always. I can feel her still, and knowing she is near is enough for now. Take me to my father, Asenti. Let's get this over with," the man said, gritting his teeth.

"As you wish," Ky'tulendu said, getting up off the bed where he had been sitting. He put his cup down and they left to go meet with the chief.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY TWO**

"Oooooo... you pompous old ...! You deal with him, Roaring Wings. I'm going back to my quarters. Tell Ky'tulendu anything you want! I've had it!" B'tunku yelled at the chief and the bewildered shaman, as she stormed away across the compound, furious and angry.

Ky'tulendu and In The Forest were just coming around the corner of a building when they caught the display. The chief was grinning broadly while his brother was giving him dark, evil looks, and the warriors with the group were looking somewhat embarrassed by it all. B'tunku continued to storm all the way across the wide dirt lawns, her hands clenched in tight fists to her sides, as she rapidly walked away.

"What was that all about?" Ky'tulendu asked, as he came up to the tour group.

"My brother was commenting on the state of women and their proper roles in life as he sees it! And commenting about his impressions of Atanzi females and how they could stand some proper lessons in behavior towards a real male. The Doctor took offense to what he was saying and lost her temper. Rather than tell my brother what was on her mind, she left," Roaring Wings said apologetically to Ky'tulendu, but his own eyes were smoldering with rage every time he looked his brother's way.

"I see. I will talk to the Doctor and get her cooled down," the Asenti said seeing that any defending of the doctor would fall on deaf ears if he discussed it with the chief. "The tour went all right otherwise?" he asked changing the subject.

"Yes, it has been most interesting. I want to talk further with you, Asenti, about acquiring some of these marvels of yours for my people. I was particularly impressed with your stunners. They would make hunting much easier and safer for my people."

Ky'tulendu saw the direction this was heading and decided to sidetrack him before this got sticky.

"Yes, we will talk about the stunners later. I have brought In The Forest to you. My people found him and brought him here."

"Yes, I see him, and I thank you for finding him," he told Ky'tulendu and looked his son over. "You - come with me!" he ordered and dragged his son off to talk privately with him, leaving the Asenti, Roaring Wings and the other warriors standing there.

Roaring Wings turned to the warrior who wasn't sure what to do. "Little Beaver, take the men back to my lodge here. Falling Leaf and White Deer will give you some food and you can rest. There is nothing you can do here now," he told them.

They looked relieved and gratefully they left for the native quarters.

"I am surprised that B'tunku held her tongue as long as she did, Roaring Wings," Ky'tulendu commented, as soon as they were alone.

"I am too, Asenti. My brother pushes people sometimes too hard. He is chief, so we take it from him. I wanted to defend the Doctor, but I also did not want to give my brother a wedge. He sees the situation between her and me. He does not like it and hopes he can make a rift between us with his words. He does not understand because he feels no similar pulls," Roaring Wings explained, bitterly.

"Does he know of White Deer and myself?"

"No, we have been careful not to say or do anything to arouse his suspicions. My brother has much contempt for your people and only wants to use your magic for his own ends," he commented.

"I know that, but he won't get far. I've dealt with people like him before and can handle this."

"Good, he's never met his match before. He has never had someone not bow down to him. Please be careful. He is a dangerous man and doesn't care who he hurts to get what he wants."

"I know ... I will take your warning seriously. You look worried - what else is on your mind?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"My nephew. Thunder Arrow plans to find another bride for him among the tribes and are you aware that he plans to marry off White Deer soon?"

"Yes. Is there any way we can stop him from ruining more lives with this insanity?"

"I don't know, Asenti. We will have to find a way. Is my nephew all right?" he asked, wondering how he had taken the news of his bride killing herself.

"He seems to be. He is understandably upset about Little Snowbird's suicide. He was surprised she would do such a thing. His main concern right now is worrying about what his father may be planning and what Thunder Arrow will next have him do. He is putting up with his father's demands only because he eventually wants to be chief. Though he is also worried about O'vettun, he has no immediate plans to see her."

"That is good in one way, but I wish it did not have to be this way for him. Somehow, we have got to reason with my brother," Roaring Wings told him, and looked over to see Thunder Arrow and In The Forest coming their way.

In The Forest looked both angry and depressed. He was frowning at what his father was saying to him, his lips were set in a bitter line. Finally, he had enough and exploded.

"Enough, Father, enough! I am through being a pawn in your schemes. You marry Smiling Flower, I will not! I married Little Snowbird to keep the peace, but I refuse to be the cause of another girl's death or heartbreak. Being chief does not matter that much to me anymore, to put up with your demands. Goodbye, Father, and don't try to send men after me because they will not find me!" In The Forest told him, and then stalked off.

His father glared as he watched him go across the compound heading towards the outer borders.

"Ungrateful whelp!" he yelled at him, but In The Forest never slowed his pace.

"Damn, that unreasonable son of mine. Probably going to go find that damn woman of his and if he

does ..."

"You'll do what, Thunder Arrow? Your son did as you asked, he married that girl and look what happened. What are you going to do, keep marrying him off to girl after girl, hoping that he'll change and be happy with the girl you pick for him? He is bonded to O'vettun, nothing can change that."

"I don't believe you!"

"You're going to have to. It's fact. It's biology. He is mated to her like a wolf is mated to a she-wolf. Only death will break that bond he has with her," Roaring Wings tried to explain.

"People do not mate like wolves. They can mate with whoever they wish whenever they wish. They do not bond to one person only!" he roared.

"In the ancient times, our people did and the Atanzis did too. We and the Atanzi are linked. We are alike, even if we do not look alike. Then some of us are meant to have Atanzi mates. The ones of us that had the dreams."

"The dreams again! That's just nonsense! I had no dreams, yet you expect me to believe you? This is just an excuse to mate with those animals and I will not allow my people to do that! None of you will mate with these animals, or I will see the animals dead!" he roared louder.

Ky'tulendu was taking it all in coolly and dispassionately as Thunder Arrow ranted and raved. "I don't think you can stop people from being with whom they want to be with, Thunder Arrow. You cannot stop what will be. Do you plan to kill us all?" he asked with a hard edge to his voice.

"Yes, if need be. I will not see your people mix with mine and create monsters, if anything is gotten from such an evil mating at all!" he shot back getting in Ky'tulendu's face.

Ky'tulendu just grinned at him exposing his long pointed canine teeth, which made the chief back up several steps in fear. "Monsters, huh? You really are quite narrow-minded and bigoted, for a human. I am glad that no one else shares your views."

"Are you so sure? My warriors are loyal to me! They will carry out my orders and storm this village, if I say so!"

Roaring Wings just looked at him incredulously. "They follow you because they are scared of you. They think you are impossible with your demands and will lead the people into disaster, if you keep going on the path you have chosen."

"You lie! You want to be chief - you have always wanted to be chief! I lead my people in the warrior's way that brings them honor and glory. They have more than they have ever had under my father!"

"Yes, but at a terrible cost in the lives of our men. And because we will not bend to your demands, you wish to spill more blood for a cause without reason. See reason, brother. The Atanzi are here to stay and they will be joined to our people. That is what was foretold in the legends! That is what is fact now!" Roaring Wings told him, not backing down.

"No! Never! This means war then between us, cat-person. Never will I allow any of my people to mate with yours! NEVER!" he screamed at both of them and shook his fists at them as he stormed off to the native quarters, to gather his men and go home to make plans.

"This does not look good, Asenti. I tried talking with him, he will not listen to anyone. He has always been like this. My father was not happy about him becoming chief, but when our oldest brother was killed before he could take over. That left Thunder Arrow next in line," Roaring Wings explained.

"So, your brother became chief by default? Your eldest brother left no children?"

"No, he and his bride were killed by an attack on our village. Many people were killed and some of our women were kidnapped by mainlanders."

"Do you think he'll start a war with us?" Ky'tulendu asked, concerned whether Thunder Arrow's

threats were real or not.

"With him, anything is possible. He will remember your weapons and be cautious, but he believes himself and his men to be invincible. He sees you as being weak because you try for peaceful solutions and don't wish to fight."

"He reminds me of the Rumnulka. They thought we wouldn't fight either, but I proved them wrong. I will post more sentries after he leaves. I want to try to avoid a fight with him. I really do not wish to hurt him or any of your people," Ky'tulendu said, reflectively, as he thought over what he had to do. "Come, Roaring Wings, let us see what mischief your brother is stirring up among your people," he added and they walked off together to the natives quarters in very glum, serious moods.

### **CHAPTER THIRTY THREE**

Outside the native quarters, Thunder Arrow was attempting to take White Deer back with him to his village. She did not want to go and was fighting him. The other natives just stood back and watched, afraid to interfere in this family squabble. They felt embarrassed to witness this private scene, although some buried instinct told them to stay, because somehow they knew that this was more than a family fight and would probably decide the nature of Atanzi-native relations for a long time.

The old chief's face was getting even redder with the anger he was feeling towards his defiant daughter. He had not expected resistance from this daughter, who had always been dutiful and obedient in all ways. To him she looked transformed into a wildcat with claws and fangs extended. She kept out of his reach as he tried to lay hands on her and physically drag her home.

"WE ARE LEAVING NOW, DAUGHTER!" Thunder Arrow yelled angrily, making a grab for White Deer's wrist and missing it as she evaded him.

She glared at him with daggers of pure hate in her eyes. Her chest was heaving and her small fists were clenched tightly into balls at her side, as she warily watched him come after her again. She knew if he caught her she wouldn't be able to get free from his iron strength and she would be lost. She wasn't going to leave with him, even if it meant running into the woods and hiding.

"No, we're not - FATHER, I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm staying here. And I'm not marrying some warrior that you chose that I can never love!" she told him defiantly.

"YOU WILL! You will marry whom I say when I say! It's bad enough your brother defies me but I WILL NOT HAVE YOU DO IT TOO!" he roared at her, edging closer, hoping to get her distracted enough that he could get a hold of her.

"I WON'T, FATHER, NEVER! I will marry whom I please! You cannot stop me!" she yelled back, moving ever backward away from him, trying to find a way to run through the crowd surrounding them.

Marry whom she pleased? That implied she already had someone in mind. What was going on that he didn't know about? Thunder Arrow looked at her narrowly, as those thoughts raced through his anger-charged head. "And who is it that you want to marry, girl? Tell me his name!" he demanded.

"NO! I won't!" she told him defiantly.

"You will, daughter, you will! If I have to beat it out of you when I catch you - you will tell me!" he threatened, still edging closer.

She was backed up to the edge of the crowd with nowhere to go and suddenly felt hands push her violently back to her father's waiting arms. Before White Deer could react her father had grabbed her and held her tight to him, with both her wrists bound together in front of her in one of his massive hands. She struggled, throwing herself back and forth and trying to kick him but to no avail. He had her and she couldn't get away!

He grinned evilly down at her. "Defy me, will you? Never again, Daughter! And you will tell me what I

want to know - do you understand?" he demanded, squeezing her wrists painfully together and making her cry out in pain, as she tried to twist out of his grasp.

"NO! I WON'T!" she yelled at him, becoming terrified of this anger in him, but she would not give in either and let him know her secret.

"That's not the answer that I want! Tell me who it is!" he ordered, raising his free hand to hit her upside the head.

An earsplitting unearthly roar like some giant cat cut through the air startling everyone and almost making Thunder Arrow lose his grip. Everyone looked towards the source fearful that some great unknown beast had come into the compound. There was no beast, only Roaring Wings and Ky'tulendu looking murderously at Thunder Arrow as they stood outside the circle.

"Let her go, Thunder Arrow!" Ky'tulendu ordered, striding quickly through the crowd to where Thunder Arrow stood.

"Get lost cat-man, this does not concern you. This is family business," he growled, ignoring him.

"It does concern me. This is my village and your daughter is a guest here under my protection. I will not have you or anyone else harm her!" he said in a deadly quiet voice, but his blue eyes were sparkling red with suppressed anger and rage over what was happening to his mate-to-be.

"You have no authority here other than I grant you, animal-man. This is still all my territory, not yours. I grant you leave to live here, no more. In fact, I want you and your kind gone from my lands, NOW! The treaty is broken. You either go or I will destroy you. Is that clear?" he threatened, holding onto his daughter tighter, making her wince in pain.

Ky'tulendu saw that and got more enraged. "We will not leave. Nor can you destroy us, for it would be you that is destroyed. For such a smart man you are very stupid. Watch and learn, Thunder Arrow," he said quietly, taking out his stunner and putting it on the highest setting.

Ky'tulendu picked out the biggest, most massive tree he could find and aimed his weapon at it. The beam hit the tree and surrounded it in an intense red light. It grew hotter at the point it hit until it burst into flame while its outlines shimmered and wavered and then it vanished, leaving only a black spot and charred dust behind. There were several gasps and murmurs of fear from the crowd. Even Thunder Arrow blanched whitely at the power of the Atanzi weapon inherent in the demonstration.

Coolly, Ky'tulendu turned back to him and asked. "Now, do you think you can fight us and win? A man will burn the same as a tree, or any other object, and we have many of these weapons, some more powerful than this one," he threatened.

Thunder Arrow was a little shaken, but he did not back off, his pride wouldn't let him. "I will not try to fight you, cat-man, because your weapons are more powerful, and you can keep this land. But you and your people will keep to this place and not come to my village. I am taking all of my people back with me. There will be no contact between us EVER!" he told him, defying him to challenge him.

"Don't you think the council and your people have some say in that?" Ky'tulendu asked pointedly. "I believe Roaring Wings' group is here by the council's will."

"I am chief! I am leader! I say what happens, not council!"

From the crowd there were mutterings of disagreement and displeasure from his statements. Ky'tulendu caught them even if Thunder Arrow didn't.

"I think your people disagree with that, Thunder Arrow."

"You lie! I am chief, I will always be chief. I tell the council what to do. No old men tell me!" he shouted, defying anyone to tell him differently, as he scanned the faces ringing him for support and to his shock he found none.

"Your people don't believe you, Thunder Arrow. They believe in the council, not you. Look around and

see," he told him.

"No! I will settle this when I get home and I will take my people with me. All of them!" he told them all.

Ky'tulendu shook his head. "Only those who wish to go with you. The ones that wish to stay can. Including your daughter, whom I suggest you let go, now!" he warned in a deadly voice.

"No, she goes home with me. She is mine to do with as I please. You may take my people, cat-man, but you will not take her!" he said moving away from Ky'tulendu and dragging White Deer with him as he tried to escape the circle.

Ky'tulendu moved quickly then, and brought his clawed hand down upon Thunder Arrow's and squeezed, breaking his grip on White Deer. She sprang away from her father quickly, with wide eyes as she saw the look in both their eyes. She rubbed the feeling back into her hands as she stood and watched.

The two males were locked together. Ky'tulendu had not removed his hand from Thunder Arrow's and his claws were starting to dig into the native's flesh slowly and painfully.

"Now that I have your attention, we will talk, Thunder Arrow," Ky'tulendu told him, seeing the growing fear in the native's dark eyes.

"We have nothing more to talk about, cat-man," he said defiantly, trying to get away and finding he couldn't.

"We do, about your daughter, for one."

"What concern is my daughter to you?" he asked puzzled and then comprehension hit him like a thunderbolt. "You want to marry her! You're the one she would not name! Now it makes sense," he said angrily.

"Yes, Thunder Arrow, I am the one. And I am going to marry White Deer," he told him.

"Over my dead body, you cat-animal-BEAST-THING!" he yelled, trying to fling himself away from Ky'tulendu.

"That can be arranged," Ky'tulendu warned, exposing his teeth. "White Deer and I are one of the dreamers, like In The Forest and O'vettun. We are bonded to one another. That can not be changed by you or anyone - it just is! It is a call greater than ourselves that we answer."

"That is something you all have made up. I don't believe you. I never will," he said bitterly, his eyes full of hate and contempt for Ky'tulendu and now his own daughter.

Thunder Arrow stared at both of them, especially his daughter and the way she looked at Ky'tulendu, and got sick at heart. He knew if he dragged her back, she would run off or worse. In his heart, he knew the truth of Ky'tulendu's statements, but still his pride would not allow him to give in gracefully.

Bitterly, he spat out the words that dripped with hate and contempt. "You can have her, beast-man. If she wants to lie with animals, so be it. I want no part of her or my son. They are both dead to me. I never want to see either of them again! Their names will be stricken from the tribal records as if they had never lived."

"That is not the way I wanted this to end, Thunder Arrow. Your son and daughter both love you..."

"I have no son or daughter. They died when they took up with your kind. Release me, beast-man, we have nothing more to say to one another," he demanded.

And Ky'tulendu did and moved back away from him. Thunder Arrow rubbed his wrist which was throbbing painfully from being held and from Ky'tulendu's claws. He looked at his daughter with a mixture of hate and sadness, not sure which to feel now. These acts of defiance and treachery were the last things he had expected from her.

Her wanting to make love to this animal-man was beyond him and always would be. She and his son



would now become dead to him in his heart. There was no other way to accept their mating with these beasts that walked like men.

Thunder Arrow turned to his people and with his arms outstretched he announced, "I declare these persons dead - In The Forest and White Deer - they exist no more and their names are never to be mentioned in records of our people. I so say it! It is done!" he told them all in a loud booming voice and then lowered his arms. "All that wish to return to our village come with me now. Those that stay behind are also dead to our people. I am leaving now," he shouted, turning in a circle to address everyone, reading their faces and their intentions.

He walked to where his brother stood, silent and immobile. "Are you coming, brother?" he asked.

Roaring Wings looked past him, not wanting to see him and shook his head. "No, I am staying. My place will now be here. There is nothing for me in your village," he said coldly.

"Huh!" Thunder Arrow exclaimed in shock. "But you are the shaman! You are needed by the tribe!" he exclaimed, completely bewildered by his attitude.

Roaring Wings shook his head. "Maybe, but Lost Owl is trained in all the ways. He can take my place. I am needed here more. I want to stay and learn, which is something you will never understand."

"Why are you needed? I see no one sick or in need of you!" Thunder Arrow questioned, completely baffled by his brother's remarks.

"There is one in need of me, my brother. I am a dreamer, too," he confessed, knowing what his brother's reaction would be but it was better out in the open now than later.

"A DREAMER? YOU? ENOUGH! HAS MY WHOLE FAMILY GONE CRAZY?" he roared, shouting at the top of his lungs again, as he lost his temper completely.

Roaring Wings looked down at him dispassionately, ignoring his ranting and raving, and shook his head again. "No, but I at least understand the pull upon my soul and do not fight what is meant to be. My mate is the Doctor and my place is here with her. Go - Thunder Arrow - we have no more to say to one another," he said, dismissing him and trying to walk away.

Thunder Arrow reached out, grabbing him on the shoulder, trying to stop him, but Roaring Wings shook him off, as if he did not exist and went over to where Ky'tulendu and White Deer stood.

"Even my brother deserts me," he spat disgustedly at them. "Who else wants to lie with these animals?" he asked his people that stood waiting with hung heads, daring them to desert him too.

He soon got his answer as six of the ten warriors that had come with him moved to where Ky'tulendu and Roaring Wings waited. Thunder Arrow was shocked, as he saw how many of his best men were dreamers - beast-lovers. It was more than he could stand.

"Fine! So be it! Stay! I want none of your kind in my village," he stormed at them all, as he raised a clenched fist to shake at them. "If there are any dreamers-beast-lovers in the village still, I will destroy them especially the women. This I promise, beast-man! On my ancestor's graves I promise this!" he shouted to them all, then spun on his heels and stalked off towards the borders of the camp, trailed by his remaining four warriors.

As the maddened warrior-chief left, Roaring Wings turned to Ky'tulendu worriedly. "Do you think we should have stopped him, Asenti?" he asked.

"Maybe, but I would rather he leave and go somewhere to cool down. Is he serious in his threat to destroy any dreamers left in your village?" Ky'tulendu asked, watching the chief disappear from sight.

"I can't say. Luckily, he doesn't know how many, or who they are. Only I do, that is at least something. Should we go and get them away from there, before he does try to carry out his threat? I would not put it past him to destroy the council if they oppose him," Roaring Wings commented, his eyes grave, as he thought on how destructive and vindictive his brother could be.

"You mean he would kill the members of the council?" Ky'tulendu asked horrified, because he had not taken Thunder Arrow's ravings seriously.

"If he needs to, yes he would. To do it, he would get aid from his allies in the other villages and make it like a tribal war, so he could seize all the power and put his own people on the council. It has been done before. My brother is capable of many dark deeds."

"Should we warn your people?" Ky'tulendu asked, not wanting to see such a scenario come true.

"Yes, at least let them know what we suspect he might do, so they may prepare for any such move by him. We can get there before him in your flying machine. It will take him many long hours to get home on foot," Roaring Wings said with a slight smile.

"It will at that. Who do you want to take?" Ky'tulendu asked.

Roaring Wings looked at the group that had remained. "You all have heard what the Asenti and I have been discussing. Who wants to go to the village with us and stop Thunder Arrow?" he asked them.

They all raised their hands.

"All right, get your weapons and meet us at the landing field. I will join you there in fifteen minutes. You, Leaping Wolf, take charge of them. I will let security know you are coming. I need to tell some other people what we are doing before I go," he told them, dismissing them.

"Roaring Wings, come with me," he requested, starting to head for command quarters.

"Asenti, I want to go with you," White Deer called after him, trying to follow them.

He spun around, having forgotten about her in the heat of the moment. "No, I want you to stay here at camp where you'll be safe in case there is fighting."

"I want to go where you go, Ky'tulendu!" she protested, coming close to him, begging him with her large brown eyes.

"No, White Deer. I want you to stay here with the others. Please, do not argue with me on this. I want you safe. Do you understand?" he asked, looking down at her, his eyes telling her what he could not say out loud in words.

"I do. I will stay, but you must come back safely," she told him, wanting to throw her arms around him and hold him tight to her, but her upbringing wouldn't let her.

He had similar thoughts but didn't want to give in to them, not yet, not here, this time. Solemnly, he promised, "I will."

He then turned and walked away before he did give in and kissed her. Roaring Wings followed, casting a look behind him at his niece, who followed them both with her eyes, her expression sad and fearful for them both. When they were out of sight, she took herself back to the native quarters to wait and pray for their safe return.

#### **CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR**

"Explain to me again why you are going to the native's village, Asenti," requested B'tunku, with a hard edge in her voice over the common system. She was having a hard time with why Thunder Arrow would attack the council and kill his own people. It wasn't an action she had expected from the arrogant and obnoxious chief.

"Precaution, Doctor, precaution. I don't want to see people killed because they are connected to us. Thunder Arrow has nothing but hate and contempt for us. He's declared In The Forest and White Deer dead, as far as his people are concerned. He has promised to kill all the dreamers, or any who feel the pull to us, as well as those on the council who oppose him. He is sick, Doctor, and he has to be stopped before he does hurt someone," Ky'tulendu told her.

"I'm aware of that, but ConFleet regulations forbid us from taking any actions in this," she warned him.

He glared at her, marveling at her stupidity as far as he was concerned. "Dammit, Doctor, get it through your head - we are no longer a part of ConFleet! We are an independent colony that has to survive on its own. We are tied to these people - these are now our people - not nameless aliens separate and apart from us. We can not stand by and let innocents be slaughtered. And Thunder Arrow is capable to doing that and we both know it!" he told her angrily.

"I can't allow you to do this, Ky'tulendu. I outrank you, remember?" she said, daring him to buck her.

"Rank doesn't mean a thing here, Doctor. It's who can best get the job done. Hide behind your rules and regulations all you want. I'm taking action, and don't even think of trying to stop me," he warned her.

"Or you'll what?" she asked, furious at him now.

"I'll figure that out when I get back," he said, losing all patience with her. "Ky'tulendu out!" he added, savagely punching off the commcon control button.

Ky'tulendu was still mad when he turned away from the screen, he saw Roaring Wings regarding him with a serious expression on his scarred face. "I did not expect her to react like that, Asenti. I thought she would be pleased that we were going to help save my people from destruction. What is this ConFleet regulation she kept talking about and her saying she outranked you?" he asked curiously.

"She does outrank me, on paper at least. Only myself, my first officer and she know it. She thought by pulling rank she could stop me. She won't. Your people deserve our help and protection. The ConFleet regulations have to do with non-interference in an alien culture by us, especially if we are the more advanced one. Normally, I would have agreed and pulled back, letting what ever happens happen. But I can't, not this time. Our peoples are already too closely tied to let that happen," Ky'tulendu explained, pacing a little to relieve the tension.

"Yes, they are. Maybe she is seeing what I do. You are changing, Asenti. You are less and less the man of peace you were. You are becoming a warrior. Your heart and your intentions are still good and honorable, but I see the bloodlust in you rising," he said gently, warning him what he saw.

Ky'tulendu hung his head for a moment as the shaman's words sunk in. "I can feel it, Roaring Wings. It frightens me because it is so new. Maybe it's this world, or maybe it's the pull of my impending bonding with White Deer that is breaking down all the barriers. Once my people fought each other over mates and territory, as I see yours do. Those old instincts are rising to the surface. I don't know whether this is good or bad."

"Nor do I, my friend, but you should guard it in yourself. It is good to be a warrior, although it is better to be a man of peace."

"Old saying of your people?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"No, just truth and wisdom. Should we be going? I see a storm coming up out of the east. Will your ship still be able to fly us?" he asked, looking out the window at the darkening sky and the lightning flashes on the horizon.

"Yes, if we can leave soon. I've flown in worse weather than this," Ky'tulendu said, evaluating the hazards.

They left the building hurriedly after picking up communicators and extra stunners. He was not going to take any Atanzi with him. This was a native dispute. Interjecting his own people would only complicate and make things worse, if there was a physical confrontation.

The wind was picking up, cooling the hot air rapidly and blowing leaves and loose trash across the ground. He looked towards the east and saw nothing but dark heavy boiling clouds stretching across the horizon above the trees. He had seen storms before on other planets, though he had seen

nothing quite like this before.

"Is that a normal storm for around here?" he asked Roaring Wings, as they dashed to the landing field.

"It does not look good, Asenti. Occasionally we have very bad storms here. It is too early to say what this one will do. Maybe it will bring only heavy rains and winds..."

"Or what, Roaring Wings? What are your storms capable to doing?" Ky'tulendu asked worriedly.

"They can be very damaging with floods, high winds that crush and blow buildings and trees away. I have only seen two of them in my lifetime and they killed many of my people that could not either get to the high ground, or into the caves for protection. After one such storm we had to completely rebuild the village from scratch. The storm took all the buildings away," he said seriously, remembering now.

Ky'tulendu was more than a little worried now. He got his communicator out and punched it on.

"Control, this is Ky'tulendu. Are you monitoring the storm?" he asked.

"Control here, we are, Asenti. It's been building out in the ocean and is now coming our way. We have never seen a weather pattern quite like this. It is a very large frontal system with high velocity winds and moisture. We estimate that it will hit here in four hours or less with great force," the female voice said, more than a little frightened.

"Relay this information to MS B'tunku. In the meantime I want crews to secure all buildings, bring in any large machinery, large objects, tools, whatever might become airborne by these winds. When it hits, turn the forcefields up to maximum power and no one is to leave their quarters until the storm is over. Relay these instructions to all buildings and outpost sentries and get them back to camp, too. No one is to be out in this," he ordered.

"Where will you be, sir?" she asked.

"At the native's village with one of the flyers. I have some business to take care of there but expect to finish it before the storm hits and return," he told her.

"Very good, sir. Control out."

Roaring Wings had been looking on approvingly, "I hope your forcefields will work. You are planning on coming back here before the storm?"

"Yes, if it is at all possible. Do you have any ideas what we can do to move your people to safety?" he asked concerned about them.

"The only place safe is the caves. This whole area is honeycombed with them."

"Then we'll move them to them. It will also keep them out of Thunder Arrow's reach," Ky'tulendu said pleased at this solution to two problems.

Roaring Wings was pleased too. "Yes, he will not expect to find the village empty. But with the storm coming, he will soon think of where the people have gone."

"True, but we will be there to stop him."

"But how? Do you plan to kill him?" Roaring Wings asked.

"No, not unless he forces me to. And I do mean forces me. I don't want to hurt anyone," Ky'tulendu said seriously, as they neared the landing field.

He really didn't want to hurt the old chief. He just wished there was something they could do to him so he wouldn't create any more problems. So far, no solution had presented itself.

The six warriors were waiting by the flyer as well as B'tunku and two Atanzi security guards looking very nervous and unsure. Ky'tulendu scowled in displeasure when he saw the doctor.

"What are you doing here, Doctor?" he asked acidly.

"Coming along for the ride."

"Like hell you are!" he snapped at her. "In case you haven't noticed, we have a storm coming in. Control has told me it's going to be dangerous when it hits. I need you here to supervise the securing the camp."

"I have that taken care of already. I'm going, Ky'tulendu. You may need me."

"Why?"

"To deal with Thunder Arrow."

"That's a laugh. You let him get to you and lost your temper. He will not listen to you because you are female, and you will only get in the way, Doctor."

She glared daggers at him, as she stood defiantly with arm folded listening to him.

He tried again, "Please, B'tunku, stay here and secure the camp. If anything happens to the two of us, then there is no one left to take charge. Someone has to stay here," he reasoned with her.

She scowled at him, but he was right. If something happened to him then she would be in charge. There really was no one to step in, except maybe O'vettun and she had disappeared. She reluctantly gave in.

"You win, Ky'tulendu, I'll stay. But you will keep in touch with me through the communicators," she ordered him.

"I will, when it is convenient to do so," he told her, and saw a momentary flicker of anger in her eyes but then it passed. "Now, before the storm hits, I want to get to the native village, if there is nothing more, Doctor?" he asked.

"No," she replied, then looked to Roaring Wings standing besides Ky'tulendu.

He had been silent watching them both. His mate-to-be had many unnerving characteristics, as he was discovering. She was still as desirable as ever, but her hardness and coldness did bother him, even if it was only directed at the Asenti. He did not understand the friction between them. Now was not the time to go into it with her, but later they would discuss this problem and much more, he vowed to himself.

B'tunku came near to him and looked into his serious eyes and saw the disapproval there, and understood the cause. She lowered her eyes in shame.

"B'tunku, you do what you feel you need to do. I have no right to judge. I do agree with the Asenti. You must stay here both to make sure your people are safe and to stay safe for me," he said wanting to crush her tight to him just once.

"I will," she said and before he could react, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fully on his unresisting lips and molded her body to his.

His first response was surprise. His next was to respond fully and do what he had ached to do anyway, which was to clasp her to him tightly and kiss her back hard. It was like a nova exploding in both of them. His people did not kiss so - touching this way was newly strange and wonderful. It would be so easy to get lost forever in the sensations that were flooding them both.

They heard a muffled throat clearing and realized their position and broke away from one another as quickly as they had come together. The doctor was flushing red, as she took a couple of steps backward away from him. Roaring Wings backed away too, embarrassed by his boldness and lack of control in front of the others.

"If we are going, we better start before it gets impossible to go anywhere," Ky'tulendu pointedly said, motioning upwards to the darkening sky with his thumb.

"You must go," B'tunku said to Roaring Wings who looked like leaving her was the last thing he

wanted to do.

He nodded reluctantly. "I know, goodbye B'tunku, for now," he said moving towards Ky'tulendu now. "Goodbye, Roaring Wings. Safe journey," she replied and turned quickly, leaving the landing field before she asked him to stay.

"I'm ready, Asenti," Roaring Wings said composing himself as he waited to board the ship.

The eight men climbed on board. The ship's interior was still set to carry passengers on the floor rather than in seats. There was no time to put the seats down. The warriors that had elected to go with them were going to have a bumpy ride. He would keep the ship as even as he could, but he expected a lot of turbulence. The wind was picking up rapidly, Ky'tulendu noted, getting very alarmed, but he kept that to himself.

He strapped himself and Roaring Wings in tightly, and told the warriors to hold onto the flying straps. He checked his systems and found that they were okay to go. Fighting the headwind, he taxied the ship to the proper speed and took off. Once airborne they had the wind behind them, but it was still rough and the unpredictable nature of it caused their airship to sway and bounce on the raging currents coming in from the sea.

He hoped that there weren't any salvage crews out there in the cruiser. With the way the ship had plowed a furrow from the ocean inland the ship had a good chance of going underwater with the advent of heavy rains, especially with all the holes and gaps in it. If the water got in it would short out the remaining electronics still working on the ship, particularly the computer. It made him angry that so much knowledge was going to be lost forever from them. He just hoped they wouldn't lose any lives either.

The wind coming from behind them made their flying time quicker than before. It seemed that they had only been airborne for a few minutes when it was already time to land by the village. Ky'tulendu set the craft down in the middle of the village instead of out in the clearing where he had previously landed. The villagers were shocked and scared when they saw the craft come down. Not everyone knew of the great Atanzi flying machines and had never seen it before. Landing it here would give it protection from the elements and hopefully give Thunder Arrow pause about attacking them.

Ky'tulendu checked to see if everyone was all right and got grunts of agreements. He and Roaring Wings unstrapped and went to the hatch and opened it. They were met with spears pointed at their midsections as the ramp-door came down and they took two steps outside. Beyond the spearmen stood Thunder Arrow who smiled happily at Ky'tulendu's and his brother's shock and surprise at seeing the chieftain here before them.

"You're too late, cat-man. It's my village now!" Thunder Arrow told them, as he motioned them out of the ship.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT**

"You are surprised to see me, cat-man, are you not?" Thunder Arrow said gleefully as he strolled casually up to him with a swagger in his step.

"Yes. How did you get here before us? There is no way you could have on foot, even running," Ky'tulendu questioned him with narrowed eyes and then noted the stunner in the native's hands which was aimed at his heart.

Ky'tulendu became very cautious and suspicious as he worried about how the old man had gotten the weapon and how many he now possessed. He was not left in suspense long.

"I took one of your flying machines. A skimmer I believe you called it. As we were leaving we were passing by the equipment sheds and one of your people was starting to put it in. We convinced him to bring us here. He was very cooperative," Thunder Arrow boasted, smiling the entire time.

"I see, and the stunner came from him as well?" the Asenti asked, more worried about where he got the stunners than the vehicles.

"Yes and no. My men are quite well armed now. I would not be stupid and try to put up a resistance because you do not know how many weapons I have or what they are. You didn't show us all your weapons during the tour, did you?" Thunder Arrow asked mockingly, getting into Ky'tulendu's face.

Ky'tulendu tried to back up but found he couldn't. His arms were held tight by Thunder Arrow's men. He decided not to answer him, in case the native was bluffing.

"So you won't answer, cat-man. Then I'll tell you. After we had the skimmer and your man. He took us on a special tour of your weapons shed. I wonder why that you left that out of my tour? It would have been the best part. I took every one I could find, cat-man. Everything that was in there is now mine and hidden where you can't find it, even with your little machines. Yes, I listen and I learn - very quickly," he gloated, pacing now before the two captives.

Ky'tulendu had steeled himself not to react, not to fight, just to listen, and let the chief go on about what he had done.

"I also ask questions that don't seem like questions. Like what makes sensor machines not see things. What do your forcefields do? What all can your weapons do? Then I watched very closely during demonstrations of your machines what buttons and knobs were used and how. I also know how helpless you Atanzi are without your machines to give you great power --the same as we are," the native laughed mockingly, trying to taunt him into doing something as he waved the stunner under his nose.

"So what are you going to do to us, Thunder Arrow?" Ky'tulendu asked him, refusing to be intimidated by this man who was going further and further into madness.

"Keep you prisoner for awhile and then kill you. You know too much about your machines for me to kill right now. I need you intact and alive for my plans."

"And if I don't cooperate?" Ky'tulendu asked.

"You will. You don't like seeing others hunt. That's why you came here, wasn't it, to stop me?" Thunder Arrow questioned with a smile.

Ky'tulendu was confused. How could he know what the plans were? Then he saw Thunder Arrow nod to one of his men who disappeared into one of the lodges and he dragged a small form back out with him that fought with all their might. White Deer! Ky'tulendu realized with a start and his face lost all color, as he looked back at her father who was well pleased with the success of his surprise.

He turned back to the chief, red fire and hate blazing from his blue eyes. His muzzle curled up in a snarl at her father. "How did you get your hands on her? You rejected her and told everyone she was to be dead to the tribe!" Ky'tulendu demanded angrily, staining against his guards.

"I changed my mind after I got the weapons. She is still a valuable commodity, is she not? I was going to marry her off to another chief, but since you have spoiled that by soiling her, I will use her to ensure your good behavior, cat-man," he sneered emphasizing the soiled part.

Soiled her? Ky'tulendu was really confused now. He hadn't laid a hand on her, hadn't even kissed her. Unless she had told her father that to keep him from marrying her off. All right, he'd play her game and see what happened.

"I will behave, Thunder Arrow, as long as you don't hurt her, or any of the dreamers here," he told him, seeing sadness and shame in White Deer's eyes as he said it.

"Agreed, for the moment. I am glad you brought my brother, because he is the only one who does know for sure who all the dreamers are. Lost Owl knows a few, but Roaring Wings is the only one who knows them all. Don't you, brother?" he asked coming up to him.

Roaring Wings' eyes only held contempt and hate for his older brother, and he looked away from him, ignoring his existence.

"Answer me!" Thunder Arrow demanded, trying to get him to look at him. The shaman stood like a statue, immobile, and unfeeling as his brother continued to shout at him, but he never flinched or moved once. "Very well, brother, you will talk to me in time, and I will get the names of the dreamers from you."

Roaring Wings' eyes just got darker and harder but he said nothing. Instead, he watched the approaching storm with alarm and glanced to Ky'tulendu to get his attention, which he did and nodded up at the wind and rain almost upon them.

Quickly Ky'tulendu spoke, "Thunder Arrow, if you want to have any people left to rule over, you better be getting them to the caves. The storm coming in is dangerous. My people have been tracking it..."

"Enough, cat-man, I know. I have sent the women and children there already. If I didn't need you and my brother for my plans, I would leave you out here staked to a pole and let the storm take care of you. Secure your ship and let's go!" he ordered, telling his men to release Ky'tulendu long enough to let him shut the hatch.

They let him go and he quickly initiated the locking program. He hoped Thunder Arrow didn't know that. Then he turned back to his guards and let them lead him away offering no resistance.

The storm was almost upon them. The wind pushed them all along making it difficult to keep their feet and balance, as they walked through the village. Then the rains hit. Hard and pelting, soaking them to the skin almost instantaneously, as it came down in heavy leaden sheets of wetness blown by the winds.

He saw White Deer fall to the ground several times, blown by the wind and the driving rain. He heard her call out and saw her guard try to forcibly pull her up by her slender arm from the mud they now waded through. She was too tired and exhausted and fell back into the deepening mud pool. As the man raised his hand to hit her, Ky'tulendu reacted. With a thunderous roar he broke loose from his guards and sprang to her side, grabbing the arm of the man who was going to strike her. With a snarl he broke the young warrior's wrist and flung him away into the rapidly rising creek.

He did not care whether the man lived or died, his concern was with White Deer, as he pulled her out of the clinging mud. She was barely conscious he saw, as her eyes flickered open and she saw him and threw her arms around him holding onto his large neck tightly. He scooped her up from the ground and held her tight. He could feel her relax now, as he looked gently down at her as he stood up with her securely in his arms now.

He glanced up and saw his guards and her father rapidly approaching him. He bared his fangs and snarled a warning to them. "Don't even think of trying it!" he growled from low in his mighty chest. "I'm carrying her. She's too weak to walk."

Her father was angry, but the concern for his favorite daughter took over. "You can carry her, cat-man," he said, giving him permission. "Come!" he ordered.

The rain continued to pour in sheets, wave after wave, with the wind pelting them as they struggled through the mud. The warrior who had been thrown into the creek had been rescued and he walked at the end of the procession nursing his broken wrist, keeping a wary eye on Ky'tulendu and White Deer.

Most particularly, his interest centered on White Deer because he had had plans to marry her himself. He had been unaware until now about White Deer and the Atanzi chief, and he hated both of them now and vowed he would get even.

The clinging sticky mud made getting to the caves even more hazardous than normal. The entrance was up on a ridge overlooking the camp. The narrow path was slick with rain washed mud pouring



rapidly down the rock-lined path. They all fell several times on the path, getting drenched head to foot in mud and muck, which the driving rain quickly washed off of them leaving nothing but the worse mud on them by the time they got to the opening.

They burst into the cave with Ky'tulendu in the lead, once he had seen where they were going. He stood at the entrance, an imposing figure with the wild storm raging behind him, and White Deer's small delicate form in his massively muscled arms.

His red-gold hair was slicked down tightly to his skull, and he shook his head to get the water out of his eyes, so he could see the dim forms of people huddled against the walls of the entrance cave.

"Is Sees Far here?" he asked loudly, not seeing her among the curious crowd who just watched him with wide eyes, afraid to come closer.

From the very back there was a movement, and a woman got up and made her way through the people seated on the floor. "I'm Sees Far!" she announced, coming closer and gasped in fear when she recognized her daughter in the Atanzi chief's arms.

"I carried her here. She was too worn out to make it. She fell in the mud several times and we have all gotten soaked to the skin. Get her into some dry clothes and keep her warm," Ky'tulendu told her gently, looking down at the sleeping girl.

Her mother nodded, worried about her. "Bring her this way, please," she asked, directing him to follow her.

He brought White Deer over to where her sisters sat at the far end of the cave with their belongings. Their eyes got huge as they saw him approach with White Deer's limp form and they quickly moved out of the way to let him put her down.

"Put her there," her mother said, directing him to put her down on a pile of soft skins. He did very carefully, sliding her unprotesting arms from around his neck to let them lay in her lap.

She was so still and silent. She had not moved or waked since they had arrived. It was not a good sign. He reached out a huge fur top hand and felt her forehead. It was warm, and getting warmer - fever. His blue eyes clouded with concern as he squatted there next to her.

"She's running a temperature. I'll tell Roaring Wings when he gets in and have him look at her. Meantime, get these wet clothes off her and keep her warm," he told her mother, who was watching him carefully and noting the concern, as well as affection he had for her daughter on his face.

"I will, Asenti Ky'tulendu," she told him. "She will be safe here. Her father will have to get through me to see her. You take your own advice and get out of those wet clothes. Here, take this robe and this loincloth and go change back there," she told with kindness in her voice, as she directed him to go further back in the cave where he could change privately.

"Thank you, Sees Far," he said, rising to his feet and then went to follow her advice.

He was just emerging from the dim shadows at the back of the cave when Thunder Arrow looked around murderously, searching for him and his daughter. Finally, he spotted her unconscious form as she was being tended by her mother and sisters.

"So they did make it up here after all," he said to himself, then more loudly he asked, "Where is he? Where is the cat-man? Speak up?" he shouted, as he stood at the entrance dripping water onto the floor of the cave.

"I am here, Thunder Arrow," he said stepping out of the shadows and into the firelight where he could be seen, as he walked to him unafraid. "Calm down. I wanted to get White Deer to her mother. She is running a temperature and may be ill," he told him.

A momentary flicker of pain and fear crossed the old chief's lined face, but then it was replaced with an angry hardness. "That is for the shamans to decide," he told him. He turned to Roaring Wings.

"When you have dried yourself off, go check on White Deer. The cat-man says she has a fever," he ordered.

Roaring Wings nodded, and gratefully took the heavy deer skins that some of the women were thrusting at him and the others to dry themselves on and to wrap themselves up in. Thunder Arrow ignored them and stalked across the cave to his wife.

"Attend me, wife," he ordered her, as she was trying to spoon some warm venison broth down White Deer.

She half turned and glared up at him. "Attend yourself! I'm busy!" She told him and went back to what she was doing, turning her back on him.

He stood there in silence for a few moments and inwardly fumed. Then he grabbed up his bearskin robe and some buckskin coverings and stalked off to change. When he was dry, he came over and threw his wet clothes to his two younger daughters to take care of. They made themselves scarce as they felt their father's anger boiling up.

"You are angry with me. Why woman?" he asked coming up behind her.

She shook her head as she felt White Deer's head. "You know why, you old fool. You've run off our son and now almost killed our daughter. If she doesn't die on us, it will be a miracle," she spat at him angrily keeping her back to him.

"I did nothing! It was the storm!" he protested.

"If you had not dragged her with you to the village from where she would be out in the storm, instead of leaving her with me where she belonged - she would not be sick!" she raged at him losing her temper with him.

"I needed for him to see her so he would agree to my demands."

"Him, as in the Asenti? Now what have you done? Are you plotting to take over his village too?" she asked bitterly.

"Yes. I've taken his weapons and I hold her as hostage for his good behavior," he smirked.

"Hostage? Hostage? Our daughter a hostage? You are crazy, old man! Because two people love one another and they appear to be different to your blind eyes doesn't give you the right to play games with them," she yelled at him.

"I will do whatever I want to with anyone I wish! I am the chief!" he yelled back and stormed off to where his men sat eating and watching the storm outside the entrance.

Once she had loved her husband, but no longer. Allowing their daughter to be harmed was the last outrage she would take from him - ever, she vowed. She had spoken with the council after he left to go find In The Forest. The elders all agreed that Thunder Arrow was getting to be a problem, but they are too afraid of him to take a stand and take the leadership of the tribe away from him.

When he and his warriors had returned on the skimmer and gathered the other warriors loyal to him, they had attacked the council lodge making the old men leave. His men had taken them into the lower level chambers of this cave and were holding them there. He had also made everyone leave their homes because of the coming storm. This also made it easier to control the people. Many protested, until they saw the blackening sky.

They could only take away what they could carry on their backs and in their arms. She remembered the storms of long ago. She wondered how much of their village would be left intact, especially of their almost ready to harvest crops. If the crops were destroyed, then it was going to be a very hard winter this year, she feared. What they had brought and what they had stored seemed so very little now.

The question remained for all of them as to what were they going to do about Thunder Arrow, now

that he had the Atanzi weapons. He was clearly dangerous to everyone and becoming more dangerous all the time. He had to be stopped but no one was sure how.

She looked up and saw Roaring Wings approach. She noted he did not wear his shaman garb, and that his scarred face was naked to the world, but still he exuded the power and presence of his office.

"You come as healer or uncle?" she asked, giving up her place so he could examine the girl.

"Both. My medicine garb was left at the lodge the Atanzi have given us. When I came here, it was as a warrior to stop my brother and help my people. Is Lost Owl here somewhere? I need to see if he has brought medicines with him," he asked pausing in his exam.

"He is below with the council members. Thunder Arrow holds them in the medicine chambers. They are prisoners, as we all are," she told him.

"Prisoners?" he questioned. "How? Why?"

"He took the council members first and then told us all to leave from the village because of the storm, but he did it at stunner point and his men have orders to shoot anyone if they dare to leave this place without his permission," she warned him.

"I understand now. Can you see if Lost Owl can be brought here with his medicines if he brought them?" he asked ungently.

"I will try. Is she very sick?" she asked.

"Not yet. If I can get medicine down her before it does get worse, then she will recover quickly. If not, it will be very difficult to help her," he told her, his tone making it clear how serious it really was.

"I will find him," she assured him as she rose quickly from her seat on the floor and went off to go find the younger shaman.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE**

Ky'tulendu saw Sees Far go to the back of the huge cave, where a guard stood before an entranceway that led off into seeming blackness. She asked the guard something and he nodded, then shook his head and frowned at her. She stamped her foot angrily, gestured emphatically and got another deliberate negative head shake from the young warrior that guarded the entrance. In exasperation, she stormed off and found Thunder Arrow and relayed her problem to him.

He stormed back and proceeded to take the young guard verbally apart, or at least that's the way it seemed from Ky'tulendu's vantage point across the cave. The young warrior was chagrined and tried to make apologies to his chief. Thunder Arrow pinned him with a savage look, as he stormed past the man going down the tunnel with a torch, leaving Sees Far and the warrior at the entrance. The young man looked embarrassed, as he stood against the wall with his arms folded across his chest while he stared upward to the ceiling, not meeting Sees Far's angry gaze.

Thunder Arrow was soon lost to sight as the tunnel turned and the torch light disappeared. About ten minutes later, he returned with a younger man dressed in an elaborate owl's head headdress. A shaman maybe, Ky'tulendu thought, seeing the bundles and bags that the man carried. They were similar to those bundles that Roaring Wings had carried on himself when he had come to the Atanzi village.

Ky'tulendu was too far away to hear what they were saying, but it was clear that the younger man had been told to follow Sees Far. They went back to where Roaring Wings sat with White Deer. He longed to get closer, but the guard assigned to him was under orders not to permit his moving from the area.

Unfortunately, the guard did not have a translator and Ky'tulendu did not know the native language. It made communicating with him difficult, but he managed to communicate with the people around him with gestures and politeness. At least the guard was allowing that.

One of the older women handed him a piece of dried meat and a round dark tannish colored object

that seemed to be made out of ground grains, nutmeats, berries, meat shavings and animal grease of some kind. He thanked her for it with a smile and she seemed to understand and warmly smiled back. Catching a scowling look from the guard, she quickly turned back to her group and they went back to watching the raging storm outside, ignoring Ky'tulendu again.

The meat was tough but edible with a salty-smoky tang to it. The strange food ball would take a while to get used to. The grease in it was rather on the rancid side, but he understood the principle of it. It was a field ration of some sort. Despite his dislike for its rather gamey smell and taste, he ate it not knowing when the next time he would get an opportunity to eat.

At least the people were not afraid of him and seemed to like him, as evidenced by the kindness of the nameless woman who gave him the food. If anything, they were curious about the strange pale skinned man with hair the color of flame with a face and hands like that of a wildcat's.

He wished he could talk with the people around him, so he could find out what was happening. Something was wrong besides the weather outside. He got the impression that he and the council members weren't the only prisoners here, that all the people within the cavern were also the prisoners of Thunder Arrow.

The only ones that weren't were those who had sided with him and were now armed with the stunners. It was with some relief he noted that those numbered no more than a dozen, but their very possession of the stunners made the situation more dangerous.

The fear in the cavern was very real, very sharp to his already heightened senses. The children he saw felt the fear of the adults and were unnaturally subdued and quiet, staying very close to their mothers. Even the few men he saw were quiet and stayed close to their families, if they had them. The resentment and burning hate for this injustice was there under the surface, in their eyes, but they controlled themselves because of the women and children. Fear was the emotion that bound them all.

And the fear had a name - Thunder Arrow. He saw that as the old man moved among them. Their eyes also strayed to the stunners. Had he demonstrated their power to his captives before they arrived? Killed someone by burning them to a crisp or worse? The people's reactions suggested that possibility.

Somehow, the people would have to motivate themselves into taking action to overthrow their guards and Thunder Arrow. The antipathy he saw around him was overwhelming. It was going to take a miracle to overcome it. He knew that he was the key. So far, no opportunities had presented themselves. He would have to wait until they did.

It was difficult being this close, and yet this far away, from White Deer. Normally, all his attention would have been focused on the people's situation, but with her near, his evaluating of the situation in the cavern, he noted, unfortunately was secondary to his concern over White Deer. Even unlinked as they were, he could feel her pain and how sick she was. In his head, he could hear her call his name and her plea for him to be near. He had been trying to ignore her attempts at communication, but it was getting more and more difficult.

He watched Roaring Wings and Lost Owl work over the girl with their medicines and with their chanting healing rituals. Sees Far and White Deer's sisters rushed to do what the shamans asked, fetching containers of boiling liquids, coverings, or whatever else they needed. Their faces looked drawn and frightened as they hovered anxiously nearby.

Then he saw Roaring Wings stop and sit back on his heels and shake his head discouragingly. Lost Owl looked at him puzzled. The older man looked over to where Ky'tulendu sat and caught his eye. With subtle gestures he indicated he wanted Ky'tulendu to come over if he could, he needed him, Ky'tulendu nodded that he understood.

Casually, Ky'tulendu got up and stretched. The guard started to get up and force him down. Before the guard could react the Atanzi spun around and was on him, quickly disarming and knocking him

out before he had a chance to cry out. Getting up in a crouch, Ky'tulendu spun around with a now armed stunner. The three other guards nearby were too shocked to move or react. They stood numbly at their posts as he ordered them to drop their weapons. They quickly threw theirs to a spot in front of his feet and backed away. He motioned them to sit down, and they did with no arguments. Four down and at least nine or more to go, Ky'tulendu thought grimly.

Thunder Arrow was nowhere to be seen and the other stunner carrying guards were missing too. He suspected that he had gone down to where the council members were being kept. He rushed over to where Roaring Wings and Lost Owl were with White Deer.

"Ky'tulendu!" Roaring Wings exclaimed as he drew nearer. "How?" he asked.

Ky'tulendu shrugged. "I knocked the guard out and took his stunner and then I relieved the other guards by the entrance of theirs. I now have four of them," he said and handed one each to the shamans and Sees Far. "Where are Thunder Arrow and the other guards with stunners?" he asked.

"Below, in the sacred chambers of the shamans. He holds the council members and the dreamers there. Swimming Otter and his party are there too. He did not have time to return to his village. My husband holds him hostage to force him and the council to declare him ruler of all the Lay'nee Lay-na'pay. Before the storm, he sent runners to Swimming Otter's village and to Howling Cat's. With your weapons and ships, my husband thinks he will be invincible. You must stop him, Asenti Ky'tulendu, for all our peoples' sake," Sees Far pleaded, her dark eyes very serious as she touched his arm briefly in reassurance of her trust in him.

He nodded gravely. "Sees Far, I want you to stay here with White Deer and guard the people. I have this set on stun. It will just make the person go to sleep for awhile, not hurt them. Just point this end at them and press the button here down hard. Can you do that?" Ky'tulendu asked her showing her how the stunner worked.

At first she looked skeptical, then she nodded in determination to do what was necessary to help her people. "I can do that, Asenti. I will keep the peace here," she said, holding the shiny black weapon carefully in her lap.

"Good," he said. "Roaring Wings, Lost Owl, come with me," Ky'tulendu said getting up cautiously and watching the guard by the tunnel, who had been observing the group off and on.

He hadn't seen Ky'tulendu take out his own guard, or his disarming of the other ones. The former guards he had disarmed were being guarded by the people that had befriended him with the food. Luckily, the young guard by the tunnel entrance was not armed with a stunner only a spear. He was very young. He had made one serious mistake already with his duties and he was not going to make more. The three men walked up to him with Roaring Wings in the lead.

"Let us pass, Jumping Fox. Thunder Arrow told me when I was to bring the cat-man down below with the other prisoners," Roaring Wings said, holding onto Ky'tulendu's arm, as if he were a prisoner.

"I know of no such orders, Roaring Wings. He told me to let no one pass. NO ONE!" he said emphatically, and stood there rigidly, threatening them with his sharp flint headed spear.

"You forget yourself, Jumping Fox. I am the shaman, and I am Thunder Arrow's brother. Do you wish to make him more angry with you than he is?" Roaring Wings reminded him.

The boy began to waver, uncertain now. "No, but he told me no one was to come down," he insisted.

"Am I no one, warrior? I am the shaman. Those are my caverns he defiles by holding prisoners there. Enough talk," Roaring Wings said angrily, and stunned him.

The young warrior slid limply down the wall. The men disarmed him and left him propped up against the wall. They threw the spear to a young boy about ten years of age who seemed eager to help them. The child grinned and then came over and stood proudly over the unconscious older boy becoming very serious about his new duties.

"Go," the boy said to them. "Jumping Fox will not cause you problems," he said motioning them to go on.

The three men went into the tunnel cautiously. They did not want to use a torch and announce their presence. Ky'tulendu wished he had a portable light but Thunder Arrow's man had stripped him of all his equipment. He had not seen his or Roaring Wings' field packs in the cavern anywhere, so it was safe to assume they had been taken below too.

Roaring Wings took the lead knowing the path downward well. Ky'tulendu soon began to realize that Roaring Wings could see almost as well as himself in this blackness. Lost Owl, on the other hand, was having difficulty keeping up and stumbling over the loose rock and dirt in the passageway.

The tunnel, after it made its sharp turn, angled downward gently for awhile, and then became steeper. As they got closer to the end they could see lights. They crept forward carefully, trying not to make noise. Before the exit a guard stood with his broad bronzed back towards them. Ky'tulendu motioned them to be still and wait while he inched forward along the wall.

The guard sensed his presence, but before he could turn or give alarm, Ky'tulendu grabbed him and clamped a hand over his mouth. He yanked the guard backward then hit him hard on the back of the neck below his skull knocking him out. He quickly dragged him back into the dark tunnel and disarmed him. Stripping him, he gagged his mouth and tied his wrists together.

"He'll be out for awhile," Ky'tulendu told them in a low whisper. "Are there other guards close by, Lost Owl?" he asked.

"Some, although they cannot see each other clearly because of the shape of the cavern and the rocks. Thunder Arrow has put everyone in the chamber near the Alter of the Ancients."

"Alter of the Ancients?" Ky'tulendu questioned, as he secured the guard's flint knife to his own belt.

"That is where the books I was telling you about are kept as well as other strange things from the ancient days of our people," Roaring Wings explained.

"Interesting," he commented. "For now, we are going to split up and take out the guards in the central chamber. You know how to work the stunners?" he asked them. They nodded and they crept forward on their stomachs using the rocks by the entrance as cover.

So far the other guards had not noticed the disappearance of their fellow. Their attention was focused on listening to Thunder Arrow's ranting at the council, trying to get the elders to capitulate to his demands. By the strident dangerous tones in his booming voice they were hearing, he was not succeeding.

It was relatively easy to stun the guards before they could react to their presence. The six outside guards went down with very little noise, not that much could be heard over Thunder Arrow's voice echoing across the large chamber. The three men relieved them of their stunners and then crept across the open space to the entrance to the sacred chamber.

A stunner beam flashed by Ky'tulendu's head just missing him and hitting the rock wall ahead of him, flinging off pieces of rock. The Atanzi's eyes got wide with fear, that stunner had been set on the highest setting. He spun quickly and began firing blinding hoping he'd hit the shooter.

Roaring Wings and Lost Owl had hit the dirt as soon as they saw the beam hit. They began firing trying to see their hidden opponent. The beams from the lethally set stunner hit next to the three tearing up the hard packed ground around them.

They gave up any pretense at keeping quiet and upped the settings on their stunners. The main advantage they had was that their unknown foe had only one stunner which was rapidly being drained by being used at full strength, and they had three apiece that still fully charged. Suddenly, from the opposite direction two more beams hit the dirt around them pinning them down. The situation was worsening, not improving.

Cautiously, Ky'tulendu raised his head from the dirt and spared look behind him. It was as bad as he had thought. Thunder Arrow and another warrior were partially hidden behind the large boulders on either side of the entrance to the sacred caverns.

"Surrender CAT-MAN!" Thunder Arrow yelled at him. "It will do you no good to fight me. It is almost too easy to kill you and the shamans where you lie in the dirt on your bellies. I give you a chance to live if you surrender fully to me now." Then he laughed evilly, his laughter echoing hollowly in the cavern.

"NO WAY!" Ky'tulendu yelled back. Then before Thunder Arrow could react, Ky'tulendu fired. It was aimed not at him but at a crack in the rock wall behind the chief. The edges of the crack got superheated and large chunks spun off where the concentrated beam hit. Thunder Arrow stared up dumbly for a second or two then his eyes widened. Before he or his warriors could react, the wall collapsed and tons of rocks came tumbling down upon their heads, burying them.

They screamed as the rocks fell on them, but once started, the avalanche of rock could not be stopped. Ky'tulendu and Roaring Wings looked on in horror, as they saw that the same rocks that were burying the chief and his warriors were also burying the only entrance to the caves beyond where the council and other prisoners were being held.

The remaining warrior that had been firing on them had quit now that his support was gone. He stood up from his hiding place and walked over to where they all now stood watching the tide of rock. It was slowing down and through the cloud of dust they could see that the entranceway was completely buried.

"Yun mah!" the warrior said handing over the stunner. "Nee-mah-ta-lo-ka'kan. Ka-kuh-ka-ta'tum?" the man continued in his own language, as he did not wear a translator.

"What did he say to you, Roaring Wings?" Ky'tulendu asked taking the stunner from the unprotesting warrior.

"Basically, he told you to take the stunner and he was now your servent and asked what you wanted of him now," the shaman translated with a grim smile.

Ky'tulendu looked the young warrior over and nodded approval. "Tell him I have nothing for him to do at the moment. And I really don't want a slave and he is a free man to follow his own path," he told the shaman and Roaring Wings relayed the message. The warrior then relaxed, and bowed gratefully to the Atanzi.

The four walked over to the rock pile and surveyed the damage, which was extensive they now saw. Ky'tulendu shook his head as he estimated how deep the entrance was buried and how long it would take to clear the rubble away.

He stood there with his foot on a large rock feeling hopeless now. "How are we going to get to the council members through that? I had not anticipated that the whole wall would go down like that. That was not my intent. I'm sorry, Roaring Wings, I know he was your brother. I just wanted to scare him, not kill him," Ky'tulendu apologized, ashamed and saddened that he had killed the old chief.

Roaring Wings put his large hand on his friend's bare shoulder as he stood next to him. "It could not be helped, Asenti. He asked for such a thing to happen to him. My brother was a bad man, who cared not who he hurt as long as he got what he wanted. The people will be safe now from the danger of his evil heart. I will mourn the boy he was but not the man he became," Roaring Wings said consoling the Atanzi, who was having a hard time accepting the results of his actions.

Roaring Wings could not spare the time to mourn. He would return and retrieve his brother's body later and then he and his people would do him proper homage. Now the living, if they still lived were of a greater concern. The sacred chambers were fairly large but with that many people, their air supply would soon diminish. Time was more critical than before.

Lost Owl was also surveying the damage, kicking the rocks with his mocassined feet as he, too, thought on how to get through. He really felt that there wasn't too much hope.

"Are there any other tunnels that lead to the caverns, ones that only shamans might know of?" Ky'tulendu asked suddenly, getting an inspiration and seriously hoping that there might be a secret entrance that was only used for ceremonial purposes.

Roaring Wings and Lost Owl looked at one another, trying to remember the passages they had been shown as initiates by the old shaman, when he had shown them both the sacred caverns and inducted them into the mysteries of the ancients. Roaring Wings looked around the cavern searching the walls looking for something.

"There, up there!" he pointed off to their right high up on a ridge above the floor of the cave, there was a dark hole. "There is another passageway that I was told of, but I've never explored it. It was used in the old days for special ceremonies. It is supposed to come out behind the altar."

"We'll have to try it. We can't dig them out. There's too much rock. We have to hope the passageway does go there. Is there a way up?" Ky'tulendu asked not seeing any way to reach the entrance from where he stood.

"Kay-hay-la, ta'lee wa-nee!" The warrior told them gesturing for the Asenti to follow him. Ky'tulendu wasn't sure what he was saying, however, his intent was clear. He wanted him to follow him.

"Swift Water wants you to go with him. He says he knows a way up there. We should follow, Asenti. What choice do we have?" Lost Owl told him, following the tall, thin young warrior.

"None, I guess." Ky'tulendu replied and fell in step behind him, as they crossed the cavern to where they could see a narrow ledge running up the side of the wall to the dark entrance hole far above.

They followed Swift Water's advice and took the narrow footpath up the side of the cave walls to reach the ledge where the small tunnel opening was located. It was a tight fit, but Ky'tulendu managed to squeeze through the rough opening into the narrow tunnel beyond. His broad shoulders were scraped raw and bleeding from the sharp crystalline rocks. He bore his pain in silence.

This was one of the few times in his life that he wished that he had been born a little smaller of chest and shoulder and not so long of limb. It was difficult going down the dark passage on his hands and knees, but there was no other way. He just hoped this wasn't a false trail and the tunnel did come out where the shamans had told him it would.

He heard someone come in behind him, whether it was Roaring Wings or Lost Owl, he wasn't sure. He just kept going. After many long minutes, he began to see a glimmer of light ahead of him. It was a hole in the wall of the tunnel he discovered. It looked out upon a large cavern lit with torches. He could see figures walking, moving about - the prisoners. As he looked out he could sense the person come up behind him.

"Ky'tulendu, have you found a way through it?" asked Roaring Wings' deep tones near his ear.

"I think so. There's just a small hole. We're going to have to make it larger to get to them and to get them out. Is there an entrance further down that we can't see yet?" he asked hopefully.

"No, this should be it. Maybe it got filled in. This passage hasn't been used in many generations," Roaring Wings replied coming closer to see for himself. "Let us see if we can kick it loose," he suggested.

"It's worth a try," Ky'tulendu agreed and maneuvered his body so that he could brace his back against the tunnel wall and kick his powerful legs outward. He could dimly see Roaring Wings move next to him and do the same.

"Now!" Ky'tulendu shouted, and they both kicked outward at the wall before them and felt it give explosively, as the rock and dirt was kicked loose from the hole, enlarging it.



There were loud and frightened exclamations of surprise from the other side, that sounded both fearful and happy because the former captives of Thunder Arrow did not know whether this was a new kind of cave-in, or the rescue they had been praying for.

They surveyed the results, almost but not quite big enough to get a person through. They kicked outward a few more times. Their legs muscles were hurting, as well as the bottom of their feet from just wearing mocassins, as they hit at the hard packed dirt and rock repeatedly using their strong legs to kick more of the wall away.

They heard the captives help them by digging out the rocks and dirt that had been knocked loose and taking the debris away. One of the captives had gotten a heavy stick and was using it to knock more rock and dirt from the edges of the hole. They were joined by two others and the hole was quickly enlarged.

They were helped out by Swimming Otter who was smiling broadly to see them. He had not met Ky'tulendu. He had heard of him, and the stories, he saw for himself, had not been exaggerated in the slightest. Roaring Wings, however, he did know from past visits back and forth between the villages. He greeted them both warmly.

"Roaring Wings, great shaman of the Wolf Clan, I am surprised that you are our rescuer. I take it this is the Asenti Ky'tulendu, chief of the Atanzi cat-people that I have heard so much about?" The chief asked Roaring Wings in their language, since he wore no translator.

"Yes, it is he. It was his idea to try this way to reach you. The entrance was buried when he killed Thunder Arrow. There was no choice. Either he killed him, or we would be killed. I mourn the loss of my brother for his being my brother. I am relieved that the evil that he did to all our people and to yours will now stop and peace will come, if we let it. Are the council members and the others all right and where are the guards?" he asked, changing to a less painful subject.

"When the shooting and the cave-in began they rushed to the entrance to see what was happening. Two of them got killed by the falling rocks. We overpowered the other two and now hold them prisoner. Here are their weapons. Here - please take them. They are too powerful and do not gain a man his honor by using them," Swimming Otter said solemnly, as he handed the two stunners over to Roaring Wings.

The shaman nodded seriously, understanding very well what the chief had said. Even Ky'tulendu did not need a translator to figure out what was meant by the chief's words and actions.

"There are the weapons and things from your village that Thunder Arrow brought here," he said pointing to several large sacks on the ground. "Please take them back to your people and keep them out of evil's way. Our people are not ready to use such powerful magics. It goes against all the teachings to use such things," Swimming Otter told the Atanzi.

"I understand, Swimming Otter. I will take them back and make sure they are put up so that both our peoples are safe from their magics. I am having my people learn to use your weapons and your ways, so that we can be equal here in this place. Our magics are too powerful, even for us sometimes. We will be careful to control ours."

"That is good, chief of the Atanzi. That will make my people rest more easily, knowing that you respect our ways and will not use your magics to harm us. It is not good for one people to have more than another because it creates greed and envy and that leads to pain and people being hurt. It is good to know you are a reasonable and honorable man," Swimming Otter said, clapping his shoulder in friendship.

"Thank you, Swimming Otter. And I am pleased to know that the chief of the Turtle Clan is a wise and honorable man as well. I look forward to many years of peace between your people and mine, as well as with the Wolf Clan peoples. When the storm and everything is over, I would like to invite you to my village and we shall all have a feast to celebrate our friendship," Ky'tulendu said, surprising both

Roaring Wings and the chief.

"I would be honored, my friend. Shall we say in one month after the harvests?" he asked.

"One month, after the harvests," Ky'tulendu agreed solemnly.

"Until then, my friend," he said pleased, and then wandered off to tell his people and the curious members of the Wolf Clan's council, who all smiled happily at the idea and generosity of the Atanzi chief.

"That was a good gesture to make to Swimming Otter," Roaring Wings said. "You are a good diplomat, Asenti. This will do much to repair the damage that has been done by my brother."

"I know, that is why I am doing it. If we do not offer the hand of friendship to Swimming Otter, then we will always have to watch our backs. I want peace with all the peoples here, so we can live our lives without fear. There has been too much pain and hurt already," Ky'tulendu said sadly, trying not to remember all that had happened recently. "Come, lets see what we can do to help," he suggested, as they moved to where the people sat by the wall of the chamber.

All told there were twenty-five people that Thunder Arrow had held captive. Ten members of the council, Swimming Otter and his three escorts, and eleven of the dreamers, both male and female. Only with the power of the stunners behind them could the guards have held so many captive in the small chamber.

Looking around, the Asenti could not see anything remarkable about this chamber or why it was sacred to the natives. It was rather ordinary looking with hard stone walls of a dark grayish color that was roughly rectangular in shape with a twice man height ceiling.

Roaring Wings saw him looking and the puzzlement on his face and guessed what he was thinking.

"No, my friend, this is not the sacred chamber. It lies in that direction beyond this room. Thunder Arrow was many things, but he would have not disgraced himself or our people by using the sacred chamber to keep his captives in. After we have gotten these people out, then I will show you the mysteries," Roaring Wings said in a low voice.

Ky'tulendu nodded, and they went to help the old people in the group to get up and make their way to the tunnel. The old people were grateful for their help and went willingly into the hole. It took quite awhile to get all the people through because they had to go single file on their hands and knees and the older ones had a difficult time of it. Ky'tulendu was glad that Lost Owl was on the other end to help them find their way to the upper chamber.

Ky'tulendu noted with interest the group that Roaring Wings had said was dreamers from the village. They were all healthy young women and men, except for three older women in the group, who the shaman explained had lost their husbands in battles. He also told the Asenti that these were not all the dreamers. There were others above among the crowd in the cavern and in the two other native villages. He estimated that there were at least thirty-five or so dreamers that he knew about. It staggered Ky'tulendu that so many were drawn to the Atanzi and would be mate-bonded to them.

Life on this planet was like nothing he had ever dreamed. It was constant change and adaptation to an established older, yet primitive, civilization, that welcomed him and his kind and made him feel a part of it in ways he had never felt a part of in his own society. When he had opened the hatch that first morning, he had known that he was home at last. Now he believed it.

He noticed that the last of the people were now entering the tunnel and that left just himself and Roaring Wings alone in the chamber. The shaman told the last person that they would be along later on, that they had some work to do here first and to tell the others. The warrior nodded and then went on.

"Come, my friend, there is much I want you to see," Roaring Wings said grinning, his fangs gleaming in the torch light.

The shaman picked up one of the torches that were stuck into holders along the wall and Ky'tulendu did the same, following him down another long tunnel off to the side of the chamber.

Without the other people, the place was very quiet, all that could be heard was the sound of their feet in the soft dirt of the passage and from somewhere the steady drip-drip-dripping of water. The walls started becoming moist and cold. The Atanzi shivered a little from the cold dampness, his fur cloak having been lost in the stunner fight.

The tunnel turned abruptly and suddenly they were on the threshold of a huge crystal cavern whose walls, floor and ceiling were composed of white sparkling snowflake crystals. Part of the walls looked like they were poured from the ceiling in thick ribbons over the surface of the vertical walls. It was breathtakingly beautiful. He could understand why this was their sacred chamber.

Stalactites jutted down around the edges of a circular dome in the center of the ceiling. The dome itself had been carved and shaped into pictures. Pictures which Ky'tulendu realized with a shock he could recognize - star maps! Star maps of the Heartworlds as they had been known thousands of years before, at the time that the **Change** had come to the Atanzi.

If that wasn't enough to unnerve him, he got a good look at the altar. The limestone crystals had overgrown much of it, but it was still recognizable as a **Gy'tusesson**, a device left over from the mysterious visitors to his world and others. It was not quite a ball, but it was not quite a square or any other shape, but something that all was all and yet no definite shape, according to what angle you looked at it. It was taller than a man, so that a man might go in it. It was said it opened on to other dimensions and spaces within its confines. He had seen pictures of them, though he had never seen one up close like this.

"How did it get here?" he asked Roaring Wings, when he could speak.

"Legend has it that the small sun appeared one day above the camp of my ancestors, who lived in a far away land at that time. It took all my people captive in a great beam, as well as others, and brought them to this island to live. It also changed us inside and out, so that we were like the people on the mainland. It was said that we resembled your people, Asenti, before the great sun changed us, though not as much."

"Go on," Ky'tulendu requested, fascinated.

"The great sun taught us things, showed us pictures in our head how to make things, do things, which we did. It made us peaceful and loving with our neighbors. The sun somehow changed those around for a time to be peaceful too and helped them. Unfortunately, they were not changed as much as my people - we were its chosen ones. The brightest, most intelligent among us were then selected for more intrusive instruction from the sun. The special ones were then made into shamans and chiefs as well as specialized craftsmen."

"That makes sense. Go on."

"When the sun thought that its job was almost finished, it told my ancestor, Talks Softly, that it was preparing a place below the village where it would now stay so it could be near for the people. This place. Then one day, it vanished from the sky and reappeared here and had remained ever since. For many years the sun continued to talk with the shamans and the chiefs when they came to ask for advice. Then gradually the sun grew silent and has been silent for many, many generations now because we could not talk with it. One of the two books that the sun gave us is missing. It was said that one had to use both books to talk to the sun."

"No one knows where the second book vanished to or when?" Ky'tulendu asked. It was the first time he had heard of an active **Gy'tusesson**. All the ones in museums on various planets were silent and still. This one was still active he noted, he could see colored lights pulsating around the edges of the crystals covering the outside of the machine.

"No. The books were supposed to be kept together here in the sacred cave. One day it just vanished

in the days of my six-times great grandfather, who was the shaman of the village at that time," Roaring Wings told him, watching as Ky'tulendu moved closer studying the ancient apparatus.

"Do you know what this thing is, Asenti?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, I do recognize the machine, Roaring Wings. It is called a **Gy'tusesson**, or the knowledge giver, in the language of my people. There are many like it all across the worlds of the peoples of the Confederation. This is the first active one I have ever seen or heard about. We don't know who built them or why. Only that the peoples who got them were mentally and physically transformed from primitive war-like beings ruled by their emotions, to beings that became peace lovers and builders of civilizations."

"So there are more of these elsewhere - on other worlds?"

"Yes, many. Not all planets in the Confederation have them, just some. This is the first I ever heard of having instruction manuals." Ky'tulendu said with a smile.

"Instruction manuals?" Roaring Wings questioned, not familiar with the term.

"Books or visuals that say how something is to be used."

"Ahh, I think I understand. So you think that is what the books were for?" the shaman asked.

"Probably. May I look at the remaining book?" Ky'tulendu asked not wanting to touch it unless it was all right with the shaman.

Roaring Wings nodded and smiled, "Yes, I am hoping you can read the writing and tell me what is in it. Maybe even get the small sun to work again," he said reverently, looking at the glowing object.

"I will try. If I can't read it right now, I would like to come back later with some of my scanning equipment and take pictures of the pages and have my techs look the writing over and compare it to writings we have on file from other worlds," Ky'tulendu asked stepping over to the large book, looking it over carefully trying to see how it opened.

"That sounds good, Asenti," Roaring Wings agreed, and noticing that the Atanzi was having problems opening the book, he went over and pressed the hidden studs on the gold metal cover opening the book.

"Thank you," Ky'tulendu said, relieved.

The pages appeared to be of some sort of thin, slick, shiny material similar to what the Atanzi themselves used for making hard copies. The book was very large, almost a pec'Issn square and almost six kec'Issns thick. The writing was a very ancient script that Ky'tulendu almost recognized as being the base root of his own native language, but it was somehow oddly different. He could make educated guesses at some of the words, though that was about all. He shook his head and turned back to Roaring Wings, who was watching him expectantly.

"I'm sorry, my friend, I can't read it. I recognize the writing and some words here and there, but I do not know the language. It will have to wait until my techs can look at it. I just do not have the skills," Ky'tulendu apologized.

"You tried, that is what mattered. We better go back above and see if the storm is over. Later, when we have time, we will come back and let you take pictures. The book has remained unread for this long, it can remain unread a little longer," Roaring Wings told him, resigned to the way things were.

Ky'tulendu agreed and let him close the book. Taking their torches they left the chamber and made their way back up the tunnel and on back the way they had come to get to the surface.

There was going to be much to do now in the wake of Thunder Arrow's death. They had made steps to repair the damage to peaceful relations between the tribes. That was only the first of many steps that would be needed. More work had to be done in eliminating those elements that had been loyal to the old chief and bringing the people's of the tribe bak together. A leader would have to be chosen.

Ky'tulendu wasn't sure whether In The Forest would be a strong enough chief yet because of his age and lack of experience, or even if the people would accept him fully. He would hate the leadership to go to one of Thunder Arrow's followers, but there was little he could do or say on the subject, except watch what was unfolded.

Almost forgotten because of the events that had been happening was the storm and the possible damage it was doing to the native villages and to the Atanzi camp. Would any of their buildings or their crops still be standing after all of this? Ky'tulendu wasn't sure. He had never seen such a fierce storm. For that too, he would have to watch and wait.

His concern was now becoming centered back on White Deer's condition. Was she better or worse? Ky'tulendu's footsteps began to increase in pace as sensations and thoughts from her were carried through their link. He had toned down the link to be able to concentrate on rescuing the prisoners. Now that it and the excitement was over, all that he had been shielding came flooding into his mind full force. And all was chaos in his mind and heart. He ran with Roaring Wings following in his wake.

Behind them in the darkness, the **Gy'tusesson's** lights started changing colors and patterns of light began forming around its surface, swirling and dancing. The Atanzi's words had activated it, patterns in the speech of the manlike that it had not heard before in the many millennia it had sat in this chamber had caused its circuits to become active again. It began to manufacture another book within its form to replace the one that had been lost.

It now had purpose again. It could now serve its masters as it had been ordered to. It was now content.

END

*Note: As far as can be determined, the Atanzi story was not completed by Vickey before her death.*