



Heart
SUNG

SONG OF THE SKY FALLEN BOOK THREE



KERI ASHE

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SAMANTHA

“I’m not certain if I could endure the silence,” Jannik said. We lay together in one of the buried ship’s berths. “No flier song, animal cries, whispers of wind, rhythm of rain.”

“That’s so poetic.” His words made me smile. “But I get it. It sure is quiet in here.”

And then it was not.

Wailing issued down the even caves, an emergency siren.

“What is that?” Jannik froze.

“Some kind of alert?” I threw on my fur dress. “Why would there be an alert if we’re buried under tons of soil?”

On the bridge, the control dash came alive. Two round monitors revealed a view of space.

“What is that?”

Something floated, long and angular.

“A ship.” I tried to manipulate the view with the computer controller we’d taken from the tower. The view changed, revealing the blue and green sphere of Lasharah. “It’s in orbit.”

The monitors shifted red. On the dash, a light matched the color and pulse.

“Is it the shelled ones? The pirates?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I know so little about starships. It might be a pirate. It might be the GGA...”

“The ones who purchased you?” Jannik made a face.

“Maybe one of those two or someone else entirely.”

“Could it be... Those Before?”

I stared for a while.

“I’m guessing most starships look somewhat similar.”

Which was no answer.

“Why are the windows red? Why does that thing flash the same color?”
Jannik asked.

“I think... they’re trying to communicate with us.”

“Red light means speaking?”

“It might.”

Jannik paused. “Do we speak back?”

My eyes locked on that blinking light. “If that’s a pirate ship, no. We need to hide.”

“If it’s one of your GGAs?”

Freedom, I thought. I began to resolve myself to life on this primitive world with a man I loved. Still, I reached out. Pulled back.

“I don’t know what to do,” I heard a quiver in my voice and faced Jannik.

“Leave it,” he said.

A crackle of disused equipment filled the room.

“Attention. This is the Alliance. Identify yourself. Repeat. This is the Galactic Alliance. Planetside vessel, identify yourself.”

My hand shook, finger poised over the button.

Jannik stared at me.

“I don’t know what to do,” I whispered. “Jannik, can you bring the others? The Sky-fallen?”

“Why?” His word was clipped, brows low.

My hand moved away from the button. “Because this isn’t only about me.”

“I STILL CAN’T BELIEVE this whole valley is one big spaceship crater,” Jeannie said. She had to raise her voice over the hoots and howls of alarm systems on the bridge. “Can this thing still fly?”

“Buried under a mountain?” Lizzie angled her head, brows raised.

Jeannie shrugged. “It might be fun, having a spaceship. Take a joyride.”

“We’re getting exiled, don’t we have enough to do? There’s talk of warriors marching us out of the valley...” Shorena was pushed through the

hatch by Lilstra. She went quiet at the sight of the bridge.

“You know alien stuff.” The feline, Lilstra’s tail twitched.

Shorena ran a hand through her bristle of wet hair. “Holy smokes.”

Planetside vessel, identify yourself. This is the Alliance, the speakers still blatted.

“How much of this is intact?” Shorena asked me.

“No idea. There are quarters and galleys, lots of room, but we only explored this level. We might be able to fit the entire village in here for the season,” I said.

Shorena laughed. “These primitives?”

Then she started. Jannik stood quietly in the corner.

Despite the sleek trim of the bridge, smooth metal, and glossy glass, his green and blue stripes somehow camouflaged him.

While the native language was imparted to us, I wasn’t sure how much of our speech Jannik picked up.

Ancient tech made him, and all the Dratum, frightened, and yet here we stood, on a starship bridge buried beneath Valley Hold.

A strapping young Dratum ducked onto the bridge. He had large eyes and an oversized nose that had been broken at least once.

I recognized him as one of Shorena’s builder guild guys.

Once inside, his jaw dropped, and he froze. Only his eyes moved, taking it all in.

“Samantha broke something,” Lilstra said. “Can’t you fix it, Shorena?”

I gave her the hairy eyeball but didn’t speak.

The twin circular screens revealed a craft in orbit around this planet.

Shorena studied the monitors. “All I ever did for the Alliance was to scavenge vehicles from the desert. Patch them back together. Install grav motivators. That was like putting kits together. But none of the GGA gadgets looked like that.”

Our own planet was in ruins. We had signed bridal contracts to get away. Of all the Earth brides, only Shorena interacted with our galactic saviors.

My brother, John, had indentured himself to the Alliance. I signed my contract to free him of his stupidity. My bride price would set him up and place me with a new husband on some far-flung planet.

Things didn’t work out that way.

The transport taking us to our auction was raided by pirates, and their ship crashed here.

A Dratum village adopted us. They expected us to run as mate prey for their unattached males.

Except Lasharah was part of a binary star system. As the planet neared the yellow star, the Glare of Dread, the axis shifted throwing the environment into utter chaos and darkness.

The village was forced to flee north to this safe place, Valley Hold. The haven was occupied by too many other villages to sustain us all. We lost the trials that would have allowed us to stay.

But inside this foundered vessel, it was warm, safe. As far as I knew.

When Jannik and I stumbled upon this ship, we activated some of the controls. And now we were spotted.

This is the Alliance. Identify yourself. Repeat.

Lilstra held her hands over her pointy ears. "Shut it up, Rache!"

Shorena moved behind the control dash. A cascade of flashing gem-like controls winked and pulsed across the panel. She took a chair. "Ah. A seat. I love a good seat."

She stretched, cracking her knuckles, and hunted over the buttons, switches, dials, wheels. With a deft finger, she pressed a ruby switch. Speakers died.

"Ahh..." Lilstra said. She relaxed into the co-pilot's chair. She gave Shorena a lazy smile.

"Not a city," Shorena's guy whispered. "But what?"

"Mikka, take a freakin' breath," Shorena said. "Go get the others. Get the gray twins, Grexi, Suvo, Cathy, whoever will come in here."

Grexi was the healer, and my mentor among the aliens. Suvo was chief, father of my mate. Cathy was one of us, but as of late, she had been moody. The gray twins were still a mystery. They had been part of quintuplets before the pirate raid shortened their number.

"My hunters," Jannik spoke. "They will come if I summon them."

Mikka took a last look around and darted back out the hatch.

"He's a cutie patootie, Shorena," Lilstra said. "Where'd you find him?"

"From one of the other villages. He likes building things. It makes him a bit of an outcast among his own," Shorena said. "But he's smart, intuitive. Once these people invent the wheel, who knows?"

"He's also handsome as all get-out," Jeannie said.

Elizabeth smiled. "Kind of a hottie."

"That doesn't hurt," Shorena shrugged.

“What are we looking at?” I tried to get us on track.

Shorena sighed, looking over the panel. “It would take me weeks to figure out all these doo-dads. My guess is that we’re getting some kind of launch sequence. Orbital observation to see if the path is clear.”

“Artificial satellites?” I guessed.

She nodded. “A signal from them.”

“Do you think that ship is our ticket home?” Jeannie asked. “Or at least, our ticket to a new home.”

“That was obviously a recording,” Lizzie said.

The phrases had repeated over and over.

“Less obviously a trap,” Lilstra said. The feline was right. We didn’t know anything about that vessel. “Could be pirates, fishing.”

“What do we do?” I asked.

Shorena sighed and sat back. “Figure out this control dash without sending that ship any information. Figure out where this signal originates, how to manipulate it.” She pointed at the round screens.

I watched the narrow vessel ply the space beyond the atmosphere. Friend or foe, I didn’t know.

“Get away from me, Adak. I’m not talking to you,” Catherine entered, followed by Jannik’s friend and fellow hunter. “Oh, there. Go talk to your pet.”

Cathy scowled at Lilstra. Lilstra’s only reaction was a tail twitch. I understood that there was a bit of a triangle between them—and I tried to stay out of it.

“Three hells.” Another of Jannik’s hunters, Takka, started when he was through the hatch. “What now?”

“Shelter,” Jannik said. He didn’t sound convincing.

“Well, I guess it’s not outdoors, but seriously?” Takka held his hands up awkwardly, as if afraid to touch anything. “The rain is starting to freeze—but still.”

Cathy looked at the screens, arms folded. “That’s triangulation satellite imagery,” she said.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“My father was interested in alien tech, once the GGA took over the planet. He loved researching the Alliance. Maybe that’s why he sold me to them. Dad was always impressed by a show of force.” Cathy sounded bitter. “There’s a similar network in high Earth orbit. Very small satellites that track

anything entering the system. That's the kind of image they generate."

"Do you know how they work?" Shorena asked.

"A little. I could probably figure it out." Cathy turned to Lilstra. "Scat, cat!"

Lilstra twisted her way out of the co-pilot's chair and sauntered away. She caught Adak's eye as she wandered down a corridor.

Adak's eyes followed her. But he realized everyone was watching him. Folding his hands behind him, he stood still next to Takka.

"Okay, this here is the orbital path of the observation satellites." Cathy pointed out a flat screen with a three-dimensional image of a sphere with points of light circling. "These guys are blue, so we're watching through their scanners."

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"We had some simulator programs on our game system. There were a few real-time access programs. The GGA wasn't afraid to show us how advanced they were. Here." Cathy touched some of the dots that were white, changing them to blue.

On the dual screens, the image changed. We now had a different angle on the ship trying to contact us. It looked like a baguette, the center a triangular prism studded and gridded with space accouterments I didn't recognize.

"That doesn't look like Great Galactic Alliance design," Cathy said.

"Well, they're an alliance. I don't know where in the galaxy we are, but couldn't other allies have different looking stuff?" Lizzie asked.

"Something they don't want Earthlings to know about?" Jeannie said.

"I guess," Cathy said. "It's not something I've seen before."

"Me neither," Shorena said. "Although my people were trying to make a living with scavenged ground vehicles, not spacecraft."

"If that is an Alliance ship, would you go back?" Jeannie asked.

"Back? To the bridal contract?" Lizzie asked. "I'm not sure if it would be any different from being here."

"I'd go," Cathy said, shooting Adak a look that he couldn't meet.

"I know Sam wants to go," Jeannie said.

Eyes turned my way. I felt Jannik's practically burning into my back. For as long as we'd been marooned here, I'd sought a way back to civilized space.

Now...?

"Wouldn't the pirates notice all the satellites in orbit?" Jeannie changed

the subject.

“Not necessarily,” Cathy said. “If they’re micro satellites, they’re only as big as a baseball. They would be tough to spot.”

“Especially to a pirate ship under fire,” Lizzie mused.

“Still, we need to be careful. The marauders who took us had no idea what they had gotten into. They were so inept, the Dratum took them out with hardly any struggle.”

Shorena said this in the Dratum tongue, and the hunters stood a little taller.

“Got it,” Jeannie said. “We don’t want pirates who are ept. Better not send any signals until we know for sure.”

“Ept?” Cathy eyed the blonde.

I was happy to see Cathy involved. This was much better than watching her moon around, not eating.

“The opposite of inept,” Jeannie said. “Right?”

“Grammar aside, she’s right,” I said. “There are villages from all over the southern continent right over our heads. We can’t alert some outsiders that we’re here. It’s dangerous.”

Shorena nodded. “One well-placed kinetic energy weapon, a big enough space rock, and the whole of Valley Hold would be blasted to glass.”

“Speaking of Valley Hold, can this grounded ship house our village?” I asked.

“We need to check the whole thing out,” Lizzie said. “See if there are rooms for all.”

“More importantly, we should check environmental control,” Jeannie said. “There’s probably a system to generate fresh water. Maybe food.”

Cathy stared at her. “Wow. That’s astute, Jeannie.”

Jeannie shrugged. “I’m kinda hungry.”

“Will the villagers accept food created by ship systems?” Lizzie’s tone was doubtful.

“Accept free food?” Jeannie snorted. “Who wouldn’t?”

“We’ll need more people to investigate this whole craft,” I said.

“More to the point, then, will the villagers accept this as shelter?” Lizzie said.

Now that was the main point. As Earthers, we girls could appreciate a nice chair, a soft bed, controlled temperature. Dratum liked their huts, caves, trees. Abandoned cities, even if they were structurally sound, were anathema.

Those Before, the ones who dominated this planet centuries ago, had left a legacy that the Dratum shunned.

This spacecraft was far more advanced than the white stone buildings behind their ivy-clad walls. You couldn't get the Dratum beyond those walls. How could we convince them to come here?

I had seen evidence that Those Before, Kyrthians, kept Dratum as slaves. Also, I saw images of the huge, bird-like ships they boarded en masse. Was this one of those?

“Will we find... bodies?” Jeannie said. “Bones?”

“Doubtful,” Cathy said. “Even that POS pirate ship had artificial gravity, inertia dampeners. You'd need it for interstellar travel—to keep passengers from getting squished flat by acceleration. No one was hurt when that hunk of junk hit the dirt. I can't imagine this ship isn't similar.”

“Best get her checked out before we light up the vacancy sign,” Jeannie said. She wandered off down a corridor.

JANNIK

When we first heard the voice of the feces-shaped sky serpent, I expected Sam to talk back.

I held my breath as her finger lingered over a flashing gem.

She could escape this world as she always talked about. Leave me behind.

Yet even now, she did not attempt to speak with the serpent. Nor did any of her sky-fallen friends.

I gathered they feared the smelly, shelled creatures that had brought them here might return to reclaim the females.

Or for revenge.

Life among the Dratum was preferable to imprisonment by the moist, encrusted, gray-skinned pirates who smelled like a trap swamp, I figured.

After all, we bathed.

Once in a while.

Grexi, the Keeper of Healing, passed through the cave ahead of Shorena's guildsman. Behind came the strange gray twins with their sleek hair and blacked out eyes.

The healer shook rain and ice from her cloak. Her steely eyes shifted around. "Cozy."

Which was the last word I would have for this cursed place. Yet the healer was always making forays to the abandoned city, Malu-Roone.

She probably felt at home among the freakish angles and foreign smooth surfaces.

"There may be room for all here," Sam said. "If we can convince the villagers to come inside."

Grexi smirked. "Since the downpour of rain became a downpour of ice,

the upper caves are not shelter. I think they might be convinced—if only to keep from freezing to death.”

“They haven’t made for the northern shelters?” I asked.

“Final Pass is impassable,” Grexi said. “All have sheltered against the storm. Many may die under the onslaught. I’ve never seen such fierce weather.”

“If they don’t, the other villagers are readying their warriors,” one of the gray twins said.

“To drive us out,” the other twin finished the sentence.

“We should lead them in,” I said.

The healer laughed. “They will not willingly come into the den of Those Before. You must convince the chief, Jannik.”

Though it was my turn to laugh, I couldn’t. “Father doesn’t listen to my council.”

“He may, if you speak wisely. Wisely, as in, it’s better than half the village dying. Besides, the way your reunion with your mother went, I believe the chief may have been impressed. After all, he was never able to accomplish it.”

Mother left when I was young. Until this Season Dark, I had not seen her.

Father used her as a hostage to get the villagers to shelter after our late arrival. I managed to forge a relationship with her—and my younger brother.

“Takka, Adak, explore this... thing fully. See if there’s room for the village. We’ll need to move everyone in swiftly,” I said.

“Oo, I’ll go,” Jeanie said, popping back into the chamber. “This place is cool. C’mon, Mikka.”

She grabbed the apprentice’s hand and dragged him down a corridor. He gave his guild mistress a fleeting look before disappearing.

“There have to be map panels on the wall,” Shorena said. “A place this big? You’d get lost otherwise.”

Takka and Adak stared at her blankly.

“C’mon,” Sam said. “We’ll help you big, burly men explore this tub.”

The two exchanged a doubtful look.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. “Let’s go, fellas.”

Takka fell in behind her. I looked at Sam before she vanished into the hellish depths. Adak gave me frightened eyes as he followed her.

“I’ll find my own way,” Grexi said, tailing after.

“You’re not going with me to talk to Father?” I asked.

“Once you get outside, you’ll know my answer,” Grexi said.

The hatch led straight into the slope of the peak other villages called Calamity. Standing at the end of the valley, this odd-looking mountain stood out from the rest of the range. And upon my exit, I was stung by a heavy fall of ice.

Getting over the hump at the foot of Calamity proved nearly impossible. Ice had built up, fingers deep. It shined off the rocks and mud. Pulled heavily on the surrounding tree limbs.

Once over the top, to the place where the village camped upon arrival, I found it impossible to make the pass.

Sam and I had taken a more direct route around the slope, and I tried this path. Slippery as it was, I made a relatively safe descent. Soon, I moved down the slope of the valley wall.

Father and my uncle, the Warchief Gattok, huddled beneath the stone shelter. Their pitiful fire looked in danger of being snuffed by the wind-driven ice.

“Jannik, where have you been?” Gattok said. “The other villages’ warriors are preparing to drive us out.”

“Then they’re idiots who wish to die in a storm,” I said.

“No one said warriors have to be smart,” Father said.

Like me, Father was once a hunt leader. We tended to look on warriors with disdain.

“I have found shelter for the village,” I said.

“Yes, but as you pointed out, we are not idiots who wish to die in a storm,” Father said. “We cannot travel in this hellish ice. The pass is closed. We are trapped here to meet our fate. Will you stand with us?”

“No. I’ll take shelter not far from here and let the weather thin out their warriors,” I said. “You should come with me.”

“Where?” Father asked.

“Just over the shoulder of Calamity,” I pointed, “On the north-facing slope.”

“There are no caves there,” Father said.

For generations, our village had retreated to this haven when the Season Dark arrived. The area was well explored.

Somehow, the hatch to the smooth caves had been revealed by recent weather.

“No,” I said. “Not caves. But shelter. It is not ideal, but it is better than

Valley Hold.”

“Better than the Hold? How?” Gattok’s eyes looked leery.

“There is water there,” I said. No lie, I saw it. “Perhaps food.”

Gattok stirred their pathetic fire. “This storm has frozen your brain, Jannik.”

“Order the villagers and they will come,” I said. “Don’t, and they die. Though the way is not easy, it is not far. There.”

I stood outside the stone shelter, pointing at the mountain that capped the far side of the valley.

Father and Gattok stared. I pointed to the shoulder on the west slope.

“Over that, and downhill to the north face. That’s all. We have no other choice,” I said.

Wind howled. Sticks were blown across the floor, the fire extinguished. Both Gattok and Father jumped. A sign, for certain.

Father grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders. “Fine. Lead on. Brother, direct your warriors to roust the village. Protect the vanguard and the rear.”

Gattok grabbed his throwing stick and darts, heading for the high caves. This third level of shelter took the worst of the storm. None of the caves were free of ice. Within, people shivered, trying to keep fires lit.

I took the lead, waving them behind me. Could I be seen in the painful, driving ice? My hair, my clothes, turned leaden, heavy, frozen.

Valley Hold was circular, with caves on multiple levels. Ours was the highest, and most vulnerable to the storm—on the western wall.

Gattok’s warriors pulled people from their pathetic shelters.

The village traveled the high ledge, pushed by the wind, blasted, slipping. Elders, children, and all in between straggled in a line toward Calamity.

My eyes spanned the valley floor, the opposite wall. No sign of other village warriors appeared. Whether from pity or self-interest, I supposed it didn’t matter.

Smarting ice made me turn my face away.

“Jannik, what’s going on?” Fennek, my youngest hunter, peeked out of the hunters’ cave as I passed.

“Exile, but to a safe place,” I said.

“In an ice storm?”

“It’s close.”

Kerkan squinted at me. “There’s nothing out there but the ridge of rough

mountains. A moon's worth of walking to the next sheltered place."

"Grab your packs," I said. "You won't like where we're going. But it's better than dying."

Neither man seemed satisfied with that answer.

Panicked voices, moans, and crying replaced the former silence of the sky serpent when I returned within. Villagers stood in shock or wandered aimlessly.

"Keepers and guild masters, follow the maps to the grand cavern. We will show you how to acquaint your people with these accommodations," Grexi kept calling.

"We cannot stay in this accursed place!"

"It is warm! My baby is warm! It is good enough!"

"How will we survive, locked away from the world?"

I managed to find Sam among the milling, nervous crowd.

She put her hands on my arms. I went in for a kiss, but she pulled away.

Not a good sign.

"Have you talked to the sky-serpent?" I asked.

Her eyes looked deeply into mine. "We don't know who they are."

"If they are your Alliance?" I asked.

"There's no time. We have to educate a whole village about plumbing and light switches. I think there are spaces for everyone—we just have to put them there."

Sam kissed me quickly and vanished into the crowd.

"Jannik!"

Takka, Adak, Kerkan, and Fennek stood in a tight knot near a smooth wall.

"We can't find the hunter's shelter," Adak said.

People shoved past us, eyes wide, clutching each other. All of them looked lost.

"Like I know? Why did you leave it?"

Takka frowned. "It's scary."

"We could patrol outside. Make certain none of the other village warriors are stalking us. Guide any who are lost into this..." Kerkan trailed off, glancing around.

We were jostled by villagers, a family huddled together in fear.

"That's the job of the warriors," I said. "I would find this hunters' shelter."

“You would?” Fennek said.

“Yes. Just to get away from all these whining villagers. I hate crowds,” I said.

“That’s because crowds are made up of people,” Adak said. “It’s people you hate.”

Kron and Gitak darted through the entrance, ice dripping from them.

“Tebor leads a party of warriors after us.” Gitak, my cousin, was the village war leader.

Kron shivered as he took in the milling throng, the freakish shape of our shelter. “We should wait them out. I doubt they’ll find us here. If they do, I doubt they’d venture far within.”

A thought shared by my entire village.

“No,” I said. “Don’t give them an excuse to return to Valley Hold.”

Gitak blinked at me. “What are you saying? We should stand and fight? Tebor’s warriors outnumber us by half. There are still warriors of another village to back them up.”

“Treat them like a hunt—but be the prey,” I said. “Elusive prey.”

“The sky-fallen warped your thinking, cousin,” Gitak said.

“No. Strike at them from shelter. You know the path to Cloud Fang. How we were ambushed by haithi.” Claw marks from one I fought with my hands still marked my skin.

“But why? We can’t hope to take out all of them,” Kron said.

“You don’t need to take them out. Just keep them out,” I said.

“Ah,” Takka nodded. “Give them reason to stay out in the weather. Let the ice take them. Let them freeze, slip and break limbs, fall into a crevasse.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Let most of the warriors recover here. Only send out small units. Ours will be refreshed while theirs succumb to the cold.”

Adak smiled. “And don’t let them find shelter or build fires.”

“It only takes a few hunters to wear down the most dangerous prey,” I said.

Gitak frowned. “This isn’t prey, Jannik, but units of trained warriors.”

“Then make yourselves prey,” Takka leaned closer. “Let them chase you, exhaust and injure themselves. Make them pay for chasing after us.”

Adak leaned against the wall. “Kill them with hubris,” he said.

“Better than staying in here,” Kron shrugged. “Visibility is bad, footing is bad, and worse on the trails. What do you say, war leader?”

Gitak inhaled deeply. “As you say. Better than staying in here.”

“For once, we can be in charge of a trial,” I said. “This time, there’s no way for the other villages to cheat.”

“Let’s get organized,” Gitak said. “Order the men not to fire unless forced to. Blame it on the weather.”

He and Kron walked back toward the entry, discussing strategy.

I turned to the hunters. “Let’s find your shelter. Which cavern did you follow?”

“The central one,” Fennek said. “It is not far. I mean, it didn’t seem so.”

We moved through the crowd in the cavern Sam called the bridge, elbowing our way toward the wall opposite the round windows. Three passages led deeper.

Eyes everywhere, the hunters moved. The cave was wide enough for all of us to walk abreast. Villagers lingered, disoriented. Caverns branching off held people who whispered together.

“This one,” Takka said, ducking inside.

It held many beds. A vertical cave ran up and down from the room, accessed by rungs in the walls.

“This seems like a good place for you,” I said.

Takka nodded at the ladders. “There’s a way to escape.”

“Escape from what?” I asked.

He shrugged. “In this place? Who knows?”

Echoing down the long cave came voices that did not sound panicked. A scent of cooking meat wafted. The fall of water.

A few caves down was a larger space, the kind with water and a place to cook. If Sam was right.

Villagers gathered. One of the cook’s boys fumbled around hot flat surfaces, a fish longer than a man flayed out to cook.

One of the villagers, a tanner, I thought, waved to Adak and called out a greeting.

My hunters finally seemed less timid as they entered the cavern.

They sat at tables within. These were not as long as village tables. Groups sat separated.

But all were engaged in conversation. It sounded much less nervous than when people first entered.

Information about this cave system—this spaceship—was exchanged. Some had done more exploring than others.

“Jannik! Sit. Eat,” Fennek said.

“I need to find Sam,” I said.

There was more to worry about than finding a place to shelter. The sky serpent still filled my thoughts.

Pirate or ally, either was an enemy to me.

Whether they were friends of the sky-fallen, or vengeful pirates, they threatened my relationship with Sam.

I moved through the central cave toward the front.

A group gathered at a square of light on the wall.

For a moment, I looked at the grid. It was like a map—perhaps a map of this ship.

But I had some idea where I was going.

When I returned to the bridge, few villagers remained. The sky-fallen females still talked in their babbling tongue about the circle images.

Ignoring them, I moved to the cave on the right.

Sam sat on a bed in the cavern we had shared before.

For a moment, I stood in the doorway, taking her in.

Her limbs were long and slender, skin dark and tempting. The very shape of her aroused me.

I watched her as if she were prey. She folded a blanket, unaware of my presence.

Bending my wrists, I released the tendrils of my shi-na. They snaked through the distance between us. In an instant, her arms were snared.

I strode into the room, binding her with my tentacles.

Grabbing her, holding her soft body against mine, I felt a shiver—only partly of surprise.

Her dark eyes gazed into mine.

“Been a crazy day,” she said, voice husky.

I bent my head, taking in the scent of her hair, her neck. Biting her earlobe, I whispered, “I would take you.”

Her trembling continued, inspiring desire within me.

My shi-na wrapped her wrists, binding them behind her. She could not suppress a cry.

“I would surrender,” she whispered as I kissed her.

One hand cupped her neck, drawing her tight. The other gripped her broad ass and ground her hips against mine.

Our kiss became deep enough to lose myself in. I craved the wet heat of her mouth.

Her breath quickened. I felt her struggle against my tendrils. She moaned into our embrace.

“Samantha, we found something—oops!”

When I faced the intruder, Jeannie backed away. Her eyes played over us, lingering on the shi-na trussing Sam’s wrists.

I felt my mate struggle against the bonds. Should I throw her down in front of the sky-fallen woman, take her, or release her.

It took a moment to decide.

Finally, I let her go, the shi-na retracting into my arms.

“What is it?” Sam panted.

“Shorena has figured out something about that ship,” Jeannie said. She crossed one foot over the other, shifting her weight, staring.

Sighing, Sam nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

Jeannie stood there, blinking.

“I promise,” Sam said.

“Oh. Right.” Jeannie shook her head a little. “See you there.”

SAMANTHA

Through some mechanism I didn't understand, Jannik and I were connected. My heart heard the song of his desire, and sang along in harmony. The entanglement of our mutual need was palpable.

And yet...

"I need to know," I said.

For a while, Jannik said nothing. He stared at me.

While the tendrils from the insides of his wrists freed me, he still held me with broad hands.

It felt like he wouldn't let go.

Did I even want him to?

"I can't deny you," he finally spoke. "Even if it means denying myself."

I shook my head. "I don't think I can leave you. Leave this..." My hand touched my chest, feeling my beating heart. And something more. A magnetic pull, a warm vibration, a feeling I could not put into words.

"I won't ask you to," I said.

Jannik's face twisted in puzzlement.

"My sense of duty is so strong. I need to protect people, to keep them safe," I said.

"I've noticed." Jannik almost smiled.

"But I have a duty to myself. To what I want. What I want is you," I said.

"Your brother?" Jannik said.

This brought out a long sigh. "He's an adult, no matter how childish his decisions. And it's funny, but John has a way of getting through life mostly based on luck. On charm. He'll probably be all right. But it isn't my obligation. I mean, if I was willing to be married off to some stranger—why

not stay with a man I love?”

On our way to Valley Hold, we encountered a boy, lost as we were. He turned out to be Jannik’s half-brother, Nakar.

Naturally, we took him under our wings, even without knowing who he was.

After decades, Jannik met his mother, and Nakar’s—Havra.

Even though the elders took mother and son hostage, Jannik stood with them.

When Nakar and Havra were released to their own tribe, Jannik let them go.

We encountered them during our brief time in Valley Hold, during the Trials.

It surprised me that Jannik could let them go to live their lives. He interfered no more. While he didn’t seek out their company, he welcomed it.

Couldn’t I do that, too? Help when I could, but also let go?

“Why the change of heart?”

“It isn’t a change of heart. I’ve felt this way since I met you. But it’s in me to resist, to follow my duty even to the point of my own discomfort or danger,” I said.

“I like that you resist,” Jannik said. “It makes for a sweeter surrender.”

“It wasn’t good, when I resisted with my heart, my emotions. I wanted to surrender to you, needed to. But you made me understand that I had to stop struggling with my sense of responsibility. That I had to be responsible for my own joy, my own life.”

Jannik frowned. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“It was when you said you would let me go. I realized I didn’t want you to. There was no sense of relief. No lessening of guilt. Finally, I found something within me worth holding onto. A reason for me to believe that I was just as important as all the people I try to protect. My love for you, your love for me, our connection—it’s real, it’s vital.”

“Then why must you know about the sky serpent?” he asked.

I had to laugh. “Because my sense of duty to my brides is still there. The ship could mean mortal danger. It could mean the life that my girls set out to pursue.”

“Fine. As long as you know that putting off our mating will result in far more strenuous activity,” he said.

I’m counting on it, I didn’t say. Yet somehow, I knew he heard. He took

my hand and led me from our berth.

The corridor stood empty. Most of the Dratum were too afraid of the tech to venture this deep within the ship.

Our cabin was close to the bridge. To my surprise, the twins each took a seat at the controls. As one, they turned toward our entrance.

The sky-fallen all gazed at the round monitors.

“Shorena discovered it,” one gray twin said.

“A faint background signal,” the other said.

“They are trying to shield communication from us,” the first said.

It was like watching tennis with these two.

“This technology is similar to our planet’s.” Both sisters waved a hand across the control dash at the same time.

“It will not take long to filter the background noise.”

I took in the screens. “So, we still don’t know if it’s an Alliance or pirate ship?”

“It is not a ship.”

“But a probe.”

“A probe?” I thought that over.

Would pirates send a probe? Exploration didn’t seem to be on their plate. Destroying, kidnapping, stealing, that was their jam.

“So more likely GGA,” Cathy said, not turning from the screens.

“Do you want to go on with the bridal contract?” Lizzie faced me.

The others turned, one by one. For as long as we’d been stranded here, I had been the one searching for a way off world, seeking a way to contact the Alliance, pushing the idea that we could get away from this primeval planet and the primitive natives.

“It is clean here,” twin one said.

“No impurities to harm us.”

Shorena, one of the few who had gone along with me, did not meet my eyes. “After living in desert junkyards, being happy to find expired cans of food, to have enough water for the day...”

“There are more men on this planet than I could... experience in a lifetime,” Lilstra shrugged. “Probably.”

Cathy didn’t speak, only glared at the feline.

“If we decide to stay here, all of us will eventually have to run as mate prey,” Lizzie said. “Submit to one of these broad-shouldered Dratum dudes. Are we all down with that?”

“I don’t think it would be so bad,” Jeanie said. Her eyes darted to Jannik’s wrists, then quickly away. Her face pinked.

“That doesn’t mean we have to let them catch us,” Shorena said. “Besides, they give us jobs, careers. I like how they work together. There isn’t that overwhelming selfishness like back on Earth. Everybody pulls their weight, most of them love what they do.”

“That’s all fine and good,” Lizzie said. “Let’s talk about the elephant in the room. This planet, Lasharah—it isn’t stable. Our happy little village lives were turned upside down. And we know they will be again in a year, or whenever the next Season Dark occurs.”

Shorena said, “But we have some technology, just basic stuff, that might make the next season easier to weather. Rafts, wheels, pulleys, ramps. Maybe metal.”

“You really want to curse these people with human problems?” Cathy asked. “Pollution, fighting for natural resources, climate change.”

“This climate could use a change,” Jeannie said.

“You know what I mean,” Cathy said.

“They aren’t far from developing simple machines,” gray number one said.

“Because they use spindles for weaving,” number two said.

“Irrigation for agriculture,” they went on.

“Stretchers for fur and leather tanning.”

“Dratum are intelligent.”

“They are already combining simple tech.”

“I could care less about simple machines,” Lizzie said. “How about a decent chair? A soft bed?”

“Cute shoes,” Jeannie said.

Which derailed the conversation for a time.

While we continued to debate, the twins watched the monitors. At times, they touched the computer controller we’d found in an abandoned tower. Then they paused as one, listening.

I considered the craft’s origin.

Would pirates care about the Dratum? Did they even know about the massacre of the crew that kidnapped us? The final remaining one had found a transceiver to communicate with his people. Had he?

And what about the GGA? Lasharah, presumably, had resources they might want to exploit. Did they have rules about contacting less advanced

civilizations? Maybe that was some science fiction trope.

Earth had few remaining resources. The Alliance had come anyway. Fertile women were highly valued, followed by labor. They never forced us into slavery or anything. Bases were established, but mostly in orbit.

Would the GGA want something from the Dratum?

They were aliens, so their motives weren't clear to me.

"Do we know what the probe is looking at?" I asked.

"It's a signal sniffer," twin one said.

"Attracted to regular pulses in the electromagnetic spectrum," the other continued.

"Frequently dumped in large quantities from ships at hypervelocity."

"Scattershot."

"Cheap and simple devices."

"As far as spacecraft go."

"Well, we know that somewhere close by is a regular route for GGA transports," Lizzie said. "It makes sense that some probes were dropped in the neighborhood."

Jeannie made a half-frown. "We haven't figured out if we want to let the GGA know we're here or not."

"Until I see evidence, I'm not going to believe that probe came from the Alliance," Lilstra said. "And neither should any of you."

"Do we know what signal they're attracted to?" I asked. "Is it coming from this ship? From the micro satellites?"

"So far, we've been unable to tell," twin one said.

The other said, "It could be the satellites, as they are beam-casting to this ship."

"On the other hand, the probe is either sending a message to this ship."

"Or the satellites are picking it up and sending it here."

"Or both."

"But we haven't figured out the signal filter yet."

"Once we do, the origin of the signal will be revealed."

The second twin touched the computer control, triggering an orange flash.

"What do you suspect?" I asked.

"GGA," one said.

"Pirates," said the other.

The twins gazed at each other for a few moments, perhaps communicating silently. It was strange that the two women, so very much

alike, differed on this one point.

“What is that?”

I had been so wrapped up in the probe, the signal, the origin, I almost forgot Jannik was with me.

He moved to the screens, pointing at the overwhelming discs of the planet.

Shorena folded her arms. “Clouds?”

“Is there a way to get a better angle?” I asked.

“Hang on,” Cathy said. “I got it.”

She moved to the right hand of the control dash. For a moment, she gazed at the display with the blue and white sparks. After pressing a few, the angle changed.

We now looked from further away. It was a better view of the southern hemisphere. You could see the way the planet was tilted away from its red sun from the shadow.

What Jannik pointed at now became evident.

“That’s a storm,” Lizzie said. Her finger twirled, following the shape of the clouds. “A big storm.”

“If it was warm and tropical, I’d say it’s a hurricane,” Cathy said.

The swirling white took up much of the planet’s surface. “Is that the current ice storm?”

“I don’t know if this is in real time,” Cathy said.

“Man. That’s the biggest storm I’ve ever seen, if it is in real time,” Lizzie said. “And I used to live in Florida before it sank.”

“It would have killed nearly everyone in the village if we stayed in the high caves. It’s coming from the east. Aimed right into those caverns,” Cathy said. “Do you think the other villagers made us stay up there just to get rid of us?”

“Maybe,” Jeannie said. “We got there late, which made us outsiders. All of us know the drill. When you’re surviving, anyone outside your group becomes suspect.”

One way or another, all the brides were survivors.

For a while, I stared at the image. I didn’t know what Lasharah looked like when the axis wasn’t tilted. I could see the penumbra, and looked hard. Valley Hold was not visible. Perhaps because it was on the dark side.

“Are there star charts?” I asked. “Something programmed into the system?”

“There must be,” twin one said.

“They shouldn’t be hard to find,” the other said.

“But why do you want to see one?”

“I want to see the Glare of Dread, and our position. Maybe there’s a graphic or something?” I said.

“To explain the orbital irregularity?” twin one asked.

“This is a binary system, right?” I said.

Twin two touched her mouth. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“But it would explain a lot,” her sister said.

As one, they touched the computer controller, the egg-shaped device pinging windows onto the round monitors.

“That one.” Lizzie, still standing close, pointed one out.

It grew to fill both screens.

“Is that the orbital dynamics of the Lasharah system?” Cathy looked on.

“I wish I could read the words,” Shorena said.

The animated graphic popped up captions as it moved. The orbit of the three moons was made evident. They traveled at different speeds, which made for a different number of moons on any given night.

Lasharah and her moons, and a gas giant many astronomical units away, orbited their home star.

“It is obvious that Lasharah’s orbit is highly eccentric,” twin one said.

“Perhaps as much as zero point zero three,” the other twin continued.

“Seasons would already be extreme.”

“But there is a second stellar body.”

“A main sequence yellow-orange star.”

As we watched, the red star system grew smaller. It quickly became evident that the larger red sun orbited the smaller yellow one at a highly eccentric orbit.

“Aphelion would be unpredictable,” twin one said.

“And we don’t know how long a Lasharah year is.”

“So it is difficult to predict how often this Season Dark occurs.”

“It would not follow the orbital seasons of this planet.”

“Huh,” Cathy said. “They never know when it’s coming.”

“It would be unlikely,” twin one said.

“A K-class orange dwarf with class five luminosity would not be visible in the night sky.”

“Especially at this latitude.”

“Until its gravitational pull became an issue.”

“At which point, it would almost be too late.”

Which we already knew.

“That is the Glare of Dread?” Jannik moved closer to the circular monitors.

“Yes,” the twins said together.

“It’s so small...”

“It’s not really,” Jeannie said. “In comparison to your red sun, it is. But it’s still pretty big.”

The image disappeared, replaced by the probe. Screens flashed red again.

“Will the ship shield us?” I asked. “I mean, if any of us wanted to return to the bridal program, they could find a place outside, right?”

“We have filtered out the background noise.”

“From the hidden signal.”

The twins stopped talking.

“Well?” I finally prompted.

The twins exchanged a glance and shrugged together.

“It is not a GGA signal,” twin one said.

“But it may not be a pirate vessel.”

“It’s a false flag,” Lilstra said. “Sending out a GGA recorded message.”

“So even if it’s not the pirates coming back...” Jeannie started, but trailed off.

Because we all understood. Whatever that probe was up to, it was up to no good.

JANNIK

“J annik?”

I turned from the windows. My hunters stood in the central corridor. They looked sheepish.

With pending danger in the sky, I was almost happy to see my befuddled men.

The sky-fallen all faced the hunters with raised brows.

Takka gestured me over with a head motion.

“Three hells,” I said under my breath.

Sam put a hand on my arm. “None of you are comfortable in here. Go easy on them.”

“I’m more concerned about the sky serpent than a bunch of jumpy hunters.”

She shook her head. “There isn’t much to do but watch and see what they do. C’mon, let’s see what they want.”

Before we could cross the bridge, noises came from the hatch.

Gitak and Kron, shiny with ice, led their weary unit into the ship. My cousin gave me a grim look. Grim, but satisfied.

“It was a good idea you had,” Kron said. “At least two of their units followed our false trail into a ravine. They won’t be coming back for a while.”

“If ever,” another warrior said.

Gitak nodded. “The frozen downpour continues. Worst I’ve seen. Limbs, whole trees are falling, weighted with ice.”

“This shelter might be fortuitous. I imagine Valley Hold to be a frozen lake,” Kron said.

“As long as there is hot food,” Arrak, another warrior, grumbled.

“We can find food for you,” Sam said. But her eyes were on my hunters. Together, we moved down the central cave.

“What is it, Takka?” I said, voice low.

“We’ve heard...” Takka failed to describe the noise.

“Grunting,” Fennek said. “It comes from the cave leading down.”

“All the villagers are tense. Are you surprised they’re mating?” I said.

“Is anyone in the level below?” Adak asked.

That I did not know. Sam shrugged.

“It is not mating noise,” Takka said. “But an unnatural, deep sound.”

“I think you’re in a place that frightens you, and you’re telling each other monster tales,” I said.

“Well, that might explain it,” my cousin mused.

“Explain what?”

“Tracks. Near the entrance. The ice storm has obliterated the spoor. I’ve never seen similar footprints,” Gitak said.

“And drag marks,” Kron said darkly. “No telling if the animal was entering or leaving.”

“Big, though,” Arrak said.

Under his breath, Takka said, “Great.”

We found a galley, one of the cook’s apprentices cleaning up. She gazed at the exhausted men. “There’s still lake beast. Would you like it in a soup? We brought in yellow tubers and blood berries as well.”

“Soup. That’ll warm our bones,” Gitak smiled.

Which reminded me. “We’ll need to hunt once the weather lets up.”

“Good luck with that. Anything that can move around in this ice is bigger than you can fit through the door,” Kron said.

Definitely a concern. We didn’t want to be in the open, butchering, with the other villages turned so hostile.

The warriors sat at a table. “Good luck with your grunt hunt,” Arrak smirked.

“Hunt?”

Moving silently, as always, Lilstra came down the metal cave.

“You’re not hunting without me, are you?”

“This may not be a hunt, Lil,” Adak said. “We’ve heard threatening noises below our cavern.”

“Threats beneath my home—and you weren’t going to tell me?” the

feline scowled.

“You bunk with a female?” one of the warriors looked at us, expression stunned.

I shrugged. “She’s a hunter. Our best one. Unmarried hunters bunk together.”

Arrak chuckled. “We should recruit female warriors, Gitak. Say, cook’s girl—how’d you like a more adventurous lot?”

“Shut up, you idiot. She’ll spit in our food,” Kron said.

We headed toward the hunters’ home.

“This must’ve been a berth for the crew,” Sam said when we entered. “So many beds.”

I eyed the ladder leading up and down. The passage was a few strides across. “Why is this hole here?”

“Access to systems,” Sam said. “The crew would need that. Maybe the engines, or the—”

She gasped at the sound.

Grunting, as Takka called it. A deep noise, the sound of a large beast. It echoed up to us.

Lilstra moved closer, her large, pointed ears twitching. She pursed her full lips.

“That’s the problem with ships,” she said after a time.

“What is the problem?” I asked. The grunting started up again.

“Ships always have rats,” she said.

I didn’t know what rats were. They didn’t sound good.

“Do you want my throwing stick?” Fennek said. “I built a bow, like the other villagers have.”

Meaning my hunters expected me to go first. I accepted his weapon. Mine was taken by the other villagers’ warriors on the trail. It felt good to shoulder a quiver of darts.

The hunters looked at me, waiting. Under other circumstances, either Adak or Takka would argue over taking the lead. Here, in this alien environment, leading was up to me.

“Do you think it’s rats?” I asked Sam.

“If it is, then they’re the biggest rats I’ve ever heard of,” she said. “I don’t like that grunting, snuffling sound.”

Neither did I. But fate put the hunters in this berth. I was in charge of the hunters. Hunters were tasked with dealing with animals, game, predator or

otherwise.

With a sigh, I gripped the rungs, slipping my boots in place.

The unrelenting silence gave the grunts an ominous gravity. Metal of the smooth caves echoed the sound, camouflaging direction.

As I reached the bottom, only a single, distant rectangle of the ship's light came on. From my bag, I removed the makings of a torch. Lighting the pitch end, I waved it around.

I expected another chamber like the one above. Instead, I found a vast space my torchlight couldn't penetrate.

"What do you see?"

Takka peered down from the height of three tall men.

"Not much. It's dark."

"Great," Takka said.

A geometric forest surrounded me as I shone the torch. Angled, glossy metals in even perfectly vertical trunks and branches with unnatural angles. Vines hung in clusters, some black and smooth, some translucent and ribbed. In four directions, black circles indicated more caves.

I heard feet on the rungs.

"Maintenance access." Sam's voice. "That must be crew quarters up there."

I looked up at the circle of light, silhouetted heads looking down.

"My brave hunters sent you down next?"

"Dratum hates tech," Sam said. "They're trying to hold it together."

"You aren't even armed," I said. Sam's bow was confiscated at the same time mine was.

"It's probably nothing," Sam said. "What would be in here? It's not like there's anything to eat."

"You weren't out in the ice," I said. "Hateful as this ship is, there's no better shelter."

Grunting came again.

Sam pointed to one of the black circles.

I shined my torch, seeing nothing.

"Where does that metal cave go?" I asked.

"We're kind of central. It could go anywhere. Maybe to a drive access."

Why did I even ask?

Lilstra, also an unarmed female, came next. "Maintenance tubes," was her assessment.

“The noise is coming from there,” Sam pointed.

With her black fur, Lilstra disappeared as she ducked inside. After a few moments, she returned.

“Eew,” she lifted her boot. It glistened with something. “What did I step in?”

“Engine lubricant, maybe?” Sam crouched down to look. She stood quickly. “Gross. Smells like ethanol.”

“Mind your torch, then, Jannik,” Lilstra said, shaking her foot.

Adak was in the intersection, the place now feeling tight. “Have you seen it?”

“We think it’s down there.” I pointed.

Wrinkling his nose, Adak asked, “What’s that smell?”

“Slimy goop in the tube,” Lilstra said. “Watch your step.”

She stood close to Adak, a hand on his back. I pretended not to notice.

He looked at the intersecting caves. “It looks like these go everywhere. Do you think the villagers are at risk?”

There was only one way to find out. “Get a torch ready, Adak. Mine won’t last long.”

“Why are there no lights down here?” he asked.

“You never get lights in a scary place,” Lilstra said. “It’s a thing.”

We entered the steel cave, more footsteps clanging down the rungs.

On the round floor, my fire picked out pools of clear... something.

A few paces on, we came upon a door that filled the cave completely. It rocked back and forth.

“Something passed through here.” Adak eyed the motion.

I grabbed the door. It moved easily, despite its size.

“On a spring or something,” Sam said.

Grunting came—but closer, the sound like a series of truncated roars.

Loading a dart onto my thrower, I passed the torch to Sam.

“I’ve never heard a beast like that!” I heard Takka, far behind us, his voice so tight it squeaked.

Many times, I’d seen Takka waving his arms to distract a charging jaroor, the deadliest prey. Here? He jumped at every shadow, every sound.

The round cave abruptly opened wide.

“Stardrive,” Lilstra said, glancing around.

“Rocks,” Sam said. “There’s damage to the ship.”

“I wonder if this brought the ship down, or if it’s from the crash,” Lilstra

said.

“Those Before, the Kyrthians, were not the best at building spaceships,” Sam said. “I’ve seen, I guess you’d call it archival footage. One of these big things crash landing.”

Rockfall spread out around five large metal boulders. More vines hung from above. The torch picked out cracks, like the shattered ice of a frozen pond, but in silvery steel.

“Is that a way out?” Lilstra climbed the rockfall. “Bring the torch.”

Above the fallen rock, a crevice appeared. It didn’t seem part of the ship, but part of the rock it was buried in. Sam moved closer, aiming the torch.

It was flickering, the sap nearly burned out. “Adak, ready another torch.”

“Looks like a mudslide in there, filling it up,” Lilstra said.

“Something wet,” Sam agreed.

But she took a quick step backward.

Lilstra followed suit. “The mud moved.”

I grabbed Adak’s torch, lighting it from Sam’s.

To my shock, a shape emerged from the crevice.

Long and sinuous, glistening black, five eyestalks wavered in the air.

Central to the stalks, two plates chattered against each other like broad, sharp teeth.

“What in the three hells is that?” Adak gripped his thrower.

Slowly, undulating, the monster revealed more of itself. Tubelike legs issued forth, dragging the creature forward.

Pink light reflected from each of the stalks.

“It’s a shipworm,” Lilstra said.

“A shipworm? That thing’s huge,” Sam said.

“Well, shipworms hang out in interplanetary space, waiting for food to grab. There isn’t much to eat in space—but there’s plenty—”

The sharp plates opened wide and a stream of thick, clear liquid spurted. Lilstra was covered in the goop.

She tried to turn, to run. The feline was stuck to the floor.

“Aw, this is disgusting,” she said, struggling to lift a foot.

Adak immediately ran to her side. He launched a dart at the monster.

To my shock, the dart only pushed back loose, wrinkly skin. Wads of tissue held the dart for a moment before letting it fall to the floor.

“It needs to fend off micrometeors,” Lilstra said. “Weapons won’t hurt it. Give me your hand, Adak!”

Adak reached to her, and together they moved her a few steps. The air filled with a rank, sharp smell.

More of the thing wriggled free, moving into the chamber, toward us.

“Retreat,” I said. “Back to that door. We can shut it in here.”

“Not it,” Lilstra said. “Them. There has to be more than one. In an environment full of nutrients—it would breed.”

“Great,” Takka murmured.

Adak and Lilstra moved slowly, her feet sticking to the floor.

Takka took the rear. The actual creature was far less frightening than sounds in the shadows. He launched a dart. It went wide.

The shipworm’s sinuous neck snapped sideways. It caught the dart in platelike teeth, crunching and swallowing the missile.

“That’s great. Just great,” Takka said.

He and I followed the rest into the round cave.

To my alarm, the shipworm moved quickly despite its rock slug appearance.

As Takka and I moved down the tunnel, it was only a few steps behind.

A glance over my shoulder proved Listra right. There was more than one bearing down on us.

“What do shipworms eat?” I shouted to Lilstra.

“I don’t think they’re carbon-based. Let’s assume they eat everything,” she said.

“Including doors?” Takka asked.

So much for my plan. It was temporary at best.

Little by little, Lilstra speeded up, the goop falling away from her legs.

Soon, we reached the door. Takka put his back to it, shoving it closed.

“Hope it locks,” Sam said.

“Wait!”

An idea occurred.

Mind your torch, Lilstra said.

I grabbed out a dart. Scraping it against Lilstra’s leg, I got a wad of clear stinky slime.

“Torch!”

Sam held it out. When I passed the goo through the flame, it burst alight.

“Get ready on the door,” I said.

As I had seen Takka do, I lobbed the dart toward the monster’s head. Like it did before, it snatched the dart out of the air.

“Door!”

Takka slammed it shut. Sam shot forward, throwing a lever.

Everything around us gave a hard jerk. The metal door buckled, and in a moment, turned red hot. More blasts rocked the ship.

“Run!” Adak said.

The circular cave turned hot around us as we made our way to the ladder. More reports shook our footing. When we reached the intersection, the clear, ribbed tubes blasted us with cold spray.

“Fire control,” Lilstra said. “I better go last. Don’t want anyone stuck on the ladder.”

“I won’t let you go last,” Adak said.

The feline glared with bright green eyes. “Shut up and climb that ladder.”

Meekly, the gallant Adak started up.

“Do you guys want to find a different place to bed down?” Sam asked once we were all back in the hunters’ cabin.

“Nah,” Takka said, stretching out on a bed. “I doubt there could be anything worse living on this ship.”

“I might want to explore other accommodations,” Lilstra said. “I’m not sleepy. Nothing like a bug-eyed monster to get your blood up.”

With a swish of her tail, she vanished out the door.

We all turned our eyes on Adak.

He returned our gaze. Frowned deeply.

“What?”

SAMANTHA

I was not as shaken by the shipworms as I should have been. Time on Lasharah made me immune to monsters, it seemed.

We left the hunters to their sleep. The scent of cooked meat was a ghost in the corridor.

“I’d like to check in on the bridge,” I said. “See if they found out any more about that probe.”

Jannik’s hand rubbed my back as we walked.

“I’m with Lilstra. My blood is up. Bug-eyed monsters and all.”

“Your blood is always up,” I said. But I snuck a look at him. “Which is just the way I like it.”

“Skip the sky-fallen on the bridge,” he said, bending close. “It will be there in the morning.”

His deep voice sent a shiver through me.

“It’s on the way,” I said, although I considered his suggestion. Especially when a shi-na wrapped around my wrist. It was a lot more suggestive than holding hands.

Only Shorena sat at the controls when we entered.

“Oh, good. I thought you were asleep,” she said.

“Something happen?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” Shorena said.

Intriguing. I sat in the co-pilot’s chair. “What do you mean?”

“You know, for a while now, I’ve wondered if Flona and Sathra’s people are related to the pirates who kidnapped us,” she said.

“Who?”

“The gray twins. I talked with them for a while. They seemed familiar

with the pirates' tech, such as it is," she said.

How long had I gone, not knowing their names? "I guess I should've been friendlier to the twins. I have to say, they creep me out a little. Those black eyes."

"They're a little broken," Shorena said. "Three of their... litter? I guess? Were killed in the raid. Their people function differently. Each depends on their siblings. With more than half of them gone, they just aren't right."

"What about the pirates?" I said.

"Flona and Sathra didn't want to come out and admit it. But their species are related. They come from the same star system—or systems near enough to each other. And not far from here. I mean, in a galactic sense." Shorena turned to the monitors. "From the look of that dumpy probe..."

I knew what she meant. "It doesn't look like a very good kit."

"The twins admitted that their people were not good at space travel. The pirates, either. They generally steal spacecraft. When it breaks down to a certain point, they send out a distress signal, and try to capture the rescuers' vessel," Shorena said.

"Ah. That explains their POS raider ship," I said.

I looked at Jannik, listening to our human speech. How much did he understand?

"The differences between FTL drives aside, space travel is pretty much all the same," Shorena said. "You know, maneuvering rockets, an atmospheric envelope, hard rad shield, artificial gravity or something similar. It doesn't strike me as something you can be bad at."

"Not often," I said. "We made it to Mars, to Europa, Titan, Triton. Space travel became more advanced, not less. Even way back at the beginning, there weren't many accidents."

"Societies can devolve, I guess," Shorena said. "Look at our culture. How we screwed up our whole planet. But once we gained advanced technology, humans didn't regress."

"You're saying that Flona and Sathra's people did regress? The pirates, too?" I asked.

"I think they did. Maybe they reached a point where they could colonize space, and then lost it. Which is why the pirates and the twins' people are separated to the point where they barely recognize each other."

Should I even say it aloud? "You know who else is not good at space travel."

Shorena spread her hands in a gesture that took in this vessel. “Whoever made this crashed ship?”

I nodded. “You know, from their stories, I’m pretty sure Those Before, the Dratum, maybe those blue-bellied simians who live in the ruins, each evolved on a different moon.”

“Huh,” Shorena said. “I guess you could interpret their legends that way.”

“Three hells, they call them,” I said.

“Well, there’s probably another reason for that,” she said. “Did you feel that earthquake?”

I had to chuckle. “That was no earthquake.” I described our brief battle with the shipworms.

“Oh. I thought for sure it was seismic.”

“Why? Because of the Glare of Dread?”

“That, and the moons,” Shorena said. “There are a bunch of gravitational bodies at play. When they line up, and I’m certain they will, the tidal forces will be immense.”

“More to look forward to. Come to Lasharah for the deadly weather, stay for the devastating earthquakes.”

“Devastating is probably the word,” Shorena said.

“Just when you think it can’t get more exciting,” I said. But I would ask Jannik about earthquakes. Would they be called Lasharahquakes here? Were they a regular part of the Season Dark?

Jannik stood, leaned against the control dash, watching the monitors.

I noted that the storm had mostly moved off or petered out. Had the other villages survived in their exclusive Valley Hold? Was Jannik wondering about his mother, his brother? How they fared?

Myself? I didn’t care much. Villages that arrived before us had merged, increasing their populations. They tried to keep our village out, though it was a curse, a taboo to do so. After offering a series of trials that, should we pass them, would allow us to stay, they cheated us. *Let them freeze*, I thought.

Shorena caught me looking. “In a few weeks or so, we’ll start to go from a lot of night to the land of the midnight sun,” she said.

“Will that improve the weather, do you think?”

“This ice storm came from somewhere. I’m going to say no. Without the Glare of Dread, this would be winter. With all the axis shifting—who knows how long it will take to calm down. Tides will be crazy high and low. We’ll just have to see.”

“Unless that probe is a pirate machine,” I said. “Our time here might be shorter than any of us thought.”

“If we can figure out how to close that hatch, we should be untouchable,” Shorena said. “If we can’t—fish in a barrel.”

I got up. I couldn’t take any more cheer from Shorena. “Good talk,” I said.

“Sorry. There’s just no good news to tell. I wish there was.”

Jannik saw me rise and followed me. We headed down the corridor.

“Have you picked up our speech?” I asked. “How much of that did you understand?”

“Some. Bad weather. Worse weather. The ground will shake as the Glare of Dread grows in the sky. As far as pirates—that should be left to the warriors,” he said.

“No. If I’m going to make this home, then I’ll fight for it,” I said.

Jannik’s hand slipped into mine. “You’re sexy when you talk tough.”

I laughed. “You think I’m sexy when I have morning breath and haven’t bathed in a week and my hair is all nappy.”

He nodded. “You’re right.”

With that, he swept me into his arms and carried me the rest of the way down the corridor. When we got to our quarters, he kicked the hatch closed with his foot.

“Wouldn’t want to wake the neighbors,” he said.

I was roughly dropped on the bed. “Since when do you care about that?”

He practically ripped the dress off of me. “I thought you did.”

Jannik was on top of me. His tongue flicked my nipples. I gasped, reaching for the frog of his belt. Soon, he was also naked.

“All day, I’ve wanted you,” he whispered.

Before I could respond, the shi-na exploded from his wrists. One wrapped around my head, my mouth, like a gag. The other pulled my wrists together, behind me.

I jerked in surprise, pulling against the bonds, letting out a cry that didn’t escape.

Aroused, Jannik pushed me down.

I was on my knees on the bed.

Exposed to him.

Needing his touch.

His tongue explored me roughly from behind, opening my lips. The tip

probed, more gently. I instantly dripped wet.

He took his time finding my clit. I could not beg for it. I was held too tightly to squirm into place. Enduring his licking, tasting, I shivered.

Like flint on steel, he found my sensitive place. My body jumped, beyond my control. With a dark chuckle, he slowly ground sparks from me.

Pleasure built up, melting me. Giving into the languid lashing, the first stirrings of an orgasm emerged.

He growled as he sensed the sensation moving through me like power through a wire. Pressure from the tip of his tongue increased, his motion remaining the same.

I was driven wild as he ate my pussy. The thrashing of my limbs was held fast. Yet he responded, feeling my resistance.

Jannik tongued me ferociously.

Joy barreled down on me. My body sang, nerves zinging. Tightly bound, I could only let pleasure wash over me.

His face pulled away.

“You’re so wet,” he said.

The tentacle unwrapped from my mouth to rewrap around my neck. I panted into the bed.

“I should fuck you.”

“Yes,” I gasped, still entwined in waves of sensuality.

“You don’t seem convinced.”

“Please! Yes, please, Jannik!”

I felt the broad mushroom head of his cock press against me. But he did not enter. Instead, he rubbed the tip against my already burning clit.

“I want you inside me,” I said. “I need you to fuck me.”

Slight pressure, and his cock unfolded my slick flesh. But just a little.

I tried to angle against him, to force him inside me. Jannik held me still.

Gently, he moved into me. Then pulled out. Over and over. Torturing me.

“Jannik, ram your cock into me! Please! All of it!”

“You belong to me,” he said.

“I do!”

“Mine.”

“Yes, all yours.”

“I’ll do with you what I will.”

With that, he easily manipulated me. I was turned over as if I weighed nothing.

His eyes were shadowed. A yellow gleam was visible. A gleam of lust, of control.

Jannik straddled me. He slid his length of meat between my tits.

Grabbing roughly, palms hard against the nipples, he pressed the flesh tight around him.

His hips rocked, stoking between my tits. I saw him bare his teeth, increase his rhythm.

“What do you offer, so that I’d fuck you?” he asked, eyes blazing.

“Anything.”

He continued stroking between my breasts, shoulders squirming, back arching.

“I’ll take your mouth,” he said.

“Anything,” I repeated.

With wild motion, he brought his dick to my lips. Leaning over me, he pressed my lower lip with his thumb. His hips loomed above as he opened my mouth.

I took his jaw-breaking cock. My tongue and lips worked furiously. My teeth scraped against his cock, pulling out.

He hissed, moving deeper into me.

The head pressed against my throat. I gagged, swallowing, taking as much as I could.

Relentlessly, he moved in and out. The motion intensified. I held on as he fucked my mouth, my throat.

I felt the shock travel through his shaft.

Growling, he clenched his teeth. He spurted into me.

Desperately, I tried to swallow his issue. It was too much.

Before I could drown, he pulled out. His come trailed over my chest and down my belly as he backed away. I thought I felt it steam on my skin.

The tentacles whipped away, dropping me to my back.

“Your pussy,” he said. “I haven’t forgotten.”

His hands pressed my pubis. Gently, he opened me, staring into my wet pink.

Then, the shi-na issued from the slits in his arms. The wedge tip of one toyed my clit. As it did, the other pushed inside me.

It was not as big as his cock, nor as hard. Yet the sensitive limb searched inside me.

It sought deeper. And then it touched a profounder, much more sensitive

place. With my clit stimulated, the tentacle went to work on my G-spot.

Jannik stared into my eyes as his alien appendages took me.

His breath came harder.

Could he feel me with those tentacles? Did they experience the slick, tight flesh?

From Jannik's reaction, I thought they must.

"So tight," he hissed. "So wet."

He played with me, until things became serious.

The dual massaging inspired another storm to rise inside me.

Vibration like thunder shook me, stoked by flashes of lightning that made me moan.

I closed my eyes, overcome. Calling his name. Shuddering in carnal bliss.

Jannik squeezed his eyes shut. His mouth opened, though no sound issued. The tendrils squirmed into me, and his body squirmed in turn.

"I can take no more!" He withdrew the shi-na with a gasp. I was not surprised to see his cock fully erect again.

The tentacles wrapped around my knees, spreading my legs. He stared into my eyes before kissing me. I pressed my lips against his.

His tongue penetrated my mouth as his cock penetrated my pussy.

The invasion was slow, measured. We had both come. Now, it would take a good long time to get there again.

My hands were free. I touched his face, running my nails down his neck, his back.

His hands moved from my hips up my body. He gripped my tits, rubbing the nipples with his thumbs.

I continued down, gripping his round ass. Pressing, pulling, I drove him deeper into me.

His lips left mine. Jannik's mouth moved to my sensitive spots he'd discovered before. A nip on my earlobe. Breath in my head. Lips and tongue against my neck. And his teeth.

Thrusts increased, almost unnoticeable, both in speed and in force.

Though I craved his control of my body, his dominance, it was this slow lovemaking I wanted most.

It continued on, hotter and wetter. Sounds escaped us, beyond our control.

His face moved lower. I felt his mouth on my shoulder.

Teeth found the mating bite he left on me.

Our first time together flooded my memory. The desire to surrender to

him, one I had not experienced before, crashing into my mind.

I was taken back to when he hunted me, captured me. We lay together in a tight cave as rain lashed the forest around us. Our own storm was just beginning.

There was no choice but to submit. Though frightened, I was beyond willing.

“Oh!” the edge came closer. “Oh, Jannik.”

My heart pounded. I felt his racing pulse. Our systems synched, hearts beating together.

Our entwined link, our heartsong, churned between us. It was more than erotic, beyond love, above lust.

I felt the almost painful jab of his oncoming orgasm in my own mind. He felt mine, the waves that built and built until finally crashing, drowning, sweeping away all thought.

Lunges rocked me, inside and out. His breath was the sound of an engine. My very breathing became a series of gasps.

We both went rigid at the same time, muscles twitching, flexing. Consumed by a feedback loop of fiery gratification.

His back arched as I pressed hard against him.

“Baby, yes!” I hollered.

Sizzling, a huge orgasm raced through me, leaving a trail of shuddering flesh. Jannik groaned, releasing liquid fire inside me.

Out of his control, the shi-na contracted.

I wrapped my legs around him, holding on, my body bucking.

His arms pulled me tight.

I couldn't breathe.

I didn't care.

Eventually, the clench eased. We lay easily, warmly in each other's arms.

His face was focused, grimly serious. Until I kissed the tip of his nose.

“Boop,” he said.

Where did he learn that?

He was still inside me, growing soft, yet still hot and writhing. His rough features went even softer.

I put my arms around his neck. Snuggling.

How did I ever think I could leave him?

With his strong arms around me, pressed against his broad, muscular chest, I felt myself relax.

We were safe. For now. I would just have to settle for that.

JANNIK

I awoke, still wrapped in Sam's warm arms.

Was it morning?

The light was always the same in here.

Wanting to savor the feeling of her against me, I remained still. Even so, she roused from sleep. Blinking at me, she smiled.

"Hi, handsome. Come here often?"

"Often as I can."

"So I've felt."

"I'd prefer not to move," I said. "For as long as possible. You are warm and soft."

"I like you hot and hard," she said.

I flipped her on her back. "That can be quickly arranged."

"Not too quickly—" She stopped speaking.

Voices were in the cave outside. The gobbling language of the sky-fallen.

I sighed and let her go. There was no point.

"Maybe they've found something more," she said. Then she looked around, puzzled. "Where's my fur dress?"

"I tossed it," I said. "I was in a hurry at the time."

We eventually found it in the far corner of the room. Though I had been rough on the garment, it remained intact. I watched her lace the front, her cleavage a magnet to my eyes.

She gave me a pointed look. "Later, baby."

"Promise?"

"Like you wouldn't find me and drag me into a cave."

"The way you like it," I said, tying the frog of my belt.

“Hmm,” she said.

We moved out of our chamber. Lizzie walked toward the bridge.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked.

“We’ve been pinged,” Lizzie said. “Don’t ask me what that means. All I know is: it sounds bad.”

The two hurried to the bridge, and I followed.

But we were intercepted by Grexi, the healer.

“The elders meet,” she said. “Come.”

We took the first cave to a cavern I had not seen before. A great round space furnished with long, curved tables and benches, an area with many metal slabs for cooking. Despite the oddness, I recognized a place for many to meet.

Rakkin, the chief cook, directed his boys and girls around the space. Frequently, he ran a hand through his silver hair, confounded by the machines before him. Yet the air was redolent with rendered fat, roasting meat.

“That ice storm froze every edible plant and berry in the area,” he groused.

“Oo, smoothies would be good!” Jeannie followed the other sky-fallen into the cavern.

The cook raised his brows at her.

“Frozen fruit? Blended?” she twirled her finger in a circle. “It’s a drink?”

“Go away, silly one,” Rakkin said.

“Right.”

Father sat at a central table, Gattok at his side as always. Othik, Keeper of Memory, and Vattim, Keeper of Legend, sat on either side. Grexi moved on her stick to take her place, completing the Elder Council.

I was surprised to see the hunters already in attendance. But Takka’s clothing was spattered with blood. Lilstra licked her fur clean.

“An early hunt?” I moved to them.

“Best time. We couldn’t find you,” Takka said.

“They could barely find the front door.” Lilstra smirked.

Adak looked troubled.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There were no hunters from the other villages,” he said. “After that storm...”

Takka slapped Adak on the shoulder. “Serves them right.”

“Seriously,” Lilstra said. “Don’t feel bad for coming out on top.”

“I wonder if they will recover,” Adak said.

He was my oldest friend, and usually laid back and quick with a jest or jab. It disturbed me to see his concerned expression—especially for those who turned enemy on us.

“Your sympathy seems misplaced,” I said.

“Does it?” he said. Then shrugged and turned away. “It was only a storm. What everyday event will wipe out our own village?”

His words gave me pause. We always hunted enormous, dangerous beasts. Survived the killing threats of our forest world. But only a storm...

“He’s catching a case of the drearies from that Sun-Hair,” Takka said, meaning Cathy, the redhead.

I shook off my own darkening perspective. “What did you hunt?”

“Riaja, of course,” Takka said.

Ice snake, I thought. It was the season. Bringing it in would have required the entire hunting party. At least they were skinny enough to bring through the hatch.

“What are they doing here?” I heard Father’s voice.

“They understand the danger,” Grexi said.

“Pirates from the sky? Ridiculous fantasy,” Gattok said.

“As are females from the sky,” Grexi said, which shut him down.

“Fine. Let’s get this over with so we can plan our exodus to a safer shelter,” Father said. “I can’t sleep in this thing.”

“With their warriors stalking the woods?” Gattok said. “The other villages mean to see us dead, brother.”

“Hope for good weather,” Father said. “Leave at night. Small groups with warrior escort. We can gather at the shelter of Lowland Grove and move from there.”

“Suvo,” Grexi interrupted. “Hear them. Shorena.”

The woman with short hair cleared her throat. “I’m sorry to say, but a probe—a spy—high above us has discovered our position. It somehow hacked into this ship’s nav gear. Once it did, it sent a signal. There may soon be a raider vessel on the way.”

“I’m sorry, but can you speak plainly, girl?” Othik said. “Your words have no meaning.”

“Marauders,” Flona said. “Perhaps slavers—they are aware of the village. They will come to take whatever they find of value.”

“With violence,” Sathra said. “And much death.”

“What marauders?” Othik said. “Every man, woman, and child from the south have already gathered here. There are no others. Flatlanders would not risk the Season Dark to raid us. We’ve had no skirmish with distant villages in living memory.”

The twins looked lost. There were no words to describe the threat. I could barely grasp it myself. Save one aspect.

“We have fought the marauders before,” I stepped forward. “They are clad in metal shells, armed with lances of light. Fantastic, I know, yet they were here. And may return.”

“For the sky-fallen?” Grexi said.

“You’ve spoken of these shelled people before,” Othik said, “But none such have ever existed in this land. Is there proof?”

To my surprise, Adak stepped to the Elders’ table. He set a shiny object before them. One of the shelled hats. I didn’t realize he’d taken a trophy from our battle.

Othik picked it up by a leather strap. When he tapped it with a knuckle, it rang. “It is burned on top,” he said.

“I use it as a cook pot,” Adak said quietly.

Ah, I thought.

“There are ways to keep the village safe,” Shorena said. “A transponder, set to the right frequency...”

“We can lure them,” Sathra jumped in.

“To a place of our choosing,” her sister went on.

“These marauders are likely related to our people,” Sathra indicated herself and her sister, “We have sensitivities to certain chemicals that do not affect the Dratum.”

“These are likely shared,” Flona said, “and could be used to bright the raiders low.”

“The Keeper of healing can test such contaminants on us,” Sathra said.

Flona nodded. “We volunteer ourselves. To save the village.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Sam stepped up. “You don’t have to poison yourselves to save the rest of us. There must be something, some forgotten weapon.”

“This vessel has no defenses,” Shorena said. “No weapon system I could uncover.”

“I looked, too, Sam,” Sun-Hair Cathy said. “There isn’t anything.”

“Perhaps in the ruins.” I was surprised to hear myself say it.

The entirety of the gathering stared at me.

“It makes sense to fight marauders in a craft like this,” I waved my hand around, “with similar weapons. This is the creation of Those Before.”

I shrugged. What else could I say?

“Your suggestion is surprising,” Grexi said. “Perhaps fitting. I have found a wealth of helpful healing material within this place. It may be a device of peace.”

Sam gave her a thoughtful look. She was apprenticed to the healer, yet there had been little time for her to practice with all that was going on.

“Who would undertake such a foolish task?” Othik said. “In the Season Dark? In forbidden ruins? In such lethal weather?”

Put it that way, it did seem an unlikely task, I thought.

Sam’s eyes lit up. She, of course, would volunteer for such a venture.

Before she could, I heard voices in the hall.

I recognized my cousin and his warriors—although the first through the doorway shocked me.

Tebor was a war leader of another village, and son of that village’s chief, Kevok. He suggested the Three Trials that, had we won, would have allowed us to remain in Valley Hold. And then he cheated during them, at the merciless game of Moons, at the hunt for the dusk flier’s egg.

The usual arrogance was absent, making him look smaller. Gitak shoved him before the Elders.

“Speak your piece, and let our Elders decide your fate,” Gitak said, his glass stone knife in hand.

“We found him alone in the woods,” Kron said. “Spying.”

“Not spying,” Tebor said. “Seeking help.”

Arrak scowled. “Were you seeking help when you sent units against our flight from the Hold?”

“I did not agree with our warchief’s decision. It was folly. Few of our warriors returned,” Tebor said.

My cousin shot me a look. I held my tongue.

“Which is why I come before you,” Tebor went on. “We are near failing. The ice storm took a heavy toll. Many are sick. Our supplies are ruined, firewood soaked, and nearly all have the creeping purple.” He held up his fingers, wiggling them. The tips were dark.

“Frostbite,” Sam said. “Hypothermia.”

“I have ways of healing in this place,” Grexi said. “We can save the villages.”

“They sent us to die,” Tebor said. Although it wasn’t his place, his words were true.

“Then tried to seal our fate by harrying our journey with their warriors,” Kron added.

Father’s gaze turned ferocious. He made a single sound through his teeth, a sharp hissing noise. The warriors hung their heads.

“My father, Chief Kevok, could not make the short journey to bow before you. He is too ill. Most of our Elders did not survive...” Tebor cleared his throat. “I have come to seek your mercy.”

“How did you even know we were still nearby?” I asked.

“We have seen your hunters,” Tebor looked at my team, “Your warriors. Somehow, you survived much better than Valley Hold.”

“This is a trick,” Kron said. “They still wish us dead—and now want to take our shelter.”

“Be still, Kron,” Father said. “Tebor could’ve come with all his remaining warriors, and the ones from the other tribe.”

“It would seem they have no force worth showing,” Gattok said. “A chief, even an ailing one, would not send his son lightly.”

Our warchief gazed at his own son, Gitak, and went silent.

Father did not look at me.

“We have the means to heal the sick,” Grexi said. “There is more shelter in this ruin than in the whole of Valley Hold.”

Othik nodded. “Prior to this, our villages have always come together during the Season Dark. To support each other, protect each other, to share resources and labor.”

“Stories say that the Dratum have always come together in times of need or strife,” Vattim said. “Against dangerous weather, and against the cruelty of Those Before. It is our way, the way that keeps us alive as much as the spoken law.”

Gattok sighed. “I would return to our usual coming together. This fighting, this selfishness, is disconcerting, and dangerous. Let us extend a hand to right this wrong—even if we have been the wronged party.”

“Really?” Father said to his brother. “Even though we have the odds now? Vengeance is within our grasp.”

“Vengeance breeds vengeance,” Gattok said. “Altruism is life.”

I was as surprised as Father at the warchief's words. But I supposed understanding war included knowing when not to fight.

Father shrugged. "Bring your sick, Tebor. This place isn't ours any more than Valley Hold is yours. Send your healers to prepare. But understand that our warriors will be wary—and ready. Gitak, inform your men."

Rakkin and his apprentices brought trays laden with meat and a few gathered roots to the table. There were also cups. The master cook himself set one in front of Jeannie.

"Frozen berries," he said. Then he twirled his finger.

"Oo, thank you!" Jeannie took a big gulp. Then she grabbed her forehead. "Brain freeze!"

"Eat with us, gain your strength to return to Valley Hold, Tebor," Father said.

I tried Jeannie's frozen berry drink. It was surprisingly refreshing. "What of the marauders?" I asked.

"We have more serious issues to deal with," Father said.

"More serious than being massacred?" Sam asked.

"Or enslaved?" Shorena added.

"Pursue it as you will," Father said. "The Elders can't take the time to explore your threat from the sky. We must remain vigilant as we take in the other villages."

"But—" Sam started.

I took her hand. When she looked at me, I shook my head.

Father had no choice but to separate himself from this threat. Real as it was, the population of the village would not believe in it. To force the issue, or even pursue it, Father would risk his position as the village leader.

Grexi, however, was an explorer of the horrors of Those Before. Vattim kept the stories of the Kyrthians, studied and understood them. These were the Elders we needed to employ in our endeavor against the pirates.

"Mm. That's good snake, Rakkin," Jeannie said. "I should've pledged to the cooks."

Leave it to Jeannie to break the tension, I thought.

After the makeshift feast, Gitak and his warriors led Tebor out of the metal caves. Grexi moved us into a corner to speak.

"I have too much to prepare. If not for this threat, I would demand your service, Sam," she said.

As her apprentice, Sam would have no choice. There was much healing to

be done.

“Thank you for granting my leave,” Sam said.

The healer shrugged. “I figured not many would be willing to venture to the ruins.”

“You got that right,” Lizzie said. “Creepy old buildings. This ship is actually pretty comfortable.”

“How can we make this happen without you?” Sam asked.

Vattim wandered over. “The legends say that Lak the Founder could wield lightning. Also, he commanded the combination of fluid and fire. You may find evidence of this. Look for his sign, the sign of fire. More importantly, Rakka the Black, spear-woman, and Kenda the Pale, bow-woman, were friends of the fliers. The Moon Maidens hatched eggs of the giants in a city called Lost Parvu-Narr.”

“Do you have any idea where that is?” Sam asked.

“Note the word ‘Lost’ in the name,” the Keeper of Legend said.

“Right,” Sam sighed.

“There are sky pictures in that city,” I said.

“Maps,” Sam nodded. “Is there some aspect of Parvu-Narr that we might recognize?”

“*Lost* Parvu-Narr is built under the sign of air. I know nothing more about it.” Vattim shrugged.

“In the ruins, you can often find answers,” Grexi said. “Search carefully. I must go to the infirmary and get ready.”

Shorena led the way to the bridge. She used the egg to make the windows change.

“Here’s what happened. We heard that signal, that language we didn’t understand. Early this morning, a return signal in the same language was picked up by the probe. Once that occurred, the probe somehow sent a ping to this ship’s controls. Some kind of info grab. I don’t know what the probe found, but I shut it down when I saw it. Sorry, I just can’t work this control dash very well.”

“We didn’t recognize the words,” Flona said.

Sathra continued, “It seemed to be a kind of code.”

“Then why do we think it’s the pirates?” Sam asked.

Flona took over the computer controller. After a moment, characters rolled and scrolled at the bottom of the windows. The gray twin pressed a gem, making the squiggles stop.

“There,” she pointed.

“Our starting for computer programs,” Sathra said. “Not exactly a word.”

“More of a machine command,” Flona said.

“Common on our entry devices, but unspoken,” Sathra finished.

“Like control or escape or something,” Lizzie said.

The twins blinked at her, expressions absent.

I understood. I usually felt the same when the sky-fallen spoke.

SAMANTHA

It was cold and bright outside, the sun actually a few fingers' distance over the horizon.

Everything dripped, the ice still melting.

"Are we all going?" Lizzie asked. The brides and hunters followed us outside.

"No," I said. "Jannik and I will go. We've been before and know the way."

Shorena's mouth twisted. "You probably don't have very long. Ten days if we're lucky. A week probably. I'll try to calibrate how many light hours the signal took to reach the probe."

I looked at the rough path along Calamity. Dratum carefully moved along the slick trail, some on their own, some supported. Their green and blue skin was blackened at the nose and fingertips. Ice had done them in.

"You'll have to figure out where to set up an ambush," I said. "Lilstra is a hunter. She knows the area outside the Hold some."

"We can act as escorts," Takka said. "I can show you some sights, Lizzie."

"I'm sure," she said.

Adak nodded. "Plenty of valleys and canyons in this range. We'll find a place."

"I'm no meteorologist, but from what the satellites show, you should have a few days of clear weather," Cathy said.

"That will help us move faster," I said. "I'm just hoping this isn't a fool's errand."

"The council doesn't believe it's important. They're trying to do what

they can for the other villages without getting double crossed,” Lizzie said.

“Should keep them busy,” Cathy said. “Out of our hair.”

“Guess you can’t convince a bunch of rustics that armored aliens are going to land and—*Pew! Pew!*—zap everyone with ray blasters,” Jeannie said. “No matter how much danger they’re in.”

“Gotta try to find a way to close the hatch,” Shorena said. “We might be safe if we’re all inside the ship and under all that rock and dirt.”

That was my hope.

I wasn’t counting on it.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” I said.

“Good luck.” Lizzie hugged me. Then hugs all around. The Dratum hunters stood back, studying us like we were foreign creatures.

Then we started up and around the mountain that buried the starship.

“Mind your footing,” Jannik cautioned.

We were moving against the flow of traffic. Apparently, the villagers had had enough of freezing to death. Would they change their minds, once they found themselves inside a vessel created by Those Before?

There wasn’t time to worry about it.

At the top of the rise, Jannik helped me over the shoulder. Most of the ice had melted, but the rocks were still slippery.

Soon, we moved down the slope of the crater. I saw a line of villagers heading from Last Pass to the plateau above. The village had been forced to camp there when they first arrived. Now, all I saw were fallen trees and mud.

“Glad we didn’t stick it out up there,” I said.

“Probably not much worse than Valley Hold,” Jannik said.

He proved right as we made our way to the crater floor. Everything not frozen was sodden. Water poured from the sheltering caves on both sides of the rim. It had been a day and night of wind-blown hell.

I saw the lake near the cave wall overflowing its banks, far past the trenches dug for our Second Trial. Refuse, branches, blankets, and clothing were scattered everywhere.

“What a mess,” Jannik said.

“Karma,” I said.

“What is karma?”

“Reaping what you sow, getting what you deserve for your actions,” I said.

He nodded. “A good word.”

We crossed the valley floor, avoiding trash and scattered goods. Even the caves on the lower levels, the most sheltered, stood empty.

“Regular ghost town,” I said.

A line of Dratum headed toward the pass. They looked like refugees. Some were so wracked by the downpour of ice that they were carried in litters. I wondered how they would get them over the shoulder.

We made for the line. Once we got through the narrow throat of stone, we would be the only ones heading south.

“Sam! Jannik!”

I saw a small figure running toward us. Recognizing him at once, I moved toward him. “Nakar. Are you okay?”

Jannik’s young brother looked unharmed. “Father managed to keep the fire going, and another family shared our cave. It was deep enough to avoid most of the damage. Most didn’t fare as well.”

“I’m glad you’re not hurt,” I said.

“Are you moving into Valley Hold, now that everyone is leaving?” he asked.

“No, we need to travel. Back the way we came,” I said. “It’s important. We’ll be back. You’ll see us in the—” I almost said spaceship, “—new shelter soon.”

“Traveling to hunt?” he asked. “The storm didn’t drive away all the game.”

“No. We need to find a place. Wish us luck,” Jannik said.

Before my mate could stride into the line heading out, the boy stopped us.

“There is a way. I felt sad that we couldn’t take them with us,” he said.

“A way?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“Let me show you,” he said. Before we could speak, he ran toward the eastern caves.

“Do we have time for this?” Jannik asked.

“I know we need to hurry,” I said.

He nodded. “I’m not looking forward to days and nights on the road in this weather, either. A few minutes won’t matter.”

We hadn’t visited the shelters of the other villages. On the one hand, a cave was a cave. But these were larger, deeper, the floors flatter. We really had been stuck up in the cheap seats. Our caves were exposed to the elements, even without the ice storm of the century.

Nakar brought us to the largest of the first level caves. I paused at the

opening. An odd smell issued. It was reminiscent of cucumbers gone bad and a large animal.

Jannik paused as well. His eyes widened at the sound of a hiss.

“Nakar?” he called into the darkness. “Little brother, are you all right? I hear a rija.”

A rija? Like what we had for breakfast? It fed a dozen. I froze in place.

“Come!” Nakar called. “This is a fast way to travel, if needed.”

Jannik drew his atlatl and a dart. “Stay here,” he said.

I waited at the entrance, trying to see into the dark. My eyes seemed better in dim light these days. Still, I could only see shapes.

One was large.

“Get away from that, brother,” Jannik said.

“Wait! Don’t shoot!”

I couldn’t stop myself from hurrying in. Then regretted it.

Nakar prevented Jannik from throwing a dart. Behind them loomed the biggest lizard I had ever seen. It was five times larger than an extinct Komodo dragon—maybe the size of a dinosaur.

A narrow, wedge shaped head darted toward the two. With a wet sound, a great purple tongue lolled from an opening maw. To my surprise, it licked the two brothers. It was hard enough to make the two stagger a few steps.

“See? She likes you,” Nakar said.

Jannik put his weapon away and shook the lizard spit from himself.

The enormous lizard had purple and raspberry striped scales. Bulbous yellow eyes took us in sagaciously. “That’s the biggest frickin’ lizard I’ve ever seen.”

“Father raises them from eggs,” Nakar said. “He uses them to move his crops. But they can be ridden as well, if there’s an emergency.”

This was certainly an emergency.

“Ridden?” Jannik said.

“Do they have a saddle?”

Jannik widened his eyes at me. “You know about riding... a *lizard*?”

“There is a rope that goes in the mouth,” Nakar said. “You pull it to tell it which way to go.”

“It sure does stink,” I said.

Nakar nodded. “You get used to it.”

“I doubt that,” Jannik said.

“Of all the animals to domesticate.” I shook my head. “They chose

Barney.”

“You mount her from the tail,” Nakar said. He walked behind the beast and quickly climbed up. “See?”

The animal didn’t seem to mind. It dipped its head in a pile of vegetation and chewed.

“Okay, watch me,” Nakar said.

There was a rope already in the lizard’s mouth, back behind the teeth. With a gentle jerk, the boy got the lizard moving toward the cave mouth.

“I was worried she would starve here with no one to feed her.” Nakar pulled back on the reins. The monster lizard stopped. “Or worse, she would run away.”

“It doesn’t look like it moves faster than walking,” Jannik said.

“Oh, she goes quick when you urge her on,” Nakar replied.

“Face it, babe. We’re riding the lizard,” I said.

Jannik sighed.

“You want me to drive?” I asked.

It was no surprise that the throng heading through Last Pass dove out of the way as Barney moved through. The lizard was easy enough to direct. Once we got past the frightened villagers, I leaned back.

“Yah! Hyah, Barney!”

Suddenly, the creature moved with long, galloping hops. Jannik sat behind me, putting his arms around my waist.

“Leapin’ lizards,” I said.

“What?”

“Nothing. Which way?”

“Down this spine, then to the left when the slope eases,” Jannik said.

How easy a slope did this dinosaur need? I opted not to test our mount.

Snow and ice didn’t seem to bother the creature. She neither slid nor bogged down. I felt heat rise from her scaly hide. *A warm-blooded animal*, I thought.

At first, I felt a little seasick. But after a while, I got used to the leaping gait. I wasn’t sure if Jannik did. He squeezed me so tight, it was hard to breathe.

Moving in the open air, she didn’t smell quite as potent.

Samantha Johnston, Queen of the Dino Riders! I thought to myself.

Barney leaped on until the sun set. Then she stopped at the side of the animal track we followed and ate some trees.

“Guess we camp here,” Jannik said.

Climbing down was a lot more difficult than climbing up. But we managed.

“I know it’s weird, but we’re making good time,” I said.

Jannik folded his arms and stared up at the lizard. “How do we keep it from wandering off?”

“Sleep on her?” I said. “She is on the stinky side, but she’s nice and warm.”

He shut his eyes tightly and rubbed his temples. “I’m going to hunt some dinner. Maybe start a fire.”

“Okay,” I said. Would a fire scare Barney away? It wasn’t like there was anything we could do to stop her if she wanted to leave. I set about looking for dry wood before the dinosaur ate it all.

Jannik came hurrying back.

“We need to move on,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“Haithi, a pack of them.”

I remembered the fierce feline hunters and wanted no part of them. We clambered back on the lizard. Would Barney go if she was eating? I jerked the reins. To my relief, our lizard mount responded, plodding back to the game trail.

“Hyah!” I kicked her solid sides with my heels. Once again, Barney took off in leaping strides.

It was a surprisingly short trip to the end of High Pass. I recalled my elation when we reached this during our trek to Valley Hold. From here, it was a straight shot along the shallow canyon between the peaks, the grade easy.

Below, I saw bobbing fields of moon-limned plants, the stalks of a bamboo-like forest beyond.

“I know this sounds crazy, but I can see so much better in the dark these days,” I said.

“Perhaps you are becoming more Dratum. Living our ways, eating our foods,” Jannik said behind me.

“I see qinta,” I said. Jannik showed me how to pop them like sweet, fluffy popcorn with kernels the size of basketballs. We had come a long way.

“The ice may have ruined them,” he said. “Soon, the High Pass will level out. We can try them once we head through the—”

Barney grunted, snorted. His wedge of a head swiveled toward the fields of qinta.

The big lizard turned off the pass, down the slope, before I could rein her in. Rocks rolled beneath her clawed feet. The beast stumbled.

There were only the rope reins in the monster's mouth to grip onto.

"We're falling," Jannik breathed.

Our mount let out a bleat, feet scrabbling. Her belly dropped to the ground, hard scales scraping the rocks.

Jannik's arms shot beneath mine, his hands gripping the reins. In this way, he held me in place.

"We're overbalancing her," he said. "Hang on."

"I didn't even think she noticed our weight." I gripped the crude rope until my hands ached.

Barney's tail raked through the rocks behind us. Loose gravel let go. The three of us went into an uncontrolled slide down the steep slope.

JANNIK

It was a long drop to the ground beneath the slope.

Beneath us, the creature lost her footing.

She started to tumble.

If the massive lizard rolled over us, we would be smashed flat.

Letting out a frightened honk, the animal Sam named Barney somersaulted.

Above us, I saw the meaty tail.

I grabbed Sam around the waist.

“Let go of the rope!” I commanded.

We swerved sideways, rocks flying around us.

“Jannik, what!”

“Let go!”

With my arms around her, I brought up my knees. Our skidding tumble turned into a drop. We were falling.

Using all the strength of my legs, I leaped from the doomed beast, carrying Sam with me.

Jumping free, we joined a shower of rocks, ice and dust rolling down the steep slope.

Sam screamed. But the scream was short, truncated by our hitting the ground. We created a frosty, wet splash.

Qinta stalks, half-frozen, provided some resistance. But the flowering bulbs popped beneath the force of our fall. Slushy, juicy fruit cushioned the blow.

For a moment, we lay panting. A sweet, floral sound rose. We were covered in cold juice.

“Sticky,” Sam said after a time.

“But alive.”

She sat up. “Barney!”

I heard a sloppy, chomping sound. There was a path of destruction through the field of wildflowers. At the end, the beast sat. She gorged herself on the juice-filled flowers. Her mouth, face and neck were wet.

We moved to her. Sam put hands on the hard, pebbly hide.

“She doesn’t look hurt.”

“That makes one of us,” I said.

Our landing was soft enough, but my bones still felt jarred.

Sam looked up at where we had fallen. “Do you think we can find shelter?”

In my youth, part of my task as a young hunter was harvesting quinta for feasts. This was an area I knew well. “Yes. There’s a place.”

Barney grabbed another mouthful of soggy plants. She chewed and munched happily.

“If we can get our transportation to move.”

Shelter was a slab of rock twenty paces across. It lay at an angle atop thick fangs of black rock. While not a cave, it was wide and dry beneath. Not far away, a stream that fed the swampy quinta bed bent close.

I found dry fuel for a fire inside. “No one has come to pick quinta this Season Dark.” Sticks were dry to the point of brittleness. Perfect. In a moment, the shelter was warmed by a substantial fire.

“Should we try to make quinta?” Sam asked. “It was so good when we did it before.”

“It may have gone over,” I said.

A few strides away, Barney staggered through the tall field. After defecating loudly, the animal keeled over on her side. Her breathing became a snore.

“Yes. It’s gone over,” I decided.

“We’re not lost, are we?” Sam asked.

“No. I would have preferred to come down where the slope was not so steep. But there’s no reason not to cut through the forest. Hunting will be sparse, but we’ll find something.”

Sam gazed into the fire, chewing on some smoked amphibian. “It seemed to take forever, walking to Valley Hold. The floods washed us so far south.”

I didn’t trust the animal we rode. Still, she moved quickly. “It won’t take

long to reach that city..."

"But?"

Sam began to hear my thoughts.

"I wonder if there's anything to find there. If this journey is folly."

"Plus you don't like the ruins."

"I hate the ruins," I agreed.

Sam leaned against me. "I don't know much about starships or space travel. Earth joined the alliance recently. Before that, throughout our history, we thought we were alone in the universe."

Dratum knew better. Those Before were not like us. Even though we lived here together, we had come from different places. "But you were not."

"No. There are all kinds of intelligent life out there," she said, staring up at the clear sky. "But if the Kyrthians were spacefaring, they would've known better. They would have developed defenses. It's just the way it goes. We need to find what they developed."

"You sound so certain." I didn't know how she could. As far as the legends went, Those Before were cruel people. There was no mention of them being clever, or fierce, or anything other than arrogant.

"I am certain. There has to be something," she said.

"You know that traveling alone is dangerous," I warned. "Menace stalks the quiet paths. So I believe you. You wouldn't put me, or yourself, in danger for no reason."

"We have to do something to protect our world," she said.

Our world. The words echoed in my mind.

Since knowing her, Sam always looked for a way to leave Lasharah. Her talk of spaceships, travel among the stars, freeing her brother by rejoining a group of people who treated her little differently from a slave.

"Most of my life, I've always wondered what if," Sam said. "What's next? I only wanted to move on, to find something better. Until now, I've never really seen what was right in front of me. Maybe there is nothing better. I never thought that before. Never had..."

Had she really come around? Was my love enough? Our love?

I couldn't ask her. Her chest rose regularly. She leaned against me, breathing deeply, asleep.

Barney was wobbly in the morning. She showed no interest in the field of quinta.

"Hung over," Sam said. "Poor girl."

She patted the pebbled wedge of a head.

We led the lizard to the stream where she drank noisily. I tried to wash the sticky quinta goop off of me. Soon enough, we mounted and headed into the forest.

Barney walked that day. She seemed too moody for her leaping gait. Even so, it was much faster than walking.

Before the sun reached full height, we entered a grove of frady trees.

“We met Nakar not far from here,” Sam said.

Her voice startled a pair of yilder from their perches. My throwing stick was instantly in my hand. With quick, deft throws, I brought them down.

“Dinner.”

Sam guided the lizard toward the fallen fliers.

“It won’t be long before we reach that other mountain range.” She dismounted and handed the yilders up to me.

I put them in my bag.

“We’ll have to be on guard,” I said. “Camp away from the rocks.”

“Lilgill,” Sam remembered.

“Frankly, I don’t know which is worse. The mountain ghosts, or the braxite in these woods.”

“I’ve never seen a braxite. Really tall bugs with two mouths, right?”

“Essentially,” I said.

“Well, we were attacked by a lilgill. I think I’m happier in the woods,” she said.

She wouldn’t be if we saw a braxite. I didn’t say that.

Almost too soon, the ground inclined. Ahead, the setting sun cast a rocky rise in shadow.

“It’s unbelievable, but we’re a day from those ruins,” I said.

Sam gave our mount a pat. Barney had recovered during the day-long ride. “Good girl.”

“There is still plenty of tree cover. We can continue, but I won’t camp in the highlands,” I said.

“I’m with you. That weird ghost thing nearly killed you.”

“Lilgill are best avoided,” I said. “Let’s find a place to camp. Somewhere with plants for the lizard, water.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open,” Sam said.

Sensing we neared the end of our ride, Barney took up her leaping stride again. We moved up the slope, among the trees. They grew twisted and low.

“I hear a waterfall,” Sam said.

Barney raised her head, snuffing at the air. She then headed off into the trees. It didn’t take the lizard long to reach a deep pool at the bottom of a tall falls.

“This will do,” I said.

“There’s no shelter,” Sam said.

“We can make one. Let’s get a fire going.”

It was a crude shelter, just the silver blanket hung over a branch, but it kept in some of the heat. We cleaned and ate the fliers. Barney munched on some brush and lapped water from the pool.

“I always wanted a horse,” Sam said. “There weren’t any around. My grandfather had one when he was a boy.”

“Horse.”

“An animal to ride. Not as big as Barney. We didn’t have much livestock. Predators were out of control. It was hard to keep goats and chickens. Browsers and fliers,” she said.

I looked at the purple lizard. “Using animals like this—it never occurred to me. But it makes a certain kind of sense. How do you think Nakar’s people came to have this one?”

“Maybe raised her from an egg?” she said. “On my world, some animals are domesticated. Especially dogs, cats, livestock, some birds—fliers. Some are wild and can’t be tamed. We don’t have lizards this big. At least, not for millions of years.”

“Millions?”

“I liked dinosaurs when I was a girl. Used to look at pictures of their fossil skeletons. Look at me now, I have a dinosaur and a horse in one.”

What was she talking about?

“Sorry.” She looked up at me. “Earth stuff.”

I stirred the fire.

“We should reach the ruins by midday, if we keep up this pace. And if there aren’t any...”

“Dangers,” Sam said.

“Maybe your horse will scare them off,” I said.

Barney lifted her tail. She let out a long, high-pitched noise.

“Her farts probably will,” Sam said.

“She could be eating the wrong plants,” I said. “Barney isn’t from around here.”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “She seems happy enough.”

We would have to see how happy she was once we climbed the stark trail and entered the ruins.

THE SUN HADN’T REACHED zenith when we came upon a rockslide that blocked the path.

“Is this where the lilgill attacked?” Sam whispered.

Barney didn’t seem disturbed in the slightest, or deterred by the blocking rubble. She leaped up the side of it and kept going. When we surmounted the pile, ruins became visible at the end of a road that branched from the path.

Up on the mountains, trees became scarce, more twisted, less leafy. In these barren highlands, there seemed to be little food for our ride. Still, when Sam twisted the reins, Barney didn’t hesitate to hop down the intersecting path.

I gazed at the white walls, the double arched gate. Abandoned cities all shared the same, haunted look.

My ears sought the hooting cries of Dwellers. All I heard was the cold, whistling wind. But I knew the knuckle-walking, blue-bellied predators lived within. As Barney rode us closer, I checked, double-checked, my reach to the thrower.

“No lilgill,” Sam whispered. “Not that I want to jinx it.”

We dismounted before entering the city gates. Sam led Barney by the reins. The lizard lifted her head, sniffing the air. She stopped.

Just inside the gate were tumbled structures of white stone. Perfect for a Dweller attack. They tended to toss rocks or chunks of the ruins from above. Like Dratum, they hunted together.

“I want to get back to that big building.” Sam pointed.

We had been inside before. It held disturbing images of Kyrthians dominating Dratum, their strange flying creations, most of the images beyond understanding.

I held it together and moved forward. We passed the healing building where Sam had tended my wounds. Claws of a lilgill had raked me, poisoned me. It was best not to think about it.

“What about Barney?” I asked. “She won’t fit through the door.”

Sam looked around, but the lizard followed her nose. There were trees growing from a fallen building. The animal set to grazing.

“Will she be safe there?” Sam asked.

I could only shrug and look to the rooftops. “Let’s hurry.”

Wind howled through the gathered structures, blowing debris down broken streets.

Centuries of weather had smoothed or dissolved many of the walls.

We skirted the curved tiles of a roof and continued on.

Our destination was a circular tower, taller than most other structures, mostly intact.

At the door, Sam stopped, gasping.

Something propped the door open. Pale and round. I squatted down, and saw a skull.

“Dweller,” I said, looking around.

Sam pushed the door open, and the rest of an articulated skeleton was revealed on the floor.

The size of it was a reminder of how dangerous the creatures were. In life, its arms were twice as long as mine, legs twice as short, chest impossibly broad. After looking at its twin set of fangs, I kicked it out of the way.

“Nothing pulled it apart,” Sam said. “No scavengers. It wasn’t here last time we were. But those bones look like they’ve been here for ages.”

Looking at the sad remains, I noted several diamond shaped holes in the skull. I didn’t want to think about what made them.

“Come.”

We passed the disturbing images behind warm ice and moved up a curving ramp to the upper floor.

Sam moved quickly to a broad square in the wall. When she touched it, it lit up. A map, she called it. With her palm, she moved it around. It made me dizzy.

“Where in the city would there be weapons?” she said to herself.

“Where the hunters and warriors lived,” I said.

“Right. Military. Police. Guards.” She stared at the uneven grid. After a while, she shook her head. “It all looks the same.”

Which was something I agreed with.

“What did Vattim say? The sign of fire? Do you see anything like that?” Sam asked.

We started at a loud bleat.

“Barney?” Sam said.

The lizard cried out again. We turned and raced back down the ramp.

SAMANTHA

We ran out of the museum tower, around fallen walls and roofs. When we reached Barney, she had returned to eating the weed trees.

“What is it, girl?” I asked.

Then I knew. A monster charged over the mound of a collapsed building. Blue belly, long, reaching arms, clawed hands.

Jannik fired, and again, the darts deeply penetrated the massive chest.

It screamed in anger and pain, but kept coming.

Another ran around a building, cornering us.

Jannik whipped darts at the second.

Even wounded, it kept coming like the first.

“Dwellers!” Jannik shouted. He stood his ground, shooting with his atlatl. “Run!”

“Run where?”

Barney bleated, and I realized the monsters were drawing us with the lizard’s alarmed cries.

Jannik pulled a dart from his quiver as the first Dweller reached him.

Then, the mound of the collapsed building shuddered. From a crevice, a flash of silver.

The ape-like predator stopped short.

I saw why. At the end of a segmented tentacle, a sharp hook had split the monster’s skull.

Another flash. Like a frog tongue, a second limb shot out, its hooked end piercing the second Dweller’s head with an audible sound.

Slowly, with dull expressions, the creatures lowered their long arms.

Both were suddenly yanked off their feet, dragged toward the pile. With a

grinding of stone, the mound sank, inverted into a funnel. The Dwellers were drawn into the hole one after the other.

In a moment, I caught a glitter at the bottom of the hole. Then everything went still.

“What was that?” I breathed.

“That was time to leave,” Jannik said.

“Barney must be too big for it.”

“But we’re not,” Jannik said. “We should get out of here.”

Motion churned the broken streets, moving away from us. Whatever took the Dwellers tunneled away.

“I have to look at those maps,” I said.

“Seriously?” Jannik said.

“We don’t have a choice. There has to be something. Has to be.” Was I pleading?

Soil and rocks slipped into the hole, making us jump. Dust rose in a cloud.

Jannik peered down. Then at me.

“I’ll give you until the sun touches the horizon,” he said. “Then I’m dragging you out, kicking and screaming if need be. Your lizard, too.”

Barney looked over at us, and went back to decimating the trees.

“That might not be long enough.”

“Then we find some other way,” Jannik said.

Part of his angry tone was fear. And I couldn’t blame him. What could so easily dispatch those Dwellers? And even with those two gone, there must be more, in addition to the tunneling horror. And who knew what else?

The other part was just good sense. These ruins, like all of them, were dangerous.

We’d been lucky the first time we came here. I saw the shadows of the Dwellers, heard their gibbering speech, but they hadn’t seen us.

Now? The creatures raised such a ruckus, there was no doubt our presence was known.

“Come with me. You might notice something I don’t.”

Jannik looked up at the museum tower.

“This is a terrible idea,” he said.

I didn’t like when my enormous guardian became frightened. He took on nearly every foe, every monster, without hesitation.

It made me understand that he was beyond his depth here.

And so was I.
Way, way beyond.
I would have to hurry, having to find something quickly.
“Let’s go,” I said, entering the building without looking back.
This time, as I studied the map in the circular room, Jannik stood across the space. He gazed over the balcony, atlatl in hand.
Noises came to us. Some the natural crumbling of the ruins.
Yet there were sounds like voices, like moaning calls. Even if I tried to put it down to the howling winds, I knew better.
“What about this?” I faced him.
He turned from his view and moved closer.
I pointed. “Sign of fire?”
It was a symbol of two curves coming to a point. It looked kind of like a candle flame.
“Could be. Where is it?”
“A few blocks from here,” I said.
He shook his head.
“A few intersecting streets away,” I pointed, “That way.”
“We can check on our way out,” he said. “Last time, we exited away from the gate. We should do the same this time.”
I touched the map, making the area grow. The ruins became smaller.
Circular areas appeared—the way we had exited last time. There was a red line also. The remnants of a railgun, I recalled.
With both hands, I tried to zoom in on that area.
“Wait,” Jannik said.
I raised my brows at him.
“Make it like it was,” he said.
If I could. This map wasn’t exactly like an old iPhone. You could manipulate it, but not in a way I found natural.
After a few gestures, I made it zoom back out again.
“Up there.” Jannik pointed.
I looked, but didn’t know what had caught his eye.
“What do you see?”
“Can you make it... go up?”
I tried, and after a few attempts, made the map zoom out and reposition.
“There. That.” He tapped a shape on the map.
When he did, a light glowed.

I turned toward it. One of the holographic displays came alive.

“Okay, why that?” I asked.”

“Sign of air,” he said.

I looked again. Now I saw it. I would’ve expected a couple curly cues, indicating wind. But this shape was two narrow triangles, joined at the base.

Kind of the shape of a bird.

But what did his touch switch on?

I moved along the curved wall. Most of the displays were dark. Only one glowed. The glass on the wall was coated with dust.

It took some time to scrape it clean.

Images, still and moving, appeared.

In something like a 3D movie, I saw one of the wide, winged ships under construction. Grey Kyrthians worked at some of the tasks. Dratum, steel collars on their necks, were bent under heavy loads of metal beams and oversized crates.

Jannik growled. I glanced at him. It seemed his reaction was subconscious.

“Is this the place on the map?” I asked, mostly myself.

We were then treated to a display of a starship. First, the outside. It had the angular shape of a bird. I’d seen a similar image in this museum before.

This one moved to different angles. A schematic of sorts.

I studied it, hoping to find weapons. Like what, I couldn’t say.

Lases, phasers, missiles, ray blasters? What would they even look like?

Then, we got a plan of the inside. I recognized a bridge, with two forward hatches. Only one was open in our shelter.

The rest consisted of three corridors and the rooms, chambers, and equipment contained on one level. It changed to another level. I had only explored the one where we entered.

But, no. It changed again. Access tubes appeared, like the ones where we’d encountered the shipworms. These extended out into the bird-like wings. Engines. Drives. Most of it I couldn’t identify.

“That is like our shelter.” Jannik nodded. “From the inside, it does not resemble a flier.”

Images shifted again. Perhaps we looked at schematics of the engines, or the life support system. I didn’t know what.

Another movie-like image came on.

In this one, a group of Dratum held up a frame, faces twisted with effort.

On top, one of the thin, gray Kyrthians used flashing tools. Maybe welders.

Sparks fell, some on top of the supporting Dratum. Hair and clothing smoked.

The whole image angled crazily.

I took a step back. What was happening?

Then I saw a metallic object in Jannik's hands. He had ripped the projector from its mounts.

"If I ever see one of them," he growled.

I reached out, putting my hands over his.

"It's all right. It's just pictures of a long time ago," I said.

The image now bounced around the round walls. Giving the projector a quick look, I found the off switch.

Metal creaked in Jannik's grip. He turned toward the balcony. Then he threw the projector with all his might.

I didn't even hear it land.

"We go," he said between his teeth.

"Okay, baby. Okay." He needed to calm down.

His eyes glowed with emotion. Breath issued heavily.

Taking his hand, I led him toward the ramp.

"Let's look at that sign of fire building, and go."

His gaze, for a moment, was fierce. But then it softened. "As long as we go."

He headed down the ramp. I paused at one of the displays.

There were projectors at each display. I studied the one in front of me. There was a way to remove it without ripping it free. It slid out of brackets.

Not knowing why, I pulled one free and put it in my bag.

Then I hurried after Jannik.

At the bottom of the ramp, we exited. He glanced around.

"Which way?"

The circular ramp was disorienting. It took a moment. "That way," I said.

We headed toward what I hoped was a sign of fire.

Barney finished eating all the trees. She loped along after us.

But the area in question lay completely destroyed. If weapons had once been kept there, they were deeply buried beneath tons of crumbled stone.

"Damn. I hoped to score a ray gun," I said.

Jannik's look was unreadable.

At least it wasn't enraged.

I nodded to him. We headed out of the ruined city.

Soon, we crossed the enormous stone circles beyond.

"I suppose you want to follow the line to the bird shape," Jannik said.

"Yeah, I do. We need to."

"I'm no expert on sky pictures, but it seems out of our way," he said.

It was. Valley Hold was northwest. The bird-shaped city was northeast.

"We have a ride," I shrugged and gave Barney a pat.

She snorted at me.

As we had before, we passed the circles, the ramp of the railgun, and followed a road leading north.

"What do you think that red line is?" I asked.

"Another path?" Jannik asked. He strode easily, shoulders relaxed, now that he was beyond the walls of the ruins.

I thought it over.

"Another kind of path?"

"Maybe."

Over my shoulder, I looked at the rusted railgun structure.

It was a device that could shoot objects into orbit, when it was functioning.

Thinking about the direction of the red line, I moved to the right, bringing Barney with me.

"Where are you going?" Jannik asked as I walked off the road.

I searched the cracked earth, the low scrub and bushes. Was there a road here somewhere?

Our mount ripped a bunch of dry leaves from a branch as she walked.

Ahead, a narrow gap ran between the tangle of trees. Eyeing this, I moved farther off the road.

"Sam!" Jannik called from the road.

I knew I was onto something. Once I faced the gap head on, I studied the ground.

He jogged over.

"What are you looking for?"

"A different kind of path," I said, not looking up.

"Well, there is the thin metal line," he said.

I finally looked at him. "The what?"

He kicked something in the ground. I came closer to look.

“It’s not something you can walk on,” he said.

Crouching down, I brushed leaves away, soil. What did he find? After a moment of digging and brushing, I found a rusty strip of metal. It was maybe six inches across. But the length? It seemed to go on forever.

“This isn’t a thin metal line,” I said.

Jannik’s brows lowered. “Yes it is.”

“I mean, it is. But it’s something else. A rail,” I said.

“What is a rail?” he asked.

“A different kind of path,” I said.

It made sense. A rail line leading from this city to the place where they built spaceships. A train? Could be. But more importantly, there was probably a cleared path all the way there.

Which meant a fast path.

“Let’s ride,” I said, crawling up the back of Barney.

Jannik climbed up behind me. “You think this is your different path?”

In answer, I spurred Barney on. “Hyah! Yah!”

JANNIK

Though branches whipped at us on both sides, I was surprised to see a narrow, well defined passage.

It wasn't like winding animal tracks through the brush. Trees had been removed in a straight line. They had not grown back. Odd.

The lizard wound up to her leaping stride, finding the way clear.

We moved along the narrow passage, our speed frightening.

Beneath us, muscles flexed in the lizard's back. I held up a hand to keep from getting whipped in the face. The other held onto the back of Sam's fur dress.

She bent low over the lizard, as if her posture would make the beast run faster.

It seemed she was enjoying herself.

I just tried to stay on top of the animal.

Even though I had lived my life in the wilds as a hunter, it amazed me how similar this area was, as well as how different.

Leaves, those that remained, had different shapes. Some trees I didn't recognize, yet some I did.

We moved fast, but I still picked out the tracks of baroshdi, the dens of similar creatures.

Yet I couldn't find comfort in this. What we needed in this season was shelter, our village. Even being in my element was not steady enough.

Sam believed there was something to fend off the threat from the sky. I could only back her up.

Even as we cut along this straight path, the walls of the highlands rose above the short, scrubby trees.

We couldn't continue on this way for long, red line or no; rail or no.

Whatever miracles Those Before could perform, surely moving mountains was not one of them.

In the west, the sun already nuzzled the horizon, throwing long shadows across our path. I didn't know this area. It made me nervous that I couldn't predict what might come.

We crossed into the shadow of the mountains too quickly.

"Slow down, Sam. It's too dark," I warned.

"I can see just fine," she said.

"Really? Do you see that we're about to run into a cliff?"

Sam rose from her low posture and gasped.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I just did."

"Whoa, Barney. Whoa!"

She pulled back on the reins.

The lizard kept racing forward.

A dark gray wall rose in front of us.

I prepared to jump from the charging lizard, and take Sam with me.

Then, we rushed forward in total darkness.

With a frightened snort, the animal finally slowed to a halt.

Looking behind me, I saw the light of day.

"We're in a tunnel," Sam said.

Her voice echoed.

There was nothing but black ahead.

Barney made a nervous sound as I dismounted.

Using the light from behind, I brought out a torch. In a few moments, I sparked a flame.

Around us was smooth gray stone, wavering in the unsteady light, the track a bright silver line.

"It's okay," Sam said from atop the lizard. "Tracks, trains, run through tunnels. It's a thing."

I moved past Barney, holding the torch ahead of me. It did seem that the tunnel moved on for a long way.

"Should I scout ahead?"

"No, just keep in front of us," Sam said. "I think Barney's scared of the dark."

I felt like I was floating, the stone around us was so featureless. I

followed the metal ribbon.

“Wow. This is one clean tunnel,” Sam said. “Dratum aren’t really big on written language, but it’s weird not seeing graffiti.”

When I turned back, I saw no debris at the opening. Even in the low light, I saw a straight cut through the trees.

“It doesn’t even look dusty,” she said.

I moved along, the cave gently curved. “Do you think it goes on for a long way?”

“No idea,” Sam said. “Why?”

“I have only one other torch in my pouch.”

“You have really good night vision,” she said.

“Night vision, yes. Pitch black vision, no.”

I cursed myself for not being prepared. With everything happening, I had not replaced my bow, nor my usual supplies. I increased my stride.

Torchlight became the only illumination.

“Maybe you should climb up again. We can move faster.”

When I moved back, Barney stopped, bleating. I sighed. A creature the size of a jaroor afraid of the dark.

Once I mounted, there was enough light for the creature. At first, she walked. Sam urged the lizard to greater speed.

I understood Barney’s hesitation. The featureless curve, the dark, the bobbing torch. I wouldn’t run, either.

It seemed the pitch burned far too quickly. Soon, I lit my last brand.

When I tossed the burned out torch behind us, my hackles rose.

A skittering, scrabbling noise followed. Twisting from my perch, I shined the fire behind. Nothing showed itself. But the lizard slowed.

“The light, Jannik,” Sam said.

I faced the front. “Get this beast moving, Sam.”

Her eyes were wide when they caught mine. Barney hurried, and not just at Sam’s urging, I thought.

Insectile clatter came from behind.

I had to look.

Wished I hadn’t.

Fist-sized spheres chased after us. They were small, but many. Moving over each other on many legs, they rolled like a wave. When they fell on Barney’s tail, the spheres opened revealing uncountable sharp teeth.

The lizard let out a bellow and let loose a pile of foul-smelling dung. She

raced headlong down the dim tunnel.

For a moment, the things fell upon the mess, falling behind.

The torch flickered wildly. We had little light left.

“Don’t be mad at me,” Sam said.

“What?”

“I have something. Took something. In my bag. I can’t let go.”

Hooting and bleating, Barney continued caroming through the tunnel.

I reached in her pouch. Pulled out a metal box.

“Here.” Sam took it from me.

The round tunnel came alight with distorted images. Like the ones from the tower.

Bright light picked out a few spheres, creeping down the tunnel walls. Their carapaces opened and snapped shut as if in anger.

“Cleaner bots?” Sam said. “No wonder this tunnel is so clean.”

“They think we need to be cleaned,” I said.

“Go, Barney, go!” Sam leaned forward, bumping the lizard with her heels.

The small machines dropped on us. With only the smoking torch, I batted them away.

One fell on my shoulder, tangling in my hair.

I had to rip it away as it thrashed at my flesh. When I tossed it, smashing it against the wall, its fellows fell upon it.

“Woah, Barney, whoa!”

Sam pulled back on the reins.

“What are you doing?”

The lizard slowed to a reluctant trot.

“The tracks were cleared outside of the tunnel,” she said.

I didn’t know what she was getting at.

“There will be more at either end,” she said. “Maybe a lot more. If we go slow, we might draw them in. If we have to wade through them...”

It didn’t take long for a wave of the chattering machines to pile up before us. They would soon overtake us from behind.

The lizard wailed in fear. Sam held her in check.

“Easy, girl. Wait for it.” Sam tried to comfort our mount.

Machines closed in. Visions of long ago played on the walls. We sat still.

“Easy,” Sam said. “Easy, girl.”

The ones behind reached Barney’s tail. Bit. She swung it, sweeping a

hundred of them aside. Then the lizard reared up. I nearly toppled into a pile of chewing orbs.

“Now! Hyah! Yah! Go, go, *go!*”

The lizard needed no prompting. With a leap, the huge body smashed through the piling machines, crushing them beneath clawed feet.

Though her footing became precarious in the broken pieces, Barney ran faster than I’d experienced before.

Ahead, I saw a spot of lighter gray.

The tunnel’s end.

The lizard saw it, too, and poured on even more speed. Her heaving muscles made it difficult to hold on.

Sam was right. There were few cleaners in our path. In a moment, we reached the night air.

I was never so happy to feel the bite of a chill breeze.

Barney snorted and slowed.

But Sam wouldn’t let her.

“No, girl, go, keep going!”

In the close trees, I saw the glimmering gray spheres. They did maintain the path along the tracks.

But as we raced past, none of them approached, or blocked the way.

Huffing, our mount kept up the pace.

“She can’t keep on like this,” I said.

Sam fumbled with the metal square, killing the light. She no longer kicked the lizard to speed, and over a time, Barney slowed to her usual loping leap.

“We need to find camp,” I said. “Water, at least.”

“I don’t want to stop on the tracks,” Sam said.

I got that. But following the tracks was the only way we knew.

“Do you remember a place from the sky picture?”

“There are a lot of small lakes along the track,” she said. “But I don’t know where. I’m not sure where we are.”

“Stop,” I said.

“But the cleaners—”

“They don’t seem interested.”

Sam looked concerned over her shoulder. But she pulled on the reins. Barney came to a walk, then a stop. She waited patiently.

None of the glossy gray spheres came for us. I dismounted.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said. “You should do the same. Come.”

Helping her down, I pulled her away from our beast.

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“Barney is an animal,” I said.

Sam’s face lit with understanding. “Right. She’ll find what she needs. We need to follow her.”

At first, Barney wandered over to a tree and browsed. But she kept lifting her head, sniffing the air. We followed her meandering down the track. Not long later, she pushed into the trees.

We followed.

“Sorry I took one of the projectors from the museum,” Sam said. “I know the images bother you.”

“Not as much as being cleaned to death in a black tunnel,” I said. “I feel bad for not having enough torches with me. Things have been happening quickly.”

“Maybe not quickly enough,” she said to herself.

Ahead, we heard the slurp of water. We came upon Barney, crouched on a lakebed. We joined her.

“If it wasn’t so cold, I’d jump in,” Sam said. “I smell like lizard.”

Barney seemed to understand. She angled her wedge of head from the water and licked Sam with a few pounds of tongue.

“Ugh!” Sam shook her arms. “That’s one cold kiss.”

“I don’t blame her.”

I got a half frown for that.

She sat on a rock. “Can we find something, Jannik? Would we have been better off preparing at the ship?”

I had no answer.

Sam looked at Barney’s tail and let out a low hiss. “Oh, poor baby! Those bots really got you, didn’t they?”

There were red tears in the pebbly hide. Barney wasn’t bleeding, but looked sore.

“I should’ve gone in that medical building. Grabbed some supplies.”

“We’re moving too fast,” I said. “There hasn’t been time to do things right.”

She nodded, though her features said she didn’t necessarily agree. “We should keep moving.”

I stood, gazing around. Behind us was the ridge with the tunnel. When we first traveled to Valley Hold, we crossed the top of it, ignorant of the hollow below. From there we traveled northwest across the forest.

While it had taken us days to reach High Pass, we weren't riding a lizard then.

Across the lake...

"Maybe we should just go back," Sam said.

"No. We need rest. Barney needs rest." The lizard went from drinking to chewing the rushes near the water's edge.

"I know, but there isn't time," Sam said.

"There is. We're here." I pointed to the opposite shore.

Straight lines appeared in the light of the rising moons. Not a city with a surrounding wall, but ancient structures certainly.

"Let's go," Sam said, moving toward Barney.

"No. I'm not doing two cities in one day. In the morning. At least we can see what's trying to kill us."

For a few moments, Sam looked conflicted. Her eyes moved to the mount, to the opposite shore. While she thought about it, I found a stand of stout frady trees. Between three trunks, I started a fire and hung the silver blanket.

"Come. Get warm," I said.

She nodded and joined me.

We dined on unknown chunks of dry meat from our pouches. Like everything else, I hadn't had time to hunt.

Cleaning bots, Dwellers and subterranean... whatever it was were not good eating.

"In the morning," she said, snuggling close.

SAMANTHA

It took some self-convincing to return to the track after the attack of the tiny janitors. But we knew no other way. The tracks curved around the lake and we reached the tumble-down buildings while it was still morning.

A tower still stood centrally, but surrounding buildings had caved in. The entirety was surrounded by acres of flat, white rock patrolled by whirling dust devils.

“Inviting,” I said.

“Let’s keep it short,” Jannik said.

Even before he captured me as his mate, Jannik had always been at my side. In frightening ruins, or beast-haunted wilderness. Again, I found that I paid more attention to the future than what I had in front of me.

I gripped the hand on my hip. Squeezed.

Barney loped over the area reminiscent of a parking lot. I hoped the vehicles parked here were starships. Our mount stopped at one of the angled buildings.

“C’mon, Barney,” I urged her.

She turned her head to me and let out a bleat.

Nope, is what I heard.

Looking into the dark beneath the flattened buildings, I didn’t blame her.

We dismounted, heading toward the only standing building. This already felt like a bad idea.

The tower was built like an upside down ice cream cone, larger structures on the bottom, a spire high above. At ground level, it was a geodesic dome. We saw cracks and a couple triangles missing from the polyhedron shape.

Wind whistled ominously through the broken structure.

“Doesn’t seem sound,” Jannik said. “But then, no ruins do.”

A rollup door came away from the top of a doorway. We climbed over and looked around.

No lights came on from our presence. Only the holes in the ceiling lit the extensive space. It seemed large enough to construct something the size of a spaceship.

A rain of debris rattled from a broken triangle. We moved in a different direction. “The center.” I pointed.

We walked around the bottom structure of the spire. It seemed an acre in size.

“No doors,” Jannik said. “No windows.”

“Ladder.” I found rungs, intact, leading to the roof.

“Why would they build a hut with no entry?” Jannik asked.

Which was a good question. It could only be answered one way. I climbed to the roof.

Dratum hunters spent a lot of time in tree branches. Jannik leapt up behind me, gazing across the tiled roof. The structure leading up was round, surrounded by a spiral ramp.

“Those Before were big on ramps,” I said.

There was no option but to keep climbing. Just before the dome ceiling was a door.

“Finally,” I said.

“Why would they not include entrances below?” Jannik said.

“Maybe we just can’t see them?” I didn’t know.

The dome must have offered protection. Inside were work benches, desks, counters in dozens of rooms. We moved quickly, finding little of interest.

Stairs led up the spire.

Open windows offered a vista. Jannik pointed. “That low line on the horizon is High Pass,” he said.

It didn’t seem that far. At the same time, it looked impossibly distant.

“This is turning out to be a bust,” I said, my spirits falling.

“Maybe in that large hut with no entry,” Jannik said. “Let’s find our way down.”

Descending, we found an interior staircase. It went down a long way. Doors opened on three walls as we reached the bottom. This time, panels of lights came on when we moved.

Jannik shook his head. “I hate those lights.”

At that moment, I loved them. “Look!”

Paths wound through a forest of shining metal. Pods and nacelles of different sizes filled the immense space.

“What are they?” Jannik asked. “Cook pots?”

“Rockets,” I said. “Engines. Machines that go fast.”

His features shifted to disbelief.

I knocked on one. It rang like a bell. “We might be on the right track.”

We moved among them, most twice as tall as Jannik, some short and stubby. My knowledge of spaceships was limited. These were for maneuvering, not distance, I thought. We reached a wall. At our approach, a light spun above us. With a screech, the wall slid sideways.

“Pots of dirt,” Jannik said.

“Not a ray blaster in sight.” I sighed.

Unlike the engines, the barrels were all the same size. Each was emblazoned with a red, curving symbol ending in a point.

“Sign of fire?” Jannik asked.

My eyes widened. I moved closer. “Could be. Maybe fuel? I don’t know.”

Behind us, the wall rolled back into place. I heard the thud of heavy locks. Lights in this room were set in a high ceiling.

I checked the contents of a barrel, the circular top on a hinge. The tops latched closed. A silvery, glittery substance winked in the light. The smell of sulfur and chemicals rose.

Across from me, Jannik turned the dog of a heavy vault door. It opened on protesting hinges. Space yawned beyond.

Hurrying over, I looked around as lights popped in sequence above. Near the door, a fleet of strange vehicles parked. They had simple handlebars, a hexagonal base several meters across.

“Carts?” I stepped on one of them. A crosspiece lit up on the handlebars. I pressed a blinking green button. Then let out a yelp. The thing rose a foot in the air.

Jannik jumped on, grabbing me. Lifting me in his arms, he jumped to the ground, putting his back to the thing.

“It’s okay, Jannik,” I said.

He faced the floating thing again. “It’s not.”

“Yes, it is. It’s just a vehicle. A, um, mover.”

Once he put me down, I climbed back on it. Controls were instinctive. I

moved the cart forward and backward.

“You should get away from that.” Jannik’s voice quavered.

“C’mon, Jannik. Get on. It’s fun. Like riding Barney. But less stinky.”

He eyed the craft. “I’ll follow.”

There was a seat, but it was too high to sit comfortably. I stood and hung on to the handles. It was like a chopper from old movies, a motorcycle with tall handlebars. Its drive whined as I drove it into the room.

Turning one handle made it move forward and back, the other up and down, although I only dared to bring it about a meter off the ground.

I drove past a ramp leading down into the dark. “Maybe that’s the way in and out,” I said. “It could link to one of the buildings outside.”

Jannik’s eyes nervously took in the space. He followed as I drove to another door.

The next room was not storage. Machines of heavy, vertical cylinders stood in the corners. Constructed of glossy metal and glass, a panel stood before a seat, a series of levers on each side. Fat tubes led into each, along with bundles of wire. Next to each was a metal table, a series of gears making them rise and fall.

“What the heck are these? Presses?” I studied one of the complex devices, not understanding. Each looked ominous. I didn’t want to touch the buttons.

Near each table, a conveyor belt stood close to the wall. Following with my eyes, I saw double doors braced with heavy, riveted bars. Whatever these machines made, it was moved into that room. And not by hand.

Jannik picked up a tool that leaned against the wall. It had the shape of scissors, the ends forming a cylinder that opened to grip. He moved them open and closed. “Weapon?”

“No. A tool,” I said. But for what?

I moved to the reinforced doors. When I tried to throw the bolts, I could not move the levers.

“You sure you want to go in there?” Jannik asked.

“There must be something in here. Maybe dangerous. That could be weapons.”

“Something dangerous,” Jannik muttered. “Why am I doing this?”

He moved next to me. When he manipulated the locking levers, they groaned with resistance. Muscles on his arms bulged, veins popping as he worked the dog. Squeaking, protesting, the bars moved inward from the frame.

Once they were unlocked, I hesitated. Jannik took a step back.

We gave each other a look. His was grim. Mine, probably curiosity mixed with anxiety. But I had to know. This could be it.

I pushed, the doors almost too heavy to move. *Blast the doors*, I thought. But with a long squeal, I moved one enough to get inside.

And then, I didn't want to get inside.

Jannik shaded his eyes from an intense, bright green glow. I felt the heat of it. The light was unnatural, unhealthy somehow. But I went in anyway.

My hair rose, electric currents in the air.

Rack upon rack held glowing items. They were shaped like tall nuts, the kind that would fit on a bolt the size of a fifty-gallon drum. Green light made my eyes ache. Were they radioactive? You couldn't see radioactivity. So what the hell...?

One of the bright nuts had cracked into pieces, some on the floor. I squatted down, reaching forward. Warmth emanated from the chunks. Did I dare touch it? It wasn't hot to the touch. I picked it up, having to squint. I dropped it in my bag.

"Weapons?" Jannik said from outside.

Were they?

"Maybe?"

Then, an idea occurred. I went back out, and hopped on the cart. Quickly, I drove it back to the barrels of glitter. On close inspection, the outside of the barrels were threaded.

These were the bolts the glowing green nuts went on.

"What is this stuff?" I asked myself.

I wished Cathy was here, or Shorena. Both of them were far more versed in space stuff than me. I was sure this was some simple thing, but I couldn't put a use to any of it.

Jannik looked around, finally taking shelter behind one of the presses. "I don't like any of this."

"Well, those green things fit on these barrels," I said. Then I spied the big clamping scissors Jannik picked up. "Probably with one of these. We need to bring it back."

"Bring it back?" Jannik gazed at me as if I had grown horns.

"Shorena will know what they are. How to use them. Or maybe Cathy. There's no doubt that this is starship stuff."

"We need to leave this alone. Leave here. It can't be good. None of it."

My brain told me otherwise. We needed to get some of this back to Valley Hold. But how? Then I looked at the cart.

Was it possible? They must use these things for just this purpose. “Help me, Jannik.”

“You’re beyond help if you want to mess with this.”

“Just... Get one of these barrels up on the cart. I don’t think I can lift one, and I don’t see a forklift.”

He shook his head at me. “You are insane.”

“Please! It’s got to be something we can use against the pirates.”

Jannik gazed upward. “Sam!”

Fine. I would do it myself. The cart pushed easily, even without driving it. Weightless. I reached up, using a control to get it on the ground. I got my hands around a barrel, bending my knees, lifting.

I got it a few inches off the ground, but dropped it. Too heavy. But it toppled over, spilling its glittery contents on the floor.

When it did, electricity snapped through the air. Streaks of light shot through the room.

Jannik ducked behind the press.

But now I knew I was onto something.

I checked the lid on another barrel. It felt secure. Then I wobbled the barrel from edge to edge and walked it onto the cart. A quick turn of the controls showed the vehicle could easily carry it.

Then I pushed the cart toward the heavy doors.

“Please, Sam, in the name of the three hells, leave it alone.”

“I think I’ve found our weapon,” I said. “Help me, Jannik.”

“I...” He closed his eyes, shook himself. “I can’t.”

Which gave me pause. I stopped, looking from the threaded barrels to the painfully bright green light. What the hell was I doing? I didn’t know how this stuff worked, what it did, if it was toxic.

I sat on the edge of the cart, my head in my hands. “You’re right. This is stupid.”

Jannik let out a long sigh, shoulders falling in relief.

“I mean, they don’t keep this stuff separated by a couple rooms and doors yag thick for no reason,” I said. “Let’s just keep looking. All we need are some ray guns or something, right?”

He just seemed happy that I wasn’t messing with the weird tech.

“Let’s try down the ramp,” I said.

“Not the way we came?”

“Might as well get the full nickel tour,” I said.

We started for the downward ramp. For a moment, I eyed the cart. It might be fun just to drive it around. But I’d never get Jannik to go along.

The idea of it almost made me smile.

He moved from his hiding place—the big strong Dratum!—and we headed for the ramp together.

“Hope there’s lights down there,” I said, staring into the gloom. “Oh, there are. Kinda small.”

Jannik’s brows dropped. “Those aren’t lights.”

A long, high-pitched chirrup echoed in the vast space. The lights moved. Six of them. And then rushed toward us.

Three eyes on two heads, thrashing mandibles on each.

“Braxite!” Jannik cried.

JANNIK

The air filled with whipping antennae, the monster seeking prey. I moved Sam behind me. I had to buy time.

Grabbing two of the antennae, I gripped as hard as I could. Twisting from the hips, I yanked.

They came loose, squirming in my hands. With an ear-shattering chirp, the insectile monster jerked back into hiding.

“It’s just a baby—”

“A baby!” Sam gasped.

“But there’s no fighting it. We don’t hunt them. We can’t eat them. We avoid them. Let’s do that quickly.”

We ran for the spire door.

Not quick enough.

With a squirm and a leap on muscular hindlegs, it was on us again.

I had the throwing stick and darts in hand. Tossing hard, I managed to get a point stuck in one of the eyes. The other dart bounced off hard shell.

Claws reached for the embedded dart, swiping, finally snapping it in half.

It was not convinced we were too difficult a meal. Before we could reach the door, it leapt in front of it.

Other way.

The sliding door of the dirt barrels was closest. It opened as we rushed it.

“Here,” I whispered, pulling her against the adjacent wall.

Cautiously, the braxite’s remaining antennae fluttered against the moving door. It skittered in, passing us. I saw its two heads separate, hunting in different directions for us.

Three hells!

“Slow,” I whispered, and sidled around the doorframe with Sam.

I breathed in relief. Like before, the rolling wall snapped back into place.

The braxite saw it, charging. Letting loose an ear-splitting cry when the door crushed it.

Claws and tendrils batted, the spiked chitin whizzing dangerously close. The building shook, the metal of the door booming like thunder. The huge animal squirmed and shook, trying to free itself.

We ran for the door. But one of dozens of claws sang through the air. It clipped hard, grabbing Sam’s dress.

It pulled her back.

She fought, pulling hard, planting her feet. But she was dragged inexorably toward the two clashing mandibles.

Before it could bite down, I yanked a dart free. With a leap, I jammed it between the segmented jaws.

The creature’s flesh was too hard. The dart was too thin. I kept it from biting, but the shaft cracked, folding with the force. Uselessly, I battered the misshapen head with my fist.

With a cry, Sam ripped free, the skirt of the fur dress parting.

She nearly fell, but I caught her hand and whirled her toward escape.

Braxites were unstoppable. Even a baby was ten feet tall, armored shell powered by massive thews. The metal door bent, wrenched from its anchors. It kicked and writhed until it wrecked the door.

Freed, it bounded after us.

I found a pair of the clasping tools. With both hands, I swung, driving the dart deeper into the eye socket, slamming the beast from its tenacious pursuit. The second half-head angled on its segmented neck. The mandibles chopped the tool in pieces.

We had to run—if it would let us.

“The vault door, where the green stuff is—it can’t get through that,” Sam said.

It didn’t sound like a good option.

We had no options.

Breaking for it, we heard the braxite on our heels.

To my surprise, Sam turned. She shoved the spooky floating platform toward the monster.

Surprisingly, the cart proved a hindrance. It tilted in the braxite’s way, the creature confounded by the floating, tipping platform.

In a moment, it batted the thing away. It clanged against the far wall. But it gave us the seconds we needed.

We jumped into that glowing room, the green light blinding. I grabbed the door and pushed. It was heavy, slow.

Light attracted the things. That worked against us. With impossible speed, tendrils and claws slapped and scratched the thick door. It was ripped from my hands. Slammed closed.

We breathed, leaning on the shelves of bright ancient objects.

“There’s no way out of this room,” Sam panted.

It wouldn’t go away. Not with food in here. I didn’t say that to Sam.

“Think,” I said. “There has to be a way. Look for doors. Windows. Anything.”

Except it was the brightest lit room I’d ever been in. We saw nothing.

The wall made a crumpling sound.

Sam’s eyes met mine, going wide.

Another report, and the wall around the door buckled outward.

I looked at the glowing loops. “These are weapons?”

“I think they have to do with rockets,” Sam said. “I don’t know how to use them.”

But the shelves... I grabbed one, rocked it. It was secured to the wall, but I moved it. The glowing things dropped to the floor. They made no noise.

There was no time to contemplate the creepiness of that. Putting a foot on the wall, I pulled one of the shelf supports free. Metal. Sharp. Long. Flats clanged to the floor, loud after the silent green things.

But I had a spear—one that might penetrate its shell.

Metal creaked, the door angling in its frame. I would have a chance to find out how lethal my weapon was.

Sam worked on another long pole. She twisted it from the shelves, bending it back and forth. I reached over and snapped it free.

Shaking the connectors free, she gripped it with both hands.

For being so small, so soft, Sam was much fiercer than the creature set on devouring us.

Something flew across the room, pinging off the walls. The door sagged from a hinge.

“Here it comes.”

The door bent in the middle and disappeared. In its place were seeking antennae and claws. I saw its heads crowd behind. Dark liquid oozed from

the dual mandibles.

Sam stabbed. Her metal pole was bashed aside. It attacked with its thin, sensing appendages.

Yet when it brushed a glowing green artifact on the ground, the whole of it flinched and pulled away.

“It doesn’t like the nuts,” Sam said. Quickly, she crouched. There were pieces of a broken one. Snatching one up, she threw it.

Chirruping in alarm, the monster backed farther away.

Taking her idea, I took a whole one from the floor. Holding the spear in my left, I heaved the nut. It was not heavy, and would make no impact.

Yet there was a reaction.

I no longer saw the braxite beyond the warped doorframe.

Grabbing another, I stepped out. Sam moved behind me.

The braxite didn’t give up. Though it hunched in a corner, it balanced on the big hind legs. Springing forward, it sailed across the room.

Tossing hard, I smashed the glowing object into the wounded head.

It dropped, rolling on the ground. Were the green things poison to it?

The way was clear. We raced past its curling body toward the tower door.

At the last second, it lashed out. Sam’s ankle was wrapped by a tendril. She was wrenched off her feet, swept over the floor.

There was nothing more to do. I stormed forward, metal pole in both hands. The segmented anatomy gave no indication where to land a killing stab. I rammed the end into the narrow abdomen.

With a satisfying crunch, it pierced deep.

Sam was let go, still spinning across the floor. Her bag flapped open. A piece of glowing green skittered. My eyes were drawn to it. It stopped in a pile of spilled glitter.

Impossibly, the glitter exploded in light. The glowing green chunk went silver and dark. A storm of lightning rose.

“Oh no!” Sam said, rolling to her knees, jumping up. “Get out, Jannik, run!”

I sprinted toward the ramp. Yet bobbing, glowing orbs rose from below.

Another one!

There was only the spire.

The two of us reached the door at the same time, scrambling up the stairs.

White light bloomed and a whistling, hissing sound filled my ears. For an instant, the sense of falling.

“SAM...”

Dark replaced the white light. Something crushed my chest.

Braxite!

My hands pushed it away. Levered it away. Not an attacking animal, but a block of shattered wall.

Dizzy, hurt, I wriggled free of the debris. “Sam!”

Dust blurred my vision. Swiping my face, I stared around. Sections of the spire collapsed over the large bottom structure. Some tumbled over the side.

I rose, slowly. On the roof. Part of it caved in.

How did I end up here?

Beneath me was more destroyed wall. Climbing atop it, I surveyed the damage, searching.

“Sam!”

My ears rang. Head ached. I threw chunks of stone aside, slabs of material.

Smoke rose from the roof hole.

Crawling closer, I looked down. “Sam!”

The only answer was an echo.

I moved around, trying to make sense of it. The spire was blasted out on one side. I went that way. Searching, tossing aside chunks, I hunted.

Then, a splay of foaming dark hair.

Sam lay near the corner, close to the edge.

I crouched over her, feeling her pulse. Her neck was warm.

Alive.

Gently, I searched for broken bones.

“Incorrigible,” she murmured.

I touched her face. “Can you move?”

She grunted. “Not happily.”

Eventually, she sat up.

“What happened? An explosion?”

“A piece of green stuff landed in a pile of glitter dirt,” I said. “There was lightning. Then white light and noise.”

Sam nodded, the motion making her wince. “Weapons. And we blew them all up. Dammit.”

“Let’s go back. Hopefully, your lizard didn’t run away,” I said.

“No. Not yet.”

I suppressed a sigh.

“You want to search, to see if there’s anything left,” I said.

Her eyes looked hopeful.

Taking in the devastation, I didn’t think it would take long.

“Okay. Let’s look. At the first sign of another braxite, we go.”

She nodded. “First sign.”

Limping, we sought a way back into the building below us. Most of the stairs from the spire had vanished.

“How did we survive this?” I wondered.

“I think we were blown out of that hole in the tower,” she said. “Luckily, there wasn’t anything in our way.”

I couldn’t guess how lucky figured into it.

There was no easy way down the spire, and no other way into the base structure.

Sam looked through the open windows, shading her eyes. After a few moments, she pointed.

“There. Didn’t there used to be a building there?”

I looked at a gaping hole some yards away. Smoke rose.

Whether there was a hut there before, I couldn’t recall. It wasn’t like any of the outbuildings were standing when we arrived.

We moved down the ramp, jumping down past where the wall was now a hole. In a few minutes, we clambered down the rungs on the outside.

It took some time to exit the dome. When we did, Barney trotted up to us, acting anxious.

I didn’t blame her.

Finding it by the smoke, we crossed the plain of stone.

“This might be where that ramp led,” Sam said.

I waved smoke away. “Might be.”

The lizard gave the dark, smoking hole a glance and gave it a wide berth.

We gave it some time, the smoke dissipating. Then we entered, searching for glowing insect eyes.

Soon enough, we found ourselves back inside the lower building. All things considered, the rooms weren’t damaged that badly. The same couldn’t be said for either braxite baby.

“It’s surprising that these objects remain,” I said.

There were still plenty of covered barrels of glitter. The green nuts still

glowed in the chamber with the puckered wall.

“I’m not surprised,” she said. “They’re meant to survive, if I’m right.”

“How much of it do you want to take?”

“All of it,” Sam said. She turned to me. “As much of it as we can. It’s what’s going to save us all.”

SAMANTHA

Even though the nuts and bolts mostly remained intact, the floating carts were blasted to pieces. I tossed some parts aside. But this facility, factory, whatever, was huge. There were chambers off the underground ramp.

“Where are you going?”

Jannik followed me as I descended. Light spilled from the far end—which used to end in a half-disintegrated building until the explosion cleared the debris.

In a side room, I stopped short. “Oh.”

Stored here was something I hadn’t understood before. Glowy-nuts were screwed onto the wastebasket bolts. The glow was gone, replaced by blinking lights on top of the glitter can. This was how they went together. Completed units looked less scary.

I then understood that the big scissor clamp things were oversized wrenches to twist the two elements together. And the lights? Well, I guessed these things were ready to go.

For some purpose.

“Here.” Jannik’s voice came from across the tunnel. As I watched, he pushed one of the floaty carts from the room opposite.

Which surprised me. “I didn’t think I could get you five paces from one of those.”

“If it means leaving this place...” Jannik gave it a shove, and it floated across the tunnel.

I guided it, kind of like pushing a boat in water. Since seeing the assembled versions, I figured those were the ones to take. Reaching up, I used the controls of the cart to lower it to the floor.

Again, I used the wobble method, moving the devices forward by tilting them on opposite rims, walking them onto the cart.

Jannik stood back. Given the glow, the explosion, I didn't blame him. It took time to tilt-wobble more of them into place.

"Maybe we can drive this upstairs, grab a couple separate parts," I mused aloud.

He angled his head at me. "Are you feeling well?" Jannik asked.

"Fine. A little out of breath."

His features pulled together in concern. Why?

Then I saw the cart platform rush up at me. Jannik grabbed me before I smashed into it, holding me in his arms.

Eyes squinted at the side of my head. When I moved my fingers to my temple, they came away red.

"You're more injured than we realized," he said, eyes serious.

I barely heard him over the ringing in my ears. Concussion? Well, considering we should both be dead, I'd take it.

"Put me down, baby. We have a lot to do," I said.

His face moved closer. "I don't think so."

What did he mean?

Rocking, bobbing, I opened my eyes wide. Around me, short trees passed on either side. Ahead, the wedge of Barney's head. When I tried to move, my arms were bound.

I saw shi-na wrapped around my arms, my torso.

"You're awake," Jannik said. Pressed against his chest, I felt his voice vibrate.

"What happened?"

"You keep falling asleep while standing," he said. "We'll need to consult Grexi."

Falling asleep?

"Where are we?"

Shadows filled the gaps in the trees. The sun set in front of us. Lizard smell filled the air. It took me until then to realize Jannik was driving Barney.

"The stuff?"

"We'll need to find camp soon," Jannik said. "There is one we used before not far ahead."

In the red twilight, we reached a familiar spot near a river. Rocks provided partial shelter. Remnants of a fire remained. Jannik helped me

down. Then I looked up, gaping.

The cart hung in the air like a kite. Rope tied around Barney's neck led up to it. Jannik heaved it down, hand over hand, and twisted the controls. The cart then hovered just above our camp.

"I couldn't get it through the trees," he said. "When I saw you work it, I thought maybe high in the air was the way to go."

Grabbing him in a hug, I pushed my face against his firm chest. "Oh, Jannik, you primitive genius."

"We should be at Valley Hold tomorrow," he said.

I started. "How is that possible?"

"We've been traveling for a couple days. I'm concerned about your health. We need a healer."

A couple days? "I've been out that long?"

"There is an injury in your head. I worried you wouldn't wake again," he said.

"You must be exhausted!"

"Not so much, now that I hear your voice," he said.

Which was sweet—but his eyes crossed with fatigue. Though stiff and sore, I set about making a fire.

"Let me do that," he said.

"I got it. I'm fine."

After carefully looking me over, he nodded. "I'll find food."

It was a lie. My head ached, my eyes hurt, and every joint creaked with my efforts. Even with primitive fire making down to a science, it took as much energy as I had. Slumping against one of the rocks, I fed the blaze twigs.

Jannik returned, placing a clutch of large eggs near the fire. He gave the blaze a stir, adding more wood. He draped the emergency blanket we usually used as shelter over Barney as she grazed on something like ferns.

"There's enough shelter to hold in the heat of the fire," he said. "But snow is falling. It will be cold."

"Aw! You're getting attached to Barney," I said.

Jannik snorted. "I'll be attached one more day. Then we'll be done with her."

Right, I didn't say.

We ate the eggs, hardboiled in the embers. Even without butter or salt, they tasted wonderful. Proof that I hadn't eaten in a while. Together, we lay

in a nest between warmed rocks. For a while, I watched Barney, the snowfall.

Then, a glow caught my eye. On the platform, the lights atop the explosive devices had changed—they were now blinking twice blue, once green, all simultaneously. I wanted to get up, to check them out, but my body wouldn't let me.

In his sleep, Jannik pulled me close. I could not resist pressing against his warm body. It seemed no time passed before I blinked at the light from the rising sun.

Jannik had already broken camp, the cart once again floating high above. There was no time to check the pattern of blinking lights. He walked to me, folding me in his arms. "I didn't realize how much I missed seeing you awake in the morning."

I accepted an enthusiastic kiss. "Mm. Nice being missed. Speaking of, we'll really reach Valley Hold today?"

"Our lizard has rested. She should be able to push through."

True to his word, Jannik guided Barney into a field of quinta midday. Gazing up, I saw the cliffs below High Pass as the lizard munched on the remaining fruit.

Jannik's eyes scanned the face. He nodded. "A path. Good. I feared we'd be looking for a way up all day."

As we neared Final Pass, flurries blowing, I saw familiar figures on the trail.

Takka and Adak stopped short, gazing up. Shorena and Cathy hurried toward us.

I dismounted Barney into hugs.

"What the heck did you find?" Shorena said, looking up at the antigravity cart.

"Exploding things," I said.

Jannik pulled the cart down to ground level. He then moved to confer with his hunters. Their eyes remained locked on the cart.

"Wow. Nuts and bolts. They explode? How?" Shorena asked.

"I don't know. The nut part glows green until it's attached. But if a little bit of the nut touches even a little powder inside the bolts—pchoww!" I made the explosion noise.

"The lights. Do you see it?" Cathy asked Shorena.

"Oh. I noticed they synched up last night," I said.

Shorena's brow came together. "Blue-blue-green."

“Just like the nav system,” Cathy said.

I had no idea what they were talking about.

“The ship must sense these things. The nav system uses retros, rockets, thrusters,” Shorena said. “That’s why we’re out here—the ship’s computers said there was something out here.”

Cathy frowned. “Rocket fuel?”

“Ready for launching,” Shorena said. “Primed, remote controlled. Kind of like bullets for a gun. It’s the kind of thing a nav system would be, I don’t know, hungry for.”

Which sounded like a weapon, I thought to myself.

“No idea how you would install these,” Cathy shrugged. “Load them. But I’d guess you’d stuff these in the retro rockets or thrusters like shotgun shells.”

“Wherever the rockets are.” Shorena shrugged.

I showed them the can of glitter dust, opening the lid. “This stuff might be useful,” I said.

“Kind of like gunpowder,” Cathy said. She sniffed. “Smells like it might ignite.”

Shorena moved her hand through the dust. “Too bad we don’t have guns. Cannons. Something.”

“Could we make them?” Cathy asked.

“Sure. Give me a year or two. A couple more guys,” Shorena said. “I could come up with some one-shot cannons. Some would explode instead of fire, probably.”

We didn’t have years, just days.

Jannik walked back, Adak and Takka walking widely around the lizard.

“You need to see Grexi,” Jannik said.

“Oo, yeah, that’s quite a bruise.” Shorena looked at the side of my head. “She’s been cooking up something with the twins. I’m sure Grexi wants to talk to you anyway.”

“We can figure out something to do with this stuff, right?” Cathy asked.

Shorena paused, deep in thought. “It’s not really something I understand. But yes, we’ll find a way to use this, to keep us safe from the pirates.”

We walked toward Final Pass, snow becoming heavier. I noticed both Cathy and Shorena carrying weapons. “Since when did you two know how to use a bow and arrow?”

“Since we found out pirates are coming to kidnap us again,” Cathy said.

“Everyone in the village has been making bows, arrows, practicing. We’re not any good yet.”

“Everyone sort of understands that we’re in for a fight,” Shorena said. “That’s good enough for now.”

“Until we figure out how to make the pirates explode,” Cathy said.

I couldn’t help but look to the sky. All I saw were low clouds and snow. Somewhere out there...

“Is that it? Explosive nuts and bolts the size of garbage cans?” Shorena said.

Wasn’t that enough? But wait. “There is one other thing.” I dug in my bag.

Cathy looked over the box. “What is this?”

I reached over and pressed the button, starting the three-dimensional projector.

At first, she pointed it around like a flashlight. Then she turned the projector into the distance.

We could then see a cube of light, both Those Before and Dratum wandering through the image.

Cathy flipped it around. There weren’t many controls. She touched something. Jaroor appeared, large animals with tusks and horns. We were startled by an atlatl dart zipping through the image.

“Watch out!”

I turned to see Takka and Adak reloading their atlatls.

“Whoa, whoa, it’s just a picture,” I said.

Cathy turned as well, swinging the box of images around.

Takka turned away. “Make it stop!”

Searching with her fingers, Cathy switched it off. “Huh,” she said.

Jannik folded his arms. “Perhaps we should move on.”

We headed toward Valley Hold.

“Can I ride your dinosaur?” Cathy asked.

“I don’t think Barney’s an actual dinosaur, just something that looks like a lizard. Knock yourself out.”

The big lizard seemed happy not to be running.

We still needed to make time.

“Do you think there’s a way to make exploding arrows or something?” I asked as Shorena walked alongside.

Shorena shrugged. “We’ll have to blow some stuff up.”

“Really?” I gazed at the floating cart. There wasn’t any aspect of our finds that I trusted.

“It’s been a while. Should be fun. I’ve been thinking about Valley Hold, the shape of the crater,” she said.

“What about it?”

“You remember when you first got here? The dam?” she asked.

Jannik and I arrived late, but so did the rest of the village. The safe zone was fully occupied by villages that had merged. As a threat (I hoped), Suvo and Gattok built a dam on the river above, the one that fed the lake. They were prepared to flood the whole valley if our village was denied a place.

“That was kinda scary,” I admitted.

“Yeah, but it might be a really good weapon, if you were outgunned,” Shorena said.

That was crazy. “You’re thinking we can lure the pirates into the crater? How?”

She hiked her shoulders. “We’ll figure something out. But we need whatever we can get against the pirates. They may not be formidable fighters, but they’ve got a spaceship, spaceship weapons, maybe plasma rifles, ray guns. Who knows? Nukes? There’s no room for mercy.”

“Guess not,” I said.

Shorena stuck her lower lip out. “Is it worth it, all this? Explosives, floods, fighting a spacefaring enemy with stone age weapons?”

I looked at Jannik, walking a few yards ahead of us. Somehow, he knew I was watching. He turned and gave me a smile.

I smiled back at him. “Totally worth it.”

We didn’t bother with Last Pass, instead moving around the top of the crater. Snow let up a little as we moved over the shoulder and around Mount Calamity.

Barney wasn’t nearly as sure-footed on the narrow path. Cathy got down, leading her by the reins.

“What are we going to do with her?” Jannik asked. “My brother’s village had her housed in Valley Hold.”

“Barney won’t fit through the hatch. I don’t want to leave her to the weather,” I said.

“There are no caves on this side of the valley wall,” Jannik said. “But plenty of haithi.”

I didn’t think the lizard, big as she was, would do well against the pack

cats.

“She needs a pen. A house. Food and water. We can’t spare the time—but we have to take care of Barney,” I said.

Jannik nodded. “She’s helped us. I won’t abandon her. Once we get in the metal caves, we’ll have to find my brother. Those northerners are the ones who know about keeping beasts.”

“Good idea. We should do it right away.”

“No. I’ll do it. You’ll see Grexi about your head injury,” Jannik said. “I don’t care much for the healer’s ways, but she’s healed me. Let her heal you.”

Grexi, I found, had set up shop in what looked like an actual sick bay. When I entered, I saw one of the gray twins, I couldn’t keep them straight yet, laying in one of the beds. Her sister stood near the bed, holding her hand.

“Is she okay?” I asked.

Grexi appeared from around a tall contraption that housed another bed. “We found something,” she said.

The awake twin glanced up, but returned to focusing on her unconscious sister.

“Is she sick?”

“She’s having a reaction to a smut that grows on the underside of white berry leaves. It can make some Dratum itchy. But it makes the twins unconscious.”

“She volunteered to expose herself?” I asked.

The second twin—Flona? Sathra?—looked at me with her fully black eyes.

“We both did. Flona is experiencing the dust form of the mold.”

The idea shocked me. “You both took poison?”

“For the good of all,” Sathra said. “It is uncomfortable, but temporary.”

“You two are really hard core,” I said.

Sathra shrugged. “We’re faced with difficult odds. In the face of such, we all need to ban together. The star-fallen, our village, the other villages. Even they understand that our situation is dire.”

“We’ve got many collecting the leaves,” Grexi said. “It is a long process to scrape the leaves, dry the smut, and prepare a way to deliver it. Hopefully, we have enough time.”

JANNIK

A dozen hunters and warriors stood with the star-fallen women Shorena and Cathy. Small pots of the glittering soil stood down the rim, at the bottom of the valley. Lilstra stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth, sighting down a drawn arrow, concentrating.

The tip of the arrow held a strip of woven fabric, dipped in lighting oil, set ablaze.

When she let fly, the arrow soared down the slope. It hit its target, dropping into the pot. There was a poof of sound and a quick blaze of flame.

“No good.” Shorena frowned.

Cathy sighed. “It’s not enough.”

The feline lowered her bow, frowning. “You try to hit that target.”

“She means the flame isn’t enough,” Shorena said. “That pot should go off with a bang.”

Lilstra tapped the point of the arrow against her lips. “Well, an atlatl dart is bigger. It might carry a larger flame.”

I frowned. The feline looked at me.

With a sigh, I tied a loop of fabric around a dart. Soaking it in oil, I dipped it in the campfire.

It was a long shot. My aim was true, but then I usually shot at things many times my own size. You didn’t need to be a sharpshooter to take down a jaroor.

I let fly, the dart a line of light trailing smoke. Despite the distance, I just managed to get the point inside—

The valley shook, lightning blinding. Moments later, thunder still echoed in the bowl-shaped crater.

“There you go,” Shorena said. “Like that.”

“Three moons!” my cousin, Gitak, exclaimed.

“I gotta try that,” Lilstra said.

She repeated my steps. When she threw the dart, she put her entire body into it. A much better shot than me, her blazing dart easily entered the center of a pot of glitter.

Boom!

As I watched, a small avalanche dropped from Mount Calamity. On the far side of the crater, I saw several of the big lizards racing around in a circle. Was that my little brother, trying to calm them all?

“It’s not very practical,” Shorena said. “Arrows would be better. They have the range. Archers could hide from the invaders. Atlatls—you need to get kind of close.”

Lilstra’s head took on a dismissive tilt. “A big wad, soaked in oil like that? You’d never get an accurate shot.”

“And just a little flame won’t set the glitter off,” Cathy said. “Damn.”

Men came from the river to see what all the noise was about. Snow flurries had become a miserable, cold drizzle.

“How goes the dam?” I asked.

“It was ready to go before the trials,” Kron said. “It only needs the taller planks shoved in place. There’s enough of a lake to fill a quarter of the valley, maybe.”

“I can’t believe you were going to dump all that water on us,” Tebor said, face pale. “You would’ve drowned women, children...”

“I can’t believe you were going to shut out my village,” Kron frowned.

Takka smirked at him. “You would’ve frozen and starved women, children.”

Tebor couldn’t hold any gaze. He backed away into the crowd.

“Do we do the powder the same way?” Lilstra asked. “Hang some bags, shoot them open?”

“I figure just keep a sack near each charge,” Cathy said. “Just blow as much of it into the air as we can.”

“This isn’t honorable,” Gitak said. “We should meet the enemy head on.”

“They lost a ship here—maybe they don’t know exactly where, but they will be wary. When they come, it will be in force, with weapons that defy explanation. We just need to even the odds,” Cathy said.

Gitak looked at our setup, the small fires, the oil, piles of fabric, with

derision. “I think we’re making too much of this. How much of a threat can they be?”

“We’ve fought them before,” Adak said, coming up behind Cathy. “If we hadn’t had surprise on our side, things might have turned out different.”

“They fell like any warriors—easier than most,” Adak said. “I trust my men to fight through to victory.”

“As do I!” Tebor said.

“How many warriors do you have? A hundred? A hundred fifty? Can you hold out against five hundred? A thousand pirates?” Cathy said.

“They won’t fight the way you expect,” Adak said. “When we hunt a beast we don’t know well, it is always best to employ tactics to understand its behavior, and drive it to a place where the hunters can remain safe.”

“Hunter talk,” Tebor snorted. “Like killing animals requires more subtlety than killing men.”

“Whatever behaviors animals exhibit, they don’t have the one characteristic that makes killing men so simple,” Adak said.

“What’s that?” Gitak raised his brows at Adak and suppressed a smile.

“Egotism,” Adak said.

His word shut both warleaders down. Cathy gave him a grateful look over her shoulder.

“You talk of many foes,” Kron said. “Yet you double the number needed to fire darts. One to tend fire and oil, the other to shoot.”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t require two warriors. Just one. Plus a person brave or foolish enough to volunteer for this madness.”

“I’m foolish enough.”

Sam came up behind me.

“Forget it. You’ll take shelter with the others in the metal caves,” I said. “You’re the healer’s apprentice. We may need a bunch of healing before this is through.”

She shook her head. “You’ve stood beside me, no matter what danger I asked you to face. I’m not about to leave you to face the pirates on your own.”

“Girl power.” Shorena followed Sam. “How’s everything working?”

“Arrows cannot transfer enough fire to make a pot of glitter explode,” I said. “It requires a stout dart.”

“No range,” Shorena mused.

“Maybe enough to keep the pirates from going where we don’t want,”

Sam said.

Cathy looked toward the waterfall on the western rim. “Send them to a place where they’ll be vulnerable.”

“There’s news,” Sam said.

But she stopped talking. When she looked expectantly at Shorena, Shorena scowled back at her.

“Fine. I’ve done some relativity calculations. Which are really hard without a calculator, or even scratch paper and pencil,” Shorena said.

“Out with it, Rache,” Lilstra said, moving into our circle.

Warriors from other villages remained nervous around the sky-fallen and backed away.

“Tomorrow, probably around sunset,” Shorena said. “That’s the best I could come up with for the time the pirates will enter normal space and find their way to orbit.”

Cathy’s expression fell. “That doesn’t give us enough time.”

“Then we’ll just have to go with what we’ve got,” Sam said.

“If we really hustle, work all night—” Cathy started.

“No way,” Sam said. “We’ve got what we’ve got. If this is my last night alive, I’m not going to spend it figuring out where to move pots of glitter. There’s nothing that says these guys are going to land and fight.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Cathy said. “I mean, pirates, they’re all kinda sneaky bullies. They might only attack if they’re sure they can win.”

“If we just chased them off, I would be happy enough,” Sam said.

“Oh...” Shorena faced away.

Lilstra rolled her eyes. “Here we go.”

No one wanted to provoke bad news.

I had to know.

I asked, “What more did you learn?”

“Ever since you brought back the rocket shells, the nav system has acted weird. At first, I figured it was just the ship systems locking onto the fuel. But it wasn’t just our ship,” Shorena said.

“What are you getting at?” As usual, the sky-fallen’s words made no sense to me.

“Are you saying the pirates hacked the nav system?” Cathy said.

I waited.

“I’m guessing they intercepted the messages between our rockets and the assembled fuel pods,” Shorena said.

“Why would the ship and the fuel be in contact?” Sam asked.

“Seems like that pods are already controlled by the ship,” Shorena said.

“Ah. That explains the diagrams I keep seeing,” Cathy said. “There’s a chart that says where each of the pods should go. Frankly, the ship is too buried to place any of them.”

“But since the pirates are listening to the communication, they must be interested in the fuel pods,” Sam said.

Shorena shrugged. “It’s fuel that ignites without air. That’s kinda rare. You need rockets to maneuver in orbit, in deep space. They’re valuable.”

Finally, something I understood.

Valuable.

Valuable enough to fight for?

I couldn’t say.

Sam looked out over the rim. “The center of the valley is the flattest part. I’d guess that’s where they would land.”

“We only need to move them to the western rim,” Cathy said.

“With perfect timing,” Lilstra said.

On the far side of the valley, fog formed from the annoying rain.

I could just make out the village fishers, dragging beasts from the lake. At Final Pass, hunters from the other tribes hauled the bodies of their kills.

“Looks like a feast,” I said.

“Everyone understands that something serious is about to happen,” Sam said.

“Guess we should pass the word that it’s happening tomorrow,” Cathy said. For a moment, she gazed at Adak.

“I just wish we could figure out what the pirates are going to do,” Sam said.

“It would be strategic if we could lead them. Even before the attack,” Lilstra said. “You know, point them in the direction we want.”

“They’re interested in the rocket shells. If we put them in the right spot —” Sam started.

“Yes!” Cathy said. “We don’t know if the pirates who kidnapped us ever got a signal to the main group. All they know for sure is that there’s a downed ship. They don’t know it’s been downed for, like, centuries. But if they’re scavengers—”

“Right. Put the goods in the spot we want them. At least have some kind of advantage,” Lilstra said.

“Away from Last Pass. Close to the rim lake. Where is the floaty cart now?” Cathy asked.

Sam shrugged. “We didn’t know what to do with it. It’s down in one of the eastern caves.”

“With your big lizard?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

“Can we use Barney to help us fight the pirates?” Shorena pondered aloud.

“I doubt one big animal would make a difference,” Lilstra said.

“Yeah, if they have ray blasters, they could just shoot the poor girl,” Cathy said.

Shorena chuckled. “Too bad we don’t have a whole stampede of the dinosaurs.”

Sam looked at me. “Is Barney the only one?”

“No idea,” I said.

“We should look,” Sam said. “Ask your little brother.”

I gazed at the large caves at the bottom of the eastern rim.

“Don’t you have people to care for?” She was a healer’s apprentice, and plenty of the other villagers had succumbed to the ice storm.

“Grexii showed me how to prepare the salve to revive the flesh. Once you apply it, there’s only waiting to see what works. If the medicine doesn’t work, it gets messier,” Sam said.

Amputation, I thought. There were few remedies other than that for the creeping black, what Sam called frostbite.

“There’s plenty of time to check on my patients. C’mon, let’s go see if Nakar is with Barney,” she said.

Action was better than worrying about crab men from space. “Okay. We’ll go see my brother and your friend.”

“I miss them both.” Sam smiled.

“I’d like to look into the navigation system, and see about the connection to the rocket shells. You’re more of a natural with ship stuff, Cath,” Shorena said.

“Sure, let’s try to figure this out. It might be some help for the coming fight,” Cathy suggested.

“Meet you back at the ship,” Sam said, taking my hand.

The hunters and warriors broke up, speaking softly, gazing at the diminished waterfall to the west, at the flat center of Valley Hold.

I knew the coming battle was on all of their minds.

Takka and Adak followed the sky-fallen back to the metal caves.

Sam and I moved along Final Pass, and into the valley proper.

It was strange to see so few people. When Sam and I arrived after barely escaping the first floods from the Glare of Dread, Valley Hold teemed with people. So many that our own village was denied entry.

“Sometimes, the most dire things seem so inconsequential with just a little time passing,” Sam said.

Looking around the empty valley, I understood her point. Getting to this shelter was life or death for all the Dratum. Now? Well, on to the next dilemma.

Long before we reached the eastern caves, we heard the hooting call of Barney.

“Hi, girl!” Sam called. “Did you miss us?”

Nakar moved among a small herd of giant animals. He smiled at us, then spoke low to one of the other boys tending the lizards.

“She likes you,” my brother said, trotting alongside Barney.

The lizard tried to give Sam a big lick. She was savvy, and sidestepped the tongue. She gave the animal a pat. “Who’s a good girl?”

“Thanks for lending her to us,” I said to Nakar. “She was helpful.”

“Oh, they don’t belong to anyone. We raise them from eggs, but each decides whether or not to stay with us,” Nakar said.

Sam leaned to one side, looking deeper into the cavern. “How many are there?”

“Seven,” Nakar said. “All females. Father would like to breed more. We haven’t done much since joining our new tribe. We live farther south than these animals now. Well, when we’re not sheltering.”

“I’d like you to think about something,” Sam said. “Tomorrow, enemies will come. I want you to think about this first. No way do I want to put you or the animals in danger.”

She told him what she wanted. As she spoke, more of the boys gathered, just close enough to hear.

“They want to hurt us?” Nakar said.

“Pretty sure, yes,” Sam said.

“Let us think it over,” one of the older boys said.

Sam nodded. “We couldn’t ask for more.”

SAMANTHA

Fog thickened, almost to the point of making our walk back to the ship dangerous.

I thought about what might be coming. Behind us, the valley was a bowl of smoke.

“What’s wrong?” Jannik asked.

He had come to know me. I couldn’t hide my feelings from him anymore. More than knowing me, our hearts were connected.

“I feel guilty. You wouldn’t have to fight off an invasion from space if not for us, the sky-fallen.”

“I would fight any menace to keep you.”

“Well, so I’ve seen. But you and me... The rest of the village didn’t sign up for this. Certainly, the other villages didn’t.”

“From what I hear, although I don’t fully understand, the enemy are interested in the devices we found. There is a building still full of them in the flier-shaped city. Maybe, they would seek them out anyway. Without you, we would not even know what we faced.”

Not far from the hatch was a butchering site. It was far enough away to avoid attracting predators and scavengers into the ship. Even from here, I saw hunters shouldering enormous cuts of meat.

Cooks’ apprentices from all villages hauled baskets toward the door filled with roots or stalks.

Yet faces were not set or grim. The people talked easily, laughed.

“Looks like it’s going to be a party,” I said.

“If it is to be the final feast of the Dratum, might as well go all out,” Jannik said.

His words made my heart sink. So many of his people were forced to gather here. It would be a huge blow if the pirate force was large and angry enough.

“This could go so badly, Jannik. Despite all our plans,” I said.

He took my hands and turned me toward him. “We will persevere. We always do. The wild of our surroundings, the hell of our seasons, disagreements among the villages, nothing can diminish us. And you—you are stronger than the fiercest warrior, smarter than the wiliest hunter. We are more with you joining. We can do what needs doing, have no fear.”

Jannik’s words made me feel a little better.

Yet I could not avoid looking into the gray sky.

“Stop,” he said. At first, his visage was stern. But after a moment, he broke into a smile. It made his brutal face so handsome. “Worry about tomorrow when it comes.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

“I’ll take your worries away.” He pulled me to him.

We kissed. It went on long enough that the hunters all entered the ship with their burdens.

When we pulled apart, my breath came fast. “You do take my worries away.”

“Later, you won’t even know what a worry is.”

“Promise?” My voice sounded breathless in my own ears.

“Do I need to?”

“Never,” I said, leaning into another kiss.

“Get a room!”

We broke at the sound of Shorena’s voice.

Cathy sat in the copilot seat, staring at the dual monitors.

“There’s a burst of Cherenkov radiation.” Shorena stood up and moved to the monitor. She pointed to a blue dot not far from the glow of the Glare of Dread. “They’re coming in hot.”

“You still think they will arrive tomorrow?” I asked.

“Unless they’re trying to hide their flight path,” Cathy said. “But I don’t think so. The ship has been tracking that vessel since it pinged us. It’s dropping into normal space out beyond the system.”

“It will take some time for it to get into orbit from there,” Shorena said.

“Using rocket pods like the ones you found, no doubt,” Cathy said.

“What about the second sun?” I asked. The yellow dot on the screen was

now about the size of my thumbnail held out at arm's length. No longer did it look like a star.

"This planet gets close. For a while, we can stop calling it the Season Dark and call it the Season Shaky. There's going to be all kinds of seismic activity." Shorena moved back to the control dash. "Moons, second sun, red sun, when they line up, the tides will be higher than a hundred feet. At the coasts, the tides will look more like tsunamis."

I understood that at the start of the Season Dark, it was the tide that caused most of the devastating floods. Supposedly, Valley Hold and other seasonal shelters were high enough to avoid damage.

"Much like the tides or the weather, there isn't really anything to do about our situation," Shorena said.

"Shorena?"

We turned at the sound of an uncertain voice. Mikka, Shorena's building apprentice, tentatively stepped onto the bridge.

"What is it, Mikka? Is something wrong?"

"No. Actually. We are feasting. You should eat," he said.

Shorena nodded. "I've been smelling food since we got back."

"We might not be here after tomorrow." Cathy shrugged. "Let's go live it up."

"I just wish there were cocktails," Shorena said.

She eyed Mikka as he walked down the corridor, eyes going a little out of focus.

I wouldn't blame her if she had a thing for the handsome young apprentice.

"What are cocktails?" Jannik asked.

"Booze. Liquor. Hootch," Cathy said unhelpfully.

He gave me a puzzled look.

"Fermented beverage—kind of like when Barney ate those quinta flowers," I said.

"Ah. Well, if the hunters harvested any of the frozen quinta, the healers know how to make them more pleasant," Jannik said.

"So there's hope, Rache," Cathy said.

"Woo," Shorena said, sarcastically. "Part-ee."

"Huh," Cathy said. "I figured you were more focused on Mikka than drinkypoos."

Though Shorena shot hot eyes at Cathy, she didn't deny it.

When we entered the galley where we'd met with the Elders, the air was heavy with greasy aromas. My head nearly swam. A rumble sounded in my belly.

We found Jeannie, Lizzie, and Lilstra seated at a table and joined them. Cook apprentices laid platters on the table.

"Hey. Gang's all here." Lizzie nodded at the corridor.

The twins, Sathra and Flona, entered the dining chamber. With small smiles, they took a bench at our table.

"The famous sky-fallen, together again." Jeannie smiled.

Mikka moved to the table, burdened by a tall pottery jug. "Cocktails," he said to Shorena.

"All right!" Jeannie said. "All we need are glasses."

"Oh, you don't use glasses for this," Mikka said. "Like this."

He angled the end of the jug against his mouth, tipping the long, slender vessel at an angle. Only a small trickle of purplish liquid entered his mouth.

"Oh, c'mon, Mikka," Jeannie said. "Drink up!"

"Yeah," Cathy said. "Chug! Chug! Chug!"

I smiled to myself. I forgot what a cheerleader Cathy was when she wasn't in a dark place.

"Don't pressure the kid," Lizzie said. "Here, pass it over here."

The liquor jug made it once around the table before the cook apprentices got serious about serving. I recognized the taste. It really was from the quinta flowers.

At once, the alcohol went to my head. When was the last time I'd had an adult beverage? The others seemed equally affected.

Slabs of meat, heaps of steaming root vegetables, bowls of some sweet-smelling stuff arrived and everyone dug in. When the hootch jug came around again, I passed.

Initially, the fermented brew made me giddy. Soon, my thoughts turned inward.

Was I too late? For so long, I'd fought to leave. Now I had found my place, my love, accepting how much better my life was here.

Absently, I took Jannik's hand. As if my grip would somehow keep us together, despite what we might be facing.

He gave me an odd look. Partly, I thought, because he was a two-hand eater like the rest of the Dratum. With his other hand, he bit a huge chunk of meat off a joint and chewed.

“Eat,” he said. “You’ll need your strength.”

I nodded. “Tomorrow will be—”

“You’ll need your strength for tonight.”

A case of the nerves turned into a case of the shivers as I gazed in his eyes. Despite the spread in front of us, he looked hungry.

Across the table, Shorena got more flirty with Mikka, smiling and touching his arm lightly. For his part, Mikka looked confused, but intrigued.

Dratum mated only after a hunt, when a mate was captured and carried off like prize game. But there were no specific rules for casual sex, as far as I could tell. It was when a mate was hunted and captured that things got serious. It was, in a way, their marriage vows.

The thought gave me a start. I gazed at Jannik out of the corner of my eye. We were mated—and until now, I didn’t really equate that to marriage. It could’ve been the blunt lack of ceremony.

I noticed Cathy giving long looks to Adak, who sat with the hunters. Takka kept looking at Lizzie. Relationships, low level, started between both couples when we first were carried into the village. Would they continue? Grow? Would my friends volunteer to run as mate prey, as I did?

“If you’re done eating, we have other celebrating to do,” Jannik said.

I blinked at him, my mind having wandered far.

Without warning, he scooped me off the bench, into his arms.

“Goodnight,” he said to the others as he carried me down the corridor.

“I guess dinner is over,” I said.

“Told you to eat,” he said.

Our cabin was not far. Jannik set me on the bed. I rose to my knees.

I took his hands, turning them palms up. Below his wrists were curved marks that looked a little like scars. His shi-na tendrils came from there. I kissed each of them, receiving a low moan. The areas were erogenous zones.

He jerked and shivered in my grip as I gently tongued one, and then the other. Like erections, the blunt, wedge shapes issued. I teased them further, taking one into my mouth.

It went firmer, quickly growing, stretching to the back of my throat.

“Sam...” he hissed, dropping to the bed beside me.

I gripped the tentacle, removing it from my mouth, and moved to the left.

His eyes closed, head lolling back.

The right tentacle moved along my face, caressing. I felt it move into my hair, entwining. Sucking the left shi-na, I ran my teeth gently along its length.

“Aah!” He shivered—his only motion.

More of the right emerged, playing in my hair, wrapping around my neck. The tip slipped into the top of my dress. It wiggled between my boobs, lightly flicking each of my nipples.

The one I toyed with in my mouth slipped away. Then the other. In a moment, both entered the bottom of my dress. The fur garment was quickly and easily slipped over my head.

My arms were bound together and I was forced down on the bed. I felt a tentacle explore between my legs.

It rubbed against me, slowly nudging open my lips, sliding along my exposed slit. The texture over my wet flesh made me breathe deeply. I closed my eyes, focusing on the sweet sensation.

My breasts were seized by the other tentacle, squeezed, massaged.

I felt his nails run down my body, over my hips. I jerked when they dragged down my thighs.

In response to a deep-seated need, the shi-na that rubbed my pussy gently worked my clit. The easy rhythm made me widen my legs. Then, I felt the second tentacle release my breasts, winding down my torso.

It slid into my hole. I was already sopping wet. I groaned as it moved deeper. Working in concert with the wedge playing with my nub, I felt it reach deep to my second pleasure spot.

“Jannik, yes...”

When I opened my eyes, he was above me. His kiss was fierce. Our lips bruised together.

His hands pushed my legs apart. I forced my tongue into his mouth. My hands gripped his hair, pulling him tighter.

Inside me, against me, the shi-na pulsed, driving me toward frenzy. My hips bucked, out of my control.

Jannik’s weight pinned me to the bed, his mouth demanding mine.

I felt the press of his cock, hard and vibrating, against my hip, my mons. It left a hot, wet trail as he shifted position.

My orgasm was sudden, rocking me. I made a feral noise.

Jannik responded by taking both of my wrists in one hand, pulling them over my head, trapping me against the bed.

With a quick motion, his tentacles moved from me. In a moment, one shoved into my mouth.

“Taste yourself,” he said.

I let it in, the oils of my desire in the back of my throat.

“The other,” he demanded, the second tentacle taking the place of the first. “Suck it.”

Following his instructions, I took the tentacle deep, until it filled my mouth to overflowing.

His growl was ferocious. I stared into his eyes, maddened with pleasure.

I wanted him inside me. He heard my desire.

The head of his cock was huge. After all the times we made love, I still didn't believe I could take him.

Yet despite the size, I was slick. He soon slid into my pussy. I angled my hips to ease his invasion.

My taut hole became elastic, accepting him, urging him deeper.

With each inch of his passage, my heart sang. He kept pressing in, an impossible length, yet I wanted more, I wanted all of him.

Jannik slid into me until our hips came together. My knees rose, legs wrapping around him, holding on for what was to come.

Tentacles wrapped me, arms, body, neck, breasts, holding me as fast as Jannik's grip on my wrists. He slid out of me, and back in. And again, faster.

Sweet strokes followed, one after the other.

I felt the pressure build inside me as his tempo worked to a fever pitch. He gasped and growled. I felt his internal heat become a blaze.

His breath became a pant, his cock growing even larger, harder, inside. Incendiary waves flowed through me, building and building until I edged toward an abyss.

“I want you to come,” he breathed in my ear. “Come with me.”

His words pushed me over. My body was aflame as he rammed deeper, impossibly deep. Jannik's issued felt boiling hot as he spurted, flooding me.

He continued pounding, trusting as his orgasm overtook him. It sent a new set of waves through me, forcing sounds from my throat, motion in my limbs even though I was held fast.

Reality vanished for a moment. My mind floated in warm liquid.

When I came to my senses again, I found him still moving inside me.

“More,” he demanded. I felt him growing inside me again.

JANNIK

Never had I wanted like this.

I looked at Sam below me, shivering in pleasure, dark skin sheened with sweat, glowing with beauty, with desire.

I grew hard again.

Releasing her arms, I levered myself up.

As I pulled out of her, I felt her grip on my shaft.

I wanted her to take me with her mouth, to taste both of us at once.

There was no need to command her.

I knelt over her face as she bobbed her head to take me in.

Staring at her beautiful face, her soft lips, as she worked me, awoke further desire.

In moments, I was fully turgid again.

Her eyes met mine, our hearts singing together.

She wanted to be on top, I felt it, and I lifted her to straddle me.

Her hand gripped my shaft, guiding me. When the angle was right, she did not ease down on me, but dropped fiercely.

She cried out with it as we were joined with fire.

Seeing her above me, her breasts swaying with her motion, roused me. Her eyes met mine.

I saw a smiling lust in their depths, as well as a smug sense of control as she rode me.

The corners of her lips turned up slightly. She ground against my rock-hard dick.

It would take time before my fire was fully stoked.

But not hers.

I saw the muscles shiver beneath her skin, arms trembling. An orgasm swept over her again.

Crying out, she bent her back to heighten the sensation. Her hair flew, teeth showing.

My mate. My love.

Then she collapsed against me, breathing heavily, yet still pumping her hips.

“Come in me again,” she breathed.

Her words, her breath in my ear, awakened some animal force within me.

Roughly, I pulled out of her. I rolled her over.

My hands slapped and gripped each side of her broad ass.

She lowered her head to the bed, levering herself to accept me from behind.

I entered her, gazing at the span of her hips, the froth of her black curls over wide shoulders.

Her surrender urged me on, and I plunged as deeply as her tight hole would allow.

My motion forced a moan from her.

“Harder, Jannik—as hard as you can,” she begged.

I acquiesced.

Leaning back, to take in her dark, shapely form as I ravished her, my hips jamming of their own accord.

Sam shivered, trembled, moaned, and I felt the roll of orgasm after orgasm issue from her.

Though I burned within her, I could not stop. My body continued on as my brain flooded, drowned, submerged in sensation.

Suddenly, I was there. I barely had time to register my pleasure hurtling forward, spinning like a hurricane, until it blasted from me.

Sam suppressed a shout as she felt me explode inside her.

Control of my body eluded me. I pounded until I was bruised.

My eruption stole the last of my strength. I fell to the bed beside her.

For a long while, I could not speak, could not catch my breath.

When I finally did, I whispered in her hair. “I love you.”

Sam did not respond. I touched her gently, feeling her body rise evenly in sleep.

Holding her, I breathed in her scent.

It seemed only a moment passed before I heard irritating activity in the

cave outside.

“Must be morning,” Sam said.

“Why?”

“They don’t sound drunk.” She rose from the bed.

I didn’t want her to. For many reasons. Reluctantly, I followed suit.

“Why is it that I can never find my dress in the morning?” she asked.

“Exuberance on my part,” I said.

She smiled. “That must be it.”

Quickly, she found it. I watched her dress. It was fascinating, watching her adjust her breasts behind the lacing at the neck. I suppressed a smile as she wiggled the dress around.

“What are you looking at?” She scowled.

“You are always interesting to watch.”

Her scowl turned into a smile. “Pervert.”

“At your service.”

“Let’s go see if there’s any leftover... whatever we ate last night.”

I followed her out into the metal caves.

“Eggs for breakfast!” Jeannie sat alone at the table from last night, her feet on the top. “Not chicken eggs. Blue yokes. But good.”

“No ham?” Sam asked.

Jeannie laughed.

I didn’t get it.

“No. Salamander or something.” Jeannie took her feet off the table. “But also blue.”

“Where is everyone else?” Sam asked.

“Oh, Cathy and Shorena were in here not too long ago, talking spaceship talk. Pirates, I guess. I didn’t really follow.”

“We should go to the bridge.”

I stopped Sam before she could turn. “Eat. We may not have a chance later.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, *Mom*.”

Today I followed the human conversation less than usual. I moved to where the cook’s apprentices worked over large, hot slabs. They offered me platters of blue food. I returned with them to the table.

“They’re really blue?” Sam asked. She cracked an egg open, blinking in surprise. “Huh.”

“Oh. Here.” Jeannie took a stone knife and a crystal block from the

middle of the table. She scraped one over the other, depositing dust on Sam's food. "Salt!"

"Thanks. Wish there was butter."

"I haven't seen an animal I'd milk on this planet," Jeannie shrugged.

Sam ate an egg. "Good point."

I saw members of various guilds coming in for food, but no hunters or warriors. We didn't tarry over breakfast. Soon, we were in the room near the entry.

Cathy and Shorena had their eyes on the round windows. "Here she comes," Cathy said.

An object like a silver bottom feeder appeared. It looked small but grew as we watched.

I recognized the shape. It looked like the fallen sky-serpent the shelled ones occupied.

Bad news.

"If the satellites can see it, it must be close," Sam said, voice low.

Cathy nodded. "They're not moving fast. We timed them from the faster than light radiation blast to this morning."

"There are lots of asteroids and debris in the system that they've been maneuvering around. Few more hours until orbit. They may take time to plan," Shorena said.

"Well, if they're like the pirates who abducted us, I doubt they'll plan anything," Cathy said. "That raid was disastrous."

"I'm still not sure how we survived it. The breach in the transport's hull. That weapon blast. The crash landing," Sam said.

"Let's hope this bunch is just as competent," Cathy smirked.

Sam looked at the entry. "What's the weather like?"

"So far, snow and rain mix, lots of fog," Cathy said. She touched jewels on the surface before her. The windows changed view.

"It's not a huge storm. Not like the ice deluge. But it won't be pleasant out there," Shorena. "I wish I knew more about weather forecasting."

"A high of thirty-three with a ninety percent chance of pirates," Cathy said.

She earned frowns from the other sky-fallen.

"Guess we'd better check our positions," Sam said. "See how the warriors are setting up."

We headed out into more light rain. Snow made white shadows beneath

trees. Gray dominated, erasing anything distant.

“Yucky day,” Sam said. “Although it might be great weather, if it interferes with the pirates.”

We made our way around Mount Calamity. “Fog is an equalizer, for both hunter and prey,” I said.

Soon, we reached the top of the rim, where our village had once camped. To my surprise, Father stood in the path.

“You can’t go this way, Jannik. There’s nothing but a lake beyond this point. You’ll have to go the other way.”

I peered past him. Water covered everything, backing up from a waterfall now silent. Logs creaked and groaned with the pressure of the lake.

“Why are you up here, chief?” Sam asked.

“My position. When we get word, two beats, we break the dam.”

“Aren’t you too valuable to risk yourself like this?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It was my idea in the first place. I want to see if it works. Don’t worry, there are warriors backing me up. I’m here to keep anyone from drowning.”

We made our way to the shoulder, and over the rim. Warriors ran here and there, vague figures in the mist. Otherwise, we looked out on a vacant valley.

“It’s so still.” Sam’s voice was low and muted by the fog.

“Enjoy it while you can,” I said.

After crossing the valley floor, we rose up the other rim. Warriors worked below, moving the pots of glitter.

Adak and Takka sat on rocks, gazing at the gloom above. Between them was the empty barrel where the glitter had been. It hung from a rope on a low, thick tree. A stout branch leaned against it.

“Now I understand what your father was saying.” Sam pointed at the dangling barrel. “A drum. Two beats. What’s one beat for?”

“To make the lizards run around, if we need them,” Adak said.

Takka cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting at the men on the valley floor.

“If you keep moving those out, we’ll never hit them!”

The warriors repositioning the ceramic pots of exploding dust took in their position and moved their charges closer to the rim.

In a line, I saw warriors among the rocks. Halfway down the rim, the position gave them a chance to get a flaming dart into a pot.

“So we drive the sky serpents toward the falls,” Adak said. “Hit the drum twice. Why not just fight them?”

“Their ships have a lot of power. It will take a force of nature to take them down,” Sam said. “It’s the only force of nature we really have.”

“Those shell men aren’t fighters. We can take them. We did before,” Takka said.

“Except we don’t know how many there will be. What weapons they’ll employ. Since they aren’t good fighters, they’ll try to stay inside the ship. At the very least, we need to drive them out,” Sam said.

I nodded. “Like driving a herd of jaroor off a cliff. Easier than getting gored and trampled.”

“Sure.” Adak shrugged. “But not as fun.”

Takka eyed him for a long moment.

“You’re an idiot, Adak.”

He ignored Takka. “How do we know they won’t land somewhere else and send warriors from a distance?” Adak asked.

“Oh. Well, visibility is bad. We need to lure them,” Sam said. “The warriors fiddling with the pots will stay there. And we’ll add a crowd. I found... some magic that will help.”

“Great,” Takka said. “Giant lizards, exploding crockery—maybe—some kind of evil spell, and a flood. Sounds like a plan.”

Sam frowned.

“Did you have a better one?” I asked.

“Oh, no. This is fine. Great.” Takka walked away, muttering under his breath. “No it’s not. We’re all going to die.”

A blue glow lit the low clouds. We heard a whine like a thousand creepers.

The color drained from Adak’s face.

“They’re coming.”

Shouting echoed from all corners of the valley. Below, I saw Lilstra run. Near the rim lake, she crouched down. Suddenly, a crowd appeared. Those Before and Dratum milled about.

“The fog is really helping the holographic projector. It really looks like people down there,” Sam said.

She had taken it from the museum. We’d used it as a light in the track cave. Now, it pretended that people moved on the valley floor.

“Sam. The fire.”

Our position was set up.

A pot of oil from blubberoon. Rocks ringed a tiny fire pit. A few quivers' worth of darts.

Sam went to work, getting the fire started. We needed to keep it small to avoid being spotted.

I tied a length of cloth near the point of a dart and readied it in the notch of a thrower.

Once the fire crackled, Sam knotted cloth around more darts, dipping them in the oil. She would set them ablaze as I needed them.

The whine turned deafening. Shadows darkened the clouds. Light flared from the silhouettes. Though in flight, the shapes looked like blunt arrowheads rather than fliers.

On the valley floor, several warriors broke and ran at the sight, the roar. They scrambled for the mountain end of the valley.

Cowards.

Fog swirled as the sky serpents dropped. They sparked with bright embers. Beams of light turned solid in the mist.

"There are two!" Sam said. "Battle launches!"

One came down near us.

For a moment, I only stared. Rusty and crumpled, the thing dropped to the valley floor.

"Shoot, Jannik! Drive it west!"

I shook my head at Sam's words. The glitter pot! Whipping the throwing stick, I launched a flaming dart. It landed short and left of the pot.

Sam had another dart ablaze.

Again, I fired, taking into account the light wind. From the valley rim, sparks shot through the air, other warriors and hunters aiming for their targets.

Mine went home. The crockery exploded with a blinding flash. A second went off nearby. I heard Adak shout in triumph.

As if startled, the sky serpent lifted off the ground with a jerk, moving away.

"It's working!" Sam cried.

Another pot blasted to pieces, the sound stinging my ears. The rusty thing spat fire and drifted toward the rim lake.

The second came down behind it. Bright light spit from the point of the arrowhead. Rocks flew apart around us.

“They’re firing on us!” Sam shouted. “Lizards! Lizards!”

Takka, who had aided Adak’s dart firing, leapt up. He grabbed the stick leaning against the barrel. When he struck it, it rang louder than the stone gong that summoned us to Elder councils.

At once, iridescent purple lizards charged from the largest cave. My brother was the only rider, driving Barney toward the buzzing sky machine.

“Nakar!” Sam shouted. “What are you doing?”

The other lizards followed in a stampeding herd. More pots exploded in front of the sky serpent. Lizards came in from the right. It rose in the sky, turning toward the west.

And the dam.

“Is this working?” Sam asked herself.

“The dam!” I shouted.

Takka looked stunned for a second, gazing at a swarm of blazing darts, a herd of racing monsters, exploding pots, and a rising machine.

“The gong!” I shouted.

He nodded, face showing irritation. With all his might, he hit the barrel twice, denting in the side.

Near the rim lake, Lilistra lobbed a blazing dart into a pot. Without looking to see if she hit, she grabbed her partner warrior and ran toward the lake.

The first ship followed. When it reached the illusion of a crowd, it spat fire.

At the same time, Lilistra’s target was hit. Light, pottery, and fire washed over the floating arrowhead.

Second flier swooping in, it let loose a barrage at the phantom figures.

When the floating craft paused to shoot, the lizards crashed into it from behind.

“Get away, Nakar!” Sam’s voice was lost in the shouting, lizard hooting, explosions, and a deep roar from above.

A huge arc of water burst into the air.

SAMANTHA

When the burst from the broken dam hit the first ship, I thought we won.

The force of water smashed a huge dent in the lander.

Glass from its port holes, its forward windshield, smashed.

It rolled beneath the water, vanishing with a froth of bubbles.

The second ship was hit by the force of water. It fell to the valley floor. I watched it tip. Roll over.

“Yeah!” I pumped a fist in the air.

But though the first ship was sunk by the rising water, the second banked, the side splashing through water, churning mud. It tried to take to the air.

Nakar led his lizard pack into the swirling, rising water.

No! He was just a boy!

The creatures rammed the tipped ship with their shoulders, their tails, driving it deeper into the muck.

As water climbed, the animals swam toward their cave again.

Buried and half-submerged, the battle launch lurched to a stop.

A wave washed over it. But even though the dammed lake released a mind-boggling amount of water, it wasn't enough to fully flood the valley. As the water washed toward the eastern caves, it shallowed out.

I saw Lilstra, a disgusted look on her face, wading through the waist-deep water toward the rim.

The remaining glitter pots were washed away.

“Did we win?” Jannik looked around, puzzled.

A moment of calm followed.

The wave from the bursting dam reached the far rim and returned. Then the holographic crowd vanished, the device shorting out underwater.

Slowly, waves moved back and forth, finally canceling each other out. Water drained from the valley slowly, leaving a few inches of mud.

Maybe it wasn't a lasting flood, but I couldn't imagine how it would have impacted the other villages when they were housed here, keeping us out. After the initial blast of freed water, a huge, impassible mess was left behind. How many Dratum might have died?

And then it was time to worry about the villagers dying right now.

With a grunt and a hiss, the hatch on the upended side of the second launch opened up. It rang as it fell against the hull.

Men in stained, grimy armor hauled themselves out. They pointed long, narrow weapons around, eyes sweeping the crater walls.

Even from our position, I saw their gray skin, the crusty growths, the beady eyes. If the breeze blew in the right direction, I had no doubt I could smell them.

"Now what?" I asked.

Jannik put a hand on my shoulder. "This part, we know."

As he spoke, the air filled with flying darts, arrows, even rocks.

The first ship was revealed by receding waters. It smoked and sparked, but otherwise remained still. Water poured from its damaged hull.

The shelled pirates fired their energy rifles. Rocks split and shattered on the rim.

Villagers howled their war cries. They fired with renewed gusto.

Pirates fell beneath the barrage. One of the enemies looked me in the eye, weapon aimed. But a split second later, he collapsed, an arrow through his neck.

Warriors from the dam charged through Final Pass. They loosed arrows and darts as they screamed in blood lust.

Some of the attackers fired toward the pass, causing a small avalanche.

But attacked from two sides, the pirates looked for cover, for escape.

They ran for the eastern caves.

"Nakar is in there!" I remembered.

In defiance, a single arrow flew from the big cave. Water low, Nakar drove the animals back into the fray. From Barney's back, he fired at the pirates.

The space brigands shot back. One of the mighty lizards was struck in a dozen places, flopping and splashing to its side.

My heart plunged at the sight of the majestic beast dying in the mud.

Jannik fired his atlatl beside me. He no longer needed fire. I ducked behind a rock feeling useless.

I watched the battle.

There were only a handful of pirates left. One by one, they succumbed. Energy weapons fell from limp hands.

Between falling missiles and hooting beasts, they tried to retreat to the far side of their sideways ship.

I saw that they could easily take cover there. The western wall was too distant to fire from. Warriors on the eastern wall and Final Pass could not hit them if they sheltered back there.

But they could blast away at us.

“We’ll have to move in on them,” Jannik said.

I grabbed his arm. “You are not going down there!”

Warriors from the dam came down from the pass. Warily, from cover to cover, they slowly made their way toward the shelter foes.

Pirates hunkered down. Every few moments, a head and rifle would appear over the side.

I heard warriors on the rim near us cry out. Rocks exploded and smoke filled the air. Whatever weapons the pirates possessed were beyond deadly.

“If you get hit—” I said to Jannik.

“I’ve been hit by their light lances before,” Jannik said.

He had rescued me from the last remaining pirate when we’d been washed all the way to that crashed ship. The cowardly pirate had shot him from hiding.

At the time, Jannik was draped in a reflective emergency blanket, a stolen pirate helmet on his head. I didn’t think he would have survived otherwise. He had no such protection now.

Would he listen to me?

I saw his grim face turned toward the warriors hunkered down in the mud.

“We need to finish them,” he said through his teeth. “Teach them to stay far away from our home.”

True enough. As long as it didn’t mean Jannik sacrificing himself.

“Then I’m going with you.” I got up from behind my rock. “This is my home, too.”

He leaped over my cover, pulling me down again.

“You are no warrior. Tough as you are, you are not trained in battle,” he

said.

Things suddenly took a dire turn.

Nakar!

With the pirates sheltered behind their half-sunk ship, they had him and the pack of lizards pinned down.

All he could do was keep the beasts close enough to the ship. He was so close! I understood that it was to keep the pirates from getting a shooting angle at him.

“I can’t leave him there—your little brother!”

Like us, he was separated from his village by the raging weather stirred up by the Glare of Dread, the Season Dark. We had traveled with him to Valley Hold. Our time together made him feel like my little brother, too.

Or...

No. Don’t think that thought. Not yet.

Still, my hand stole to my belly.

I climbed over the rock. We had to save him somehow.

Then, the pirates shouted.

The first of the warriors from the dam made it to a good vantage. I saw Suvo, Jannik’s father, among them. From behind mud-painted trees and low rocks, they fired at the pirate’s backs.

“Three moons, what are you doing, old man?” Jannik shouted.

The brigands turned their weapons on the advanced group.

Weapons blazed, soundless.

Whatever blasted from their rifles was a powerful beam.

I watched in horror. Bit by bit, the trees, the rocks, were pounded, blasted by ray beams.

Yet the pirates got better than they gave. With each man who popped up, half a dozen missiles flew his way.

“Standoff,” I said.

Even as their cover diminished, more warriors joined those pinned down.

I couldn’t guess which way it would go.

“We need to get a better angle on them,” Jannik said.

An idea struck me. “The cart! We can get above them. The bottom might shield us from the ray blasters long enough to get at them.”

Jannik nodded. “Maybe get more glitter. Drop it on them. A whole barrel.”

It was all the way on the other side of the crater, near the hatch of the

ship.

Not only was it a long way to go, but there were two possible bad outcomes.

First, if any pirate survived, he could follow us to the buried ship.

Second, and more pressing, getting to the cart might put us in the line of fire from the ray blasters.

What else could we do?

“I’ll go,” I said.

“We go together,” Jannik said. “There’s nothing I can do to help them from here. Or down there.”

I backed up, keeping the low rocks between me and the fight. “The camp above the rim, it won’t be a lake anymore. It’s faster going that way.”

“Except it will be as muddy up there as it is in the valley,” Jannik said.

“We can cross at the dam. There may still be supports there, across the river.”

Nodding grimly, he moved toward Final Pass, keeping the standoff in view as we moved.

Quickly, we reached the warriors hunkered down above the action.

“Don’t tell me you’re joining your fool father,” Gattok said. “What is our chief thinking? And my son—”

I gazed at the men pinned down. In addition to Suvo, I saw Jannik’s cousin, Gittak, village warleader, among those fighting toward the sheltered pirates.

“He’s no warrior.” Jannik shrugged.

“He does care about his people,” I butted in.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to charge in there,” Gattok said. “I won’t allow it.”

“No. Another way. But only if we hurry,” Jannik said.

“Silver shelled men in flying machines!” Gattok spat in the mud. “How are we supposed to fight them? The world makes no sense any longer.”

“We’ll try a nonsensical approach,” I said.

Gattok rolled his eyes. “Of course you will. You’re sky-fallen.”

There wasn’t time for retorts or discussion. We moved off, heading around the rim to our former camp.

It was evident where the lake had formed behind the dam. Jannik was right—mud everywhere. Aquatic creatures flopped on the ground. They didn’t get the word that their environment was getting abruptly displaced.

Nothing about the place remained recognizable. We hadn't spent long here in exile. Trying to find a dry path, we plodded toward Mount Calamity at the north end of the rim.

"We'll need help to move those barrels off the cart," Jannik said.

I tried to think of a way to use more of the glitter. To make the antigravity cart more than just moving cover from ray blasts. Even our advanced technology might have been hammers for the way we had to use it.

Feet sucking in and out of the mud, we finally reached the dam. It was back to vertical poles, the horizontal logs gone over the falls. Once again, a river ran slowly from higher ground.

Coated in muck from the waist down, I was happy when we reached beyond the bottom of the vanished, temporary lake.

My thighs burned from pulling my feet free of the clinging goop.

Jannik, as usual, showed no sign of fatigue as he pushed on. Occasionally, he looked over his shoulder at me, but never disparaged my slow progress.

Once we reached the shoulder of Mount Calamity, he rose up a few feet, and reached his hand to me. Gladly, I let him help me up.

From up here, on the highest part of the rim, the battle didn't look so bad. We could make out tiny figures, the smoking ship, the overturned vessel.

We needed to quickly get back to the fray.

Hopefully, with an advantage.

On the north face, a path angled down toward the hatch.

"I should move ahead," Jannik said. "Start clearing the cart."

"You'll need help. We might as well stick together. I can go into the ship and get more bodies to move those containers."

He grunted in response. I understood his frustration. The longer we took, the more likely it was that the pirates would fight free. Or, worse, kill more of our people. Suvo. Nakar. People we loved.

And then, the situation radically shifted away from our favor.

It started with a rumble in the sky. Jannik froze, looking up.

After a moment, a now-familiar sound came to us. The high-pitched whine of a battle launch's engines, and getting closer.

Through the swirling fog, we saw the delta shape above, a shadow like a shark swimming above us.

"Another one..."

In moments, it lowered to a few feet above us, inexorably moving toward

the battleground.

“I have to go,” Jannik turned.

“No, you don’t! We can still do this!”

“There’s no time. I have to fight for my village. My father, my brother.”

He grabbed me, kissed me.

A red flash, slow lightning, emitted over our heads. Solid, a red beam of light cut through the rim. Water within the rocks boiled, making them explode. We flinched away from a rain of pebbles even though the weapon had struck distantly.

“No!” he cried.

Just like that, Jannik was gone.

JANNIK

The sky serpent lowered into the valley. It spewed red fire, tearing apart the ground below. The warriors facing the pirates didn't have a chance.

Sam was safe for now. Let her get into the metal caves. Take shelter.

As I ran, pell-mell, down the rim, the enemy machine continued blasting a path toward the stand-off. Under the force of its horrific weapon, I saw one of the lizards disappear in a flash of steam.

Had Sam and I been on that cart, in the air...

On the eastern wall of the valley, hunters and warriors flung darts and arrows against the hard shell of the oncoming thing to no avail.

Wisely, they retreated away from the solid red light.

Systematically, the sky serpent floated along the rim. With the beam blasting, it didn't take long for the warriors to retreat. I watched them race to the top of the rim and leap over.

I was not surprised at the lack of resistance.

Until the pirates showed themselves, they were safe from darts and arrows.

Though I knew what was next, dread thumped my heart as the sky serpent turned back to the standoff.

Racing across the valley floor, I knew there was no way I could reach them in time. My quiver was full, my arm strong, but it didn't matter.

Mud sucking at my feet, I charged on.

The pirates were too efficient to be called evil. In their unstoppable ship with its lethal barrage of light, they drew closer to the ground, nearer the sideways ship.

I saw Nakar leap off of Barney.

He landed poorly, stumbling in the mud. Limping, he moved toward his mount. Giving the lizard a slap, he sent her off.

Scattering lizards gave their pursuers much to deal with. One by one, however, they blasted their lightning, eliminating the beasts as they charged for shelter.

It left Nakar on his own. Injured and slow.

My feet could not fly fast enough to reach my brother.

To my shock, Father shouted to the boy.

“Cover me!” he shouted to the warriors.

The old idiot! He was never a fighter. And Nakar wasn't his son. Not even of our tribe.

Yet he sprinted in the line of fire toward the boy.

Pirates took aim at him.

As they did, a flight of arrows and darts flew at them from diminishing cover.

To return fire with their flashing spears, the pirates had to ignore my father's folly.

He grabbed Nakar and pulled the boy to the shelter of the rocks and trees.

Several lizards made the shelter of the caves. The sky serpent gave up on its hunt. But not on the fight.

As Father shoved the boy to safety, a bright light of a spear blasted the rocks in front of him. He cried out, but I could not see what happened to him as he dropped behind cover.

I did not let my trepidation slow me. If the pirates were to kill every last warrior, I would stand with them.

Sam.

Would my actions save her? For so long, I feared she would find a way to leave this world. Now I willingly charged toward the afterlife.

I was almost there.

The sheltering pirates did not expect an attack from the other side. Too engaged with the fighters huddled beneath the low rocks, they did not see me coming.

As I ran, I knocked a dart and tossed. My throw was true. A pirate fell from shelter, splashing into the mud.

Too late, I realized that my mad charge was the strategy that would have ended the standoff.

Now, however, the floating weapon moved into position.

It slid close, the front angled down. The part that emitted the killing red light aimed at the warriors under cover.

Yet it did not fire.

From the cover of the fallen ship, one of the shelled men yelled at me in his bubbling language. It gestured at me with the light lance, motioning with it toward the warriors.

I understood. We were to be taken prisoner.

Moving toward the rocks and trees, I was stopped by the Shell's shout. He patted the top of his weapon. Pointed at the ground.

The thrower fell from my hand. Slowly, I shrugged the full quiver off my back.

Yelling and pointing toward Final Pass, the pirate demanded something in his strange tongue.

To back him up, the floating sky serpent rotated, fixing the red light weapon on the better sheltered warriors.

There was nothing for it. They had seen the solid light destroy swaths of stone, an entire lizard in one blow.

One by one, they stood. Weapons fell. Hands raised.

We were done.

We lost.

Pirates came from behind the shelter of the fallen sky serpent, moving behind their lances. Warily, they prodded us into a tight group.

One of them struck me with the butt of his weapon. Though he grunted with the strain, I barely felt the impact.

These were flabby men, soft. Men who needed to protect themselves with metal shells. Unhealthy gray skin was scabbed with thick, light growths that made them look even more like crabs.

For a moment, I considered grabbing the Shell who struck me and ripping him apart.

Other enemies read my intention. I found myself facing the bores of five light weapons.

One appeared to be in charge. He shouted wet orders to the others.

After the Shell who struck me vanished and returned, my wrists were bound with metal bracelets. Did they really think such flimsy bonds would hold me?

I let them believe it. For now.

We were pushed toward the nearest cave.

“Father?” I found him in the group.

His skin was red on one side, a burn that spread wide. Clenching his teeth against the pain, he walked on. “I’m fine.”

“That burn won’t heal,” I said.

“Grexi has found all manner of unholy hexes. I’m sure she can—”

One of the Shells jabbed Father with his light lance. He babbled a fierce command. I didn’t need to know his language to understand: shut up.

But a step toward him made the Shell back up.

Father was an old man, wounded.

If they wanted to bully someone, they could choose me. A lethal head butt would be the price of their petty harassment.

We came to an unspoken understanding.

“You went for the boy,” I said. “Why? He is not your village, not your kin.”

Father said, “We mistreated him before. I felt I owed him.”

“And his mother,” I said.

“Your mother. Your brother. Your family. And thus, mine by extension. I could do none other but save him. He is the future. You are the future. Except you came charging across the valley like a mad jaroor.” Father spat on the ground.

Over my shoulder, I saw Nakar limping along, trying to keep up. His knee was swollen like a quinta flower.

His infirmity did not escape the scrutiny of our captors.

The biggest pirate slapped the one who struck me on the shoulder. His voice bubbled as he pointed to Nakar.

With the butt of his weapon raised, the bully approached my brother.

I stopped, moving against the marchers to stop the attack.

But the large pirate leveled his weapon at me. Unlike the bully, there was nothing but a pragmatic look on his scabbed features. His black bulbs of eyes indicated that he was already considering that keeping me prisoner would not be worth it.

My heart skipped when the bully struck Nakar’s head, sending him unconscious into the mud.

There was nothing I could do but march on with the rest of the prisoners.

An ache pierced my heart.

But I made a note that, whatever might happen to me, I would kill the man who killed my helpless brother.

Kill him very slowly.

We were herded into a cave on the lowest level. It was barely large enough to house all of us. I could barely turn around. Guards were posted at the mouth of the cave. My target was one of them.

Good. He'd be easy to find when the time came.

"Jannik," a familiar voice with an unfamiliar tone came to me over the murmur of my fellow captives.

"Gattok?"

I made my way toward my uncle's voice. How had he gotten captured? Studying faces in the dark, I didn't see Adak or Takka. Much to my relief. Something far more dire greeted me.

Father leaned against a cave wall, breathing heavily.

"Make room for the chief!" Gattok growled.

A stranger gave him a blank look. "Not my chief."

"Shall I make you swallow your teeth?" Gattok challenged him.

"Give it a try," the warrior from another village said.

"He said make room," I said.

The warrior turned to me. I wanted to break his arrogant face. "Ha! First an old man, and now a bound one?"

I twisted the chains of my bindings against each other. With a hard shrug, the manacles parted with a clink. The arrogance fell from the man's expression. He made some room.

Gattok and I helped Father to the cave floor. I felt his limbs shivering. The extensive burns must be extremely painful. The damage sending him into the chill sleep, what Grexi called shock.

"You aren't going to make it, brother," Gattok said.

"Grexi can fix this with her black spells," Father said. His voice wavered. "The metal caves are filled with dark magic. The sorcery of Those Before."

"The healer is far away," Gattok said.

I crouched down beside my father. His breathing was shallow, ragged. I took the hand that wasn't burned.

"We've never seen eye to eye, Father."

"Ha! Is that what you think, Jannik?"

I didn't know if he was delirious from the burns.

"I'm hoping, in some way, you aren't disappointed in me."

Pain filled his eyes. But the old man managed a smile.

"It's always hard to see your son make the exact mistakes as you.

Someday, when you have your own, I hope you'll remember that. And be less hard on your boys."

"The same mistakes?" I asked.

"You were never serious about anything, Jannik. Until the day came when you became serious about the wrong thing. Your obsession with the star-fallen woman."

I nodded. "You were opposed. You didn't even present me for the mate hunt."

"I was obsessed with a woman once. My brother's mate. And I killed him when he broke our taboos. It was my place to shelter her, but not to fall in love. Not to bring a life into the world. Mistakes in love... It was the last thing I wanted for you."

Zakrik, an uncle I never knew, claimed my mother as his mate after the hunt was finished. It went completely against our ways. Up until now, I didn't know Father had killed him. Or that he was in love with Havra, my mother. Nakar's mother.

"But of course when females fell from the sky, I should've known you'd be first in line."

"Sam is a good woman," I said.

"I know," Father said. "Maybe too good. Just pray you can be her equal, son."

I thought it was the first time I heard him speak positively about her.

"Protect the sky-fallen. My ways are old, my fears of the power of Those Before have guided us well. But now, it seems we must embrace new ways. Those females have ways, ways that will make us a better people."

"I'll protect them," I said.

Father sighed, closing his eyes. For a moment, I thought he was gone. But after a moment, he lifted his head.

"Your face. It reminded me daily of a woman I could never have. I held that against you. It was stupid, but I couldn't help myself. Any more than I could help loving you, boy. Guide the village."

"Father?" His eyes closed again.

"Love you, boy."

His eyes did not open again. Father's chest became still. For the first time in memory, I saw his face relax.

Gattok sobbed. He turned away.

Until now, I never understood the idea of the dead being at peace. But all

the strain, the pain and worry, dissolved from Father's visage.

Crowded among the prisoners, I envied that peace.

The hand in mine went slack. After a moment, I felt it cooling.

"Goodbye, Father."

I let him go and stood up.

"We'll kill them all," I said.

Gattok wouldn't face me. "Jannik—"

Inside, I went cold and hot at the same time. "Tell me we'll kill them all, warchief."

His eyes met mine. I saw my own emotions reflected in my uncle's gaze.

"Yes. One way or another, we'll kill them all."

If I could just figure out how. Being a captive in a cave wasn't the best position for undertaking revenge.

"You're chief now," Gattok said.

"I'm not," I said. "I don't want it. It's up to the Elders. There's none of my father's desire for control in me. Nor his wisdom. I'll never have the temperament. You be chief, Gattock."

"Me?"

"Why not? I think in some ways, you're more suitable than Father ever was." My eyes drifted down to the still form.

"Don't speak of him that way," Gattok growled.

"It's the truth. You don't have father's passion, his emotion. Nor his determination. That might not be a bad thing." I sighed.

There was nothing I could say to chase away the pain.

Shortcomings were part of the man.

A man who was now gone.

I looked toward the mouth of the cave. Pirates swarmed the sideways sky serpent like shore creepers on a beached vorg. I guessed that they were trying to heal the machine.

It didn't matter. They were all soon to die, if it was the last thing I ever did.

SAMANTHA

It all turned bad so quickly, I couldn't believe it.

The third ship rested next to the tipped one, men trying to repair it. They grabbed parts from the ship that had been submerged. They'd given up on that one.

Nakar lay near the eastern rim. From here, I couldn't see if he was still breathing.

Jannik's father, Chief Suvo, looked badly hurt as well.

The warriors were imprisoned in a cave, two guards posted outside.

I had to rescue them, somehow. My heart heard Jannik's song of sorrow. It made me desperate, but what could I do?

Nakar. I could at least get to the boy. Was he still alive?

I couldn't follow Jannik's path down the rim. I'd have to stick to a path. Maybe back through the mud-filled camp, or around to the eastern slope of Calamity and down the rim from there.

Before I got far, a voice came to me.

"Forget it, Samantha."

Green eyes peered at me from the shadow of low trees. A shadow coalesced into the shape of Lilstra.

"I can't leave the boy there. And the warriors—"

"It will be dark soon. And you can't do this on your own."

"You think I'm going to wait until morning?" There was no way. I could barely keep from heading into the valley as it was.

"Wait? No. Once the sun sets, I'll help you get the boy. But the pirates—that's a larger problem. Let's call retrieving the boy a test run," she said.

My eyes wandered across the torn-up valley floor. "The cave guards will

see us if we try to get to Nakar.”

“I don’t think so,” Lilstra said. “But we’ll see. Why were you heading back to the ship?”

“To get the cart.” I explained our plan to get above the pirates who had taken cover behind the sideways ship.

“Not bad,” Lilstra said. “Unless those particle rifles could rip through the metal. The first time we escaped the pirates, they hardly even got a shot off. Be nice to know what they’re packing.”

Jannik’s brother lay awfully still. “I don’t know if we can wait for sundown. He doesn’t look good.”

“Well, I’m not going to risk my ass pulling a dead body off the field. And neither should you. If he can’t hold out until we can get to him safely, forget it,” Lilstra said.

“Lilstra—”

She held up a hand. “You want my help, you do it my way.”

“I’m sure Shorena would help, or—”

“Sexy as Shorena is, do you think she can out stalk me? Out hunt me? Outshoot me? Face it, Sammy, you need me. None of the other sky-fallen, or, heck, none of the Dratum hunters, have what I do.”

She was right. Her feline eyes could see in the lowest light, her black fur made her melt into the shadows, and she was a deadeye with bow and atlatl. A natural hunter. “Fine. We wait for sundown.”

“Don’t look so glum, baby.” Lilstra slapped me on the shoulder. “If we pull this off, we’ll be more than halfway to getting rid of the pirates.”

“How do you figure?”

Lilstra smiled, revealing sharp fangs. “You’ll see. Trust me, I think you’ll like it.”

“That sounds like something you say a lot,” I said.

“What? No! I never say trust me.”

We found a place in the trees on Mount Calamity, watching the pirates at work. The day seemed to last forever, despite the tilt of the planet. At the same time, night fell far too quickly. How much did I trust any plan Lilstra came up with?

“C’mon,” she whispered. “With this weather, it’s dark enough.”

I followed her along the rim.

“How are we going to get past the guards? Even if it's dark, they could still see us,” I said.

“It’s something we never had a chance to try. We were too busy having our asses handed to us by ray blasters. I’ll need your help,” the feline said.

“What do I do?”

Lilstra reached in her quiver. In the dark, I almost didn’t see the thing she tossed to me.

It was a dusty fabric bag, smelling moldy.

“What is this?” I held it away from me.

“The stuff that makes the twins sick,” she said.

“The stuff... Oh, right.”

“We couldn’t figure out how to use it. Well, the two of us are going to get medieval on it. This is the perfect opportunity,” she said.

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“Sathra and Flona admitted to being related to the pirate species. They’re both gray-skinned. Supposedly, if the twins are exposed to toxins in the environment, they grow those same crusty scabs as the pirates,” she said.

“I guess we have to try it,” I said.

“Could be key in getting rid of these jerks.” Lilstra stopped. I followed suit. After a moment, she pointed downhill. “There’s a trail.”

If not for the foggy, gray skies, it would still be twilight. Weather made it darker than the middle of the night. I couldn’t see where we were going.

Lilstra took my hand. “Go slow. If we tumble down the hill, the guards will probably hear our death screams. Might be embarrassing.”

Was there even a path to follow, or was this just some feline-only passage down a near-vertical surface?

“The boy’s gone,” she said low.

“Where?” My heart stopped for a second. “Did they take his body?”

“Don’t think so. I think the kid must’ve done the same thing we did—wait until dark. Dratum probably have better night vision than the crab pirates,” she said.

“There!” I pointed. A figure huddled in the trees at the bottom of the rim. It had to be Nakar.

Lilstra shot me a look. “You’re getting better at seeing in the dark.”

“Maybe I have a little Dratum in me,” I said.

“From the sounds of your nocturnal screaming, I’d say you’ve had a really big Dratum in you.”

Before I could respond, I heard a voice.

“Is someone there?”

It was Standard, the shared language of the GGA and other galaxy-faring peoples. One of the pirate guards for sure.

Lilstra put her lips close to my ear. “This is how it’s going to go. You’re going to throw that pouch as high over the pirates as you can.”

“You think that’ll work?”

She took the bow off her shoulder. “I’m sure it will when I split it with an arrow. You’ve played some sports, right?”

“That was a long time ago,” I whispered. “And it wasn’t baseball.”

“Whatever.” There was certainly no baseball on Lilstra’s home planet. “Can you toss that thing pretty high, or not?”

“Yeah. I can. We should get closer.”

“Hey! Is someone out there?” another voice called.

We moved silently down the slope of the crater. When there were no trees in the way of my pitch, we stopped.

Lilstra knocked an arrow, drawing the bow lightly. She nodded at me.

Glancing at the pirates’ position, I knew I’d have to throw nearly straight up in the air.

“It’s probably that kid. I don’t see him out there. Too dark.”

“Shine a light.”

I didn’t want that to happen. Stepping back, I readied for a windup.

I threw as hard as I could. The pouch rose way up in the air.

Lilstra drew the bow, following the passage of the woven ball. At the point just before it paused in midair before falling, she fired.

Even with the breeze, or perhaps she considered it, the arrowhead neatly cut the fabric in half. Dust puffed, drifting down on the guards.

She reached into her quiver, tossing me another pouch. Then an arrow.

I made another throw.

This time, the pouch fell much closer to the pirates before an arrow bisected it.

The noise of the arrow, the tiny impact, was enough to get the guards’ attention. They both looked up.

“What the hell was that?”

Now, the dust fell on their upturned faces. Would it be enough?

One of them coughed and spit. The other waved a hand in front of his face. Direct hit.

We waited, tensely.

A groan sounded from below. Nakar.

As one, the pirates headed for the trees, weapons before them.

“Damn,” Lilstra said. She knocked another arrow, taking aim.

Could she kill both of them before one managed to fire at us? I held my breath.

Before she let loose, one of the guards stumbled. The other looked at him.

“What’s the problem?”

“Got an ache in my joints. Must be from standing too long.”

Lilstra raised her brows at me.

“C’mon, someone’s out there. Show some hustle, that’ll warm you—”

The second one stopped, a hand at the small of his back.

“You feel it, too?” The second rolled his shoulders. I couldn’t tell if he grimaced, his face was so ugly, contorted.

“I can hardly move! I wasn’t hit. Hell, I spent the whole battle in the launch.”

“Must be something on this planet,” the second said. “Dammit, we need to get to the autodoc in the launch.”

The pirates turned away, limping, stiffly, toward the third ship.

“Now’s our chance,” Lilstra said.

Together, we moved the rest of the way down the rim. Nakar lay curled in a fetal position. There was blood on his green and blue-striped face, matted in his dark hair. Mud had dried on his legs and hands.

“C’mon, babe. We need to get you to a healer,” I said.

“On your feet,” Lilstra said. Together, we helped him up.

“Nice work, playing possum until we could get to you,” I said.

Nakar gave me a dazed look.

“Pretending to be dead,” I amended. There were no possums on Lasharah.

“Who’s pretending?” he moaned.

We steadied him between us. Lilstra sought an easier path up the crater wall.

Pulling and pushing, letting the boy lean on us, we moved up the slope. After a panting, sweaty climb, we made the top.

“Look.” Lilstra stopped, looking back down.

I followed her glance.

“It worked!” I breathed in excitement.

In twisted poses, the guards lay on the ground. Whatever made the twins sick also worked on the pirates.

“That worked fast,” I said.

“I told you you’d like it.” She smiled.

We tried to move the boy as quickly as we could. I didn’t like the way his eyes looked. Head injuries were nothing to trifle with.

“Too bad we couldn’t figure out a way to use it before the battle,” I said.

“Well, it’s one thing to land some of that toxic stuff on two guards standing still. I don’t know how effective it would’ve been during the fight,” she said.

“This is what you meant by being halfway to getting rid of the pirates,” I said.

She nodded. “Since our test proved successful.”

“Finally we have a real advantage,” I said.

“An advantage, yes. But it will still be bloody business, even if we do knock a bunch down with that toxic powder.”

We moved along the rim toward Mount Calamity. Nakar was supported between us.

I looked down at the ships. One still remained on its side, buried in the drying mud. The other sat beside it, brilliant lights illuminating the crater floor.

Looking skyward, I couldn’t make out the larger pirate ship in orbit.

Hopefully, it couldn’t see us, either.

We neared the hatch, now practically carrying Nakar. His head lolled, snapping up again from time to time. Out of it. Did the blow injure his brain? I hoped Grexi could do something for him.

“Wow. Look at that.” Lilstra raised her chin.

The antigravity cart sat beneath a rocky ledge. I stared. Usually, the lights blinked in sync with the buried ship’s nav system. Now, the lights on the rocket pods flashed like tiny fireworks.

“That’s freaky,” I said.

“I’m not sure what it means. Maybe Cathy or Rache will know,” Lilstra said.

When we got Nakar into the ship, Adak dropped his conversation with Cathy and hurried over.

“I saw him pinned down before we had to retreat,” Adak said. “This is Jannik’s brother, isn’t it?”

“The guards hit him in the head when he moved too slow for them,” I said.

“Slow,” Adak said darkly. “The way I’m going to kill them all. Let me

get him to the healer.”

“I better go with you,” I said.

“Samantha, wait,” Cathy said.

Shorena nodded. “Something you should see.”

“Is it the rocket fuel pods?” Lilstra said.

Giving the feline a double take, Shorena nodded. “How did you know?”

“The control lights are going crazy,” Lilstra said.

“We’re picking up some active scanning,” Cathy mentioned. “Maybe you could call it active hacking. The pirates are trying to break into the computer systems on the ship.”

“Since the launches landed, the scrutiny has intensified,” Shorena said.

“Probably the way pirates boarded our transport,” Cathy added. “Messing with the scanners, with navigation.”

“We’re thinking, after all the maneuvering through the asteroids and junk in this star system, they’re desperate for thruster fuel.”

Cathy nodded. “They came into normal space well above the plane of the ecliptic. It was a long burn before they even got close.”

“Now they’re out of gas, and they have to go a long way before an FTL leap,” I said.

“Right,” Shorena said. “A couple AU at least before they’re clear.”

Astronomical Units, AU, were an Earth conceit, about ninety-three million miles, the distance from our home world to the sun. In other words, they had to travel *far* before engaging the hyper luminous drive.

“Is that why they came here in the first place?” I wondered.

Cathy shrugged. “Could be. They may have thought this buried ship was something they could scavenge.”

“Or attack,” Lilstra said.

Shorena shrugged. “That’s more like it. But good luck attacking a ship under a mountain.”

The idea struck me.

Maybe there was a way to make the pirates go away without any more fighting, injuries, lives lost.

Pirates were lazy by nature. They wanted the biggest profit with the least amount of work.

I thought I could give that to them.

And maybe save all of us.

JANNIK

For a long time, I stood, looking at my father's peaceful face.

Many of us were wounded. There was no way to treat the burns, wounds from the exploding rocks, broken bones.

"It's going to be a long, miserable night," I said aloud.

How many more would die without a healer at hand?

"Might be a short, miserable life," Gattok said.

"If the villagers are safe, it will be worth it," I said.

He nodded. "Beneath a mountain is a good hiding place. If they wanted to attack the metal caves, they wouldn't have landed in Valley Hold."

"They still aren't hard to kill." The arrogant warrior from another tribe faced us. "I apologize about your chief. It's frustrating to be in here. What I want is a fight. These cowards with their poisonous lights—I would show them how a true warrior can kill with his bare hands."

"We all want the same thing," Gattok said.

"Start with the two guarding us. Insulting. Two? We should rush them, take them out, and make for their sky serpents," the young warrior said.

"It's a fight you want, not a suicidal charge," Gattok said. "Their light weapons need no reloading. They fire as water did from the broken dam. So many would fall before we reached them."

"Hit them with a rock," a voice joined in. "Once we take them down, get to our weapons. The rest will fall quickly."

"But the red light—it could kill us all with a single blow."

"So don't let them use it."

Gattok raised his hands over his head, an Elder's call for silence.

"Should anyone have a serious plan of attack, I will go along. But I will

not throw suicidally myself against their magic death weapons. I will not let another do it," he said.

Murmurs followed.

But no good plan.

A voice came from the cave opening.

"I don't even see the guards."

To my mind, it meant they hoped we'd try to leave. So they could pick us off from hiding. That seemed well within the pirates' character.

"Does someone have a rope?" Another voice came. "A thong? My arm is broken. I need a sling. I'm not afraid to fight one-handed."

Though filled with braggadocio, the voice shook pathetically. Pain wore him down.

"Even if there was a plan, are there enough able bodies left to fight?" I said low to Gattok.

"The Shells are weaklings. Even a handful of warriors could wipe out their whole number," Gattok said. But then he sighed. "Even so, we'll never have enough to battle a sky serpent in flight."

We had no defense against it.

Sam had suggested a similar plan, to get above the sheltered pirates in the floating cart. We attacked from the top of the rim. There was something to be said for fighting from a high vantage point.

Right now, we were at the lowest point possible. Practically underground. Even with the brave talk, I felt our spirits were at the same level.

At the start of the battle, victory felt inevitable. Our foes were weak, dependent upon their metal magic. We thought we could take it away from them.

Overconfidence was never a useful weapon.

"I've heard it's the sky-fallen these pirates are after," a voice said.

"They're in cahoots, I'm told."

"All of them come from the sky."

"Maybe the same place."

"Don't be stupid. Have you seen the sky-fallen? They may not be green, but they are beautiful. The pirates are beyond ugly," the arrogant warrior said.

"It was pirates who brought the sky-fallen," Gattok said. "They took them, and then ended up here in catastrophe. Our village thwarted that group. These may be out for vengeance. Or to reclaim the females they stole. But the

sky-fallen have joined our village. Our guilds. We will fight for them as we would any member.”

Gattok’s words lifted my heart some.

“Brave words, old man,” the arrogant one said. “But none spoken more truly. Any who joined our village would receive the same protections. Especially if they chose to fight at our sides.”

“What is your name, warrior?” Gattok asked.

“Makkan, warleader of the river village. Never have I seen a fight like this. It only makes me hungry to face these Shells again.”

“We need to hit them hard, Makkan,” I said. “Hurt them so badly that they have no taste for returning to Lasharah.”

“I’m all for that, big man. Except I’m stuck in this cave with a bunch of invalids,” Makkan said.

Wet speech at the entrance made us quiet.

The largest of the Shells, the one I thought to be in charge, pointed. Two of his minions entered the cave. They put their weapons under the chin of a man closest to them. Then he was marched outside.

“What’s going on?” Makkan demanded. “This is a chance to take a few of them down.”

“There are two dead Shells outside, on the ground,” a voice near the front said. “Our guards, I think.”

None of us had attacked the guards. If we had, we would be back in the metal caves by now.

I made my way to the entrance.

The two lackeys held the warrior, looking like children next to his height. But the Shell in charge put a knife to the warrior’s neck. He pointed at the fallen guards, demanding and cajoling in his unpleasant language.

Then the one in charge looked my way. I could see his beady eyes fall to the bonds I had broken. He issued orders to his men.

They marched the warrior back into the cave. Weapons then pointed at me. It was my turn to march before their leader.

Pointing at the men on the ground, he bumbled at me. I followed his point.

The look of the guards repulsed me. While all of these shells had unhealthy growths on their skin, these looked like all growths and no skin.

If he understood my repulsion, it did not show in the leader’s actions. Pointing between the prone men and me, he spat and blubbered at me.

“I don’t speak your tongue,” I said.

One of the underlings rammed his weapon into my back.

Whirling, I took it from him. With a backswing, I slammed the infernal device into his jaw. The Shell dropped to the ground.

Before I could club the leader senseless, a flash of light stunned me.

My limbs went numb. I dropped to my knees. Vision dimmed, but not before seeing the mailed fist plunge toward me.

I felt the crack on my jaw. Then another.

The leader thought he could beat me into submission. I spat blood on the ground and prepared to rise, to rip him apart.

A blow fell from behind on the back of my skull.

For a moment, I saw only a galaxy of stars.

When I roused myself, it was the kick of boots to my head, my ribs.

While the impacts hurt, the attack was feeble in comparison to what I would soon dish out. My arm was kicked from under me as I tried to rise.

From the cave, the shouts of village warriors rose. With a quick glance, I saw many of them surge from within, ready to fight.

I spun around, gripping an armored boot. With a quick tug, my enemy was on the ground with me.

It meant his death.

Except a blinding flash of light stopped me. A swath of valley floor smoked, a deep hole revealed from the leader's weapon fire.

He pointed the light lance at me.

If this was it...

But he gestured to the cave.

I rose to my feet. There was no way I could charge faster than the weapon could fire.

Still...

"Don't do it, Jannik."

Gattok.

"There will be another time. Come back."

"The old man is right," Makkan the Arrogant shouted. "Together, we will take out all of these Shells. Live for that moment, hunter."

My eyes did not leave my foe's. I saw a glimmer there. Respect, perhaps. Fear, definitely. Wariness dominated.

He lifted the light lance, motioning to the cave.

I should kill him.

Sam entered my mind.

Given my chances, I took a breath and stood down.

I couldn't bear the idea of not seeing her again. The thought trumped my rage by a wide margin.

Keeping my eyes on the Shell, I took a step back. Toward the cave.

It could be a trick, the leader wanting me clear of his incompetent warrior.

But I made it all the way.

From the mouth of the cave, I watched the Shells. The two underlings lifted the fallen guards over their shoulders.

"What took them down?" The arrogant one folded his arms, observing.

I had an idea.

There was no sign of Nakar on the ground where he had been left. Maybe he crawled away to safety.

Maybe someone came to get him.

Taking out the guards was an added benefit.

"There was another weapon to use against the Shells," Gattok recalled. "It was not practical for battle."

"Perhaps for a quieter attack," I mused.

"You think the sky-fallen?" The warchief truncated the thought.

I didn't know how. Perhaps Adak or Takka, more likely Lilstra.

Sam's hand was visible in this.

She was attached to my little brother. There was no way she would leave him, if she knew what happened.

The view from the rim where I left her would let her see everything.

"The females put down the guards?"

Gattok frowned. "They do have their strange ways."

"Why not alert us that we were free?" a voice said from deeper in the cave.

"They were not here for us, but for the boy who fell," I said. "Nakar must have been gravely injured."

"We could have helped."

"I'm sure they had reasons," Gattok said.

One reason that occurred to me chilled my heart. They planned to return.

"Has anyone wondered why we are still alive?" Makkan asked.

A few of us exchanged worried or confused looks.

After a few moments passed, the arrogant one went on. "We must have value to them."

“As food?” a voice offered.

Shells were different from us. But not so dissimilar to avoid the taboo of cannibalism. I, for one, would not eat them.

“I’m guessing for labor. For slaves. We are much bigger, much stronger than them,” Makkan said. “The legends tell of Lak the Founder using us as labor.”

I recalled the images Sam had uncovered in the ruined city. Collars around the necks of Dratum, chains leading to the hands of Those Before.

“I would die before serving those disgusting pirates,” a defiant voice said.

“Well, as long as we’re prisoners, and at the mercy of their light lances, I wouldn’t let our captors know that,” Gattok said. “At least, not yet.”

“They probably have that idea already,” Makkan said. “Thanks to Jannik.”

Over the long night, we hatched plans that led nowhere. I crouched near Father, remembering him. I knew one day, Gattok would sit with me, telling stories of his brother that I had not heard before.

For now, there was nothing else for it.

“This cave may prove shelter enough,” a voice said.

“There is no way to come at them directly, shelter or not.”

“New guards. Four this time.”

“Can they see in this dim light? We might overpower them.”

“Four, we see.”

“I can’t stand this waiting.”

No one could come up with a battle plan. Against such swift, final weapons, we stood no chance, and all the warriors and hunters knew this.

Talk went on until sunrise. Those who could find a nook, slept.

Not understanding how I knew, I waited near the cave mouth.

For Sam.

When the sun brightened the low clouds, my heart froze.

Morning brought Sam with it.

I stared out the cave.

What in the three hells was she doing?

SAMANTHA

“You’re nuts, you know that?”

We’d covered our features with mud to hide our alienness—would that even work? More mud in our hair, sticks, anything to hide our identities as other worldly.

There was no telling if these pirates came to reclaim us, brides heading for auction. If that were the case, better not to let them know we were walking right up to them.

“Wee!” Jeannie waved her white flag in the air.

We all carried them. Did white flags mean surrender to other species in the galaxy?

At the very least, we looked unthreatening.

Perhaps even stupid.

“I never knew flags were so heavy,” Lizzie said.

I walked in the middle, Elizabeth on my right, Jeannie on my left.

Most importantly, Lilstra rode on the antigravity cart. Her bow was out of sight, but ready if things went pear shaped.

“You really think this is going to work, Samantha?” Lizzie asked for the fourth time.

“I don’t know. We have to try. Logically, it’s in the pirate’s interests. Even with their ray blasters, our warriors are more than a handful. If their game is slavery, I can’t think of worse subjects for forced labor,” I said. “And glitter—they need the glitter more than anything. To get out of the system, first of all.”

“Sure. It’s got value,” Lizzie said. “But is it enough?”

“Well, it’s pretty,” Jeannie said, resting her flagpole on her shoulder.

“Plus it explodes. Added benefit—it won’t try to strangle you when you turn your back like a Dratum would.”

In a nutshell, that was my thinking.

The GGA, even if they traded in brides and offered voluntary indentureships, did not abide slavery.

Maybe that was a fine line.

Given our situation, we had to walk it.

At sunrise, we’d brought the cart from its rocky shelter and started around the rim.

Lilstra had refused the mud disguise, instead opting for something like a burka. Up on the floating cart like that, I was reminded of old movies. Camel-mounted warriors crossing a desert, perhaps, though in this case, the landscape was an old impact crater full of frozen mud.

That romantic idea made me feel less self-conscious, dragging a white flag behind me, smeared with dirt.

We descended into the valley. Two guards were replaced by four. I breathed in relief. They hadn’t killed all the men.

A twinge of satisfaction lifted my heart. Maybe we had taken out two of them with the white berry leaf concoction, but obviously the prisoners had taken a stand during the night.

Guards whirled around, energy rifles aimed.

“Easy,” I said, and continued walking.

They had communication with the ships. Moments later, pirates left their repair work. Others clambered out of the third launch. All of them walked toward us, all of them armed.

“Females.” I heard one of their bubbly voices when they neared.

I wasn’t sure if they knew we spoke Standard. When we were abducted, communication was mutual. For now, I wouldn’t let them know we understood them.

The pirates came to a stop a few paces from us.

I pointed to the cart. Then to the cave holding the prisoners. Making gestures, I indicated we wanted our men, and we would trade the loaded cart.

One stood much taller than the others. He nodded to a pirate beside him. This one held a boxy device in his hand. He aimed it at the cart.

“Like the scanners detected. Thilidium, in small crystal form. They are primed with zilumian igniters. It would take little to no modification to fuel our thrusters.” The smaller man turned to the main pirate.

“And they want to trade,” the largest one said.

“That’s ten times more than we need to leave this system,” the one with the scanner said.

Other pirates murmured. *In appreciation*, I thought.

The large one turned, scowling them into silence.

When he faced us again, he held his palms up.

In my crude sign language, I framed the cart with my hands. Then pretended to set down a pretend cart. And another. And another. Did he get the idea? There was a lot more where this came from.

“How many ships would we have to raid to get that much fuel?” the one with the scanner asked. “We could power the thrusters on a whole fleet.”

“Shut up,” the leader said.

It was my turn to raise my palms.

“Let’s end this ruse,” the leader said. “Some months ago, we received partial communications regarding one of our raiders and the capture of brides to be auctioned. Despite your... *disguises*, you are obviously off-worlders.”

Dammit.

“This thruster fuel is obviously worth more than you dealing with the men. They have a history of dispensing with any who would force them into labor.” I fudged a little. There was no way of knowing if the Dratum threw off the yoke of Those Before.

There were no Kyrthians here to contradict me.

“Why wouldn’t I simply take the fuel shells, and you females, and the males? I’m sure the Alliance would pay a ransom for recovered brides. Someone in the galaxy certainly can tame the males.” More murmuring. Perhaps in agreement.

“If you didn’t understand my signing, there is a lot more of this. A whole city built to manufacture space vehicles. There may be more of interest to you there.” Was this going to work? I was beginning to doubt it.

“You think we couldn’t find it from orbit?” the leader said.

“Well, no,” Jeannie piped up. “If you did, you would’ve gone there. Instead you came here. Where the fuel was out in the open.”

“Don’t forget—your fellow pirates already tried kidnapping us once before. It didn’t go well. You aren’t really equipped to deal with slave trafficking, are you?” Lizzie said.

Good points. I’m glad our speech incompatibility was debunked now. “Surely, the fuel is worth more. A warehouse full certainly. We saw how

difficult it was for your ship to navigate to Lasharah.”

Plus, we had already heard the pirate with the scanner. A whole fleet, he said.

“Let the men go. Return to your ship with these fuel pods. We will broadcast the location of the city once your launches are secured. Otherwise, you’ll use up all this fuel searching. This planet is unstable, the system full of debris. Things will get dicey as we near the second star,” I said.

“It’s an easy score,” Lizzie said.

“Better than playing bumper cars with asteroids,” Jeannie added.

“Or dealing with savage warriors in your hold.” Lilstra eyed the men from her full hood. “Feeding them, keeping them alive, making sure they don’t kill you all.”

I shrugged. “And they will kill some of you. We’re living in the stone age here, but you know you’ve been in a fight.”

The odd mandibles of the leader’s mouth settled in a way that might be a smile.

“We have lost crewmen.”

“And a battle launch,” I said. “You don’t know how many more warriors remain. I don’t think you came here for a war.”

“Engaging in war is unprofitable,” the leader agreed. “Supplying a war, that’s a different story.”

“Then leave us in peace. It’s a win-win for you. No murderous cargo. Lots of fuel—to use, to sell.” I tried to keep a pleading tone from my voice. Samantha Johnston—the voice of reason.

“What’s to keep us from returning and taking you all?” the leader asked.

“This is an assumption on my part. Because you aren’t stupid. It’s a dangerous and difficult system. You could easily lose everything if you tried. The last one of your ships that came here did lose it all,” I said.

There was a stirring among the pirates at my words. I figured marauding was a dangerous enough business. When you added the hazards of an unstable binary star system, the aggression of the planet’s natives, I’m sure my simple deal sounded pretty good.

“I’ve lost friends to those green-striped monsters,” the one with the scanner frowned at the cave. “I want nothing more to do with them.”

“Aye,” another agreed.

A crystalline snow began to fall. It tinked off the pirates’ armor.

“This planet is cursed,” a pirate on the leader’s left said. “We’ve defeated

these primitive giants. We can take a substantial prize.”

“Honor enough for you, eh?” the leader eyed the speaker.

“To hell with honor. I’d just like to come out on top,” he said.

The leader turned and faced his crew. “We take the crystal thilidium and zilumian igniters and leave this hell system. A rich haul. No complications. Any opposed?”

None of the gathered pirates spoke up.

Then he faced us again. “Should you cross me about the warehoused fuel, I will return. This whole area will be sterilized and pulverized under our disruptor beams. Nothing will be left alive. Understood?”

“Understood,” I said. “We have no need for fuel. Only our lives, our freedom.”

“A fair trade, then.” The pirate leader stepped forward, hand extended. I shook it.

“Your warriors remain in that cave until we lift off.”

“Can we see them?” I asked.

“Yes. Get out of my face. Don’t return until we’re gone,” the leader said. “Go away.”

Leaving the cart behind, we headed for the cave. Lilstra grabbed up her bow, casting a defiant look over the pirate crew.

None of them said a word.

“Wow. They’re going for it,” Lizzie said.

“Whew,” Jeannie said.

“It makes sense they would,” Lilstra said. “Why fight when they can leave here wealthy? No more men lost, no more bloodshed.”

“From the satellite view, it seems the space rocks are going to move erratically the closer we move to the Glare of Dread. The pirates must know that. If they’re forced to stay here too long, they might not be able to leave for years.”

Jannik rushed from the cave as we approached.

“No! No, go back!” I said. Running to him, he grabbed me in his arms.

“What have you done?”

“Everyone needs to stay in the cave. You can leave after the pirates do.”

A face poked out of the cave. “They’re leaving?”

“Part of the deal is that you stay in the cave until they take off,” I said, trying to push Jannik back inside.

It was like trying to push a mountain. But when I took his hand, leading

him, he acquiesced.

Not without a few looks at the pirates.

“Why are they leaving?” Gattok, the village warchief, questioned us as we entered.

“We traded. The objects we found are worth a lot to the pirates,” I said.

“What’s keeping them from coming back?” A warrior I didn’t know moved closer.

“Nothing.” I shrugged. “Yet.”

Jannik gave me a long speculative look.

“I’m glad we kept your mate from charging out to protect you, then,” Gattok said.

“I wasn’t charging,” Jannik said.

“Once he calmed down, he claimed to trust you,” the warchief said. “I’m glad he did.”

Then I saw a man on the cave floor. “Oh, no! Jannik—your father!” I pushed through the warriors to the chief’s side. When I touched his hand, it was cold.

“He didn’t survive his burns,” Jannik said. “At least he didn’t suffer long. What about Nakar?”

It took me a moment to respond. I gazed at Suvo’s face for a long time. Then I shook my head. “He’s better. The blow to the head fractured his skull. There was some swelling, but it went down overnight. I think he’ll be fine. I’m sorry we didn’t have the time to come for you.”

“If you saved my brother, your hurry was worth it.” Jannik sighed. “At least it’s one less death.”

“The sky serpents,” a voice called. “They’re rising.”

We moved to the cave entrance. The launch that had been half-buried now lurched free of the frozen mud. With engines whining, it lifted from the ground, wobbled, and headed skyward. A few moments later, the remaining ship followed.

“Gone,” Gattok said. “And good riddance.”

It didn’t take long for them to swoop out of view.

In moments, all of the men moved from the cave. Jannik carried the body of his father.

I blinked and looked away. The two didn’t get along. But Suvo was so fierce, so commanding. He had such a huge personality. It was hard to believe he was dead.

A sad procession walked through the snow, up to the top of the rim.

“We will give the village a day to view their chief,” Jannik said. “There is a burial ground not far. Father fought hard for a place here. It’s fitting he rests here.”

I nodded. “If not for his damned plan, our fight against the pirates might have gone a different way.”

“My brother was a maniac,” Gattok said. “But a good chief.”

“Father needs no more worry,” Jannik said. “But plenty of warriors and hunters need attention from the healers. We need to focus on the future, on surviving this Season Dark.”

For now, I would let Jannik eschew his grieving. We were still in a crisis, even if the warriors were in high spirits. You really couldn’t blame them. Hours before, they were facing what seemed like certain death or slavery.

“Success, I see.” Adak hurried toward us.

Takka found a limping warrior and supported him. “The healers are prepared to accept the injured.”

“Nakar?” I asked.

“Up and around. Three hells, Suvo?” Adak gasped at the body in Jannik’s arms.

Takka’s face turned down. “He might’ve been a hunter, and a chief, but the old man was always a scrapper. He wouldn’t have wanted to go any other way.”

“Sorry, Jannik. I’m so sorry,” Adak said.

Jannik nodded. My heart broke for him.

“Will you go ahead? Make preparations?”

“Of course. Yes, I’ll go,” Adak said. He ran ahead of the procession toward Mount Calamity.

“Let me take him,” Takka said. “May I? The sky-fallen need you in the room of jeweled lights. They seem more chaotic than usual.”

I eyed the tall hunter, but didn’t say anything. Gently, he took the body from Jannik’s arms.

“We go,” he said to me. “Quickly.”

“All the sky-fallen are needed,” Takka said. He gave Lizzie a long look.

Her return gaze was pregnant with emotion, even if she didn’t speak.

“We go,” I repeated.

JANNIK

I forgot about Father for the moment. The twins plus Sun Hair and Shorena, were talking excitedly near the round windows.

“Are they on board?” Sam asked.

“The second launch just docked,” Shorena said.

“We’re sending the data transfer request,” Cathy said. “No return signal.”

“They have to respond,” Sam said. She hurried to one side of the slab with blinking lights. “We still have the pods linked, right?”

“Yep. Still in the nav system,” Shorena said.

Cathy, Sun Hair, moved closer to Sam, pointing. “All ready to go.”

“Why aren’t they answering?” Sam said.

“The battle launches just arrived. It might take a little time for orders to be relayed,” Shorena said.

“If they renege, this isn’t going to work!”

I hadn’t heard Sam worked up like this before.

“Reneged on what?” I asked.

“I agreed to send them the location of the flier-shaped city, where we found the fuel pods. If they aren’t interested, this was all for nothing,” Sam said.

Still, she made no sense.

“Chill out, Samantha,” Jeannie said. “Jeeze.”

“C’mon, you SOBs, answer the phone!” Sam demanded.

At a strange peeping noise, Shorena circled to the lighted slab. “There it is. They want the position of the ruins.”

“Do it,” Sam said.

Cathy closed her eyes and took a long breath. Her finger came down on a

gem. “Firing all maneuvering rockets.”

“Holy cow...” Shorena looked at the round windows.

They went from the starry black of the night sky to blinding white. After a moment, the light gathered itself into a smaller and smaller point.

“Implosion,” Cathy said. She pumped her fist. “Yes!”

I stared at Sam, more confused than ever. Sam’s shoulders fell and she took a deep breath. “We got them.”

“Got them?”

“We fired the rocket shells. The ship linked to them when we brought them here. We were able to detonate them remotely when the pirates opened communications. The pods they took. They blew up. The pirate ship is destroyed,” Sam said. “The pirates are dead.”

“Woo!” Jeannie said.

“We won!” Cathy shouted. “We’re safe!”

Well, there used to be a sky serpent in the window. Now there was not. That was a good enough explanation.

Then, all lights in the cavern went red. Irritating noises bleated from all corners.

“What now?” I asked.

“The satellites,” Shorena said. “They picked up the pirate ship’s destruction. Now, they’re broadcasting a warning beacon. So it’s decision time, ladies.”

“What decision?” Lilstra asked.

“We have a link to the satellites from this ship. It wouldn’t take much to make the warning permanent. Which would mean no ships would ever enter this system again. Either GGA, pirates, or otherwise. We would be stuck on Lasharah for the rest of our lives.”

“No more bride contract,” Lizzie said.

“You’d never see your brother again, Samantha. You need to think about this,” Cathy said.

My mate looked at me. I thought I would see doubt. Instead, she gave me soft eyes.

“I’m sure. Make us a quarantine planet, Shorena.”

Shorena gave each of the females a look. “Anyone opposed? It has to be unanimous.”

“I’m happy here,” Cathy said. “As happy as I’ve been anywhere.”

“I’m good,” Lizzie said. “Do it.”

The twins agreed, as did Jeannie and Lilstra.

“Okay. Lasharah is about to be alone in the universe.” Shorena pushed her gem.

Red lights returned to the soft regular glow. The loud screaming noises stopped suddenly.

Sam threw herself into my arms. “This is my life now, Jannik. You are my life.”

“You’ve been my life from the moment I first heard your heartsong,” I said.

I kissed her.

“Woo!” Jeannie said again.

Still holding her, I looked at the gathered sky-fallen. “Soon will come the time for healing and mourning.”

“Right now, it’s party time!” Jeannie said. “Bust out the quinta juice! Fry up an amphibian! We beat the pirates!”

“Why are you always such a goofball, Jeannie?” Sam said.

“The world needs goofballs. Look how boring this planet was before I arrived. You know what? I’m going to invent dancing for these primitives. All I need is a band with a decent drummer.” Jeannie tapped her hands on the jeweled slap, strangely moving her hips.

“I’ll have to party later,” Sam said. “There are wounded people in the infirmary. I’m still the healer’s apprentice.”

“I would see my brother,” I said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make the arrangements,” Jeannie said, still doing her thing.

We headed into the metal caves.

I was surprised to see Grexi’s lair so unpopulated. In the cave, I witnessed many injuries. The old woman conferred with two healers from other villages.

Sam touched my arm.

“Jannik. Your mother,” she said.

Havra sat on a bed next to Nakar.

“Mother,” I approached. “Brother. How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts,” he said.

“The healer’s magic took away the break in his head,” Havra said. “But he is to remain in bed for a day or so.”

“So boring.” Nakar frowned.

Mother took Sam's hand. "You stayed with my son through the night. Your Keeper of Healing said you made him well."

"I didn't do much. Grexi showed me some of the equipment here, and how to use it. I'm just an apprentice."

"Mm," Mother said, eyes thoughtful. "For how long?"

Sam smiled. "I'm not sure. As long as it takes."

"The Season Dark lasts for some time," Havra said. "Can we talk later, when Nakar has healed?"

"Of course," Sam said.

Mother's eyes fell on me. "You as well, son."

"Whenever you wish, Mother," I said.

Grexi broke up her meeting and hurried toward us on her walking stick. I found it strange that she and my mother were around the same age. Grexi always seemed so old to me.

"I heard about Suvo, Jannik," she said. "I'm so sorry. Would you be chief?"

"No," I said. "It isn't my place. I can barely keep a hunting party together. A village? No."

"Suvo was always ambitious. He didn't pass that on to you," Grexi said.

Havra stood, draping her arms around my shoulders. "I'm sorry you've lost him."

"I'm sorry for the village," I said. "No one could be a greater defender of the people."

"Put me to work, Grexi," Sam said. "There are miracles in this ship. I'd like to know more about them."

"So would I," Grexi said. "I'm sure you'll teach me as much as I teach you. You sky-fallen all have a knack with the ancient artifacts."

"Is that so?" Havra mused to herself.

"You've seen the bone knitter. It's been quite the help," Grexi said. "And the picture machine that looks inside. Come, look at this. Maybe you can tell me what it does."

The healer led Sam away, the two of them speaking low.

I recalled the time it took for Grexi to heal my leg when it was broken. Now there was a device? Glancing at Nakar, seeing the boy fidgeting, I knew it worked its magic.

"How are the lizards?" he asked.

"I will return to check on them. If they haven't wandered off to eat the

trees,” I said.

Nakar rolled his eyes. “They have. You gotta keep an eye on them.”

“You surprise me, Jannik,” Mother said. “You’re not like most. I see your mate, your deeds. You are very adaptive.”

I’d never been called that before. “That may be true.”

“It’s just that…” Mother paused, looking at Nakar for a moment before facing me again. “We’d like to return to our village. The merge was necessary. Our healer died, and many of our hunters took ill after she passed. But it’s a wonderful place. My husband tends great fields of crops that feed all. It is on a river bounded by jungle, and then the northern desert. We could start again there.”

A healer and a hunter. I mused over her words.

“And lizards,” Nakar said. “We keep the ones that like to be handled when they hatch. Like Barney. You like Barney.”

“It is an open minded place. We just need another chance,” Havra said.

“It sounds like a place for the sky-fallen,” I said. “They have all manner of strange ideas.”

“It also sounds like a place for you, my son,” Mother said. “And your mate. Perhaps a perfect place. If not perfect now, you can help us build it that way.”

“What are you asking me?”

“At the end of the Season Dark, come with us. We can leave the merged village, return home. It will be much work. But it will be yours, Jannik. Yours and Sam’s. By then, she’ll be all the healer we need. And you are already hunt leader.”

“Will you come with us?” Nakar said. “I would like having a brother around.”

I had no idea what to say.

“Think it over. Speak with your mate. We are in Valley Hold for many more months yet. You don’t have to decide immediately,” Mother said. “But I feel it would be a joy to you.”

I looked over at Sam and found her busily working.

“Okay. I will think it over,” I said.

Not wanting to distract Sam, I left the sick cave.

I had never spent time with my mother. Not in my memory. I couldn’t say if it would be a good thing.

“Jannik. Here.”

Adak stood before me. I wandered, mindlessly, thinking. But here was the cavern where Father lay. Others from our village visited, saying their goodbyes.

Would I say mine at the end of the Season Dark?

“A grave has been dug, the weavers will soon have a shroud,” Adak said. I hardly listened.

“Adak, you have always been my friend,” I said.

“Well, since you were old enough to hold a throwing stick.” He gave me a strange look. “Is this part of your mourning?”

“No,” I said. “I just wanted you to know that you will always remain my friend.”

“Jannik, you are in a strange place. But I’m here for you. If you need to talk...”

But I no longer listened.

I wandered down the metal caves, finally finding our chamber. I sat on the bed, mind in a whirl, troubled and yet... hopeful?

“Where have you been, Jannik?”

Sam walked in. She sat next to me on the bed, an arm around me. “There’s a feast, celebrating our defeat of the pirates. Have you eaten?”

“I have something I need to talk to you about,” I said. “A new village, a new start.”

“With your mother?” Sam guessed.

“She says it is beautiful there. You are beautiful. Maybe you belong there.”

Sam smiled.

“I have something I need to talk to *you* about, my love,” she said.

Her smile grew broader, lighting her face, her eyes. It made me want her. Want her more, in truth.

“What is it?”

Sam didn’t speak.

She took my hand.

Placed it over her belly.

Looked deeply into my eyes.

Understanding traveled through me, a shock of joy, a stab of possibilities.

“You’re—”

She nodded.

“I am.”

Sam kissed me.

My mind ran in circles.

The softness of her lips focused my thoughts.

Kissing her back, I felt her tongue invade. I let it, wanting it. My hands roved her curves.

“Make love to me.” Sam pulled me down on top of her. “Make love to me, Daddy.”

I pulled the dress over her head. For a time, I stared at her midriff, astounded.

Kissing her there, my tongue lightly playing around the rim of her navel, I sought some sign of the life within her. I pressed my palms over her hips, moving them across the flat of her abdomen.

“I’m not showing yet,” she whispered.

I buried my face in her soft stomach, kissing, biting.

Slowly, I moved lower, over the bump of her pelvis. My hands pushed her legs open. And lower.

“Are you happy, Sam?” I asked.

“You’re all I want. You are my life.” She gasped. “You’ve made me feel more than happy.”

I was about to make her feel something else.

Kissing, tasting, I opened her slit with my tongue.

“Oh, baby, yes...”

Shi-na erupted from their ducts, winding tightly around her legs. Abruptly, I pulled them wide open.

I kissed her opening blossom, already dripping with her heady nectar.

Taking my time, I crept up like a hunter on the places that made her squirm and shiver. Once her clit was snared, held tight by the tip of my tongue, my fingers stalked into her dripping hole.

She groaned as my digits moved deeper.

Crooking my fingers, I sought her most secret place. When her hips jerked wildly, out of her control, I knew I found it.

Working at both areas at once, gentle circles with my tongue tip, easy massaging with my fingers, I urged her pleasure forward.

For long moments, the air of her tiny gasps, the wet swishes of my ministrations, were the only sounds.

Shivers down her legs preceded her breaking the near silence with a cry.

She bucked in my grip, but I held her fast.

I felt her need. My own desire to be inside her mirrored it.
Sam gripped my rigid shaft, pumping firmly, guiding my angle.
For a time, I lost myself in her motion. Pure sensation rolled through me.
But her easy grip became a demanding pull.

My cock moved into her. I felt my head against her taut, slippery pussy.
With effort, I eased the grip of her to move deeper.

Forward and backward, I entered, all the while staring into her eyes.
Together, we rocked until I was fully seated.

Hips moving in tandem, I kissed her mouth, her neck, her ear.

“I love you, Sam.”

“I love you, Jannik.”

My motion stepped up. She kept time. Every time we made love, it became sweeter. I wanted to be like this always.

Her legs wrapped around me. Urgency flared at my core. I held back, waiting for her.

I moaned with the effort.

She kissed me. “Come inside me, baby. I know you want to. I can feel you.”

“Come with me,” I demanded. “Come now, Sam.”

Ramming, I moved all the way inside, nearly all the way out, and again.

Through her teeth, she made a noise. Sharp nails bit deeply into my ass.

“I can’t hold back!” I cried as I was overtaken.

“I’m coming!” Sam responded. “Yes! Let go! Let go inside of me!”

Explosions. Behind my eyes. Through my flesh. Waves of Sam’s pleasure washed over me through our heartsong. I continued to lunge until I was empty. Her arms flung around my neck. Pulled me down. We lay there kissing.

“I want this always,” Sam said, echoing my thoughts.

“I am yours,” I said. “Always.”

EPILOGUE: SAMANTHA

Savchi was born toward the end of the Season Dark. Soon, her third season would come. She sat atop Barney's warm back in the sun. Beyond, waves of silver grain led to the ripple of a wide, slow river.

This green swath hugged the water, verdantly cutting through miles of bright sand dunes.

In the fields, Dellir worked with his son, Nakar. This was not like the farms of our former village. This one plot easily fed the entire village.

The villagers frequently employed our suggestions. Even now, a lizard even larger than Barney moved through the field, hitched to a wagon.

If I could only figure out yeast, we might one day have beer...

"Mama, I see Daddy!" Savchi stood up on Barney's back, pointing.

I moved off the porch of the healer's hut, pulling her in my arms. She touched my round belly.

"When is John Suvo coming?" she asked.

A boy, I hoped. A boy for Jannik to teach and nurture and love.

Jannik walked with a group of hunters, splitting off at the path that led to our door. He carried a hooved animal over his shoulders. His face lit up in a smile as he saw us.

"Ribbak for dinner!" he shouted.

We met on the path. He kissed me deeply, moving a hand on my stomach. Then he kissed Savchi on the cheek. "Hi, baby."

"When can I hunt with you, Daddy?" she asked.

"Well, there are a few nibits trying to get to the fields," he said. "Maybe we can try out your bow in the morning."

"We can make more blankets!" she said.

“I’m sure the tanners would love to. They never have enough work. Plus, I love the taste of a fat nibit. Are you my nibit?” He kissed her tummy until she squealed. “Nibit, nibit, nibit!”

“You’re tickly!”

“Walk with me to the cooks’ guild?” he asked.

The ground was flat here. During the Season Dark, the river would overrun its banks, bringing fertile soil. Now, it was harvest, almost the end of the Season Dry. This time, we had go bags at the ready. I would never be surprised by the Glare of Dread again.

We walked toward the clustered huts of the guilds. Sparkling in the background, the ruins of a white city. This one was not as dangerous as the cities to the south. Visiting was a frequent event.

“Hey, Samantha.” Shorena walked from the builder’s yard. She wiped a black smudge from her face. In the ship, she had worked with rope and sand, pulling apart the oversized bolt from the Trials until she came up with metal tools. Now, she built wheels, pulleys, levers with scavenged metal from the ruins. “Dinner time?”

She looked at the beast over Jannik’s shoulders.

“Practically a feast,” he said.

“How are your hunters doing?” she asked.

“Typical knuckleheads. But they’re getting better.”

“Hey, Nugget!” Shorena gave the baby a kiss.

“Rache! Is your baby coming at the same time as John Suvo?” she asked.

Shorena put a hand on her curved stomach. “I hope my baby comes sooner. I’m getting tired of hauling him around. I practically need wheels under my fat gut.”

Mikka jogged out of the yard. He had come with us. This village was a place for builders. Not a month after we arrived, he snared Shorena in a mate hunt. Or maybe Shorena had snared him.

“Hey, Savchi. Taking Mama and Daddy for a walk?”

“They’re too slow. I take Barney for a walk. He’s much faster.”

I looked down at my daughter. She was darker than Jannik, but bore a similar pattern of blue and green stripes. She had my dark curls and eyes.

Beautiful.

We walked on.

“Oo!” I stopped short. The baby kicked.

“Your tummy punched me,” Savchi said.

I laughed. "That's John Suvo. He sure is an active little guy."

When we reached the community well, we saw Jeannie haul up a bucket. She dumped it into a basin she had thrown. Prior to her arrival, there had been no pottery guild in the village. Now, she was the guild mistress.

She splashed water over herself, washing away the dust of clay. When she saw Savchi, she shook her head like a dog.

"Ee, that's cold!" Savchi said, getting splashed.

"Down, girl," I said.

"I threw a bunch of bowls today," she said. "Got a hankering for soup, I guess."

"I'm almost done with a new wheel for you," Mikka said.

"Oh, good. I hate sharing. And all these guys want to learn pottery," Jeannie said.

Jeannie came when Shorena promised to build her a pottery wheel. Even though it was all wood fired, it was beautiful work.

"All those guys are interested in you, Jeannie?" Shorena asked.

"Will you run as mate prey?" Mikka asked.

"One of these days. I like to keep my options open." She wrung out her blonde locks. "I am so glad we came north. Who knew high school crafts would take a girl this far?"

Voices came to us, the village gathering for the community meal. Havra sat at the Elders' table. When Jannik approached, she rose to kiss his cheek.

"It won't be long until the end of the Season Dry," she said. "The Elders have decided to ride out the Season Dark at Valley Hold."

"Thanks for doing that," Jannik said.

"You must miss your old hunters."

"It would be good to catch up," Jannik said. "See if they've hunted their mates."

"Oh, that will be nice. I can't wait to see Lizzie and Cathy, the twins," Jeannie said.

Lizzie had pledged the weavers' guild, and Cathy the tanners. This village had few hunters, relying on the grain grown by Dellir and the fruit grown by Nartuk and his family.

Personally, I liked the carbs and veggies more than the gamey meat. There was no other place to get that on Lasharah.

But it meant too few skins to tan for Cathy. And Elizabeth I knew was sweet on Takka. He was a good man, but he didn't have a very progressive

mindset. He would hate it here.

“What about Lilstra?” Shorena asked. “You don’t miss her?”

“No,” Jeannie said.

Then she burst out laughing.

“Okay, Lilstra, too.”

“Lilstra is so soft,” Savchi said. “I like when she purrs to me.”

“You remember Lilstra? You were just a baby then,” I said.

Last Season Dark, we had wintered over in a closer shelter, following the river upstream. It made sense to do so. But I missed my fellow former brides to pieces.

A balmy breeze brought the aroma of the cookfires.

Jannik slipped away to bring his kill to the cooks. I sat with the others at a long table.

“I’ve always wanted this,” I said. “A very fine house with two...”

“Dinosaurs in the yard?” Jeannie grinned. “It is nice here. The best.”

“And so clean,” Shorena said.

“You work over smoking fires all day,” Mikka said.

“Yeah, but when I’m done, I can breathe in the air, hear the sound of Broad River, not having to fight off giant mutant rats over my dinner. There may not be any old Buicks buried in the sand, but I kinda hope there never will be here. It’s perfect the way it is.”

“It is perfect. And quiet. And... perfect,” I said.

“You had a rough time of it here in the beginning,” Jeannie said.

Shorena laughed. “We were always planning our escape. Man, looking back on it—what for?”

“I know. Once in a while, one of Jannik’s hunters falls out of a tree. A kid gets a sick tummy. Otherwise, it’s just me, the baby, and our big lizard. I do love staring out at the fields, the way the stalks move in the wind,” I said. “It has taken a lot of getting used to.”

All three moons appeared on the horizon, chasing the sun toward the west.

“What has taken getting used to?” Jannik joined us, wet from his turn at the well. He put Savchi in his lap.

“This feeling. This happy feeling. I used to wake up in the middle of the night, awaiting the next catastrophe. So far, it hasn’t come.” I knuckled the tabletop. “Knock on wood.”

“It’s so weird, having to get used to being happy, to being safe. Crazy,”

Jeannie said.

“But crazy good,” Shorena said.

The baby kicked again.

I hadn’t had morning sickness with this one. And I carried the baby low and in front. According to my time with Grexi, signs indicated a boy.

Either way, I would be ecstatic.

One of the girls from the village expressed an interest in being my apprentice. I hoped to teach her enough to help me when the time came. I had the healers of three villages when Savchi was born.

Plates of food arrived. Actual plates, created by Jeannie’s wheel.

“Do you think the babies will come before the Season Dark?” Shorena asked. “I’m not sure if I’d rather carry one inside or outside on the journey.”

“We haven’t seen even a little yellow in the sky yet. We’ll be toting both our babies on the way to Valley Hold,” I said.

“Oh, speaking of which, I offered to help work on the barge tomorrow,” Jannik said.

“What about the nibits?” Savchi pouted.

“I’ll go to the river after the nibits, baby girl,” Jannik said. “Don’t you worry.”

I sighed as I looked at Savchi. And Shorena’s very pregnant abdomen. Soon, this village would look like my baby girl. Dratum and human hybrid children running through the fields, down the paths.

We would make a comfortable place for them. A safe place with plenty to eat. Would little Savchi be a potter like Jeannie, a builder like Shorena, maybe a hunter like her father?

She could even take after her mama and become a healer.

Kravka, the village Keeper of Legends, sat across from us. “Would you like to hear a story, Savchi?”

“Tell the one about the Moon Maidens!” she said.

Which is the story she always wanted to hear.

I let the words of the story wash over me, not paying much attention. Tradition would remain here, the spoken law, the stories of the first Dratum and Those Before. We were bringing a little bit of our advanced world, but just enough to keep us from getting too lazy.

My mind drifted, to our very, very, very fine house with two dinosaurs in the yard, after life had been very hard. How did that ancient song go?

I finally found my place. Finally found myself. As a healer, I still helped

others. That was just my nature. But I had also come to appreciate what was mine alone, to help and protect my growing family, my family, mine.

Jannik gave me a look and a smile. Our hearts sang together more strongly than ever. He knew what I was thinking. He knew I was content.

He knew I was happy.

And I knew he would never let that change.

EPILOGUE: JANNIK

Big, purple eyes gazed in suspicion as the beast lifted his head. It was a tangle of horns, the snout mostly tusks. Snorting, it turned toward us on sharp hooved feet.

The desert flavor of jaroor was smaller than the ones back home.

They were no less deadly.

John Suvo pulled back the string of his bow. He was small, so small, and far too young to hunt.

Did all fathers think this?

Sniffing the air, the monster moved through the riverside jungle. She was upwind of us, unable to catch our scent.

The season where the giant lizards mated was not long over. They were a favorite prey of the meat-eating jaroor.

I looked at the serious concentration on John Suvo's face.

His expression did something to my heart that I couldn't explain.

When he let fly, his steel tipped arrow flew true. The jaroor turned its head at the last moment. With a clack, the arrow bounced off a broad horn.

Growling, the beast drew a hoof through the soil and charged our position.

My bow was ready, yet I held back.

As if by magic, an arrow jutted from the indentation in the monster's chest. It continued to charge, unaware that it was dead.

A stride away, the beast fell to the ground. Rear legs kicked for a moment.

"Gotcha." Savchi, sitting on a branch above me, lowered her bow.

"I was going to kill her!" John Suvo said.

“You missed,” Savchi said.

“He moved. It wasn’t my fault,” my son said.

My son.

Seasons later, that combination of words still sounded marvelous.

A little frightening.

My daughter—another two words that stirred me strangely—clambered down from the tree. “I’ll get Barney,” she said.

“No, I will!”

My children ran off toward the river’s edge. Moments later, they rode the purple lizard into the clearing, laughing together on the beast’s back.

Nakar walked behind, striding easily.

He had protected the lizard, in case the jaroor slipped past us.

He was taller than me now, perhaps not as broad. Sam said we resembled each other. I didn’t see it.

“That’s a big one,” he said, looking at our kill. “Plenty of good eating.”

We knelt by the jaroor together, thanking the animal for giving its life for us.

Then, with practiced hands, we secured our prey to Barney’s harness.

With a grunt, the lizard dragged her burden toward the village.

My brother gave our old friend a pat on her long neck as we walked.

“Three of her brood have taken to handling. We’ll soon have more mounts than we know what to do with.”

But I knew what we could do with them.

Kranak, the cook guild mistress, scowled at our offering. “Can’t your family ever kill anything small? Nibits are delicious. And they don’t take four cooks to butcher.”

But I was used to her grouching. I knew she was pleased to have meat enough to smoke for later.

It was too early for the evening meal, so we wandered home.

Sam tended to a man whose wounds had turned to blood fire in the infirmary. The four of us moved to the porch of the house.

Dellir’s crops were still low in this early part of the season. Our view of the river was unobstructed.

And our view of the barge.

Would I ever get used to traveling by water? Full-blooded Dratum could not swim. My children were practically fish in the water, and the sky-fallen women as well. But my people sank like stones.

Still, it was faster than walking. Big lizards pulled the vessel from the shore. We could make shelter in the highlands to the south in days rather than weeks when the Glare of Dread gazed upon us.

And now...?

John Suvo and Savchi played a game of tag that involved jumping on and off Barney.

I watched them from something called a bench. The sky-fallen were crazy about seats. My brother sat beside me.

"I remember when they were babies," he said. "Pretty soon, Savchi will run as mate prey."

"Bite your tongue, brother."

"Okay. I guess that's still a few seasons away." He laughed. Then gazed at the barge for a long time, expression becoming serious. "Father says he needs no help in the fields before harvest. I can go with you."

In this village, my brother and I were often at loose ends. With the grains and fruits of the fields, hunting was mostly a pastime. Farming had a lull season while all you could do was watch the stalks grow.

Sam walked out on the porch, kissing me. "His fever has broken."

"Good news," Nakar said.

"You two talking about the trade?" Sam asked.

We weren't. We kept quiet council, dreading the journey.

She read my expression. "Oh, come on. We have plenty. We have so much that it's wasteful. Other tribes, other places have things that are dangerous for us to get."

It was true. Harvest brought more grain that we could eat, and baskets of fruit that would rot, even with the sky-fallen methods of keeping it. With Nakar leading an unofficial guild of animal husbandry, the village crawled with beasts of burden.

Shorena's tools, Jeannie's pottery, it was more than anyone here could ever use.

However, frady wood for bows grew far to the south. A lack of hunting meant a lack of hides, of leather. There were no ideal plants for fibers growing along the river.

Life here was idyllic. We wanted for nothing, really.

Yet there were comforts from our old lives missing in this far north village.

"I would have my children see where their father comes from," I said.

Sam nodded. "They are curious. I wish I could go with you."

A healer's place was in the village. That was one thing that stayed the same, even here.

"Your apprentice—"

"Is still an apprentice," she said.

When Havra, my mother, asked us to come repopulate this old village, the idea took hold quickly.

Sam and her fellow humans were not of this world. I was not of this village. It seemed a logical place for us to start a new kind of family even as this was a different kind of village.

Even footing, were Sam's words.

We had plenty here. Our children were safe. No one went hungry for lack of meat, or seasonal plants. It was that as much as anything that Sam wanted to give to the other villages.

"My people, the human race, went to war over resources," she said. "I want everyone on this planet to share what they have, the ideas they come up with."

"You want to change the world," Nakar said.

"No. Just make living easier. It's hard enough with the migrations. Most villages practically have to start all over again when the Season Dry comes. And the seasons..."

It drove the sky-fallen crazy that they could not predict the seasons or keep track of something they called birthdays.

Even though they counted the days, Lasharah was utterly unpredictable. What they called years did not exist here. The seasons came as they would, longer, shorter.

A small figure ran into our yard, hands over her head. She was John Suvo's age. While my son was dark like his mother, with stripes subtler than mine, Vaniki was pale with vivid stripes and a shock of long, straight hair.

Her mother followed as the girl joined in the tag game.

"Hey, Shorena," Sam said.

"How's my boy?"

"Better. I'll send him home in the morning. Just a few stitches and a dose of antibiotics," Sam said.

"Good. We have a whole pile of scrap that's going to rust if we don't get at it," she said. "It's too much for me and Mikka to handle by ourselves."

For a while, the mothers watched their children play.

Shorena put her hands at the small of her back, arching. She was pregnant again, belly extended. A girl this time, Sam predicted.

“Besides, with Mikka going on the trade barge, I’ll need my apprentice,” Shorena said.

I stared at the barge, at the river. It was the same river, by torturous route, that ran past my birth village.

“Maybe some of your hunters will want to come back with you,” Sam said.

“You must miss your old buddies,” Shorena said.

“Or some of the brides,” Sam said.

“It’s been so long.” Shorena gazed at Vaniki, a slight smile playing.

“However long.” Sam rolled her eyes.

“I still remember working on the hydroponic gardens on the buried ship with them,” Shorena said. “Good times.”

“Wasn’t that a nice place to hang out?” Sam said wistfully.

Between us and the river, a young lizard wandered, chewing up low trees.

“Make sure you come back with some white berries,” Sam said. “The way they ferment, they must have yeast on them.”

She had hunted this elusive yeast for as long as we’d been here.

“Of course. We have our list.”

Sam taught me their symbol system. I was not adept with it, but it helped me remember all the goods the village wanted in trade.

She made sure all the children of the village could use the symbols. School, she called it.

Shorena’s eyes welled up. “All this talk—it makes me wish I could go south.”

“One of these days.” Sam put a hand on her friend’s shoulder.

“Once the way is proven safe,” I said.

Shorena rolled her eyes. “Like that’s ever stopped us.”

We walked together to the cooks’ domain, enjoying the best cuts of jaroor. The kids tore into the meat, smiles greasy.

“Just like the old man,” Sam smirked.

Afterwards, I stood on the river bank alone.

The barge was long. Fifty paces. I walked it often.

Already, carefully packed goods sat on the surface. Poles were in place to help keep us off the shallows.

Could we make the full distance to my old village? The headwaters there

were nearly as slow and broad as here.

I heard Sam's footsteps.

"Kids are asleep," she said.

Turning, I pulled her close and kissed her.

"I'll miss you when I'm away," I said.

"You better," she said.

Looking over the tall jars of flour, crates of metal blades, stacks of wooden wheels, padded boxes of pottery, I worried. "What if other villages don't want this?"

"Find someone who does," Sam said.

"You make it sound so simple."

Sam smirked. "Trust me, the first villagers who try fried flat bread with frizzleberry jam are going to be in. The first butcher to cut with a long steel knife is going to be in. The first hunters that don't have to drag two tons of jaroor—"

"I get it," I said.

Her eyes roved over the cargo. "I think I'm just as nervous that you're taking my babies."

We had gone over this before.

Five hand-picked warriors watching them closely was more protection that they would have here in the village.

As secure as we were here, we had just brought down a desert jaroor within walking distance of the village.

"They'll be safe," I said. "Besides, a healer will always have more work than a hunter here. And you always say that the children are our future."

"That's from an ancient song." She laughed. But then she nodded, face more serious. "Okay. I believe it. I want them to make our future here."

She sighed.

"I'm not looking forward to Sunday," she said.

These females. Always trying to keep track of time.

I looked at my mate in the moonlight. Childbearing softened her a little. Made her even more beautiful. I thought of Savchi and John Suvo, their hair as wildly curly as their mother's.

My hand gently touched her lovely dark skin, drawing her eyes to mine.

"Let the future begin on Sunday," I said. "I want you right now."

"So what's new?" She smiled into our kiss.

Unbidden, my shi-na wrapped her body, pulling her tight to me. She

surrendered with a gentle moan, our kiss becoming intense.
I allowed myself to become consumed with her softness.
Let the future wait. I had all I wanted right now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keri Ashe is an unapologetic romantic who has always been drawn to the fantastical worlds of science fiction and fantasy. With a passion for writing, she creates stories that capture the imaginations of her readers, weaving together passion with thrilling adventures, epic battles, and otherworldly experiences that transport them to new realms.

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