

Slave Empire

Prophecy

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Published by T C Southwell

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Prologue

The lurid light of the temple's sputtering torches illuminated the high priest's grim face. A sleek white animal writhed on the gem-encrusted altar, its slender legs thrashing as its life drained out in a scarlet stream. Its grey eyes closed, and its head drooped.

The priest glanced at his audience of Draycon nobility before he slit the animal's belly with a deft motion. Red and blue entrails spilt out, and he thrust his hands into the bloody mass and spread it on the sacrificial slab, bending closer to study the offal. Several minutes passed before he straightened, his eyes bright with triumph.

"She has come. She has been born on Enthos." He raised his hands, the wide sleeves of his crimson and gold robe sliding back to reveal withered arms, and shouted, "She must die! Her destiny cannot be fulfilled! She must not stop the great one who will vanquish Atlan. He is our saviour! He comes soon, to aid us in our fight against those who would oppress us!"

Empress Drevina Ranshan stepped forward as he lowered his arms, her eyes as hard as chips of green ice. "What does she look like?"

The priest shrugged. "She is the Golden Child, Empress. Something about her must be gold. Her hair, eyes, or skin."

"So you don't know. How will we find one miserable girl on this Enthos? We don't even know where the planet is!" The Empress' voice rose.

The priest met her gaze. "I know not. I have done my duty and given warning of the coming danger. Follow the Atlanteans. They will go there to find her, or wait until they have her, then take her from them."

"Take her from them? They are the most powerful people in the galaxy. How easy do you think it will be to take her from them?"

The priest nodded, his haggard features impassive. "You'll find a way, Empress. That's why you were born as our ruler at this time of danger. You've been chosen to stop her, and you will."

The Empress of Drayconar snorted, then smiled, revealing sharp pink teeth. "Yes, I'll find her, and she'll die. Your ranting cannot stop the wheels of destiny, but I can. All you can do is fondle the guts of dead animals and prophesy, but I'll ensure Drayconar rules the galaxy."

She thrust her angular face closer to the priest's. "You had better be right. If she's not on that stupid planet, it will be your blood on this altar next. So you must be quite sure before you send me off on a fool's errand. Do you understand?"

The high priest licked his lips. "I am certain, Empress."

Drevina turned away, casting her gaze over the bevy of loyal subjects gathered within the temple's blood-red walls adorned with gold inlaid carvings of grotesque gods and demigods. The torches' green-shot flames fluttered and dipped, sending monstrous shadows across strained faces. Thick, oily smoke gathered in the temple roof's grimy carvings, the noxious fumes adding to the planet's already foul ammonia-sulphur atmosphere.

With a cold smile, she announced, "Then we will find this Enthos, and kill the Golden Child."

Chapter One

Rayne woke with a start, as one who sleeps lightly does. Sitting up, she rubbed her face and glanced around, then yawned, squinting at the bloated, angry-looking sun on the horizon. Thick, sooty clouds almost obscured it, dimming its glory to a weak gleam beyond the polluted atmosphere. The distant muttering and shuffling of thousands of human beings and the pungent smell of unwashed bodies and excrement wafted to her on the chill morning breeze.

Throwing off her ragged blanket, she stood up and stretched, ridding herself of the kinks acquired from sleeping curled up. She studied the countryside, on the lookout for roving police patrols or the furtive movement of a fellow raider. Ruined buildings huddled in groups, surrounded by the remains of roads and walls the tanks that had rumbled through here in the days of the rebellion had reduced to rubble. Only the hardiest weeds struggled to grow in the rubble, their yellow leaves blotched with brown. Rusted or burnt-out cars lay in ditches and on kerbs. Most of the trees that remained were dead, but a few bore sickly, withered leaves.

Her gaze drifted to the feeding station housed in an ugly building at the bottom of the valley. Thousands of thin, filthy people stood around it in a never ending fight for survival. Their only ambition was to reach the food dispenser and push their battered tin plate under it to receive a meagre helping of sludge-like food. Then the crowd pushed them to the back, sometimes stealing their share along the way. More often they gulped it down, growling at would-be thieves. They would then find a warm hollow or deserted building to sleep in, curled up in the ragged blankets they carried with them. Those who failed to reach the front often enough grew too weak to ever make it, and died where they stood.

There were only a few women in the, so it was an old feeding station where the weaklings had already succumbed. Once a day, a meat wagon came to collect the dead and deliver the next food supply. The police, using shock sticks and batons, cleared a path and dragged out the dead and dying, loaded them onto refrigerated trucks and left. Some bodies remained to add to the stench, however.

Rayne and her brother scorned the sludge-eaters and their stink. They were raiders, and they took whatever they could from whoever was vulnerable. The people at the feeding stations ate the ones who died. There was nothing else they could eat. All the animals, wild and domestic, had long since been slaughtered to feed the starving billions. Other species had succumbed to pollution or deforestation, the rest had been judged expendable and wiped out. The autocrats, remnants of the political and social elite, had retained their power and prosperity by taking control of the massive food stores that the government and army had hoarded over the decades.

Raiders were too proud to work for the autocrats. Those who did were virtually slaves, paid only in food and shelter. They served as police and store guards, but for more unpleasant jobs the autocrats had real slaves. Rayne and her brother, Rawn, preferred to live by the gun and die by it, if necessary. Many years ago, Rawn had taken a .44 automatic from a dead man, and it had given them the means to become raiders. Without it, their destiny might have been quite different.

Rawn had taken care of her since their parents had been killed in a riot when he was twelve years old and Rayne eight. She was twenty-two now, and the last fourteen years had been tough.

A fallen tree's roots formed the dry hollow in which they had slept. Rawn had dug it deeper and filled it with bracken and leaves. The canopy of roots had protected them from most of the stinging, acidic dew that fell each morning.

Rayne glanced around at the sound of footsteps, relaxing when she recognised her brother's familiar figure approaching. Evidently he had answered a call of nature.

Rayne stood up and brushed leaves from her fawn shirt and brown leather jacket. Like her ragged suede mini skirt and stretch pants, they had been scavenged from abandoned shops. Leather afforded protection from injury and rain, making it the material of choice, although difficult to find. Rawn's black leather trousers bore the scars of many violent encounters, as did the suede jacket he wore over a grey shirt. Their pseudo plastic boots would last for years, unless the pollution ate through them.

At six foot four, Rawn was unusual in a world where most were stunted and malnourished. Exercise and hunger had honed his lean, muscular physique, but his size and strength allowed him to stave off malnutrition. His strong jaw, straight nose, piercing tawny eyes and dark gold hair streaked with silver made him handsome, she thought.

She said. "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry."

"That's because you don't feed me enough."

"Bullshit! You eat as much as you want. You're just a gannet."

"You're always hungry too," she shot back.

Rawn pulled a face and shrugged. Hunger was the driving force of their never ending struggle for survival in a world gone mad. They had grown up in it, and knew its dangers well, which was perhaps the reason they had succeeded where so many had failed. They were a remnant of the last generation to survive, old enough to fend for themselves when they had been orphaned, but young enough to adapt.

"Come. Let's go."

Rawn led her down the hill past the sludge-eaters, secure in his advantage of youth and comparative health. The people watched them pass with bright, envious eyes, some finding the energy to throw a few stones in their direction, all of which fell short. Rayne followed Rawn at a steady lope through the desolate, ruined suburbs towards the city.

Rayne hated the city, but they had to go into it for food. They always left as soon as they had supplies for a few days. They paused on the crest of a hill, but when Rawn started down it, Rayne stayed behind, forcing him to stop and turn to her.

"Couldn't we raid the country store again?" she asked.

"We raided that last week. It'll be crawling with guards."

"I have a bad feeling today."

"It'll be all right. Come on."

Rayne glared at the distant cluster of shining towers that sprouted from the tumbled ruins of lesser buildings, crushed in the rebellion or fallen foul of pollution later. The decaying buildings formed a complex concrete jungle whose dangers included collapsing walls and crumbling sewers. Broken glass and twisted, rusted reinforcing littered the streets, where bands of hostile vagrants roamed, preying on anything that could not defend itself or run. Packs of giant rats infested the sewers in an army of disease-riddled vermin. She caught a glimpse of herself in a piece of broken glass as she passed it, averting her eyes quickly.

The harsh life and lack of food had taken its toll, giving her a gaunt, elfin look. Her blue-green eyes burnt with hunger, and soot smudged her creamy skin. Her mane of silver-streaked blonde hair, which she had hacked off in a thick fringe, was a little grubby. Her unusual beauty made her a target for raiders and autocrats. Rawn was too, not so much for the autocrats, but the mistresses, their female counterparts.

Only the autocrats' towers, which their slaves maintained with cannibalised parts from unused towers, remained intact. They clustered at the city centre, known as the Inner City. A leaden grey sky hung above it like a dirty shroud, and black smoke belched from the power plants that provided electricity to the towers, fuelling its filth. To Rayne, who preferred the country, barren and dead though it was, the glittering buildings represented all that was evil in the world.

She glanced at her brother. "We've been lucky until now, but one day our luck's going to run out."

"Do you want to starve?" He turned away. "We have no choice. Come on, let's get on with it."

At the city's outskirts, they grew more cautious, dodging from building to building to avoid the police patrols that were meant to keep raiders out. Dawdling guards outside a red-brick building gave away the site of a food store. The ruined top floors sprouted twisted girders, and rotting planks covered the windows. Crouched behind a crumbling wall, they watched the bored guards pace up and down with measured strides.

"That's the place," Rawn whispered. "Only two guards, and they're bored stiff. That place hasn't

been raided for a while. It's perfect. Time to do your stuff, Ray."

Years of fleeing irate store guards had given Rayne an unusual turn of speed. She could out sprint the fastest guard, creating an effective diversion while Rawn stole food. The guards, knowing their master would reward them for catching her, always vied for the prize. She had to keep them interested long enough for her brother to do his part, then escape. Afterwards, she would meet him outside the city. Rawn patted her shoulder, and she stepped out from behind the wall and walked towards the guards.

They spotted her and shouted, drew their guns and gave chase. Rayne sprinted down the street while Rawn ran to the doors and picked the padlock on the chain that secured them, slipping inside. There he would fill his rucksack from the masses of food bars stacked on the shelves, and, if his luck was really good, he might find ammunition too.

Rayne ran across a road and into the street beyond, glancing back at the panting guards, who flagged after just three blocks. Slowing, she faked a limp so they would not give up too soon, and their yells of triumph rewarded her. Their occasional shots were wild, and she loped on for another block, then swerved and ran across a vacant lot into another street. By the time they walked back to the store, Rawn would be long gone. She entered a more dilapidated area of crumbling ruins inhabited by a few thin, dirty people so scared they even hid from each other.

The guards followed, shouting in frustration. She glanced back with a smile as she rounded a corner. Something slammed into her midriff, and she rebounded and sprawled. Gasping with shock, she struggled to rise, staring at the sleek grey hover car that blocked her path. The airtight door seal broke with a faint wheeze, and a gush of conditioned coolness washed over her, scented with strange perfume. An autocrat stepped out, his shiny black robe covering all but his face. Rayne scrambled to her knees, shaking her head to clear the spots from her eyes, broken glass slicing into her shins. She staggered to her feet and backed away just before he came close enough to grab her.

He raised a hand. "Wait! Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

Rayne retreated, and he followed, a hand extended in a parody of friendship, his tone soothing. "It's okay. I only want to help you. You're hurt."

Rayne knew an autocrat would never help her. His beady brown eyes, set close together in a thin face with a bony nose and a rat-trap mouth, roved over her in a way that made her skin crawl.

Spinning on her heel, she sprinted down the street, hoping to put a good distance between herself and the autocrat before he started his car. He cursed, then the car's soft whine pursued her, catching up fast. She could not outrun a hover car, and there was nowhere to hide. She dodged burnt-out car wrecks and avoided twisted girders and rubble. The shock of her fall had sapped her strength, her lungs laboured and her legs grew weaker with every stride. The autocrat followed, waiting for her to tire while he called his men.

A doorway ahead yawned dark and forbidding, but she dived through it and stopped, panting. He would not dare to follow her into such a dangerous area, even though he was armed. The old building provided a perfect place for an ambush.

Rayne listened to the hover car's whine, gasping in the building's damp, smelly gloom. He could wait out there all day, and would have called for men to send in after her. Walking further in, she stumbled over garbage, startling a few rats. The building stank of urine, faeces and decay, and pollution ate away at its crumbling walls. Icy fingers of fear marched up and down her spine, but she forced herself to go on. A square of light beckoned ahead, and she quickened her pace.

The door led into an empty lot surrounded by high buildings, some of which had partially collapsed, filling the area with broken bricks, twisted girders and glass. Hurrying across it, she entered the building on the far side, where she rested in the musty darkness, contemplating the dangers that still faced her. She had to get to the meeting place, which meant running the gauntlet of hazards with which this ruined world was rife. At least she knew what they were, and how to avoid them. A lifetime of training had prepared her well.

Walking to the doorway, she looked up and down the dirty street. A group of vagrants huddled around a fire, cooking a rat, but they were far away. Further up the street, a manhole cover flew off with a clang and a ragged figure wriggled out onto the road, then sprinted for the shadow of a doorway. Seconds later, three more ragged men emerged, looking up and down the street for their

prey before setting off down an alley. The group that had been cooking the rat had vanished into a building, leaving their little fire.

Rayne waited for the men to return. They had to be raiders or desperate vagrants banded together to hunt others. After several minutes, the distant vagrants re-emerged and fought over who would eat the rat. Still she waited, all her senses alert. A movement at the end of the street caught her eye, as four police hover cars entered it and moved towards her. The vagrants broke off their argument and retreated into the building behind them.

The autocrat must have ordered the police to patrol this block in search of her, so she could not venture out. Retreating, she found a room with a single dirty window and settled down to wait, piling damp cardboard boxes into a makeshift seat. Periodically, she rose to peer out of the door, where the police still patrolled. Her stomach rumbled, and she thought of Rawn, by now enjoying the meal he had stolen from the autocrat's food store.

Rayne piled up the rubbish on the floor as darkness oozed into the city in a tide of shadow, and set it alight with her precious lighter, which Rawn insisted she always carry. He had one too, but made her carry her own, so if they were separated she could at least light a fire. As the night chill settled on the city and a corrosive mist filled the street outside, she longed for her brother's warm, comforting presence. They had not been apart for a night before, and she toyed with the idea of trying to sneak past the police in the dark. There were too many dangers at night, however. This was when the mutants usually hunted. Safety lay in numbers or concealment, and she huddled close to the little fire, hoping no one would find her.

Rawn ate some stolen food while he waited in a grove of dead trees. Dusk sent long fingers of shadow through them, bringing with it a growing fear for his sister. His imagination conjured up visions of her caught or injured, alone and frightened, somewhere in a ruined city filled with pitfalls and dangers that could kill even a street-smart girl.

The more he thought about it, the more horrible his imaginings became. Rayne had been reluctant to go to the city, and he had persuaded her. He paced about, racking his brains for a plausible plan of action. If he went after her, he could be caught too, and, even if he was not, he would not be here if she did make it back. He had to do something, though. The inactivity made him frustrated and angry. She could be fighting for her life while he procrastinated, but the task was enough to make anyone pause. Even if he knew where to look, there were many places in the ruins where she could hide. If she had been captured, his chances of rescuing her were slim to nil.

Rawn gathered up the stolen food, his mind made up. Stuffing what he could easily carry into his pockets, he stashed the rest under a rock and stamped out the fire, then headed for the city. If she had been caught, she might be at the market. The only way to get into the market unobserved was in a guard's disguise, and for that he needed a uniform. He knew where the market was usually held, and made his way to it. Without a gun, travelling through the city at night would have been suicide, but the sight of it on his hip would deter most would-be attackers. He traversed the ruins with confidence only an armed raider would display, and, although he sensed the scuttling of vagrant gangs nearby, none had the courage to take him on.

When he reached the market, he crouched behind a ruined wall and watched the guards, waiting for the right opportunity. Soon a man wandered off to relieve himself, and Rawn crept along the wall until he was close enough to pounce on the guard, clamping a hand over his mouth. Dragging him into the shadow of the wall, he knocked him out and stripped off his clothes. Stashing his leather jacket, he donned the uniform before walking out into the street.

The uniform was too tight across his shoulders, but he hoped no one would notice in the dark. None of the guards gave him a second glance as he walked past them into the market and took up position just inside the door, where he could see the merchandise.

The building had once been a grand theatre, but now the heavy velvet curtains around the stage hung in rotten, filthy tatters. The wooden stage and panelling crumbled, eaten away by pollution, adding its stench to the general air of dilapidation.

A few autocrats and mistresses sat in a bored-looking cluster on several rows of refurbished chairs, laughing and pointing at the dozen or so slaves on the stage where once great actors had given

their oratory. The autocrats sipped exotic beverages and discussed the miserable group assembled on the stage. The naked slaves tried to cling to what little dignity they had left by covering themselves with their hands. Most were thin, woebegone creatures who hid their faces and hunched their shoulders in cringing servility. A few lifted their chins, their feral eyes bright with hate. These, Rawn decided, were captured raiders; tough, stringy men and women of about his age, who possessed an air of savagery and strength.

Rawn seethed with silent rage at the humiliation visited upon his fellow man. Now that man had wiped out all the animals, save for insects and rats, he had no one to inflict his cruelty on but his fellows. Rawn studied the pathetic group, making certain his sister was not amongst them before he quit the market. He had no idea what he would have done had she been, since his planning went no further than the disguise.

Even as he pondered his next move, the autocrats rose to leave, many exiting via sky ways to other buildings, some going by hover car. The market emptied, and Rawn wandered out too, depressed and angry. Had she been there, he could have planned her rescue, but now he would have to find her first, which meant searching the city.

He walked into the darkness, pulling off the uniform.

Morning found Rayne stiff and tired after a cold, restless night that the scuttling and squeaking of rats had disturbed. She rose and stretched, eased her aching back and rubbed some feeling back into her legs. She shivered in the morning chill, chafing her arms as she went to the door to peer out. The street was almost deserted, only the vagrants from yesterday were back at their fire, haggling over another rat. After waiting several minutes to see if anyone else appeared, she left the doorway and trotted down the refuse-strewn street, her eyes darting into dark alleys, on the lookout for danger.

The vagrants paused to regard her with glinting eyes, and she tried to act as confident as an armed raider. Her ploy seemed to work, for they returned to fighting over the rat as she loped away. She stayed away from buildings, which often harboured vagrants and raiders who waited to ambush unsuspecting passers-by. Heading towards the suburbs, she kept her pace to a steady jog that ate up the miles. As she approached the outskirts, the ruins of office blocks gave way to demolished houses. Far fewer human vermin hid here. Most congregated around the city centre, where rats were more numerous, since the rats lived on the food in the autocrats' stores. She stayed in the middle of a road, trusting her ability to run more than the possibility of hiding from a threat, which could get her cornered. She looked up in alarm as a shadow fell on her, then stopped in amazement.

A giant, blood-red saucer hovered about twenty metres above her, light shining from portals along its edge. More lights flickered across its belly in random patterns, and it hung there as if on invisible strings. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, sending chills down her spine. For a moment surprise kept her frozen, then she edged towards the side of the road, where the houses' safety beckoned. The alien ship filled her with foreboding, and something told her it was not friendly. Vagrants emerged to point and stare, but Rayne backed closer to the derelict buildings, her eyes fixed on the ship.

Turning, she sprinted for the nearest house. As she dived through the doorway, crimson fire erupted where she had been instants before. The explosion blew her off her feet, and she threw out her hands to break her fall. Glass imploded from the few intact windows, whizzing past her in a shower of razor-sharp shards. Her leather jacket protected her from most of it, but splinters stabbed into the back of her legs. She hit the ground with a muffled cry, raising a cloud of fine white dust. Lights danced in her eyes as she gasped in dust, coughing.

The explosion's rumble died away, leaving her ears ringing, and she raised her head and shook splinters from her hair, glancing back. The saucer descended, and the vagrants had prudently vanished. Climbing to her feet, she staggered deeper into the house, her mind whirling with stunned confusion. Whoever, or whatever was in the saucer seemed to be after her. The house offered doubtful protection, its walls mottled with mould amid peeling paint, the ceiling sagging under the weight of the wet rot in the upper floor.

Her leg wounds burnt as she limped through another door, entering a smaller room. Broken furniture, smashed crockery and shredded papers littered the filthy, rotten carpet. Excrement and

graffiti smeared the walls, and ripped curtains hung in tatters around empty windows. Gasping, Rayne flattened herself to the wall when a shadow passed the window, then flung herself down as explosions ripped through the house. Red fire blazed in a brilliant barrage outside. The bolts threw up great clods of earth, and the brick walls cracked.

Bricks and mortar would not hold up against the fiery fusillade for long. Scrambling to her hands and knees, she crawled towards another door. The house shook and rattled as what could only be lasers pounded the walls, chunks of brick and cement flying into the rooms to smash on the floor. An outer wall fell with a grating rumble, and dust and wood chips, mixed with cement fragments, rained down from the upper story. The deafening explosions were almost constant, and the house was collapsing around her.

Crawling through the door, she found herself in an entry hall. A flight of stairs led to an upper floor ablaze with laser fire, the roof cinders. Smoke billowed downwards, and ash and burning wood fell from above. The thickening haze almost obscured a door under the stairs. Quickening her crawl, she reached it and turned the handle, praying it was unlocked. It swung open, catching her off balance, and she fell into pitch blackness, flinging out her arms. Her hands hit steps and her momentum sent her rolling down them, scraping her palms and banging her head. She reached the bottom bruised and winded, and lay gasping for a minute before crawling deeper into the darkness.

Above, the house's destruction continued. The earth shook as laser bolts pounded the building to rubble. The explosions all but drowned out the roar of flames and the bangs and crashes as walls collapsed, bricks falling with dry, grating thuds. The distant tinkle of smashing glass mingled with the creak of tortured wood. The house groaned and roared as it was destroyed. Reaching a wall, she curled up next to it, pressing her back to it as she stared up at the oblong of light at the top of the stairs.

Flames licked around it, feeding on the wooden frame. Soon they would travel down the stairs and fill the room with choking smoke. She plugged her ears to block out the terrible sounds of destruction above. She coughed as the smoke grew thicker, and the inferno's heat made sweat bead her face and trickle inside her clothes.

A terrific crash made her jump, and she was plunged into blackness as the door at the top of the stairs slammed shut, hit by a falling beam or wall. The door's violent closure snuffed out the flames that licked at its frame, sealing her off from the burning house until the fire ate through the door.

The explosions stopped, leaving a silence that only the fire's crackle broke. Burning wood made little mewling sounds, and the occasional crash as a burning timber collapsed, or the tinkle of glass shattering in the heat, made her start.

Why would an alien space ship try to kill an insignificant human being? There was no doubt in her mind that she had been the target. The vagrants would have been far easier to kill. She wiped sweat from her face with grimy hands, realising, from the stinging of her palms, that they were raw. Would these hostile aliens leave, or would they wait for the house to cool and search the rubble for her corpse? Had it been sport, choosing a target and trying to kill it for fun? Plenty of UFOs had been seen since mankind's downfall, observing, and perhaps recording Earth's demise. They had kept their distance, however, never making contact in spite of humanity's attempts to contact them.

The stifling smoke stung her throat, and her eyes watered. The door at the top of the stairs creaked, its outer surface on fire. Rayne forced herself to wait in the suffocating darkness, fighting a strong urge to go in search of light and air. The aliens might think she was dead, or they could be waiting outside to make sure, and if she revealed herself now they would hunt her down again.

Rats ran about, their claws scratching on the concrete floor. One ran over her leg with tiny hard paws, and she shuddered, jerking it away. Their squeaking held a note of panic, so they must be trapped too, she surmised. The wall against which she leant was damp and coated with slimy mould, which soaked into her jacket, chilling her back. Flames appeared at the bottom of the door, throwing a little light down the steps. Rayne straightened and looked around. The rats' glowing eyes met her gaze from a corner, where they seemed to be engaged in a purposeful activity, perhaps trying to chew their way out through the stone.

The smoke thickened, and she realised she had to get out before the fire consumed all the oxygen and the smoke suffocated her. Now that her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she could make

out the faint outlines of boxes stacked against the walls, and an old-fashioned boiler in one corner. She tried to stand up, but stabbing pains in her legs reminded her of her injuries and she sank down again to explore the painful areas. Blood soaked the back of her jeans, and she ran her hands over the wetness.

Finding a protruding glass spear, she jerked it out with a cry and flung it away. Biting her lip as fresh tears stung her watering eyes, she continued her search, locating another, smaller shard. It was slippery and deeply embedded, and her fingers could not grip it at first. The agony that lanced up her leg when she touched it made her stomach clench, but she pulled it out, groaning, and hunted for more. She extracted three more pieces, then sagged back, sick and dizzy.

The door burnt, flames licking at the roof. Thick, stifling smoke filled the room and the heat had become almost unbearable. Climbing to her feet, she hobbled along the wall, running her hands over its cool dampness. She had to find another exit, or she was doomed.

Chapter Two

Dawn found Rawn wandering along a dirty alley, tramping through piles of rotting refuse. This provided the rats' breeding ground, and the people who lived in this evil, depressing place trapped and ate them. Rawn hardly took any notice his surroundings, unable to think of anything except how he was going to find his sister. He did not notice the group of men lurking in a dark doorway until a net descended over his head, and many dirty hands pulled it tight around him. Someone snatched his weapon from its holster, and the men flung him to the ground. The net pinned his arms, and the raiders pulled it tighter while he fought. He kicked a man on the shin and made him hop and curse. These were the worst sort of raiders, who hunted people to sell to the autocrats for food.

A bald, scruffy individual with an eye patch stepped forward, holding Rawn's gun as he crouched down beside his captive to study him with his remaining bloodshot eye.

"You're a pretty one. The mistress will pay well for you."

"Fucking bastards!" Rawn snarled, earning himself a kick in the ribs from another man.

The leader gestured. "Bring him. Put him with the rest. The mistress is going to love him."

Two raiders hauled Rawn to his feet, one producing a pair of handcuffs. He twisted and cursed, trying to loosen the net and free his arms. They were a runty bunch, none with his strength or stature, and there were only four of them. Lunging at the man with the handcuffs, he dragged the two that clung to the net with him and butted the raider in the stomach. The man staggered back, tripped and sprawled, the cuffs slid into a storm drain and vanished with a distant splash.

"Hold him!" the one-eyed raider shouted. They did not want to kill him, and that worked in Rawn's favour. He swung and butted another man in the face, breaking his nose with a dull crunch. The raider released him with a bleat of pain, clutching his nose. The one-eyed man aimed the gun at Rawn, but killing or even injuring him would make the whole exercise pointless. Rawn turned to the man who still held the net, hooked his fingers into it and jerked it from the raider's grip, then loosened it with a heave of his arms and flung it aside. The slaver hesitated, casting a desperate glance at his leader, but his courage failed as Rawn stepped towards him, and he fled. The man who had tried to cuff Rawn sprinted after his comrade.

The one-eyed man, becoming aware of his danger, cocked the gun and waved it. Rawn lunged at him, gripped his wrist and twisted it until the bones cracked. The man screamed and dropped the weapon as Rawn smashed a fist into his face, sending him sprawling. The raider Rawn had butted staggered to his feet and raised his hands as Rawn picked up the gun the one-eyed man had dropped. Rawn glared at him, and he fled. Rawn looked down at the whimpering one-eyed slaver, disgusted. This was what it had come to now, raiders hunting each other to sell as slaves. Even they had lost their pride and become as pathetic as the people who waited at the feeding stations.

Relieving the one-eyed slaver of his gun, he holstered his own and tucked the other one into his belt, then glanced up and down the street. He had wandered into the territory of this sort of raider, which was not a healthy place to be. As he walked back the way he had come, his thoughts returned to his lost sister.

Rayne groped along the wall, gasping in the heat and smoke, her head swimming. The blazing door consumed the oxygen, and flames crept down the stairs. Her fingers touched a frame, and she examined it, finding a hatch set at an angle to the wall, which must open upwards. Stepping into the recess under it, she set her shoulder against the trap door and heaved with all her might. It creaked, the dry wood digging into her.

Again she pushed, her legs weakening as she panted for air and inhaled smoke instead. She was tempted to give up, lie down and surrender to the injustice of this cruel world she had struggled so hard to survive in all her life. With a strangled cry of defiance, she put the last of her strength into a final push. The hatch flew open as the rusted lock gave way, and she climbed out, inhaling great breaths of fresh air.

For a while, she lay and gasped on the withered grass, then sat up and wiped her streaming eyes.

The house smouldered, most of the fire having burnt out already, leaving embers that sent a column of black smoke spiralling upwards. In some places, flames still licked at the timbers. She glanced around for the scarlet saucer, but the sky was innocent of alien ships. Nevertheless, she staggered to her feet and moved into the shadow of the neighbouring house, just in case.

Flopping down next to the wall, she watched the house burn. Deep craters surrounded it, and the structure had been reduced to rubble and charred beams. Whoever had attacked her had tried to ensure that she would not survive.

Rayne recuperated in the shade, strength seeping back into her limbs. After about half an hour she rose, wincing. Dried blood caked the back of her jeans, but she hobbled along the street towards the meeting place, keeping a wary eye on the sky as well as the houses. She had given up wondering why an alien ship would want to kill her; it made no sense. No other houses were damaged, and vagrants emerged to gape and point at the smouldering ruin. She hoped the aliens thought she was dead, so they would not try again.

By the time she reached the grove of dead trees that was the meeting place, she tottered from exhaustion and hunger. She stumbled into the grove, fell to her knees and flopped down. Her brother's absence brought a fresh wave of despair and loneliness. She longed for his comforting presence and needed his help to bind her wounds. The trees hid her from prying eyes, but hunger gnawed at her, not allowing her the luxury of rest. Crawling across the soft leaves to the rock where Rawn always stashed extra food, she groped under it. Finding the sleek rustle of plastic, and she tore at the chewy, orange-flavoured concentrate, desperate to relieve her gut's emptiness.

While she ate, she pondered her situation. Staying in one place was dangerous, even in the grove's secrecy. Some raiders had noses as keen as dogs. Rawn must have gone in search of her, but she did not have the strength to travel back into the city to look for him. She could only hope he would return soon, and no one else found her before he did. Tiredness turned her limbs to lead, and she curled up in the leaves, drifting into a deep, exhausted sleep.

When Rayne woke, the sun's rays slanted through the dead trees. After eating more food, she examined her raw, sooty palms, picking out a few splinters. Although the wounds were not serious, the risk of infection in this polluted environment was high, so she went to the stream that chuckled through the rocks nearby. Stripping, she washed in the cold water, scrubbing her jeans. She emerged shivering, to wrap herself in the blankets she dug from under the rock where the food was stored, then lighted a fire.

The wounds in the back of her calves were easy enough to tend, and she removed several more splinters, but she could only examine the ones in the back of her thighs by touch. When she finished, twilight filled the grove with shadow, and she curled up next to the fire for another lonely night. At least she was safer in the country.

The swollen, sickly sun's first rays woke her, stealing into the grove with their slight warmth like fingers of light. She sat up with a start as the events of the previous day flooded back, making her glance up at the sky. It contained only dirty grey clouds, and, after studying it for several minutes, she relaxed. A hoar frost whitened the ground, liming the trees and bracken with a coating of ice.

The chilly air nipped at her nose and numbed her fingers and feet. Her legs had stiffened, and the pain made her gasp as she dragged more wood from the dwindling pile and lighted a new fire. As soon as a tiny blaze took hold, she huddled close to it and almost thrust her hands into the flames to warm them. Her breath steamed, and she clenched her jaws to prevent her teeth from chattering as she waited for the sun to warm the air.

By mid-morning, her jeans were dry, and she ate a little food, then dressed and sat beside the fire. She pondered the flying saucer's attack again, trying to fathom the reason for the senseless assault on an unimportant girl. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that she would never figure it out. She sighed and stared into the fire, remembering the dangers that had honed her reactions so keenly.

Her parents had joined the revolution in twenty-twelve, when wages had been cut to food only, and so many had lost their jobs. It had been madness, not a real revolution. They had been killed in a riot when the troops had shot most of the crowd on the government's orders. Massacring crowds

reduced the overpopulation that ruined the economy and threatened dwindling food supplies, as well as curbing civil unrest. People had become a burden, and the army had been ordered to sacrifice the many for the sake of the few. She and Rawn had been at home when their parents were killed, and ran away to avoid the looters who came afterwards in search of food.

Harvests had failed, and the erratic weather wrought havoc. Floods had washed away entire crops, while droughts hit other areas. Unseasonal hail storms had wreaked terrible damage, and freak winds or wild fires ruined what was left. Earthquakes had ravaged some countries, and the resulting famine and disease wiped out entire populations. Crops that had survived the weather became sickly, and the remaining livestock was slaughtered. The ozone layer had thinned, and millions starved. People had eaten their pets, turned on each other and abandoned their children to die in the streets. Mankind had turned to the last remaining food source and hunted whales and dolphins to extinction, wiping out fish stocks.

It had been a time of turmoil and terror. People had killed randomly, burnt and looted in their desperate search for food. The government had ordered the army to keep order and reduce the population, but the soldiers rebelled and went home to their families. The putrid stink of decaying or burning flesh had filled the air, and hospitals became charnel houses. All the while, the world had died.

Rawn had looked after her since then. They had run and hidden, trusting no one, two frightened children in a world gone mad. They had nearly been caught a few times, but survived.

Rayne frowned as a prickle of unease made the hairs on her nape rise, and glanced up. Years of being hunted had honed her survival instincts, and she never ignored her sixth sense. Her eyes flicked back down as a golden glow appeared about ten metres away, growing brighter until she was forced to squint. Seconds later it faded. A man dressed in strange white clothes, a tinted helmet hiding his face, stood there.

Rayne stared at him, frozen with shock and fear. If he had moved she would have run, and she sensed his scrutiny as she groped for and found a fist-sized rock. The stranger wore what appeared to be a weapon on his hip, and she waited, holding her breath as she wondered what use the rock would be if he chose to use his weapon. The stone dug into her palm, which grew damp with nervous perspiration, and she was forced to breathe again as her lungs burnt for air. The golden light shrouded the stranger again, and when faded, he had vanished.

After a while, she rose and limped to the spot where he had stood, searching for tracks. She found two footprints, which proved she had not been hallucinating, and she shivered, glancing up at the empty sky. The uneasiness stayed with her, and her neck prickled in warning, making her retreat to her fire and build it into a blaze. Her eyes darted around, vigilant for any sign of danger.

On board a ship that orbited high above the Earth, the man who had recently shed a white bio suit studied the image from the spy cam he had ordered to follow the girl. The wafer-thin crystal screen gave a sharp, perfect colour picture, almost as if he was still there with her, just a few metres away. He recalled his amazement when he had first caught sight of her. The shock had kept him rooted to the spot for several minutes, ignoring the growing urgency of the telepathic calls of his crew. He still thought it amazing to find such a creature on this dying, polluted world, where half the people had degenerated to shambling monsters and the other half were undernourished and diseased.

Although he had been sent to find her, he had not been prepared for his first encounter, and still marvelled at it. Her golden hair had gleamed in the weak sunlight and her grimy skin glowed with health. The sharp intelligence of her luminous eyes had startled him. They had been filled with suspicion and fear, while her thin, callused hand had gripped a largish rock, ready to hurl it at him if he made the wrong move. She exuded a kind of leashed savagery, the alertness of a wild animal mixed with the rational response of a civilised being.

This girl was the one. He was more certain of it than he had ever been of anything in his life. He turned to the book that lay on the desk's smooth white surface and ran his fingers over it. Soft leather bound it, and the gold that trimmed its edges also depicted the name inscribed on its cover.

The Olban, set down thousands of years ago, contained all the teachings and prophecies that had guided the Atlantean culture throughout the ages. This particular copy was, of course, a symbolic token. His home city's high priest had given it to him before he left on this mission. It signified the

sacred duty imposed upon him and his crew; a constant reminder of their objective. The Olban's contents were, and always had been, available on the central data processor. Over the centuries, many prophecies had come true, affirming the wisdom of the ancient seers who had foretold them.

Now a grave and momentous prophecy was about to unfold, which could change the course of the Atlantean Empire's fortune. He opened the book to the marked page and read the short passage that had brought him to this dying planet.

'In the time of the junction of Perinus and Lodis, when the comet Vistar appears in the heavens, travel through the void to the dying world. Here will be found a golden girl child, pure of spirit and flesh, she who must be saved, so she may save Atlan.'

That time had come. On Atlan, astronomers had seen the two stars, Perinus and Lodis, melt into one, and the comet had drawn its fiery trail across the night sky. The council had sent out all available ships to search for dying planets, and he had found this one. This girl, he was positive, was the golden girl child of whom the prophecy spoke. All the other people were sick, dying or depraved, yet she was perfect.

Tallyn turned back to the screen as the girl glanced around as if she sensed the spy-cam, even though she could not see it. Remarkable. Her harsh existence must have honed her senses to the point where she could detect the slight static frisson of the spy-cam's shield. The spy-cam employed a fluctuating stress shield that warped the light around it, effectively making it invisible to the naked eye, and it floated high above her on a tiny anti-gravity coil.

Touching a crystal on the console, he called the ship's laboratory. Professor Rasham's mild, cultured face appeared on another screen, looking, as he always did, as if he had just been pulled through a hedge backwards, his thinning grey hair standing out in a wild halo.

Tallyn suppressed a smile. "Professor Rasham, have you the results of the air samples you took?"

Rasham's eyes brightened. This was his favourite subject. "Why yes, Commander. Basically, it's similar to our atmosphere still, in spite of the pollution, although that is a major difference, of course. There's less oxygen than is desirable, and the pollution factor is high. Methane, ammonia, carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide gases have been found in far higher concentrations than is good for a person. The ozone layer is breaking up rapidly now, and the ultra violet and infrared radiation is getting very bad. The result of many decades of rampant greenhouse gas emissions, of course."

"Projections, Professor?"

The professor harrumphed. "Ah, well, not good. The increased radiation is killing the, err, natives. Most suffer from malignant cancers, apart from a few who have avoided direct sunlight, and some have mutated beyond all recognition. However, it's killing off the vegetation now, and once that goes, the oxygen level will become too low to support life. The polar caps are melting, causing the seas to rise, and, of course, the increase in temperature is causing more water to evaporate into the atmosphere to form clouds, which are trapping still more heat -"

"What will happen to the people?" Tallyn interrupted.

The professor shot him an injured look. "Well, those who don't die from the solar radiation will die of suffocation or starvation. They are going to die, that's certain. Earth is turning into another Venus. Soon it'll be just as hostile, with a corrosive methane-ammonia atmosphere, and nothing will survive. The temperature will continue to rise until the core expands and volcanoes erupt, spewing molten lava over the surface. Which will be dry, of course, as all the seas will have evaporated -"

"How long, Professor?"

The mild-featured man looked vexed at the constant interruptions. "Hard to say, exactly. Maybe three or four years before the people are gone, then the clouds will continue to thicken -"

"Thank you, Professor."

Tallyn broke the connection with a sigh. Like most elderly, over-educated men, Rasham loved to extol his subject, and if not kept under control could produce a monologue that would consume hours of precious time in educational, but unproductive discourse. It had taken Rasham close to five hundred years to gather all his vast knowledge, and it seemed to long for egress, taking control of his tongue in order to gain access to a fresh mind. Once Rasham had possessed high-cast black and white hair, but age had mixed it into a dull grey monotone that most Atlanteans found unattractive. Then

again, one as old as the professor did not care about such things anymore.

Turning back to the spy screen, he watched the girl feed the fire, her eyes scanning countryside and sky. He wondered if she possessed more than the five senses humans were limited to, for she seemed unusually astute. Some studies conducted on humans indicated that a few had developed one of two extra senses over the course of their evolution, and most possessed a latent but never-awakened ability.

Leaning back, he pressed his hand to the sensor pad before him and closed his eyes, selected his topic from the central data bank and allowed the rush of data to enter his mind. It streamed in, a mixture of written information, images and sensory perceptions too intense for an untrained mind to absorb. The history of humankind, their biology, language, culture and peculiarities flashed into his mind in a few moments, preparing him for the ordeal of dealing with a member of this alien and heretofore-un-contacted race.

The reasons for their isolation soon became clear. Their propensity for violence and cruelty, their strange disregard for the destruction they had wrought upon their planet, dooming their civilisation, was enough to befuddle the most open of minds. It struck him as odd that the Golden Child should come from such an inept society, but then, perhaps she was the first to see the mistakes of the past.

Rayne spent the day resting beside the fire, nibbling food bars and mulling over the increasingly strange events. First the scarlet saucer, then the white-clad man, both with no logical explanation. It seemed unlikely that the white-clad man was connected to the scarlet saucer, yet she found it hard to believe that two alien ships studied Earth's demise. Also, why were they so interested in her? Were they doing this to other people too? At least the white-clad man had not appeared threatening, and she hoped the scarlet saucer had left the area.

The odd feeling that she was being watched stayed with her, even though there appeared to be no reason for it. She spent another night curled up in the blankets beside the fire, but the next day the food ran out and there was little firewood left. When the fire died and her stomach rumbled, Rayne decided she would have to go back into the city. Without food, she would only grow weaker, and she could not rely on her brother returning. Rawn could be dead for all she knew, and to sit here hoping he would come back was sheer folly. Only the fittest survived on this cruel world, so she had to find food or starve.

Quitting her warm nest took a great deal of willpower, and her injured legs protested. She buried the blankets under the rock and forced herself to her feet, grimaced and bit her lip to stifle her whimpers of pain. Her first few steps were so excruciating that she nearly returned to her camp, unable to face the long walk. She refused to lie there and starve, however, so she pressed on, ignoring the agony that shot up her legs at every stride. As she walked, her stiff muscles loosened, allowing her to walk a little more freely, but fresh blood dampened her jeans. She stumbled often, unable to hide the dangerous weakness that, if a gang of vagrants or another raider saw it, might lead to disaster.

Rayne reached the outer city at midday, and limped through the dingy, tumbled-down buildings. Rats scampered, squeaking, from piles of refuse, and she hurried past an occasional corpse, mutilated, diseased or skeletal. Many vile stench abused her nose, varying only in their strength or foulness. Skinny, hollow-eyed people dodged into ruins at her approach, their eyes gleaming from the shadows as she passed. Rayne paused in an empty building to regain her strength and rest her throbbing legs, the pain making her queasy.

Keeping a sharp look out, she only rested for a few minutes. As she rose to leave, however, she froze at the faint sound of shuffling feet, and frowned. There were several of them, but the tread was too heavy for a group of vagrants. Raising her head, she sniffed the wind, all her senses straining. A vile stench wafted to her, which had not been there moments before. Terror turned her blood to ice, and she bolted from the building like a hare from its burrow, only to stop just outside the door.

Twenty mutants formed a semi-circle around the door she had just exited, shuffling closer. Rayne glanced back as another mutant filled the doorway. They stood seven foot and over, their long arms reaching to their knees. Brown, matted hair covered some, and slack lips revealed long yellow teeth. Others looked more human, but grossly deformed, and wore only a few dirty rags. One had

elephant-like ears and hands that looked more like clubs.

Another had a single eye and nostril, while the mutant beside him had a dog-like muzzle full of sharp teeth. Some had almost normal faces, but half-animal bodies with claws, spines or scales. Most of them had cancerous growths of various sizes, suppurating ulcers that oozed stinking pus. Their stench made her bile rise, souring the lump of terror lodged in her throat. Dirt matted their hair and caked their mottled skins with a layer of greasy filth spotted with patches of dried gore and pus. A few even had mould growing on them.

They were genetic mutants, those unfortunates who had been children or just conceived when the ozone layer broke down and the sun's radiation had wreaked havoc on their development. Most had died. These were the angry, suffering survivors, who killed for food and fun, their minds as twisted as their bodies. Their size and well-fed appearance stemmed from their cannibalistic lifestyle, and she was to be the latest delicacy on their menu.

Rayne looked around for a weapon. Rawn had always protected her, and weapons of any sort were hard to come by, due to the demand for them. Desperate, she tugged at a steel reinforcing rod protruding from some rubble, but it was firmly lodged and all she did was scrape her raw palms on its rusty surface. The approaching mutants stared at her with dull eyes and licked their lips in anticipation.

Picking up a brick, she hurled it at one, but it bounced off the creature's forehead with no noticeable effect. Panic squeezed her heart in an icy grip as she glanced around for a way out, but they were shoulder to shoulder, closing the circle. Her stomach threatened to hurl its meagre, acidic contents up her throat. Rancid breath, mixed with unwashed hairy bodies, urine and faeces, plus the decaying blood of past victims that clung to their fur, created a stench unrivalled in singular vileness.

Sobbing with hysterical panic, Rayne hurled brick after brick at the encroaching mutants, following each with a stream of useless abuse. Her aim was good, but the bricks bounced off the mutants' thick skulls without making them blink. Some leered and growled, others quickened their steps and raised their arms.

A low-pitched hum filled the air. A pillar of blue fire impaled the mutant in front of her, which exploded. Blood and guts splattered its companions, making them recoil. The blue fire burnt a molten spot in the ground before it cut off, then impaled another mutant. The powerful hum made her teeth ache, and intense heat scorched her skin as mutant after mutant died, impaled by the beam of light. She gasped and crouched down, covering her face as an orgy of blue heat destroyed the mutants. Some died before they could make a sound, and none had time to even turn away.

When the last mutant was vaporised, the blue fire vanished, leaving scorched, smoking spots that glowed. Shredded gore coated the rubble, and chunks of cooked meat clung to the crumbling wall behind her. Rayne lowered her hands and glanced around, poised to flee but afraid to move in case she attracted the attention of whoever had killed the mutants. She was fairly sure it had been a laser beam, invisible against the sky. Her mind raced as she struggled to make sense of it.

An alien ship had just tried to kill her, now some unknown and unseen benefactor had saved her, or were they just toying with her? Perhaps they enjoyed her fear, and now waited for her to flee before killing her, too. She glared at the sky, hating their power and elusiveness, determined not to give them the satisfaction of watching her run about in terror. Her bravado drained away, and she stumbled from the scorched circle to hobble down the street as fast as she could, intent only on getting away.

The imperative and rather rude telepathic intrusion of Marcon, his first officer, jerked Tallyn from a deep slumber. Such tactics were only ever used in an emergency, so he quelled his initial annoyed reaction and sent back a query. Marcon's response, that a group of mutants were attacking the human girl, brought Tallyn wide awake. He jack-knifed out of his bunk and pulled on the one-piece stretch overall that was slung over a nearby chair.

His quarters were only a few strides away from the bridge, and within seconds he watched the confrontation on main screen. He admired her pluck as she hurled bricks and abuse at the monsters, but when it was quite obvious she could not escape, he gave the order to destroy the mutants. The ship's neural net, under the guidance of a net-linked officer, locked onto the targets and calculated

distance and trajectory before firing the lasers with deadly accuracy.

The girl glanced around and up, but the ship was in orbit, hidden by the grey clouds that cloaked her world. The spy-cam that brought her image to him also marked her position, enabling the ship's infrared scanners to track her movements. The spy-cam was programmed to keep her image in its lens. She hobbled down the street, the spy-cam following like a faithful dog. Her limp worried him, and the brown stains on her trousers indicated injuries that he had only noticed when she had set out on her journey this morning. The possibility of infection added to his concern, making him toy with the idea of picking her up.

Tallyn could not explain why he had not done so yet, but something warned him not to, in spite of her injury. The same instinct told him she was the golden girl child in the prophecy. Over the years, he had learnt to trust his instincts, and this was probably the most significant mission he would ever perform. As the ship's commander, he had no need to explain his actions, or lack of them, to the crew, although Marcon had looked at him oddly.

The ship held orbit now above the city where the girl dwelt, and she was obviously the target. The crew probably wondered why he did not order her transferred up, but Atlantean crews rarely questioned their commanders' orders. Nor did he find any need to explain it; he would wait until the time was right.

Rayne entered the Inner City late in the afternoon. She slipped into the shadows of the towering, shiny skyscrapers and dodged from building to building. Her chances of finding Rawn were slim to none, but she had to try. The pain in her legs sapped her, hunger gnawed at her, and she stopped at taps to drink. The water eased her stomach ache, but added nothing to her dwindling strength. Twice, she spotted police patrols and hid in dark doorways until they passed.

At dusk, she rested in a ruined office building, on a battered sofa that had somehow survived the destructive effects of the pollution that ravaged the planet. She stared out of a grimy window at the dismal street, raising her gaze once more to the grey clouds that no longer offered any protection against the sun's radiation. The cuts in greenhouse gas output had been too little and too late.

The vast amount of gas already released wrought irreparable damage on the ozone layer as it rose into the upper atmosphere. Huge cattle farms produced massive amounts of methane, and the destruction of the world's forests reduced oxygen production just as drastically.

The ozone layer was almost gone now, making exposure to the sun hazardous, for even a few hours could cause skin cancer. The acid rain ate into everything. It soaked into the ground and killed the trees and few struggling weeds that were left. Once filtered by the soil, it was safe to drink. Sometimes thick yellow smog would envelope everything, burn eyes and skin and leave behind a layer of black soot.

The once-beautiful blue oceans were mere legend now. Brown seas foamed on filthy beaches like a massive sewer. No one lived beside it anymore, for the stench of rot and noxious bacterial secretions were strong enough to make people sick. A thick blanket of green algae covered the sluggish waves. Adapted to the saline conditions, it thrived on the toxic soup of chemicals and pollutants that filled it. The sea had turned into the very thing humans had used it for, a cesspit.

Rayne sighed and rose, wincing. The prospect of stumbling through the darkening city did not appeal to her, but necessity drove her. If she did not find Rawn, she was not sure she would survive, since she would have great difficulty running with her injuries and she had to find food before she became too weak.

Chapter Three

Rawn wandered along a deserted street, glancing into gloomy corners, his hand never far from his weapon. Since his encounter with the slavers, he had increased his vigilance. He no longer allowed his constant worry about Rayne's welfare to distract him, although it nibbled at his mind like a rat gnawing in the ceiling. Hunger gnawed at him too. He had not eaten since this morning, when his food had run out. He stopped for water at a tap in a building, then walked on until dark, when he found a safe place and built a fire.

As the night chill settled through the air, he went to a nearby drapery and searched amongst the rubbish and dust for blankets and curtains. Returning to his fire, he settled down for the night.

Rayne built a fire, but her leather jacket could not cope with the bitter cold. Although she huddled over it, her back remained cold while her front cooked. Her supply of combustible material dwindled rapidly, for cardboard burnt quickly and wood was in short supply. Curling into a ball, she strived to conserve her warmth as the fire died. Her stomach rumbled, and she longed for her brother's comforting warmth. She clenched her teeth to stop them chattering, but her shivers grew more violent as the night air cooled. Nevertheless, she closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Every little noise woke her from her uneasy doze, mostly rats scuttling in the garbage, and she knew she would have a restless night.

Tallyn stood in the gloom at the back of the ship's bridge and watched the girl with growing concern. The officer who monitored the surface conditions informed him that the temperature approached freezing point, since the thick clouds dispersed at dusk to release the heat trapped under them. This planet's peculiar weather grew stranger every day, and the changing atmospheric conditions led to some pretty weird aberrations, such as hail storms on a warm day or heat waves on a cold one.

The girl suffered from the cold, and he considered the various ways in which he might help her. He could transfer a blanket down to her, but, with her suspicious nature, she would probably not use it. The same would apply to a heating unit, so the only real option was to bring her aboard. As yet, he had not informed anyone that she was their target, but the surveillance and concern for her welfare should have made that obvious by now. He glanced at Marcon, who stood nearby, an ear cocked for orders.

"Deploy the transfer Net. Put her into the quarantine section under deep sleep inducement."

Marcon nodded and took his station to send orders to the various crew members who would be required to perform their particular function. Crystals twinkled in the gloom as the locator beam was sent out. Using the spy-cam as a guide, the particle beam locked onto its living cargo and sent back her precise location. The Net deployed next, surrounding the girl in a nimbus of golden light as it coalesced into a shell of pure energy.

The transfer Net's technology had always fascinated Tallyn, although its use was limited by the amount of power it devoured when the ship was not linked to the energy dimension, like now. This single transfer would use enough power to run the star ship for a month. The transfer Net worked in a similar fashion to the way in which the ship moved through space, but its ability to work at a distance complicated it. The ovoid of energy, once formed into a tangible shell, changed the frequency of its wave form, and by doing so, side slipped through time and space.

Essentially, the shell transferred itself into a dimension of pure energy, where distance, matter and time did not exist. Without these laws, all that remained was to force the energy shell to re-emerge at a predetermined point, in this case, the ship's hospital. To do this, the programmed instructions of the initial beam forced the shell to change its wave form again, whereupon the energy dimension ejected it, and it emerged at the time and place contained in its original instructions. Within the energy shell, the cargo, even when awake, was unaware of anything other than the golden glow, followed by a change of venue.

Many scientists had argued against the Net's safety, challenging its inventors to prove that living cargo could not be destroyed, should the shell break down in the energy dimension. The ensuing experiments had gone on for years, but the closest anyone had come to losing a cargo was a small animal that vanished into the energy dimension for seven years, but re-emerged unharmed at its point of origin. This had caused serious consternation, since the laboratory had, in the meantime, been torn down, and the Net had returned in an office block.

The animal, when caught, had proven to be in excellent health, since no time had passed for it. After that, the Net was deemed to be safe, although by then it had already been in use for several years. Essentially, the conclusion was that the shell could not break down in the energy dimension simply because it was kept intact by the one thing that abounded there. Energy. The beast's loss had been due only to its sender failing to encode any return instructions into the initial beam, and even then it had eventually returned, unharmed.

The wave form of the Net changed, and the shell and its cargo vanished from the spy-cam's screen. The spy-cam, confused, spun as it searched for its target, but a new set of instructions halted its frantic revolutions.

Tallyn left the bridge and walked along the corridors that led to the ship's hospital, his feet silent on the thick moss carpet. Going over to the shimmering stress field that surrounded the bed where she lay, he gazed down at her. The doctor, clad in a sealed suit, tended the wounds in her legs. He glanced up and waved before returning to his work.

Tallyn studied the girl, his conviction that she was his quarry growing stronger. Her perfection cried out for notice, almost impossible in the revolting atmosphere in which she lived. Her skin had no sun blemishes at all, which, even if she had lived all her life in a cave, was amazing. His hair stood up as he moved closer to the stress screen, and he stepped back, unwilling to be touched by its unpleasant aura.

The screen, unlike the Net, used hardly any energy at all, but created a barrier by changing the polarity of the air molecules in a series of alternating layers. This created a tangible barrier through which air could not circulate, for the stressed molecules were static, held in position by the field's slight energy. Its effect on flesh was startling and violent, deadly if a person tried to penetrate it. Fortunately, its hair-raising properties and the shimmer of its stressed particles were warning enough to keep most people away.

The agony it imparted upon entry would also enforce a speedy withdrawal. Stress screens were used in prison ships and bank vaults, and as yet, no one had found a way through one without a door stasis switch. The screen's effect on metal armour was even more dramatic than flesh, resulting in atomisation and the instant death of its occupant. An air-cleaning unit stood beside the girl's bed, providing her with fresh air. The doctor, his task finished, switched off a door in the screen and exited, approaching Tallyn.

"She's the one, isn't she? I would never have thought that such health could thrive in that putrid environment."

"Yes." Tallyn gazed at her, then turned to the doctor. "Keep her asleep until morning, then I'll have her returned."

The doctor looked perplexed. "Returned? But surely...?" He caught himself. "Yes, sir."

Rayne woke with a gasp, opened her eyes and sat up. All her senses tingled and her head spun from the speed of her movements before her metabolism had speeded up from its sleeping state. Her breath condensed before her face in the cold air, yet she was warm, the chill nipping at her fingers and nose. She had slept through the night, with no dreams or sudden awakenings caused by rats or other noises.

The dull throbbing ache in her legs was gone, and when she poked the wounds she found hard scabs where yesterday there had been bleeding sores. She was refreshed and invigorated, and a metallic taste lingered on her tongue. The peculiarities were alarming, yet harmless, and made her wonder afresh at the strong sensation of being watched. She glanced around at the dank, gloomy room in which she had spent the night, her gaze flitting over peeling walls and mildewed floor to come to rest on the ashes of her fire.

Hunger lived as a dull pain in her belly, and today she must find food. Dismissing the inexplicable oddities for the moment, she pulled her jacket closer and rose, going over to the door to peer out. Rain had fallen during the night, and she was surprised that she had slept through it, since rain was so dangerous, it usually woke her. Puddles in the road hissed as they ate into the tar, and acrid steam stung her nostrils. Leaving the room's safety, she walked down the deserted street, avoiding puddles. Finding a tap, she drank and washed her face, keeping a sharp lookout for danger. The only place she would find food was at an autocrat's store, and, although the prospect chilled her, hunger drove her on.

Rayne set off to find one, sprinting across roads and staying close to walls, where she could duck out of sight if necessary. Even vagrants were a threat to her now. Her only defence was to act like a raider, so they would think she was armed. She flitted through the city until she found a food store, but the number of guards patrolling its entrance dismayed her. The autocrat must have been raided recently, for there were four guards instead of the usual two.

Rayne considered finding a less well-guarded store, but the prospect of continuing her dangerous journey on an empty stomach did not appeal to her. Like most food stores, it was an old shop with all the doors save one bricked up. In the early days, raiders had used explosives to blow open food store doors, and some autocrats had given up repairing the damage. This store was one that possessed no doors, its owner having opted to use more guards instead.

This meant that raiders were sometimes killed, which pleased the autocrats. The rivalry between store guards and raiders had become something of a deadly game, which was why guards did not merely stand outside the doors, or wait inside in ambush. To even the odds, they patrolled in front of the store, giving raiders a chance to get in if they had the guts to try.

Watching them, she noticed that there was about a minute when both pairs had their backs to the door. This gave her a slim chance, but it was risky. If they caught her, they would give her to an autocrat, a prospect grim enough to make her hesitate. Then her stomach rumbled, reminding her of why she was there.

Rayne waited for the right moment, missing two before she plucked up enough courage to make her dash. Leaving the safety of the doorway, she sprinted across the road and ghosted through the door. She held her breath as she waited for the shouts and the pounding of feet that would tell her that she was now trapped. Her heart's hammering was the only sound in the vast, dilapidated room, however, and she turned to survey her surroundings.

Mountains of boxes were stacked against the walls, and she went to tear open the nearest cardboard lid and look inside. Plastic-wrapped food bars, nutritious but, in this case, tasteless. She gathered some, then looked in another box, finding tinned stuff, too heavy to carry. A third box yielded protein and vitamin pills, and she filled her pockets with these and more food bars of different flavours and nutritional values.

Once she had as much as she could carry, she returned to the door. It was dangerous to stay inside too long, since the guards sometimes checked for intruders. She peered out and jerked back. The guards faced the door, and she waited, then looked again just as they turned away.

With her heart lodged in her throat, she sprinted for the doorway she had hidden in earlier. Shouts rang out behind her, followed by the clatter of running feet, and she veered off. Clutching her stolen booty, she raced down the street, the guards pounding in pursuit. She lengthened her strides, her muscles stretching, her hair flying like a banner. For a while, she revelled in her speed, but all too soon the burning of fatigue invaded her legs. Sprinting required a great deal of effort, and was not something that she could sustain for too long, especially while carrying an armload of food.

Scarcely a block passed before the extra weight and her weakened condition took their toll. The guards kept up, their wild shots ricocheting off the walls on either side of her, alarmingly close. They did not seem to be aiming to kill, only to frighten her, for now. She dived into an alley, hoping to lose them in the shadows and garbage, but they were too close, and followed.

The men stopped firing and whooped with triumph as they closed with their quarry, certain of their success. Dropping the food, she sprinted again, intent only on escape. Her legs were lumps of burning lead and her lungs seemed to have shrunk. The guards gained, and she leapt over a pile of old cardboard and stumbled, sobbing with terror and exhaustion. The alley ended a few metres further on

in a high wall. She slowed, her mind numb with horror, unwilling to look back at her triumphant pursuers.

A golden light appeared in the dingy alley ahead, forming a nimbus that brightened to blinding intensity, forcing her to squint and avert her eyes. She stumbled to a halt, panting. The light vanished, and a man, clad mostly in black, with a grey, knee-length coat, stood there. She gaped at him. Although he remained immobile, in this hostile place she could only assume he was an enemy. His appearance from the golden light made her wonder if he was another alien, or if the autocrats had discovered this odd mode of travel.

If he was an alien, Earth was becoming rife with them. His appearance did not change her situation, however. The guards would reach her momentarily. Letting her aching legs fold, she sank down gasping and waited for the guards' rough hands to drag her to her feet. Instead, the unmistakable hum of a laser bolt blazed over her, filling the alley with shimmering blue light. Shouts came from behind her, and she glanced back. Two guards lay still on the ground. Another brilliant beam crisped the air overhead, and a third man collapsed with a strangled cry. The last guard tried to aim his weapon as yet another vicious buzz and flash of blue light passed over her. He crumpled with a hoarse cough, and a tense silence fell.

Rayne stared at the sprawled bodies, hardly daring to breathe, then turned to face the man who had killed them. He stood there still, his grey coat flaring in the breeze that stirred scraps of paper and made them dance along the grimy tar. He holstered his laser, the soft click loud in the stillness.

Rayne stared at him with deep trepidation. If he came after her, she did not have the strength to run. He was too far away for her to make out any details, and the gloom made him little more than a shadow. His black clothes did not have the cheap shine of an autocrat's garments, nor did he act like a raider.

Considering the startling way in which he had arrived, she did not think he was either. His strange method of travel and odd inaction mystified her. She was usually good at sensing people's moods, but he appeared neither impatient nor hesitant; he seemed to merely study her. He glanced up, and she glimpsed the alien profile of what appeared to be a black mask, then golden light engulfed him, forcing her to avert her eyes. When she looked again, he had vanished.

Scrambling to her feet, she glanced around with deep suspicion, but only papers scuttled past in the breeze. She took a moment to recover from the shock while her heart slowed and her breathing became less painful, swallowing to ease her throat's dry rawness. Then she headed back up the alley and collected the guards' weapons before stepping over the bodies to pick up her food.

A few blocks away, she sat down to eat, glancing around with fearful, hunted eyes. These mysterious beings or people who appeared and vanished were becoming unnerving, and, even though they had helped her twice, she wished they would leave her alone. Perhaps they would when she found Rawn. When strength returned to her limbs, she set off once more in search of her brother, hoping she found him before hunger forced her to raid another food store.

Rawn woke shivering and crawled out of the musty blankets to sit in the sun's feeble warmth. He cursed the many abuses this cruel world heaped upon his head daily, adding one more to the list. Now he was not only hungry, dirty, cold and weary, but lonely as well. He watched a group of vagrants trying to catch a rat in the filth. The mutated rodents were the size of rabbits, but still slim pickings for four people. Three ragged, skinny men and a woman, brown with dirt, chased the rat with starved desperation. The woman gave a thin cackle of delight as she caught it, which turned into a squeal of pain when it bit her. She dropped it, and the men groaned in despair as it dived into a storm drain. One cuffed her, growling something unintelligible.

Rawn's lips twisted in disgust as he looked away. It turned his stomach to watch them. They were human, or at least they used to be; now they were worse than animals. Would he end up like them when the food stores emptied? The group shuffled off down the street, kicking the piles of rubbish heaped against the walls in search of another rat. A sudden urge to quit the city took hold of him, and he jumped up. He would go to the meeting place. Rayne was bound to go there eventually, if she was not already there, waiting for him. Either that or the autocrats had captured her, in which case he would never see her again. He set off at a run.

Rayne headed across the city, unsure of where she was going. As she walked through a building, a crash nearby made her jump and sprint out of the nearest door, where she collided with someone. She recoiled, preparing to flee, then recognised Rawn with a rush of relief and joy.

He shouted in delight and swept her into his arms, squeezing her until her ribs creaked. She gasped and pounded on his back until he held her away to study her.

"Thank God you're all right. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Me too! What happened to you?"

Rawn laughed. "What happened to me? I went to the grove to meet you, but you never came! What happened to you?"

"I was attacked..." She broke off as Rawn glanced around. "Let's get out off the street, huh? We'll find a spot where we can talk. Do you have any food? I'm starved."

She gave him a food bar as they entered a building.

When the girl bumped into a man, it surprised Tallyn. The spy-cam, following her, did not spot the stranger until it exited the building behind her, by which time she was already enfolded in the man's arms. Tallyn opened his mouth to order his weapons' officer to protect her, then shut it when it became apparent that they knew each other, and she was pleased to meet him.

After the previous incident, when the officer assigned to watch her had been distracted and missed the store guards' chase, only returning to the screen in time to see her stepping over four corpses, Tallyn had taken to watching her himself. How she had killed the guards remained a mystery, for she did not have a weapon, as far as he knew. Yet she must have acquired one since her confrontation with the mutants. How else had she killed the men?

He studied the man and turned to his lieutenant. "Our girl's guardian? What do you think?"

Marcon nodded. "Looks like her brother, sir."

"Yes, he does, doesn't he? I wonder if he is."

Tallyn scrutinised the new man, who was another excellent specimen of humanity with no signs of disease, but most importantly, someone she knew. Now he knew that this was what he had been waiting for. All his instincts told him that now it was time to bring her aboard. He turned to Marcon.

"Deploy the transfer Net. Put them straight into the isolation cell in sick bay, full quarantine. Use a mild tranquilliser gas and start decontamination. We don't want to give them too many shocks at once."

Marcon nodded, signalling to a crewman, who touched the crystals on his console. The spy-cam's screen went blank as the tiny floating camera was recalled, and moments later the main screen filled with an image from one of the ship's on-board cameras.

The energy shell's golden glow faded as the Net dispersed to reveal two confused humans in a pale room. They clung to each other with wide eyes, then relaxed as the tranquilliser gas took effect.

Tallyn glanced at Marcon. "We'll let them recover for a while, I think."

On his way to his quarters, he wondered how they would react to their translocation. The tranquilliser gas would calm the male's aggression, so his primitive projectile weapon did not pose a threat. Tallyn was more concerned that the transfer's shock would make the girl overwrought.

Chapter Four

Rayne studied the strange room, her heart thudding. She had flung herself at Rawn when the golden light engulfed them, her skin prickling with static power. The glow had faded to reveal the odd white room. Rawn had held her with one arm while he drew his gun and glanced around, then a wave of dizziness had washed over her, along with a slight sensation of detachment. Several minutes had passed since then, and Rawn studied the featureless walls with a scowl, hefting his gun.

"Where are we?" Rayne's whisper was a thread of sound in a pit of silence.

Rawn muttered, "Out of the frying pan and in the fire."

"What?"

"I don't know." He released her and went over to the nearest wall, running his hand over its silky smooth surface. "This is weird."

Rayne sank to the floor as shock drained the last of her energy and her stomach knotted. After so much hardship and struggle, she had thought her life was about to return to normal. The confusing and possibly dangerous situation had ousted her joy at finding Rawn. She rubbed hot tears from her stinging eyes as the possible ramifications of this new and inexplicable predicament overwhelmed her. Rawn prowled the room, testing the walls and finding them solid, apparently.

"I don't know where we are, but this isn't the work of the autocrats," he muttered. "They don't have this kind of technology."

"Then who? The aliens?"

Rawn frowned at her. "What aliens?"

Rayne told him about the scarlet saucer, the white-clad man, and the two incidents since then. It sounded bizarre even to her, but Rawn listened with a wrinkled brow. When she finished, he remained tight-lipped, unable to offer any explanation. Telling her tale made their situation seem more threatening, and she wondered if whoever had captured them was listening.

A tense hour dragged by while they waited for something to happen. Rawn paced the room, then holstered his gun and sat beside her. They relaxed as the vertigo lessened and fatigue set in. Rayne struggled to keep her eyes open, although Rawn told her to sleep. She jerked into nerve-jangling wakefulness when a soft hum and swish broke the tomb-like silence. A section of seamless wall slid back to reveal an alcove with a basin and toilet. After Rawn inspected it, Rayne used it to refresh herself with cool water. As soon as Rawn had used it, the door swished shut again. Moments later, a narrow beam of purple light swept across the cell, making Rayne's skin crawl. Rawn banged on the wall and swore at their unseen captors.

"Any more stunts like that, and I'll shoot a hole in the wall," he promised.

"I don't think you can do much to them."

"We'll see about that."

A few minutes later, just as they relaxed again, another section of the wall slid back to reveal two glasses of clear liquid. Rawn eyed the beverages, lifted a glass and sniffed it.

"Smells like water."

"We had water from the basin," she pointed out. "Unless we weren't supposed to drink that."

"But I think we're supposed to drink this."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "It's probably got medicine in it." He put the glass down. "Whatever it is, I don't want it." He glared around at the walls. "You hear me, you bastards out there? We won't co-operate until we get an explanation. Show yourselves, you cowards! We're not animals, so stop treating us like them!"

Rayne tugged his arm. "Stop it! We don't want to make them mad."

"They're making me mad."

"They might be the ones who helped me."

"Well they're not acting very bloody friendly now."

Another strained silence fell as they waited for a response to Rawn's outburst and their refusal

to drink the water. Undoubtedly they were being watched, and Rayne was sure it would only be a matter of time before their captors were forced to communicate with them. The response came sooner than she expected, in the form of a soft masculine voice that spoke in oddly accented English.

"We apologise for the quarantine's necessity. Unfortunately, if you wish to meet us, you must drink the liquid in the glasses."

Rawn yelled back, "Where are we? What do you want?"

"You are aboard a space ship called Vengeance, and we wish you no harm," the disembodied voice said.

"Why have you kidnapped us?"

"That will be explained once you have imbibed the medicine."

"What does it do?" Rawn demanded.

"It is merely to eradicate unwanted bacteria that could be harmful to our health. Your world is, unfortunately, an unhealthy place. Once you have drunk the medicine, you will be released after a set period of time."

"And if we refuse?"

"That is not an option we are prepared to accept. Eventually you will become thirsty and drink the medication. Obstinacy will merely prolong your incarceration."

Rawn glared around at the walls. "I could shoot my way out of here!"

"No. Any attempt to use your weapon will be countered by an increase in tranquilliser gas. I urge you to co-operate."

"I'll bet you do!" Rawn shouted. "But why should I co-operate with you, huh?"

"Because you wish to leave the room," the voice stated.

"But I don't want to be bullied by the likes of you!"

Rayne gripped his arm. "Stop it. Let's just drink the medicine. This is a pointless argument."

"How do we know it isn't poison?" he demanded.

"Why would they bring us here to poison us? They could have killed us any time."

"Maybe they want to use us in some kind of experiment, like damned guinea pigs."

She shook her head. "I don't think so, but what choice do we have? Like he said, they'll just keep us locked in here until we get so thirsty we drink it. Let's rather do it now and get it over with. There's really nothing else we can do."

"You're too damned fatalistic, Ray. I could shoot a hole -"

"No you couldn't, and even if you did, what then? If we're aboard a space ship, there's nowhere to run, is there?"

Rawn let the gun drop to his side, his shoulders slumping. "Guess not, if that's true. But I don't like this. It's all too damned neat and prepared, as if it was planned. I feel like we're in a damned laboratory. And I'll tell you this, if I start to feel sick, I will shoot my way out of here and take a few of those bastards with me."

Rayne glanced up at the walls. "Will the medicine make us sick?"

"No," the voice replied. "Side effects should be minimal. At worst, some cramps and diarrhoea may result."

Rayne picked up a glass and drained it.

He watched her. "What does it taste like?"

She shrugged. "Water."

Rawn drank his, and they settled down to wait again. This time they passed the hours in silence, and Rayne dozed against Rawn's shoulder. They jumped when a door slid open again, revealing a larger bathroom with two shower cubicles. Two sets of grey one-piece clothing were folded on a shelf next a pair of fluffy white towels. Rawn glanced at his sister.

"I suppose the inference is pretty obvious."

"We smell."

"Undoubtedly, but do they have to be so blatant?"

She smiled. "Well, having cleaned out our insides, they have to do the outsides too."

The soft male voice spoke again. "You have already been externally decontaminated. The cleaning facilities are for your comfort. We have tried to simulate your method of washing. We hope

you find the facilities adequate."

Rayne gazed at the showers. "It's been a long time since I had a shower, especially a warm one."

Rawn frowned. "Our method of washing? What kind of aliens are these?"

The voice said, "We are what you would call humanoids, similar to you in many respects, but we have various means of washing that would be strange and possibly alarming to you."

"Us primitives, you mean," Rawn snapped.

Rayne poked him. "Will you quit arguing with him? I don't give a fig how they wash. I want a shower."

"He sounds like one of those damned fairy airline stewards. They always bugged me."

"Well, I'm going to have a shower."

He grabbed her arm as she started towards the cubicles. "You seem to be very damned trusting all of a sudden. What if this is just a way to separate us?"

"We can shower together, if you prefer, but I think they can do pretty much what they like with us, and there's really nothing we could do to stop them. They could have knocked us unconscious with their gas if they chose, taken away your gun, stripped and tied us up, but they haven't. If they're going to treat us well, then I, for one, am going to co-operate. They're not autocrats, so let's see what they want before judging them."

His eyes narrowed. "You're being too calm about this."

"It must be the tranquilliser they gave us. There's really no point in being upset, is there?"

"Guess not," he muttered. "You shower first then. I'll stand guard."

"Okay." She headed for the shower cubicles, shedding her clothes.

Tallyn switched off the monitor and sat back, frowning. The girl was perhaps a little more intelligent than her companion. By opting to stand guard, the man had foiled his intention of removing the weapon, but it was not a serious setback. It meant their first encounter would require a stress screen between them to thwart any attempt by the man to take a hostage, until he could be persuaded to give up his weapon. He seemed hostile and potentially dangerous, a trait common amongst human males. It meant Tallyn might have to separate them, and possibly keep the man confined until he co-operated. The first contact mediator was doing a good job. The girl, at least, was responding well to his overtures. He switched on the monitor again.

The girl was in the shower still, and clouds of steam rolled from under the frosted glass door. The man, Rawn, stood outside, his expression bitterly truculent. After a few minutes, the girl emerged wrapped in a towel, and donned the smaller of the two grey outfits, which fitted her well. She rubbed her hair dry, then took the projectile weapon from the man while he went to shower.

When she moved into the main part of the cell, Tallyn decided it was time to act. He jumped up and left the bridge to hurry along the corridor to the hospital. He wanted to speak to the girl before the man re-emerged. When he arrived in the spacious, clean room with its faint odour of antiseptic, the mediator, Egan, rose and saluted. Two doctors, who watched the humans over his shoulder, straightened.

"Relax, Ensign Egan," Tallyn said. "I want to speak to the girl." He turned to the two guards who stood at the hospital's entrance. "You two, set up a stress screen."

The guards brought over a portable screen and placed it in front of the cell's door. It looked like a metal door frame, and was to protect him should the girl try to shoot him. The stress screen's alternating layers of charged air molecules formed a shimmer that would deflect a projectile.

Tallyn waved the guards back when they completed their task, indicating that they should stand to one side, out of sight. Once they were in place, he ordered the nervous ensign to open the door. Egan touched crystals on his console and the cell door slid open with a hiss.

Rayne whipped around, raised the gun and opened her mouth to yell for Rawn. Her shout turned to a gasp as she gaped at the man who filled the doorway. He was almost as tall as Rawn, and well built, but quite alien. His fine brows arched above dark eyes, and his cropped black hair gleamed with blue tints. An aquiline nose jutted over his thin-lipped mouth, but the resemblance to humans ended there. His skin gleamed with a metallic golden shimmer, and his black hair ended in a line just

above his ears, where it turned pure white.

His earlobes joined the edge of his jaw. His form-hugging suit of dark blue material had a line of gold that edged his collar and ran down the middle of his chest, separating into two at his waist to continue down the front of his trousers. Gold also trimmed his cuffs and ran up the outside of his sleeves to form swirling patterns on his shoulders.

He smiled without showing his teeth. "Hello. I am Tallyn." He spoke with less of an accent than the disembodied voice had. "I am the commander of this ship."

She nodded, stepping back. "Hi." It sounded pathetic, even to her, and she searched her vacant mind for something more suitable to say. While she did, he spoke again.

"Do not be afraid. I wish you no harm."

Rayne took another step back. "I - I'll call my brother."

"No." He held up a hand. "Please, I wish to speak to you, alone."

"Why?"

"The weapon." He indicated her gun. "Please give it to me."

Rayne looked at it. He did not seem afraid of it, and she did not think she could use it on him anyway. Rawn might, though, but what good would that do? They were at this man's mercy. Shooting him, or trying to, would not improve their situation. The gun was useless, and she let it sink to her side.

She looked at the alien again. "Will you give me your word that you mean us no harm?" Again, it sounded silly, but the alien placed his hand on his chest and smiled.

"I do. We never had any intention of harming you, but if your brother uses that weapon we'll have to restrain him. As you pointed out to him earlier, there is very little you can do to us."

She nodded and stepped towards him, intending to hand over the weapon. He raised his hand again.

"Do not approach the screen."

Rayne stopped, sensing a faint tingle on her skin. So there was a screen between them. He had not trusted her completely. He turned and gestured to someone. The tingle vanished, and the alien stepped into the cell, holding out his hand. With a shiver of trepidation, she handed the .44 to him. Another man, dressed in a white uniform, appeared behind him and took the weapon when he held it out.

He smiled at her again. "Good. I know you are confused, alarmed, and perhaps a little angry. The tranquilliser will wear off soon. Do you require a further dose?"

"No, I'm fine." She found his alien features fascinating.

His smile broadened. "I see that I intrigue you. That's understandable. I don't mind."

Warmth suffused her cheeks. "You're not human."

"No. I am Atlantean. I come from a planet very far from here. However, as aliens go, I'm not that different from you."

She frowned, realising that she should be asking more intelligent questions. "Why did you kidnap us?"

"Ah. Perhaps we should wait for your brother. It's a long explanation."

She nodded. "You killed the mutants, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And the store guards?"

His smile, which had become something of a fixture, faded. "No. Your account of the black-clad man interests me. I would like to hear more about it."

"Like what?"

"Was he wearing a mask?"

She shrugged. "He was too far away to see. How do you speak English so well?"

His smile returned. "I have studied your language for this event. Unfortunately, very few Atlanteans speak it, so you'll have to learn our tongue."

A frisson of alarm went through her. "But surely we won't be here long enough to need to, will we?"

"I'm afraid you will. You cannot be returned to Earth."

"Why not?"

"Your planet is dying, as I'm sure you know. Within the next five years your entire race will be wiped out. Surely you don't want to share their fate?"

Rayne glanced around, wishing Rawn would hurry up. "Can't you do something about it?"

His brows rose a fraction. "We're not that powerful, I'm afraid. It's far too late to undo the damage your people have done to the ozone layer and oceans. We can save you and your brother, though."

"What about the rest of the people?"

"No. We didn't come here to rescue humanity."

"So why us?"

Tallyn glanced past her as the sound of water stopped. "You're special. Talk to your brother, and let me know when he's ready to meet me. You'll get a full explanation then."

Tallyn turned and stepped through the door, which hissed shut behind him. She stared at it, then turned as Rawn emerged, rubbing his hair. He took in her pale countenance and strained expression with a glance, his gaze dropping to her empty hands.

"Where's my gun?"

"I gave it to them."

"Are you nuts? Why?"

She shook her head. "It's no good to us. He was very nice about it, and polite. He said they won't hurt us, and I believe him."

"Oh, great! So you just handed it over like a good little girl. Dammit, Rayne, sometimes I think you're an idiot!" He loomed over her, scowling. "Now we have absolutely no defence at all, and that was my gun."

Rawn had always been attached to his gun, and, as their means of survival, it had been important. She met his glare.

"It was useless. They probably have a dozen weapons hidden in this room, any of which could drop you like that..." She snapped her fingers. "...Anytime they choose. And he said they're here to rescue us."

"From what?"

"Earth, what do you think? The planet's dying, we know that. For some reason, he wants to save us."

"Why?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. He said he'd explain it all, as soon as you're calm enough to meet him."

Rawn swung away and flung the damp towel across the room. "Who is this guy, anyway?"

"He's the commander of this ship. His name's Tallyn, and he's an Atlantean."

"As in from Atlantis?"

She glanced at him in surprise. "I never thought of that."

"What is he, green with yellow spots?"

"No. Just weird."

"Great. So what makes him think I'm not calm enough?"

Rayne shot him a smile. "Well, you were making threats about shooting holes in things, and he was listening."

"Yeah, watching too, no doubt. He must have got an eyeful of you in the shower. Well, I don't have a damned gun anymore, so what's the problem?" She looked away in embarrassment, and Rawn smiled. "Don't worry, I'm sure you're not his type."

"Can you talk to him calmly and rationally?"

"Sure, why not? We're in deep shit now. We might as well make the best of it."

A few minutes later, the panel that had dispensed the medicated water opened again, this time disgorging a welcome meal. Although some items defied description, Rayne assumed their hosts knew what was good for them and ate it all. It proved to be tasty, and afterwards she relaxed again, the unusual fullness of her stomach improving her mood. Despite Rawn's encouraging words, another hour passed before contact was re-established. The door slid open to reveal the commander once

more.

Rawn jumped up, and Rayne rose slowly, watching them. Tallyn sized Rawn up, but gave no sign of tension, while Rawn made the most of his extra height. This did not seem to impress Tallyn, who addressed Rawn in a flat, no-nonsense tone.

"Please remain calm. You are welcome aboard my ship. I will now conduct you to a viewing room, where I will explain your abduction."

"That would be nice," Rawn remarked, but Tallyn turned away to walk through the sparsely furnished room they found beyond the door. It looked like an ultra-modern hospital, with a lot of strange paraphernalia parked against the walls. They followed Tallyn into a passage, glancing around. Rayne slipped her hand into Rawn's, drawing courage from his familiar presence. The corridor's seamless material was smoothly rounded, as if in a giant mould. Mellow light gave it a warm glow, and a carpet of soft grey moss muffled their footsteps. No other people passed them before a door slid open at Tallyn's approach, and they entered another room.

"Please sit."

Tallyn indicated two chairs, which moulded to Rayne's shape when she sat down, startling her. Tallyn went to a desk that held a huge book, bound in black leather and gold. Opening it to a marked page, he gazed at Rayne, who glanced at Rawn.

Tallyn sat behind the desk. "This is the holy book of my people. In it, all the prophecies of the ancient mystics have been set down, so we may follow their teachings and fulfil the destinies. There is a prophecy that must now come to pass, and I believe you, Rayne, are the one spoken of."

He proceeded to read the paragraph, and Rayne listened in amazement. When he finished, he gazed at her.

Rawn looked at Rayne and snorted. "You think that this... this golden girl child is Rayne?"

Tallyn nodded. "This is a dying planet, one of only a few we've found, and your sister is a young girl with golden hair."

"But that doesn't mean she's the one you're looking for."

"No, but isn't it remarkable that you and she have suffered no ill effects from your planet's radiation and pollution, while all the other people have?"

Rawn shrugged. "We've been lucky, I guess."

"Nobody's that lucky. She's different. You both are, and I can only assume that you're her guardian, which is why you too have been spared. Our task is to rescue the golden girl child, and I think we have done that." He closed the book.

Rayne asked, "Is that why you saved me from the mutants?"

"Of course."

"And those other aliens who attacked me?"

"The ones in the red ship, which you told your brother about? That happened before we found you. They're members of a race called Draycons, whose ships are red. We chased four of their ships away two days ago. But they were not trying to kill you. They're slavers."

She shook her head. "They were trying to kill me. They reduced that house to a pile of rubble."

Tallyn smiled a little thinly. "They were probably trying to flush you out into the open, where they could stun you and capture you. Why would they want to kill you?"

"I don't know, but I was lucky to survive. If it hadn't been for that cellar, I'd be dead." She frowned. "Maybe it had something to do with your prophecy. Perhaps they think I'm this Golden Child too. And if I am, what is it I'm supposed to do?"

Tallyn sighed, his smile fading. "Unfortunately, we don't know that yet. As for the Draycons, they don't even know about the prophecy, as far as we know. It doesn't concern them."

"So you didn't chase them away?"

"No. I'm sure they left of their own accord."

Rawn studied Tallyn. "Why do you look so much like us if you're alien?"

"Your race is the result of genetic engineering carried out on you millennia ago. All human races are descendants of the first people, who were engineered from proto humans native to Earth. Many advanced races are similar because of a far-reaching expansion that carried out a policy of advancement on many of the more primitive species they found. Almost all carbon-based life in the

universe has a similar blueprint, but you didn't evolve to your present state on your own."

"Well, that explains the missing link. But if we're descended from people like you, where do you come from?"

Tallyn shrugged. "We have legends. I'll tell you about them some time. But now, I have things to do, and I expect you're tired. Would you like to go to your quarters and rest?"

Rawn glanced at Rayne, who said, "What are you going to do with us?"

Tallyn looked a little pained. "Nothing, really. We'll take you to Atlan, where you'll be treated with the utmost respect and courtesy, given everything you could wish for. A home, a job if you want it, knowledge, entertainment, anything. When the time comes, your purpose will be revealed to you."

"How?"

"We don't know. We only have those few words in the book, but I'm sure you'll know what to do when it happens."

"I'm glad you think so."

Rayne had many more questions, but the ebbing of the tension and anxiety, plus the meal, made her eyelids droop with fatigue. Rawn was running on adrenalin, but, although she knew he could sustain his alertness for several days, she saw no point in subjecting herself to any more rigours. The prospect of a real bed was as seductive as the hot shower had been.

Tallyn guided them along a corridor to a lift, which whisked them down several floors. He stopped before a numbered door that slid open when he pressed a button beside it. They entered a comfortable, sleek room with two sleeping alcoves, tasteful, but sparsely furnished and functional. Tallyn showed them how to switch off the lights and summon an attendant when they woke, then left them to sleep.

Chapter Five

Tallyn settled into his chair on the bridge and studied the main screen, which showed the star field around Earth, and in one corner, the dull grey-brown orb. The sun was just starting to form an arc of gold along its edge, prelude to the dawn of another drab day on the surface. Only the twinkle of the tiny crystals that covered the many consoles broke the bridge's silent gloom. A crew of five sat before them, their hands occasionally touching a crystal as they attended to the running of the ship.

Dim holograms hung in the air before certain crew members, while lists of data scrolled up before others. The overall atmosphere was one of hushed industry, somewhat relaxed now that they were in orbit. Tallyn looked over at Marcon, who sat at the compiler's console, his eyes flicking over three holograms. He monitored all the ship's functions, ready to correct any errors that other crew members made. As usual, Tallyn hated to disturb him; he always looked so busy.

"Marcon, set course for Atlan. We've got what we came for, let's go home."

"Yes, sir." He turned and touched the crystals on his console, causing those on other consoles to light and alerting the officers who manned them to the new directive. They ran their hands over their boards, or pressed their palms to sensor slots to communicate with the ship's neural net. Two pilots entered the bridge and lay down on their couches, strapped themselves in and pushed their hands into sensor slots to link with the ship. The whole exercise took a little over a minute, during which time the activity in the dim room rose to a high state of tension. Marcon reeled off the list of procedures for his commander's benefit, in case he decided to change anything.

"Course laid in. Neural net expanded and online. Pilots linked. Back up net online. Proximity repellers charged, course changing. Preparing to link with the transfer Net." He paused, his eyes scanning the scrolling holograms. "Link successful. Heading reached in five, four, three, two, one... Transfer Net charged, acceleration factor five, normal status, all systems functional."

Tallyn sat back and laced his fingers as Vengeance turned out of her orbit with ponderous grace, curving away towards a distant star. He could imagine how the sun's light would glint on her sleek silver flanks and flash on the many protuberances that robbed her of any great claim to beauty. As a star ship designed purely for space, her array of antennae, weapons and emitters was only possible in a vacuum. He had seen many ships use the Net, and knew that a web of golden lines crawled over her, embracing her in a crazy cage of lambent power, like snakes of lightning. The transfer Net activated in a flash of pure energy, and with a twinkle, the ship shot away.

During the five-hour trip, Tallyn ate a meal and relaxed in his cabin, enjoying a new holofilm from Atlan. On the bridge, the crew's subdued industry continued. The pilots each spent two hours in control of the ship while the other observed. Marcon was relieved after three hours, his head undoubtedly aching from the strain of the high level of vigilance necessary from a compiler. His replacement, Vandiar, informed Tallyn of their approach to Atlan half an hour before the transfer Net dispersed. Tallyn entered the humming bridge and sank into his chair, glancing up at the blank screen.

"Where are we?"

"Decelerating. Fifteen minutes to Net dispersal," Vandiar informed him. "You came quickly, sir."

"I usually do," he grumped, settling back to wait.

From inside the ship, Net dispersal was no more interesting than its initiation. Only the resumption of the external feeds brought any new sensations to the crew. After the prescribed number of minutes, the main screen filled with the welcome image of his home world.

Tallyn gave a curt nod. "Good. Get us an orbit, and have them send shuttles. I'm sure most of the crew want to go to the surface, and we'll need a maintenance crew to replace them."

Tallyn made his way to his guests' quarters and pressed the plate beside the door to activate the entry call buzzer. The portal opened, and he entered to find Rawn eyeing him, looking sullen and dishevelled. He muttered and went into the bathroom to splash his face. Rayne stretched and yawned as she slid from the shelf-like sleeping alcove, her hair tangled. She smiled, and Tallyn returned it.

"I hope you've had sufficient sleep. We've arrived at my home world and will be disembarking

soon."

Rayne's eyes widened in shock, and Rawn emerged from the bathroom, his face wet. They stared at him in horror, and Tallyn realised his blunder and strived to correct it.

"I apologise. I should have warned you before we left."

Rawn raised a finger and wagged it, water dripping from his chin. "Listen, buster. Just a few hours ago, we were on our own planet, and now you tell us we're on the other side of the bloody universe? You kidnap us, feed us drugs, fry us with weird lights, confiscate our clothes, and fly us a thousand light years without so much as a 'by your leave'? Bugger 'warned us', what about 'asked us'?"

Tallyn frowned, a little nettled. "You're in my care. You've come to no harm. All that was done to you was for your benefit, and the safety of my crew. It was unavoidable. The trip was necessary. Rayne had to be brought to the safety of Atlan, where she can be guarded and cared for. Informing you of our departure would have been a mere courtesy, and I did say you would not be returned to Earth. There was no point in staying in Earth orbit any longer."

Rawn wiped his face with a towel, looking incredulous. Rayne went to a chair and sank into it, her eyes downcast. Rawn tossed the towel onto a nearby shelf and stepped closer to Tallyn.

"You may find that all quite satisfactory and logical to your little alien mind, but what about us? We never even got to see our world from space. We never had the chance to say goodbye. Maybe we have feelings you lack, but you could have found out about that first."

Tallyn inclined his head. "Perhaps. I regret any distress this might have caused you. I understand your anger, and I would have the same reaction if it was done to me. However, returning to view your planet is a simple matter, and can be arranged sometime in the future if you wish."

Rawn glanced at Rayne, looking mollified, but still angry. "You okay, Ray?"

She nodded, fighting the sensation of unreality that threatened to overwhelm her. "How far are we from Earth?"

"Seven point four light years, by our measure of time," Tallyn replied. "Since our days are twenty-eight of your hours long, it would be around eight light years of your time. If you're feeling shock, I can have the doctor give you a tranquilliser."

"No, I'm fine. But I would like to know how we got here so fast. We could only have been asleep for a few hours, unless you did something to us."

"I didn't do anything to you. You've slept for five hours, which is how long the journey took. At the moment, we're waiting for shuttles from the surface, so I have time to explain it to you if you wish."

"That would be nice," Rawn muttered, sitting next to Rayne.

Tallyn took the third chair and settled back. "Obviously we travel a great deal faster than light. We do this by using what's called a transfer Net. Essentially, we tap into a parallel dimension that comprises pure energy, where things like time, weight and distance don't exist. By establishing a link with the energy dimension, we draw power from it, and at the same time use it to ferry us through space. You could liken it to one of your electric trains, which draws its power from an overhead cable, and uses it to drive its wheels. The only difference is that the link is also a tow. The energy dimension exists everywhere in the known universe, and everywhere in the energy dimension is in the same place and the same time."

Rawn shook his head. "You've lost me. How's that possible?"

"As I said, distance and time don't exist in that dimension."

"So you go into the other dimension, then come out where you want to?"

"No, not exactly. That's how it works for the transfer Net with which we transport people and supplies, like the one that brought you here. In the case of the ship, it never actually enters the other dimension. The power needed to achieve that is too much for our machinery to deal with. The ship has no engines, as such. What we have are complicated conduits, through which the energy is channelled. It's difficult to explain." Tallyn looked a little vague, gazing into space.

"We're not morons. Explain it as it was explained to you," Rawn suggested.

"Okay. Imagine the universe is a series of layers, like a sandwich. We live in one layer, and the next layer is a mass of energy so powerful it exists everywhere at once. We establish a link with the

energy, which, since it exists in all places, is able to tow us through space. We plot a course, and the link moves us at the speed we wish. The speed is actually infinite, but our ship's structure limits it."

"Why's that? There's no substance in space."

"There's a great deal of substance in the form of dust, meteors and other debris. Our scanners warn us of obstacles, and proximity repellers deflect the dust."

"What are those?"

Tallyn smiled, and Rayne reflected that, although he had a nice smile, she had yet to see him use it with enough enthusiasm to reveal his teeth. Her curiosity about his dentition was growing, meanwhile. He glanced at her, perhaps sensing her stare, and launched into another explanation.

"Proximity repellers are powerful, negatively charged coils of super magnetic alloys. They will repel anything, from a planet to a dust particle. Even air molecules react to a certain degree. We also call it anti-gravity, when it's used on a planet, but those systems are a lot weaker."

"Is that how you generate gravity on this ship?" Rawn enquired. "By reversing it?"

"No." Tallyn looked patient, apparently resigned to explaining everything. "The gravity on this ship is generated by a layer of super dense metal on its underside. As I'm sure you know, the denser the object the higher its gravitational pull. This metal is extremely dense, so much so that to call it metal does it an injustice. Lead would be like cloth next to it."

"Why can't you use the super magnetic alloy things?"

"The proximity repellers? That would be extremely dangerous, since, if you reversed the polarity and turned them into attracting magnets, they would work differently on different parts of the body. Liquids, solids and gasses all react differently. They would not generate true gravity, but rather a magnetic attraction that, if it was strong enough, would flatten the ship before it made people stick to the floors. You understand? Metal is far more magnetic than flesh."

"But surely gravity works the same way? The denser something is, the heavier it is," Rawn pointed out.

"Ah, yes and no. The difference is, a measure of water, or flesh, can be compared to a measure of lead, let's say. The lead, though a smaller amount, would weigh the same, right? But with magnets, the measure isn't weight, it's attraction, and flesh is like feathers compared to lead when you talk about attraction." Noting Rawn's blank look, he elaborated. "Look, you know how strongly an ordinary magnet attracts a ferrous metal, right? But it doesn't do anything to flesh. So imagine how strong it would have to be before it attracted something as nonferrous as flesh."

"I see," Rawn muttered, looking a little awed. "We never discovered anything like that. Not as far as I know, anyway." He looked at Rayne, who raised her brows and shrugged.

Tallyn went on, "But you must understand, these are not ordinary magnets, they attract, or repel, all forms of matter, not only ferrous metals. The comparison is not really valid; it only serves to elucidate my point. An ordinary magnet, no matter how strong, would not attract flesh."

Rawn nodded. "I get it. And all this runs off the power you suck out of the energy dimension?"

"Correct. Everything that requires power. You never discovered the energy dimension, which is why your culture foundered and destroyed itself by using combustible fuels. A Net link would have saved you."

"Pity nobody told us about it," Rawn muttered.

"Unfortunately for you, we don't interfere with primitive cultures. The destruction of a good, living planet like yours is a great shame. There aren't that many of them around. Many intelligent races come from worlds whose atmosphere we would find toxic. Most have a metabolism that burns hydrogen, since that's the most plentiful element around, and generally found in all atmospheres. They're able to live very comfortably in an atmosphere like yours, but we can't survive in their air, which often lacks sufficient oxygen."

Rayne stared at him, the sheer eccentricity of his words leaving her dumbstruck. She would never have considered a metabolism that burnt hydrogen, but why not? It was just as combustible as oxygen, and far commoner. Tallyn, surprisingly, looked a little embarrassed by her scrutiny, and glanced away. Rayne mused that this was one of the few emotions she had seen him express, apart from the stiff, rather false smiles he apparently forced himself to make. She wondered if all Atlanteans, or, indeed, alien races, were as reticent as him, or if smiling was just not an Atlantean expression, but

one he put on for their benefit.

When the silence grew pregnant, Tallyn rose and made a vague gesture. "We should find a shuttle to the surface, if you're ready?"

Rayne sat forward, attracting his attention. "Do Atlanteans smile, usually, Commander Tallyn?"

He looked surprised. "Yes, they do. It's a natural expression of friendship or joy, same as you. Why do you ask?"

"Because you seem to have trouble with it in our company."

"Ah. Well, we hardly know each other. Naturally things are a little strained."

"No." Rayne frowned. "It's something else, which you're not telling us. What's waiting for us on your planet? A battery of tests and experiments? Perhaps ones you don't altogether approve of, so you find our company unpleasant because you feel guilty?"

"There will be a few tests, naturally, and a lot of vaccinations. You won't be allowed to mingle with the populace until your immunity to our diseases is established. It's for your own good. Our diseases would kill you otherwise. We still have a few that can't be eradicated, unfortunately. No harm will come to you, I promise."

"Even if I'm not this Golden Child in your book?" She enquired. "What happens to us then, Commander?"

"Nothing. You'll be welcomed into our society, given jobs and a house. Eventually you'll find mates and settle down."

Rawn demanded, "What if we don't want to do that? What if we don't like your world?"

"Then it'll be up to you to decide what you want to do, but I'm certain Rayne is the Golden Child, in which case, she'll be well cared for before and after the prophecy is fulfilled. She'll be a heroine, after all."

"Unless I fail," Rayne pointed out.

"Then you won't have to worry about it. You'll be dead."

"Well that's just great," Rawn said, rising to his feet with a scowl.

Tallyn raised a hand. "Please bear in mind that if you'd remained on your own world you'd have perished horribly within the next five years, anyway."

Rayne rose and took hold of Rawn's arm. "It's okay. Leave it."

Tallyn glanced at an instrument with luminous alien characters on the wall. "It's almost time to go down to the surface. All your questions will be answered, I promise. Not by me, I have many duties to attend to, but a first contact officer will be assigned to you. Now, if you wish, I can take you to see the bridge before we leave."

Rawn glanced at his sister and shrugged. "Yeah, that would be great."

Tallyn led them to the lift they had arrived in, and they ascended a long way before stepping out into a gloomy room. Soft illumination revealed the floor, chairs, and table edges. Other light came from dim images and hundreds of tiny crystals. Men sat at the various consoles, concentrating on data that scrolled up before them, ghostly in the gloom. Rayne's gaze was drawn to the massive screen that dominated the far end of the room.

It held an image of an orb swathed in pale clouds that swirled in bizarre patterns, reminding her of Venus. Patches of pale green or dark blue could be seen through thinner areas, but mostly the planet shone like a vast pearl. An alien sun blazed with a brilliant, almost white light.

Tallyn said, "Atlan is the fourth planet of this system. It has five moons of various sizes, and is a lot larger than Earth."

Against the inky backdrop, ships in orbit shone like stars, and further out, several space stations glittered. A few closer ships had strange, spiky shapes, and the moving lights of shuttles seemed to crawl past. Tallyn waited while they absorbed the astounding sight. Rawn studied a nearby ship, clearly fascinated by its strange shape and lack of symmetry.

"That's a weird looking ship," he commented, pointing it out to Rayne.

Tallyn followed his finger. "Not at all. Compared to some, that one's ordinary."

"Who are they?"

"Those are Wellans, from the planet Predantia in the Urmanian system. If you're curious about them, I'll introduce you to some. Now it's time to go."

They followed Tallyn back into the lift, which shot downwards, judging by the flicking counter next to the door, the only measure of their progress, since there was no sensation of descending. When it stopped, they stepped out into a vast room where a sleek grey vehicle was parked on a smooth metallic floor. As they approached it, a young Atlantean with blond and brown hair emerged and saluted Tallyn. He eyed the humans, who studied him with equal interest.

Tallyn returned the man's salute. "This is Egan, our first contact officer. He speaks your language, and will be your guide and liaison."

"Will we see you again?" Rayne asked.

"Of course. I'll visit you as often as I can, and if you wish to see me, just tell Egan."

They boarded the shuttle and strapped into comfortable seats, then it headed for the alien planet.

Chapter Six

Tallyn entered the council's echoing hall, where pink quartz pillars, veined with gold, flanked a broad swathe of silver-speckled black marble floor. They supported a high domed roof covered with intricate mosaics of ancient Atlantean legends, picked out in different kinds of quartz. He approached the twelve elderly men who sat at the back of the hall, his boots ringing on the floor. Within the three-sided square the elders formed, he stopped and bowed to the man in the middle, a thin-faced individual with piercing dark eyes, who sat upon an elevated chair.

"I believe I have found the golden girl child," Tallyn announced.

"Do you? And who is the boy?" Vargon spoke in a rich, strong voice not quite in keeping with his elderly looks.

Tallyn knew the elders had already viewed holofilms of the two humans he had brought back, so his knowledge came as no surprise. "He's her brother, First One, and, although he's not mentioned in the prophecy, I believe he's her guardian."

Some of the council members turned to whisper to each other. Vargon glanced at them, then addressed Tallyn again. "As you say, it's not mentioned in the prophecy that the girl would have a guardian, but I see no harm in it. Certainly they are perfect, when all the others are sickly and dying."

"Yes, First One."

"How do they feel about their capture?" Vargon enquired with the unhurried assurance of an elderly tortoise.

"They're not happy, and they'll be even unhappier with the tests and implants you mean to implement."

Vargon rubbed his lips. "Can't be helped, I'm afraid. Anyone would object to being poked and prodded, but we've been quite polite about it. We could have kept them under heavy sedation until we were finished. They're lucky they know as much as they do. Others would not have been so gentle with them."

"Considering who she might be, I think we should try to treat them well, Vargon."

"Yes, well, you do tend to think an awful lot, don't you, Commander Tallyn? They're almost primitives. What do they know?"

"I know that if she's the Golden Child, our fate rests in her hands, and that's not something to be taken lightly."

"No, of course not. See to it that they're treated well, Commander. I'll leave it up to you. Just don't break any rules, okay?"

Vargon waved a dismissive hand, and Tallyn bowed and swung away, leaving the council chamber. As usual, his encounter with the council left him frustrated and a little angry. He found their inflexible, inscrutable ways a great impediment to his wish to communicate more fundamental issues to them.

The council was not known for considering the feelings of others, other than being polite when confronted. The rights of primitive aliens, however, ranked low on its list of priorities. This was strange in a society that was supposed to be free and just, but then, sometimes those rights were reserved for the members of its own race.

At the end of a long passage, he entered another vast hall pillared with white quartz. A fountain played a gurgling tune, surrounded by exotic plants with curling leaves of red and purple. Creepers scaled the columns and trailed streamers of pink and yellow flowers in cascades of colour. The people who populated the hall strolled or hurried past, while many sat on stone benches and chatted. Blue-green moss-like grass covered the floor, and a clear crystal dome let in shafts of sunlight.

Tallyn walked outside, squinting in the white sun's familiar brilliance. Frilly-leafed trees, festooned with flowers, jostled at the edge of the clearing in which the council hall stood. Wild herbivores grazed the lush grass, glancing up with twitching ears. Birds filled the calm air with bright songs, and in the distance, another building blended cunningly into the environment. Compared to the dying world he had saved the humans from, this was paradise, and he hoped they would enjoy it.

With a sigh, Tallyn headed for a row of disk-shaped public access craft. He chose one and climbed into the glass dome atop the disk. As he settled before the controls, he wondered again why the council had waited two days before seeing him. He had thought news of a potential Golden Child would make them demand an immediate report, but then, they probably had daily updates from the team of doctors that attended the humans.

They had been sedated since their arrival, so they knew nothing of the barrage of procedures being carried out on them. That was probably just as well, he reflected. He pressed the joystick's stud, and the craft drifted up. So far, they had undergone many of the tests he had warned them about, and were due to be released in a few days. He guided the craft towards the medical facility where they were.

At the underground building, he parked the craft and marched along well-lighted corridors to the humans' rooms. They had been placed in robotic cocoons that monitored their functions, technicians and doctors attending them. Tallyn entered Rayne's room and gazed down at her. She looked pale and a little gaunt under the harsh lights, one side of her head plastered with regeneration jelly. Tubes entered her nose and probes poked from her skin like obscene spines.

A doctor came to his side. "Commander Tallyn. Good of you to visit us again."

"How are they?"

"In excellent health."

"You've finished the implants, I see."

The doctor nodded. "Yes, yesterday. Their immune systems are responding well to the vaccines, and our tests are almost finished."

"When will they be released?"

"In a few more days, if the council approves. We want to wait for the implants to heal so they won't have headaches."

Tallyn glanced at the pasty-faced doctor, hating him and his entire breed. Technicians were devoid of caring or compassion, the sort that would perform torturous and often useless experiments on helpless animals if it was allowed. The man's hair was almost monotone, indicating his low cast.

"How thoughtful of you," Tallyn muttered.

"Well, the council members thought -"

"Spare me." Tallyn raised a hand. "I know what the council ordered, and it had nothing to do with thoughtfulness. You'll inform me when they're ready to be awakened, then I'll take over their care. Do you understand?"

"Certainly, Commander."

"And under no circumstances are they to regain consciousness while you lot are poking them with needles."

"Of course not."

"Good." Tallyn left, angrier with himself than the doctor. At times like this, he wished he did not have to follow the council's orders. It would have given him immense satisfaction to release the humans today. He was responsible for their predicament, and knew they would blame him for whatever was done to them. As he headed for the exit, he consoled himself with the fact that, had he left them on their world, they would have suffered a far worse fate.

Rayne woke with a pounding ache just above her left ear. Grimacing, she sat up and rubbed the tender area. Swinging her legs off the soft bed, she gazed around. The room was furnished with the same sparse, functional furniture and pale walls as the ship. Rawn snored on a bed across the room, and she stood up, fighting a wave of dizziness. He woke with a snort when she shook him, and clutched his head with a grimace as he sat up. She wondered if she looked as pale and gaunt as he did. Odd that he rubbed the same spot she had. She looked around as the door opened to admit Egan, who wore a broad smile.

"Have you slept well?" he enquired.

Rawn frowned. "How long were we unconscious?"

Egan looked a little uncomfortable. "Five days. It was necessary to carry out the tests and vaccinations painlessly, you see."

"What did they do to us?"

"Nothing harmful."

"Did any of the tests include sticking red hot poker in our heads?" Rawn snarled.

"Ah, you have headaches." Egan dug into his pocket and took out two apparently empty plastic bubbles, which he held out. "Here."

She took the bubble and studied it. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Oh, here, I'll show you." Egan took the bubble and held it under her nose. "Now, breathe in."

As she did, he popped the bubble. A strange, numbing scent invaded her nose, and the pain in her head vanished. Rawn popped his bubble and experienced the same rush of relief, judging by his blissful expression. Egan was eager to bring them whatever they wished, and they sat down to a gourmet meal followed by party snacks and tasty treats they had never dreamt to taste. It distracted them from the unpleasant aspects of their situation, and when they were full, they went back to sleep.

The next day continued the trend, and Egan answered questions willingly, but they had no way of knowing how truthfully. He brought them holofilms and played the helpful host, but Rayne disliked his condescending air and stilted speech. The food restored their strength and the films were educational, but the rooms had no windows and the door was locked. After several fruitless hours trying to open it, they gave up.

The following day, Rayne demanded to see Tallyn, and Egan balked. He claimed the commander was busy, and would be for some time. Rawn gripped Egan's collar and almost lifted him off the floor, evincing a reluctant promise to try to contact Tallyn. It took another day and several more threats before Tallyn came, and when he did, Egan looked unhappy. Then they learnt that the commander had come of his own accord, to check on them.

When Rawn told him about their request, Tallyn's brows knotted, and Egan was subjected to the commander's icy glare. "Who ordered this duplicity, Ensign?" he demanded.

"The council, sir."

"Of course. Who else? Inform them that I'm taking the humans to my dwelling, where they can stay for the time being. They can't be kept in this... prison."

"But sir, they have to be monitored."

Tallyn's brows rose. "They've been immunised, and they're fully recovered from the ordeal, it seems. Why must they be monitored?"

"The council ordered -"

"I'll deal with the council, Ensign. Dismissed."

Egan, who had a pale complexion with a silvery sheen, turned an interesting shade of pink, then retreated.

Tallyn eyed the humans. "It's a good thing I have some authority over the more junior staff members."

Rawn said, "I was getting sick of that pompous little fart."

Tallyn appeared to riffle through a mental dictionary before understanding dawned. "An apt description. The council, it seems, intended to keep you in a comfortable, if sterile environment, but I think you'd rather see more of your new home."

"Damned right," Rawn muttered.

"Good."

The door opened for Tallyn, and he led them down a corridor where several white-suited men watched them pass, muttering and frowning. Rayne stepped out into the open air and gazed around at Atlan's alien beauty. The sun was a hot white spot beyond the glowing roof of clouds, and verdant landscape stretched away in every direction. Only an occasional tower broke the carpet of greenery, and the air was sweet and rich.

After a few minutes, Tallyn led them to a disk-shaped craft, and they sat in the two seats behind his. They skimmed away over the trees at an amazing speed, and Rayne studied the well-hidden buildings that nestled in the pristine forest below.

Rawn asked, "How can billions of people live in such a sparsely built up world?"

Tallyn glanced back at them as the craft swooped between two tall trees. "Billions of people don't live here. They live on fifty-two planets all over the galaxy. We're always colonising new planets,

as long as they're not already inhabited by intelligent life forms."

"What about the animals?" Rayne asked, gulping as they skimmed past a tree trunk with inches to spare.

"We don't destroy the ecology; we live in harmony with it. The animals have no fear of us because they have no reason to."

"But we've been eating meat," Rawn said.

"That's grown in bio tanks, not from raising and slaughtering animals." He swooped and swung the hover car, oblivious to the growing discomfort in the back.

"Where are your factories, industries and so on?"

"Those are mostly underground."

Rayne gripped her seat. "How far is it to your house?"

Tallyn looked back at her. "Not too far." He shot them a brief smile, turning back in time to swerve around a tree.

Rayne released her white-knuckled grip on the seat as they passed the tree. A few minutes later, they landed in front of a rustic log cabin in a glade, and quit the vehicle. The cabin's door slid open at Tallyn's approach, and it appeared to be a lot larger inside than it had looked from the outside.

They passed through a long room that housed a heated swimming pool set amid rocks, ferns and palms. A transparent roof allowed sunlight to flood in, filling the house with cheerful warmth, and soft grey moss served as carpeting. Atlanteans, Rayne reflected, certainly seemed to like plants. They entered another spacious, sunlit room decorated in pastels and filled with alien foliage.

Tallyn handed out fruity drinks and flopped into a comfortable chair with his own.

Rawn settled on another chair. "How long were they going to keep us locked up in that damned room, anyway?"

Tallyn shrugged. "I don't think they had given it much thought. Once you were safe and installed in what they thought was a suitable environment, provided with food and entertainment, they thought they had done enough."

"I'd have thought they'd take better care of someone who might be their precious Golden Child."

"Rayne is only a candidate. One of four, I believe, that have been found on other worlds. If she's the one, she'll be accorded the respect she deserves, but until then she'll be treated just like anyone else."

Rayne asked, "What are the other girls like?"

"Mostly children, except for one older girl, but I believe you are the oldest."

"So there are another three planets dying right now, just like Earth is?"

"No, we've found five or six. One might be saved. Two girls were taken from one of them, and none were found on the other three."

"What are they like?"

Tallyn looked thoughtful. "The two who were taken from Hendis seem to fit the prophecy's description better. They're young, five and eight of their years old, and they have golden skin, hair and eyes. There's biological warfare on their planet, and the people are dying from a disease they unleashed. But the planet itself is not dying, and the prophecy definitely says 'the dying planet'.

"The other girl, who's sixteen, comes from a race of white-haired, brown-skinned people. She only has golden eyes. Her world is being destroyed by radiation released through the foolish testing of nuclear weapons, but again, the planet may recover, although grossly changed, and inhabited by mutated animals, mostly insects." He glanced at Rayne. "The council agrees that you're the most likely candidate, although Rawn fits the description better."

Rayne glanced at her brother, who met her gaze with raised brows and a teasing smile. She wondered what lay in store for them on this alien world, and how much they could trust their new benefactor. Although he seemed genuinely concerned about their welfare, she clung to the old habit of distrust that had served her so well in the past.

Chapter Seven

For the next three weeks, they stayed at Tallyn's dwelling, enjoying luxuries like baths and hot meals, along with such delights as sweets and films, long strolls in the forest and swimming in the heated pool. The council summoned Tallyn, who returned with the welcome news that it had agreed to let them stay. He urged them to learn Atlantean, and provided them with the necessary material.

Rayne found that she could learn at a remarkable rate, and retained the information with startling clarity. Rawn experienced the same phenomenon, but Tallyn would not explain the anomaly. It worried Rayne for a while, but then she accepted it and concentrated on her studies. By the end of the week, they spoke and read Atlantean, and practised on Tallyn. Some of their blunders amused him, but not sufficiently to make him laugh, or even grin. Rayne wonder if he did, in fact, have teeth.

Rayne studied other interesting subjects, like space flight, the theories behind the transfer Net and anti-gravity. Tallyn brought holofilms that they watched together after supper. The trio grew comfortable together, and Tallyn eventually laughed at one of Rawn's tasteless jokes, revealing even white teeth and dashing Rayne's theory on his reluctance to bare them to the light of day. Life settled into an ordered rhythm, which seemed normal to Rayne. Tallyn was away most days attending his duties, of which he rarely spoke.

After three weeks, Tallyn said he wanted them to meet an alien, ignoring Rawn's quip that there was one right in front of him. He took them to a little house, saying they would discover their talents, which intrigued them. Tallyn left them at the door with a parting smile.

They entered a room with a round black pool in the centre, bare but for a few plants. Rawn became wary, his old raider instincts kicking in. Rayne had grown to trust Tallyn a little more over the weeks, and was less concerned.

"A good thing too. He's earned it," a soft voice said.

Rayne gasped and glanced around in alarm.

"What's wrong?" Rawn demanded.

"I... There's someone here."

The honey sweet voice came again, and this time she realised that it was in her head. "So, you can hear me, but your brother can't. It's usually the females who have the power."

A strange itching made Rayne want to scratch behind the bone of her temple, and she rubbed her brow. Rawn looked puzzled. The sensation of a voice speaking inside her head was unpleasant, as if vibrations quivered her brain.

"Well, that's not a bad description," the telepathic voice said. "Don't worry, the itching goes away after a while."

"Where are you?" Rayne asked, and Rawn frowned at her.

"Over here."

She glanced around. A creature sat beside the pool, and Rayne wondered why she had not noticed it before.

"Because I did not wish to be seen before, my dear."

This time it spoke aloud, and Rawn spun around, his hand dropping to his belt, where his gun had once resided. He scowled. "Who are you?"

"I'm your teacher. My name is Callamindra-Falona, but you can call me Mindra for short."

The alien spoke clearly, even though it had the split lip and muzzle of a cat, which had always been thought to prevent animals like cats from being able to speak. It spoke Atlantean fluently, without any trace of an accent. It rose and walked towards them, looking like an overgrown cat with wide ears, sleek black fur and a bushy white tail. Its slanted golden eyes were set in a grey-furred face that was long and pointed, rather like a highly bred Siamese. A white ruff encircled its throat like a fluffy collar.

Mindra purred, "But you want to know what I am more than who I am, so sit down and I'll tell you."

They sat by the pool, a little stunned, and the cat-alien settled in front of them, curling its tail

around its paws.

"First of all, I'm a she, not an it," she said. "I'm Shyanese. I come from the star system of Tryan. Many years ago, the Atlanteans came to our world looking for new planets to colonise. At first we stayed away, thinking they would leave, but when they started building houses we decided enough was enough, and made them leave. You see, we're the most powerful espers in the known universe, and that's what I've come to teach you. Tallyn asked me especially."

Rayne tilted her head. "How did you make the Atlanteans leave?"

Mindra's eyes twinkled. "We teleported them and all their equipment back aboard their ships, then teleported the ships about twenty light years away from our planet."

"But they came back."

"Oh yes, dearie, they did, but this time they came as friends, not colonists. They didn't try to invade us again." She gazed at them with wide, beguiling eyes.

Rawn leant forward. "So you've come to teach us ESP?"

"I'm going to teach you how to use more of your brains than you ever have before." Her ears twitched. "It's a shame to waste potential. So, let's not waste any time. I have a busy schedule. First, let's see what you can do now." She looked at Rayne. "You're already a little telepathic; an unformed talent. But you have more. Have you ever sensed people's moods in the past, and perhaps when they're lying?"

Rayne nodded.

"You have a slight empathic ability, most undesirable, although not too bad at such low levels." Mindra turned to Rawn. "You can't even hear me, which, considering how powerful I am, is amazing. I want you both to try to speak telepathically."

Rawn looked puzzled. "How?"

"Just think the words, dearie."

Rayne recited a poem to herself, and Mindra's luminous eyes rested upon her. "You I can hear faintly, but Rawn I can't. Let's try teleportation."

A rock near the pool floated over and landed in front of them. They gaped at it, and Mindra looked a little smug. "Lift it."

Rayne concentrated and Rawn scowled at it. Once more Mindra's eyes rested on Rayne. "I can feel power from you, but weak. Again, Rawn, you have nothing. Now I want you both to lie down and make your minds blank. I'm going to unblock the channels in your brains. You must relax and trust me. It may hurt a little, but don't try to resist, or it'll hurt more."

Rayne met Rawn's worried glance, sharing his obvious aversion to allowing an alien to do weird things to their brains.

Mindra purred, "I'm not going to hurt you, but it's your choice. If you choose not to do this, I'll understand. The crude operation the Atlantean doctors performed on you is also a harmless, perhaps even beneficial to you."

"What operation?" Rawn demanded.

"Ah." Mindra's ears flicked back. "Ask Tallyn."

"That's about as much good as asking a brick wall."

"Then I can't help you. Now, what have you decided to do?"

Rayne bit her lip, but Rawn shot her a wry smile and lay down. "Hey, I'll try anything once."

Mindra sat beside his head and gazed down at him. His trust surprised Rayne, for he was usually more suspicious of strangers than her, but the little cat-alien appeared to have inspired his confidence. In her, he seemed to sense an uncompromising integrity, and her gentle nature would not allow her to do him harm. Rayne sensed it too.

Mindra said, "You're correct, Rawn, and I'm flattered by your perception. Now, please empty your mind."

He smiled. "That's easy."

Rayne took his hand and cast him an encouraging smile when he glanced at her, then he closed his eyes and relaxed. Mindra sat like a statue, staring into the middle distance. Several moments passed before Rawn gasped and gripped Rayne's hand. She chewed her lip, her eyes darting from his impassive face to Mindra's. He grunted, twitching, and Rayne leant closer to put a hand on his arm.

He winced four more times before Mindra's eyes regained their focus, and she relaxed.

"All right, it's over, you can think again."

He stared up at her. "What did you do?"

"I cleared a few blockages, but you'll never have any great ESP power. Now you have improved intelligence and memory. You might be able to hear telepathically, but that's about all I can do for you, I'm afraid. You just don't have the ability for more."

Rawn sat up. "Why not? I mean, what gives some people the ability and others not?"

"People with the ability have pathways in their brain through which the power flows, but you don't have them. That's the best way I can explain it."

Rawn looked disappointed, but shot Rayne an encouraging smile. "Go on, it's not too bad. You can handle it. Maybe you'll get more from it than I did."

Mindra nodded. "She will, but that also means it may be more painful."

Rayne looked from one to the other. "How painful?"

"It will be over quickly," Mindra said, "and you'll be glad you did it."

"This was Tallyn's idea? I wonder what I did to him."

"It's for your own good. Now relax and clear your mind."

With a sigh, Rayne lay down, closed her eyes and blanked her mind. A slight tingling sensation started inside her head, almost itchy. It moved from front to back and side to side, then stopped. There was a stab of pain, like a plucked nerve, and she yelped in surprise.

The tingling sensation continued to explore her brain for much longer before the next stab made her yelp again. Rawn took her hand and patted it. The pain faded, then another stab made her grimace and grit her teeth, squeezing Rawn's hand until he winced. Five more stabs of pain followed, then the tingle vanished, leaving her head throbbing.

"Rayne." The voice was in her head and much stronger now, clearer. "Sit up. It's over. You're now able to receive and speak telepathically. You'll be able to teleport objects over short distances, but nothing too heavy. Mostly your power is healing."

Rayne sat up and rubbed her brow, grimacing. "Healing?"

"Yes." Mindra rose and stretched, then settled herself again, her tail wrapped around her feet. "You'll be able to see sickness and heal it by projecting your consciousness into the patient's flesh and commanding it. I can't explain it, but when you meet a sick person you'll know what to do."

"Could it work the other way? In self-defence?" Rawn asked.

Mindra glared at him. "Such uncharitable thoughts do not exist amongst my people. A true healer would not think such things." She turned back to Rayne, her tail twitching. "I also discovered a weak path for creation, which I tried to clear. I'm not sure whether I succeeded, but try."

"What do I do?"

"Concentrate on something, like the tip of your finger, and imagine a tiny flame growing from it."

Rayne hesitated. "Won't it burn me?"

"Only if you do it wrong."

Rayne stared at the air above her finger, concentrating with all her might. Her head pounded, but, after a few seconds, a tiny flame appeared, flickered, and vanished.

"I did it!" she crowed, grinning.

Mindra snorted. "That will never do you any good."

"I could light a fire."

"You have no idea of true power. Allow me to demonstrate, so you'll know what you're striving for." She wandered a few feet away and sat down again, settling her still twitching tail around her paws. "First, teleportation."

Rayne gasped and flailed as she floated into the air, Rawn beside her, his face stretched in surprise. They rose to the roof, where they hovered, along with all the other objects in the room. The rocks and plants around the pool, the water, still in the shape of the pool, and Mindra herself, calmly washing her face, cat fashion. Ending her impromptu bath, she gazed at them with smug eyes.

"This is nothing," she said. "I could lift this whole building, and the rocks it's built on, but that might upset some people."

Everything settled back down where it had been.

"Next, creation."

A pillar of flame exploded in the far corner with a dull boom and grew to the size of a bonfire, filling the room with stifling heat. It vanished, and the air cooled. Mindra nodded at the floor in front of her, and a pile of fruit appeared, dewy fresh.

"Try some, if you like. It's perfectly real, not the images some charlatans project."

Rawn plucked an orange, lumpy fruit from the pile and bit into it. Juice ran down his chin. Mindra's tail stopped twitching. Evidently she enjoyed showing off.

"Next, shape changing."

Her form contorted and her features melted, then expanded into a scaly, seven-foot tall dragon-like creature. It gazed down at them, lifting its lips to reveal rows of shark-like teeth in a parody of a smile. Then the dragon melted into a dark-eyed gypsy woman.

"Like it?" She giggled.

Rawn gaped at her, the fruit forgotten. "Is that... was that... Which is your true form?"

The gypsy woman sat next to him, the little bells on her clothes jingling. "My true form is the one you met me in, dear boy." She laughed again.

"So you could become anything you want?" Rayne asked.

"Anything."

"That was why we didn't see you when we came in?"

"Yes, I was a rockery plant."

"And you could stay like that as long as you like?"

"Yes."

"Do I...?"

"No, my dear, you don't have that pathway."

The gypsy woman became Mindra again. "Then there's telekinesis." She looked at one of the rocks around the pool, and it split in two with a sharp crack, then the water bubbled, steam rising from it.

"I also heal, but that's difficult to demonstrate." She looked from one to the other. "Any questions?"

Rawn wiped fruit juice from his chin. "Can you do more than one at a time?"

"Yes. I could hold my shape as a gypsy woman and do one of the others, or I could teleport and do one of the others, but some combinations don't work, for instance, I couldn't create and do telekinesis at the same time, or creation and healing, or telekinesis and healing. Some things require more concentration, you see."

Rayne smiled. "No wonder the Atlanteans didn't bother you. No one could match your people."

"Yes, that's true. We're respected amongst the alien races, although we don't travel much."

"So do you just create a spaceship when you want to travel?" Rawn bit into another alien fruit, this one bright green and hairy.

"No, we just teleport. There are two ways of teleporting, this one, which is really levitation," She drifted into the air, "Or this one." She vanished and reappeared several feet away.

"So you just... vanish here and reappear at home?"

"That's right."

Rayne leant forward. "You said I would be able to teleport. Will I be able to do that too?"

"I don't think so, dear. Your powers are limited, though Tallyn was right about your being talented. That's not your strongest talent. You're best at telepathy and healing, concentrate on improving those things. Now that you can communicate with your brother, practise that, and visit a hospital."

"Why don't you heal the sick?" Rawn munched the apple.

"I do, when I'm asked to, but I have other things to do at home. These are not my people. Besides, they have healers of their own."

"You said I had a talent for empathy. Did you strengthen that too?" Rayne asked.

"No." Mindra's ears flicked back. "That's one talent you're better off without. The ability to sense other people's emotions is fraught with disadvantages. You're better off without it. If I could, I

would even remove that talent, but unfortunately pathways are far more difficult to close than they are to open. Your channel for empathy is large, but you appear to be unable to use it, for some reason. Rather leave it that way."

Rayne pondered this, no new questions springing to mind. The rock drifted over to her again.

"Lift it," Mindra commanded.

Rayne concentrating on it, and it wobbled. She tried harder, her head pounding. The stone rolled, then rose a few inches.

"I did it!" she crowed, and the rock cracked down on the floor.

"Very good." Mindra's eyes twinkled.

"But it hurts my head." She rubbed her forehead, where a steel band tightened.

"It will at first. You're using areas of your brain that you've never used before. The pathway is weak. You must exercise it, then it will get stronger and the pain will stop."

Mindra stood and stretched, arching her spine like a cat. "Now, if you have no more questions, I think my job's finished."

Rayne glanced at Rawn, unwilling to let this fascinating alien go, but not knowing how to delay her. His gaze was blank, and she turned to Mindra with a sigh. "We're very grateful for your help. Is there any way we can repay you?"

Mindra's ears flicked back, and her tail twitched again. "I have no use for money, if that's what you mean. I did it for Tallyn as a favour. If you wish, you can both owe me a favour. How's that?"

"Agreed." Rawn rose and helped Rayne to her feet.

Mindra looked up at them with mischievous eyes. "Well, good luck, and farewell." She vanished.

After staring at the place where she had been for several seconds, they turned to leave. Before they reached the door, Mindra's voice spoke in Rayne's mind. "Oh, I almost forgot, I slowed down your ageing to the same as the Atlanteans'. For some reason, you evolved into a far shorter-lived race than them, or maybe they did it to you. Anyway, you'll live a lot longer now."

They spun around, scanning the empty room.

"Mindra?" Rayne said.

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you at home?"

"Yes."

"How long will we live?"

"Several hundred years. Same as everyone else."

Outside, dusk spread cold fingers through the forest. Soon after they emerged, Tallyn arrived to take them back to his dwelling. Rayne found that her experience with Mindra was too personal to share, even with Tallyn.

The following day, Rayne studied ESP. Tallyn gave them access to the data web through the web line screens in his house, where they found a treasure trove of information. Rayne was a little surprised when Tallyn revealed that he was a telepath, and that most Atlanteans were, to varying degrees, but none had the awesome power of the Shyanese. Rayne added the Shyanese to her list of interests, and Rawn shared her curiosity. A vast amount of information was available from the technical library. Rayne knew that even if she lived to be three hundred she would never learn all it contained, even with their enhanced abilities.

They learnt how to operate the gravcar, and Talon brought one for them to use. With this, they visited the local library, where they found extra facilities for studying the store of knowledge. They often spent the whole day with the flocks of students that attended the various lectures and demonstrations.

Time seemed irrelevant, and Rayne was surprised when six months passed without her noticing. The council seemed content to let them live with Tallyn, and he appeared to enjoy their company. Rayne asked him if he had ever had a wife, and he told her he had made contracts with four women, two of whom had borne his children. He explained that Atlanteans made temporary contracts of a few years, during which time they might have children.

When the couple terminated the contract, the children stayed with their mother and the father supported them. To Rayne, it sounded a lot like a human marriage, only all parties knew from the outset that the end would come. Tallyn saw his children once a week, spending a day with each of them.

Tallyn explained the semi-defunct cast system, which was a casual ranking based on hair colour. In the past, it had been an important part of Atlantean culture, and only those of high cast were allowed to hold high office. Now it was a symbol of status, but its use to advance careers was frowned upon.

The more diverse an Atlantean's hair tones were, the higher status he or she held. Tallyn was therefore exceedingly well bred, which he admitted was the reason for his many contracts. The same rules precluded him from making a contract with a woman whose hair tones were insufficiently dissimilar, however. The whole thing sounded rather cold-blooded to Rayne, but, from her experiences with Tallyn, Atlanteans did seem to be a reticent and undemonstrative race.

Meanwhile, the seduction of knowledge continued to enthrall her and Rawn with its bounty of discoveries waiting to be plumbed. Since they seemed to have no other function than to wait for the prophecy to come true, they studied alien cultures, languages, space flight, ships, and technology.

When Rayne glanced at the calendar again, nine Atlantean months had passed. The summer warmth faded as the planet moved away from its sun on its shallow elliptical orbit. The nights grew chilly, and they spent many pleasant evenings in the heated pool. Tallyn invited his friends over, and Rayne asked him to introduce her to more aliens. He took them to a crowded bar hidden deep in the jungle, where they met a bizarre collection of aliens.

Sseth, the owner and bartender, was a burly reptilian with a huge, frog-like mouth, four bright yellow eyes and a red-gold skin that gleamed like wet silk. Rayne asked permission to feel it, to Sseth's delight, and found it as rough as shark skin. Four sturdy legs supported his three hundred kilos of muscular bulk. He also had two pairs of arms, one pair long and delicate, with four-fingered hands, the other short and powerful with stubby hands.

Sseth grinned at Tallyn as he poured their drinks, lifting his lips to reveal several rows of pointed teeth. It was the best he could do, since his mouth was rigid. He and Tallyn were old friends, and he seemed pleased to see the Atlantean commander again. The alien band was an amazing collection of strange beings that seemed totally out of place with the sweet music they made. The flute player must have weighed several hundred kilos, and rested his huge tusks on the floor to hold up his head while he played the flute with tiny hands.

Rayne turned her attention to Sseth when he said, "I hear you're building a fancy ship, Tallyn."

"Your ears been flapping again, Sseth?"

Sseth grinned at what was clearly an old joke, since he had no visible ears. "I hear a lot of things behind the bar, like, for instance, that she's going into Quadrant Forty-Four."

"Who told you that?"

Sseth shrugged. "Don't remember. Alcohol loosens a lot of tongues. I just flap my ears." He made a hissing, grating sound that passed for laughter, Rayne assumed. "Besides, people have been wondering what's in there for centuries."

Tallyn frowned, finishing his drink, and Sseth poured him another.

"What do they say is in there?" Rawn asked.

"It's just a lot of tall tales," Tallyn said. "No one knows."

"Oh, yes, most of them are," Sseth agreed. "Like beautiful space sirens luring men to their deaths, and mysterious forces tearing ships apart." He leant closer. "But the latest one is interesting. There's supposed to be an ancient machine, left by some long-gone super race, which still guards the quadrant."

Tallyn snorted. "That's a load of rubbish. How can you repeat such nonsense?"

Sseth wiped the counter. "Some people believe it. They like to hear stories."

"And tell even bigger ones." He turned away.

"Could there be any truth in it?" Rayne enquired.

"Nobody knows what's in there. These are just stories that people with nothing better to do make up."

"What harm can it do?"

"Lots. Some poor sod might believe it enough to go in there, thinking he can make contact with this robot ship, or whatever it is, and live to tell the tale. There are a lot of would-be heroes around."

"Is there a fancy new ship that's going to explore the forty-fourth quadrant?" she asked.

"That's classified. Personally, I think it would be a waste of time going in there. Ships cross it all the time. It's only explorer ships that vanish. Whatever is in there doesn't want to be found, and when it is, no one lives to tell the tale. Does it sound like a good idea to go and look for it?" He sipped his drink. "Plenty of probes have been sent in there, and none of them returned either. It's a waste of money and men."

"Could it have something to do with the prophecy?"

"If it does, we'll find out when the time comes."

Rayne shivered. "I'd rather stay away from Quadrant Forty-Four, and whatever's in it."

Chapter Eight

Rayne glanced up as Tallyn entered the sun-warmed morning room, casting her his usual stilted smile. Returning it, she continued to eat her breakfast, trying to ignore Rawn slurping his porridge. After four years, they had settled into a comfortable routine in Tallyn's house, although he remained distant. Still, he showed them great kindness and consideration, and many of his friends had become theirs.

Oddly, his crew were not numbered amongst his friends, so she had not met any of them. She and Rawn spoke fluent Atlantean now, and spent more time on recreational activities, especially Rawn. He had several friends and often went out, but she disliked the social circles. All too often, her possible identity as the Golden Child either intimidated or alienated potential friends and admirers.

Tallyn interrupted her reverie. "I've spoken to the council, and they've given me permission to take you back to Earth, to see it, if you wish."

Rayne gaped at him, her spoon poised before her mouth. "Why?"

"Well, when we left, you said you wanted to see your world from space, and were somewhat annoyed at the speed of our exit, if you remember. Until now, the council forbade any trips into space by the two of you. But the members have grown more lenient, especially since I explained how much you've been studying it. Perhaps they underestimated your intelligence, but now they've relented."

Rayne glanced at her brother. "Has it changed a lot?"

"Our scouts have reported its progress, which is as we predicted."

"And how are things progressing?" Rawn glared at his porridge.

Tallyn shrugged. "The cloud cover has increased, and the surface temperature is now in the hundreds. Probes show that the seas have dried up."

"Sounds wonderfully depressing."

"I understand if you decline, but I thought I'd make the offer."

"Big of you," Rawn said, putting down his spoon.

Rayne frowned at her brother. "There's no need to be rude. Tallyn can't understand how we feel. It's not his planet."

Tallyn shook his head. "I do understand. That's why I think you should see it. In the distant past, my people were forced to leave their home world when the sun swallowed it. I've seen the holofilms of the evacuation, and it's traumatic. But it's not something that should be avoided. It's part of our history, and yours. The loss of a home world is devastating for any race."

After a short, tense silence, Rawn nodded. "Okay, we'll come."

"Good. We leave tomorrow, early."

The following morning, they travelled to the spaceport, no longer discomfited by Tallyn's casual mode of navigating. Since learning to fly a gravcar, they had discovered that having an accident was impossible, since the car's tiny repellers also fended off any obstacles. Even if the driver was incapacitated, the car would merely descend, following the path of least resistance until it reached the ground, whereupon it would transmit a distress signal. No one was ever killed in a traffic accident, even drunk drivers, of which there were a few, always got home safely if they remembered to engage the autopilot.

They boarded a shuttle and strapped themselves in beside Tallyn. The doors sealed and it floated up, then switched to repellers at a safe height. It ascended swiftly, the inertial compensators removing all sensation of acceleration. The weaker anti-gravity was used first, because otherwise the powerful repellers would punch holes in the ground with their invisible 'foot'.

They left the atmosphere, the pearly sphere of Atlan shrinking beneath them. The massive spiral galaxy that lighted the night sky shone like diamond dust strewn across black velvet, millions of suns so brilliant the nights were always bright, even when none of the five moons were visible.

Aboard the Vengeance, it hardly seemed possible that four years had passed. They disembarked in the same smooth room and followed Tallyn along moss carpeted corridors to the lift, which shot up

to the bridge. Tallyn indicated that they should sit in two empty chairs, and tense silence filled the gloomy room as the crew awaited their orders. Tallyn faced his lieutenant as Marcon approached and saluted.

"Everything ready to go, Marcon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, let's get on with it then."

Breaking orbit and entering the transfer Net were achieved with little fanfare. If not for Marcon reeling off the list of procedures, and a brief glimpse of Atlan's receding globe, Rayne would hardly have known anything unusual had occurred. The screen went blank, and Tallyn turned to her with a smile.

"It's so mundane, isn't it? Space travel is almost boring."

She eyed him. "You read my mind."

"Of course I did. You still haven't learnt to guard your thoughts."

"That's rude, and I wasn't trying to."

"When in the company of so many, it would be wise."

She glanced around the bridge. "They're all...?"

"Telepaths? Yes." He looked at Marcon, who smiled. "Marcon finds your disappointment most amusing."

"If you can all read each other's minds, why do you bother talking?"

"We try to guard our private thoughts, so speaking telepathically requires just as much effort as talking. If we all left our minds open, our most intimate thoughts would become public knowledge."

"I see." She lowered her gaze, embarrassed. "Perhaps you should teach us how to do it properly."

"Well, Rawn doesn't really have to worry about it. His thoughts are pretty murky, since his telepathy is so weak. He can hear the equivalent of a mental shout, but he broadcasts almost nothing."

"Why didn't Mindra teach me?"

Tallyn's slight smile broadened. "Mindy's a busy little cat. She didn't have time. She only agreed because of who you are - might be. She likes dealing with VIPs. She did what I couldn't, but I can teach you the rest."

Rayne nodded, uncomfortable amongst so many people who could read her mind. On Atlan, they had seldom ventured into crowds of strangers, except at the bar, where the number of aliens made mind reading almost impossible, she had discovered. The library was often pretty empty, and the reading rooms had neural dampeners. Tallyn's friends had all been polite and ignored her open mind, it appeared, and crowds always made mind reading difficult. Although the crew were busy, it seemed to her newly awakened awareness that they all listened to her thoughts.

They went to a recreation area, where they ordered drinks and sat around a table. For the next five hours, Tallyn instructed her on the art of shielding her thoughts, while Rawn listened and asked questions. Tallyn rarely had so much time to devote to his guests, so he took this opportunity to teach her. She was making progress when Tallyn received a message from Marcon and took them back to the bridge. They arrived as the main screen activated and a dull, cloud-shrouded globe appeared on it. Rayne swallowed hard, a lump blocking her throat.

"That's not Earth."

"I'm afraid it is," Tallyn murmured.

"It can't be."

"It is."

She blinked and looked at Rawn, whose expression was drawn, his eyes bright. "I knew this was a bad idea."

Rayne forced herself to look at the screen again as Tallyn moved away into the gloom. It looked like a dirty Venus, perhaps after a violent dust storm, if Venus had such things. The blanket of clouds swirled various shades of brown and yellow into a soup of striated, venomous colours. A glance would tell anyone this planet was poisonous, and unfit to support life.

Yet this was Mother Earth, the world that had once had an entire self-supporting ecology matured over millions of years. The horror of it made her want to turn away and remember the

glowing blue jewel within a fragile envelope of pure air, patterned with fleecy white clouds. The reality was a lifeless, hostile lump of rock cloaked in a poisonous atmosphere, a product of man's ingenuity. Its ugliness made her want to know more.

She glanced at Tallyn. "All I can see is clouds."

"We've launched a probe. You'll be able to see the surface soon."

A few minutes later, the screen's picture changed, and a wall of brownish mist replaced Earth's dirty corpse.

"The probe is descending through the clouds." He glanced at one of Marcon's holographic displays. "The temperature is one hundred and thirty degrees."

In the Atlantean system for measuring temperature, zero was freezing point and one hundred degrees was boiling point at sea level, which meant Earth's atmosphere was akin to a furnace. The probe fell below the clouds, and the screen showed an alien landscape of ravaged, barren desert shrouded in a haze of dust. Huge chasms snaked across it, vomiting lava in an endless bubbling ooze. The clouds reflected the lurid glow, creating a garish scene.

Seas of cooling lava filled valleys, and steam and smoke rose to thicken the clouds. The probe followed the contours of a savage land, finding a ruined city. A sprawling mass of twisted, rusting metal came into view; the remains of the Eiffel Tower. A solitary, broken statue raised an arm above the jumbled rocks like a drowning man begging to be rescued from this eerie, desolate place.

"What happened to the buildings?" Rayne asked in a horrified whisper.

Tallyn replied, "Seismic activity has levelled just about everything. The pyramids have survived, and the sphinx. Parts of the Great Wall of China are standing, but everything else is gone."

The probe flew through huge, alien canyons. "That's the sea bed; there's not much left of it. Most of the water is now in the clouds."

A crewman interjected, "Temperature two hundred and ten degrees."

"All gone," Rayne murmured. "All those millions of people. An entire civilisation wiped out." She turned away as a drunkenly leaning Big Ben came into view, unable to watch anymore, and sank into a chair. Rayne continued to stare at the screen, which had reverted to the picture of a distant Earth.

Tallyn winced, as if he had sampled her unguarded thoughts. "Okay, Marcon, switch it off. Run all the usual tests." He glanced around in surprise as Marcon announced, "Our long-range proximity repellers are reacting to an approaching mass, sir."

"What is it?"

"Its density indicates it's a ship."

"Can we focus a viewer on it?"

Marcon touched a crystal on his console, and an empty star field filled the screen. He touched more crystals, and the stars swelled, but remained enigmatic.

Tallyn demanded, "Are you sure the repellers reacted?"

"Yes, sir. They still are."

Rayne gazed at the screen, the excitement a welcome distraction. A star vanished near the centre of it, then another. She jumped up, pointing. "There is something there, look!"

Tallyn nodded as another star vanished. "I see it. Marcon?"

"Activating the laser pulse sensory array." He touched more crystals, studying a hologram that scrolled up before him. "We're getting a very mushy reading, sir, but it seems to be coming closer. The pulses are not being reflected, but absorbed. Time lapse indicates it's still quite distant, three light seconds. Initiating broad laser sweep."

One of the other officers looked up with a worried expression. "It appears to be enormous, sir."

"Elaborate," Tallyn said, frowning.

"At least five times the size of Vengeance. Maybe bigger."

Tallyn swung around. "Battle stations. Red alert."

Distant alarms sounded, and the bridge doors slid shut with an ominous hiss, cutting off the howling.

Tallyn turned to Marcon. "Try to contact it."

"Yes sir."

A few tense seconds passed, the Marcon said, "No response to laser link, trying radio... nothing. Microwave... nothing."

Tallyn glared at the screen. "All right, initiate Net link, power up energy conduits and shell."

Marcon's hands flew over the crystals before him. Vengeance lurched, making Tallyn stagger and grip a console. He frowned at his luckless lieutenant, who spoke calmly.

"Attractors, sir. Our orbit has been broken."

"Are we linked to the Net?"

"Yes."

"Charge the repellers."

A crewman's hands danced across his console, and Marcon watched his readouts with a frown. "There's no effect."

"Still no reply?" Tallyn glanced at his second-in-command, who shook his head.

"None."

The huge ship blotted out all the stars on the screen, filling it with a featureless blackness. The crewman who monitored the distance between the ships was down to thousands of kilometres now, the proximity becoming dangerous. Several officers showed symptoms of stress, their brows sheened with nervous sweat and their eyes wide. Tallyn and Marcon remained calm, their expressions set in rigid lines.

Tallyn said, "Fire energy weapons."

An officer touched a crystal, and a point of golden brilliance that rivalled the sun appeared on the screen, winking out as the black ship absorbed it.

"No hit, sir." Marcon stared at his hologram in disbelief.

"Impossible. We couldn't miss at this range."

"We didn't miss. It had no effect."

Tallyn's brows knitted. "Fire the anti-matter cannon."

The officer touched another crystal, and a distant boom shivered through the ship. The blackness on the screen remained unaffected.

"No effect, sir," Marcon stated with chilling calm.

"By the Olban," breathed Tallyn. "What is that?"

"I am the Guardian."

The voice came from all around them, as if the air itself had spoken. Tallyn swung around, his eyes snapping about the bridge, seeking an enemy.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am the Guardian."

Tallyn stared at the black screen. "Why do you hold us? We have no quarrel with you."

"I have come to greet the Golden Child."

Everyone swung to stare at Rayne, who gaped at the screen, stunned. Tallyn muttered, "I knew it."

Rayne glanced at Rawn, who met her eyes with a look of mingled awe and disbelief. She wanted to run, but the door was closed, and she turned back to the screen, trying to ignore the crew's stares. Embarrassed by the sudden attention, she cleared her throat. "How do you know I'm the Golden Child?"

"I am your guide, Golden Child. Do not fear, your destiny will be revealed to you in due course."

She swallowed hard, wishing she could vanish like Mindra.

Tallyn frowned at the great ship. "What must she do?"

"That will be revealed only to her."

He nodded. "Why have you chosen to greet the Golden Child here, now?"

"I came to the place of her birth to await her, knowing she would return."

"You didn't know where she was?"

"I knew."

"Is the time of the prophecy approaching?"

"As it has been for millennia."

Tallyn snorted. "Why do you call yourself the Guardian?"

"I am the Guardian of my people, entrusted to keep them safe until they awaken. This place was one of their creations. More than that, you have no need to know."

"This place? What do you mean?"

A semi-transparent image of a blue planet appeared in the middle of the control room, making many of the crew jump up in consternation.

"A projection, sir," Marcon said. The planet rotated, its glowing blue seas patterned with snowy clouds within the clear bubble of its atmosphere.

"That's Earth," Rawn muttered.

Tallyn looked disbelieving.

"Ignorance and greed have destroyed it, just as they destroy everything they touch." The voice sounded sad, and the image of Earth vanished.

"How did you create it?" Tallyn demanded.

"My people did, not I. Such order does not easily come from chaos. My people created many habitable planets."

Rayne dragged her reeling mind from the morass of shock, the questions that hammered at her brain demanding answers. "If your people created it, can you save it?"

"There is nothing left to save. It has reverted to its former state, and my people are no longer here."

"Where are they?"

"In a safe place."

"Would that be Quadrant Forty-Four, by any chance?"

"Farewell, Golden Child, until we meet again."

The blackness vanished, and stars shone on the screen again. Rayne sank into a chair as her knees gave way. The crew stared at their readouts, their hands skipping over the lighted crystals that covered the consoles like jewels.

"We've been released, sir," a crewman announced.

"No sign of anything nearby, not even on the long-range repellers. I never saw anything move so fast," Marcon sounded amazed.

Tallyn's expression was inscrutable. "Send a message to Atlan. And try to identify that ship. Analyse the recordings of the voice. I want to know who or what that was, and where it came from."

"Yes, sir."

Marcon touched crystals, and other consoles lighted with his messages, their operators responding by touching other crystals or sensor pads. The alarm was cancelled and the bridge doors opened, allowing several new men to enter and take up unoccupied stations. The bridge became a hive of activity as crew members in other parts of the ship demanded orders through the consoles, and the officers replied. Marcon sat before five holographic readouts, scanning the displays.

Tallyn went over to an empty station at the back of the bridge, where a curved console deflected traffic. Rayne and Rawn followed, curious. He sat in the contoured chair and ran his hands over the crystals. Scorning the holograms, he directed the recorded image onto the screen, which lighted with the empty blackness of the strange ship's image. Tallyn tried to enhance the picture, but the scene remained black.

"How can a ship be so black it doesn't even reflect the stars?" he asked. "Why did the energy weapons have no effect, or the anti-matter cannon?"

Rawn stepped up to stand behind Tallyn's chair. "If he's Rayne's guide, maybe he has a super advanced ship."

"Yes, but who, or what, is he?"

"I don't think it matters."

"It's gone!" Rayne pointed at the screen, where the stars had reappeared. Tallyn's fingers darted over the console, crystals lighting in their wake. The black image reappeared, and he stared at it, as did Rayne and Rawn. This time he had slowed down the replay, and a haze of gold covered the blackness for an instant, then the stars returned.

"That's impossible," Tallyn muttered.

"What?" Rawn asked.

"It's a Net ship! It used the transfer Net."

Rawn glanced at Rayne. "So?"

"It went into the Net." Tallyn turned to face them. "It used an energy shell and went into the Net. That's impossible. It went into the energy dimension. Nothing that big could go into the energy dimension and survive. The shell it would have to generate would be monstrous."

"But it did it."

"Yes. Which means its technology is far more advanced than ours. By the Olban. That ship has instantaneous travel."

Tallyn stared at the screen for several minutes, apparently deep in unpleasant thoughts, then replayed the recording again before turning to Rayne. He studied her with disconcerting intensity, making her uncomfortable until he ran a hand over his hair and forced a strained smile.

"So, you are the Golden Child. I was right."

She glanced at Rawn. "I don't find it a very appealing prospect, somehow. I'd rather be nobody, given a choice."

Tallyn sighed. "I understand. Your being special is what saved you, but such things cut both ways. There's always a price to pay for being different. And Rawn, although he's not the Golden Child, was also saved because of you, so you shouldn't curse it too much."

"So what happens next? Am I put out as bait, like a sacrifice to a dragon?"

"No, nothing like that. Fate will take its course, that's all."

Chapter Nine

Tallyn traversed the long, pillared hall to the council's chamber, his footsteps echoing. The council building was intended to intimidate, but Tallyn had been here many times, and its grandeur had lost its effect. He hated meetings with the council, which demanded detailed explanations and endless reports. The novelty of discussing his work with such august persons had worn off when he had become aware of their weaknesses.

A quartet of Draycon guards waited outside the doors, dressed in blood-red uniforms and horned helmets that concealed their features. He frowned, wishing his audience did not coincide with the Draycons' visit, for he had a particular disliking for the much-despised race. The council often did this to impress such visitors with its busy schedule and important meetings, when, in truth, it had little to occupy its time, and its members spent most of it bickering amongst themselves. Atlan's efficient civil service made the council all but obsolete, yet the grizzled oldsters who comprised it refused to allow a modern government to replace them. This, Tallyn reflected, was one of the disadvantages of Atlanteans' lengthy lifespans; it slowed down progress.

The guards stood aside for him, and he stopped just inside the doorway. Two people addressed Vargon, their backs to the doors. After a few minutes, Vargon looked up and signalled Tallyn to approach. As he did so, the aliens turned to face him. Hiding the shock of recognition behind a bland mask, he inclined his head and spoke the required words of greeting.

The tall, thin woman nodded in reply. Her bright green eyes spat venom in a narrow, angular face. Ridges of raised grey scales ran down the bridge of her nose, along her brows and around the edge of her jaw. Her rough grey skin resembled sharkskin, and the long, feather-like scales atop her head rattled when she moved. Although her form was similar to an Atlantean's, her hands, which rested on a pair of curved daggers in her belt, were more like claws; three long fingers flanked by a short thumb and a vestigial fourth finger above the wrist. A suit of finely woven red metallic cloth, rather like chain mail, sheathed her mannish figure. A gold chain encircled her waist and more were looped under her armpits, attached to the beading on her broad shoulders. Her coat hung to mid-thigh, and thick-soled black boots shod her feet. The male who stood beside her was almost identical in appearance and dress, but a little shorter and less imposing.

Tallyn met the woman's cold eyes. "Drevina, how nice of you to visit. We're always pleased to see you. At least that way we know what you're up to."

Drevina's lips drew back to reveal pink teeth. "Tallyn, your wits are as sharp as ever. Pity you don't put them to better use."

He bowed mockingly. "I can think of no greater challenge than to pit them against yours, and your delightful brother, of course. Is he potty trained yet? Mertar, it's good to see you."

Mertar snarled. Drevina raised a claw, and he subsided. "You've always thrived on petty insults. They must be your speciality."

"Never as good as yours. I always bow to your superiority."

Drevina ignored the jibe. "You've been visiting the Chandra system a lot recently. Any particular reason?"

"Chandra? Oh, Ellath Three, you mean. Well, it's undergoing some interesting changes, not that it's any of your business."

"You chased four of my ships from there, four years ago, that's my business."

"They had no right to be there. Picking over the bones of fallen civilisations may be your speciality, but that system falls within our territory."

She showed her teeth again. "The Chandra system has never been disputed, yet I fail to see why you protect such a useless planet. My ships did not change its fate. We did nothing to interfere, only took a few materials."

"Well, you can go there as much as you wish now. The atmosphere would fry even you."

"Empress Drevina, you have yet to state your business before the council," Vargon interrupted, his voice deceptively mild. "Fascinating though your discourse with Commander Tallyn may be, we

really should get to the point, don't you think?"

Drevina glared at Tallyn before facing the council again. "We're here to lay claim to a new solar system in the Vega nebula. We discovered it several weeks ago. Naturally, it's uninhabited, but we brought a recording of it for you."

"How kind," Vargon muttered rather sarcastically as Mertar pulled a black box from his belt. He detached two metal discs and placed them on the floor, one on top of the other. He then aimed the black box at the two discs, and the topmost one rose some five feet into the air. Between the two, a holographic field sprang into existence. The images were dull and rather hazy, but sufficiently clear to make out a white dwarf and an aged orange sun in a binary system. Five planets and a debris ring orbited the orange sun at widely spaced intervals.

Drevina gestured at the image. "Four of the planets are useless. The two farthest are frozen mud and ammonia, the third planet is a gas giant, and the one nearest the sun is extremely hot; a barren rock. We're interested in the second planet." The hologram zoomed in on a yellow world, the rest of the solar system vanishing. "It has sulphur clouds and an ammonia-based atmosphere, but we can make it habitable. Its orbit is good."

"I see." Vargon nodded as the hologram vanished, then glanced around at the rest of the council members. "I see no basis for objection. It's in your territory and looks sufficiently hostile. Do you have an observation, Commander Tallyn?"

"Yes, I'd like to know the real reason for the Empress' visit. All this could have been done on the space line; there was no need for a meeting."

Drevina said, "We came here out of courtesy. There is no reason to accuse us of lying."

"Courtesy! You're not just here to flaunt your unsavoury goodies. You never have before. Every other such agreement was achieved on a space line, but now suddenly you're here in person. Are you perhaps spying on us at the same time?"

"You never did have any manners, but why would I want to spy on the Atlanteans? You seldom do anything of interest, and when you do, you always tell everyone about it first."

"Empress, please," Vargon soothed. "Commander Tallyn's suspicions are his own, kindly ignore him. We don't wish to start a dispute about it. I'm sure your reasons for coming here are spawned purely by a righteous wish to be polite to your friends."

"Friends!" Drevina snorted, then caught herself and tore her glare from Tallyn, who now wore a bland expression. "Yes, of course."

"Good. Now that you have told us, it was nice seeing you again, and have a safe journey home."

Drevina shot Tallyn a last look of unadulterated hatred as she swept out, her brother at her heels. When the brisk tapping of their feet had faded to a distant echo, Vargon looked at Tallyn, shaking his head in reprimand.

"You shouldn't antagonise her, Commander. You know that Draycons have difficulty in controlling their tempers. Pointing out the obvious was unnecessary, and only served to anger them. Rest assured, whatever they came here to spy on, they've been kept too far away to find out anything. The orbit they were given is barely inside the third moon."

"Good. But I'd like to know what they're after. Since they lost the war, they've been looking for a way to win the next one."

Vargon nodded. "As we do. Have one of your scouts investigate the Vega system and report. Now, tell me of your encounter with this black ship." Vargon settled more comfortably in his hard-backed chair, and the rest of the council members squirmed and stretched.

At the end of Tallyn's account, Vargon looked thoughtful, and the other council members turned to one another in muttered consultation. When they fell silent, Vargon roused from his reverie.

"So, the girl you found *is* the Golden Child. This is excellent news. You must extend to her every courtesy, and grant her every wish, so long as it doesn't put her in danger. All that remains now is to wait. Good work, Commander."

Tallyn bowed and retreated. Outside, Drevina waited with her escort, talking to her brother in the strange, hissing Draycon tongue. She broke off her conversation to approach Tallyn, surrounded by her guards, and he stopped, eyeing her.

"One day, Tallyn, I'm going to fix you, permanently."

"You've already tried that. It didn't work, remember?"

She smiled, her eyes filled with malice. "Next time it will. You're going to pay for your insults."

"Is the Drayconar Empire prepared for another war with Atlan? The last one, as I recall, left you nursing a lot of wounds. You should be careful what you say in public places. These walls have ears, and eyes, too, sometimes."

Drevina glanced around. "Our antagonism is well known, as is your disrespect. The next war between our empires will result in your defeat."

"Really? It's lucky for you that we know how often you lie, or that might be taken as a threat."

Her eyes glinted. "You'll pay for that too, I promise."

Drevina spun on her heel and swept away with her escort, Mertar trotting at her side. Their red and black-clad forms radiated hatred, at odds with the peaceful setting of the white pillared hall. He knew that provoking Drevina was unwise; he was just never able to resist it. She and her brother ruled the second largest empire after Atlan, and the war had cost millions of Atlantean lives.

The Draycons had attacked undefended planets and outposts, using biological and chemical weapons. The war had ended in resounding defeat for the Draycons when the Atlanteans had blown up their empress' palace on Jandar One, killing her. Drevina, daughter of the dead empress, still longed for vengeance. Ten years ago, she had started the Saurian War, but that could never be proven, and the only reason she informed Atlan of her discoveries was a lingering fear of the empire that had killed her mother. Her presence on Atlan worried him, for she seemed more confident than before, as if she had a trump card she was about to play.

Draycons had evolved in a distant galaxy, and moved closer to Atlan when their sun died. The Atlanteans had helped them, but soon learnt the folly of that. Draycon culture, morals and intellect were far more alien than their forms, and to them, helping others was a sign of weakness. Draycons believed that all victories were justified, no matter how they were achieved. A saying had sprung up, which summed up their mentality most succinctly, that a Draycon would stab you in the back with the knife he had borrowed from you.

Nothing was beneath them, if it gave them an advantage. Physically they were tough, able to withstand extreme conditions and breathe poisonous air. Those who had studied them had deduced that they originated on an unstable, continually changing hellhole, like a planet with an extended elliptical orbit, which became terribly hot as it passed close to its sun, then freezing cold as it moved away. Now they dwelt uncomfortably close, a mere fifteen light years distant, in the Regal Galaxy.

Late afternoon sunlight streamed in through the tall windows to dapple the tawny carpet in Tallyn's study. He was away most of the time, and Rayne and Rawn studied at his house, since travelling to the library was no longer necessary now that they had completed the groundwork. They spent more time on the vast data network that spanned the planets in the system. She and Rawn had made many friends amongst the users, most of whom were students. Rawn sat at Tallyn's desk, engrossed in a conversation with an alien on the fifth planet. Rayne lounged in a comfy chair beside a low table, studying the dynamics of a binary system. A soft pop from the lounge made her glance at Rawn, but he did not appear to have heard the noise. As Rayne turned back to her screen, she noticed a slight, astringent scent, then her eyelids slammed down.

Rayne woke in a padded grey room, her head pounding and her vision blurry. Her wrists were manacled, and a lacy dress that barely reached past her crotch replaced her utilitarian suit. She clutched her head and struggled to banish the terrible ache at the back of her skull, tears of pain stinging her eyes. When she brought it under control, she opened her eyes and looked around at a featureless cell that did not even have a discernable door.

After several minutes of trying to remember how she had got there, she gave up and worried about what was in store for her. She wondered if Rawn was in a similar predicament, or whether she had been the only target. She was sure this had something to do with the prophecy, although how anyone knew who she was remained a mystery. The crewmen who had been on Vengeance's bridge during the encounter with the black ship were all loyal to the Atlantean Empire. She could not believe any of them was a spy; some of them were almost fanatical in their fealty.

A door appeared as it slid open, and a tall, angular woman with green eyes and sharkskin

entered, revealing pink teeth in a revolting grin. Rayne recognised her race as Draycon, her heart sinking. The woman studied Rayne, gloating, then spoke in Atlantean.

"So, little pink thing. Frightened? Your sort has weak, stupid females, don't you? Breeders. Humans. You were good at that, mind you. Bred yourselves right into extinction. How could the gods choose one like you to be the Golden Child?"

Her grin widened as Rayne stifled a gasp. "Ah, yes, I know all about you. You were supposed to have died on your miserable planet, but you survived, hidden like an animal in the ground. Those bungling idiots who said they had killed you have paid for their mistake. Our seer knew you weren't dead. And I followed the trail of that fool, Tallyn, to find you. This universe is filled with incompetents. So I have to do the job myself, don't I?"

She put her hands on her hips, running a red tongue over her lips. "Do you want to know what's going to happen to you?"

"I suppose you're going to kill me."

"No." The woman chuckled, a grating sound. "That would be too easy, wouldn't it? But you are going to die. Tempting though it is, I can't have the pleasure of killing you myself, even though it would be so easy to burn you and eject your body into space. Unfortunately, it's only a matter of time before Tallyn finds out who took you, and gives chase. Even if he never proves I killed you, he will find out that I took you. Atlan's sensor grid will have logged my illegal stopover.

"So, if I make you disappear, it counts against me, for then the question of why raises its ugly head. After all, if I didn't know who you were, I wouldn't have killed you. By denying the prophecy and ensuring Atlan's downfall, I will most certainly earn their wrath. Even the suspicion would be enough for severe reprimands against my people. But if I sell you, it's not such a crime at all. I just have to ensure that I sell you to someone who's going to kill you, and there are plenty of them. Don't think your pretty face will save you either, there are many who hate such things, and long to destroy them. A torturous death, which is what you deserve, that's what awaits you."

Rayne failed to repress a shiver, and the woman chuckled again. "I'll even profit from the deal. Isn't that justice for you?"

"Tallyn will find you."

"Oh, I'm sure he will, stupid girl, but I'll be guilty of no more than slave dealing, which, given my status, will be shrugged off. As far as he knows, I simply snatched an unimportant human girl to sell as a slave. Once you're sold, he'll never find you, and your destiny will be lost. You won't live to fulfil it, and the Atlantean Empire will fall, as it has been prophesied. Draycons will take over their worlds and enslave them."

Rayne looked away, unable to meet the woman's hateful, sneering eyes. The door hissed shut, cutting off her grating chuckle.

The Draycon ship emerged from its energy shell in a swirl of golden light, approaching Gergonia. The unpleasant, barely habitable world was technically a large moon orbiting a gas giant with huge ice rings. Not quite large enough to become a sun, the gas giant gave off an eerie red light that the rings reflected in a multi-coloured display, unfortunately not visible from Gergonia's surface due to the cloud cover. The planet's sulphur rich atmosphere was breathable, but unpleasant. Gergonia's distant red giant sun gave off plenty of heat, but little light, which barely reached the surface through the thick yellow fog that enveloped the planet, making it a twilight world. Dwarfish natives inhabited it, adapted to the dimness and acidic atmosphere. They lived on a yellow fungus that thrived in the sulphur-rich soil.

The people of Gergonia rarely ventured outside, living in sealed dwellings with filters to eradicate the stench, the buildings joined by an underground system of travel. Entertainment of the worst kind flourished; gambling, whorehouses, drug dens, pain parlours and the buying and selling of stolen property. The clientele was made up entirely of crooks, petty tyrants and wealthy psychopaths. No one asked questions on Gergonia, and merchandise sold there rarely surfaced on law-abiding worlds. The residents who ran the markets and pleasure houses originated on some of the most obscure planets, had arrived on Gergonia by unpleasant means, and cared nothing for anyone else's misfortune.

The Draycon ship docked amongst the assortment of converted freighters, battered explorers, old fighters bought from defeated dictators and a smattering of modern ships. Two armoured Draycon guards manhandled Rayne from her cell, and a sting on the side of her neck warned her that they had given her a drug. As they hustled her down a passage to a smooth docking bay with a shuttle parked in it, a wave of vertigo washed over her, followed by a strange detachment. She barely registered the trip to the surface, and walked between the guards when they dragged her from the shuttle.

A room, a corridor and a busy chamber followed each other in a blur; voices spoke in strange languages she did not understand. She was led into a dim room filled with the stench of sweat and fear, a strong sensation of misery pervading the air. She tried to rouse herself sufficiently to take in her surroundings, noticing that the Draycons now wore masks.

After a hissed conversation with a blue-skinned man, the guards took her into an empty area, leaving the other two Draycons behind. The blue-skinned man followed, armed with a gavel, and mounted a podium. Rayne shook her head to try to clear the fog and gazed around with dazed, unfocussed eyes. The short, tubby blue man whose bald pate gleamed under the bright lights stood on a podium to one side. He clasped chubby hands and smiled down from his pedestal.

Rayne started when she noticed the crowd seated in tiers of seats before him. A sea of masks stared up at the stage on which she stood. She shivered, aware of how little clothing she wore, and the horror of her situation seeped into her dull brain. Closing her eyes to block out the bright lights and weird masks, she swayed in her guards' grip. They kept her upright when she would have fallen, and the auctioneer's loud, brash voice jabbed her brain, reviving her enough to understand his fluent Atlantean.

"Lords and majesties, crooks and cutthroats! I present to you a special piece of merchandise. A human! One of only two left in the universe; a lovely creature. Obviously reluctant, but then some of you prefer them that way."

A wave of chuckling swept the audience. The auctioneer stepped down beside Rayne and gripped her hair to lift her face to the light. She kept her eyes closed, too numb to fight.

The man's strident voice rang out. "Look at her! What a beauty! Descended from Atlantean intervention; a rare success. Who will start the bidding at twenty thousand? She's worth much more. Look at the hair, the figure, the face! Come along gentlemen, imagine all the fun you can have taming her! And if you can't tame her, have some fun killing her! You have money to burn! Give me thirty thousand, yes! Over there, fifty! Thank you sir, sixty there... yes? Seventy thousand I am bid. Eighty! Thank you sir, ninety over there... good, ninety-five? Yes! Any more? Come along gentlemen. Any more than ninety-five? Look at her! Any more bids?"

The auctioneer paused, evidently waiting for those who had not quite made up their mind yet. Distant mutters mingled with the swish of a door closing and footsteps that approached her, and Rayne opened her eyes. A tall, black-clad figure with a dark grey coat and an intricate mask sauntered to the front of the audience. People stepped from his path, but she sensed it was not because of the two men in black and silver uniforms who followed him. A hawk-like silver emblem glinted on his chest as he stopped before the stage to gaze up at her. The auctioneer stared at him, and the stranger nodded.

"Sold! For one hundred thousand regals!" The auctioneer banged his gavel. "To the Shrike!"

The Shrike raised a gloved hand, and his men climbed onto the stage to relieve the Draycon guards of their captive.

Chapter Ten

The men pulled Rayne along, supporting her when her legs buckled, their shoes tapping on a hard floor. Strange sensations penetrated her dazed mind. A smell of burning oil, a pungent odour she could not identify, and the passing of a nearby hum. Ephemeral bright lights glowed through her eyelids, but she could not open them. A door hissed open, and she was pushed onto a soft chair, which, she discovered when she slipped sideways, was a couch. Alarms jangled in her numb brain, but she could do nothing about it, for her limbs refused to obey her. Her worries could not keep her awake, nor could she summon the willpower to use her healing to oust the drug that held her in its thrall, and sleep washed her away on a black tide.

Rayne woke with a start, and sat up to find everything back in focus. Pale walls surrounded her, a thick maroon carpet covered the floor, and some rather ugly paintings hung on the walls. For a moment she thought she was back on Earth, for the room lacked the Atlantean technology and propensity for flora. The faint but unmistakable smell of rotten eggs reminded her of where she was, and memories of her recent ordeal rushed back. Thoughts of escape hammered at her brain, and she rose to examine her prison.

When she discovered that the door would not open and the room lacked any other exit, she went back to the couch and sat down. Several minutes later, a tall, black-clad man entered and paused, as if to gauge her reaction, but she merely stared at him. A grey coat relieved his sable garb, which included gloves with silver emblems on the back and a strangely designed mask that covered his head and neck. His well-cut suit clung to a whipcord figure with broad shoulders and narrow hips. The suit's seams were ridged in the Atlantean manner, concealing its fastenings. Nothing hinted at his race other than his form, which appeared to be human, Atlantean, or one of many other races that shared the humanoid physique.

Rayne's fears multiplied as a dozen unsavoury prospects invaded her still-raw mind. Tension curdled her stomach, and a sour taste crept into her mouth. The Draycon woman's words shouted from her memory, drawing dark images in her flinching mind. The man broke his immobile stance to clasp his hands behind his back, and his action pushed back his coat to reveal a weapon clipped to his belt. She wondered if this was deliberate.

Rayne licked her lips. "Who are you?" It came out as a croak, and she swallowed to try to alleviate her dry throat. Her fuzzy recollection of the auction supplied the name the auctioneer had given him: the Shrike. It sounded ominous.

The Shrike picked up a suit of clothes from a table by the door and threw them onto the couch beside her, then left. Realising that she still wore the scanty garment in which the Draycons had dressed her, she changed into the black one-piece suit with a silver hawk emblem on the right side of the chest. After throwing the dress into a corner, she sat down again and tried to figure out what she should do now. Perhaps her new captor would listen to reason and return her to Atlan if she offered him a reward.

Whether or not the council paid it was irrelevant, as long as she got back to Atlan. He unnerved her, and, despite her hopes, she wondered if he would be susceptible to bribes or blackmail. His silence, and the Draycon woman's promise that her new owner would kill her, increased her anxiety. The Draycon woman, however, had no way of knowing who would buy her, and a chance existed that this man was not the sort the woman had hoped for. Rayne's stomach rumbled and she cursed it. Now was not the time to think of food.

Rayne jumped when the door opened to admit her captor and a black-uniformed man carrying a tray, which he set down on the table before leaving. She watched the Shrike, wondering if he was going to speak this time.

"Eat something," he said in fluent, slightly accented Atlantean, his voice deep and attractive. "You must be hungry."

She glanced at the steaming food, which looked like nutri-paste, and shook her head.

He sat in the chair opposite. "What are you afraid of?"

"You." She struggled to keep her voice from quivering. He radiated strength and confidence as if it oozed from his pores.

"Why?"

"I don't know you, but the woman who sold me said you would kill me."

"Really? Drevina doesn't know me that well, I assure you. And I'm hardly likely to do that when I just paid a hundred thousand regals for you. Of course, you were too drugged to know anything."

Not quite, she mused. "So now I'm a slave?" She wished he would take off the mask, it bothered her.

"Legally, yes."

"I see." She strived to remain calm. It sounded like someone else spoke.

"Do you?"

"Probably not, but I expect I'm going to find out. So, you're not a violent pervert who enjoys killing slaves?"

"I flatter myself that I'm not a pervert, and I'm not going to kill you."

"Then what do you intend to do with me?"

"You'll find out soon. How were you captured?" His husky voice sent shivers down her spine.

"The Draycons kidnapped me on Atlan. They must have used gas. I woke up on their ship. They might have killed my brother. I don't know what happened to him."

"So, the Atlanteans took you from your home world before it died. I wondered what happened to you."

She frowned. "How do you know my world is dead? You don't know where I'm from."

"I do. We've met before, in a manner of speaking, although you might not remember such a brief encounter."

Rayne searched her reeling mind for an explanation, finding a dim memory of a black-clad man in a blind alley, blue laser humming over her as she lay huddled on a dirty road. "You were there, on Earth. You shot the store guards."

"Yes."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "You needed help. I was there. Why not?"

"Will you help me again? Take me back to Atlan? The council will reimburse you."

The Shrike paused, and she hoped that he was considering her request. His rescue on Earth did not mean he was a good person, she reflected. If he was a slaver, he might have been planning to capture her then, but the Atlanteans had chased him away. He stood up, and she leapt to her feet, backing away.

His head turned to follow her retreat. "There's no need to fear me. I'm not going to hurt you."

Rayne wanted to believe him, but her instincts clamoured for caution. She could sense neither friendliness nor hostility from him. He appeared to have no emotions at all. He seemed taller than Rawn, but perhaps it was the coat and mask.

"How can I trust a man who hides his face?"

"Is that what's worrying you?"

"Partly." She moved closer to the wall and leant against it, feigning confidence.

"I'm afraid I can't take it off."

"Then I won't trust you."

The Shrike shook his head, the mask's flat planes gleaming. Most of it was dull, but shiny, tinted plasglass covered his eyes, reflecting the light.

"Suit yourself." He turned and left.

Rayne closed her eyes and slumped, then returned to the couch and ate the meat-flavoured nutri-paste. Considering her situation again, she found no good in it. Her only hope was the fact that he had not refused to return her to Atlan, and perhaps considered it. Common sense howled against this naive fantasy, reminding her that a slaver who had just paid a small fortune for her would not be keen on returning her to Atlan for the sake of getting his money back. She should have offered him a reward to sweeten the deal. Then again, it would be dangerous for him to go near Atlan, since they imprisoned slavers. So she would have to guarantee his safety, too, which she was not sure she could

do. There was no reason for him to trust her any more than she trusted him, either. As her thoughts whirled in useless circles, her eyes grew leaden as her full stomach compounded her fatigue, and the room was so quiet that she fell asleep.

Rayne woke to find her captor standing over her, and leapt off the couch like a startled cat. Lacking feline reactions, she tripped over her feet and landed with a thud on her rump. She grimaced, then tried to scramble away in alarm when he stepped towards her. He gripped her wrist before she could evade him and hauled her to her feet, and as soon as she was upright she tried to pry his fingers loose. After a futile struggle with his iron grip, she became aware that he was merely watching her efforts, and glared up at the horrible mask.

"Are you going to just stand there and hold my arm all day?"

She sensed his reluctant smile, and he said, "You should be more careful. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Well your wishes aren't exactly high on my list of priorities, you know."

"You're very brave all of a sudden."

"This isn't bravery, it's called desperation. Something you wouldn't know anything about."

"I understand better than you know," he replied.

"I'll bet you get your kicks from terrorising helpless slaves, but I won't give you the satisfaction again." She drew a shaking breath. "Look, if you take me to Atlan, I'll see to it that you're rewarded as well as reimbursed."

"Really. You must be an important person, then."

"I have some important friends. The council will pay for my return."

He shook his head. "As much as I would like to oblige, I'm afraid it's out of the question. You see, there's a price on my head on Atlantean worlds. A very large one. If they catch me, they'll kill me, so I'm not going anywhere near Atlan."

"Well, just let me go then. I'll call my friends, and they'll come and get me. I'll make sure you still get the reward."

"The Atlanteans, come here?" He gave a soft, mirthless bark of laughter. "That would be risky. Besides, you have no money, and, unlike on Atlan, a space line costs money here."

"Oh. Perhaps you could..."

"Lend you some?" He chuckled again. "Why don't I just take you to a law-abiding world, then you can call on a free space line?"

She glared at him. "You're not going to help me, are you?"

"No. I have plans for you. I didn't buy you just to give you back to your Atlantean masters."

"Damn you!" She tried to wrench free, but only succeeded in jerking herself closer to him, something that, oddly, seemed to discomfit him, for he stepped back. For a moment she was close enough to sense his warmth and strange, powerful charisma. Startled, she stepped back, then realised that his laser was within reach, grabbed it and tried to yank it out. It seemed to be stuck, and his grip on her wrist tightened painfully as he pushed her away, releasing her.

"That was a really stupid thing to do," he said.

"If you think I'm not going to fight, or try to escape, you've got another think coming."

He gestured to her wrist. "Did I hurt you?"

She looked at it, surprised by his concern. There was a red mark around it, but no real damage. "No, it's fine."

"Good." He paused. "For future reference, in case you're tempted to try that again, my weapon is keyed to my DNA, so you can't use it, or even release it from the holster." His tone became brisk. "We're going to my ship now. We'll be more comfortable there. Stand next to me, so I can activate the transfer Net."

Rayne longed to refuse, but there was no escaping, and if she did he would only force her to do as he wished, a humiliation she chose to forego. The golden light of an energy shell engulfed them, and dispersed to reveal a room decorated in pale blue and cream. A thick carpet of the grey moss covered the floor, and comfortable chairs formed a half circle around a low glass table. Two slanted windows gave a view of Gergonia's dull yellow globe and the sullen red planet beyond it.

The Shrike went over to a console and placed his hand on the sensor pad. The crystals lighted

and sparkled at his touch. Although no sensation was evident, she sensed that a Net link had been forged, and the ship headed into the unknown. A glance at the windows showed a golden haze crawling over them, obscuring the view and confirming her suspicions.

"Where are we going?"

"To my base."

"Where's that?"

He shook his head, studying the holographic readouts that scrolled up from the console.

"Won't you at least tell me your name?"

"Most people call me 'the Shrike'." He wandered over to a chair and sank into it, indicating that she should take the couch opposite, and she perched on the edge of it. She longed to point out that this was not the answer she had been looking for. It sounded more like a title.

"So, who's your benefactor on Atlan?" he enquired.

"Commander Tallyn."

"Ah, Tallyn." He nodded. "Now there's a man with a devious mind."

"He's a good man."

"Oh yes, he is, and you seem to like him."

She looked away, embarrassed. "He was good to me and my brother. He saved us."

"Why?"

She shied away from telling him the reason for her rescue, which was also the reason for her kidnapping. He might be another enemy of Atlan, and decide to kill her if he knew who she was.

"It has nothing to do with you."

"Don't be difficult."

"I don't have to tell you anything. If you want to force it from me, then put a slave collar on me."

"I'm not going to collar you."

She stared at him, puzzled. "Why did you buy me?"

He shrugged. "I have my reasons."

Rayne glanced around, a few wild and improbable plans presenting themselves for her common sense to dismiss. If she could escape from the room, she might be able to evade pursuit long enough to locate the emergency life pods. Once on board one, she could escape, deactivate the pod's beacon until the Shrike's ship was out of range, then reactivate it and wait for rescue. Her roving eyes lighted upon the open door, which seemed to beckon to her, inviting her to use it and find the freedom she craved. Glancing at the Shrike, she found him facing her, his hands clasped before him. He seemed to be watching her, but it was difficult to tell. As she looked at the door again, his deep chuckle made her tense.

"That's the most ridiculous plan I've ever heard. Even if you managed to escape this room, which you won't, do you really think you'll be able to launch a life pod by yourself, and without any of my crew noticing?" He chuckled again, and her humiliation grew.

"You shouldn't read other peoples' minds," she retorted, wishing she could think of a more scathing rebuttal.

"Probably not, but yours is most entertaining."

Rayne tried to imagine what he might look like, conjuring an image of a deformed, malevolent alien much like the mutants she had seen on Earth.

"How unpleasant," he said. "I can assure you, I don't look anything like that."

"To me you do."

He sighed. "Will you tell me your name?"

After a moment's hesitation she did, aware that he might try to learn it telepathically if she refused, and discover her secret. She tried to block his mental intrusion with the method Tallyn had taught her, aware that she pitted slight and unpractised skills against a vastly experienced intellect.

The Shrike stood up, taking her by surprise. "I must go and see to the running of my ship. I'll see you later."

Rayne paced the cabin, racking her brains for a way out of her predicament. The door was

locked, and no other avenues of escape offered themselves. Getting off a space ship in flight had to be almost impossible, she had never heard of it being tried. Once they reached their destination, her chances would be even slimmer, and she did not even know where they were going. Appealing to the masked marvel seemed hopeless, so she had to find her own way home. After an hour or so of fruitless pondering, she sat down, deciding that she would have to wait for her situation to change.

The door opened as she was dozing off, and she jerked awake, cursing the fact that she always seemed to be falling asleep whenever she was left alone for a while. The Shrike stood in the doorway, and gestured for her to precede him into the corridor. Grey moss carpeted it, and the smooth white walls seemed to have been moulded from a single sheet of plastic, or whatever they were made from. Harsh white lights overhead cast stark shadows, and the only colours seemed to be grey and white. The cold corridor led to a smooth, featureless room, rather like a shuttle bay, where two guards waited. At the Shrike's signal, they stepped forward and gripped her arms. Before she could protest, the shimmering gold of an energy shell engulfed her.

When it dispersed, she stood on a planet's surface. The increased gravity made her knees buckle, and the guards held her up. It must have been half again as much as Earth or Atlan, whose slightly stronger gravity she had grown accustomed to over the last four years. She stood at the edge of a vast transparent dome, and, beyond it, a desert strewn with rocks of varying shapes and sizes stretched away as far as the eye could see. It reminded her of Mars. A wind blew dust against the clear barrier with a soft hiss, and she sensed the aching cold beyond it.

Scudding clouds moved across the grim planet's dull grey sky, and the sun was a dim glow. She turned to look at the dome's interior, which a sprawling city filled. The air was calm and warm, and stunted trees bordered the road that led into the metropolis. The guards guided her between white buildings, some festooned with greenery. Skyways looped overhead and gravcars hummed past. The plasglass dome created a tropical greenhouse where the desert soil yielded all manner of vegetation. Further off, between the buildings, water sprinklers irrigated tracts of agricultural land, and the dome gave the sky a pearly glow.

They entered a nondescript building and traversed a short corridor to a door, which slid open. The guards pushed her inside and the door shut. She gazed around at a sleek, modern room with elegantly understated décor and every creature comfort. Light poured in through skylights, and a warmly decorated bedroom, plush bathroom and an auto kitchen led off it, all tastefully furnished. After an hour or so, she decided to have a hot bath to ease her tension. When she was dressed again, she wandered about, growing bored and restless.

Chapter Eleven

In his Spartan quarters, the Shrike faced a space line screen and activated it with a flick of his thoughts. The wafer-thin crystal that stood on a graceful wand of pale green quartz filled with the chubby, cheerful face of his most trusted friend and second in command. The man's eyes twinkled and his grin revealed square white teeth.

"Well, it's good to see you. Where are you?"

"Ironia. I have the bait, Vidan. Set up the meeting."

Vidan sobered. "You're sure he'll go for it?"

"I'm sure. She's perfect. I paid a hundred thousand for her on Gergonia."

Vidan pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "She must be perfect. I'll contact Urquat."

"Make sure he knows the deal. Jamdar must bring two hundred low-grade slaves, rejects, cripples, burn outs, I don't care, but he must meet Urquat in person. Find out where and when, then contact me."

"You sure Urquat can be trusted?"

"He knows what will happen to him if he betrays me, and he's being paid handsomely for the cover, so why would he betray me?"

Vidan shook his head. "Okay, but I'll need something to whet Jamdar's appetite. He'll want to see the goods."

"I'll transmit a holoidimage."

"Right."

The Shrike turned away as the screen went dead and retracted into its slot.

When no one came for several hours, Rayne decided that she had been left alone for the day and tried to pry off the lock plate on the door, but it foiled her. She cursed it, boredom and frustration fraying her temper. She turned her attention to the rest of the complex, determined to find an egress of some sort, an air duct or maintenance hatch. After searching all the rooms, she came to the disquieting conclusion that the apartment had been designed as a prison.

Sitting on the sofa, she thought about that. It meant the Shrike kept prisoners here, which did not reflect well on his character. She found it strange that he had locked her in here; it did not strike her as the usual quarters for a slave. The rooms seemed to be designed to look like guests' quarters, but to imprison anyone in them.

She jumped as the door opened to admit the Shrike, who glanced around at the disarray her search had caused.

"I trust you've been having fun?"

She glared at him. "What sort of man keeps his guests in a carefully designed prison?"

"A real guest would never know, since they wouldn't try to escape. But you're not a guest, are you?"

"Then you should have put me in the slave pen, with the rest of your slaves. As for your guests, I pity them. Just because you're a crook, you think everybody else is, too."

"Most of the people I know are, and they're not the sort I want wandering around my base."

"So you lock them up."

He shrugged. "If they find themselves locked up, it's only because they tried to escape."

His logic confounded her, and she frowned. "How long are you going to keep me here? Don't you have any use for me? And if not, why did you buy me? Was I an investment?"

He faced her, and she longed to tear off the mask and see his face, its mystery ate at her. She went on, "Why don't you sell me again? Make your dirty profit. Perhaps the next person will be more helpful than you and take me home."

"If you believe that, you're not as smart as I thought you were. Or perhaps you're just naive."

"Does that reduce my value? I'm not stupid. Others would do it for the reward, ones that don't have a price on their heads. You should sell me while you can, Tallyn will be looking for me."

He folded his arms and leant against the wall. "He won't find you."

"You don't know that. The council will send a search party."

"What makes you so important to the Atlanteans? Why did they save you and your brother?"

She rose and wandered away, buying time to formulate an answer. Stopping beside a shelf, she fiddled with an ornament. The few moments did not allow her to come up with anything intelligent, so she settled for hostility. "Wouldn't you like to know? Figure it out for yourself, if you can."

"Maybe I'll have someone look into it."

"They won't find out. Only a few people know, and they won't talk."

"So, it's a big secret, is it?" He pushed himself away from the wall. "I'll bet Drevina knows. She seems to know everything. And she doesn't usually sell her merchandise herself. I was surprised to see her on Gergonia, at least, at a slave market. She's been to a few of the more unsavoury parties, but she's not a great business woman."

"She doesn't know anything," Rayne denied, but he crossed the room towards a blank wall. As he approached, a panel slid aside and a space line screen emerged.

"Okay, I'll tell you," she blurted, desperate to stop him, and he turned to her. "We're the last humans. They wanted to save our genetic data for future generations, a sort of legacy. They created us, after all."

"You're brother and sister."

"Yes, but our genes can still be used with others, and we were the only ones not mutated or diseased."

"Not very plausible, I'm afraid. Your genetic data would have been stored in a lab by now, and even if it wasn't, it's not that important. If the Atlanteans are so desperate to find you, they must have a better reason than that." He faced the screen and activated it, waiting until a link was established and a grey Draycon face filled it.

"Get me Drevina," he ordered.

Rayne chewed her lip, searching her mind for another lie that would satisfy him, but sensed he would go ahead with his call anyway. She was amazed at how quickly the Draycon woman appeared, wearing a false smile.

"Shrike, how nice to hear from you."

"Cut the crap, Drevina. Why did the Atlanteans rescue this girl I bought from you today?"

She looked smug. "You should have found that out before you bought her. Like so many others, you couldn't resist a pretty face, could you?"

"I had my reasons for buying her, now tell me why."

"Kill her, and you won't have to worry about it."

He shook his head. "I paid a lot for her. I'm not about to do that."

"You will when I tell you what she is."

"So tell me."

Drevina said, "She's the Golden Child of Atlantean prophecy, destined to save the Atlantean Empire from ruin. They'll search every corner of this galaxy for her, and when they find her they'll kill you. Kill her or sell her, if you value your life. Why do you think I got rid of her so quickly?"

He broke the connection, banishing her smug visage, and the space line screen slid back into the wall as he turned to Rayne. "Wonderful. Why did you try to keep it a secret? It's the one thing guaranteed to make me want to get rid of you."

"Or kill me."

"No, I'd be more likely to ransom you back to them."

"Then why don't you? They'll pay it."

"I'm sure they would, but I have other plans for you. The Atlanteans won't find you that quickly. It's a big galaxy." He went over to a chair and sank into it. "Who else knows about this, apart from the Atlanteans?"

"No one, as far as I know, why?"

"It would be inconvenient."

"So what are you going to do now?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't change my plans. Things are already in motion, so it's a bit late now."

We'll see what happens."

His evasiveness and mystery angered and frustrated Rayne. Although she could sense little from him in the way of moods, she did not think he was lying. He did not have to, he just told her nothing. An idea struck her, and she stretched forth her fledging telepathy in a clumsy attempt to read his mind. She sensed his thoughts under the surface of his consciousness, a seething cauldron of psychic activity normal for any mind. They were unintelligible to her inexperienced intellect, and she strived to unravel them.

A flash of red pain hit her behind her eyes, as if someone had thrust a hot poker into her brain. She staggered back with a yelp, clutching her temples. Her knees buckled, but the Shrike caught her before she hit the floor, gripping her arms. The pain vanished, leaving her dazed.

"You fool! Don't ever try that again." He lifted her and pushed her onto the couch. "I didn't know you were a damned telepath. I could have fried your brains, you idiot. Are you all right?"

Rayne nodded, her head pounding with an unbelievable migraine. He sat beside her, and she closed her eyes, concentrating on soothing the ache in her skull.

He said, "I thought humans were incapable of telepathy. Whoever opened your mind to its powers did a very bad job of teaching you how to use them. They should have told you never to attempt such an obvious intrusion into a fellow telepath. I could have sworn you had no ability at all. You can't even hide your thoughts, although they are pretty clear. I should have realised."

The pain eased, and she opened her eyes, startled to find him so close, and even more surprised that his proximity did not disturb her. Instead, she found it exciting, and looked away as a wave of shyness washed over her.

He seemed to study her. "Is there anything else I should know about? I don't like surprises."

She rubbed her brow, frowning. "No, not really. Only that I'm a psy-healer."

"That's a rare talent."

"But I'm sure it doesn't change your plans, which, if you don't intend to make a huge profit by ransoming me back to the Atlanteans, can only mean you'll sell me to someone who will make me disappear forever, even if they don't kill me."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because, like Drevina, you stand to gain if Atlan falls. They've condemned you to death, and they hunt you. With them gone, you'd be free to do as you please."

"True," he agreed, "but I'm not Drevina. In fact, I have no liking for her at all, and a galaxy ruled by the Draycons is not a place I'd like to live in. The Atlanteans are a fair bunch, and their efforts to capture me have never caused me a problem. If Atlan fell, I'd more likely find myself at war with the Draycons, which wouldn't make me very happy."

"At war?" She snorted. "You mean wiped out! You're just a slaver. The Draycons have the second largest empire."

"They'd have a job wiping me out. My empire rivals theirs in size and is perhaps a little stronger in firepower."

She frowned. "That's impossible. I've been studying at the Atlantean library for years, and there's no mention of you in it at all."

"That doesn't surprise me. I'm sure there is, if you looked for it, but it's probably well hidden or classified. They don't like to admit that I exist. That's why they don't come looking for me. They know it would end up in a very bloody battle, and it's not worth it to capture one man. They'd rather wait for an opportunity to grab me when I'm away from my fleet and out of my territory, but that doesn't happen much."

"But you're an outlaw. How can you rule an empire?"

He shook his head. "I don't rule it exactly. I'm not a king or an emperor. It's an empire of wealth and ships and planets I've accumulated over the years. I have more ships than planets, and most of my people are fighters; outlaws, like me. Atlan and Draycon have massive civilian populations spread over many planets; a lot to protect with their fleets. The war between them was messy. Whole planets were wiped out before the Atlantean ships could reach them. I have a few more planets like this one; well hidden, where my crews are able to have families and holidays, but they spend most of their lives in space."

He paused, and Rayne urged, "Go on."

"That's about it. What else do you want to know?"

"How did you become the leader of your empire?"

"I built it. People flocked to my banner, you could say. It's taken fifty years to get this big, but it's still growing, because I keep building ships. I'm far less vulnerable than Atlan or Draycon. My planets are all well-guarded, since I have only a few of them."

"If you've had an empire for fifty years, you must be pretty old," she said.

"Not really. I'm a hundred and twenty-eight, which isn't old, considering I should live to see five hundred if Tallyn doesn't find me."

"Do you ever take that mask off?"

"Only in private," he said. "It has filters to purify the air, and can protect me from some noxious gasses."

"Are you Atlantean?"

"No. My race is extinct, like yours."

"What happened to them?"

He looked away. "It's not something I like to talk about."

The Shrike rose to his feet, forestalling further questions, and wandered around the room, rearranging the things she had untied in her search. She turned to watch him as he moved with cat-like grace. He righted a couple of ornaments, then went over to a wall and straightened a picture before facing her again.

"I have things to do. Food will be brought to you at the appropriate time."

After he left, she stared at the door for a while, startled by his abrupt exit.

The Shrike sat before a space line screen in his private sanctum, a gloved finger tracing the edge of his mask. The room's tranquil ambience stemmed from its subdued décor of grey-blue walls and cream and glass furniture, recessed lighting and grey moss carpet. The plump, jovial face that filled the screen looked worried, and Vidan's tone was unhappy.

"I agree, it all seems legitimate, but it's awfully risky. Is it really worth it to get Jamdar? You'll be out of your territory, with only one ship. You can't bring more without them being spotted, and if Urquat decides to rat you out Jamdar will have you."

"I want Jamdar," the Shrike said. "He's taken the bait. This is the closest I've ever come to cornering that slimy bastard. No one will suspect anything, it's a legitimate takeover. The only risk is in the kill itself."

"Because you insist on doing it yourself."

"It's my decision. I don't have the right to risk someone else's life."

Vidan grimaced. "What if you're killed? You're the most important person around here, you know. Others would give their lives for you. I'd do it myself!"

"I know you would. When is the meeting set for? We might have to rush this; certain other factors have come to light."

"Two days from now. Why? What other factors?"

The Shrike shook his head. "Nothing to be concerned about."

"When you say things like that, it only makes me more suspicious. I need to know all the circumstances surrounding this deal, or I'll pull the plug, I swear. If it's more dangerous than it seems, I need to know about it."

"You can't pull the plug."

"I could warn Jamdar."

"You'd do that?"

Vidan puffed out his cheeks. "If I thought it would save your life, yes."

"I should fire you." The Shrike sighed. "All right, it's the bait. It seems she's important to Atlan. They're looking for her, so I need to do this tomorrow, then they can have her back."

"Are you nuts?" Vidan's brown eyes widened in an almost comical expression of horror. "You're going to meet Jamdar with the damned Atlanteans on your tail?"

"They're not on my tail. It'll take them a few more days to find out I've got her, even if they grab

Drevina. Then they have to try to find out which of my bases she's on. I just want this over and her off my hands before they start making a nuisance of themselves. Set up the meeting for tomorrow. Tell Jamdar it's a one-day deal."

"You are nuts. All right, I'll do it, but personally, I hope Jamdar tells you to go stick it."

"Thanks. Get back to me as soon as it's set."

Vidan snorted, and the space line went blank. The Shrike stared at it for a few minutes, then rose and left the sealed room in which he conducted his most secret communications.

Rayne looked up as the door opened to admit the Shrike, who moved with his usual unhurried grace. After a good supper, she had slept well and woken refreshed. Since her nights were not in sync with the planet's, dawn had not yet broken, and she had filled the time watching an entertainment vidfilm, nibbling on snacks. If anything, her prison was more comfortable than Tallyn's house. The Shrike glanced at the large, millimetre-thick crystal screen on which the vidfilm played, and it went black. The screen slid back into its socket, and Rayne shot him a frown.

"Come." He gestured towards the door, indicating that she should precede him through it. She put down her packet of snack bits, the alien equivalent of crisps, and rose to approach him. As she stepped into the corridor, the crazy urge to run took hold, but the sensation was short lived, for such an action was foolhardy and doomed from the outset. The prospect of discovering her fate cheered her somewhat as she strode ahead of him.

"Where are we going?"

"Just for a walk. I thought you'd like to see the base, get some fresh air, and stretch your legs."

A tart retort leapt onto her tongue, but she bit it back. It would be foolish and prideful to scorn his effort to make her comfortable, to say nothing of churlish and ungrateful. Instead, she gazed around at the scenery. People, whom she assumed were slaves, since they all wore collars, bowed to him as he passed, smiling. Most were Atlantean, but some had alien features and a few were truly unusual. They left the building, and he led her to a sleek gravcar. Dawn tinged the dome with delicate pink as the sun neared the horizon, brightening the sky outside. She found the car's confines uncomfortable, acutely aware of the man beside her.

The Shrike guided the car along a smooth black street towards the growing light, passing uniform, square buildings where people were just starting the day's work. They approached the edge of the dome, and he steered the vehicle onto a grassy area bordered by flowering trees. He parked it and climbed out, waiting for her to join him. Standing beside him, she gazed out through the clear barrier, enthralled by the desert's beauty.

After a few minutes, the sun touched the horizon with a line of liquid gold, then rose in a blaze of glory as the dust that flew in the bitter wind turned the sky into a medley of red, yellow, magenta and pink. The scant clouds were painted with the wonderful reflections of these colours, a paler counterpoint to the masterpiece. The huge orb of the magnified sun blazed at the centre, a great gold coin rising over the horizon.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the Shrike murmured.

Rayne nodded, unable to speak. The brilliant rays turned the desert into a blazing golden platter; a gilded anvil that belied the cold that seeped through the dome.

"Even the most hostile environment has its beauty. I'm sure you've never seen such a glorious sunrise," he commented.

"No, I haven't."

"It's hard to imagine people living out there, isn't it?"

"Do they?"

"Yes. A few hundred lost, scarred souls, too hostile to live in a normal environment anymore."

Rayne went over to the low wall and leant on it. She wondered what kind of people would live in the golden desert with its swirling dust.

She glanced at the Shrike. "How do those people live out there?"

The Shrike clasped his hands behind his back. "I give them food and water."

"Why don't they live here, with the others?"

"They can't." He turned his head towards her, and apparently noticed her puzzled look. "You

would never understand. You're an innocent in a cruel universe. You have no idea what goes on."

"So tell me."

"No. You'll find out, but not from me."

Rayne swung away, angered by his refusal to explain even this. He watched the sunrise until the colours faded, then returned to the gravcar. She followed, sitting beside him with a shiver. He seemed unaware of her discomfort, although he ensured that no contact was made. He touched the controls, and the car rose.

The Shrike took her on a tour of the city, pointing out the agriculture and the rig that pumped water from far beneath the planet's crust. Workers' houses lined the roads in residential suburbs, each surrounded by a little patch of flowering greenery. Rayne wondered why he spent so much time with a slave, but knew she would not get an answer. Thoughts of escape still plagued her, but even if she could get out of the dome, she would perish in the desert. The more she pondered the problem, the larger it grew, and even getting out of the dome was almost impossible. There was only one well-guarded airlock.

At noon, they returned to the apartment, where the Shrike ordered lunch from the dewy-eyed slave girl who cleaned it. She appeared to be Atlantean, a lower cast with almost monotone brown hair and dark green eyes, her skin a dusky gold and her figure willowy. She smiled at him with such blatant flirtation that Rayne was embarrassed for the girl's sake, but when the slave glanced at Rayne her eyes turned into chips of ice.

Rayne waited for her to leave before turning to her captor. "Your slave seems to be rather hostile. Does she think I'm going to replace her or something? Is she afraid of being sold?"

"Slave? Oh, I see. No, nothing like that. She might be jealous. A lot of them are somewhat possessive."

"Jealous? Of you?" She laughed. "How can they be jealous of a man who hides behind a mask? A man who is their master?"

He stalked over to the bar and poured a drink. "I don't know."

Rayne was delighted to have found something that made him uncomfortable, eager for a way to avenge her humiliation at his hands. "So you think your female slaves are in love with you? You must have an enormous ego." She giggled, but her amusement vanished when he strode over to her, making her step back in surprise and trepidation.

"You would never understand," he said. "You may be innocent - perhaps too innocent - but you're also ignorant."

The Shrike thrust a glass at her, and she took it with trembling hands, unable to stem her reaction to his angry proximity. Her heart slowed as he moved away and sat on the sofa, and she took several deep breaths to calm herself. A gulp of the liquid in her glass made her cough, surprised by its alcohol content. He watched her as he lifted his glass to the region of his mouth.

Rayne stared, fascinated, as a hinged portion of the mask allowed the glass to touch hidden lips. After a pause, she sat opposite him, uncertain of what to say. His sudden anger had sent her hard-won confidence scuttling into a dark corner of her mind, leaving her timid and unsure. An uncomfortable silence ensued, which the re-entry of the serving girl with lunch broke. The Shrike watched her, and must have noticed the icy glance she shot Rayne.

After the maid left, he poured the wine and passed Rayne a plate of roast pseudo-fowl and steamed vegetables, leaving her to stew in her curiosity. He slid aside a portion of the mask to eat, but the darkness within was too deep for her to glimpse anything. About halfway through the meal, he asked about her life on Earth, and appeared to be interested in her stories. After several tales, she decided to see if he would respond in kind.

"Why did you rescue me from the store guards, that day on Earth, and why didn't you capture me then?"

"I wasn't there looking for slaves or booty. I was just curious, and stopped over for a few hours, no more. I pitied your people and their fate, but I didn't want to interfere. I admit, I was tempted to take you away from that terrible place, but I wasn't sure how you'd react. Some people prefer to die with their world. Saving an intelligent being isn't the same as rescuing a starving Versar kitten. That awful place might have unhinged you, or the shock of being taken from your world might have driven

you mad.

"I didn't want to be responsible for that, and my ship wasn't equipped for acclimatising or decontaminating aliens. The environment you lived in was pretty hostile. It gave me a nasty rash, even though I was only in it for a few minutes. I did you a small favour, which I hoped would help you, but I couldn't do more than that. Besides, the place was getting crowded, and the Atlantean ship was coming dangerously close to detecting mine."

"You were lucky they didn't see you. They had me under surveillance," she commented.

"If they'd been watching, they would have done something about it if they wanted to collect you. I watched the chase for several minutes before I intervened. I hoped you'd escape on your own."

She smiled. "When you appeared in front of me, I thought you were an autocrat."

"Tell me about them."

Rayne obliged while she ate her lunch, whose flavour was far superior even to the finest pseudo-meat she had consumed on Atlan. The Shrike appeared to be interested, made a few comments and asked questions. The wish to see his face redoubled as she talked, for she could only guess at his mood, other than polite interest. She wanted to ask him again to remove it, but sensed that he would not.

As soon as the flirtatious slave girl cleared away their empty plates, he left without explanation, only saying that he would see her later. She seethed inwardly at the unwelcome reminder that she was only a slave and unworthy of any kind of excuse, to be left alone when he felt like it, with no concern for her feelings. Her anger set her once more upon her endeavour to escape, and she set to picking the door lock with a thin-bladed knife she had purloined from the lunch table. She pried open the panel beside the door, but the mass of crystals and wires that resided within it confounded her. She prodded it with the knife, hoping to hit the right short circuit, but only succeeded in giving herself a nasty shock.

Rayne was nursing her tingling hand and glaring at the ruined panel when the Shrike returned. He noticed the damaged panel and shook his head.

"So, you've been busy again. Did you hurt yourself?"

She scowled at him. "I'll live. Do you think I'm just going to sit here and do nothing?"

"You won't have to do that much longer."

Her blood turned cold. "You're going to collar me."

"No. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Slaves usually get collared, don't they?"

"Usually."

"So why should I expect anything different?"

He made a sound of disgust and turned away, sinking into a chair. "No reason, I suppose. Anyway, you're going to get your wish. I'm going to sell you. The sales been set up. It will take place within the next few hours."

A wave of intense dismay and terror swamped her, and she sat opposite as her legs shook. For some insane reason, perhaps because he had been so evasive before, she had not expected this. She fought a strong urge to beg him not to, her emotions conflicted. Her sale offered a slight hope of rescue, unless her next owner turned out to be the killer Drevina had hoped for. At least the Shrike did not seem to be such a person, yet she had asked to be sold. Now that it was about to happen, the prospect terrified her. He studied her stunned expression.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

"No! I want to go back to Atlan."

He nodded. "Of course, but that's not an option. You'll be quite safe, I assure you."

"How would you know? Once I'm sold, anything might happen to me."

"You wanted me to sell you."

"I've changed my mind. I'd rather stay with you. At least you're not a psychopathic killer, or so you say."

"I might have lied," he pointed out. "You also know that the Atlanteans have a better chance of finding you if I keep you, don't you?" She shrugged, and he continued, "Which is exactly why I have to sell you. I don't need the aggravation. You'll be safe, I promise. As soon as you're sold, I'll contact

Tallyn and tell him who's got you, then he can rescue you."

Her brows rose, a stab of bitterness spoiling her joy. "That would be generous of you, if you weren't so obviously killing two birds with one stone. You make a profit and destroy a rival at the same time. A neat plan."

"What makes you think it's a rival and not a customer? How do you know I'm not just doing this to throw Tallyn off my trail? Or maybe even to help you, as I did on Earth?"

She hesitated. "If you only want to help me, why don't you just let me go?"

"I must admit, I do want my money back. But passing the information to Tallyn is to help you."

"And to get him off your trail."

He shrugged. "That too. But my reasons are irrelevant. The end result will be the same. You'll be returned to Atlan."

"Unless you're lying, or your rival decides to kill me before Tallyn can save me."

"Are all humans so pessimistic and suspicious?"

"I have my reasons," she said.

"Yes, I suppose you do. I debated the wisdom of telling you anything. Perhaps I shouldn't have. The damage is done, I suppose."

"You're a cold bastard, aren't you? You don't care what happens to me. I hope Tallyn does find you. I hope he kills you. In fact, I'll do all I can to help him."

The Shrike tilted his head, as if considering her, but she sensed no hint of his mood. She regretted her words, and wished she could call them back. Apart from the fact that she did not want him to be killed, for reasons she did not care to contemplate, her threat also gave him every reason to ensure that she could not help Tallyn. Not that she could do much, other than describe the world on which he had his base, but arid planets around yellow dwarf suns were common.

For some reason, his decision to sell her was hurtful, yet she did not understand why. Her confusion brought a wave of homesickness and self-pity, mixed with an unhealthy dose of shame at her worthlessness. A logical voice demanded to know why she would imagine a man like the Shrike, an alien, an outlaw and a slaver, would care about someone like her, but it did not salve her emotional reaction.

Two tears escaped down her cheeks, and she scrubbed them away, then glanced up when the Shrike rose and headed for the door. He paused there as if to say something, then turned and left.

Rayne rubbed her eyes, her emotional turmoil now including anger and embarrassment at her show of weakness. Going into the bathroom, she splashed her face, then returned to sit in the lounge and contemplate her future. If the Shrike kept his word, she would soon be back on Atlan and reunited with Rawn. If not, she could face any number of horrors. She regretted her ill-advised threat now, and resolved to take it back when next she saw him.

On Vengeance's bridge, Marcon looked up from his holograms and announced, "We've just received another signal, Commander, dead ahead again."

Tallyn's looked grim. "Time delay?"

"Still more than two days."

"The same heading," Tallyn mused, his brows knotted.

"Do you want to call for an escort before we go any further into this area, sir?"

"No, continue."

Rawn asked, "What's so dangerous about where we're going?"

Tallyn turned to him. "The signal is leading us into an area of space that's notorious for outlaws and petty tyrants. That in itself isn't of great concern, since Vengeance is a battle cruiser and few can hope to match her. But we're heading into the territory of a particularly nasty and... powerful tyrant. Since we left Gergonia, the trail has led straight here, so there's little hope that it's going to change its heading now."

"So who is this tyrant you're so concerned about?"

"He's known as the Shrike, and he has a particularly bad reputation of hostility towards intruders. He has a large fleet, and is considered dangerous. No doubt one of his buyers purchased Rayne on Gergonia and took her to one of his bases. They have no reason to harm her, I assure you.

As a valuable slave, she'll be treated well."

Rawn studied the commander's tense face. Since Rayne's abduction, Tallyn had put on a convincing façade of bluff confidence and unconcern, but Rawn could tell he was worried. He wondered how much of Tallyn's concern stemmed from Rayne's abduction, and how much was because she had fallen into the hands of this particular slaver. Putting aside his worries, Rawn asked the question that had been burning in his mind since they left Atlan.

"Just how are you tracking her? What's this signal you're following?"

Tallyn hesitated, shooting him a guilty look. "When you were brought to Atlan, you were both fitted with cyber implants. It's standard procedure, so one day you can be trained to use them to link with our data nets and such, but they also serve as beacons."

Rawn rubbed the spot above his left ear, which, although he had no scar there, was where the terrible headaches had started in the weeks after their testing and immunisation. Anger chilled him, but he quelled the hot words that sprang onto his tongue.

"Beacons. So you can always track us down."

"For your safety. We're your guardians. We have to be able to keep you safe."

"You didn't do a very good job with Rayne, did you?"

"A slip. It won't happen again, and we'll find her, I swear."

Rawn glared at him. "When you do, we're having these things taken out of our heads, got it?"

"If not for the beacon, we'd have very little chance of ever finding her again. That implant will save her life."

"You put these things in our heads without our permission, and you'll remove them if we tell you to!"

Tallyn made a calming gesture. "You can't have them removed. They're considered compulsory in our society. Without them, you wouldn't be able to use the space net, drive a car, hell, even some doors won't open for you. We all have one."

Rawn frowned at Marcon. "You do?"

Marcon nodded. "Most of the interfacing done here is through the implants. Atlanteans have them fitted at a young age, and they're used for most everyday transactions between us and machines. Cars, databases, medical facilities, purchasing, selling, whatever's done through the space net or with machines requires a cyber implant's codes. It's also how we convert our thoughts into signals that machines can understand."

"Then we'll keep that part of them, but the beacons must go."

"That's not for you to decide," Tallyn said. "Yours will be deactivated if that's what you want, but it's up to Rayne to make her decision. After what she's been through, she might want to keep it."

"Fine. As long as she knows what you did to her and has a choice, which she should have had in the first place. I don't like the fact that we were never consulted about it, asked if we wanted it, or even told we had the damned things. You treated us like animals."

Tallyn glanced at Marcon, unwilling to meet Rawn's angry eyes. Instead, he studied the holograms scrolling up in front of his lieutenant, trying to ignore Rawn's glare. He could not deny that what the council had ordered was wrong. The humans should have at least been told what had been done to them. The fact that Atlantean children were fitted without being consulted did not mean alien adults should be treated the same way.

After a short silence, Rawn asked, "What's this 'time delay' you were talking about earlier?"

"The beacon gives off a normal microwave signal," Tallyn explained. "It only travels at the speed of light. The ship on which Rayne travelled was moving much faster than light, so the signals were left behind, like bread crumbs on a path. The time delay is how long the signal had been travelling when we picked it up."

"Two days?"

"Well, that's almost how long she's been missing, so we're still following the track of her second abductor, the one who took her from Gergonia. Unfortunately, it took us a long time to pick up her trail from Atlan. But now that we're on the right track, it's only a matter of time before we catch up."

Rawn grunted and gazed across the bridge, wishing it was not taking quite so long. Every passing hour increased his worry. Their progress was slow, for in order to detect the signals, Vengeance had to decelerate and shed the energy shell. Even though they knew which direction the signals were heading in, they could not risk overshooting their destination and being forced to double back, perhaps losing the trail forever when the signals dispersed.

Chapter Twelve

Rayne watched a vidfilm documentary of an obscure alien ecology, which she found rather fascinating in a shuddery sort of way. The suite was equipped with a diverse selection of entertainment and informative vidfilms, some of which she had sampled to stave off boredom. When the door opened, she looked up in surprise, expecting the Shrike. Instead, the diminutive slave girl who had served lunch stood in the doorway, her eyes cold. Rayne's gaze slid past to the temptingly open door, but, even as she stared at it, the girl stepped forward and it slid shut. The slave eyed Rayne with obvious dislike.

"So, what makes you so damned special?"

Rayne's brows rose. "I have no idea. What makes you say I'm special?"

"Come on, you don't think he keeps all the girls he saves in this kind of luxury, do you?"

Rayne shook her head in confusion. "He didn't save me. He bought me at a slave market."

"Of course he did, stupid. He buys all of us, except the ones he steals. What I want to know is why he's keeping you here, and why he's spending so much time with you." Her eyes dropped to Rayne's neck. "You don't even have a collar."

Rayne's mind raced, hope flaring in her heart. This girl obviously resented her presence, for reasons best left unexplored, and might be willing to help her escape, if it was at all possible. She leant forward, her eyes eager. "Listen, you don't want me here, and I don't want to be here. Is there any way to get off this world? Maybe send a distress signal? Could you smuggle me aboard a ship, maybe a freighter? There must be foreign ships in orbit, like traders, or associates?"

"You want to escape from Tarke?" She looked incredulous.

"Tarke? Is that his real name?"

"Yes."

"Will you help me?"

The girl stepped closer to study Rayne with a puzzled, pitying expression. "You don't have to escape from Tarke. He'll take you back to your home world if you want to go."

Rayne's jaw dropped, then she gave a snort of laughter. "I'm a slave, like you. He's going to sell me."

The girl touched her collar. "I'm not a slave anymore. He freed me, like everyone else. There are no slaves here."

Rayne stared at her, stunned. The poor creature must be drugged or deluded, not to know her situation, or perhaps she made her life bearable by living in a fantasy of denial. She gestured to a chair, inviting the girl to sit. Rayne searched for the right words to ask for help without bursting the girl's bubble of self-delusion.

"Look, you may be happy here, but I'm not. I want to go home, and perhaps the Shrike is too busy to take me. Can you help?"

The girl frowned. "There are no foreign ships in orbit. All the ships around this planet belong to Tarke."

Rayne's heart sank. "Is there any other way off this world?"

"There's a transport leaving tomorrow, returning slaves to their home worlds. If you mingle with the others, they'll take you. I don't understand why Tarke would refuse to let you go. Are you sure he said no?"

"Well, perhaps he just wants to keep me a little longer." Jealousy flared in the girl's eyes, and Rayne hurried on, "But I want to be on that ship. Can you help me?"

"Yes, I can get you on the ship, if you want."

Relief washed through Rayne in a warm tide. "Thank you."

The girl shot her a puzzled look, and Rayne tried to keep the pity out of her eyes. This poor girl was jealous of a man with no face, and obviously could not understand Rayne's wish to leave. Tarke. A strange name. Meeting a slave girl who imagined she was free had undermined Rayne's slight faith in his honesty, and the whole situation stank. After all her futile attempts to escape, one of the Shrike's

slaves was going to free her. How ironic.

The girl rose and went to the door, where she stopped and beckoned to Rayne as it slid open. "I'll take you to the embarkation area, where you can wait with the others. You'd better cover your neck, or you'll draw attention to yourself."

Rayne turned up the collar of her suit and fastened it under her chin as she followed the girl. Apparently the door was coded to admit anyone but her, so leaving the suite was just a matter of following the girl. She hurried down the deserted corridor after the slave, who turned into another that led deeper into the building. The girl marched along confidently, and they passed several people who ignored them. Rayne was inclined to try to duck out of sight when someone appeared, which made the slave girl shoot her scathing looks.

They trotted down another corridor, and, although she did not seem concerned about capture, the girl was certainly in a hurry. They passed more people, none of whom gave them a second glance. Rayne relaxed, realising that they did not know who she was. Surprisingly, no guards or overseers were in evidence; the slaves seemed to go about their business without supervision.

Halfway along the corridor, they entered a lift and shot up several floors. The girl used the time to scrutinise Rayne, as if trying to discern her particular brand of madness. When the lift doors opened, they stepped out into a brightly lighted area populated by scores of men and women moving purposefully about. Rayne followed her guide across a vast hangar where several gleaming black shuttles were berthed, attracting only a few incurious looks.

Glancing into a clear-walled office as they hurried past, she stumbled, shocked. The Shrike stood talking to a man who bobbed his head in a subservient manner. As she watched, the Shrike settled into a form-fitting chair and glanced around at the people outside. Rayne quickened her pace, turning her head away. The acres of open floor seemed to take hours to cross, and she almost trampled on the girl's heels in her eagerness to reach the other side, as far away from the Shrike as she could. They passed through a door at the far end, entering a larger hangar, which also bustled with activity.

A sleek black space ship sat on its belly in the middle of it, and Rayne was unable to resist stopping to study it. At first the ship's streamlining puzzled her, then she realised that it was small enough to be an atmosphere craft as well. A needle nose swelled into a graceful body, the bulk of which comprised two enormous energy conduits for the dimension drive. It hovered on its anti-gravity coils, mere centimetres above the ground. Deactivated repellers made spiral indentations on its flanks, top and tail. A scanner ring circled the sharp nose, held in place by invisible attractor fields.

Silver hawk emblems gleamed on its sides, and its familiarity struck Rayne. Every ship she had studied on Atlan had some bizarre shape, either boxy, saucer, spherical, pyramidal or beyond description, but this was the first ship that looked like something she could relate to, a jet fighter without wings. It also lacked the delicate antenna arrays that sprouted from star ships, which atmospheric travel would destroy. She became aware of the slave girl beside her, gazing at the ship with a soft smile.

"It's Tarke's special ship. The neural net was damaged in a battle. It's being fixed."

Rayne glanced around, wondering if they had any security at all in this place. Evidently not, for no one seemed concerned by their presence. She followed the girl through a door at the far end of the hangar, which led into yet another vast area, where Rayne stopped in surprise. Hundreds of people sat at one end of the room, a soft murmur issuing from their ranks.

Three long lines shuffled towards the far wall, where three shuttles were parked. The people vanished into the vessels, and several black-clad men watched them, at times stepping forward to answer a question. Others walked amongst the seated people, occasionally bending to speak to them before they moved on. Rayne stepped back at the sight of the uniformed guards, and the girl turned to eye her scornfully.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. Go and join them. They're being taken to a ship that leaves tomorrow. Tell them where you want to go, and they'll take you there."

"Atlan?"

"All who wish to go to Atlan are taken to Adrivia, a nearby world. There you can call your friends to pick you up."

"Just like that?" Rayne could not believe it. It was too simple, too easy.

The girl snorted. "Why not? The Shrike's not a slaver, stupid girl. He rescues slaves and gives them back their freedom. There are no prisons or guards on Ironia, none to keep you here, at any rate."

"He bought me at an auction. He told me he was going to..." Remembering her resolve not to end the poor girl's fantasy, she trailed off. "It doesn't matter. This will suit me fine."

Rayne studied the crowd with a pang of pity, finding some poor thin wretches amongst them, and their placid, contented expressions surprised her. These unfortunates were probably being transported to auction, but mingling with them still offered a chance of escape. Once away from the planet, she could make her offer to the ship's captain, and the chances were good that he would find it tempting. A valuable ransom had to be better than a lesser amount from the auction block, and would save him the expense of a collar. She turned to thank the girl, who pulled a face and flounced off the way they had come.

Rayne joined a queue, hoping she would be off the planet before the Shrike realised she was gone. Her hopes were dashed when a guard announced that the shuttles were full, and those in front of her went to sit by the wall. She checked that her collar still hid her bare neck, which, along with her clothes and well fed appearance, set her apart from the other slaves. Most of them wore plain grey coveralls, and only the guards wore black suits like hers. She realised that she would be mistaken for a guard, not a slave. Heartened, she walked over to a wall and leant against it, like the other guards.

Over an hour passed before the shuttles returned, and the slaves rose to reform the queues. Rayne got some odd looks from the other slaves when she joined the line, but ignored them. After half an hour of waiting, the shuttles were full again, and the slaves returned to sit at the back of the room once more. She wandered over to lean against a wall, affecting a bland expression to hide her growing nervousness. The shuttles returned and the queues reformed once more, and this time she got a place much further up the line, not far from the nearest shuttle. Her spirits lifted as she shuffled forward, prodding the man in front of her to try to speed things up, and he glanced back irritably a couple of times.

The slaves' murmur hushed, and an eerie silence fell on the crowd as the people in front of Rayne glanced around. They fell to their knees with a great sigh, and she stood rooted to the spot, unable to look around at her approaching doom. An insane urge to run for the shuttle made her want to giggle as hysteria swelled inside her like a giant bubble.

A soft, beautiful, and all too familiar voice spoke beside her. "Going somewhere?"

She swung to face him, her brows knotting as she was forced to look up at the ugly mask.

"Trying to."

"Well done. You got quite far. But surely you didn't think you'd escape this easily. Who helped you?"

"No one." She couldn't bring herself to betray the girl.

The Shrike took hold of her arm and led her towards the distant door through which she had entered. The slaves watched him pass, their expressions adoring, or perhaps merely terrified, she mused. Why would slaves adore a slaver? In the next hangar, he released her, apparently once again secure in the knowledge that she would walk meekly beside him. His arrogant assurance made her seethe with futile fury, wishing she could prove him wrong. He stopped before the sleek black ship and gestured to it.

"What do you think of my ship?"

"It's a bit small," she said, hiding her admiration.

"It's meant to be. Size isn't everything. I have huge battle cruisers too, of course, some even larger than Atlan's finest, but they require big crews, and I prefer solitude."

"You like to brag, too, don't you?"

He took her arm again, his touch impersonal, and steered her away from the ship. "You're in a bad mood today, aren't you?"

Rayne longed to jerk free, for his touch made her shiver. "So would you be, if you'd almost managed to get free of a damned slaver, then been caught."

"Well, almost isn't good enough, is it? Anyway, it was a pretty dumb plan in the first place.

Whose was it?"

"The - mine. And it wasn't so dumb. The captain of that ship would have jumped at a huge reward from Atlan for my return."

He shook his head. "No he wouldn't. My crews are all loyal to me. He would have brought you back."

Rayne fumed as he escorted her back towards the office where she had seen him earlier. The short, stocky man to whom he had been speaking, an Atlantean with pudgy features, narrow brown eyes and high class two-tone hair of ash blond and dark brown, came at his signal and bowed. The Shrike stopped and released her arm, facing his subordinate.

"Find Layalia and bring her to my quarters."

The man nodded and left.

Rayne looked at the Shrike. "Who's Layalia?"

"The one who helped you, I'm sure."

She shivered as he took her arm again and led her towards the corridor. "Please don't punish her."

He glanced at her, and she sensed a rare unguarded emotion from him. Surprise. "Why not?"

"She was only trying to help me. She seems to think..."

"What?"

"That she's not a slave."

"Ah." He shook his head. "But she was wrong to do that."

"She thought those slaves were being freed. She thought I could leave too. She didn't know she was helping me escape."

"Layalia was trying to get rid of you, and her actions might have jeopardised my plans."

She cast him a baleful glance. "What will you do to her?"

"That remains to be seen."

"You don't even know if she's the one who helped me."

"She's the only one who would have a reason to, strange though it is. She's the girl who served us lunch, the one who disliked my attention to you. Don't bother denying it."

Rayne jerked her arm from his grip as they arrived outside her door. "If you want to punish someone, punish me. I'm the one who persuaded her to do it. She's a poor deluded creature, living in a fantasy world. Please, Tarke."

"Very well." The door opened, and he followed her inside. "So she told you my name. Stupid girl."

Rayne turned to face him in the middle of the lounge. "What will you do to me?"

"Do to you? Oh, punishment, right." He went to the bar and poured a drink, which he sipped, then chuckled. "You know, right now she's probably disporting herself naked on my bed, hoping my summoning of her is for that reason. Unfortunately for her, it's not, and her wish will be unfulfilled. That, along with a few choice words of chastisement, will doubtless send her weeping to her room, and will be her punishment. How do you plan to partake in that?"

"That's all? I suppose it's cruel enough, in its way, considering the fantasy she lives in. I thought slave collars were used for punishment."

He turned to face her, and she sensed a faint flash of pure pain from him. "They are. They inflict exquisite torture. But this is far too slight an infraction for such drastic measures, don't you think?"

"I think the whole thing is barbaric."

"Of course you do." He put down his glass and picked up a dress that was draped across the back of a chair. Its delivery was doubtless how he had discovered her escape. He held it up, displaying a shimmering fall of silver-shot white silk-like material, the thin shoulder straps glittering with gold thread, its uneven hem a marvel of silver filigree lace. Rayne stared at it, entranced by its beauty and repelled by its purpose.

"I want you to wear this for the auction." His words made her stomach clench.

"No."

"Come on, it's not as bad as the one Drevina made you wear. This isn't revealing and crass, just beautiful."

"I won't wear it."

He lowered the dress. "Don't be difficult, Rayne." She shook her head, and he added, "I don't want to have to get the guards to put it on you, do you?"

"I'll rip it to shreds."

"And be sold in the nude. You certainly will be tempting like that." He put down the dress and stepped closer, forcing her to look up at him. "Do this for me."

The full force of his devastating charisma made her spine turn to jelly and her knees quiver. She fought it, hating the raw power he exuded, a blatant charm so strong he did not even need a face to wield it. The urge to do as he asked was almost too strong to deny. She was aware that some of the power she sensed was mental; a telepathic coercion mixed with his animal magnetism, but the combination was almost irresistible.

She swallowed hard and stepped back. "All right, on one condition."

"What?"

"You take off the mask."

"No. No deal, I'm afraid. Just wear the dress. It's not much to ask. It's a beautiful gown. I'd like to see you in it."

Once more the full force of his charm came to bear, and this time he reinforced it by reaching out to stroke her cheek with a gloved hand. The caress was feather light, but her skin tingled and her stomach tried to turn over. With an act of will, she swung away and strode across the room, putting as much distance between them as possible before facing him again.

"No."

"You're a strong one. Or are you...?" He walked closer, and she forced herself to stand her ground, refusing to let him chase her all over the room. This time she sensed only his natural charm. He stopped and studied her, the mask a blank barrier that she longed to tear off. A slight tingle within her skull warned her, and she gasped, trying to throw up the mental shields she never remembered to keep in place. The tingle of his intrusion stopped, and he turned away.

"So, no wonder that didn't work."

"What did you try to do? Why didn't it work?"

"I want you to put on the dress, and I really don't want to use force."

"Take off the mask."

"No."

She folded her arms. "Then you'll have to use force."

He sighed and sank onto the sofa. "Why this preoccupation with the mask? Why does it matter to you what I look like, unless you want to tell the Atlanteans?"

"Why would the Atlanteans care?"

"Because whenever they've come close to capturing me, one of my people has donned a copy of my mask and taken my place to save me. So far the Atlanteans have tried and executed six Shrikes. I don't like it, but my forbidding them to take my place means nothing to them, they do it anyway."

"How loyal of them," she muttered.

"So, now you know. Apart from that, I have other reasons for not wanting my fellow slavers to know what I look like, very different reasons. If you want to bargain for the dress, name something else."

Rayne considered. Her position was hopeless; he would get the dress on her one way or another, so she might as well gain some small concession out of this. If he was willing to offer something in return for her co-operation, it was better than nothing. Her gaze wandered over him, then snapped back to the hated mask.

"Show me something then, your skin, at least. I'd like to know whether you're green with purple spots or orange with blue ones."

He chuckled. "Neither. I'm Antian. You can look it up in Atlan's databases. My skin is the same colour as yours."

The name did not ring any bells, and, if his race was extinct, she probably had not encountered it during her studies. "Prove it," she said, determined to make him do something to earn her co-operation.

The Shrike hesitated, then sighed and started to pull off one of his gloves. She went over and sat beside him on the couch as he stripped it off one finger at a time. The slender hand that emerged looked human in every respect, except she had never seen such fine, beautiful hands on a man. He held it out for her inspection, but as she reached out to touch it, he withdrew it slightly, then appeared to stop himself with an effort.

It was as if he fought the urge to snatch it away, and she wondered why. Did he think she had some disease? He allowed her to run her fingers over his skin, and she turned his hand over to examine his palm, then back to study his nails. There seemed to be nothing alien about it, other than its refinement. A beautiful voice and beautiful hands. What would his face be like?

"You seem to be very like a human."

"Antians are - were. Very similar."

"Do the Atlanteans know you're Antian?"

He shook his head. "Not for certain, and even if you told them, you have no proof. They tend to arrest anyone in a grey coat and mask."

"I wouldn't tell them." The words tripped off her tongue without thought, and she wondered where they came from.

"Why not? Don't you want to see me captured and executed?"

"Captured, perhaps, but I don't want to be responsible for anyone's death."

"Ah. How noble of you. You'd like to see me dead, but don't want it on your conscience. Fair enough, I suppose. Now, put on the dress, we must leave for the auction." He rose to his feet and pulled on his glove.

Rayne fought a strong urge to beg him not to sell her, for she longed to stay and discover his secrets. The more she learnt about him, the more he fascinated her, and for all his apparent ruthlessness and barbaric trade, he spoke and acted with no hint of malice or cruelty. It might all be an elaborate façade, but she sensed a deeper mystery within him, something dangerous and complicated. Then there was his all too strong attraction. He marched out, and, as the door slid closed behind him, the room seemed empty all of a sudden.

Picking up the dress, she studied it, then stripped off the functional black suit and slipped into its shimmering folds before gazing in the mirror. It clung to her slight curves, and, unlike the brazen gown Drevina had dressed her in, made her look like a princess. She found a pair of delicate white sandals, which complemented the dress, and the final effect was quite stunning. A silly idea flitted through her head, that perhaps he would not want to sell her once he had seen her in it. She snorted at her stupidity, wondering where such foolish romantic notions came from, and settled down on the couch to await his return.

When the door slid open, two guards stood outside, and her heart sank. She realised that she might never see him again, and found the prospect unpleasant. With a mixture of trepidation and regret, she followed the guards back into the building where she had seen the black ship. As they passed the office in the first hangar, the guard ahead of her stopped so abruptly she almost bumped into him.

Curious, she peered around him. The Shrike stood several metres away, in a tableau that had apparently only just happened. A slave woman knelt at his feet, gripping the edge of his coat as she shook with sobs and wept unintelligible words. He gazed down at her, his hands at his sides. Then he jerked his head at a couple of matronly, uniformed women, who came forward, gripped the woman's arms and helped her to her feet, leading her away.

At first, Rayne thought the woman might be Layalia, but she was a stranger with copper-gold skin, an alien of surpassing beauty. She stared after the woman, whose wails of woe reached Rayne until the guard behind her prodded her forward. The Shrike glanced at her as she approached, then signalled to the guards, who escorted her past him into the next hangar, where the black ship was berthed. The guards strode past it into the hangar where the slaves had been, now empty save for a single shuttle parked on the far side. The men guided her to it and escorted her aboard, strapping her into a seat before sitting on either side of her.

Rayne sat numbly, disturbed and dismayed by what she had witnessed. The scene had displayed the Shrike's cruelty and dashed her supposition that he was a gentle man. Whatever the slave had

been begging for, freedom or life, he had not granted it. Her naive notion that he might be good man, even if he was a slaver, was reduced to ashes, and just as well, she thought. His gentle treatment of her was doubtless an oddity, perhaps to win her co-operation in his bid to sell her at a profit.

Certainly prospective buyers would pay more for a tame, sweet-tempered slave than a frightened, defiant hell cat. Now she longed to rip off the traitorous dress, but the prospect of being sold in the nude, as he had threatened, prevented her. Not only would it be cold, but nothing was more humiliating than being naked when others were clad.

A perceptible reduction in gravity told her that they had left the planet and were on their way to the ship. Within minutes, the shuttle door opened and her guards led her into a smooth room. From there, they took her to a small, but comfortable room, and left her alone. She paced its confines for a while, then settled down to wait. When the door opened again, the same guards escorted her back down the short corridor to the shuttle bay. They led her to a circular sheet of shiny metal, made her stand in the middle of it, and stepped back.

The golden shimmer of an energy shell engulfed her, and when it dispersed, she gazed around at her bizarre surroundings with a twinge of fear. She stood within a glass cube at the centre of a vast dark room. Spotlights shone down on her, trapping her in a pool of light and making the rest of the room darker. She peered into the gloom, shading her eyes against the glare, and made out an approaching shape.

Its alien form became clear as it approached the light, and she swallowed bile. The creature stood on a single rippling foot, like a snail's, its skin a mottled grey and green, a metallic robe hiding its middle portion. From the top of the robe, a sinuous neck protruded, topped with a round head with a parrot-like beak and four antennae tipped with tiny, intensely blue eyes.

It did not appear to have arms, and stopped close to the glass to study her with two eyes. Apparently satisfied, it turned as another alien approached, this one a humanoid with slate-grey skin and tusks protruding from an undershot jaw. He stopped beside the first alien and examined her with close-set dark eyes above a flattened nose and a wattled neck. His garb matched his skin almost exactly, giving him the rather revolting appearance of being naked. He possessed disproportionately large hands and feet, and claw-tipped fingers.

The second alien walked around her glass box, his eyes roving over her with what she interpreted as a greedy glint. He spoke to the first alien in a gargling language, and she concentrated on placing their species. The first had to be a Rentarian, a race that had left its swampy home world centuries ago and made their homes now on other worlds. The second appeared to be a Mar'Ashan, native to a hot, humid world colonised by a hostile, but advanced race that had raised them up to a civilised level, then died out from a mysterious disease.

Many blamed the Mar'Ashan for the demise of the warlike Agrebe people, but few considered it a punishable offense, since it could be seen as an act of self-defence, for the Mar'Ashan had been the Agrebe's slaves. The Mar'Ashan had taken over the Agrebe's technology, but lacked the intelligence to add to it, and some thought their society was slipping back into savagery as the machines broke down and no one could fix them. Fortunately for them, the Mar'Ashan's home world was rich in rare, valuable minerals, which allowed them to purchase new machines and hire technicians.

Slaves, too, Rayne thought as she watched her prospective buyer sizing her up. He gargled to the Rentarian again, then made a peculiar gesture and pulled what looked like a communications device from his pocket, tapping buttons. The Rentarian gargled back, weaving its neck, and turned away. As it slithered off, she glimpsed movement in the darkness, the faintest hint of something there, and her eyes were jerked towards it. The Mar'Ashan studied his device, frowning. Rayne gasped as a familiar figure stepped into the light and stopped. The Mar'Ashan became aware of the Shrike and swung around, his jaw dropping.

"You!" he said in Atlantean.

"Hello, Jamdar. Welcome to my trap," the Shrike spoke in a soft, dangerous tone.

Jamdar glanced around, but the Rentarian had vanished into the gloom. "Urquat helped you? He betrayed me?"

"I would have thought that was obvious, but then, you Mar'Ashan aren't very bright, are you?"

Jamdar held up his hands, one of which still clutched the device. "I want no trouble with you,

Shrike. If you want the female, take her. I'll cancel the sale."

"No deal, Jamdar. This is my trap, and she's my bait. Haven't you even figured that out? You've been surprisingly difficult to corner, but then, you don't have to be clever to be cunning. Now you're outside your territory, with nowhere to run."

"This isn't your territory either! You're breaking the laws!"

"Laws!" Tarke snorted. "There are no laws in outlaw territory. That's what 'outlaw' means, you stupid shit. Just because you and a few other idiots have come up with some rules, you think everyone abides by them? Even your cronies don't, and who will you tell, once you're dead?"

"You can't do this!"

"Sue me."

Jamdar dropped the communications device and reached for the sleek weapon clipped to his belt. A flash of laser light illuminated the room and pierced his chest with a vicious buzz. It seemed to originate from thin air, but then Tarke lowered his arm and returned his weapon to his belt, studying his fallen foe. The Mar'Ashan had a neat hole burnt through the right side of his chest, and purple blood oozed from the wound as his skin turned white and started to flake off. Rayne swung away, fighting a wave of dizziness and nausea.

Urquat emerged from the gloom on his rippling foot. Two of his eyes examined the corpse, while the other two turned to Tarke. Urquat pulled a cone-shaped crystal from his robe with a thin, vine-like tentacle and held it to the side of his head. A halting, hollow voice spoke Atlantean in a nasal whine.

"A satisfactory outcome, although I might have profited more from your demise, Grey Shrike."

"You know you wouldn't, Urquat."

"I curse your ships. You have far too many of them. I'll still buy as many as you'll sell."

"No deal. Build your own."

"Well, in that case, kindly clean up this mess and get off my station. I've done my part, and I didn't like it. Now you do yours and make sure his death can't be blamed on me."

The Shrike said, "His body will be found on Trystate, with witnesses to swear that he was killed in a drunken brawl. His crew stole his ship, and will never be heard from again."

"You'll kill them all?"

"No, I have a buyer looking for a dozen Mar'Ashan males, one who doesn't listen to their stories."

Urquat turned all four eyes on Rayne, who leant against the glass, wondering if she was going to be able to prevent herself from vomiting.

"I'll buy the girl, if you're still interested in selling her."

"I have other plans for her."

Urquat lowered the crystal cone, turned and slithered off. Tarke approached the glass cube and touched a pane, which swung outwards. He held out a hand, but she shied away from it, stepping around him as if he had developed a bad smell. He ignored her rejection and gripped her arm, guiding her over to the Mar'Ashan's body. An energy shell engulfed all three of them before she could protest, and dispersed to reveal the interior of the shuttle bay. Tarke led her away as several of his men moved towards the corpse. Clearly they had their orders, and his part in the process was over, so nothing remained but to relax.

Rayne yanked her arm free as they entered the cream and blue suite in which they had travelled from Gergonia. Shivering, she rubbed her arms to try to stop the unwelcome trembling that had invaded her. She had just seen a man, albeit an alien and a slaver, murdered in cold blood, and his murderer stood behind her. The horror of the situation chilled her, and her churning stomach would not settle down. She jumped when a gloved hand touched her arm, swinging around to find Tarke offering her a glass of something pale pink and fizzy. He pressed it into her shaking hands, and she was unable to resist when he pushed her into a chair and sat beside her. The strong alcohol burnt her throat, and she coughed, her shivers increasing. She was horribly aware of him beside her, this man she had thought gentle, who was in fact a monster.

The Shrike stood up, removed his coat and settled it around her shoulders, enveloping her in the lingering warmth and a slight masculine scent. She shuddered, longing to throw it off, and clutched

the glass, staring into its pink depths. The silence grew tense, and when he sank back down with a sigh, it seemed loud.

"You're angry with me now, is that it? Not scared, surely?"

"Why not?" she bit out through tight lips. "Don't you have to get rid of the witness too?"

"No. Tell anyone you want that I killed Jamdar. No one will believe you, because his body will be found on a distant planet, with a dozen eye witnesses to swear that he was killed in a drunken brawl. Didn't you hear me tell Urquat?"

She nodded, scowling at her drink. "I should be angry, I suppose, if I'm as safe as you say. I'm more disgusted and shocked, I guess."

"What, you didn't expect that from me? I suppose I should be flattered, but actually I'm disappointed by your lack of judgement."

"That makes two of us. I'm disappointed by your lack of moral character."

"Ah. Now we come to the crux of the matter." He rose and went to pour himself another drink. "You had started to imagine I'm some sort of outlaw prince, a sort of Robin Hood, to refer to your Earth legends, which I've been studying, by the way."

Rayne looked up at him, startled. Without the coat, he was more slender than she had thought, and her eyes flicked over him. The coat lent him bulk and breadth he did not possess, although he still cut a powerful figure. She revised her previous opinion. He was not as broad or muscular as Rawn, but possessed a more graceful build. She lowered her eyes, realising that she was staring, and sensed his amusement at her scrutiny. He wandered back and settled beside her again.

"In case you're wondering, your expressions are as easy to read as a space line screen." His soft voice mocked her, increasing her ire.

"You're certainly no Robin Hood," she gritted. "Just a damned slaver and a murderer."

"And a thief, don't forget."

"What are you going to do with me now?"

He shrugged. "You've served your purpose, so now I'll really sell you, I suppose. I'll tell Tallyn where to find you, to get him off my trail, as I had planned."

"You bastard."

"You should be grateful. You get to go home."

"Only because Tallyn's looking for me. He's the one who deserves my gratitude."

He cocked his head, the mask glittering. "True. Good old Tallyn, guardian of the Golden Child, defender of the weak and enemy of the wicked. He might not be so zealous when you've served your purpose."

"I still have my brother." She remembered her abduction with a grimace. "If he's still alive."

He sipped his drink, and she jumped up, shrugging off the coat. "Why did you kill him?"

"Jamdar? He was a rival slaver, and a slimy bastard. Slavers kill each other all the time. It's how we stay in business. Kill or be killed, and grab as much of what the other guy's got as you can."

Rayne put down her drink, her stomach still in a tight, queasy knot. A strong sense of betrayal filled her, and she did not understand why she was so upset. With herself and him, not because she had misjudged him, but because he had deceived her, and she had not realised it. Mindra had said that she was able to sense people's moods and emotions as well as when they were lying, yet she had been convinced that he had been himself before, and now she knew it had been an act. His gentleness and wry generosity had been the façade she had dreaded, and her pain at his deception ran so deep it sickened her. A touch on her arm made her start, and she swung around to find him standing beside her again.

"You look ill. Perhaps you should lie down."

Rayne glared at the mask, longing to rip it off and look into his eyes, to see the truth in them, where he could not hide it. How could a cold-blooded killer be kind and considerate, his soft voice filled with concern? She moved out of his reach.

"I'd like to be left alone, if you don't mind. In fact, I'd rather not see you again."

He sighed, putting his drink down. "All right."

Rayne listened to his footsteps leave the room, and the swish of the door closing behind him, then sank down on the chair, covered her face, and wept.

Chapter Thirteen

Tallyn glared at his second-in-command with glinting black eyes as he stood over Marcon's console. "It's moved? *Now* it's moved? We're a few light minutes from one of the Shrike's fortified bases, and now you tell me the signal's moved?"

"Yes, sir," Marcon said, unfazed by his commander's ire.

Tallyn swung away with a curse. "Then change our heading! Follow it. Where's it going now, anyway?"

"It's coming from the territory of a nearby slaver, a Rentarian called Urquat. The signal's only a few light hours old."

"Good. At least that's good news. Maybe it's better this way, Urquat is a small slaver, he won't be a problem. Now that we know exactly where she is, how long until we get there?"

"An hour, maybe a few minutes more."

"Make it a few minutes less." Tallyn frowned at the main screen, which was blank. "I want boarding crews ready in fully armoured space suits. We have to be ready for anything. And keep us linked, I want to use the Net to transfer the men, take them by surprise."

Rawn looked up. "Shouldn't we demand that she be returned first? She might be hurt in the fighting, or they might use her as a hostage. We could use the threat of Vengeance to force him to hand her over."

Tallyn shook his head. "He mustn't even know who we're after. It's better if he just thinks it's a raid. If we tell him to hand her over, he's more likely to dispose of her and deny he ever had her."

"But the beacon..."

"He doesn't know about the beacon. If he did, she wouldn't be here."

Rawn stared at the Atlantean commander, realisation dawning in a cold tide. "She'd be dead."

"Exactly. The beacon can only be removed with delicate surgery, and only deactivated with Atlantean codes. The only other way to stop its signal is to destroy it, and believe me, you can't do that without killing her, too. If he finds out what brought us here, she's dead."

Rayne looked up in surprise as the door opened and the Shrike strode in, his coat spreading like wings behind him. He reached her in a couple of long strides, gripped her arm and pulled her to her feet. The golden shimmer of the transfer Net engulfed them, then dispersed, and she staggered as he released her, gazing around at a dim room. A curved screen gave a startling view of space, sprinkled with stars. In one corner, a space station rotated, glittering in the harsh light of a white dwarf star. Several ships orbited it, distant points of moving light. She seemed to be on the bridge of a small ship, judging by the lack of space and multitude of twinkling consoles that surrounded her. A contoured pilot's chair faced the curved screens, flanked by consoles and vidscreens. She opened her mouth to ask him what was going on, but then he addressed the console beside him in an urgent tone.

"Scan the individual with me."

A bland, sexless voice spoke from somewhere above her, making her jump. "The individual carries an Atlantean tag."

The Shrike swung to face her, making her retreat a step. "You're tagged!"

"Tagged?"

"You've got a damned homing beacon in you somewhere! You didn't know?"

"No!" She raised a hand to her head, the spot above her left ear that had been the source of so many headaches.

"They implanted you, and didn't tell you?"

"No. I don't know. Did they?"

"How nice of them. Your heroes, the Atlanteans. They tagged you like a damned animal, so they could track you down wherever you went."

She lowered her hand, stunned. "How did you know?"

"I didn't, until a bloody Atlantean ship showed up in this sector, heading straight for Urquat's

station." He swung away, his hands clenching. "I should have had you scanned. Especially when I knew what you were."

"What are you going to do?" A strange mixture of hope and anguish made her heart race.

"Do? How the bloody hell should I know? Urquat would have put you in a damned atomiser."

Her knees shook, and she leant against a console. "You're going to kill me?"

"I should," he said. "I should jettison you and get the hell out of here." His voice softened. "But I won't. Shadowen, how long before the Atlanteans arrive?"

"Eleven minutes."

"Okay, link with the Net, set course for... Octovar One. Send a message to the Shadow Wing, tell them to return to base. The Atlanteans will follow us. We've got the bait."

Rayne clutched the console behind her as space swung past the portals, the stars wheeling around before settling into new patterns. The station vanished, and a belt of stars filled the screens. As she gazed at them, trying to recognise their patterns, a web of snaky golden brilliance crawled over the screens. She turned to the tall man who stood in the shadows, staring at a screen that hung before a bulkhead. After a moment he nodded.

"Good, they're following, and we're pulling away. Their stress factors are much higher, due to the size of their ship, so we're faster."

"What are you going to do with me?"

He turned to face her. "Nothing unpleasant. Octovar One is an Atlantean outpost, a law abiding world with little military presence. I'll get close enough to transfer you to the surface, then I'll leave and you'll be free. Your friends should pick you up within an hour or so. All you have to do is wait."

"Is it safe for you? What if they lay a trap for you?"

"I'll elude them. I've done it many times before." He turned to study the screen again. "I'm touched by your concern. I didn't think you'd mind having my death on your conscience now you know the extent of my depravity."

"I'm not sure what to believe anymore."

"Believe what you saw. Your eyes don't lie."

"Then why are you helping me?"

"Helping you?" He laughed, a rich husky tone that the mask muffled. "I'm not helping you; I'm getting rid of you. All right, I could have jettisoned you, but that might not be such a good idea. You are, after all, the Golden Child, and I've explained why I'd rather not meddle in the possible future. Whether or not this Atlantean prophecy will ever come true is debateable, but I don't believe in taking chances." He turned and gestured to a narrow corridor that led off the bridge. "Now, I'll show you to a room where you can relax in solitude, since you don't like my company."

Rayne squeezed past and preceded him down the passage, aware of his presence close behind. A door slid open ahead, revealing a haven of soft light with luxurious grey and white decor. She entered a cosy sitting room with comfortable chairs and a low table, a well-stocked bar and an entertainment section. The Shrike paused in the doorway, then turned to go, but stopped when she called out and turned back to face her.

"Who were you talking to on the bridge?" she asked.

"The ship."

"This ship talks? What, did you use some poor man's brain instead of a neural net?"

"It has a highly advanced bio-crystalline brain, and is capable of thinking for itself. It's what I call a companion ship, which I can talk to when I'm alone." He leant against the doorframe. "I'm currently building a second one, since this one is a little old now. A companion ship flies itself. I don't have to link into a neural net and run the risk of having my brains fried."

She stared at him, astounded, then forced herself to look away, resisting the urge to ask him more questions. "I see. Thank you."

Tarke left, and the door slid shut behind him, sealing her in the quiet room.

Tallyn glared at the holograms scrolling up from Marcon's console, his eyes narrowed and brow furrowed. Vengeance had dropped out of the Net only to find the slaver station abandoned and no ships in sight. They had been forced to wait for a signal to reach them from Rayne's beacon, a tense

few minutes during which many feared the worst. Then the welcome flash of the signal appeared on Marcon's console, and a new course was set. The destination puzzled Tallyn, and he tried to discern the Shrike's actions.

"Perhaps only a crew and Rayne are on the ship," he mused. "We don't know if that bastard is on it. I don't see him putting himself in such danger. For what?"

"Maybe he still doesn't know about the beacon," Rawn suggested. "He might be simply fleeing."

"Towards an Atlantean outpost?"

"An unguarded outpost. Perhaps he thinks it's the last place you'd look for him."

"No, I doubt that. He could have gone in any number of directions and ended up deeper inside his territory, with his ships to protect him. Instead he's heading away from it. I might be tempted to think it's a decoy, except she's on that ship." Tallyn made a tired gesture. "And he can't know about the beacon, or he'd have jettisoned her already."

"How can it be detected?"

"With a body scan. Any medical scanner that registers metal or microwaves will pick it up, but he won't know it's a beacon unless he detects its pulses, which he can't unless he knows the frequency. Since most of the advanced races use cyber implants, there's nothing unusual about it."

Rawn gave a soft snort. "He might think it strange that she doesn't know she has it, and therefore can't possibly use it. You don't think that might make him a little bit suspicious?"

"Why would he discuss it with her? I don't think he talks to her at all. She's just a commodity to him."

"I hope you're right, but it'll be hard to keep Rayne quiet."

Tallyn frowned at him. "Let's hope she doesn't annoy him too much. He's a killer."

Rayne stared at the door, her thoughts and emotions in turmoil. Part of her longed to join him on the bridge and ask him the many questions that bred in her mind, another part knew the answers would probably be lies, if she got any at all. A voice in the back of her mind shouted that she should stay out of his way and hope he really meant to release her, while the young, naive part of her insisted that he would make a powerful friend, and should be cultivated.

In her confused state of indecision, she was unaware of how swiftly time passed until the door opened again, revealing the empty corridor. At this invitation she rose and went to the bridge, where the Shrike sat in the pilot's chair, staring out at the stars. A blue planet, mottled with white clouds and green land masses, shone like a jewel in the blackness.

The Shrike turned his head. "We're here. Octovar One."

"So," she murmured, her voice quivering a little, "You really mean to release me."

"I'm not that much of a liar."

"But you are one."

He shrugged. "I have to spin the occasional yarn. Now, I don't have much time. Are you ready?"

Rayne experienced a strange pang of sadness, and wondered at it. In all likelihood, she would never meet him again, which was a good thing, yet she regretted it. She longed to ask him what would have happened if she had not been the Golden Child. What he would have done with her if she had just been another slave? The possible answers made her shudder, but she had no time to ponder the question further. He stood up, facing her.

"Are you ready?" he repeated.

"Yes. I - I'm grateful to you."

"Don't be. I'm not your friend, nor am I some sort of romantic figure out of one of your cheap novels or fairy tales. Reality is harsh, so forget about me and get on with your life."

As she cursed her unguarded musings, he turned away and addressed the ship. "Activate the transfer Net, and place our guest on the surface, in the principal city."

Rayne raised a hand in a belated gesture of farewell as the golden shimmer engulfed her, then the energy shell dispersed, and she stood on a bright, clean street beneath a clear blue sky. Atlanteans, dressed in their preferred loose, colourful garments, wandered past, some glancing at her. Gravgars swept by above and beside her, skywalks arched overhead, linking towering buildings. She made her

way to a public bench in a patch of red and green flora and sank onto it, her legs shaking. Fortunately, the air was warm and calm, for she still wore the dress he had given her, which offered little protection from the elements.

An hour later, Tallyn and Rawn transferred in, and she ran into her brother's arms. Even as they embraced, the energy shell engulfed them once more, and she was back aboard Vengeance.

The Shrike gazed at the stars, his chin resting on his hand. He had removed the mask to rub his face, relieving a persistent itch on his cheek. Stripping off his gloves as well, he tossed them onto a console, where the mask stared accusingly at him. He studied his hands, remembering how she had scrutinised one so closely, and the touch of her fingers. No one had touched his skin for fifty years. Not while he was conscious, at any rate. Doctors had tended him after the many attempts on his life, but he had been unaware at the time. She was so young, and so innocent. Her touch had been like fire. He rubbed his wrist, pushing up his sleeve to gaze at the scars around it as he remembered what had made them so long ago.

Octovar One was two light years behind him, and he had dropped out of the Net to relax and ponder his hasty decisions. Releasing the human girl had been the right thing to do. He had no problem with that, whether or not she was the Golden Child. The Draycon Empire, however, would find out about her continued existence, and Drevina would seek to kill her again unless someone stopped her. The Atlanteans' laws forbade them from using violence except in self-defence, a fatal flaw in their culture, in his opinion. He ran a hand through his hair and stretched.

"Shadowen, what's the probability that this Atlantean legend is true, and Rayne is the Golden Child?"

"The human female who accompanied you earlier?" At Tarke's nod, the ship went on, "I would say slim, if not for some recent data collected from the Atlantean space net. Apparently, on a trip to her former home world, Vengeance encountered a mysterious ship that claimed to be the Golden Child's guide. The ship was huge, and immune to the Atlanteans' weapons. It also used the transfer Net to leave the area instantaneously."

"It used the Net to make a complete transfer?"

"Correct."

Tarke frowned at the winking crystals before him. "Are you sure?"

"I am sure that is what the Atlantean space net's information said, yes."

"You know the legend of the Golden Child, don't you?"

"Just as you do."

"Refresh my memory." Tarke laced his fingers and settled back.

"Translated into simple language, the legend says that at a certain time, the Atlanteans must save a golden girl child from a dying planet. She will, apparently, be able to avert a terrible catastrophe that will otherwise befall the Empire, and save it. This is not only an Atlantean legend, however, the Draycons have it too, but in their version, they must kill the Golden Child in order to rule the Atlantean Empire."

"But there's no mention of this strange ship in either of them?"

"No."

"So, the Draycons will soon find out she's still alive, and Atlan's protection is pretty shoddy," Tarke mused. "If Atlan falls, I'll be next on Drevina's extermination list. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to take out some insurance. What would happen if Drevina and her brother were to die suddenly?"

"They have no true heirs. By Drayconar tradition, she must bear her brother's twins. Drevina has a child by another male, but he's not considered a true heir. Draycon would be plunged into chaos, even civil war."

Tarke rubbed his chin, his eyes narrowed. "That might be a good thing." He sighed. "I want the Drayconar battle cruiser Norron destroyed. Send out the order."

"This will focus Atlan's attention even more on you."

He shrugged. "So be it."

"You have no idea what monster might emerge at the head of the Drayconar Empire. You might

make it worse. And if the Draycons find out who killed their Empress, there would be reprisals."

"Then there must be no survivors. I have a feeling that by the time the Draycons sort themselves out and kill off all but one potential leader, whatever catastrophe is coming to Atlan will have run its course. It will prevent the Draycons from interfering any further in the prophecy. I have no love for Atlanteans, but at least they keep the Draycons quiet. Send the order."

Rayne sat back and rubbed her temples, switching off the data screen with a flick of her thoughts. Weariness tugged at her eyelids, but she forced herself to stretch and rise to wander over and gaze out at the soft rain that soaked the land outside. Since her return to Atlan three months ago, a great many things had happened. The beacon in her brain had been deactivated at her insistence, much to Rawn's delight. Tallyn had argued against it, but her status now allowed her to make certain demands, which the Atlanteans were obliged to fulfil in order to keep her good will. She had been questioned about her time with the Shrike, and had answered all the questions honestly.

They did not ask for his true name, and she did not offer it, so it remained her secret. Drevina's murderous plot would have earned her a severe reprimand from the Atlantean Council, and perhaps even a token visit by a warship, had she lived long enough. The debris of her ship, Norron, had been discovered in an asteroid belt not far from Drevga B, a Brentar mining colony. The Draycons had threatened the peaceful Brentar with retribution, then Atlan, before turning on each other. A bloody civil war now raged on Amranon and Periel, the two principal Drayconar planets.

Soon after her return, she and Rawn had been taught to use their cyber implants, gaining easy access to all the Atlantean machines and data links. Whereas before they had to view the data via a screen, or listen to it, now they used a sensor pad and allowed the information to stream directly into their minds, accompanied by images and sensations, where necessary. They had also been allocated their own dwelling, and Rawn had started dating a low cast Atlantean girl. Once again, Rayne had forgone the social whirl to bury herself in research, primarily on the Shrike's empire, uncovering many unpleasant facts.

Most disturbing was the crime that had earned him a death sentence from the Atlanteans, the extermination of his race, the Antians, fifty years ago. The report was brief and sketchy, but said that a planetary distress signal had been received from the Antian home world, Elliadaren. By the time an Atlantean ship had reached it, the world was lifeless, rapidly descending into a nuclear winter. The only ship in orbit had been an outlaw craft called Night Hawk. Its pilot, when challenged, had identified himself as the Shrike, claimed responsibility for the destruction of Antian civilisation, and fled.

Rayne thought the situation demanded further investigation, but none had been attempted. The Atlanteans had accepted the confession and passed a sentence of death on the unknown individual who called himself the Shrike. Why had Tarke destroyed the Antians, and how? To do that to an entire civilisation should have been impossible, even with an armada of warships. It made no sense, and she resolved to find out more through other channels, if possible.

The rest of her research had confirmed his story, a list of bloody deeds performed in the building of a giant empire of ships and manpower, untold wealth and immense political might. The Shrike was certainly a force to be reckoned with, but the file lacked any sort of personal details other than an estimate of his age, a list of possible species and a description of his usual garb. It did contain a three-dimensional space map of his territory, which spanned a fair stretch of space, mostly populated with useless, barren planets.

In another file, she found a list of all his crimes since he had exterminated his race, any of which would have earned him a death sentence. He was blamed for seventy-four murders, all of which, oddly, were fellow slavers and outlaws who were also sentenced to death. In addition, he was supposed to be responsible for two massacres on slaver space stations, apparently instigated by him. She continued to dig, but only found a file that listed all his known aliases, one of which was the one the Rentarian had used, Grey Shrike. The file also listed his ships, whose number and strength amazed her, even though the file was several years out of date.

Rayne then requested data on the Antians, curious about why he had destroyed them. It took several hours for the information to be located and transferred from old archives, but when it reached

her, she found it surprising. The Antians had been the eldest of what were known as the Younger Races, people who had developed after the Elder Races had left or died out. Elliadaren had been similar to Earth in many ways, except the climate was better, lacking hurricanes, quakes, tidal waves and volcanoes.

The weather had been gentle and predictable; the seasons followed a set pattern that did not deviate by more than a centimetre of rain. The Antians had more land than sea, their polar caps were small and their sun was an old, stable yellow dwarf, like Sol. One could argue that their system was old and decaying, but several million years had still been ahead of them. The Antians had not expanded into space, but had chosen to control their numbers and remain on their home world.

They had also forgone the usual armada of warships most advanced people kept for defence and aggression, although their home world was equipped with extensive defences that made their destruction at the hands of a single man in a small armed cargo ship even harder to believe. She searched in vain for a picture of an Antian, and the lack of one surprised her. At the end of the file, a single word blinked in red capitals. Extinct.

Rayne gazed at the rain-soaked garden, where plants bowed under collected water, letting it stream off onto the ground. Elliadaren had been a more beautiful world than Earth, populated by gentle people. Why had Tarke destroyed them? His parents, surely, had been amongst them, perhaps brothers and sisters. It made no sense. She shook her head, rubbing the spot above her left ear, which still ached at times like these, when she had spent too long linked to the data net.

With a sigh, she headed for the kitchen to make something to eat, then swung around at a soft click behind her. She reached for the laser she carried on her belt now, then gaped at the space line screen that rose from its slot. Usually a tone announced an incoming call, and its silent deployment gave her goose-bumps. When the wafer-thin crystal had risen to the end of its glass wand, a series of words appeared on it in blue script. Rayne read them with a mixture of amazement and growing dread.

'Golden Child. The time has come. Meet me at the Cerebilus Moons, alone. Your Guide'.

After several minutes of shocked inaction, her eyes riveted to the writing, her heart hammering, she tottered to a chair and sank into it. Her hands shook as she activated the web line screen used for local calls, dialling Tallyn at the space port. She sent a message to him, then Rawn, demanding they come immediately, then broke the connection, not wishing to explain anything on the web line.

By the time they hurried in a few minutes later, she had poured herself a strong drink and sipped it as she gazed at the screen. Tallyn, first to arrive by about three seconds, put away his laser and scowled at her.

"Were you just testing us? Because if so, I -"

"Read the space line."

He and Rawn read it, then turned to her.

"When did this come through?" Tallyn demanded.

"About a minute before I sent you the message."

"It could be a hoax, a trap. The Draycons -"

"Are embroiled in a civil war," she interrupted again. "Besides, it wasn't an ordinary message. The space line didn't give a tone, it just deployed. It was kind of spooky."

Tallyn glanced at the screen again. "It could be malfunctioning."

"I have a feeling this is genuine. I have to do as it says, anyway, don't I? Just in case it is. We were expecting some sort of contact. Well, there it is."

Rawn frowned, looking anxious. "You can't go to the Cerebilus Moons alone. It's too dangerous, and someone has to fly the ship. You have to have a crew, people to guard you."

"The message says alone. If I'm not, I don't think there will be a ship there to meet me."

"She's right," Tallyn said. "But even if we gave you a scout ship, you don't know how to fly it."

"You can programme it, can't you? Put in the co-ordinates for the Moons, and for the return trip, then all I have to do is activate the Net, right?"

"In theory." Tallyn sat in a chair opposite, studying her. "You're taking all this very calmly. How much have you had to drink?"

She giggled. "I'm not drunk. Believe me, I'm terrified. I almost fainted when I first read that, but

I've had time to calm down now. It's kind of exciting, don't you think?"

Rawn sat beside her, placing an arm around her shoulders. "I'll come with you. I'm your guardian, right?"

Tallyn shook his head. "We made that assumption when we took you from Earth, but there's no mention of a guardian in the prophecy, and the instructions say she must go alone.

"It could be dangerous," Rawn protested. "Like you said, it could be a trap. Maybe it's not the Draycons. We don't know who else might want to stop her fulfilling the prophecy."

Rayne sighed and put down her glass. "I have to do as it says. Just show me how to operate the scout ship. If it's trap, I can simply reactivate the Net, and it will bring me straight back to Atlan, right?"

"Yes, but being in the Net doesn't guarantee your safety," Tallyn said. "And if it's a trap, you might not have time. I would suggest we shadow you in Vengeance."

"No. It might detect you, especially if its technology is as advanced as it appears to be."

Tallyn shook his head. "There's only one way to settle this. I'll call the council and let them decide."

Rayne nodded, and he wandered over to the window to gaze out while he contacted Vargon on his implant's net line. When he turned to her a few minutes later, he looked grim.

"The council agrees. You must follow the instructions. I'll arrange for a scout ship to be made available, and show you how to operate its basic functions in a simulator."

Rayne slipped her hand into Rawn's, trying to reassure him with a brittle smile. He looked unhappy, but rose and followed when Tallyn led them out to his gravcar.

Chapter Fourteen

Over the next four hours, Tallyn put Rayne through several simulated flights, which she managed fairly well until he sprang an emergency on her, then she panicked and failed miserably. He coached her until she learnt to control her panic a little better, encouraging her with lavish praise. He was a good teacher, motivating her when she wanted to give up, until her skills improved sufficiently to satisfy him. When at last he allowed her to leave the simulator, she was tired and shaky.

The worst part was linking her cyber implant with the ship's neural net and being bombarded with masses of information whilst in the grey no-place of the net. The scout ship normally had a crew of two, so they could fly it in shifts, but she would have no such luxury. Tallyn wanted her to sleep before she left, but a sense of urgency consumed her, and she only ate a hurried meal before insisting on going to the spaceport. Tallyn seemed to admire her resolve, but she was certain that if she delayed she would lose her nerve and not go at all.

The scout ship parked on the spaceport apron was a tiny, ovoid silver craft bristling with sensor arrays and one energy weapon. They climbed into the cramped interior, bumping into each other and equipment that had been fitted in the most inconvenient places. While Rayne and Rawn watched, Tallyn lay down on the pilot's couch and hooked himself into the ship's neural net, inputting the co-ordinates and instructions it would need to leave the atmosphere and fly to the Cerebilus Moons, then return.

Tallyn could have assigned the task to another pilot, and Rayne was flattered that he did it himself. Curious spaceport personnel watched from the hatchway, amazed at the breach of regulations that was being perpetrated with the council's approval. Such acts were unknown to Atlanteans, and the ground crew was horrified and fascinated. When at last Tallyn was satisfied, he turned to her, his expression schooled to hide the anxiety she sensed.

"Once out of the atmosphere," he said, "you must hook yourself into the neural net. The ship will follow its programme and fly to the Cerebilus Moons, but you must be alert for any problems. The repellers will deflect debris and asteroids, space junk and such, but there are other things, like space storms, which will endanger your link with the Net, or void fields, which may pull you off course. The neural net can be re-initiated if that happens, and will then compensate for the mistake, but you must be there to do it. If you're not linked to the ship, you won't even know it's happened. If all else fails, terminate the Net link and activate the distress beacon. We'll come and pick you up. Also, if you need any other instructions, you can call me on the space line."

She nodded, her stomach a cold knot. "How long is the flight going to be?"

"About four hours. It's a long way."

Rayne nodded again, avoiding his intense scrutiny, which searched her face for signs of excessive stress. She forced a smile and glanced at Rawn. "Well, let's get this show on the road then."

Tallyn said, "You should have been trained for this. We should have realised this might happen. When you get back, I'll put you both on a course."

"Well, nothing like closing the stable door after the horse has bolted," she quipped, which earned her a stern glance.

Rawn hugged her, then Tallyn touched a crystal and they left the ship. The hatch closed with a hiss and clunk, sealing her in the tiny craft. She sank into a luxuriously padded acceleration couch as gravity increased, but it did not grow uncomfortable as the scout floated up on its antigravity, then switched to repellers. The scout had inertial compensators, but they were only powerful enough to reduce the effects of inertia. Since pilots were strapped into their couches and the ship had no other crew, larger ones were deemed unnecessary.

The ship lacked any luxuries apart from the two comfortable pilot couches, and made alarming noises. The simulator had not clunked and groaned, hummed and whined like this ship did. She lay back and forced herself to relax, closing her eyes to block out the plethora of winking lights around her, few of which she knew anything about. The ship was trusted to fly itself, and Tallyn had assured her that it was a new, advanced craft, unlikely to malfunction.

With its powerful repellers, the chances of her having an accident were slim - repellers were inclined to make ships as slippery as eels. However, she pondered as she drifted up through Atlan's atmosphere, there were a number of things that could go wrong. Any damage to the Net link could result in the ship's stores of energy being depleted, which would cause all its systems, including the repellers, to fail. In that event, the chances of its surviving for long were not good, even if her air did not run out before a piece of space junk punched a hole in the hull.

When she opened her eyes again, Atlan's milky orb was a pearl on the main screen and Net energy crawled over the hull. The screen winked off, and she inserted her hand into the sensor slot beside the seat. Instantly the grey no-place of the ship's neural net swallowed her senses, and the data bombardment began. Most of it was incomprehensible, a mass of scrolling black figures, but Tallyn had told her to ignore those and concentrate only on the other colours when they appeared. A statement in green flicked past, telling her the link was successful and the ship was in super light. A column of white figures counted her increasing speed, and a line of orange letters listed her co-ordinates.

A window filled with blue lines opened, displaying the stars and planets they passed. A flashing red dot whizzed past, warning her of a passing ship on a parallel course, heading for Atlan. A yellow diagram identified a nearby planetary system, and a mauve overlay plotted the commercial space lanes. The daunting stream of data was exhausting, and her mind seemed to grow hot as she strived to digest it all and make sense of it. Fortunately, nothing seemed to require her undivided attention, for there was so much to take in.

Rayne watched the data scroll, whiz, flash and flicker through her brain, numbed by it all. The energy conduits' soft hum was the only sound, and, if she opened her eyes, the consoles' flashing lights illuminated the bridge in a flickering glow that mixed horribly with the data in her brain. According to the neural net, they hurtled through space at fifteen times the speed of light, flashing past solar systems in the blink of an eye.

Lost in the data stream, she waited as the hours passed and she drew closer to her destination and whatever lay in store for her. The scout would travel the sixty point four light years through clouds of gas that were unborn suns, past quasars and asteroids, pulsars and glowing nebulas of fluorescent gas.

A flashing orange statement caught her attention in the midst of the chaotic data. The ship was decelerating, and she noticed a lot of the other figures changed as her speed decreased. The figures rolled back, hurrying towards zero, the programmed destination and her current co-ordinates growing closer and closer to matching. The dizzying dance of words and figures took on a final frenzy, then the numbers froze in their correct results and the neural net announced its termination of the Net link. Rayne pulled her hand out of the sensor slot and sat up with a gasp, almost falling off the couch as her brain emptied and the grey walls spun.

Gulping burning bile, she raised a trembling hand to wipe the cold sweat from her brow. Four hours linked to the neural net was more than she could stand easily. The gush of information had disorientated her, and she fought to push aside the ghostly after-images of scrolling numbers and whizzing data. No wonder ships' crews rotated so regularly. Four hours was a long shift, even for an experienced pilot. For her, it had been pure torture.

Rayne tottered to a refreshment dispenser and ordered a strong drink, which she gulped down. Braced, she went back to the couch and gazed at the main screen. The Cerebilus Moons were a strange collection of planetoids orbiting each other in a destructive, collapsing sunless system. They were called moons because of their size and orbits, which appeared to indicate that the planet they had once orbited had vanished, leaving the moons, like lost sheep, to endlessly wander through their diminishing circles until they crashed into each other. Of the eighteen original planetoids, only eleven remained amid a spreading debris field.

Closing her eyes, she wondered if she would be able to get some badly needed sleep. Her ordeal with the neural net had exhausted her, and her eyelids were leaden.

"Welcome, Golden Child."

Rayne sat bolt upright with a gasp, her eyes scanning the main screen. Thrusting her hand into the sensor slot, she closed her eyes as the data washed through her mind again. The ship was close, in

fact, a red proximity warning flashed. Jerking her hand out again, she stared at the main screen.

"I... What do you want?"

"To show you something. You must prepare for your meeting with the one who comes."

"Who's that?"

"I will show you. I will take you to a world that has known one before."

She shook her head. "No, I can't. I don't know how to fly this ship."

"Then I shall."

"Wait!" She jumped up, then grabbed a bulkhead as the moons whirled on the screen. Her gravity remained steady, but the screen gave the sensation of spinning, and she looked away. "Wait! I can't leave here. This ship is programmed to return to Atlan from here."

"Then I will bring you back."

Rayne sank down on the couch, staring at the screen again as the vast energies of a transfer Net crawled over it. Instead of the ragged, branching lines of crackling power, the screen filled with solid golden light. When it faded, new stars appeared.

She gasped in astonishment. "You used the transfer Net!"

"Of course."

"No, I mean you went into the energy dimension!"

"Yes."

She shook her head. "I've got a lot of questions for you."

"Later. I want you to go down to the planet below. You must wear protective attire."

Rayne glanced at the screen, adjusting the camera until a dull grey orb came into view. "What planet is that?"

"It is called Elliadaren."

Rayne stared at it for a long time, her mind reeling.

The guide's voice broke into her reverie. "You are distressed."

She shook her head. "No, just tired. I'll go and find a space suit, if there is one."

"It is in the locker at the back of the cabin."

With a suspicious glance at the empty air whence the voice issued, she went to the locker. The bulky suit inside was too big for her, even when she adjusted it. She struggled into it, finding herself entombed and almost immobile. The final catches defeated her, and she sighed with frustration.

"This isn't going well. Can you help?"

A fuzzy ball of golden light appeared beside her, and she staggered away from it in alarm.

"Do not be afraid, it will not harm you." The voice sounded much closer now, and a lot smaller, to her relief. It seemed to come from inside her helmet, through the communications relay next to her ear.

"What the hell is that?"

"An energy sphere. I will seal the suit for you."

The ball of light swirled and formed two tendrils, the tips of which solidified into three-fingered pincers. She forced herself to stand still as the pincers fastened the suit seals, then they became tenuous again and shrank back into the sphere. With a flick of her thoughts, she switched on the suit's air and took a deep breath as the stale smell of canned air rushed into her nose. The two tanks on her back contained enough liquid air to last for several hours, and the suit's sensors fed a readout into her brain. The energy sphere vanished, and she glanced at the main screen through the suit's plasglass visor.

"I'm ready, I think. But wait a minute. Isn't Elliadaren radioactive?"

"Yes, but the suit will shield you."

"Right, okay."

Even as she wondered if she could trust this alien entity that claimed to be her guide, an energy shell engulfed her, then dispersed. Her boots sank into a thin layer of bitter, greyish snow, and she tottered, struggling to keep her footing on a slippery surface. Legs braced, she regained her balance and look around. A dull, almost uniformly grey landscape stretched away to distant hills and a jagged jumble that could have been the ruins of a city. The sun was a dim glow beyond a dull blanket of clouds that almost blocked it out. A bitter wind tugged at her, and her breath fogged the inside of her

visor. The sensor feed in her brain informed her that the air outside was well below freezing, and a heating circuit activated, sending warmth down her spine.

"Okay, I'm here. What am I supposed to see?"

"Turn around."

With great care, she shuffled around, and gasped. The visor fogged, and she tried to wipe it, cursing when she realised that the mist was on the inside. She waited, breathing slowly, for the fog to clear. The patches of mist shrank, and she tried to make sense of the view.

Giant spires of crystal thrust up from the grey snow, towering kilometres into the air. The crystal glinted with a medley of colours, mostly soft blue, mauve and pink with glimmers of yellow and green. The crystal was, for the most part, clear, and the colours came from refracted light. The faceted columns were broken, their tapering tips lying smashed beneath the snow. The jagged, oddly-shaped mountain from which the spires sprouted had to contain something the size of a moon hidden under several feet of snow, and she shivered as she stared at it.

"What is it?"

"A ship of sorts. It was a sentient crystalline beast capable of using the transfer Net far more efficiently than any man-made ship."

"What's it doing here?"

"Its master forced it to partially enter the planet's atmosphere, and it was employed in his work when nuclear fire razed the planet. It is the only instance in which one such has been... killed."

"Why are you showing it to me?"

"I will explain that in due time. I will return you to your ship."

"Wait a minute!" Rayne cried. "Can't I have a closer look?"

"There is nothing more to see. The creature has been dead for fifty years. It is frozen solid, and there is no portal through which you could enter."

"Still, I want a closer look." She plodded towards the mountain, the stiff, heavy suit and slippery ice underfoot making progress difficult.

After sinking waist deep into drifts twice, she reached the edge of one of the broken spires and touched the frigid crystal. Aware that its razor edges could rip her suit, she moved around it and slogged towards the mountain. It rose high above her in a vaguely dome-like curve, its under parts either flattened or forced into the ground by the force of its impact or its sheer weight. Certainly something so massive and constructed largely of crystal had to be extremely heavy. Whatever shape it had had when alive was hard to determine now. Decades of atrophy had caused it to sink and buckle, and summer thaws had allowed parts to rot. Something told her it had been much larger when it had been alive, and even now, it was so huge that to view it in its entirety was impossible unless she could hover a couple of kilometres in the air.

Radiating lines of buried crystal columns hinted at a vast array of wing-like structures whose purpose she could only guess at. The columns stretched away into the distance, swallowed by snow and mist, but she estimated that they must be hundreds of kilometres long. She climbed up the steeply sloping snow banked against the sides of the mountain, her legs aching by the time she reached an area where it appeared to be thinner.

After resting for a while, she scraped the snow away, hoping to dig through to the skin of this amazing space beast. The snow covering it was a metre deep, and she was sweating by the time her glove scraped crystal. Her suit link warned her that the humidity within it was becoming dangerous, and it vented clouds of steam. Cursing it, she knelt to peer into the hole, where crystal glinted in the grey depths. As her guide had said, there was little to see, and finding a way in would take months and a great deal of machinery. She sat back with a sigh, her visor fogging.

"Okay, you win. Take me back."

The transfer Net deposited her in the scout ship, and, with the help of another energy sphere, she stripped off the suit, eager to quit its sauna-like confines. Free of it, she revelled in the sweet cool air and towelled the moisture from her face. As her damp clothes dried, she sat on the couch and stared at the grey planet on the main screen.

"What happened to Eliadaren?"

"It was the first, and only planet in this galaxy to be attacked by an Envoy."

She sighed. The voice seemed clearer now. Evidently the guide ship had found a more suitable waveform to transmit on. "What's an Envoy?"

"That is a long and complicated narrative."

"I'm all ears." She rose and fetched a cool drink from the refreshment dispenser, then settled back on the couch.

"You are tired. You should sleep."

Rayne yawned and put the glass down before it slipped from her fingers. The black abyss of sleep dragged her into its dark embrace, and she fought against it with every iota of her will.

"Is it safe?" she mumbled.

"I will guard you."

Her eyes slammed shut, and she sank into darkness. *She floated in space, stars glinting in the distance. Within its utter, frigid silence she was at peace, watching the tiny specks of light with god-like knowing. The trailing arm of a spiral galaxy embraced her in a tenuous clasp of tiny suns. It was her galaxy, she realised, and she could even pin-point the brittle glimmer of the yellow star that was Earth's, insignificant against the backdrop of a million greater suns. She could almost reach out and touch it with a celestial hand of pure thought. Utterly peaceful, perfectly still, the endless universe filled her spirit with an all-encompassing glory, a masterful creation that moved to the ageless harmony of a silent song of invisible waves and speeding light.*

A wave trembled and shattered on an imperceptible barrier that cut through the void. A portal tore into a dimension of golden light, and a sparkling stranger birthed itself into the universe. Golden energies crawled over and through it, dispersing. A crystal ship sailed into the darkness, gathered the light of a billion stars and harnessed it.

The ship radiated shafts of lambent energy. Light shattered in its facets and danced like shining water along vast butterfly wings of delicate filigree. Never had she seen anything so utterly indescribable, for there were no words to define its awesome power and grace. Its wings seemed to harness solar winds, and she turned to follow its trajectory.

It sailed towards a blue and white globe orbiting a yellow dwarf star. Her heart ached, but the oddly-shaped landmasses and two moons told her that this was not Earth. Time seemed to speed up, and within moments it reached the planet's atmosphere and the tips of several immense spines entered it, fire sprouting from their edges. The ship dwarfed the moons, its wings almost spanning the gap between them and the planet.

Her view shrank until the world's sunlit surface replaced the universe. She looked down on forests and oceans, white beaches and rolling grasslands. Networks of simple dwellings patterned the emerald green around tall cities, and ships sailed the blue depths between floating communities. The crystal ship descended until its wings almost touched the ground, and the strange envoy fascinated the populace.

The space creature reached out to the people of Elliadaren and touched them with a powerful telepathic message that at first brought intense joy. Then the crystal light darkened, and she sensed the malice of those who dwelt within this intelligent, harmless creature and controlled it. Their malevolence used the ship's vast power to turn joy into the thing those who commanded it sought, and fed off. Pain. Millions of people cried out in agony and fell to their knees, bowed under the cruel force of a telepathic suffering too vast to be denied, and the beings within the ship revelled in their torment and drank it in. The pain flooded through Rayne, filling every part of her being with anguish that made her long for death.

Rayne sat up with a gasp, a choked cry echoing in her ears. Her eyes swept over dull walls and winking consoles as the terror drained away. She waited until her hammering heart slowed, then went to the dispenser and poured another drink, casting a dark glance over her shoulder at the main screen with its view of the grey world.

"Are you still there? You'd better be."

"Of course."

She sank back onto the couch with a sigh, sipping the drink. "Do you have a name?"

"Not really. My creators imbued me with several of their personalities combined, so I can lay claim to no one name. However, if you wish an appellation with which to refer to me, you may call

me Endrix."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing, it is a name my masters used to use."

"And just exactly who are your masters?" She held up a hand. "No, forget that for now. What I meant to ask was, what happened to Elliadaren? The dream didn't explain everything. Where did the Envoy come from?"

"I do not know for certain, but I suspect another universe, since I have never encountered anything else like it in this one."

Rayne refused to be side-tracked by that statement's insinuation that Endrix had explored the entire universe. Sticking to the subject, she asked, "And these creatures who lived inside the Envoy? What were they?"

"No, you misunderstand. The crystalline creature was not the Envoy, the being it carried was."

"Ah. There was just one on board?"

"No. From what I could learn of their society during the ship's flight here, they are a form of hive creature, but ruled by a male. There were about fifteen thousand creatures on the Crystal Ship, and the dominant male was the Envoy. I will not detail their reproductive cycle -"

"Please don't," she muttered.

"But their society was primitive and cannibalistic. What they did to each other, however, pales into insignificance when compared to the atrocities they have visited upon other intelligent beings, in particular the crystal ships. From studying this one's metabolism, I deduced that the ships usually live in a gaseous nebula, where they feed on gas and sunlight.

"They are incapable of landing on a planet, although they can hover, as you saw. But their structure is too massive and delicate - if you will forgive the contradiction - to withstand gravity. They are deep space creatures, and utterly harmless unless harnessed by an Envoy. What you experienced while asleep was not a dream, but a segment of my memory broadcast into your brain. You woke yourself before the end, however."

"It was painful," she said, setting aside her empty glass and returning to the dispenser for a sandwich.

"Unfortunately, I cannot delete sensations from my memories."

She turned in surprise. "You felt that pain?"

"I experienced the same sensations as the populace, yes, but my brain does not perceive pain as you do."

"So, just tell me what happened next, but I think I know." She perched on the edge of the couch and nibbled the sandwich. "A ship called Night Hawk arrived in orbit, and when he saw what was going on, he dropped a nuclear arsenal - which I have no idea how he had - then left when the Atlanteans arrived."

"Not exactly. Elliadaren suffered for seventeen days before that ship arrived, and all the others that were orbiting it crashed on the surface."

"Why?"

"The pain drove them insane. They either lost control of their ships or deliberately crashed them to escape the suffering. Ultimately, they would have died of dehydration or shock, anyway. Elliadaren was not a busy planet. Ships came here rarely. Only a few commercial traders a year. Night Hawk did not go into orbit. If he had, he would have succumbed too, but even at the distance where he stopped, the pain must have been bad. He watched the planet for two days, and I understood his anguish, for he was Antian."

"How do you know all this?" Rayne waved the sandwich. "Did you read his mind?"

"Yes. He was a smuggler, carrying a cargo of nuclear warheads when he decided to return to his home world, since he was passing close by. He had not intended to stay, but when he saw what was happening, he eventually did the only thing he could, and used the Net to transfer his cargo to the surface, where he triggered it. Then he waited for over a month until the planet's light speed distress signal was answered."

"Why?"

"Perhaps to see who came, or maybe to mourn his people. I did not pry into his thoughts after

he set off the bombs."

She finished the sandwich and rose to fetch another. "So the Antians didn't possess Net technology?"

"No. They preferred culture and religion. They had no wish to leave their world."

"The pilot of Night Hawk, did you learn his true name?"

"I did not pry deeply into his mind. He was able to shield his thoughts quite well, but I sensed a great deal of suffering there, not only because of his world's fate. Now he calls himself the Shrike, as you know."

She frowned. "Have you been prying into my mind as well?"

"A little."

"Why didn't you do something to help them?"

"I could not. I have no weapons."

"Presumably this all has something to do with the prophecy?" Rayne asked.

"Yes. Unless you stop it, an Envoy will destroy Atlan."

"Now how the hell do you know that?" she demanded. "And what am I supposed to do about it?"

"My masters gave the prophecy to the Atlanteans. My masters travelled between the universes, and encountered the Envoys."

"And who gave it to the Draycons?"

"No one. They learnt of the prophecy and knew that if Atlan fell, they would be able to take over, so they made up a prophecy of their own. They are deluding themselves, however, for the Envoys have no interest in them, and will destroy them too."

Rayne put down the half-eaten sandwich and rubbed her face, trying to assimilate all this astounding information. Fatigue made her eyelids droop, and her brain laboured to absorb everything. "Okay, so what am I supposed to do about this Envoy?"

"I am not certain, but my masters claimed that one such as you could stop it."

"By warning the Atlanteans?"

"No. I, or my masters, could have done that. The Atlanteans will be helpless to prevent the next crystal ship from entering their atmosphere. Their weapons will be useless against it in space, and once in the atmosphere, anything powerful enough to destroy the ship will also wipe out the population, just like on Elliadaren."

"So what's so special about me?" she asked, almost dreading the answer.

"I do not know," Endrix replied.

"Well, that's a first. All right, tell me about your masters. Do I get to meet them?"

"No. That is a long and even more complicated tale. If you wish to hear it, I recommend we travel to my masters' world. I do not believe you should attempt that now, in this ship, however. I will return you to the Cerebilus Moons, then you can return to Atlan. But I must urge you to do something to arm yourself for your coming conflict with the Envoy."

"What?"

"Seek out the Shrike and befriend him. Only he can provide you with a ship that will be able to take you where you need to go and help you in your battle with the Envoy."

Rayne sat bolt upright, her fatigue banished. "Are you nuts? He's a damned slaver! A murderer! An outlaw! He'll never help me, and he's..."

"He has already helped you, and he will again, if you are pleasant to him."

"Pleasant..." She scowled. "I never want to see him again."

"That is not true. He did not murder his people. He saved them from untold suffering. He has killed many men, it is true, but they deserved to die. As for the rest, I recommend you ask him about it. His answers, if he is truthful, may surprise you."

"Why would he help me, anyway?"

"Look at the planet on your screen," Endrix replied, and she gazed at the dull grey world. "That is his world, destroyed by an Envoy. If for no other reason, he will do it for vengeance."

"Couldn't you help me? Talk to him?"

"No. In this instance you do not require my aid, nor would he welcome my interference."

She sighed, slumping. "Okay, answer this question, if you can. Why the hell are these sadistic, cannibalistic monsters called Envoys?"

"Since we have never communicated with them, we have no idea what they call themselves. My masters named them Envoys because, even in their own universe, they come from deep space, where few ever venture. They fall upon a planet broadcasting peace and love, just as an emissary would, and only when they have gained access do they show their true natures."

"More like a Trojan Horse," she said.

"The Trojan Horse of your history was a gift from a warring king, which turned out to be a trick. This is not an accurate description of their actions. They come as envoys, but they consume their hosts."

"Parasites."

"In a sense."

A short silence fell as she pondered this last bit of information, and, after a few minutes, Endrix said, "I think it is time to return you to the Cerebilus Moons, and for you to return to Atlan. Your next priority should be to seek out the Shrike. The time of the Envoy's coming draws near."

She stifled a yawn, clamping a hand over her mouth. "I have to sleep, I'm pooped."

"Pooped?"

"Tired."

"Would it help if I returned you to Atlan? My appearance may cause some consternation."

She waved a hand. "Don't worry about that. I'd be most grateful. I have absolutely no wish to be hooked up to that damned neural net ever again."

"Very well."

The crawling golden fire engulfed the screen in a solid curtain, and when it faded, Atlan's pearly orb hung there.

Chapter Fifteen

"Are you nuts?"

Rawn placed his hands on his hips and scowled at his sister, who sat on one of the comfy sofas in her lounge. The shade shields on the vast windows that overlooked the wild garden were withdrawn, allowing the warm rays of a glorious sunset to stream into the airy room with its pale décor and crimson carpets. Tallyn sat on a plush white faux leather chair on the other side of a low crystal-topped coffee table, frowning at her. She shrugged, and Tallyn leant forward.

"The council will never allow you to seek out the Shrike, Rayne."

"Look, I'm not keen on the idea either, but I'm following my guide's instructions, and he seems to know a lot more about this story than you do. After all, he knew the Shrike didn't murder his people."

"How were we supposed to know that?"

"Go down to the planet," she said. "See the remains of the Crystal Ship for yourself."

"We can't. The radiation is too intense; the result of several hundred high-yield nuclear bombs. It will be hundreds of years before anyone can safely go there again. You shouldn't have gone; you took a hell of a risk."

"I'm fine."

"You should see a doctor, just in case."

"Endrix said it was safe, and I believe him."

Tallyn rose and went over to the window to gaze at the sunlit garden. "Anyway, now that we know what we face, we can arm ourselves against it. That ship won't be allowed anywhere near Atlan, and certainly not into our atmosphere."

"You can't stop it. It's immune to your weapons, just like Endrix."

"Then we'll find other weapons. Our scientists will start work immediately."

"It won't work. Don't you see? That's why Endrix's masters gave you the prophecy. I'm the only one who can stop it, and I don't even know how, but I need the Shrike's help, so I must find him."

"What can he do that we can't?"

"He has more advanced ships. Endrix says I'll need one."

Tallyn swung around, scowling. "Why would he give you one, or even lend you one? He'll sell you at the nearest market."

"He'll do it for revenge."

"He won't, because it's not his planet that's threatened this time. Atlan's demise would please him."

"No." She shook her head. "He told me he doesn't want Atlan to fall. That's why he let me go."

"He let you go to throw us off his trail. He made his escape while we stopped to pick you up. If he had killed you, we'd have hunted him down, and he knew it."

Rayne jumped up. "Fine, think what you want. I have to find him, whether you like it or not."

"But if we don't help you, how will you find him?"

She glared at him. "It's up to the council to decide, not you."

"They won't allow you to risk your life."

"Then they'll stop me from saving Atlan. If you prevent me from doing this, you could be the ones to pay the price. If I have to, I'll buy passage on a commercial ship and find him that way."

Tallyn smiled. "Impossible. Commercial ships don't go into his territory, and he rarely ventures out of it. No, we'll provide you with a good ship when you need it."

Rayne opened her mouth to scorn this suggestion, but Rawn took her arm and tugged her aside. "Leave it, Ray. He's never going to agree, nor will the council, I'm sure. They're too proud to admit that they need anyone's help, least of all an outlaw's."

"Whose side are you on?" she demanded.

"Yours. Look, I don't like this either, but it kind of makes sense. After all, if your guide's story is true, and I see no reason for him to lie, then this man is the only living person to have ever

encountered one of these Envoys. Am I right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"He knows what we're up against, the Atlanteans don't."

She met his tawny eyes. "So you agree that we need his help?"

"Yeah. I don't like it, but I think your guide's right. But arguing with Tallyn is just a waste of time and air."

"What do you suggest?"

"Quit arguing with him. We'll find a way. I have an idea."

Rayne nodded and turned to Tallyn. "Why don't you ask the council if they'll help me find the Shrike? You have to report to them anyway. Let's see what they say."

"Fine," he headed for the door.

Rawn went to use the net line screen, and while he was busy Rayne ate another meal, resolving to get some sleep afterwards, and a bath. Fatigue still plagued her. She had not slept since her brief, nightmarish doze on the scout ship. Rawn was still busy when she finished her meal, so she bathed and went to bed.

Rayne woke refreshed, and washed before she wandered through to the kitchen to make a cup of a hot beverage that took the place of coffee on Atlan. Pale morning light streamed in through the windows to dapple the grey carpet, and the silence told her that she was alone. The peace did not last long, however. Before she finished her coffee, Tallyn called to inform her of the council's decision, which denied her request, as Rawn had predicted. She accepted it without argument, and he broke the connection looking puzzled and annoyed. An hour later, Rawn returned, brimming with news. She made him a cup of Atlantean coffee, and he told her what he had achieved.

"It's Mergan's doing," he said, naming his Atlantean sweetheart. "Her father owns a yacht, and he works for military intelligence. She can borrow the yacht to take her friends on trips to Verdian or Termon. When I told her the story, she agreed to help, and she'll arrange for the yacht to be available tomorrow night. The biggest problem is finding this Shrike guy. The Atlanteans don't actually know where he is. They never do. But..." He raised a finger. "...Last night they received information that leads them to believe there's going to be a raid on a shipment of slaves in the Jarlan solar system, just outside his territory. It might be him."

"And if it's not?"

He shrugged. "Then we keep looking. It's our best shot."

"I suppose so. That's great. You did good. So tomorrow night I can take the yacht?"

"Well, yeah. And a few of my friends."

"No way! This isn't a pleasure cruise. We might encounter one of the most dangerous outlaws in the quadrant, and you want to bring your friends? And Mergan too, I suppose?"

"Well, it is her yacht." He squirmed.

"No. Absolutely not."

"If it's safe enough for you..."

"I know him!" She threw up her hands. "Yes, it's dangerous for me too, but I have to do it. Well, I don't have to do it. I could just let the Envoy destroy Atlan, as long as I'm not on it. He knows me, or he might remember me. At least he might give me a chance to discuss it. Endrix thinks so. Damn! I just don't know anymore."

"Well, you can't go alone, anyway. The yacht needs a crew. You can't fly it."

"I don't have to. We could have it programmed, like the scout ship."

"That's tricky, you know. What if it's not him?"

"We can have two - three programmes. One to go to the Jarlan system, one to return to Atlan, and one to take me to his base."

Rawn looked dubious. "That sounds dangerous. What base?"

"It doesn't matter. There's a map of his territory on the data net. We can choose a base from that. They're all marked. Once I'm there, his people will inform him of my request to see him."

"Why don't you just send him a message from here, and ask him to meet you?"

"With the Atlanteans listening? He'd never even respond."

Rawn frowned and rubbed his chin.

"That's got to be the dumbest plan I've ever heard," a soft voice said behind them, and Rayne whipped around with a gasp, her heart skipping a beat. Rawn released his laser's hilt as Tallyn stepped into the lounge, his eyes chips of black ice, his lips twisted in a sardonic smile.

"You did that on purpose!" Rayne accused. "You imitated his voice. You've spoken to him."

"Of course, we're old enemies. I knew you two were up to something when you took the council's refusal so well. I should have you placed in protective custody."

"If you want your world to die."

He raised his hands. "Okay, I've thought about what you said, and I suppose it does make sense. If your guide told you to do this, he must have a good reason. I dislike the prospect of asking that murderer for help, though, I have to say."

"I'm sure you do."

"I don't think he will help us, either. But if you're so determined to find him that you would contemplate sailing off into deep space in an interplanetary yacht, with no more idea of where you're going or how to get there than a map off the data net..."

He sighed, shaking his head. "I'll just have to help you, so you don't get yourself killed. The Shrike might still do that, but at least it won't be because of your ignorance or my stupidity."

Rayne glanced at Rawn, then cast Tallyn an uncertain smile. "Thanks, but won't the council punish you if they find out?"

He shrugged. "Probably, but who's going to tell them? Look, I don't like this any more than I did yesterday, but you do seem to have led a charmed life so far. Making an eight-hour journey in a flimsy yacht is just asking for trouble, though, and locking you up is guaranteed to defeat the prophecy.

"This little scheme may seem like an adventure to the two of you, because you know so little about space and its dangers, but you'd never have made it, trust me. Nor can you go into his territory in an Atlantean scout. We have a lot of enemies amongst the various outlaw factions. If I take you in Vengeance, you'll be safe, but you won't get anywhere near the Shrike, and his people will suspect a trap."

He held up a hand again when she opened her mouth. "Even if I dropped you at one of his bases, I doubt he'd agree to meet you, and his people might just decide to dispose of you anyway. For some reason, they're damned loyal to him."

Tallyn wandered over to a chair and sank into it with a sigh. Rayne sat opposite him, her gaze intent. "Then what?"

"The Shrike is notoriously elusive. Few people who've gone in search of him have found him. Most of them found sticky ends instead. I have a... an acquaintance, who might be able to help you. He's a smuggler, a petty crook who trades information with me in return for his freedom. He might be able to take you to one of the Shrike's bases without arousing too much suspicion. It will be expensive, though. Like most of the lesser outlaws, he has a morbid fear of the Shrike, who has a reputation for wiping out his competition."

She glanced at Rawn as he settled beside her on the couch, and he raised his brows and cocked his head with a smile. She turned back to Tallyn.

"When do we leave?"

"The Shrike will not see you."

Rayne was tired of hearing that proclamation, in various forms, and gritted her teeth. She had been waiting on his base for two days. Tallyn's smuggler friend, a middle-aged Atlantean with a scarred face and bad halitosis, had dropped her on Ironia before beating a hasty retreat, and she was glad to be away from his lecherous looks and smutty talk. He had kept his deal with Tallyn, however, and delivered her into Tarke's territory. Now she faced an unexpected obstacle, one she was beginning to think was insurmountable.

Tarke would not see her, and nothing she said seemed to make any difference. Rayne glared at the black-clad woman who faced her, a blank-faced Erdorian whose rather sullen expression suited her office as bearer of bad news. Rayne recalled the unpleasant fourteen-hour journey she had

endured. The smuggler had spent only four hours linked to the net before taking a six-hour nap. Mercifully, she had not been linked to a neural net, but now found herself barred on Tarke's doorstep for her trouble.

"Does he give a reason, or is he just being bloody-minded?"

"He's not currently on this base," was the tart reply.

"And is he planning to come here any time in the not too distant future?"

"I don't know his plans."

"All right." Rayne forced a stiff smile. "Would you give him a message then?"

"Certainly."

"Tell him I know what happened on Elliadaren."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rayne shrugged. "He'll know."

The woman snorted and spun on her heel, marching off down the corridor. Rayne watched her until she turned a corner, then decided to go for a walk in the garden in front of the building. Two guards kept an eye on her from the doorway. They followed her everywhere, and sometimes prevented her from entering certain areas. She was not being treated exactly as a prisoner, but that her host did not trust her was abundantly clear. She had been scanned upon arrival, and since then her keepers had treated her with deep suspicion. This time, she had her own clothes, and wore a dark blue one-piece suit that stood out amongst the monotony of black-clad people.

Rayne glanced back at her guards, who followed her, laser rifles held across their chests. At first she had thought the guns were meant for her, which seemed rather paranoid since she was unarmed, but now she suspected that the weapons were more for her protection. Several times she had encountered people whose eyes had glinted murderously and whose glares had only been deterred by her guards' hard-eyed presence. She had no idea what she had done to deserve their animosity, for she had been studiously polite to everyone she met. These people, it seemed, were as strange as the man they served. She sighed and headed back towards her apartment.

The following morning, just as she finished dressing in a pale blue one-piece suit trimmed with grey, the apartment door chimed. She hurried to press the button that opened it, and found the two guards on her doorstep.

One stated in a gruff voice, "The Shrike will see you now."

Rayne wondered if the thrill that raced down her spine at his words was terror or excitement, deciding it was probably a bit of both. She followed them along several uniform grey corridors at a brisk march before being whisked up several floors in a high-speed lift. It seemed that she was in the same building, but she was not sure, for the route was confusing and the scenery monotonous.

The guards stopped outside a door and stepped aside as the portal slid open. She took a deep breath and walked in with all the confidence she could muster. Most of it drained away at the sight of the tall masked man who stood gazing out of a massive window. When he turned to face her, she found her mouth dry and her knees weak. Her eyes flinched from the mask.

The Shrike gestured to a chair with a gloved hand, and she sank into it. Four soft cream chairs were arranged around a low, polished red wood table in the centre of a plush room decorated in pale grey and soft blue. A bank of huge windows overlooked the gleaming white and green city. Tarke walked over and sank into a seat opposite, the table between them.

"So, the frightened slave girl has now become what? An Atlantean messenger? A spy?" His soft voice made her shiver. "Few dare to seek me out, and even fewer have the temerity to come to one of my bases. What makes you so bold?"

She gulped, brave words dying on her tongue. Several seconds passed in silence, while she cursed her blank mind.

"What happened to Elliadaren?" he murmured.

"It was attacked... by an Envoy." To her relief, his words kick-started her brain, and her voice was steady.

"Who told you that?"

"My guide, an entity called Endrix."

"Go on."

"I've been there. I've seen the remains of the Crystal Ship that carried the Envoy to your world." Words tumbled off her tongue in a nervous flood. "Your people were suffering terribly when you found them. You were forced to kill them. There was nothing else you could do. The Envoy came from another universe. He fed on your people's suffering. Another is coming to Atlan, and I have to stop him."

The Shrike was silent for several moments, his emotions guarded. "I never had a name for the monster that tortured my people. What else do you know about this Envoy?"

"Not a lot. They're patriarchal, cannibalistic and sadistic. He controls the Crystal Ship, and forces it to use its telepathic ability to inflict pain on his victims. He and his minions feed on the pain of others."

"But you didn't come here just to tell me this."

"No. I need your help. Endrix told me to seek you out. He said you would help me."

He tilted his head. "Why should I help you?"

"You don't want the Atlanteans to fall. You said so yourself."

"That's true, which is why I killed Drevina and her brother."

She gasped. "You did that?"

"I thought it would throw the Draycons into confusion long enough for this situation with you to blow over or resolve itself. Otherwise they would have tried to interfere again, and next time they might have succeeded."

Rayne stared at him, longing to tear off the horrible mask. He seemed hostile, and she knew she trod on thin ice, for he could have her removed from his base any time he chose. She decided to be blunt.

"Will you help me?"

"That depends. Who is this Endrix, and why did he tell you to come to me for help? What do I have that Atlan can't offer?"

"I don't know what, or who he is. I've never seen him. All I know is he's in the huge black ship that can use the transfer Net to transport itself instantly. He saw what you did to Elliadaren. He understood why you did it, as I do. I saw it through his memories. I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like to be forced to make that kind of decision, and I'm sorry about what happened."

He stood up, making her tense, but he only walked back to the window and stared out. "That was a long time ago."

"I'm sure the memories haven't faded."

"No, they haven't. I knew they were all going to die, but to share in that wordless agony was a thing no one should have to endure. The silence that fell after the bombs exploded was like... paradise, after the torture of their pain."

"You should have told the Atlanteans why you did it."

He gave a soft snort. "Do you think they would have believed me?"

It all made terrible, tragic sense as the last pieces of the puzzle fell into place. "So you became a slaver, because you were already condemned to death, and nothing mattered anymore."

"Don't try to analyse me." He turned to face her. "What do you want?"

"Endrix says I need a ship, and only one of yours will be good enough."

He walked over to lean on the back of the chair beside her. "You want a ship? You expect me to just hand over a multi-million regal ship to you?" He laughed and shook his head. "You amaze me. Why don't the Atlanteans give you one? It's their necks you're supposed to save, not mine."

"If Atlan falls -"

"I know that. I told you, remember? Why must I give you a ship?"

"Endrix says only one of your ships will be good enough to do whatever it is I have to do when the time comes. He didn't go into the details. And you don't have to give it to me, a loan will do."

He chuckled. "A loan. This Endrix seems to think he knows everything."

"He also said you're not what you appear to be, and if you told me the truth it would surprise me."

"Did he? Yes, I suppose it would."

"But you're not going to tell me the truth, are you?"

He stepped around the chair and sat in it, appearing friendlier and more relaxed. "No. But I might loan you a ship."

Her heart leapt. "On what conditions?"

"Conditions?" He paused, and she wished she knew what he was thinking, or at least could sense his emotions, but his guard was up. He shook his head. "Only one. That you stay the hell off my bases and away from me. When you're finished with the ship, it will return to me."

Rayne stared at him, shocked. "Why?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you. It shouldn't be a problem, since you find my company so abhorrent."

"I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. It's just that what you did was so terrible, so shocking, killing that slaver in cold blood like that, setting a trap for him. Using me as bait. Now that I'm over the shock of it, I don't dislike your company. In fact, I'd like to get to know you better."

"Would you?" he murmured. "A dangerous ambition. Few people know me well, and they're utterly loyal. They would die before revealing anything about me to my enemies. You, on the other hand, are an unknown quantity, and might still be working for the Atlanteans. You have no proof that anything you've told me is true. I only have your word for it."

He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to protest. "Granted, you're right about the Crystal Ship, so you've been to Elliadaren. But that doesn't prove anything else, does it?"

"No." She lifted her chin. "But I would never betray someone who helped me. You can trust me. Read my mind if you don't believe me, I won't try to stop you."

"I never delve that deep into the thoughts of others. It lays bare far too much that's private. Which shows how little you know about the subject."

"But I can sense when..." She frowned, confused. Usually she could sense when someone was lying, but she had failed with him.

"If you know when someone's lying, you're an empath, and that's really dangerous."

"Why?"

"Why?" He snorted. "How many people do you know who would like to be caught lying?"

"The people I know don't lie."

"Of course, the Atlanteans. Damn, but they're a stuck-up, self-righteous lot. Never did like them." He rose and came around the table to loom over her. "Let's get this over with, shall we? I'll take you to the hangar, where you can meet your ship."

"I haven't agreed to your condition," she pointed out as she stood up to face him.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. You won't find me next time."

"What if I need your help?"

The Shrike turned and went to the door, where he waited for her to join him before leading her down the corridor. He set a brisk pace, which made it difficult to talk, so she followed him in silence. To her surprise, he took her back to her apartment and pointed at a black one-piece suit draped over the back of a chair.

"Put that on. And to answer your previous question, why the hell should I help you any more than I already have?"

She glanced at the clothes. "Why must I wear that?"

"Because, in case you haven't noticed, my people think you're a slaver, come to do business with me. They don't like rival slavers, which is why I had to have you guarded. My rivals visit me rarely, and when they do, they don't wander about the station, not even in my company. It makes my people angry. So put on the suit."

The Shrike stepped back, and the door shut in her face. She picked up the suit with its hawk-like emblem and went into the bedroom to change. He was becoming more and more confusing, this strange man, and she could not figure him out at all. When she had been afraid, he had been gentle and kind, but firm and mysterious too. Now he was harsher, brisk, suspicious, and downright rude.

When she had changed, she found Tarke waiting outside, and followed him back down the corridor that led to the hangars. The guards were absent, so apparently he had dismissed them outside her apartment. They marched through the room with the glass-walled office and into the next hangar, where she had seen the black ship before. It was still there, or perhaps it had returned, and she gazed

up at it with a thrill of awe.

"This one?"

He nodded. "Its name is Shadowen. It's the same ship you travelled in to Octovar One."

"I thought it was your special ship?"

"It was, but I've built a new one, slightly better, but basically this one's twin. I even cloned the bio-crystalline brain. They're almost identical. Shadowen is twenty years old, which is not young by a ship's standards. It was due for an overhaul and a refit, which it's had now, since the new one's been in service. I had planned to use them both, but I don't really need two."

Rayne gazed at the ship. "She's beautiful."

"I wouldn't call Shadowen a 'she', if I was you. It's a moot point, but the brain prefers a masculine title. I'm assuming your guide had one of my companion ships in mind when he told you to ask me for a ship, since they're my best, far superior to anything Atlan has. They're faster, and able to withstand more stress than a bigger ship, like a battle cruiser. But it has a good deal of firepower and an excellent Net link, which is a ship's most important asset.

"As long as it's linked to the Net, this ship can hold its own in battle with a cruiser the size of Vengeance. Not only does it have a number of fore and aft energy weapons, it also has one-way stress screens, which the Atlanteans don't. Their ships have to lower their screens for an instant to fire their weapons, this one doesn't."

He headed for an almost invisible door in the sleek hull. "By the way, if you try to hand this ship over to the Atlanteans, it will return to me, and you won't be received so cordially if you come here again."

"I wouldn't."

He stopped beside the door. "But they might try to take it. They'd love to get their hands on one of my ships and study it. Shadowen won't allow that either."

Rayne nodded. "If necessary, I'll stay away from Atlan."

"Where else would you go?"

"I don't know. I want to visit Endrix's world. He said I could, but if the Atlanteans try to take the ship, I'll have to find somewhere else to wait for the Envoy to appear."

Tarke faced her in silence for several seconds, as if trying to decide what to make of her, then turned to the ship. The door opened with a hiss, and two steps floated out to hang suspended on antigravity fields. He walked up them, vanishing within. Rayne followed him into a dim bridge, where tiny crystals glowed and a soft background hum sent faint vibrations under her feet.

"Hello, Tarke." A bland, sexless voice, which she assumed was the ship, spoke out of the gloom.

"Shadowen, this is Rayne," the Shrike said. "I'm loaning you to her for a while. She has a mission. When she's completed it, you'll return to me."

A pregnant silence fell, and she could have sworn she sensed the ship's confusion and dismay, but that was impossible, since it was a machine. It said, "Very well."

"You'll have to be linked to her biorhythms for the duration."

"I understand."

Dark turned to her. "My companion ships are linked to my biorhythms, so if I die they self-destruct. I can't leave him linked to me, in case something happens to me, but he has to be linked to someone."

She nodded. "Okay."

He faced a console, and a slot opened on it. It looked like a neural net sensor pad, and she shot him an enquiring glance.

"It is a neural net slot, I'm afraid," he answered her thoughts. "Shadowen requires a brief link, to learn your particular patterns and rhythms. It will only take a moment."

With a slight grimace, she slid her hand into the slot and shut her eyes as the data stream swept through her brain. Far more information appeared than she had experienced on the scout ship. The river of knowledge was too deep to plumb, and was not meant to be. She sensed that anyone who tried to control this ship through the neural net would be driven mad in moments by the sheer mass and complexity of the information within it.

Emotions were mixed with the flood of words and numbers, as if she read a person's mind, which made her uncomfortable. Mercifully, the link only last a few seconds, then the grey nothingness of the no-place filled her mind, and she pulled her hand out, staggering a little as emptiness flooded her brain on the heels of the neural net's occupation.

Tarke gripped her arm and guided her to the solitary, form-fitting seat that faced the screens, and she sank into it. The Shrike stood beside her, his gloved hands clasped before him.

"Now you have a ship. One that won't allow a stranger to enter without your permission or any harm come to you, if he can possibly stop it. His loyalty will cause him to sacrifice himself, if necessary, to save you. He does not require a neural link during flight. He's quite capable of dealing with almost any situation, and if he can't, he'll tell you. You can tell him where to go, then go and sleep, if you want. It's like having a pilot, only this one's part of the ship."

"He's amazing," she murmured.

"Thank you," the ship replied. "It's good to be appreciated."

"Will he still be loyal to you as well?"

Dark nodded. "I'm afraid so. No chance of stealing him. He'll always obey me, but then, I won't be around."

Her face grew hot, and she was glad of the gloom. "I wasn't thinking of stealing him. I just wondered."

"He could have told you that himself."

A sudden thought made her smile. "I daresay I could learn a lot from him. He must even know what you look like."

"Well, that's an unpleasant fact, isn't it? Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid he won't oblige." His voice was hard, and he swung away, striding to the door.

Rayne hurried after him, catching up as he marched past the glass office. "Tarke..."

He ignored her, and she followed him back to her apartment, where he turned to face her, making no effort to hide his anger. "Is that what this is all about? Are you just an Atlantean spy with a great way of tricking me into revealing my secrets?"

"No! If I was, I wouldn't have made that comment, would I?"

"Not unless you were incredibly stupid, but sometimes I do wonder. You seem so naive, yet you're charged with saving the Atlantean Empire, and you tell some pretty amazing stories. The worst part is, I believed you. I still do." He turned away, raising a hand as if to run it through his hair, then encountered the mask and lowered it. "What is it about you, anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"I find myself talking to you far too much, and I never talk to people. You have a knack for asking the wrong questions, and I have to stop myself answering them. You're dangerous."

She shook her head, confused. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I was kidding, really."

He swung around. "No you weren't. You would have asked him. Fortunately, it's the one thing he won't tell anyone. But he'll tell you a lot of other things, most of which you'll find very hard to believe."

"The truth about you?"

"Yes."

She sank down on a chair, her legs weak. "Is it so terrible?"

"If it reaches the ears of my enemies, yes."

"The Atlanteans?"

He sat opposite, shaking his head. "No. They wouldn't believe it. I should never have agreed to loan you one of my ships. What was I thinking?"

"I won't betray you." The urge to jump on him and rip off the mask was overwhelming. "Who are your enemies? Other slavers? What are you hiding from them?"

He stood up and strode over to the dispenser to pour himself a fizzy green drink. "I should never have agreed to see you. I wouldn't, if you hadn't mentioned Elliadaren. I had a feeling this would happen." He sipped his drink and walked closer, clearly ill at ease. She watched him, uncertain of what to say. Finally he murmured, "All right, I'll tell you, since you'll find out anyway. But first you must swear never to tell another slaver."

"I don't know any -"

"You'll meet a few, I have no doubt. Drevina was one, and there are plenty more. Assume everyone is a slaver until you know they're not. All my people know the truth about me, but they'd never reveal it, not even under torture. So, if you want that ship, you'll swear to keep my secret."

"A condition?"

He nodded. "Unfortunately, I can't order Shadowen not to tell you about me. I've given you the highest authority with him, and I can't lend him to you without it. If I tried to prevent him from telling you, it would confuse him, and he wouldn't be able to function properly."

Rayne gazed at him, recalling Endrix's enigmatic words. The prospect of learning at least some of his secrets excited her, and she was ready to agree to just about anything to achieve it. This window into his mystery was an unexpected boon, a strange by-product of his loaning her the ship. "I swear that whatever you're about to tell me will die with me, unspoken."

"Well, that's a pretty promise. Couldn't have worded it better myself." He sank down on the chair next to hers, putting his drink on the table. "I'll make it brief. I'm not a slaver."

Rayne stared at him, stunned, as a lot of things made sense and she realised Drayalia had been telling the truth. Some things still confused her, however, and she frowned. "But... all the people here..."

"Are ex-slaves I've rescued, and sworn to my service. That's what I do, steal slaves from slavers and free them. All my crews and their families, every person who works for me was once a slave. That's how I know they won't betray me. Even those who are still in slavery know about me, but they'll never betray me, because I'm their only hope of salvation. If the other slavers ever found out, they'd have me assassinated."

"But... I saw a woman begging you, on her knees..."

He turned his head away. "She wasn't begging, she was thanking me for saving her. Sometimes they get emotional. It's embarrassing."

"And the Mar'Ashan you killed?"

"Jamdar. A bastard. He was selling slaves to the Saurians in the Outer Belt." At her puzzled look he added, "They don't need slaves for labour or entertainment, they eat them."

She raised a hand to her mouth in horror, sour bile burning her throat. "Oh, god."

"Quite. I needed pretty bait to corner that monster, and you were it. I knew exactly what sort of female slaves he liked for his entertainment, and in exchange I got two hundred starved, miserable sods destined for the Outer Belt. He used to buy second and third-grade slaves in bulk, ones who were old, sick or maimed. Children with no potential and women burnt out by drugs."

He turned his head briefly in her direction, and she sensed a flash of pain from him. "I had no intention of allowing him to take you. After his death became public, I raided his bases and saved five hundred more, but thousands before them died."

"And the seventy-four slavers you've killed? They weren't just rivals, then?"

"No." He picked up his drink and sipped it. "And it's a lot more than seventy-four. The Atlanteans try to fight slavery, but they're useless at it. They raid the odd base, rescue a few slaves, maybe even arrest a slaver from time to time. But to know what's really going on, you need to be in the thick of things, like me. Oddly enough, killing off other slavers has proved profitable, and at the same time I've been able to free countless slaves. It's the biggest business in space. Bodies are in great demand, and for a variety of purposes, from taming raw, hostile planets to pandering to the demands of the rich and debauched."

"Did you really think I'd betray you to your rivals?"

"No, not really, I suppose. You're clearly against slavery, and I saved you from a collar, too, whether or not you appreciate it."

She looked away. "I do now. Then I was too angry and confused. So why did you lie to me?"

"So you wouldn't come back. When you thought I was a slaver, you didn't want anything more to do with me, did you? It would have worked, too, if not for this guide of yours. The fewer free people who know the truth about me, the safer I am. Slaves will never betray me."

She hesitated. "Why did you think I'd want to come back? I didn't plan to, nor would I, if not for Endrix, even if you'd told me the truth then."

"Wouldn't you? Perhaps I underestimated your maturity. A girl your age tends to harbour romantic notions, and knowing I'm not the evil slaver you thought, you might have wanted to return and unveil my secrets." He cocked his head. "Perhaps you even hoped to find a handsome prince behind this mask, and dreamt of a fairy tale ending, like Robin Hood."

Rayne cursed the blood that crept into her face, unable to hide her embarrassment, and tried to brazen it out. "I'll admit, I'm still curious about what you're hiding and why. That's only natural, but I'm not such a naive romantic. I never had any such ambitions, and still don't."

"That's good." He stood up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to. Leave whenever you're ready, and good luck."

The Shrike headed for the door without a backward glance, and was gone before she could collect her scattered wits. She stared at the door for several minutes, puzzled and disappointed. Knowing the truth about him only increased her fascination, which he had already sensed, to her embarrassment. Yet when she should have wanted nothing more than to quit his station and his company to prove him wrong, she found herself longing to stay and talk to him some more.

Determined to thwart her foolish desires, she packed and left the apartment, heading for the hangar.

Its smooth, sexless voice welcomed her aboard, and she settled into the form-fitting chair after stowing her baggage. When she asked how to go about leaving the base, Shadowen informed her that he could do all that was necessary, and all she had to do was sit back and enjoy the ride. The soft hum of the anti-gravity coils increased, and the dome above rolled open, allowing egress. She experienced a pang of regret as the dull brown world shrank on the screens, wondering if she would ever see the Shrike again.

The story continues in Book II, *The Crystal Ship*, also published at Smashwords. Book III, *The Shrike*, will follow soon.

About the author

T. C. Southwell was born in Sri Lanka and moved to the Seychelles when she was a baby. She spent her formative years exploring the islands – mostly alone. Naturally, her imagination flourished and she developed a keen love of other worlds. The family travelled through Europe and Africa and, after the death of her father, settled in South Africa.

T. C. Southwell has written over twenty novels and five screenplays. Her hobbies include motorcycling, horse riding and art, and she earns a living in the IT industry.

All illustrations and cover designs were done by the author.

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Acknowledgements

Mike Baum and Janet Longman, former employers, for their support, encouragement, and help. My mother, without whose financial support I could not have dedicated myself to writing for ten years. Isabel Cooke, former agent, whose encouragement and enthusiasm led to many more books being written, including this one. Suzanne Stephan, former agent, who has helped me so much over the past six years, and Vanessa Finaughty, good friend and business partner, for her support, encouragement and editing skills.