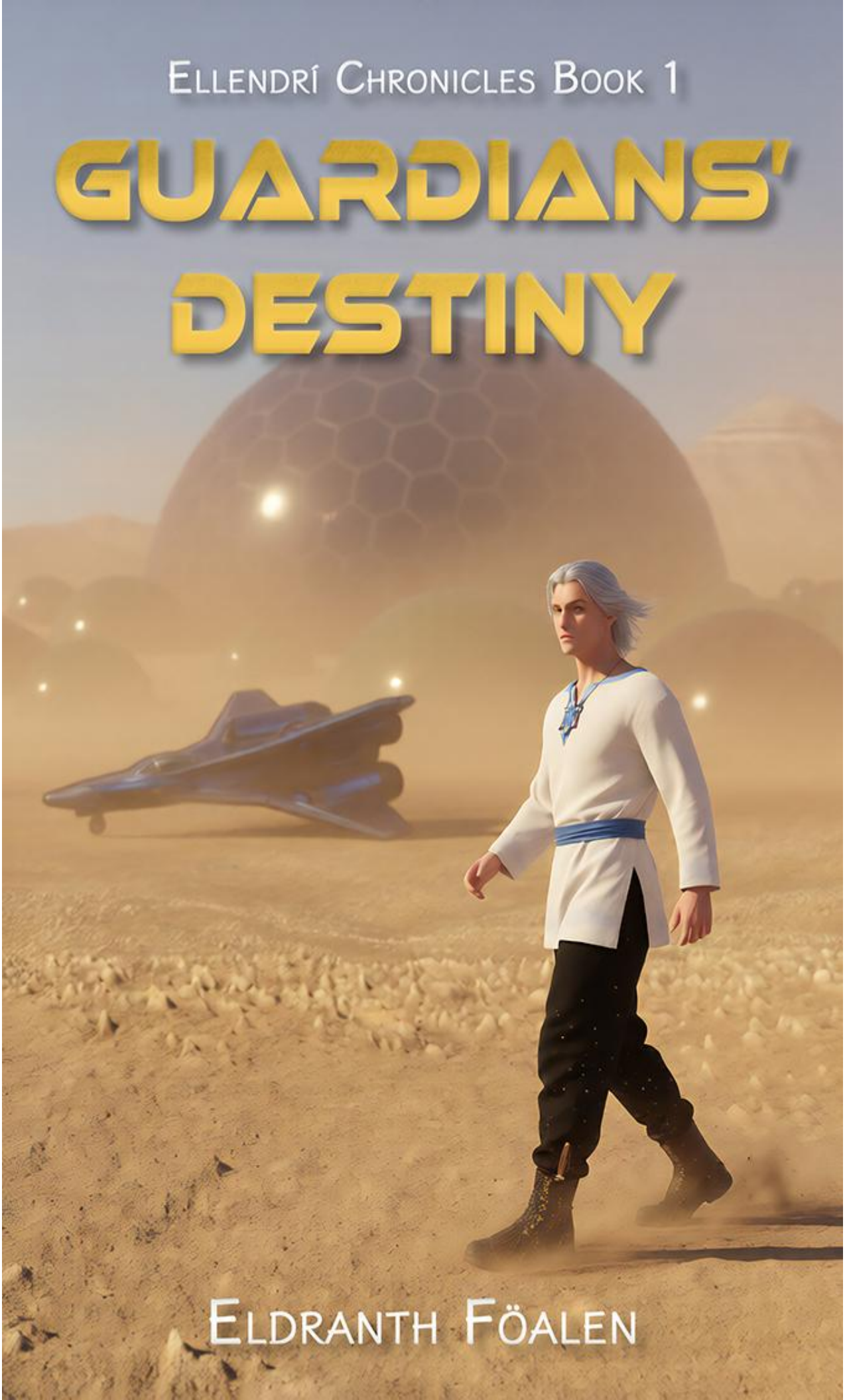
Ellendrí Chronicles Book 1

Guardians' Destiny



Eldranth Föalen

Ellendrí Chronicles

Book 1: Guardians' Destiny

by

Eldranth Föalen

Seawolf Publishing

Front Matter

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The Ellendrí have lived peacefully on their home planet for thousands of years, but even they cannot stave off the eventuality of change. As their sun gradually morphs into a red giant, they are faced with difficult choices, to stagnate and die as their planet turns into a desert world or leave, evolve and survive. Some among them are not willing to wait until the greater whole of their people have made the decision. Once revered as peacekeepers throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn, these rogue and exiled Ellendrí are now feared in the space lanes. And, for the first time in recorded history, there are hostile aliens on the borders of the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Can this ancient and declining race find a new existence in a universe that suddenly seems to be sliding into chaos? Can the remaining few Guardians of Peace stand against the exiles and uphold the dignity and beliefs of their people? Or are the old ones doomed to extinction by fate itself?

þí tí þitəíí

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Preface

If anyone had asked me long years ago whether I might consider writing a book in Terran English, I would have looked blankly at them, and inquired, politely enough, "What language is that?" while wondering if they'd been struck by some form of temporary insanity to even consider me as a potential author for a book in any tongue. What in any of the Known Universes would motivate me to embark on such a project? Of course, that was before Drí[1] talked me into it …

****

It was nearly midsummer, and the days were long and warm. I was sitting on the porch that extended along one side of the southern wing of our family complex, enjoying the cooling breeze as the day was coming to its end. The air was rich, earthy, and with a level of moisture that a desert-born person such as myself could truly appreciate. Overhead, the sky was like the inside of a blue porcelain bowl, with the sun hovering close to the horizon, and one of the moons showing as a faint crescent. A few thin, hazy clouds hung gauze-like to the north. Looking westward and downhill from the complex, I could see the green pastures where various herd animals grazed, and I remembered the work that went into clearing the land and making our small farm self-sustaining. My muscles ached sympathetically with my reminiscences, but I was happy with our accomplishments. In the farthest pasture, I could see a family of *dÿntarálon*[2] socializing, and felt well-pleased with the course of events that now allowed these intelligent and sensitive creatures to share this world with us.

Inside the house, I could hear Darí[3] and Ceara, their voices rising and falling in animated conversation. Letting my mind sink into the gentle rhythm of their speech, I could feel their thoughts resonating with mine, echoing their spoken words. This too was a thing to be grateful for. I stretched, wolf-like, happily basking in the warmth and security of the deeply intense bonds that held the three of us together.

A third voice, familiar but not heard so often in our home, was woven in and around the music of my *anÿncáras'*[4] speech. Farrwÿn, our best friend, was there, contributing his bass notes to Darí's tenor and Ceara's contralto. He and Drí had recently returned from an assignment, and our family felt full and complete. I closed my eyes, letting contentment swirl through me, and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on my skin.

Soft steps behind me brought my thoughts back to the surface, and my eyes flicked open. Ah, yes … Drí. Wherever Farrwÿn was, Drí was never far away. Those two were inseparable, as inseparable as Darí and I. I chuckled, asking, "Tired of the conversation already?"

I heard a snort, and felt the bench creak as Drí settled down beside me. "No, I just wanted to talk with you for a while," Drí's melodic tenor voice answered back, a singer's voice. "*My darïlad*[5]," I thought

warmly, and then, like a glimmer of sunlight, my mind quickly added, "*My friend*". In truth, Drí was much more a friend to me these days than simply my progeny. Although none of us would ever suffer the ravages of aging, Drí was no longer young, even by Ellendrí standards. Indeed, he was long a mature adult, strong and capable in his own right, partnered, and a parent of a grown child himself.

"So, what's on your mind?" I inquired, glancing sideways at Drí as he settled himself on the bench, leaning back against the sun-warmed wall of the house, booted feet stretched out before him. The red streaks in his sun-gold hair caught the rosy tints of the sunset. He turned to face me, his cerulean eyes giving me a feigned look of surprise, his expressive eyebrows, a gift from his *dasban*[6], held high and questioning. I cut him off before he could play me along any further, "You've been pondering something all day. Don't think that I've missed that look. And I'm starting to think that whatever it is you're thinking, it has something to do with me."

"Hmmph," Drí snorted. "I never could fool you three." He was quiet for a few breaths, then slowly brought forth his cogitations. "Farrwÿn and I've been talking about the past a bit. Our family's been through quite a series of adventures," Drí shook his head, and I shared his feelings of almost disbelief. We had been through a lot … too much, in fact. Seemingly off on another thought, Drí asked, "You remember when you looked up the history for Turien, Killarÿn, and Danaldrí in the archives on Ellendrïa?"

I nodded, adding, "Farrwÿn asked me to do that long before you were born, I think mostly to convince me that they existed."

"There wasn't much information on them, was there?"

I shook my head slightly, "No. Drÿfoch might have destroyed some of the records, but there probably hadn't been much recorded in the first place."

"That's kind of what I thought, too," Drí confirmed. "You know, if it wasn't for Farrwÿn, we'd never have known what happened to them, or been able to deal with Drÿfoch," Drí paused, giving me a chance to comment, but I remained silent, waiting to see where he was headed with that thought. "Farrwÿn thinks it would be wise to make a detailed recording of the events that we've been through." Again, there was another heavy moment of silence. "I don't know if what we've done will be important to people in the future," Drí continued slowly, "but if it is, I'd like them to have more than a couple brief lines in an archival record in order to recreate the events in their minds."

"You have a point there," I chuckled, thinking of how little we'd known about what we were getting ourselves into, back at the beginning. "And your suggestion is?" I prompted.

"Well, I thought that since you are a trained Recorder," Drí hesitated momentarily, then plunged on, "maybe you could record our story." He smiled, and I felt faintly like I was in an arm-lock with some torsion being applied.

“Why me?” I questioned. “After all, you’re the Bard. If there’s a story to be told, I’m sure you’re the best one to do it.”

Drí shook his head, somewhat sadly. “No,” he dropped his eyes, and the feeling of being pressured faded away. Clearly Drí had thought this over, and if he’d felt that the task had belonged to him, his sense of duty would have held him to it. “You’ve lived through more of the story than I have. I just showed up for the last few chapters,” he laughed softly. “It would be best if you or Darí did it.”

“We weren’t there for all of it, either,” I reminded Drí as I considered what he was proposing. None of us could really tell the whole story—pieces of it belonged to each of us. But maybe I could cobble all the pieces together into a simulacrum of the whole. Taking that idea a bit further, I suggested, “I don’t think I could accurately record the entire story, but maybe if each of you wrote your own pieces, I could act as an editor and put them all together.”

“Hmmph,” Drí gave another of his dry snorts. “That may be harder than you think. Even after all these years, I’m not sure if I could write about that last bit with Drÿfoch. I still can’t think about it without giving myself nightmares.” Drí’s eyes turned dark, and I knew he was remembering a struggle for survival against a truly malevolent individual, a coming to terms with his own mortality, and the reality of violence and death. I reached out and put my hand on his arm, an attempt at comfort. He smiled at me limply, accepting what little solace I could provide while obviously trying to pull himself away from the dark precipice of his thoughts.

“If Farrwÿn really thinks that this is important, then I’ll do my best,” I conceded. I trusted Farrwÿn, and I knew he never suggested something difficult unless there was a very good reason.

Drí nodded, “I’ll talk to the others, and see if I can convince everyone to work on recording their own parts.” He looked as though he might jump up immediately, but then he paused, his eyes lighting up as something else entered his mind. “Do you think you can write the record out in English?”

“You mean Terran English?” I exclaimed. Drí nodded. “Why?” I asked.

“So much of the story revolves around things that happened on Terra,” Drí answered slowly. “Someday, Terra will be brought back into contact with the rest of the peoples of the Ll’Ellendrÿn. It would be good to have a story in one of their native languages which shows that they have been a part of the history of the Ll’Ellendrÿn all along.” The sunlight came back into Drí’s face, and he smiled brightly at me, glowing with a contagious enthusiasm. “Besides, we’re all fluent in Terran English,” he added.

****

And so this is our story, from the day that Farrwÿn, Darí, and I decided to fight against the threat of extinction that faced our people to the time when my *darïlad*, Arrwen, was born. The story is not mine alone, but told in the voices of the people who lived through the events—Farrwÿn, Allandrïon, Ceara,

and Eldarí. Although I have added my own pieces to a few of the chapters, my main contribution to this work has been to cajole, beg, coerce, and harangue my family into writing about the things they remember, and on occasion, assist those whose parts have been too difficult and emotionally loaded to put easily into words.

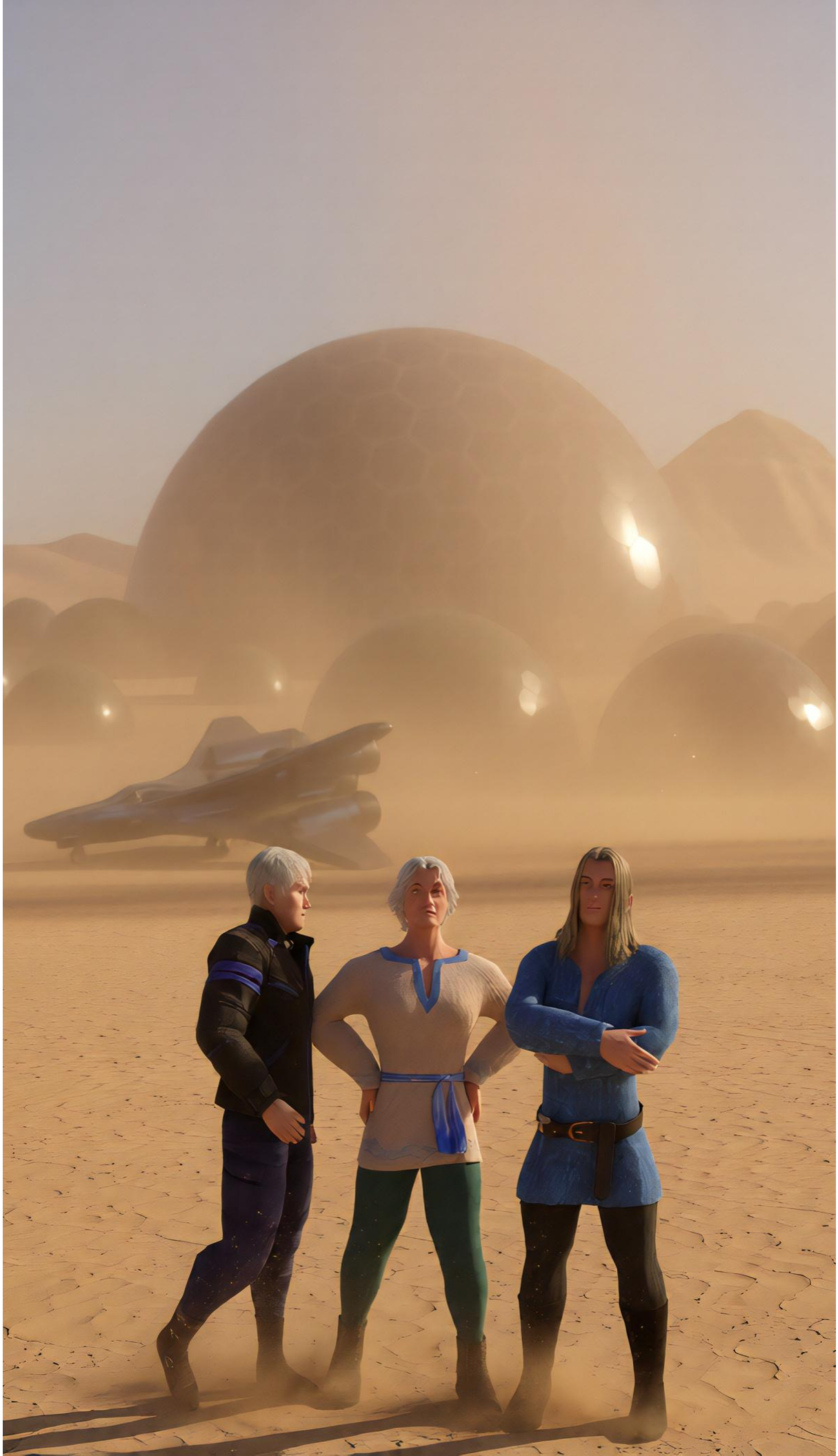
As Drí requested, I have written the original work in Terran English. This has been somewhat challenging, as the first part of the story took place long before Darí and I had ever been on Terra, and the language that we spoke in those days was Ellendrí. Terran English is actually a polyglot of native Terran languages, and is filled with idioms and slang, many of which are only valid and understandable for a single Terran generation. Furthermore, there are a number of concepts in Ellendrí which are not directly translatable to English. In the parts of the manuscript covering our early years, I have tried to faithfully recreate the essence of our lifestyle, language, and culture as it existed on Ellendrïa without resorting to terminology that is clearly of Terran origin. In places, this has made the writing feel somewhat stiff and stilted, and for this, I apologize. In other sections, I have regretfully resorted to Terran idioms, even though none of us knew them at the time during which that portion of the story occurred. To those who find this unrealistic, I can only say that this was the best I could do with my limited abilities. For those who want to see the manuscript translated into Ellendrí, I can happily say that this is a work in progress.

I have added endnotes to the text where I felt that further linguistic, cultural, or technical explanations were warranted. The reader may choose to view these if they feel that additional information enhances their reading experience. Otherwise, the narrative can be read without referencing the endnotes.

Finally, I would like to point out that this work is not a complete description of all the events in which our family was involved during the time period defined above; rather, it is a compilation of the events that our family felt were the ones that most needed to be told. A total description of all the things that the five of us have done over that time frame would fill many volumes, and probably bore any potential readers to tears (another Terran English idiom).

My thanks to any and all who read this. If you walk away from the experience feeling even the least bit wiser, then I think that my work will have been well worthwhile.

Eldranth Föalen



Prologue

Excerpt from "Ed Öl Rÿngÿ ó ad Ellendrí"

(A Brief History of the Ellendrí, translated into Terran English)

We have very little recorded data from the times of our earliest ancestors. Most of what we know today has been pieced together from those few surviving ancient records, along with oral folklore and legend, archaeological studies, and scientific investigations into the natures of the plants, animals, and people that populate the Hélïwÿr[7], a portion of one of the spiral arms of the Jälaeth Dannaig Sérïen[8], the galaxy where we live. The Ellendrí's home space, the Ll'Ellendrÿn, is located about halfway between the center of the galaxy and its outermost edge, along the Hélïwÿr. This region appears to have been colonized by groups of closely-related peoples during a period of time spanning approximately seven million years. We believe that these waves of colonization, extending outward along the Hélïwÿr, were initiated by an ancestral people, which we refer to as the Ellendorí[9], the ancient ones.

What little we know of the Ellendorí comes from our oldest information. Many of our records describe the Ellendorí who were our direct ancestors as slender, ageless, and sexless beings with fair skin and grey eyes. In truth, we really don't know what all Ellendorí were like, and certainly the many races of people who have evolved from them vary widely in physical characteristics, some to the extent that they are now considered almost distinct species. All we do know is that it's likely that the Ellendorí had a very high level of technology, and traveled widely throughout the galaxy.

When one considers the genetic similarity shown by the organisms inhabiting the Ll'Ellendrÿn, it is quite clear that colonization in this area was carried out in a rigorous and meticulous manner. In order for our people to survive on a planet, the plants, animals, and microbes inhabiting that planet must share our common chemical building blocks—their nucleic acids, amino acids, sugars, and fatty acids must be the same as ours. Any significant differences in basic chemical structure would result in incompatibilities which would not allow our people to integrate into the planetary ecosystem. That there are so many nearby planets on which we can survive comfortably suggests that there must have been some early bioengineering on these planets. We believe that this work was undertaken by the Ellendorí. Given our own peoples' studies in planet bioengineering, we believe that the Ellendorí likely selected candidate habitable planets on which life had not yet evolved. These planets would then have been seeded with select bacterial and fungal species—the early photosynthetic, chemosynthetic, and saprophytic organisms of a developing biosphere. If these organisms proliferated successfully on the planet, the second phase of bioengineering, the sowing of plant species and the establishment of a viable atmosphere in which animals could subsist, would have followed. Again, depending upon the success of the second step, a third step involving the introduction of animal species from the Ellendorí homeland may have occurred.

What is not fully understood is how the Ellendorí operated within the time frames of these grand

bioengineering projects. Paleographic studies on a number of the planets in the Ll'Ellendrÿn suggest that it takes approximately 2,500 million years for a planet to evolve from an abiotic state to a point at which human colonization occurs. However, since archaeological evidence of hominids only extends back to about seven or eight million years, how could the Ellendorí have bioengineered planets thousands of millions of years before their own existence? While this may, at first, seem like an unanswerable paradox, our own experiences with traveling throughout the galaxy have provided the most likely explanation. Our use of temporary gravitational anomalies, or "gates", to travel nearly instantaneously over large distances of space provides the necessary clue. Not only do these "gates" allow travel in space, they also permit travel in time, and potentially even between parallel universes. Although time travel is feasible, there is the prospect for confusing, and possibly dangerous, paradoxes. Early theories suggested that even insignificant changes in the past might be enough to alter our present time completely. However, more recent theories propose that time travel can result in a closed causal loop—a situation where a chain of events is created that loops back in time, so that an event turns out to be amongst its own causes. In the case of the Ll'Ellendrÿn, it is believed that the Ellendorí went back in time to create the bioengineered planets which encouraged their expansion into space, thus stimulating the development of the technology necessary to bioengineer planets and carry out time travel, and finally resulting in the closure of the causal loop. If the Ellendorí were as long-lived as we are, planet bioengineering was probably pursued with far-removed goals in mind.

Since the process of planet bioengineering would have taken many millions of years to complete, some degree of independent evolution probably occurred on each planet, with resulting species diversification. Indeed, this is what we have observed—planets in the Ll'Ellendrÿn which have the same basic biochemistry, but sufficient biodiversity to be unique. As these bioengineered planets matured and stabilized, they provided new home worlds for the first wave of Ellendorí colonists. These first colonists expanded and diversified, interacting with each other and those people remaining on the Ellendorí home world, resulting in the complex patterns of colonization and genetic variation seen amongst the related peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn.

Even our own peoples' history is buried deep in time. Although the story of our origin has many variations, the basic pattern running through all the narratives is similar. There existed in the Ll'Ellendrÿn a planet known as Gwÿrdrÿn. The name of the planet varies somewhat in the records, and we don't know which sun it circled. If the stories are correct, it no longer exists, so it is unlikely that we will ever know its exact location. Like us, the inhabitants of Gwÿrdrÿn, the Gwÿrdrí, were also hermaphroditic and unaging. However, in physical appearance they were quite different from us, often being described as a tall, dark, and broad-shouldered people. It is probable that they were descendants of one of the earlier waves of Ellendorí colonists, originating from a unique racial mix and then adapting to a planet with conditions that differed significantly from the Ellendorí home world. Approximately 15,000 years ago, the Gwÿrdrí were visited by a colony ship of a very antiquated design. The people on that ship were a racially homogeneous clan claiming to have fled from Dorïanya, the planet circling Ellendorïa, which had passed into a cloud of interstellar dust and was experiencing severe glaciations. They believed themselves to be

the last remaining denizens of the Ellendorí home world. Their request for a place of refuge on Gwÿrdrÿn was granted, and the records show that the two peoples lived harmoniously for a number of millennia.

The Gwÿrdrí were a highly advanced, technologically astute people, with a well-developed industrial base. By contrast, the Ellendorí, while technologically knowledgeable, had developed a science based on psychic abilities[10], requiring only a very small industrial footprint. Their divergent approaches to living maintained a cultural separation between the two races, and although some intermingling occurred, they remained as separate peoples throughout their cohabitation on Gwÿrdrÿn.

About 9,000 years ago, resource limitation on Gwÿrdrÿn caused the formation of warring factions amongst the Gwÿrdrí. The Gwÿrdrí entered into a catastrophic cycle of war, leading to the development of increasingly devastating weapons. In the midst of this strife, the descendants of the Ellendorí refugees, who practiced pacifism and refused to become participants in the war, feared that their adopted homeland would be destroyed. Ultimately, a decision was made to refurbish the ancient colony ship, which still remained in orbit around the planet, and evacuate the Ellendorí and those few Gwÿrdrí who had commingled with them. The records imply that the evacuation occurred only just in time, and the refugees had barely left Gwÿrdrí's solar system before massive explosions destroyed the planet. Not surprisingly, this terrible loss only served to further reinforce the pacifistic nature of the survivors.

Neither truly Ellendorí nor Gwÿrdrí, this small, highly inbred group was a blend of both peoples, and chose to call themselves the Ellendrí. The colony ship traveled until it reached a habitable planet—one circling a Class G sun (Terran classification used in translation) with no evidence of previous colonization, although it was clearly a legacy of Ellendorí bioengineering. This planet, which was named Ellendrïa, became our home, the land where our people have lived out the cycles of their lives for nearly 9,000 years. Throughout that time, Ellendrïa has been free from war and other significant violence.

Chapter 1: A Question Yet Unanswered

Eldranth—Date: 8936.111

[11]*Ellendrïa, Midsummer*

Hope … such a fragile thing. What we believe, or don't believe, our subjective reality, can make or break us, can stretch and rend the delicate filaments of our hope, or build it into an enduring, multi-stranded web upon which we can suspend an entire life.

Such a fragile thing … and I'd nearly lost mine. I had felt the darkness closing in on me, the colors fading from my world, leaving everything gray and tasting of dry dust. My fires had burned low, my energies ebbing outwards like a slowly falling tide, leaving the stranded flotsam behind. Finally to stop, to take that last sleep, to slip quietly into the beyond[12] *…*

Ah, but a single drop of that precious elixir can raise the nearly-dead … and I'd been given my dose, another chance to open my eyes and see the world in a different light. Now, it was up to me …

****

I was running, my legs aching with fatigue, feeling the burn of lactic acid as I tried to get enough oxygen. I gasped for air and pushed harder, but the greater my attempt, the more force I expended, the slower it seemed my legs moved. I yelled out my frustration, hoarsely, breathlessly.

The sand under my feet churned, puffed up in yellowish dust, which whirled about me, tormenting me with grit in eyes already burning with tears. I hacked, and tried to swallow, but my mouth was thick with dust, dry with fear.

I was too late. I knew that already, heard it in my mind, felt it in the very depths of my straining body. Always too late. But still I ran. At least let me say farewell, if only to one of them …

Slowly, the looming face of the mountain drew nearer. The blowing dust made everything grainy, indistinct, details lost in ever deepening shades of yellow. There … at last I could see the fresh scar on the mountainside, a place where rocks had fallen and slid … my destination.

For a moment, time seemed to both stop and yet jump forward. I have no memory of traversing that final stretch of desert to the base of the mountain, and yet I am there and time slips into the present. My eyes focus on three people, a tableau of despair and loss. Eldarkÿn, my *athairad*[13], sits on the gravelly scree, legs carelessly askew, cradling Anaduviel's head in his[14] lap. Eldarí, *deirfad*[15] and so much more to me, is on his knees, arms wrapped around Eldarkÿn in an attempt at comfort. I can see the blood on my *athairan's* face, the deformation of skull that is the telltale of a fatal injury. Tears streak Eldarkÿn's face, washing pale lines through the coating of yellow dust. Darí's eyes are full of anguish, frustration, loss … he also is too late.

My knees grind into the harsh, jagged rock as I reach Eldarkÿn's side. A flash of recognition touches my mind, acknowledging my presence, but Eldarkÿn's eyes remain fixed on Anaduviel's face, staring unblinkingly at his *anÿncára*[16], almost lost to this world already. Touching his arm, I know there is too little time to say all the things I want to say. As I look down at my *athairan*, I know it is already too late to say goodbye to one I love so well. Soon my *athairad* will follow … he has only waited for me to come, to say his last farewells to Darí and me.

Tears blur my sight and Anaduviel's features shift, distort, and change as my vision swims in and out of focus. Then the image sharpens, and it's not Anaduviel I see at all, but Darriel, sightless eyes staring dully upwards, face slack with death. Around me, the landscape ripples and wavers, mountains transforming into buildings, desert becoming roads. No! I am too late! My body, my mind feel as though they have been ripped apart, a sudden yawning emptiness opens within my soul, sucking me into its maw. With a terrible effort, I drag my eyes away from Darriel, from the void within me, and look for Darí with desperate need. But he is not beside me anymore, no longer a part of this tableau of death. I see his back as he walks away from me, like a sleepwalker, slow, unreachable. "Don't leave me!" I cry out, despairing, as another emptiness opens up within me, leaving only one-third of a whole behind. Slowly, the color seeps out of the world around me, leaving behind shades of grey. The edges of my vision fade to black, gradually narrowing my field of view. I think, "*So this is death*," and maybe that's not so bad. I am so alone, and it hurts too much …

****

Sound … a voice in the distance, someone calling my name. The eternal present crumbled and fell away. "*Dran*[17]*!*" I heard a shout in my mind. "*Dran, wake up!*"

"What??" I wheezed. There was no air in my lungs. I gasped, drawing in a deep refreshing breath.

"*Wake up! It's just a dream*." The voice resolved into something I recognized … Darí's mind touch, reaching out to me telepathically.

"*What?*" I mumbled again, mentally and audibly, still mind-numbed with sleep.

"*You weren't breathing!*" Darí's thoughts were anxious, concerned. "*Your heart stopped for a few moments. I thought you were dying!*"

"*I'm alright*," I tried to be reassuring, but I felt shaky. The pain of the dream was still with me, but fading fast as I drew in deep breaths of air. I must have been holding my breath. "*I've had that nightmare before, and it hasn't killed me yet*."

"*Yet …*" Darí's thought trailed off. I could hear the "*There's always a first time*" in the background of his thoughts, although he hadn't actually formulated the sentiment into mental speech. "*So this nightmare is recurrent?*"

"*Hmmph*," I responded in a noncommittal affirmative. I really did not want to discuss the dream, or its causes. "*I'm sorry that slipped through and worried you. I'm usually better at shielding …*" I added, feeling rather guilty about disturbing Darí so unpleasantly.

"*You thought you could shield <u>that</u> from me?*" There was a mixture of anger and frustration in Darí's tone.

"*Well, I have … before.*" I finally opened my eyes, mostly awake now. It was still dark, although looking out my window, I could see a faint flush of rose on the horizon.

"*Why?*" Darí asked sharply.

"*I don't know*." It was an honest answer. I did the mental equivalent of hanging my head. There really should be no secrets, no hiding, no shielding between the two of us.

Darí's mind touch went silent for a while, and I thought that he might have withdrawn, but then he was back, "*I'm coming home today. I've got some information that needs to be presented to the Elder Council. I should arrive shortly before sunset, if I don't get too tied up with meetings*," he paused again. "*Dran, I really need to see you*," I could sense a measure of desperation in his thoughts.

"*And I you, my <u>anÿncára</u>*," I let my emotions color my thoughts so that Darí could sense the sincerity of my reply.

There was another brief pause, then Darí added, "*You are not alone, Dran. You do know that, don't you*?" Then he pulled his thoughts away, although I could still sense the bond linking us, quiescent, but present, even if once, in a state of self-imposed insanity, I had refused to believe in its existence. Yes, I was not alone.

I lay still on my bed, waiting for my heart to slow to its normal, steady rhythm. Sweat soaked my skin, and I shivered slightly, even though the temperature in the room was warm. I certainly wasn't going to get any more sleep this morning! I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood up, clasping my hands behind my head and arching my back, stretching out the muscles which had tightened with tension during the dream.

I wandered over to the window and stared outwards to the landscape beyond, through both the pane and the translucent canopy of the dome. Purple streamers chased across the misty blue sky as I watched the first rays of the sun crest the distant green-topped mountains—another dawn like many others in the last few years of my life. I closed my eyes, took several slow deep breaths, and tried to relax as much as possible. Softly, I murmured the ancient sun mantra, "I welcome you, our sun, bringer of life", the cynical part of my mind pointing out that it could be argued these days that the sun was more a bringer of death than life. I pushed the thought from my mind, repeating the mantra silently in my head, slowly and steadily as I inhaled and exhaled in time with the words. Gradually my mind stilled and my physical

tension eased, as the quiet meditation grounded me and let me regain control of myself, body and mind.

Unless I have some pressing duty to perform for the Elders, I often start my day with this small ritual, enjoying the sense of peace and balance it gives me, although seldom do I need it more than after that particular nightmare. In the calmness that follows, I feel more competent to sort out the day's activities—and it was now looking as though today was going to be busy, if Darí was indeed coming home. I finished my morning pattern with some stretches followed by my usual daily workout—years spent as a Guardian[18] had taught me never to neglect my body. By the time Hauldrÿn's white-hot orb had fully cleared the horizon, I had achieved a fine state of sweltering sweatiness. Even after 10 years of living mostly on Ellendrïa, I still sometimes forgot how hot the summer mornings could be.

Throwing open the room's window to let in a cooling breeze sparked a childhood memory—Darí and I engaged is some wild and crazy game in the pond out back, attempting to find relief from the tepid summer heat. I could smell the moisture from the pond even now. I chuckled a moment at the memory, stripped off the loose trousers that were my only clothing, paced barefoot through the house, and out the back door onto the soft meadow grass that extended behind our home. Taking a few running steps, I dove into the small garden pond, startling a variety of water birds that made various sounds of alarm and dismay at my apparently, from a bird's perspective, strange behavior. I surfaced, swam a couple strokes to the edge of the pool, and lay in the water for a few moments, happily cooling off. Fortunately, the pumps and filter systems kept the water clean; otherwise I'd have been covered with the green slime that usually forms in ponds frequented by birds. Feeling my mood brightening as the last black tendrils of the dream faded from my mind, I laughed softly at the memories of some of the places I'd had to bathe in on other worlds, rolled to my feet in the shallow water, and clambered over the low rock wall that formed the pond's boundaries.

It only took a few minutes standing in the warm morning sunshine to dry off, then I headed back into the house to get dressed for the day. Pulling a tunic over my head, the soft white fabric, hand-woven from the silky fiber of a plant grown in one of the agricultural domes, was a tactile reminder of the many changes in my life. Instead of the closely fitted, durable clothing preferred by the Guardians, what I now wore was lightweight and loose, suited to the hot, dry climate of Ellendrïa. The trousers I selected for today, made of a similar, but slightly heavier weight fabric, were a pale blue in color. Using a belt of soft, yellow-dyed caprinid[19]-hide, I gathered the loose tunic around my waist in the fashion favored by the younger Ellendrí. The tunic was unadorned, although by my current profession, I could choose to wear yellow trimming at cuff and collar. However, today I had no immediate duties with the Elders, and so I had no need to dress formally.

Darí was coming home—my mind chanted this thought like another mantra, generating feelings of well-being and good humor. During the past 10 years, things had not been so good between Darí and me. Not that we hated each other—in fact, the very opposite was true—but rather, tragedy, loss, pain, and the pressures of social norms had put our relationship through some serious struggles. At one point,

I wasn't even sure that the deep soul bond which had linked me to my *deirfad* had even survived our misfortunes. But while I despaired, my actions driven by depression and an insane sense of recklessness, Darí had recovered. In fact, despite my self-inflicted fears, the strong, vital connection between us that I had remembered from our childhood was still present. However, my mood had been so dark that I'd barely noticed the existence of that one all important thing in my life. Only this spring, circumstances had led us to a situation which proved to us both, beyond any doubt, that our connection was still alive, strong, and healthy. That had cleared a lot of emotional debris out of our lives, and Darí had left me with the one question that still needed answering, "*Will you become my sïathcára*[20], *my shield mate?*" Not hide our relationship, run from it, pretend that it might have been destroyed by the whims of fate, but to accept it fully and completely for what it is—the bond between *anÿncára*—and stand by his side, regardless of criticism and disapproval. Darí had long since made his decision, and it had only been personal tragedy that had kept him from demanding an answer from me sooner. And after nearly 60 years of difficult choices, I did indeed have an answer.

Eldranth—Date: 8925.106

Davandrïa and Ellendrïa (approximately 11 years earlier), Midsummer

Davandrïa; colonized planet circling the sun Danaldrÿn at the edge of the Second Arc; slowly backsliding into chaos and confusion, like so many of the colonies in the Second and Third Arcs. A government feigning democracy rigged an election. The people decided to revolt. With violence incited by armed rioters in the streets, the government had placed a request with the Guardians to help bring about a ceasefire and negotiate new conditions for the governance of the planet—would've been nice if they'd asked a bit sooner.

So … we had been sent in to deal with the situation. There are six major cities on Davandrïa, a planet of plains and wide open spaces where the majority of the population lives in small rural settlements. The cities seemed to be where the riots were focused—we'd been traveling to each city in turn, announcing the ceasefire and setting up timetables for facilitated meetings to hear grievances and start the process of moving towards a settlement. So far, we'd visited four of the cities. Gavaldrïn was the fifth—the largest city and the planetary capital—and also, by the look of things, the location of the worst of the violence.

The three of us—Kerredrÿn, Rallandrí, and I—had developed something of a pattern for handling this process. Mulling this over, I made a minor course correction in my ship's flight path. As I looked to my right and left, I could see the other two ships, flying tight, one on each side of me, and just slightly to the rear, with my ship forming the spearhead. Announce our presence with a low, slow, precisely executed flyby—that was the first step. Supposedly, we weren't showing off, but rather we were giving the people who were watching a chance to recognize the ships as Ellendrïan, letting them know that we were Guardians who came to assist, not to harm. The precision wasn't a bad idea either—Kerredrÿn figured that it was a good show of our professionalism and competence. So far, he seemed to be right. Fortunately for us, the Davandrïans no longer possessed space flight technology. Their small atmospheric planes were no match for our ships' speed and agility, and no one had challenged us yet. Of course, if someone had, what would we have done? It's not like any of our ships are armed. Our only option would've been to run. But usually, if we're asked in to help, we're respected by the people, and not generally attacked. I was really putting my faith in that belief because I could see that there was a lot of chaos and violence going on in the city below us.

I banked my ship, bringing it around to a new course and lining up with a large central plaza located in the governmental and administrative center of the city where we hoped to land. The other two adjusted their relative positions accordingly, and the formation stayed nice and neat. People in the plaza looked up and began to realize that they needed to get out of the way. Quickly the space cleared out, leaving us lots of room for landing. Excellent! It's never the intent of the Guardians to cause injury or death, except in dire situations of self-defense, and it's always best when the local population gives us space to maneuver without hurting anyone.

Just as I brought my ship down to land, I spotted movement along the rooftop of a building fronting the plaza. Not so good. A brief flash of light suggested that the person on the roof was armed with some type of projectile weapon. I sincerely hoped that they weren't shooting at us. I touched the communication screen, instantly bringing up the link between the other two ships, and warned them about the possible presence of snipers.

Human cultural regression always seems to follow a particular pattern. I've seen it on half a dozen planets now, and while the details of the pattern may differ, the basic descent is the same. Space flight technology is resource expensive. Some cultures manage this better than others, are more conservative in their use of technology, or live more sustainably within their planet's limitations; those who don't quickly deplete essential resources. Once resource limitation sets in, the first step down the path of descent is the loss of space travel. Many of the people in the Ll'Ellendrÿn survive this by relying on those worlds that can maintain space flight to supply them with trade goods, communication, knowledge exchange, medical needs, and so on. But as more and more of our peoples slip back down the rungs of cultural evolution, there are fewer and fewer ships plying our space ways, and neither goods nor knowledge are shared.

As a culture loses its capabilities, its knowledge, even its history, there always seems to be an associated increase in violence. We humans are a violent lot at best, struggling to maintain a semblance of peace and goodwill. Add a lack of resources, poor medical aid, starvation, and suddenly people are very willing to fight each other in whatever way they can to get what they need. The desire to cooperate seems to be lost. Weapons always seem to be readily available. At first, we see a proliferation of high-tech weapons—lasers, missiles, biological warfare. Over time, as technology fails, every culture seems to develop, or redevelop, projectile weapons or firearms, devices based on explosive charges. As metallurgical and chemical sciences start being lost, we relearn how to make simple bladed weapons—knives, swords, spears, arrows. I haven't seen it yet, but I guess this slide could keep on progressing until we were hitting each other with clubs and stones.

Since this pattern is so common, Guardians doing covert work are trained in the use of as many weapons, both high-tech and low, as possible—not because our job is to go out and kill people, but rather that these skills are often very essential if you want to survive in conditions where violence could erupt at any moment. So, I know a firearm when I see one.

Dust billowed around us as we set our ships down on what appeared to be a paved surface. The low two-story buildings surrounding the plaza were all made of some type of concrete or stone, colored in a variety of subdued hues. Everything was looking a little tired and worn—I could see chips on some of the buildings where projectile damage had occurred. The people who vacated the plaza for our landing were watching us warily from alleyways, looking distinctly nervous.

With a few quick taps on the main control console, I had the ship's antigrav units and main engine shut down, but I kept everything on standby, ready to be fired up again in an instant if necessary. I got up

from the pilot's position at the front of the ship, stretched a little bit to make sure all my muscles were limber, and put my hand against the panel that activated the ship's hatch. With a quiet whir, the hatch opened downward to form a ramp. A furnace blast of dry, dusty air rolled into the ship. I could smell the tang of hot metal, the burningly aromatic odor of some type of spilled fuel, and most disturbingly, the sulfurous smell of gunpowder. Although it was mostly quiet outside, I could hear the occasional clipped explosion of a firearm being discharged. So … someone was still shooting. It would've been nice if they'd stopped to hear us out.

Without stepping out of the ship, I stuck my head out as far as I dared and tried to scan all the rooftops around the plaza. Our ships were facing in a direction more or less towards planetary north. Looking eastward out through the hatch, I could see movement on a couple of roofs in that direction. Looking forward in a northward direction through the ship's canopy, I didn't see anything that looked particularly alarming. However, I couldn't see much to the west or south, as there were no viewports in the ship that were oriented in those directions. I went back up to the pilot's seat and activated the external viewer, watched as it showed a full hemispherical image of our surroundings, but still didn't see anything except the two I'd already spotted on the east side.

I quickly reached out with my mind telepathically and connected with Kerredrÿn and Rallandrí. They'd been going through the same procedure as I'd been and confirmed that they'd only spotted the two snipers on the eastern rooftops. We'd need to be watching out for them. Hopefully there weren't any others we hadn't seen yet. Moving back to the hatch, I eyed the situation again and got ready to go into action.

Back to our pattern … the next step was to meet with the local government representatives, presumably in the government complex which was located on the north side of the plaza. It would be their duty to contact the media and arrange for local broadcasting of the ceasefire. Our job, working in concert with whatever administrative structures were still functional, was to set up meetings with the various stakeholders. Normally, this process was not particularly dangerous, as we didn't take sides and weren't there to threaten anyone. However, getting caught in unfriendly crossfire was always a possibility, as it seemed today.

Grasping my Star[21] from where it hung on its chain around my neck, I quickly glanced down at it as I began to visualize a shield. The *ferrïl*[22] was, as always, glowing with an inner blue fire, a reflection of my own vital energies. As I concentrated, the *durrïls*[23] flared bright yellow, absorbing planetary infrared radiation and feeding it to the *ferrïl*, increasing its glow to an intense blue fire. Controlled psychically, this energy was transformed into other wavelengths of electromagnetic and gravitational energy, and created a plasma force field a short distance in front of me. Although it was possible to make a spherical shield, which would provide protection from all directions, the energy expenditure to create such a shield was considerably more than that used to create a simple unidirectional shield. The shield I had just formed was a forward-facing arc that moved with my body and protected me from oncoming danger. This was usually more than adequate when the source of danger was known, and would be

strong enough to deflect anything the snipers shot at us.

Kerredrÿn's ship had landed in formation, to the right and just rearward of the landing ramp that now extended down from my ship. His ship would provide convenient cover between us and the sniper. I stepped down onto the ramp, and with a quick leap, landed on the ground beside my ship. The sniper apparently hadn't noticed me yet, but I wasn't taking any chances and kept my shield up while I sidled back towards the sheltered position between the two ships. Kerredrÿn was already there, having jumped out of his ship and rolled underneath it to come up in the space between our ships. Rallandrí had it a bit easier, as he'd landed on the far side of my ship. He was able to walk around behind it and still stay hidden from the sniper, and joined us a moment later.

Crouching in the shelter of our ships, we were able to drop our shields and take a few moments to assess the situation. Without any doubt, things were not as good as they should be. Normally, we would just walk up to whatever building had been assigned as the meeting location and get on with the work we had to do. Looking northward, I couldn't see any signs of life in the government complex. If anybody was waiting for us, they were clearly staying out of sight and under cover. No one was about to welcome us in. So, should we attempt to enter the building and see if the plans here were still as scheduled, or should we get back in our ships and try to re-establish contact with the city from a safer locale? I made eye contact with Rallandrí and Kerredrÿn, my question expressed both telepathically and by a quirk of my left eyebrow combined with a slight tilt of my head towards the complex.

Of the three of us, Rallandrí was the oldest, and if it can be said that age imparts wisdom, the wisest amongst us. Kerredrÿn and I valued his judgment, and thus he'd become, unofficially, our leader. Although we'd all had the same Guardian training, each of us had developed our own particular specialties and expertise. Kerredrÿn was our spokesperson—he was able to project his voice and emotions using his Star—and could accomplish amazing things with the power of his words. I'd seen him calm aggressive and violent mobs and, within minutes, encourage people to start talking rather than fighting. Rallandrí was our expert on culture, sociology, history, and just about any of the other social sciences one could name. If we had a problem dealing with a situation, he could usually come up with a solution. Me? Well, I'm just Eldranth. I've been doing Guardian duty for a long time, 50 years or so, and seemed to have picked up a little of everything. Mostly, however, I'm the one who looks after the defensive end of our operations. Partly that's because I'm not too bad at fighting, if it comes to a difficult situation. I'm a little taller and heavier built than a lot of Ellendrí—a physique I've inherited from my *athairad*—and this seems to be useful in a fight. Partly it's because I seem to be lucky—although I've had my share of cuts, bruises, and scrapes, I've never been seriously hurt … until today.

"*Doesn't look like there's anyone here waiting for us*," Kerredrÿn seconded my assessment of the circumstances. We spoke mind-to-mind, not wishing to provide any potentially lurking antagonists with information that could be used against us if it came to a fight.

"*Not that we can see*," Rallandrí replied as he stared intently at the building. "*But someone might be*

trapped in there, in danger, or hurt. I'm going to scan around and see what I can detect."

I nodded my head fractionally, indicating that I would do the same. Using a combination of empathy and telepathy, we were looking for traces of emotion or stray projected thoughts that could provide information on the numbers, locations, and states of mind of the people around us. Psychic abilities were rare amongst the Davandrïans, and generally feared whenever they did crop up in the population. In situations like this, telepathic shielding was extremely uncommon, and the environment was usually psychically noisy. However, where I expected to hear an emotional clamor—there had been quite a crowd in the plaza before we landed—I was surprised by how quiet things had become. The people who'd been hiding between the buildings had silently departed, possibly expecting more violence and wanting to be well clear of it. The two snipers were an easily detected churning of hate and anger and I could sense three people in the administrative complex; surprisingly, they felt very passive, unnaturally calm. Drugged? I wasn't sure.

"*Two snipers, three people in the building*," Rallandrí reported. "*Is that what you sense, Eldranth?*" I gave him a confirmatory nod. "*I'm not sure about the people in the building—could be drugged, or just very complacent*," he continued. "*I think we should check it out. I'd feel guilty if we left and the people waiting for us were killed when we could've done something to prevent it.*"

Rallandrí made a good point and I could easily agree with him. Was it not a Guardian's duty to protect those who had requested assistance? And yet, I felt a little uneasy … the mental state of the people in the building was concerning. Were they drugged … and was this some kind of trap? Or did they simply feel that they were completely safe regardless of what happened in the plaza? And if they felt so safe, why? What did they know that we didn't?

I'm a very cautious person, risk-adverse some might say, but I'm not a coward. I take my duties as a Guardian very seriously; nonetheless, I have made promises to others, and vows to myself, to be especially careful. Again, I analyzed the situation: two snipers, the three of us with shields, and a distance of maybe 30 strides to the entrance of the building. The door should be open; after all, they were expecting us. In any case, a locked door could be quickly dealt with. The likelihood of us getting hurt should be very low.

"*Should be safe enough*," I looked at Kerredrÿn, raising my eyebrows quizzically by way of soliciting his opinion. He glanced back towards the complex and I found my eyes following his. The plaza was amazingly barren for a central city square … no vehicles, no benches, trees, or planters, no vendor's stalls, nothing. I noticed an area of blackened paving off to the northeast corner and suspected that whatever had once occupied the plaza had been burned in some act of violence. It felt almost eerily empty, especially now that all the spectators had withdrawn.

Kerredrÿn sucked in his breath, "*I can't sense anything that should be a problem except for the snipers. It just seems so quiet …*"

Glancing at both of us, Rallandrí responded decisively, "*So we go … shields up, facing eastward and overlapping, in a staggered diagonal line. I'll go first, followed by Eldranth, and Kerredrÿn will bring up the rear*." Checking to see that we were in agreement, Rallandrí gave us a brief tense smile, then turned and walked a step forward, bringing up his shield as he did so. Re-establishing my shield, I followed a pace behind him and slightly to his right, traveling north, but angling my shield towards the east to protect our flank. Behind me, I could sense Kerredrÿn doing the same, staying just a little to my right. Two steps brought me out from the shadows of our ships and into brightness, the sun a white-hot orb in the eastern sky.

If the snipers had missed their chance before, they were focused and aware of us now. A series of sharp reports sounded, and several projectiles slammed into our combined shields. I was prepared for this and had leaned my weight into my shield, taking up the recoil as it rebounding in response to the expended force of the bullets striking it. Step by step, we were moving out of the shelter of the ships and towards the administrative complex.

For a brief instant, an image flashed in my mind—Kerredrÿn being struck, falling to the ground, blood trickling from the side of his head—combined with a sharp sense of danger, not from the east, but from the west. Then I was back in the here and now. *Turas*[24] … a warning, but how much time did I have? I whipped my head around and scanned the profiles of the roofs to the west … a flicker of movement, then nothing, no sense of a person at all. Was there a mind-shielded sniper? Unlikely, but …

"Back!" I shouted. "Get back to the ships!" Rallandrí responded immediately, but Kerredrÿn hesitated, searching for the source of my alarm. Kerredrÿn's stance was starting to echo the image still burning behind my eyes and I knew I had run out of time. Momentarily, I was caught between opposing responsibilities—my duty as a Guardian and my duty to my *anÿncára*. It was this conflict, and my obligations as a Guardian, that Darí understood and accepted, but that Darriel was unable to acknowledge. As adrenaline surged through my veins, time seemed to slow. I sent a quick thought outwards to the great One, a plea for luck, then steeled my determination to be a survivor no matter what was to come. I dropped my shield, took a couple running steps, and launched myself at Kerredrÿn.

The force of my impact slammed us to the pavement, skidding us most of the short distance back to the ships and forcibly ejecting the air from my lungs. Without thinking about it, I grabbed Kerredrÿn around the torso and used our dying momentum to roll us into the ship's shadows. Rallandrí had quickly stepped into a protective position between us and the snipers, expanding his shield so that it deflected the shots from both the east and west roofs. In only a few seconds, we were back in relative safety, sheltered by the ships. It was only as I sprawled on my back, winded and trying to catch my breath, that I realized I'd been hit.

No matter what the statistics say, we always think that it will never happen to us. But it's a fact that almost every Guardian will be seriously injured at least once during their service time. The positive side to this fact is that the majority of us recover. When you consider that most Guardians only serve for 20

to 30 years, I was even luckier to have survived nearly 50 years of service with only a few minor injuries. No one is quite sure how I managed such a record. In part, it's due to simply being careful, cautious, and keeping my wits during difficult situations. It might also be attributed to the *turas* that runs in the genetics of our family which has often given me that tiny bit of forewarning I needed to stay out of trouble. And maybe chance and fate have played their roles in my life as well. In any case, whatever it was that usually kept me relatively safe, it failed that day. I'd taken a risk to save a friend's life and I had not escaped unharmed.

I guess you never forget the first time you get badly hurt. I'll always wonder if I made the right choices, especially as the outcome of those choices led to a juncture in my life. I'm still questioning my actions today. More than that, I'm questioning the situation that we found ourselves in. Guardians were once highly regarded as peacekeepers throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn, so why were the Davandrïans shooting at us in the first place?

Initially, I hadn't quite realized what had happened. I was a little stunned by the force of my tackle on Kerredrÿn and numbed by the shock of the impact of the bullet. I couldn't seem to take a deep breath. I kept thinking that my collision with Kerredrÿn shouldn't have winded me this badly. As I lay there gasping, things were still moving around me in slow motion. I saw Rallandrí walk towards us. Kerredrÿn rolled to his feet and turned to look at me where I'd fallen. That was when the pain kicked in, and the world started moving in real time again. I rolled over on my side and curled up in agony. *Flaming balls of fire!* My brain was catching up now, and I realized that I'd been hit by a projectile. I could see blood was starting to ooze out of a wound on the right side of my chest and drip in bright red splatters on the dusty pavement. This was not good.

The actions taken in the first few minutes after a serious injury can make the difference between living and dying. All Ellendrí are trained in biocontrol during their childhood—a technique that allows the mind to control certain bodily functions, such as temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, and fertility. Biocontrol can also be used to control bleeding, alleviate pain, and prevent shock. As Guardians, we were given more advanced training in biocontrol techniques—training that often saved our lives when the assistance of a Healer could be days away. I closed my eyes, visualizing the numerous capillaries, arteries, and veins in my chest cavity, trying to find those that were injured … and willed the bleeding to stop. Opening them again, I could see that the blood flow was reduced to a trickle; however, the presence of pinkish froth around the wound indicated that my lung was punctured and air was escaping out through the wound with each breath; this was the reason I couldn't seem to breathe properly.

As I stared at the wound while my pain-dulled brain pondered my next action, two things happened. The first was that Rallandrí came over and knelt beside me. The second was that Darí's voice suddenly spoke inside my head.

Darí and I are very close; too close, some might say. We are *anÿncára*—soulmates, held together by a bond so intimate and strong that we can, and often do, share everything and anything. Once, long ago,

our bond would have been recognized and honored as the great gift that it is. Darí would likely have chosen to accompany me as a Guardian, to be "the shield at my back and the sword at my side", as the old adage goes. The Guardians still honor all *anÿncára* relationships, even if they occur between siblings. Once, long ago, before the Genomic Enhancement Interval, it wouldn't have mattered that we were siblings. When our people were still improving our psychic abilities by selective breeding, *anÿncára* bonds between siblings were encouraged, as the inbreeding strengthened recessive genes. However, now that inbreeding and genetic engineering have resulted in low fertility, such relationships between siblings are strongly discouraged to prevent incest. Although Darí and I are both currently in male phase, and couldn't produce children, it would only be a simple matter for one of us to switch to female phase, thus allowing us, at least in theory, to do the very thing that our society wants to prevent. Unfortunately, since I doubt that the Elders would be easily convinced that we intended to remain childless, I've chosen to keep our bond private and unconsummated. Of course, a few close friends know that Darí and I are *anÿncára*, and others may well suspect.

At the moment, Darí was more than a little concerned, and I was hearing his worried thoughts clearly in my head. A strong telepathic bond is typical of the *anÿncára* relationship amongst Ellendrí. One of the interesting and unique things about telepathy is that it is not constrained to travel at the speed of light. Therefore, although my *deirfad* was many light years away, back on Ellendrïa, his thoughts were reaching me without any time lag and only a small degree of attenuation due to the distance. It's been hypothesized that telepathic energy travels as waves in n-dimensional space, and is therefore subject to different laws of physics than light or radio waves. For this reason, the Ellendrí have often used telepathic communication as a means of relaying messages between star systems, although in more recent times we have developed relay stations that can pulse radio waves through gates in n-dimensional space.

"*Eldranth, focus on your biocontrol!*" I heard Darí command me firmly. I realized that my mind had been drifting, my thoughts carrying me away from the pain and struggle of the moment. I felt Darí's mind touch thread through my awareness, using my own psychic abilities to scan my body for injury. Darí is a healer, and his gentle touch was welcome, not only for the comfort it gave me, but because he could quickly assess my injury and provide me with whatever help he could.

"*Good, you have the bleeding under control*," Darí was talking me through his diagnostic scan, his thoughts positive and reassuring. I looked down at the wound again—the trickle of blood had stopped. I didn't know what the exit wound looked like, but I supposed that the bleeding was probably stopped there as well. I made the telepathic equivalent of a grunt in agreement.

"*It's a clean perforating wound*," Darí continued, almost more to himself than me, although long association with a healer gave me a great deal of familiarity with medical terminology. While still very worried, I sensed Darí's tension was easing, which probably meant that the wound was not going to kill me immediately. "*The tissue damage is quite limited, and it looks like I'll be able to heal this without taking you into surgery.*" That was good to know; I only wished he could heal me here on Davandrïa.

However, I knew enough about healing techniques to know that this was impossible. While telepathy can travel great distances, psychokinetic energy, a vital component of psychic healing, is much more limited in its spatial reach. There was no way Darí could heal me when he was so far away. If I were a fully trained healer myself, it might be possible for Darí to use his mind touch to guide me through a process of self-healing. But a healer I am not, so that wasn't possible either.

"*You need to bring your heart rate down and your blood pressure up*," Darí's voice interrupted my mental meanderings. "*Don't let yourself go into shock*." While his worry was ebbing, concern was still clear in Darí's tone.

"*I'll definitely try to avoid it*," I tried to make my telepathic voice sound steady, replying to Darí with my usual irreverent, and sometimes cynical, humor. Closing my eyes and visualizing the various systems in my body that I must bring under my mental control, I attempted to follow his instructions.

"*Good!*" Darí's voice was encouraging. "*Keep that up for a while. Rallandrí and Kerredrÿn will help stabilize that wound and send you back to Ellendrïa*." Darí was reminding me of the process, keeping my mind focused. The entrance and exit wounds needed tending—they must be sealed with an airtight dressing so that air could no longer enter my thoracic cavity and compromise my breathing. Although I'd never been injured this seriously before, the standing order for my treatment was to stabilize and ship immediately to Darí … he would allow no one else to look after my long-term care.

I opened my eyes and looked up to see Rallandrí's concerned face hovering in front of me. "*Darí, I need to respond to Rallandrí. He's getting very worried*." Darí made the equivalent of a telepathic "*Mmmph*", and then, reassuringly, "*I'll be right here if you need me*."

"*Thank you, my anÿncára*," I felt Darí's presence settle into me, like a gentle embrace, and it gave me a sense of well-being and safety.

"Eldranth, let me see where you're hurt," Rallandrí adjured, and I could tell from the level of concern in his voice that this wasn't the first time he'd tried to get me to respond. I hadn't noticed during my communication with Darí, but Rallandrí had one hand on my shoulder and was gently trying to roll me over enough that he could examine my injury—I was still curled into a fetal position. The pain was starting to become bearable, and I pushed it further away, blocking it and trying to get some mental clarity. I forced my body to relax, rolling onto my back as my muscles unclenched and allowing Rallandrí to get a look at the wound. The look on his face wasn't very reassuring.

"Kerredrÿn, we're going to have to get Eldranth to a Healer," Rallandrí spoke as he glanced over his shoulder to where Kerredrÿn had taken up a defensive position, "as soon as possible." Looking back at me, he asked, "Can you get up?" I closed my eyes and quickly monitored myself—I had my blood pressure back up to a reasonable level, my heart was beating slowly and strongly, and I hadn't lost too much blood. On the other hand, I was only getting about half as much air into my lungs as I would be if I was able to breathe normally. Fortunately, Ellendrí are adapted to relatively low oxygen levels, about 13

percent compared to the 15 to 20 percent found on many of the worlds in the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Davandrïa was closer to the 20 percent range, so even with only one functional lung, I was getting pretty close to what I needed in terms of oxygen as long as my hemoglobin-rich blood did a good job at scavenging it out of what air I was taking in. With those thoughts in mind … I didn't think I was going to pass out if I stood up. I nodded, and let Rallandrí give me a hand up. The pain ratcheted to a higher level as I moved, and I swayed a bit, but Rallandrí slid under my left arm and supported me so that I didn't fall over. I closed my eyes and willed the pain into a back corner of my mind. For the moment, it reluctantly slunk away, like some predatory beast.

"Is Eldarí with you?" Rallandrí asked. I nodded. He was one of the ones who suspected. "Good. Do what he tells you." Rallandrí adjusted his position so that he could take more of my weight. "Now, we just need to go a few steps to get you back into your ship. Kerredrÿn is going to shield us. Can you walk?" It was clear from the way Rallandrí was handling the situation that he and Kerredrÿn were in telepathic communication, and had obviously devised some plan while I was trying to get myself together.

"Yes, I can walk," I was starting to feel a little better, as my body's systems began to stabilize and adapt to an upright position.

"And talk too," Rallandrí responded cheerfully, albeit the cheer may have been a bit forced. We made it easily to my ship, and with a little more difficulty, up the ramp and inside. The snipers may have taken a few more shots at us, I don't really know, but if they did, Kerredrÿn fended them off without any problems. Rallandrí hauled me to the rear of the ship and seated me on the bunk, while Kerredrÿn crouched over the main flight console. Rallandrí rummaged around in the ship for a few moments, and then returned with the medical kit that I kept on board.

"I need to get your shirt off so I can get some temporary patches over those holes. We're going to send you back to Eldarí, but we need to make sure you're going to be able to handle the flight." Rallandrí emphasized his words by starting to loosen my shirt where it was tucked into my trousers. Rather than being forcibly undressed, I grabbed the bottom of my shirt and pulled it off over my head, not without some reservations after the pain monster resurfaced and left me a little breathless. I shook my head to clear it, and Rallandrí gave me a wry grin. "Well, I guess you've got the worst over now".

With my shirt off, I could see the entrance wound a little more clearly. It didn't look all that bad, but I still felt a bit queasy looking at it. Rallandrí must have seen this, and warned "Don't look at that if it's going to make you faint. It really would be best if you try to stay conscious."

Glancing up at Rallandrí, I frowned slightly. I've been through enough ugly situations with the Guardians that a little blood, even if it is my own, is not going to make me pass out. "I'm not going to faint, I'm just trying to see how bad it is," I moved my right shoulder slightly. It was painful, but it seemed like the exit wound had missed my shoulder blade, and the joint was still functional. It didn't feel like any of my ribs were broken either—the sniper had been far enough away that the projectile's velocity had been

reduced, and it hadn't had the force to shatter bones. I was lucky.

Rallandrí was watching me intently as I checked things out. "You don't have Healer training, do you? I'd heard that many of your family do." Strangely, although Rallandrí and I had known each other for years, and had worked together as Guardians for much of that time, we'd never talked much about my early life or my family. I guess that was mostly my fault, a reticence to discuss problems for which I had no good solutions.

I shook my head, "No—just what I've picked up from Eldarí over the years." Rallandrí had the medical kit open and was using a sterile antiseptic wipe to clean the blood away from around the entrance wound, carefully avoiding touching my Star where it lay suspended from its chain against my chest—contact with a *ferrïl* keyed to someone else's pattern could be very painful for both parties. "Too bad," he shifted to my back and continued working on the exit wound, "Although that's probably better than what most of us have. Why hasn't Eldarí become a Guardian? The two of you would make a great team, and we could really use a Guardian with Healer training."

I responded with another head shake, "Darriel wouldn't let him, even if he wanted to." I wasn't entirely sure how Darí felt about being a Guardian now, not with the way our lives had drifted apart. It had been a long time since last we'd discussed it, and I'd just assumed that he was content being a Healer. He was, after all, one of the best Healers on Ellendrïa, and well respected.

Rallandrí was now doing a good job at putting airtight dressings on the wounds, and appeared to be mostly unperturbed by my injury. "Darriel—that's Eldarí's *anÿncára*?" I nodded. "Why doesn't Darriel become a Guardian as well? There's no reason why the three of you couldn't work together. And besides, I heard a rumor that Eldarí and his partner haven't had much success having children. Maybe it's time for them to do something else." Rallandrí's comments left me wondering what other sorts of rumors abounded about my familial circumstances. I guess I only hear what my mind wishes to acknowledge.

"If only it was that simple," I paused and found that I was able to take a slightly deeper breath now that Rallandrí had patched things up. Enough air that I could manage a couple of complete sentences, "Darriel doesn't have enough psi potential to take Guardian training. She's lost her sense of adventure, and her tolerance for risk of any kind is very low." And that was a terrible simplification. Distractedly, my mind wandered through memories of Darriel. As a child, she had been just as wild and adventuresome as Farrwÿn, Darí, and I. The four of us had been an inseparable team, full of the crazy schemes of youth. But that had been while everyone still hoped that Darriel would recover her psi capabilities, that they hadn't been completely burned out. Time passed, we learned, we trained, we grew into our adulthood, and still Darriel remained only a very limited telepath. Finally, believing that she had little psi potential, Darriel became the person she is today—a gentle individual with a sharp intelligence and a teasing sense of humor, but with her adventurous spirit limited by fear and vulnerability. I still wonder if she might have reached her full potential if she hadn't foundered in despair.

On that thought, my mind returned to the present situation. Darriel and I were best of friends, *avángri*[25] but not lovers, not *anÿncára*. And she was going to be very annoyed with me for getting injured, not that I wasn't annoyed with myself. She always wished I would be more careful, even when I returned home with little more than minor scrapes and bruises. I hoped she wouldn't take this too badly. "I suspect that I'm going to get a lecture on the dangers of recklessness when I get home. Hopefully, Darí will get to me first," I commented, grimacing at the thought.

"Have you ever thought of taking Healer training? I assume you have the potential abilities?" Rallandrí was double-checking his work, and seemed to be satisfied.

"No, and yes," I replied in answer to his questions. I'd been too busy working as a Guardian to have considered expanding my skills in other areas, but I knew that Darí and I had pretty similar abilities—we were so alike that some people had difficulty telling us apart. I suspected that just as Darí could become a Guardian, so I too could become a Healer. We simply hadn't tested that theory yet.

"Well, you should. If you'd been able to heal yourself, we wouldn't need to send you back to Ellendrïa." Finished, Rallandrí took a step back from me and cocked his head to one side, "There, that should hold until you get home." Turning away from the bunk in the narrow confines of the ship, Rallandrí opened the door to the ship's washroom and cleaned his hands in the small sanitizer unit. A few moments later, he returned, asking "Any improvement in the breathing?"

"Yes, thanks," I was actually almost able to breathe normally, now that I wasn't sucking air in through two holes in my chest. Rallandrí bustled around, packing up the medical kit and searching through my belongings until he found a loose shirt that opened down the front. He handed it to me and I carefully put it on, glad for the warmth, as I was feeling a bit cool and shivery.

"So, you know how this works," Rallandrí was obviously giving me his final instructions before they sent me off. "Try to stay awake and conscious. If you start having problems breathing, loosen one edge of that front dressing—that should relieve any pressure build up. You should be home in less than a deciday[26]. If things start getting really bad, let Eldarí know and he'll send a rescue ship out from Ellendrïa." I nodded. I was certain that Darí had already contacted Kÿrrÿl, our *ïdrÿlad*[27] and manager of Ellendrïa's space flight facility, and set up an emergency response vessel. "Let's get you up front and strapped in. Hopefully the locals haven't been giving us any more problems." He gave me a hand up and steadied me as we walked forward to the front of the ship.

Kerredrÿn looked up from the main console as I slid past him and into the pilot's seat. "It's been pretty quiet out there—looks like the snipers have everybody pinned down and nobody's been moving about." He tapped the main console one final time, clearly finishing what he'd been working on. "I've programmed your ship to do the entire flight on autopilot, from liftoff to landing on Ellendrïa. When I activate the program, it'll give us just enough time to get over to our ships and get them ready for flight. Your ship will lift off first and we'll follow behind. We'll escort you as far as the edge of the atmosphere,

then you'll be on your own," Kerredrÿn smiled in what he probably thought was a reassuring manner, although it looked more worried than encouraging to me. "We'll stay behind on Davandrïa and wait until we can get some more support."

"Great! I hate takeoffs and landings on auto," I muttered, trying to be slightly humorous. In realty, I felt terrible and not just because I was hurt. I had failed the mission, and the team, and they were sending me home. At least I wasn't going back as pieces in a bucket, but that thought didn't make me feel much more cheerful.

"I know you're a good pilot," Kerredrÿn was sensitive to my feelings of wretchedness and trying to make me feel less like a failure, "but we don't want to lose you if you pass out while trying to fly."

"I'm sorry," I started buckling myself into the seat, "I'm just being miserable."

"Don't worry. You'll be back on duty soon," Kerredrÿn was using his talent to radiate feelings of comfort and support. "Maybe they'll send you back here to finish off this assignment with us." I sensed his encouragement, and deeper, a little hint of wistfulness.

"I hope so." We were all friends—I was certainly going to miss their companionship. However, there was little more I could say.

We were quiet for a moment, then Kerredrÿn put his hand on my shoulder, the light feathery touch of a fellow telepath, "Thank you. You saved my life out there."

I smiled ruefully, "Guardians look out for each other … and I watch out for my friends." I closed my eyes briefly, trying to shut out the mental image of Kerredrÿn lying on the ground, dead eyes staring up at me, killed instantly by a projectile through the brain. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry. "I saw you die … I couldn't let that happen." I knew that Kerredrÿn and Rallandrí would understand that the sight I referred to was *turas*, foresight. With a shake of my head, I tried to drive the grim vision from my mind. "I only wish you didn't have to send me back to Ellendrïa … I guess I didn't really think that I'd get hurt," I added. "I'm sorry. I've let you both down."

"No," I felt Kerredrÿn squeeze my shoulder very slightly, as if to emphasize his negation. "We were all too quick to dismiss the possibility that someone might be shielded from us. You are no more to blame that we are. I'm just glad you weren't more badly injured. Go home and heal, Dran."

Taking his hand off my shoulder, Kerredrÿn reached out and touched the control panel, activating the program, and then the two of them were scrambling to get out. I could hear them running down the ramp, Kerredrÿn calling out the voice command which would trigger my ship to close the hatch as they darted towards their own ships, hopefully with their shields up in case the sniper was paying attention. The main engine started warming up and then the ship engaged its antigrav units. A slight whining sound indicated that the engines were rotating into position for vertical takeoff, and a breath later, the

ship was airborne. It all had the slight jerkiness of the overly-precise autopilot system, not the smooth grace of a manual liftoff, and it grated on my nerves, but there wasn't much to do but bear with it. Looking to the left and right, over my shoulders, I could see the other two ships liftoff—good, that meant that both Rallandrí and Kerredrÿn had made a safe escape. That was a cheering thought—for a moment I'd entertained a terrible fear that someone else was going to get injured or killed in the attempt to get me safely on my way home, but apparently everything was going according to plan.

Looking down, I could see the city buildings growing smaller as we gained altitude. Soon, I could see the surrounding plains, great expanses of sun-gold grass. A few small houses formed clusters in the distance, probably farmsteads. And far off, faint and hazy, was a range of mountains. A nice place—just too bad that the humans here weren't any better at getting along with each other than they were any place else in the universe.

The pale blue sky got darker and darker as we soared higher up into the atmosphere. Rallandrí and Kerredrÿn maintained tight formation with my ship, just as we had on the flight earlier in the day. Gradually, the air thinned, and I found myself looking out into velvety blackness, stars glowing brightly. My escort peeled away, one turning left and one turning right, but my ship continued forward into the darkness of space. Suddenly, I felt very lonely.

Luckily, this didn't last too long. Darí's voice was in my head again, "*Are you doing all right?*"

"*Yes.*" There was no point in hiding my feelings from Darí. "*I feel badly about how things ended up. I've really let the others down.*"

"*Don't blame yourself. It was just mischance.*" That was easy enough for Darí to say—he hadn't been there. However, as my mind returned to the day's unfortunate outcome and I started to dwell on the consequences of my actions, Darí relived the events with me. Disrupting the dark turnings of my thoughts, Darí added pointedly, "*You saved Kerredrÿn's life.*"

"*I did, but what if I'd been killed instead?*" I asked the question that seemed to take over my thoughts now that the adrenaline was wearing off. "*What would have happened to you?*"

For a long time there was silence. Darí's thoughts were withdrawn and muted. Finally, he answered, "*That's the choice we've made.*" Although he didn't send it clearly, I could hear the subtext "*and the price for your freedom*" in his thoughts. I could sense his feelings were mixed, chaotic. Did he accept the life I was leading, or did he hate what I was doing to him, to us? I couldn't tell. There was little more I could say that would make much difference to the situation, we'd been over this ground before. I quieted my thoughts and watched Davandrïa gradually fall away and become a small round globe, like some brightly colored ornament hanging against the black backdrop of space. Soon the ship would be in position to make the jump between.

"*Dran*," Darí's telepathic voice had a certain timbre to it that instantly brought my mind back to reality,

"*you're not going to enjoy the trip through between*."

"*Hmmph*," I responded. "*I'm not sure I've ever enjoyed going between.*" I wondered what Darí's point was. *"What do you mean?*"

"*I've had patients tell me that going between with a serious injury can be very painful*," Darí responded. True enough—I'd gone between with the occasional cut or scrape, and that had certainly smarted a bit, but nothing that I couldn't bear. As I considered Darí's concern, my ship came to a complete stop, and then started to do small precise maneuvers, like a strange jittery dance, as it made final pre-jump adjustments to its position.

Even after all my years of flying, I still feel a moment of anxiety before making a jump. Taking a slow, but necessarily shallow breath, to calm myself, I replied, "*I'll let you know if they were right—I'm just about to go through now*." A patch of space in front of my ship started to distort in a way that was visually nauseating. The electromagnetic shields hummed loudly as they came up to full power. Before I could take another breath, I was plunging through space that was twisting and writhing around me like a nest of demented worms. Instantly, the raw flesh in my chest turned to searing fire. I screamed, and then there was nothingness.

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I must have passed out from the pain. I don't think I was unconscious for long—when I opened my eyes again, the universe was normal, and off in the distance I could see a tiny sphere that I knew was my home, Ellendrïa. I had come through the jump safely. My chest ached fiercely, and there was a clamor in my head. Darí was, of course, worried, so much so that my first coherent thoughts were feelings of concern for my *deirfad*. But I could hear another voice, not as loud, but just as clearly worried—Darriel. Why she would have reached out to me now was odd. She knew that Darí would tell her how I was faring, and given her distress when I'd had only minor injuries, I was surprised that she would brave my pain to touch my mind now. I drew a shaky breath and tried to let them both know that I was still alive, and as far as I could tell, other than the intense pain, no worse than I was before. "*Well, Darí, your patients were right—it hurt like the mythical fifteen hells of Vorÿn …*"

The rest of the flight passed quickly. For a while, I just stayed very still, waiting for the pain to recede a bit, and trying to re-establish some biocontrol over my rebelling body. I was peripherally aware of Ellendrïa growing larger in my view out the forward canopy, the mountain ridges with their vibrant green crests standing out in sharp contrast to the yellow-brown sand which formed the base material for most of the continents. Except for high in the mountains, there was no surface water on the land masses, no rivers, no lakes, only deserts, and beyond the land, the great seas. My ship dipped shallowly into the outer atmosphere of the planet, its heat shielding starting to glow redly as it shed excess heat generated by the interaction with atmospheric gases. Dropping lower, the ship trembled in the thicker, more turbulent layers of the atmosphere, losing both speed and elevation as rapidly as

possible—Kerredrÿn had programmed the autopilot to take the fastest route, not necessarily the most comfortable one. It was somewhat assuring to know that Kerredrÿn and Rallandrí had judged me tough enough, or at least alive enough, to tolerate a fast re-entry.

Looking down, I could see that I was descending at high latitude over the largest northern landmass. Soon the city, the only city on Ellendrïa, came into view. The flight path took me directly over it, and I could clearly see the cluster of domes that served my people as sanctuaries on a dying world. Then the ship had flown past the city and was banking into a final landing approach. Leveling out in that sharply mechanical way so typical of the autopilot, the ship flew straight towards the outlying domes on the edge of the city, losing elevation and braking as it prepared for landing. Hovering momentary, it performed a precise touchdown, gracefully settling on the tips of its downward sweeping wings and the base of its nose cone in a solid three-point landing, just outside of one of the domes located on the farthest extent of the city. I could see two people standing beside the dome's entrance, waiting for my ship to settle—Darí and Darriel.

As soon as the ship was down, I unbuckled myself and wobbled to my feet. I still had a bit of pride left, and I didn't want to see Darriel's face if she and Darí had to drag me bodily out of the ship. With a sense of grim determination, I steadied myself and walked to the ship's hatch. Leaning against the wall, I touched the door panel, and the hatch smoothly opened downward into its landing ramp configuration. Hot, dry air swept into the cabin—Ellendrïa's atmosphere, torrid, dusty, with too little water and not enough oxygen. The sudden decrease in oxygen concentration almost made me pass out again, but I held myself up against the wall, willing myself to stay conscious. The dryness burned my chest. I coughed. Squinting in the bright sunlight, I watched Darí run towards the ship, now that the dust had settled, with Darriel a moment behind him. Taking a couple shallow breaths, I forced myself out onto the ramp. My steps were shaky as I made my way down to ground level, trying to keep my knees from buckling. Struggling, I managed to stay upright as Darí reached me, panting himself in the oxygen-poor air.

You can't hide anything from your *anÿncára*. His eyes met mine, and in the next moment, he was on my left side, arm wrapped around my waist and supporting me. I can take some little solace in the fact that I didn't quite fall down.

Darriel caught up to us, her eyes full of concern, and maybe something else—sadness, love—I don't know. Underneath that, I caught her fear—of me, of the work that I do, of the life I lead—and even a sense of anger. I could almost hear her scold, "*Look at what you've done to yourself now! Don't you ever think about us?*" But she didn't say anything.

Physical contact with Darí intensified our bond. I could feel his energy flowing into me, giving me strength. "Just a little bit further, and everything will be fine." I sensed him encouraging me to keep going, so I put my head down and told my body to walk, and it did.

“It’ll be better once we get inside the dome,” I wheezed out between painful gasps for air. I suppose a person could get accustomed to coping with injuries, but I really hadn’t had much practice in tolerating intense pain. I definitely wasn’t feeling much like a strong and capable Guardian with 50 years of experience.

Although it seemed to take far longer than I would have liked, Darí quickly had me up to the dome entrance. Darriel already had the outer door to the airlock open, and my next breath was an ecstasy of moist, oxygen-laden air. The door hissed shut behind us, keeping as much of the precious moisture and oxygen contained within the dome environment as possible. The breath after that started me coughing, at which point the bones in my legs seemed to dissolve. Darí caught me as I started to fall, and despite being a little lighter and less muscular than I am, easily picked me up.

After that, things got pretty cloudy for me. I remember Darí putting me down on a bed, in my own room in our old family home, I think. I saw Darí’s *ferrïl* flash—it was a small one, of the size commonly used by Healers and maybe a tenth the size of the one in my Star, with no associated *durrïls*. I remember trying to tell him to use my Star—the psychic patterns of *anÿncára* are usually so similar that they can handle each other’s keyed *ferrïls*, and I knew Darí could use my Star—and then my mind faded into a swirl of chaotic images and thoughts.

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Full consciousness was slow to return, but gradually, by stages, I knew I was finally awake again. My head was turned towards the window in the room, which was dark, so I knew night had fallen. Cautiously, I took a breath, and then another one, deeper. Everything seemed fine, so Darí must have completed the healing. Moving my head, I could see Darí standing over the bed. He looked pale, with dark shadows under his eyes. Immediately, I began to worry. Shifting my head a little further, I saw Darriel standing in the doorway, looking tired, like she’d been standing there for a long time.

Darí looked down at me, giving me a smile that was almost overwhelmed by exhaustion, with a hint of pain around the edges, “You’ll be fine now.” His voice, normally a warm tenor, was wispy, barely audible. He took a step back from the bed, stumbled, as though trying to keep balance on a suddenly shifting surface, then his eyes rolled up, and he collapsed bonelessly forward towards the bed. I didn’t think I was awake enough to have reflexes, but I caught him before he could strike his head on anything solid, dragging him across my lap. I looked up at Darriel, whose face was a mixture of shock and fear.

“What happened?” I asked her sharply. Her eyes were wide, alarmed, but gradually her attention focused on me.

“He had two other emergencies before you were injured,” she seemed to break out of her dazed state and stepped forward to kneel beside the bed, hand on Darí’s chest, checking his breathing and heart beat. “He was tired before you arrived. I told him to get help, but he refused to bring another Healer in to work on you.”

“That was foolish,” I growled, but I knew why he couldn’t ask another Healer to assist. How could I speak against the love, responsibility, and commitment that we felt for each other? “Did he use my Star?”

“No,” Darriel shook her head. “I didn’t think he could.”

By the great One! So much myth and misinformation surrounds the Guardians these days. “He can. I tried to tell him to use it before he put me into a healing trance.” I was beginning to get seriously worried about my *deirfad*. I rolled him over onto his back on the bed beside me, not liking the flaccid way his body moved. He was, of course, still alive—if he were dead, our *anÿncára* bond would be broken, and the breaking of such bonds is traumatic to the degree that the survivor frequently dies shortly afterwards. I was still alive and functional; therefore my *anÿncára* was also still alive. I pulled out my Star and started to monitor his unconscious form, but I was suspecting the worst, “If he’s burned out his psi channels looking after me, I’ll …” I never got around to finishing that thought, as it was pretty clear what was wrong. The paleness had left Darí’s face, and he was starting to look flushed and feverish.

Healers use psychic energy to regenerate tissues, modify body chemistry, alter hormonal balances, and even correct or change DNA sequences, in the same way that Guardians use psychic energy for various defensive purposes and to assist in crowd management and control. Many other Guilds use psychic energy for tasks specific to their particular roles in our society. Regardless of how psychic energy is used, it must first be channeled through the body of the person wielding the energy. This generally occurs following the tracts of the major nerves in the body. Most nerves lie in grooves or canals—these then form the channels along which the psychic energy must flow, or what we refer to as psi channels. Excessive flow of psychic energy through these channels, particularly if the affected individual is already exhausted and getting careless with their energy control, can lead to inflammation or “burning” of the channels. This inflammation causes pressure on the nerves, fever and delirium, and ultimately depression of the central nervous system resulting in death in some cases. Darí was exhibiting a classic case of psi channel burn out.

There are ways of “clearing” the psi channels, reducing the inflammation, and releasing the pressure on the nerves. Since channel burn out is fairly common amongst Guardians, who often end up in challenging situations where they are using large amounts of psychic energy, most Guardians are taught how to perform channel clearing—it’s a skill you might need to save the life of a friend. Psi channel burn out is also common during puberty when a combination of physical changes and increasing psi abilities can cause a crisis to occur. Thus, families having high psi potential tend to train some, if not all, of their members how to clear channels in order to deal with this possibility. In my case, I had been doubly trained, both at home by my *r’athaira*[28] and later as a Guardian, so I knew what needed to be done for Darí. However, I was also still pretty shaky after recovering from the day’s events … I wasn’t at all sure that it was a good idea for me to try.

“Darriel,” I touched her shoulder, “Darí’s burned his channels. He needs to have someone clear them.

Can you help?”

Darriel looked up at me, her face going pale, “No. No, I can’t.” She shook her head back and forth, agitated, a look of fear in her eyes—fear that harm would come to Darí if she couldn’t help, or memories of a fear long past, I wasn’t sure. I’d hoped that maybe, over the long years I’d been away on Guardian duties, she’d been able to overcome some of that fear and regain at least a fraction of what she’d lost. My own worry for Darí had made me insensitive to Darriel’s struggle. The hurt I’d caused her stung me, left me regretting my words.

Eldarí, Darriel, and I are the products of lineages that have been highly bred for psi powers; however, where Darí and I had developed our abilities normally, Darriel was damaged, stunted. What we take for granted, Darriel can’t even attempt. I felt a wave of sympathy and sadness for her—it must be a difficult challenge for her to be Darí’s *anÿncára*. Darriel must have seen the look in my eyes, or read the thoughts from my mind, because suddenly her eyes flamed with anger, and she jumped up, pulling away from us, “That’s right—I can’t do anything!” She whirled and headed for the door.

“Wait!” Without thinking, my exclamation had the snap of a command, meant to stop her before she was out the door and beyond reach. She turned slowly back to me, feeling my power, her angry eyes burning through me as she tried to break away. Darí needed her help too much for me to let her go. “You *can* do something. I need you to bring me some *firalïan*. Darí usually keeps some in his medical supplies. It’s in a small blue vial.” I let her go, and hoped that she would see the sense in helping me.

Whether or not I felt fit enough, it was quickly looking like I was going to have to deal with this. My time sense told me that it was late at night, and by the time I managed to find and wake up another Healer, Darí might be in full crisis. Better to deal with it now, than wait. I had my Star and a good deal of training that should hopefully allow me to do what was necessary without ending up in the same condition as Darí. I shifted around on the bed so that I had Darí’s head in my lap. He was starting to move restlessly, probably in pain.

I heard footsteps and looked up to see that Darriel was back. She had the blue vial in her hand, which was an immense relief. *Firalïan* is a drug specifically used to treat this particular condition, and it would help Darí a great deal. I took the vial from her, tilted Darí’s head back in my lap, and gently used my thumb to open his mouth just enough that I could get a drop of the vial’s contents on his tongue. The drug was designed to be absorbed directly through the mucous membranes, and didn’t need to be swallowed, which was good because Darí was in no condition to swallow anything at the moment. Waiting for the drug to take effect, I looked up at Darriel. The anger had faded from her eyes, and she just looked terribly weary.

“Darriel, I’m sorry,” I tried to apologize. Using mind control on a friend was unconscionable. I had no justification—I had to accept that my concern for Darí had overwhelmed my ethics. “I had no right to do that to you.”

“You did,” she smiled weakly. “You have every right to try to help Darí, and I have every reason for you to try. I only wish that I could do more.”

Gentle Darriel—even now she was capable of forgiving me for such a serious transgression. I shook my head sadly, “Sometimes our lives just don’t happen the way we would like.” Those words had far too much meaning for me right now, but they were all I could give as an explanation for the current state of affairs. “You’re tired. Try to get some rest. I’ll do what I can for Darí. You’ll be the first to know if anything gets worse.” I tried to smile encouragingly at her, but I was too tired and worried to be terribly convincing. Darriel met my gaze, and I felt the complex swirl of her emotions—anguish, sadness, frustration. She turned and went out the door, but I knew she wouldn’t be far away, that she was allowing me this time with Darí only because she believed that I could do something she could not.

Darí had quieted, so the *firalïan* was probably working. It should prevent him from going into convulsions and full crisis, but without any further help, he would be days recovering. I placed my hands against Darí’s temples, closed my eyes, and let myself sink into the depths of our bond, using it as my anchor point. Allowing my mind to expand outward into his body, I explored along the lines where I knew the channels lay, searching for the source of his distress. In my mental visualizations, I saw pain as a dull red glow, like metal that’s been heated in a fire. As I found the swollen red nodes in Darí’s channels, I pictured my energy as cooling blue water, which I used to quench the heat and still the pain. I was using the *durrïls* of my Star to recharge my depleted levels of vital energy—I didn’t want to end up burning out my own psi channels, since that would leave no one to help Darí. Even with the assistance of the Star, the procedure seemed to take a long time. However, when I’d finally finished, and opened my eyes again, it was still dark outside.

Darí’s skin was no longer feverish, although he looked very tired and worn even as he slept. I gently lifted his head off my lap, and slid down to lay beside him, like I used to do when we were younger. I hoped my presence was still a comfort to him. I was weary, but emotionally keyed up from the day’s intense events. Feeling like a fiery meteor coming through the atmosphere, leaving flames and chaos in my wake, I was about to crash. Rallandrí’s words of the afternoon had struck a sensitive nerve. An old saying ran through my mind: “Vulnerable is the one without *deirfa*.” A venerable old adage it was, but a true one. And I would never have my *deirfad*, or my *anÿncára*, at my back, nor did I suspect that I would ever seek to find an intimate companion elsewhere. Our bond is what it is, and it’s all that I have. Unexpectedly, deep, silent sobs wracked me, releasing tension and emotional anguish. It had been a long time since I’d been so overcome by my emotions.

I had cried for some time, quietly, inconsolably, lost in my own world of dark depression, when I began to realize that some of the emotions were not my own. I was instantly contrite—I hadn’t meant to wake Darí up. I started to apologize, but Darí placed his fingers on my lips and shook his head. “The tears are my own. You don’t need to say you’re sorry,” he paused for a moment. “I should have been out there with you today. We’ve been so lucky—more than 50 years and you’ve never really been hurt. They say you’re the best Guardian in living memory. I guess I’ve just come to believe that my *deirfad* is

invincible," he turned to me and smiled sadly. "But I guess that's not really true, is it?"

I shook my head. Words like "best" and "invincible" bothered me—they were exaggerations of reality. Yes, I was cautious and careful, and I had my *turas* and maybe some luck, but to say that I was greater than that … no. However, there was more to Darí's words. I hesitated a moment, then asked a question that had been unasked for many years now, "Would you really want to be a Guardian?"

Darí was quiet for a while, thinking I guess. "I don't know," he finally replied. "I just want the people I love to be happy. For Darriel, that means staying here and being as good a Healer as I can. For you, that means becoming a Guardian, joining you in the one place where we can be *anÿncára* without facing criticism. I can't be both things."

"I know, Darí," I reached out and held him like I'd done when we were children. "That's why I've stayed away as much as I do—to make your choice easier, to give you the freedom to make a life for yourself here with Darriel." Darí curled up against me, accepting the comfort I was offering. His face lay close to mine, and I could feel his steady breathing against my cheek. We were like two halves of a whole, and I missed Darí's companionship every day that I went about my duties as a Guardian. I wanted this moment to last, but knew it would end far too soon.

Darí took a deep breath and sighed, "You could stay here with us." He was tired, and I could feel him struggling to find the energy to speak. Although we could communicate mind-to-mind, Darí seemed to need to vocalize, to express himself aloud, as if that could imbue his words with more meaning, more emphasis. "We could register officially as a threesome. Darriel wants that—the two of you are almost bonded now." I could hear the pleading in Darí's voice. "And with Darriel as a part of us, we could argue against the concerns about inbreeding. Maybe you might even give Darriel a child; I certainly haven't been able to."

In a way, I really wanted to do as Darí asked, but there were so many reasons why his simple proposal wouldn't work. Our situation was much too complicated. Even if he refused to acknowledge them, I knew that Darí was aware of those complexities. I didn't really expect to change his perspective, but I tried. "Darriel is afraid of what I've become. She doesn't want to share my experiences or try to understand who I am or why I've chosen to become a Guardian." Again, the image of a younger Darriel filled my mind. "She wasn't so distant when we were children, but now …" I trailed off.

Darí sighed softly again, as if the situation was so obvious that it didn't need clarification. "She's afraid of what might happen to you. Haven't you noticed that you only come home after you've been on a tough assignment?" Darí paused, resting for a few moments, giving me time to contemplate the delicate balance between my needs to be both at home and yet far away. My life ran in cycles—time spent amongst the Guardians, far from home, but also far from the difficulties that arose as a result of Darriel's relationship with Darí, followed by short, intense periods at home when I could no longer withstand the isolation and loneliness.

Darí made a disparaging sound, in response to some thought of his own. “I know you were never badly hurt, but you were tired, bruised, battered.” Raising his head, Darí looked me full in the eyes, “She’s afraid that one day you’re going to be sent home in a box, so she keeps her distance. She fears what will happen if you die.”

“And you don’t?” It wasn’t a fair question, but I was beginning to feel defensive. Today seemed to be one of those days that everyone was full of criticism about the way I was leading my life. But what choice had I been left?

“How can you ask that?” Darí sounded choked, and rightfully so.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to keep another freshet of tears from starting. “Darí, I’m sorry. Truly, I didn’t mean that,” I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. “But at least you and Darriel have each other.” That was some of the pain—Darí didn’t really need me anymore.

Darí grabbed my arm, forcing me to open my eyes. “Darriel is not a replacement for you!” his quiet voice was intense. “How can you believe that?”

I closed my eyes again, shaking my head, tears leaking out across my cheeks in damp trails. The problem was that to some extent I did believe exactly that—and it was both a source of deep grief and limited freedom. If I was killed during my Guardian duties, it was possible that Darí might not suffer the fate common to *anÿncára*. His bond to Darriel might protect him from my death, allowing him to survive. I wasn’t certain about that, but it helped to ease my conscience when I found myself in dangerous situations. So I didn’t answer Darí’s question—it seemed rhetorical to me, even though I knew he hadn’t meant it that way. How often does a single person have two *anÿncára* bonds at the same time? Even amongst the Ellendrí, this is considered unusual. Darí firmly believed that his bond with Darriel had not supplanted the bond that had developed between Darí and me as children, but I knew of no test save death itself that would actually prove this one way or the other.

I needed to take the conversation away from this place of conflict and angst. “You and Darriel know that I’ll be as careful as I can. I’m not a risk taker,” I shook my head ruefully, trying to imagine what it would take to satisfy Darriel’s concept of careful.

Darí sensed my attempt at changing the mood of the discussion, and raised another point, “You’ve been a Guardian for a long time—longer than anyone has a right to expect. You might have died out there today. No one will be unsympathetic if you lay down your Star and stay home after that.”

“And do what?” I raised a diversionary question. It wasn’t what I did that was the issue, but how I was going to live with Darí and Darriel, how I was going to find my place within Darriel’s complicated universe, how I was going to find the other half of my whole when it might already have been given over to someone else.

Darí took my question at face value. I couldn't believe that he was unaware of my deeper concerns, not with the bond that we still had, but for some reason, he wouldn't address them. "Become a Healer like me," he answered softly. "Or do whatever you'd like—I doubt there's much you can't do if you turn your mind and skills to it."

I shook my head again, trying to imagine what it would be like to stay and live on Ellendrïa. More than that, although my separation from Darí hurt, I'd come to find enjoyment and satisfaction from my travels throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Trying to fill my words with some of the passion that has kept me journeying throughout the Arcs in spite of the lonely ache in my heart, I asserted, "I'd be trapped here, feeling the call of the stars and not being able to answer. Traveling to different places, learning about new things, trying to help people make better lives for themselves—that's what gives my life meaning. I'm not sure I could give that up." I paused, taking a deep breath, and added more weight to my case, "Maybe I'm addicted to adventure. Maybe I just can't see myself finding anything meaningful in the work I could do on Ellendrïa." I wasn't entirely sure of the truth of those statements, but certainly I did enjoy the challenges and the diversity of the tasks that I performed as a Guardian. Listening, Darí lay still in my arms, quiet, but I could feel the tension in him, the painful desire to go with me balancing the need to stay with Darriel.

Something sparked at the edge of my mind, "Why didn't you use my Star tonight? I tried to tell you—it would have saved you from burning yourself out. I didn't realize how exhausted you were."

Darí remained silent for a long time. I thought maybe he'd finally fallen asleep, but after a while, he spoke softly, "I couldn't."

"Couldn't or wouldn't? I'm sure my Star would have answered to you." Not just sure … I knew with an inner certainty. For whatever reason—sibling relatedness, growing up together, our *anÿncára* bond—Darí's psi pattern and mine were as close to identical as two people could get. He could use my Star without even needing to modify his psi frequencies.

"It's a Guardian's Star. Healers don't use Stars to heal," Darí seemed to be trying to convince himself more than me, trying to rationalize his reasons for avoiding my Star.

"That's odd." I shifted my head to meet Darí's eyes. "Just today, Rallandrí was suggesting that I take Healer's training so that I could do exactly that. It seems to me that Stars have been used to heal people for millennia." I waited a moment, but Darí wasn't willing to respond. "Are you afraid that if you use my Star, you're suddenly going to want to become a Guardian?" If only that was Darí's problem … I could wish. Then my cynical side twisted this little strand of hope, and I added, "Believe me, the power is not that addictive, especially when you balance it against the challenges a Guardian faces. The desire to be a Guardian comes from the heart—you wouldn't make it through the training if it didn't." I felt Darí sigh, but his thoughts were unreadable to me, confused and chaotic. Once again, we were at an impasse.

Speaking mind-to-mind, I tried to ease the rift I feared was developing between us, "*My anÿncára, you*

have my heart, my soul. I would give my life for you. But I cannot let you chain me here … we both need our freedom." I held Darí tightly, sinking deeply into our bond and opening my mind up to him completely. I couldn't make things better. I couldn't fix the dilemma that we were in. All I could do was give him my love. It probably wasn't enough, but after a long while, our fatigue overcame us, and we fell asleep.

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I stayed on Ellendrïa for 10 days—the longest I'd stayed for quite a while. After the third day, feeling fully rested, I let the Guardians know that I was recovered and ready to return to service. I was told that I'd been overdue for a break from duty, and that I should take as long as I needed to recuperate. This was the Guardians' polite way of telling me that, since I'd nearly been killed carrying out a mission, they were happy to give me all the time I needed to decide whether or not I wanted to lay down my Star and take up a new life on Ellendrïa. It was not uncommon for Guardians who had been seriously injured to choose not to continue on in the service, and this was well accepted by all Ellendrí.

For a time, I enjoyed a renewed closeness with Darí. Even Darriel seemed very happy to have me home, just like it once had been when we were children growing up together. Everything seemed idyllic, and I almost made up my mind to stay. But it wasn't long before I became restless again. I tried keeping myself busy doing chores around the gardens and repairing things that needed to be fixed. That helped a bit, but not enough.

On the eighth day, I started to notice a change in Darí. His energies shifted subtly, and he almost seemed to have a special kind of glow around him, a certain sparkle and snap that tried to draw out the same response in me. I was probably more aware of this change than other Ellendrí would've been, but on the ninth day, Darí stepped down from his Healer's duties for an unspecified period of time, which confirmed my suspicions. The air in our home was sweet with pheromones, and Darriel began to respond in her own way.

I don't know whether it was stimulated by my close contact with Darí, the approach of midsummer, or whether he and Darriel had their own particular timing, but it was very obvious to me that they were both coming into *ërïol*, a period of sexual arousal. In the past, I'd always managed to be somewhere else when Darí and Darriel were at the height of *ërïol*, and since this seldom occurred more than a couple times a year, that hadn't been too difficult. Now, however, I was clearly in the wrong place at the wrong time. Worse, I could feel my body respond to Darí's pheromones; I could feel the heat stirring in my blood. I knew I could control myself, but it would be unpleasant and difficult. Allowing myself to respond would be even more problematic, because I was sure that if I joined with them, a triad would be forged and my life would forever be different. I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't sure what kind of life that would be. I needed to leave.

So, on the ninth day, I informed Darí that I'd been called back to service to finish the work I'd been

involved in on Davandrïa, and that I would be leaving the following morning. It was one of those polite untruths that you use to avoid hurting someone you love. Darí saw through it, of course. As I stood next to him, my body trembled with need and desire. I gritted my teeth and struggled for control and equanimity.

“Stay,” Darí’s voice was hoarse with emotion. “Stay and make love to Darriel. Give her the child she’s always wanted.” It was Darí’s last try at convincing me not to leave.

“Darí, you’re a Healer. You know that if you can’t give Darriel a child, neither can I. And you know why,” I turned aside, struggling for composure. Our family’s dark secret, come to haunt us. And what Darí had, so did I. Then for a moment, I did give in, and flung my arms around Darí, hugging him tightly, feeling the warmth of him, the smell of him—wanting so badly, yet knowing that I couldn’t accept their offer without giving up those things that made me who I was, knowing that my presence here would not heal Darriel or give her what she desired. His arms went around me and for an endless instant our passions met, mingled, and merged. Then I was pulling away, knowing that I couldn’t take any more and still leave.

“Maybe we will find a way someday, *anÿncára*,” Darí smiled sadly, touched the tears that were trickling down my face with his fingertips, then turned away.

We enjoyed the remainder of the day as best we could, trying to keep our passions under control, trying to treat each other with kindness. It was bittersweet. I ached deep inside, desperately wishing there was something that I could undo to make us a happy family again. On the morning of the tenth day, I said my goodbyes to Darí and Darriel, and made my way to my ship, sitting outside our dome where it had landed 10 days before. The air was still as hot and dry as it had been when I’d arrived, but now that my injury was healed, I was once again able to tolerate the low oxygen levels of my dying home.

As I was about to open the hatch, I heard the soft scuff of a foot and turned to see that Darriel had followed me outside. She reached out, caught my arm, turning me so that I was facing her. My breath caught in my throat—she was so beautiful, more beautiful than I’d ever remembered her being before. Her soft grey eyes had a captivating radiance, the delicately penciled eyebrows raised slightly as her eyes met mine. Her pale hair was cut neatly to collar length, curving around to frame her heart-shaped face, gleaming silver in the early morning sunlight. Her slender, fine-boned body seemed rounder and more feminine than the wiry, energetic person I remembered from our youth. I knew it was the pheromones, the fact that she was in *ërïol*, but it nearly drove me crazy.

“Stay. Please.” She was making her plea with her entire body, with everything of which she was made, even down to her very deepest essence.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” I rasped out hoarsely. “I’m a wild thing. You can’t cage me or tame me. If you drive me into *ërïol*, you’ll regret it.” My head was throbbing with the effort to keep control of my body.

Darriel smiled at me, the smile of a close friend who was offering to become something deeper and more soulful. “I won’t regret it. And I’m willing to take the risk.” I knew she was offering herself to me, asking me to be *anÿncára* with her, to complete the circle.

“You can’t live with what I am. I can’t be what you want. We’ll just end up making our lives more painful than they already are.” My voice was a husky gasp. I needed to get away before it was too late.

She just looked at me, cocked her head in a way that was so typically Darriel, and said, “I *can* learn to live with you.” She let go of my arm, her eyes catching mine before I could turn away, a look in them that has haunted me ever since. There was something important here that I was missing, something that I was unable to read even with my psi abilities. Then she dropped her gaze and took a step backward. “Think about it. We’ll still be here for you.” And then she was gone.

Chapter 2: Fate and Destiny

Eldranth—Date: 8936.111

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

I absently gazed out the window, now open to the early morning convective breeze stirring inside the dome. Through the dome walls, I could see the distant mountains, bluish with haze except where the early morning sun was catching the peaks and drawing out tints of rose and yellow. Turning away, I left the room and quietly padded barefoot through the corridor into the common room, and from there through the door to the gardens surrounding the house. Looking up, I could see the clear dome that enclosed the various buildings and gardens of my home. Although still very low in the sky, I could already feel the intense heat from the fierce, white-hot sun that would slowly move towards its zenith. Even now, I could hear the mechanisms for the dome's cooling system starting to ramp up for the long, warm day ahead. The dome, built nearly a thousand years ago by my *r'athaira* when the planet's atmosphere had finally deteriorated to a level that made living on the surface difficult, had developed a faint milkiness from years of erosion by blowing grit. It was one of the first domes to be constructed on Ellendrïa—now no one lived outside a dome, at least not for long.

Hauldrÿn, that fiery orb overhead, was reaching the end of its stellar life. For thousands of years, it had been gradually expanding outward, well on its way to becoming a red giant. As the sun became hotter, Ellendrïa had become largely uninhabitable. Once, the planet had been abundantly supplied with rivers and lakes. However, with each passing year, the sun had grown slightly larger, and planetary temperatures had increased, leading to desertification. Now, even though nearly 62 percent of Ellendrïa's surface is still covered by ocean, the life-giving surface freshwater is nearly gone. No streams, rivers, lakes, or swamps remain in the lowland regions, although there is still enough water vapor in the atmosphere to form clouds. I could see the haziness in the sky that indicated the presence of moisture—enough to absorb and reflect some of the intense solar radiation, thus preventing the temperatures from reaching completely intolerable levels. On the horizon, I could even see some clouds, hovering over the tops of the distant mountains. Those mountains were the only place on Ellendrïa that still had lakes and streams, and supported native plant and animal populations. Elsewhere, the resultant massive loss of forest and savanna had led to a tremendous reduction in plant photosynthesis. Ultimately, the oxygen concentration of the atmosphere had dropped to levels that made animal survival difficult. There were still a few remnants of the original animal populations, but it was clear that this would not be for long. While we Ellendrí can tolerate exposure to the planet's atmosphere, due largely to our high efficiency hemoglobin, we prefer to live in the domes, where the growth of plant crops enhances the oxygen levels.

Walking through the food gardens, I enjoyed the moist dampness of early morning as the warmth evaporated the water from the soil, which had been irrigated during the night. As the day progressed, the water vapor would rise to the top of the dome, where cooling fins would condense and collect it to

be recycled back into the system. The dome was programmed to create the occasional rain shower using this condensed water, mimicking a more natural system, which seems necessary for some of our crop plants. As I went, I checked the health of the plants, ensuring that the system was operating as expected, and collected some ripe fruit and vegetables in a container. Darí would appreciate something fresh—the rations onboard his ship, while not unpalatable, definitely didn't compare favorably to food from our gardens.

Returning to the house, I left the fresh fruit and vegetables on a table in the main common room and headed down the corridor to the small private rooms in the west end of the building. Entering Darí's old room, I opened the window to the gardens, letting the morning breeze wander through and clear out the stale air. This was the room where Darí had occasionally slept as a young boy, when we were growing up together, and our *r'athaira* had still been alive—unless he was in my room, or the two of us had ended up sleeping in a communal heap in the main sleeping area with our *r'athaira*. Later, long after our *r'athaira* had gone to the beyond, Darí and his partner Darriel had moved into the main sleeping area on the building's east side. However, Darí never wanted to sleep there anymore.

Thoughts of Darriel still hurt intensely. It had been 10 years now, but at times, the emotional wounds seemed as fresh as ever.

There had been four of us growing up together as close childhood friends—myself, Darí, Darriel, and Farrwÿn. And before that, there had been just Darí and me. Some of the Sfoení[29] races believe that what we refer to as an *anÿncára* bond is strictly a sexual relationship. How wrong they are! Darí and I were *anÿncára*[30] from our earliest years, before we even understood what that meant, and long before either of us had reached puberty. The *anÿncára* bond is a bond of the soul, of the mind, of the heart. Physicality only intensifies what already exists.

When I was eight, the world that Darí and I knew was expanded, first by the addition of Darriel, who was three years older than I, and then a half-year later, by the coming of Farrwÿn, who was two years my senior. There were a number of reasons for this sudden change in our previously happy, but rather exclusive, universe. Probably the first and foremost was that the Elder Council[31] was unhappy about the close relationship between Darí and I, fearing it might lead to incest and inbreeding. Short of separating the two of us, they felt that the best solution was to widen our exposure to other young people. However, there were other important reasons. Both Darriel and Farrwÿn were struggling with their own difficulties, and it was felt that Eldarkÿn, who was a highly esteemed Healer, might be able to help them reach their full potential. And so, from my eighth year forward, the four of us grew up together, being taught by Eldarkÿn and Anaduviel until we were old enough to enter a Guild for further training[32].

In a culture where everyone is taught contraceptive biocontrol, and where children are valued and cherished, Farrwÿn was the product of an unwanted pregnancy, an unwelcome child. His *athairad* was unknown, and Aleysïa Aurora, his *athairan*, although belonging to an ancient and powerful lineage, was, to my mind at least, mentally unstable. Unless an individual displays violent tendencies, treatment for

such disabilities is voluntary. Rather than accept such aid and allow Farrwÿn to be taken from her custody and nurtured in a responsible and caring environment, his *athairan* chose to raise Farrwÿn unassisted in the family enclave. No one could deny her that choice—the opportunity to be an *athaira* is a coveted experience.

What takes place in the family home is generally a private affair, and no one expected Aleysïa to punish Farrwÿn for her miscreant behavior. With none to protect him from his *athairan's* irrationality, Farrwÿn lived through years of neglect and mistreatment. Ultimately, when Farrwÿn developed strong and uncontrollable *turas*, resulting in crisis and a series of convulsions, the Elder Council stepped in and had him removed from his a*thairan's* care and placed with our family. At that point, Farrwÿn was in terrible shape, having had very little training in the control of his psi abilities, while at the same time being in the throes of an early onset of some clearly very potent psi powers. Although Aleysïa claimed that Farrwÿn had no significant abilities, I now believe, many years later, that Farrwÿn may have one of the greatest psi potentials of anyone in our generation.

While I learned Farrwÿn's history early in our childhood together, it took much longer to understand the circumstances responsible for Darriel's troubles. At first, she seemed very normal, except for a distinct lack of psi abilities. Unlike Farrwÿn's situation, her family was supportive, caring, and visited her regularly while she stayed with us. She was happy, intelligent, and participated with wild abandon in our childhood adventures. It was only when Eldarkÿn tried to teach her the fundamentals of psi control that problems arose—an overwhelming sense of terror that would leave her incoherent for hours. After a number of years with Eldarkÿn's careful assistance, Darriel was finally able to tell us much of her story. Other bits and pieces I was able to learn from her family, although there was a great deal of sorrow and guilt surrounding the event.

Like Farrwÿn, Darí and I, Darriel's psi abilities were early onset. This is not uncommon in the highly bred lineages to which we were born. Darriel had an elder *deirfa* with whom she had a strong telepathic rapport, and her other psi talents appeared to be developing normally.

Then, in a single afternoon, things went very wrong. At that time, Darriel was eight and her *deirfa* twelve, both reasonably responsible and mature for their age. Their *r'athaira* were away on a geological survey, some hours from Dïarven by hover car, and their *athairan-deirfan*[33], a Healer, was left in charge of the children at the family dome. A medical emergency occurred, and with no other Healers immediately available, their caretaker, believing the children would be safe on their own for a few hours, left to undertake an emergency surgery.

Like many domes, the one in which Darriel lived had several ponds, both for storage of water and as habitats for aquatic organisms maintained within the dome environment. Darriel and her *deirfa* knew of the potential danger of these ponds, and stayed wisely away from their edges. However, an accidental slip on the grass while running, leading to a skidding fall, caused Darriel's *deirfa* to slide into one of the reservoirs. Immediately, ey attempted to climb out, but the slope of the sides was steep, the retaining

wall material was slick with algae, and ey just slid back into the water. Darriel tried to assist, but she was too short to reach her *deirfa* without falling in herself. She quickly ran to find a rope, or some other object, which could be used to help. In the meanwhile, her *deirfa* was left swimming in the pond. Unfortunately, Ellendrí are a desert people, and few of us swim well. Darriel's *deirfa* was no exception, and by the time Darriel had returned with a rope, her *deirfa* was exhausted and starting to panic. Darriel managed to get the rope around her *deirfa's* waist, but she was not strong enough to pull her quickly tiring and frightened *deirfa* to safety. Not yet trained in the use of her developing psychokinesis, she was unable to generate enough force to lift her *deirfa* out. Realizing that she was rapidly running out of options, Darriel held onto the rope with all her strength, crying out telepathically to her family, and hoping to keep her *deirfa's* head above the water long enough that someone could rescue eir. The caretaker, now in the middle of a life-or-death surgery, was unable to answer Darriel's call. Her *r'athaira* responded immediately, but even at the top speed of the hover car, it was two hours before they arrived. They were too late to save their eldest child, drowned and dead far too long for any hope of resuscitation. Their youngest child lay unconscious by the rim of the pool, hands bloodied by the rope she had gripped until her strength failed.

Darriel remained in a coma for several days afterwards. It was surmised that she had been in telepathic rapport with her *deirfa* until ey had died, and that the intense feedback from that death had damaged her psi channels. The Healers gave her the best care they could, and felt that she should recover completely. However, when she finally awoke, it was with no memory of the event, completely mind-blind, and with no capacity for telepathic speech at all. Over the next three years, Darriel recovered some rudimentary telepathy, but showed no other indications of regaining her previous psi potential. The Healers checked her psi channels numerous times, but found no sign of damage. No one could determine if there was some hidden injury that prevented Darriel's recovery, or if she was somehow impeding her own abilities in an attempt to block out her memories of her *deirfa's* death. It was at this point that Darriel came to join us.

Beyond the telepathic rapport that Darriel developed with Farrwÿn, Darí, and I, she never did show signs of any other psi abilities, at least not any of which I was aware. She had become a very close friend to me—I respected her life choices, but I always wondered if she really had blocked her own abilities, and whether she could have broken through that barrier. In the end, her lack of psi abilities severely restricted her career choices. Since our lives were interwoven, ultimately her actions affected the paths that both Darí and I took as well. When I left Ellendrïa to take up my duties as a Guardian, I asked Eldarkÿn what he had learned about Darriel's condition. While he refused to give me a definitive answer, I left that discussion believing even more firmly that Darriel could have had much greater potential if she had been willing to face her fears and find a way beyond them.

With a shake of my head, I brought myself back to the moment at hand, and finished cleaning up Darí's room. It seemed to be a day for reflection upon old memories. I really wanted to be happy today, but there was so much angst in our past, it was hard to leave those memories behind and move on. I don't

think you ever forget, although maybe in time you learn to accept. Closing my eyes, I ran my hand across my forehead, pushing back sweat-dampened hair as more memories flooded through my mind.

Darí and Darriel had become very close during the days of our shared childhood. When they reached puberty, it was obvious to everyone that they were *anÿncára*. Later, it wasn't much of a surprise when Darí and Darriel decided to start a family. Darí had completed his Healer's training, and, following the path of our *athairad*, had become one of the best Healers on Ellendrïa. That was no surprise either—the healing talent is an inherited ability that runs in our lineage. Darriel became a Historian, and taught Ellendrí history at the Academy. There was no close familial relatedness between them, often a serious problem in the small and much inbred population of the Ellendrí, so the situation was ideal for them. It should have worked out. It hadn't.

Anÿncára—the soulmate relationship—is often described as an enduring bond of love, friendship, companionship, and eternal partnership. Was it a gift or a curse? I wasn't sure at times. Darí and I were born three years apart, but we were so similar that we might have been twins, identical copies. Our high degree of similarity was attributed to the severe inbreeding and lack of genetic diversity in the lineages of our *r'athaira*. Regardless of the cause, as young children, we had been very alike in many ways, so alike that we became as one—*anÿncára*, inseparable. Once, this wouldn't have been an uncommon situation amongst our family, but in recent times, *anÿncára* relationships between *deirfa* are not encouraged. And when Darriel joined our group, the situation became even more complex—Darí, it seemed, was one of those rare individuals who could form more than one *anÿncára* relationship. So the sanctioned relationship between Darí and Darriel was publicly honored and accepted, and the sibling *anÿncára* bond between Darí and I was kept quietly hidden, still strong, but never formally acknowledged.

Darí and Darriel spent many happy years together, but were never able to have children. It seemed that even as unrelated as they were, they were doomed to suffer the Ellendrí curse—infertility. But the bond between *anÿncára* can easily survive the hardships, struggles, and disappointments that seem to be so common in this plane of existence. Childless, they still continued to take joy in each other's companionship, and, apparently, that was enough for them both.

The drying and heating of Ellendrïa's crust has increased the frequency of earthquakes in Dïarven. Mostly these have been small. The more modern architecture is designed to tolerate these shakings without any significant damage to their structures. However, 10 years ago, a particularly violent earthquake brought down the main historical archive on Ellendrïa. It was an old building, designed and constructed long before the sun's outward expansion had started to impact Ellendrïa's climate. The ancient foundation had suffered through thousands of years of the death throes of a planet, and finally could withstand no more. Five people were buried in the rubble of the collapse. Four were rescued and survived the day. The fifth was Darriel, who died in Darí's arms.

Eldranth—Date: 8926.115

Ellendrïa (approximately 10 years earlier), Midsummer

Compared to some of the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn, the Ellendrí aren't generally considered very religious. We have plenty of myths and legends, some going back to our earliest recorded histories, but only a few simple spiritual beliefs. We believe in the existence of the beyond, a place where the spirit goes after life on this plane of existence ends, and that we can return from the beyond through a process of rebirth. We acknowledge the great oneness of all things—that we are a small part of the greater whole, interconnected with each other and all things to form the web of life. And we believe that, in some way, this great oneness, like a massive living organism composed of many tiny, individual cells, is self-aware. From this self-awareness flows both fate, that which was decided before we were born, and destiny, that which we create as we follow the path of our soul's purpose. Sometimes fate and destiny blend together and merge, and it is hard to tell if the path we're on is one that we've chosen, or one that was chosen for us. I don't know whether it was fate or destiny, but whatever it was, Darí and I had our lives forever changed by it on the day Darriel died.

I was sent back to Ellendrïa by the Guardians, ostensibly to be an observer in the increasingly heated debate amongst our people about whether to evacuate Ellendrïa and start a new colony. The Guardians felt that someone should be present on Ellendrïa as their representative, as well as to assist in maintaining order should intense emotions lead to violence. At first, I had stubbornly refused to be the one to go—after my unexpected visit home the previous year, I really didn't know how I would be able to live with Darí and Darriel. But I could feel the noose of fate tightening about my neck as all the other Guardians were called off to important tasks, and I was the only one remaining with the time to take on this particular project. I was sullen and miserable, but couldn't refuse to do my duty, not without explaining something which I preferred to keep private. So I agreed to go. For a while, I had seriously considered hiding out in Kÿrrÿl's space flight facility, but I figured that would just eventually make Darí annoyed with me. I didn't want to anger my *deirfad*; I just didn't have any more answers to our problems than I had last year.

Darí and Darriel were reserved—I had already stayed away too long. They knew I was avoiding them, avoiding the issues between us. I tried to pretend that everything was just the way it had been years ago, but in reality, things had been going awry with us for so long that I can hardly remember what normal might have felt like. However, they accepted my behavior as an attempt to keep things from erupting unexpectedly. After a couple of days, their tepidness warmed up to moderate friendliness. Maybe they really didn't want me sleeping in my ship where it was stored in Kÿrrÿl's facility.

Several tendays later, I found myself working with Darí in the family gardens, having just returned from a meeting with the Elders and having little else to accomplish for the moment. It was a quiet time, filled with the smell of freshly turned soil and herbs warming in the sun. We were just starting to relax in each other's presence again—I felt happy about that. However, in the back of my mind, some little warning

was tickling me. I've had these feelings before, and they've seldom ever meant that something good was going to happen.

Before I could figure out what my *turas* was trying to tell me, the earth started buckling under our feet, heaving as though it was a living thing. Darí and I crouched down, trying to find some stability on the suddenly fluid ground, hoping that nothing would get shaken loose from the dome above and fall on us. After a few moments, the tremor stopped. I looked around quickly, but nothing in the dome seemed damaged. This was the second quake in the short while I'd been home—clearly Ellendrïa was suffering further stress from the sun's increased warming. Then another shock rattled our home, this one worse than the first, knocking us to our knees. And that's when it hit me. Pain. Overwhelming, engulfing pain. Not mine. I looked at Darí—his face had gone completely white, but he was clearly unhurt. And then I knew—Darriel!

"Where is she?" I gritted out against the waves of lashing pain that somehow I was receiving empathically from Darriel.

Darí's teeth were clenched, and his eyes squeezed shut, but he managed to answer faintly. "At the history archives." I grabbed his arm, dragging him with me as I started to move. "We've got to get there, now!" The waves of pain in my head were starting to get weaker, which probably wasn't a good sign. I was running, pulling Darí behind me. Fortunately, he seemed to have found his strength, and was starting to run on his own accord.

I was heading for the dome's exit that led to the city's main subterranean thoroughfares. These environmentally-controlled tunnels would lead me to the dome containing the old city center, the location of the building containing the history archives. Reaching the north edge of the dome, I saw the two parallel railings that marked the ramp leading downward, out under the edge of the dome and into the tunnel that connected our dome to the rest of the underground network. Charging down the ramp, we quickly reached a narrow, flat-bottomed tunnel carved out of the bedrock. It extended, straight and level, for a short distance before exiting into a much wider, hemispherical tunnel with three traffic lanes—two narrow raised lanes, one on each side of the tunnel, and a wide central depressed roadway. This was one of the main routes into the heart of the city.

All the tunnels were well-lit, and the polished rock work gleamed in the light. As we entered the main thoroughfare, I turned left onto the nearest raised lane. This roadway was designated for small powered and self-propelled vehicles. All access tunnels merged into the main tunnel on this side. The raised way across the tunnel was reserved for walkers. Large antigrav transports carrying both people and goods moved along the broad center lane. Wherever an access tunnel merged onto a main thoroughfare, certain utilities were provided for people traveling through the system. A small alcove was located near the mouth of each access tunnel—this was a charging station. Each of these stations usually had two jet sleds—generally a single- and a double-seater—and several wheeled vehicles that were pedal-powered. These vehicles were communal[34]—anyone could use them, but they were always brought back to the

station from which they were taken, and the jet sleds were always put on charge after they had been used. On the other side of each access tunnel entrance was a stairway attached to the side of the tunnel. This led upwards to an arched overpass, which allowed walkers to safely cross the tunnel to the other side and reach the dedicated foot traffic lane.

It was some distance from here to the city center. At running speed, it would take us over a centiday to get there—much too long. So far, both of us had been running hard, and mostly blind, not worrying about anything except getting to our destination as fast as possible. Now we had to think. As I looked into the charging alcove, I was hoping that at least one of the jet sleds would be there, preferably the two-seater. My eyes quickly scanned the vehicles present, and I felt a burst of relief as I spotted the one I wanted. Moving rapidly, I straddled the sled and unplugged the charging cord. I didn't need to look back to know that Darí was sliding onto the seat behind me—our minds were linked, and he was reacting to my thoughts before I could even verbalize them.

Touching the starting icon on the control console of the sled, I felt a gentle thrum between my legs as the antigrav unit purred to life. The sled rose off the ground and reached a stable hover. Two small electric jet engines with rotatable nozzles propelled the sled. Using these, I swiftly backed the sled out of the alcove. Once we were out in the lane, I bent low over the controls, gripping the sled tightly with Darí taking up a similar position behind me. I needed to push the jet sled as fast as it would go … I could still feel Darriel's pain, and knew that we had to reach her soon. Sliding my finger along the throttle bar on the console, I brought the engines up to full with a muted roar.

Jet sleds are not meant to be ridden at high speeds in the city thoroughfares. But fearing that we might be too late to save Darriel, I didn't care … whatever repercussions there would be for this wild ride, I would face them later. Luckily, the traffic in this lane was light, and some combination of my training as a pilot and my *turas* got us through safely.

While it seemed to take forever, we actually reached the central hub, with its many radiating tunnels, quite quickly. The hub is located just below the central dome. A long ramp leads upwards from it, opening out underneath the viewing platform in the central park. Although jet sleds are usually left parked below ground in the hub, I drove the sled up the ramp, emerging into slanting rays of sunlight broken up by the shadows of the pillars supporting the round platform above us. I blinked rapidly as my eyes adjusted, then guided the sled through the pillars and brought it to a stop on one of the park paths, another transgression that I would worry about later.

From the park, I knew it would be faster to go on foot to the history archives. We could take shortcuts that the jet sled would be unable to negotiate. We were running now, working our way eastward. Once we left the park, more people were milling around, obviously frightened and concerned by the earthquake. I was vaguely aware of people jumping out of my path, but I said nothing to anyone I passed, saving my breath to run as fast as I could. Taking the most direct route to the history archives, I dodged around confused people, jumping over flower beds and park benches, moving fast and hard. The

people I passed looked shocked, stunned—by my behavior or the impacts of the quake, I didn't know. At the time, I didn't care. I could hear alarms in the distance now—something very serious had happened.

I was starting to outdistance Darí. He was in good shape, but hadn't had the intensive physical training that I'd had as a Guardian, and it was starting to tell. I didn't slow for him—he would see what I saw through our mind link—and I knew he would catch up.

Cutting through a hedge of low trees, I reached the street where the archives complex was located and came to a sudden stop. Where I had expected a building, there was an untidy pile of rubble. Shock hit me like someone had punched me in the stomach. I gasped for a moment, reaching out for Darriel. Yes, I could still sense her, quieter now, but still there. Then I was running again. There were already people working on the collapsed building—I could see that at least two people had been pulled from the wreckage and were being attended to by Healers. But no one was working where I could sense that Darriel was buried.

Plunging into the pile of collapsed rock and metal, I had my Star in my hand, readying it to enhance my psychokinesis, which would allow me to move some of the biggest rubble aside. I wanted to be careful, but I could feel Darriel quickly weakening. I didn't have much time. Then I was ripping the collapsed section apart, heedless of the energy I was expending, guided by my sense of Darriel's location. I felt, rather than saw, Darí arrive. He started digging with his bare hands, pulling away anything he could move. I realized that Farrwÿn was there too; had probably been there when I arrived. Although he looked thin and gangly, he had the strength to move some larger pieces of debris, but his fine artist's hands were already abraded and bleeding.

I was spurred to a renewed frenzy at the sight of Darriel's foot emerging out from under a piece of rubble that Darí had lifted. Now we focused our energies, clearing material away from her body. But at the same time, I could feel her life force flickering even dimmer. I could tell that Darí was trying to use his Healer's skills to restore some of her vital energy, but he didn't seem to be able to keep pace with her ebbing levels. It was almost as though she had already given up. I sent a mental command to her to hold on, telling her that we nearly had her free, but that seemed to have as little effect as Darí's efforts.

Finally, we had the rubble cleared, and Darriel was no longer trapped beneath it. However, when I saw Darí gather her up in his arms, I knew there was no hope. He wouldn't have moved her, as injured as she was, if he had known that there was the faintest of chances. He was crouched down, holding her in his lap, cradling her head against his arm. I knelt beside them and put my hand gently on Darriel's shoulder. She opened her eyes and blinked a couple of times, but I could tell that she wasn't seeing us. I've watched people die; so has Darí. Something happens to their eyes, the spark of life fades, and they start looking into the beyond. Darí whispered her name. For a moment, Darriel's eyes did focus on us. I could see that she knew we were there. She moved her lips, trying to say something. I could hear her voice, faint and weak, "I'll wait for you." The corners of her lips lifted in a small smile, undaunted by the pain and fear. She looked directly at me. "Both of you."

The breath caught in my throat as her eyes closed. I thought she was gone, leaving us with that last cryptic comment, but no, I heard her voice in my mind, "*Don't let him follow me.*" I knew that the "him" she was referring to was Darí. "*Promise me!*" her voice demanded sharply. I looked at her, and her eyes were open again, boring into mine.

"I promise," I rasped out through dust and tears, my throat almost too tight for words. Then her eyes closed that last time, and she went limp.

Suddenly, I felt the most terrible thing I'd ever felt in my life—like a piece of my heart was ripped out of my body, leaving a huge black abyss where Darriel had once been. I cried out—a horrible, raw anguished scream that echoed off the buildings. Then I saw Darí slump forward in a faint over Darriel's body.

At last, I understood, horribly and totally, what had happened. An *anÿncára* bond had already formed between Darriel and I, had quite possibly been there for many years. I simply hadn't recognized it for what it was. But she had known, had tried to make me accept it. Where I had believed that I needed to give Darí and Darriel space to sort out their own lives, in fact, I had been a very integral part of their lives all along. Darriel had realized that we had reached an irresolvable dilemma, had felt that her lack of abilities had been the source of the problem. So when she was injured, feeling death closing in, she had made the choice to leave, thereby resolving the dilemma, but not before binding me with a promise. Not realizing that she and I were *anÿncára*, I promised to keep Darí from going beyond. In truth, had I known, we both would have followed her. Now we would have to learn to live without her, or I would have to break my word. Feeling myself being sucked into the black chasm of emptiness inside my soul, I wasn't sure I could keep my promise. As darkness overwhelmed me, my mind wondered, "*Wait for us where? Here or in the beyond?*"

Eldranth—Date: 8936.111

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

Darí had barely survived Darriel's death. The strength of the *anÿncára* bond in a relationship as deep, strong, and long as that between Darí and Darriel is immense. The breaking of that bond creates a backlash that can destroy the mind. Even if the remaining partner survives, they often choose to follow their companion into the beyond, having little left to keep them amongst the living. Darí's mind did not break, which would at least have given him a clean death.

My memories of the time were filled with bitterness and pain. I'd kept my promise to Darriel, and had held us precariously on this side of the beyond. And when it seemed that my *anÿncára* bond with Darí couldn't hold him back from the beyond any longer, Farrwÿn came and stayed with us, sitting up long sleepless nights, keeping us from seeking that final choice. Farrwÿn talked with us about many things—the good times we'd had, the times to come, the call to take up our destiny. Eventually, after some weeks had passed, we were both still alive. Darí was a changed person, grim, but still somehow amongst the living.

I shuddered. The passing of Darriel had hurt me deeply as well. Although I had never been Darriel's lover, somehow I'd become her *anÿncára*. Only too late had I realized the full depth of my relationship with her. I still don't know how that had happened. Had my bond to Darí somehow linked me to Darriel? Or was I just like my *deirfad*, able to form more than one *anÿncára* bond? Had I always been destined to be Darriel's *anÿncára*? Did I love her the way I loved Darí? All questions for which I had no answers. All I really knew was that I too had survived, but my world, like Darí's, had changed.

Even my *anÿncára* bond with Darí seemed uncertain now, so much had changed between us. As young children, we had been extremely close, our *anÿncára* bond strong and sure. Our family bloodline was known to carry genes for exceptional psychic abilities—it was said that during the Genomic Enhancement Interval of Ellendrí history[35], our lineage had been specifically designed, and later bred, to yield very powerful talents. High levels of telepathy and empathy naturally produced intense bonds between members of our bloodline.

I have fond memories of Darí following behind me like a shadow and copying everything I did with serious intentness. Three years the elder, I had always protected and cared for my younger *deirfa*. However, that had all changed after we reached puberty. All Ellendrí children are neuter before puberty. After puberty, Darriel had been the first of our group of four to change—shifting into female phase. Possibly in response to this, Darí and I went into male phase, followed much later by Farrwÿn. After these changes, the *anÿncára* bond between Darí and Darriel became more pronounced. Suddenly, the dynamics between the four of us were radically changed. I became unsure of my place in the group and of my bond with Darí, which had once been so infrangible.

I was 22, and I lacked the wisdom to make sense of the strange threesome relationship that was

developing between me, Darí, and Darriel. I felt like the odd person, awkward and not quite belonging, and that stimulated further change. Traditionally, members of our family have initially become Healers, Guardians, or Psi Technicians, gradually expanding our interests and skills into other areas over time. As the eldest, I'd been naturally more outgoing and adventure-seeking than Darí, always asking questions and seeking answers. Darí, on the other hand, had been quieter, shyer—a more focused and scholarly individual. The stresses on our relationship that occurred after puberty enhanced these small differences—from being nearly indistinguishable, we gradually diverged onto very different paths. Ultimately, I trained as a Guardian, and by 25, was working primarily off-planet, a situation, which, I felt, kept me from causing complications between Darí and Darriel. Darí stayed on Ellendrïa and became a highly respected Healer.

With a sigh, I pulled myself out of my reminiscences. "I never thought I'd be the one to look after our home," I muttered, leaning out the big window in Darí's room and breathing in the fragrant smells of the herb garden planted along the side of the building. "I was always the adventurous one." Long ago, when our *athairan* had died in a rock fall, and our *athairad* had chosen to join her in the beyond, it was assumed that Darí would take over the family home and care for the dome. And so he had, until Darriel died.

Chapter 3: The Making and the Breaking of a Guardian

Eldranth—Date: 8936.111

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

A sound like water tumbling over rocks in a small stream brought my mind back to the present as I finished reorganizing the main common room, creating sufficient space for visitors to sit. The sound was being generated by the communication center, located in a corner of the common room, trying to alert me of an incoming call. I walked over to the corner and touched a small, slightly raised square, set at chest height and of a color almost indistinguishable from the background color of the wall. The communication center, designed to look like an inconspicuous blank space on the wall, suddenly resolved into a large screen and a console with various control elements. The screen lit up, showing the face and upper body of the caller. Farrwÿn smiled in greeting, his smoky-grey eyes, as always, holding a trace of otherness. Although it was difficult to estimate age based on physical appearance amongst the Ellendrí, it was usually possible to guess how old a person was based on their eyes, speech patterns, and body language. I knew that Farrwÿn was only a couple of years older than me, but he always had the gravity and bearing of an Elder.

Meeting my eyes directly, Farrwÿn began his call with "Darí is coming home today." It was a statement, not a question. Of course, Farrwÿn would know. Even if Darí hadn't communicated his plans telepathically, Farrwÿn's *turas* would likely have warned him that Darí was going to arrive soon.

"Yes," I replied, giving Farrwÿn what I hoped was a cheerful smile. I was still determined to keep my mood upbeat, even though my thoughts had been wandering through memories of darker times. "I think he should get here just before sunset, if he has no problems along the way."

"He'll arrive on time." Farrwÿn dropped his eyes and seemed to study something on the floor. I felt a sense of relief. It was good to know that Farrwÿn was sure Darí would arrive safely. It was also a relief not to be staring into Farrwÿn's all-to-knowing eyes, and he had clearly sensed this. Even though our friendship was deep, it was still possible to have awkward moments like this. I knew without asking that there was more to Farrwÿn's call than just a confirmation of Darí's imminent arrival. Affirming my feelings, Farrwÿn added, "I think we should meet together tomorrow. There are some things we need to discuss."

I arched an eyebrow in question. "Yes?" I probed for some more information.

Farrwÿn shrugged, still looking at the floor. For a moment, he seemed less like an Elder and more like the childhood friend that I remembered. "Gryffÿth has been raising controversy again. There's going to be trouble. There are some things we need to do. Let's talk about it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, then," I smiled encouragingly at Farrwÿn. "Meet us in the orchard. I'll tell Darí to expect

you. I'm sure he will be happy to see you."

"I'll certainly be happy to see him. It's been awhile," Farrwÿn looked up, and I could see the happiness in his eyes.

Excerpt from "A Öfölscealta ó ad Ellendrí"

(Legends of the Ellendrí, translated into Terran English)

As the oldest space-faring people in the Ll'Ellendrÿn, and one of the few remaining races directly descended from the Ellendorïa, the Ellendrí felt that it was their duty to promote and protect peace in the interstellar space of this region, thus allowing trade, knowledge-transfer, and travel to occur freely and without danger. To this end, a force of 120 Ellendrí, carefully selected for strong psychic abilities, and trained extensively in mediation, peacekeeping, and a variety of armed and unarmed combat skills, was maintained. Although highly adept at survival, and well capable of defending themselves and protecting those seeking their aid, these Ellendrí were oath-bound to a specific creed: to always pursue the path of nonviolence whenever and wherever possible, to seek peaceful solutions to disputes, and to limit physical conflict to the least amount possible. These elite peacekeepers were known as the Guardians of Peace, and all swore the Guardian's Oath:

> *This I swear:*
>
> *I renounce war, and dedicate my life to finding peaceful and nonviolent solutions to conflict.*
>
> *I will respect all life, in any of its myriad forms.*
>
> *I will not act for personal power or wealth, but only seek wisdom and enlightenment.*
>
> *I will respect the limitations of my own knowledge, and will always work to improve myself through study and training.*
>
> *My word is my vow, and I will always seek to deliver more than I promise.*
>
> *I will believe nothing without evidence, and never arrive at a judgment without hearing all sides of a story.*
>
> *I will never initiate force or aggression against another individual or group.*
>
> *I will fight only in self-defense, or in defense of another, and only as the last resort.*
>
> *My strength is a shield, and I will stand between those bent on violence and those who cannot defend themselves.*
>
> *If it is beyond my strength to prevent violent action, still I will not yield, but will do everything within my power to reduce the conflict and minimize the damage so that the least amount of harm is done to the fewest people.*
>
> *If I am unable to prevent the outbreak of violence, it is my sworn duty to tend to those*

who are its victims, the weak and the injured.

I make these vows solemnly, freely, and upon my honor.

Guardians were primarily involved in interstellar issues, and had no authority over planetary governments; however, if requested, Guardians served as mediators in planetary disputes. The Guardians were self-regulating, and were not bound politically or legally to any planet in the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Ellendrïa provided the funding and resources for the Guardians, but did not demand any allegiance in return.

While the Ellendrí were highly respected as an elder race, individuals engaging in dispute resolution and other peacekeeping activities far from their home world would still be placing themselves in dangerous situations. For this reason, a special device was designed for the Guardians, which became both their emblem of duty and a means of enhancing their psychic capabilities. Thus, Psi Technicians designed 120 Guardian's Stars—six-pointed star-shaped pendants. Each Star had at its center a large ferrïl, and at each point, a durrïl[36]. The Star was slightly smaller than the palm of a person's outstretched hand, with the ferrïl approximately three finger widths in diameter, and each durrïl one finger width in diameter. The body of the Star was a bluish metal, engraved with a star map of the Ll'Ellendrÿn as viewed from the hypothetical position of Ellendorïa, with the center position of the map occupied by the ferrïl. Each Star was keyed to an individual Guardian. When a Guardian chose to put aside their duty and return to Ellendrïa, the Star could be rekeyed to a new Guardian, a task that could only be performed by a highly skilled Psi Technician.

And so it was that the Guardians of Peace were established, the legends of their exploits growing larger with the retellings, and the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn flourished in peace for nearly nine thousand years.

Eldranth—Date: 8928.130 to 8934.156

Ellendrïa (between eight and two years earlier)

I was as proud as I'm sure my *athairad* would have been, had he still been alive, when Darí was given his Guardian's Star. He had completed his training in a phenomenally short period of time—only two years since Darriel's death, under the direct tutelage of Thorven.

Thorven Seabÿn had spent many of his years as a Guardian, having returned to active Guardian duty a number of times throughout his long life. He was an excellent, albeit tough, teacher. Old enough to be an Elder, he was still very active and physically strong. He was tall for an Ellendrí—the tallest I'd known—and broad across the shoulders, fit and densely muscled. His smoky-grey eyes and steel gray hair, gilded with bright gold streaks, marked him as one of the Ellendrí lineages containing a fair amount of Gwÿrdrí blood. Some long years ago, he'd been my mentor as well, although with reservations. Darí had done very well under Thorven's skillful training, showing all the signs of being every bit as good as I was, and probably better.

Unfortunately, in other matters, things were not going as well as they should. After two years, I had recovered somewhat from Darriel's death, at least to the point that I could get through a day without thinking about her, and the dark emptiness in my soul where once she'd been, more than a couple of times. Darí, on the other hand, still cried himself into exhaustion most nights. I often stayed with him—sometimes I could comfort him, but other times, he'd just shut me out completely. I'd no idea how he managed to do so well in training when he was still in such emotional pain. He'd become very quiet, dark, driven—it was difficult to carry on much of a conversation with him, unless it was about some technical matter related to the skills he was learning.

Thinking that I was providing some assistance and support to Darí, I had chosen to remain on Ellendrïa after Darriel's death. I was assigned by the Guardians to be a Recorder for the Elder Council meetings—not very exciting work, but it kept my mind off other things—and was taught the necessary skills by the Historian's Guild. Occasionally, I would go off-planet for a few days to provide aid where necessary, but for the most part, I'd become a resident of Ellendrïa. I still wore my Star, tucked inside my shirt, but people got used to seeing me in the yellow-trimmed tunic of a Historian. I suspect that a lot of them didn't even realize I was still an active Guardian.

I've never been sure exactly why Darí decided to become a Guardian. Originally, I had believed, and hoped, that it was because he wanted to travel with me, to be my companion and my *sïathcára*. Now, I often wonder if it had something to do with his conversations with Farrwÿn.

Farrwÿn had been a frequent companion to Darí during the two years after Darriel's death. Farrwÿn was gifted with a particularly strong form of *turas* granting him an almost unerring ability to see the future. None of us really knew the true depth and breadth of his visions, as he seldom spoke about them. But it was pretty clear to those of us who knew him well that his *turas* was often a burden to him. The

question I ask myself now is “What had Farrwÿn seen that had compelled Darí to become a Guardian?”

While Darí was taking his training, Kÿrrÿl, my *ïdrÿlad*, was designing and building a new ship, something much more modern than the old craft that I flew, which had been my *athairad’s* before me. This new ship was the first of the Guardian’s ships to be armed—something that caused more than a little controversy—in response to the Cultaní raiders that we’d been driving off along the Ll’Ellendrÿn borders. I had assumed that Darí and I would leave planet together, and that this new ship was to be a replacement for my old one, which was getting more inclined to unexpected break-downs as the years progressed.

We had a gathering to celebrate Darí’s new position as a Guardian. There are not many of the Föalen lineage left these days—just the two of us and the family of my *athairad-deirfad*[37]. Thus, it was a small event with only a few people attending, including some close friends like Farrwÿn. Darí almost seemed normal—shyly accepting congratulations, telling a few amusing stories about his apprenticeship, but generally being subdued and calm. He seemed happy enough, so I left him by himself that night, while I sprawled on the bed in my room and fell into a mostly dreamless sleep.

I’m a relatively light sleeper—many years as a Guardian have trained my body to pay attention to unusual activities around me even when I’m asleep. It was barely dawn when I awoke, hearing Darí get up and rummage around. I quickly pulled a tunic on over my loose trousers, and went out to see what was happening, only to find that he was already heading out of the dome, a few items stowed in a pack, and obviously about to leave. The *Föalen*, the new ship, had been brought over to our dome the previous night by Kÿrrÿl, and was ready to go.

“Darí,” I shouted at him as I ran over to the *Föalen*. “Aren’t you going to wait until I get my gear packed up?”

Darí kept his back turned to me. “No. Rallandrí has assigned me to Lorril. As far as I know, you are still on assignment here.” Rallandrí, my old friend from previous missions, was now working as the dispatcher for the Guardians. What Darí said was probably true; however, I knew that I could easily get reassigned by simply requesting a posting with Darí. I suppose I should have already done that, but I didn’t think Darí would be so anxious to leave.

“That’s not a problem—I can get reassigned, if you’ll wait for a little while,” I replied with a bit of a smile—I remembered how excited I was to get underway on my first mission. I wasn’t blaming Darí for his eagerness.

“No,” Darí finally turned to look at me. His eyes had this terrible sad, almost hopeless expression, and I felt as if my heart was stalling.

“What do you mean?” I gasped out.

“I’m going alone,” he said softly. I just stared at him, questions rushing around in my head. For a moment I thought he wasn’t going to say anything else, just leave me to wonder what in all the many universes was going on—my once eloquent *deirfad* had become a person of few words. However, he saw my look, and I guess he felt obligated to make some sort of explanation. “Dran, I feel so empty without Darriel, and I don’t know if the pain will ever stop. When we’re together, I can’t keep it away from you.” He shook his head, helplessly. “I don’t want to keep hurting you forever with my feelings.” He had tears in his eyes, which told me how much this was hurting him. “It will be better if I go and work with people who can’t feel my pain the way you do.”

“Don’t you think I’ll still hear you when you’re off on another planet?” I finally managed to force out through my confusion. “Don’t you think our bond won’t still transmit your feelings to me?” I was truly dismayed by his reasoning. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m doing it for you,” he turned his face away. I could see tear tracks running down his cheek. “The distance will help attenuate our bond. I’ll be able to block my feelings, at least a little, when we aren’t in contact.” He didn’t say goodbye, or offer to touch me in any way, just turned back to the *Föalen*, and walked up the ramp. I stood in complete shock while he gently lifted the *Föalen* off the ground and flew away, leaving me standing alone in the dry, blowing dust of my dying homeland. My heart suddenly felt dead and dry too, as if it were echoing the planet’s death. I don’t remember much of the rest of that day, except that I found an old tree in the family orchard and beat on it until my knuckles were skinned and bleeding, finally sliding down into the damp grass at its base, sobbing until long after the sun went down.

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I tried. I really did try. I’m not one to give up, or at least I wasn’t, then. Farrwÿn, in his usual cryptic way, assured me that eventually Darí would heal, that when he could finally see past his pain, he would remember that I still existed. Of course, Farrwÿn didn’t say when this might happen.

I was particularly concerned for Darí during his first few years as a Guardian, while he still lacked experience and could more easily get himself into trouble. Fortunately, new, inexperienced Guardians aren’t usually sent on dangerous assignments. So I worked a deal with Rallandrí. Anytime it looked like Darí might be in a potentially difficult situation, Rallandrí would shift my assignment, unannounced, to the location in question. I quickly learned to be ready to leave Ellendrïa on a moment’s notice.

I think everyone was a bit worried about Darí, so a few of the problems that invariably come up with this type of last minute arrangement were overlooked. It meant that I could be at Darí’s back if he needed me, often without him knowing that I was coming. I also became very good at blocking my actions from him, assuming that our bond was even capable of transmitting much to Darí anymore. Once things had been resolved to my satisfaction, I would disappear as quickly as I had come, presumably off on another assignment.

It wasn't easy. I did it for four years. Sometimes, we actually met during a mission. A few times, I probably saved his life. When we did meet, I was never sure what to expect. Occasionally, he would be grateful, or happy to see me, and I could almost believe he was my *deirfad*. At other times, he would be in some other universe, his soul filled with darkness and pain. Then, he would walk right past me as if I wasn't even there. Our *anÿncára* bond was just as troubled. Sometimes I could hardly feel the link between us and barely knew if he was alive or not, while at other times, I could sense his presence just as I always had when we were children together. On even rarer occasions, I was actually able to communicate with him telepathically. I just never knew what to expect.

At the end of four years, I was exhausted, emotionally and physically. By this time, it was clear that Darí had become a highly skilled Guardian that was in no real need of protection by me or anyone else. Rallandrí had gotten tired of seeing my *deirfad* turn away from me, refusing to do assignment shifts for me anymore. Instead, he sent me back to Ellendrïa to stay, back to working as a Recorder for the Elder Council.

I guess that was when I finally gave up on Darí. In giving up on him, I also gave up on myself. I did my Recorder's duties and, on Rallandrí's suggestion, I enrolled in Healer's training. These things filled my time. I worked hard at them, but they didn't give my life any meaning. I felt like I was drifting with no purpose or reason. There was a restlessness in my soul.

After two years, I'd completed the Healer's training, having done well enough, I suppose. However, I didn't take my Healer's Oath[38]. In my heart, I was still a Guardian, and felt as though I always would be. The healing skills were useful, but I didn't think that I would ever work as a Healer on Ellendrïa. Now, though, I had much more time in my life with not nearly enough things to fill it. The restlessness in my soul became a terrible need for action. Furthermore, in addition to the painful emptiness left behind by Darriel's death, the loss of a meaningful relationship with Darí had left my heart hollow and aching. I was blindly seeking anything that would give me enough focus to keep going.

The Cultaní raiders had begun directed attacks on the Guardians, seeing them as the only opposition to their inroads into Ll'Ellendrÿn space. The Guardians weren't used to fighting ruthless, armed aliens, and this was taking its toll. Each year, there were fewer and fewer Guardians—some died in action, some simply came home to Ellendrïa and laid down their Stars with no one willing to replace them. Fewer Guardians meant that now many of those that remained carried on their duties solo, rather than with the teamwork that used to be our normal approach. Guardians working solo had a greater risk of being in dangerous situations. As a result, there was a greater need to rescue individuals who had gotten into something that they couldn't get out of by themselves.

I saw a role for myself in all of this. Having gotten used to rapid deployment when I was surreptitiously watching my *deirfad's* back, I could see that there was a place amongst the Guardians for someone who could get somewhere quickly, carry out a rescue, and hopefully get everyone back alive. Initially, Rallandrí wanted no part of this idea—he could see that it was going to be very dangerous, and that I

really didn't care. Thorven objected strenuously. However, I'd always been lucky. Now, I trained harder than I ever had before, working my mind and body until they were as finely honed as I could make them. Between luck and hard work, I thought I could pull this off. And the need was there. Finally, reluctantly, Rallandrí put me into service.

I guess I became a bit of a crusader. I worked alone, with the firm belief that I would always get the job done, no matter what the personal cost to myself. I got tough, inured to minor injuries. Being a Healer helped, as I could look after myself pretty well. My luck held out—I never got hurt beyond my coping abilities. And lives were saved. This made me feel that there was still something worthwhile to which I could contribute. But it never helped the ache in my heart, the holes in my soul, the black depression that gradually became a bigger and bigger cloud in my life. I had long since stopped trying to communicate with Darí. I could hardly remember the last time I'd seen him. I figured that our *anÿncára* bond had faded into nothingness, although occasionally Darí would still reach out to me telepathically, wondering where I was, if I was all right. I guess we were still family, and he had a right to know. Beyond that, I paid little attention to much else, except getting the job done, saving as many lives as I could, and living one day at a time. In the end, I knew that eventually I was going to make a mistake that would cost me my life, but it really didn't matter to me anymore. That day would come when it did.

Chapter 4: My Deirfad, My Anÿncára

Eldranth—Date: 8936.111

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

I had finally settled down on a couch in the common room. Although Darí and I shared the family home, Darí was seldom on Ellendrïa. Often, on the few occasions when he was, I would be on duty elsewhere. Essentially, we lived alone. It was seldom that the living quarters had to be adjusted to accommodate both of us at the same time. Darí would probably have to put up with some of my sprawl.

With the two of us coming and going as frequently as we did, our small single-story house and associated gardens didn't get as much attention from us as they should. Unlike so many other cultures, our people don't work for money and have no currency. Resources are distributed freely amongst the population according to the needs of the individuals. People voluntarily work at activities of their choice. Concepts like "jobs", "salaries", and "income" are not a part of our lives. Thus, neither Darí nor I receive payment for our services, nor do we "hire" people to look after our home when we are absent. However, it has long been the practice on Ellendrïa that those who offer their lives up in particularly demanding service, such as Healers and Guardians, are provided for in other ways. Thus, during our absences someone had been looking after the gardens and orchard, harvesting the produce, keeping the dome machinery operating smoothly, and making sure the house was supplied with food enough to feed two often hungry Guardians.

Faintly, in the far distance, I heard a booming sound. There wasn't much air traffic these days, so that was quite likely Darí's spaceship coming down through the atmosphere. He would probably circle over the mountains to lose speed and elevation, then come up the valley for his final approach.

I got up and walked outside to the main dome entrance—a large cargo door for big equipment with an adjacent smaller door for people to pass through. I put my hand, palm facing outward, against the dome material beside the small door. After a moment, the door slid sideways with a quiet hiss, disappearing into the dome wall. I stepped into the airlock. Quickly the door slid shut behind me, preventing the loss of precious water and oxygen from the dome's environment. Shortly afterwards, the outer airlock door opened. Hot, dry air blew into my face as I walked out into the open. A second hiss told me that the external airlock door was now closed behind me. I sucked in a lungful of air, feeling momentarily light-headed as my body accommodated to the much lower levels of oxygen. I squinted—even though the sun was low in the sky, the air evaporated the moisture from my eyes, making them feel gritty.

A quiet whine announced the ship's low gliding approach. The dome was on the farthest extent of the city, located where once there had been the edge of a forest. The forest was now long gone, and there were few other domes in the near vicinity, so Darí had a clear landing approach. The sleek ship was still shedding velocity, but braking smoothly, coming in on a good flight line. Darí was an excellent pilot,

probably one of the best. Our *athairad's* ship, which I still flew, was a much older design; however, Darí had worked with the engineers to construct a new, more modern ship to his specifications. This ship, the *Föalen*, looked like a cross between a fast courier and something more deadly—it was highly maneuverable, with four wings and a long needle nose. Unlike most Ellendrí ships, it was armed. At first, this seemed a little excessive, since Guardians were very seldom threatened, but with the recent spate of pirate activity in the space lanes, it was now clear that Darí had been given some warning from Farrwÿn about what to expect.

The ship came to a stop a short distance from the dome, hovering. No longer requiring any forward thrust, Darí shut the main engine off. The ship gently settled to the ground using its antigravity units, barely raising any dust from the parched soil. I heard a few clicks and whirring sounds as the ship's systems were shut down, then the whine of servos as the door opened downward to form a landing ramp.

I blinked a moment in the scorching air to clear my eyes, then I could see Darí at the top of the ramp, stepping down. Silvery bright hair, pale grey eyes, high arching eyebrows that were a gift from our *athairan*—I could almost be looking in a mirror. Although I am the eldest by three years, the two of us could be twins, so similar are we in appearance. Eight years working as a Guardian had wrought changes in Darí—no longer my quiet, introverted *deirfad*, he had developed an unexpected strength of character and bearing that made the similarity between us even more striking.

Although Guardians had no formal uniforms, Darí was wearing the same style of clothing that I used when on duty—shirt and pants made of a heavy, long-wearing fabric, fitted to allow easy movement, but without loose, bulky folds. Guardians' color choices were personal—Darí favored dark blue. Over his shirt, he wore a black jacket that featured numerous pockets and places to store items that might be needed when traveling. These jackets were standard apparel amongst those who traveled the star lanes of the Ll'Ellendrÿn. A heavy belt provided a place to carry more equipment if necessary, and occasionally a belt knife, if a Guardian was spending time on a planet where animal attacks or dueling was common. Like most Guardians, Darí wore sturdy boots that came to mid-calf, and his had clearly seen a great deal of walking.

Darí looked tired, but he was rapidly striding across the space that separated the landing site from the dome. I quickly walked forward to meet him. We stopped midway between ship and dome, standing in the lifeless dust. After a moment of hesitation, Darí gave me a self-deprecating half-smile. I gave up any pretense of dignity, and grabbed my *deirfad* in a hard welcoming hug. For now, it was just enough to be together again, to be alive, even if questions remained unanswered between us.

After a while, we stood back, breathing heavily in the low oxygen air. I met Darí's gaze, still not completely certain what I would see there, but glad to find only a sense of happiness to be home, and the weariness of long days on duty. Somewhere, somehow, Darí had finally found the soul healing he needed—the terrible pain and hollowness that had haunted his eyes for far too many years was gone,

replaced by a look that spoke of experiences weathered, wisdom gained, and determination to move forward with whatever life now held for him. I felt comforted by that look. It gave me the confidence that my own decision, after much soul-searching, was indeed the right one. I hoped that the black cloud of despair that had been dogging my steps for much too long was being pushed away, leaving me with the opportunity for a better life.

“Welcome home, my *anÿncára*,” I said wholeheartedly, clasping Darí’s arm in the more formal greeting between family and friends.

“It’s good to see you” Darí replied softly, inclining his head a little, studying me as though he too was trying to judge where he stood with me. Then he smiled a little, and gave me a hearty embrace in return.

Eldarí—Date: 8936.056

Lorril and Ellendrïa (approximately a quarter-year[39] earlier)

When I look back at the things that I've done to Dran, I sometimes feel so wretched that I really wish I'd followed Darriel to the beyond, but of course, that would've only made the situation worse. How something as vital, beautiful, and soulful as our *anÿncára* bond could have become such a burden to us both is still a circumstance that's beyond my ability to truly understand. I suppose it all began back when we were children. The pressure that society places on people to conform to certain standards, to behave in certain proscribed ways, is a terrible thing. That we let these pressures force us to make bad choices is even worse.

Anÿncára bonds between siblings are actively discouraged in our culture today, although once, they were honored and accepted like all other *anÿncára* relationships. But you don't choose your soulmates—they just happen. And soulmate bonds are eternal—you can no more destroy them than you can choose them. Dran and I were so young when our bond formed that we had no concept of good or bad, right or wrong. We simply were. As we grew older, we began to understand that this connection we had was not considered a good thing between siblings, where children born from such a union could be highly inbred. So we kept it to ourselves. Looking back, that was a bad decision. It would have been better to have faced the criticism of our culture, to have been public about our nature, because I suspect that would have changed everything else that has happened since. At the time, I'd been strongly in favor of being open about the situation and Dran had been opposed, mostly on the grounds that he didn't want to see me hurt. He has always been my protective older *deirfad*.

Sometime later, I discovered that I was one of those lucky few who can form a second *anÿncára* bond. However, with my first bond a well hidden secret, that second bond to my beloved Darriel became the sanctioned public perspective of my life. Dran became lost in the shadows, although in no way had our bond been lessened. It was an awkward situation. Ultimately, it drove him off-planet. I am truly to blame for all the terrible things that have come to pass since Dran and I were forced to live separate lives.

It was Darriel, however, who took much of the blame for our struggles as her own. She felt that her personal limitations prevented us from achieving a life where all three of us could be together. But really, had I not driven Dran off-planet in the first place, we would've been together already. It's hard to say whether Darriel's feelings of guilt were in part responsible for her death after the archives building collapsed. It had seemed as though she'd already given up before we'd managed to rescue her from the wreckage, but in reality, she was so badly injured that I don't think she would've survived in any case.

What was particularly uncanny about Darriel's passing to the beyond was the promise she extracted from Dran. With our strong beliefs in the beyond and the possibility of rebirth, our people don't make promises lightly to those who are about to make the crossing. Dran and I would've happily followed

Darriel, instead we were trapped in the world of the living, with Dran forced to be our anchor.

I don't hate Dran for the role he was compelled to play. I don't believe it's possible to hate your *anÿncára* any more than it's possible to break the *anÿncára* bond. But Darriel's death left me miserable—moody, depressed, and angry at myself. Over time, I found that if I focused on achieving something, I could temporarily escape the feeling of desolation. On Farrwÿn's suggestion, I went into training to become a Guardian. It gave me something to keep my mind away from thoughts of Darriel, and better yet, it would get me off-planet. I couldn't walk through Ellendrïa's only city without seeing the place where the old archive building used to stand, reliving the scene of Darriel's death. I needed to get away.

Throughout those two years of training, Dran was always there, pulling me away from the brink of beyond, trying to ease my grief. I knew he was hurting too, but trying hard to be strong. All I could offer him was more pain, and that only made me feel worse. When I finally received my Guardian's Star, I decided that it would be best if I left without Dran, hoping to maybe save him from some of my black moods. That may not have been a wise decision, but it seemed like the right one at the time.

In those first four years as a novice Guardian, Dran never gave up on me. I knew he was always somewhere near at hand, somehow managing to be there when things got tough, then disappearing just as quickly. How badly I wanted to thank him, to tell him how much it meant to me to know he was there. Yet, each time I got close to him and started to say something, the flaring of the bond between us would bring images of Darriel to my mind, and I would begin to crumble. Sometimes, I had to walk away without even looking at him, blinking back tears of pain, anger, and frustration. Would the anguish and loss over Darriel's death never end? I dreaded that my life would forever be a nightmare of misery.

Thankfully, grieving does end. Six years after Darriel's death, I realized that when I thought about her now, it was the good things I remembered, not the image of her dying in my arms. Healing had come at last. Finally, I was able to reach out to Dran, with the hope that maybe we could find our place together in this world. However, it seems that happy endings are seldom found. Six years is a long time to be strong, to be the rock that held us fast. When I was once again able to offer my heart and soul to Dran, there was a barrier between us. He was polite and kind, but I found it difficult to push past my *deirfad's* defensive shell, find the closeness that I sought. I had rebuffed him so many times in my grief that he had built a protective shield around his inner self to keep the hurt away. I suppose, looking back, I should have pushed him harder, broken through his shields before they'd hardened and become impenetrable, before he had a chance to convince himself that it was indeed possible to destroy the bond between us.

Life went on. Things were very busy amongst the Guardians, both as a result of significant reductions in our numbers and the constant border attacks by the Cultaní. Dran and I came and went from our home on Ellendrïa, sometimes meeting, mostly not. We were polite, careful of each other, but there was no warmth, none of the old familiarity.

Dran had been almost 60 years in the service of the Guardians—a phenomenal length of time. He was becoming a legend. Still looking the same as he had at 25, he moved with the wild grace of the *föalen*[40], his grey eyes clear and penetrating, his mind knife sharp. Ellendrí don't age, unlike some of the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn—I could easily believe that Dran had become the ceaseless Guardian, forever upholding the path of peace.

Dran told me little about his life, but some stories eventually reached me, traveling as all tales do. A few I believed, most I did not. He had taken his Healer's training, and had done very well indeed, but had refused to take his Healer's Oath, stating that his work was as a Guardian. That I could believe—it seemed well within the character of my *deirfad*. Other tales I didn't believe as much. One described how he had played a game of dare with a Cultaní raider who was attacking a passenger ship, charging down on it with his old ship, shields up, taking a beating from the Cultaní's lasers, but refusing to turn aside. At the last moment the Cultaní ship pulled away from its prey and fled, cowed by the sheer audacity of an unarmed ship doing a suicidal charge. Another told that he had worked his way through a battlefield to rescue a Guardian caught on the wrong side of the action, dodging projectiles and bombs with graceful ease. Still another portrayed him as some kind of hero who had fought to protect the lives of innocent people, showing outstanding skill in weapons as archaic as swords and daggers. Some stories claimed that he had surely been injured in battle, but had simply shrugged it off and walked away. These stories were clearly fictitious or maybe fanciful elaborations on events with more rational explanations. Dran was no risk-taker—I remembered how careful he'd been during the years when Darriel was alive. Nor was he some kind of invincible hero. I recalled only too well the time he'd collapsed in my arms after being wounded—not an unexpected response, but certainly not the actions of someone with supposed superhuman powers.

The better part of 10 years had passed since Darriel's death when our world changed again. I had been on Lorril, having a discussion with representatives from a number of the First Arc worlds about the possibility of setting up an armed Border Patrol to defend against the Cultaní raiders. There were three of us representing the Guardians at that table, although I'd been acting primarily as the spokesperson. On this particular day, the group had just taken a break for the midday meal when Rallandrí was suddenly at my elbow. Rallandrí generally acts as dispatcher for the Guardians, and his appearance was unexpected. He hadn't been at the meeting that morning or anywhere on Lorril as far as I knew, and must have only just arrived on planet. I was surprised to see him.

"You've been assigned to Ellendrïa," he instructed curtly. I raised my eyebrows at him. Normally, Rallandrí notifies us of new assignments telepathically—that he was here in person to give me new orders was unusual. Besides, Dran normally worked out of Ellendrïa, and should have been able to deal with anything that could arise on our home world. I looked at him with considerable speculation, "When? Why?"

"Now." Not only was Rallandrí being very abrupt with me, I could also sense that he was both angry and frustrated with something that I'd done. "Get your gear together and I'll meet you at the *Föalen* to give

you the details." Then he was gone as quickly as he'd come. I spoke briefly to the other Guardians, making sure that things would go smoothly in my absence, gathered the little bit of equipment that I'd had with me, and left the meeting.

Lorril is a water world, mostly ocean with a scattering of island archipelagos. It's probably about as different from Ellendrïa as you can get—moist, tropical, lush—and very beautiful. Even the meeting building, a pale pink structure artistically designed in the shape of a fluted seashell, had an oceanic theme. The *Föalen* was crouched on a flat white sand beach just outside the building, along with about 20 other ships. Not far beyond the ships, the sea lapped in turquoise waves against the shore. Tall trees topped with elegant fronds were planted around the meeting building, providing shade to the walkway that gave access to the facility. Rallandrí was already beside the *Föalen*, waiting impatiently.

"When was the last time you communicated with your *deirfad*?" he asked sharply as I reached the ship.

It wasn't a question I was expecting. I blinked, thought for a moment, then replied, "Yesterday afternoon, Lorril time." I'd been making a bit of an effort to check in with Dran at least once a week. I'd been worrying about him, afraid that something might be wrong, but since everything between us was wrong these days, it was hard to tell if anything had changed.

"And?" Rallandrí was playing me along. I didn't like the feeling. Something was up and I wished he would just tell me straight out.

"He seemed all right." I focused my mind on the conversation I'd had with Dran. As usual these days, I could never tell what his underlying thoughts and emotions were. I only seemed to be able to touch the surface of his mind, where once we had been completely open to each other. But had there been something specifically different yesterday? I could feel myself frowning as I contemplated our difficulties, adding "A bit tired, maybe. He said he'd just finished a job and was heading back to Ellendrïa." I was getting distinctly uncomfortable with this line of thought. What was up with Dran?

"Nobody's heard from him since," Rallandrí was clearly worried. I remembered that Rallandrí and Dran were good friends, that Rallandrí had always kept a careful watch out for Dran, especially in the last few years when he took on so many missions unaccompanied. "I've received a disturbing report regarding him," Rallandrí continued, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. "It appears that he was injured yesterday during a small planet-side altercation. The Guardian who made the report said that he didn't think the injury was life-threatening, but it looked like Dran had sustained a burn in some laser crossfire. Apparently this didn't stop him from leaving in his ship." Rallandrí let out a frustrated sigh. Evidently, he was used to this sort of behavior from Dran. "Normally, I wouldn't worry too much about him, but he usually reports in once he's reached Ellendrïa." Rallandrí gave me a hard look, "I was under the impression that you two were *anÿncára*. Don't you know if he's injured?"

I was a bit flustered and hurt by the accusing note in Rallandrí's voice, realizing that I'd probably failed my *anÿncára* yet again. I closed my eyes and sank deeply into our bond—I could feel it, trace it, but

when I reached my *deirfad*, it was like looking at a solar eclipse. I could sense the bright edges of our bond all around Dran like a halo, but when I tried to reach him directly, I just felt darkness, a barrier. I pushed a little harder, trying to make my presence felt against this mental wall. His mind stirred slightly. I sensed the red glow of pain, but his shields remained in place.

I opened my eyes, focusing on Rallandrí again. “He’s on Ellendrïa. He does seem to be hurt, but I can’t tell how badly. He’s shielding against me.” Wondering out loud, I asked “Why doesn’t he just call in a Healer if he can’t heal himself?” I shuddered as that thought sank in. There was a time when I would not have allowed any other Healer but myself to work on Dran.

“That’s exactly the question I want you to answer,” Rallandrí’s look turned fiercer. I could see that he wasn’t feeling very friendly towards me. In fact, he had never been more than perfunctorily polite in any of our previous meetings. “Why would your *anÿncára* be shielding himself from you?” he demanded.

I sighed, feeling pained. “I’m sure it’s my fault. Things haven’t been very good between us for a long time.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I’ve seen how you behave when Dran is around.” Rallandrí’s heavy brows were drawn together, shadowing his steely grey eyes, making him look even angrier, if that was possible. “I finally sent him back to Ellendrïa just to keep him out of your way. I only wish he’d stay there.” Rallandrí stared down at the white sand between his feet, obviously sorting out in his mind what he wished to say to me. After a long moment of silence, he brought his eyes up to mine again. “Look Eldarí, I’m not unsympathetic to what happened to you after Darriel died. You’re lucky to have survived at all. You’re also lucky that Dran is your *anÿncára*. Even after all that has happened, he still cares more for you than anything else in his life. I don’t know exactly what’s happened between you and Dran, but whatever it is, I want you to fix it. Now. Before Dran kills himself in some insane rescue mission.”

“I’m sorry.” Even as I spoke, I knew the words were trite, overused, meaningless. “I never meant to hurt him.”

Rallandrí’s gaze released me, and his eyes shifted their focus to a position somewhere over my right shoulder. His expression seemed to have the slightest trace of amusement. “Dran always was impossibly stubborn. I suspect you aren’t much different. Once he’d made up his mind about something, there was no stopping him until he’d convinced himself utterly that he was wrong.” Rallandrí’s eyes returned to mine. “If you don’t get this sorted out between you, I will personally come to Ellendrïa and force you to talk to each other until you start seeing some sense, even if I have to tie you both up to keep you in the same room.” Looking at Rallandrí, I could almost believe that he might be able to carry out his threat. Although shorter than I, he had broad, muscular shoulders and a barrel chest, indications of Gwÿrdrí blood in his heritage. Rallandrí sighed, rather dramatically. “Dran’s acting like a heart-broken hero, and you’re so worried about hurting him again that you’ll let him die from his own stupidity.” That pretty much summed the situation up. I dropped my head in acquiescence. Rallandrí put his hand on my

shoulder, shoving me gently towards the *Föalen*, “Go. Quickly.”

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I went as fast as the *Föalen* would take me, but I still had time to ponder the implications of the situation. Dran and I had been functioning in isolation for so many years that I simply took it for granted that he would look after himself, I would look after myself, and neither of us would get killed. Dran had always had such unbelievably good luck combined with a good deal of hard-earned skill that I never doubted his ability to survive, even in very difficult circumstances. He’d always been cognizant of the risks inherent in Guardian duties, and very conscientious at reducing them to the lowest possible level. Could my *deirfad* truly be acting like a “heart-broken hero”? Was he even capable of such behavior? Were some, or even all, of the tales I’d heard about him true? The thought that they might be made my skin prickle with fear. What if Dran was to get himself killed in some wild escapade? Worse, what if he really didn’t care about the risks anymore? I had just barely survived Darriel’s death. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that if my *deirfad* went to the beyond, I would be following him shortly thereafter.

Although it seemed to take much longer, in less than half a deciday I was landing the *Föalen* just outside our family’s dome on Ellendrïa. The white glowing orb of the sun was touching the western mountain peaks that formed one side of the wide valley in which the city of Dïarven was located. Orange bands were starting to streak across the sky in a prelude to sunset. Yellowish dust stirred up by my landing settled quickly back to the baked soil in the hot stillness. The dry air sucked at my lungs, the lower levels of oxygen making me feel momentary light-headed—that was always my first taste of coming home.

Dran’s ship was neatly parked in front of the dome, a short distance from where I’d set down. Unlike the *Föalen*, it looked much more like an atmospheric plane than a spaceship, with only two wings, swept sharply backward and downward, and a long tail fin. It was faster than the *Föalen*, but less maneuverable, and carried no armaments. It looked to be in good condition, but as I approached it more closely, I could see that the surface heat shielding on the front edges of the wings looked discolored, gleaming iridescently where the material had been slightly damaged. The ship had taken a lot of heat on those surfaces, as though the outer energy shields had nearly collapsed, pushing back against the ship’s hull. I touched the ship’s surface with my fingertips, but refused to allow my mind to speculate on how the damage had occurred.

In front of me, our dome rose opalescent in the rapidly fading light, like a strange outgrowth thrusting up from the barren soil. Through the nearly transparent material, I could see the green of gardens, grass, and orchards, and the small, low structure that was our home. I walked across the yellowish sand to the small, slightly out-jutting airlock, which formed the entrance into the dome. Next to it was a larger cargo door, but we seldom ever used it. Pressing my palm in a specific location beside the door, I activated the mechanism, which slid the door to one side, allowing me to enter the airlock. I stepped inside. With a hiss, the exterior door closed automatically behind me. I waited a few moments, then the inside door

opened. Moist air laden with the smell of living, growing things flooded my nostrils. I strode quickly inside, letting the airlock door swoosh shut behind me.

I was standing on the small, grassy meadow that led up to the house. It grew wild, with tiny white and blue flowers scattered amongst the blades of grass. A path of worn paving stones made its way from dome entrance to house front. Quickly, I strode along the familiar walkway. The scents in the air began to sort themselves out in my head—pungent herbs used for cooking from a small garden just below the front windows of the house, sweeter, more fragrant odors from pink and purple flowers hanging off vines along the east side of the house. The house itself was low and long, a single story made from blocks of yellowish sandstone, running in an east-west direction. The main entrance was in the center of the building, opening into a large common room where most of the family activities occurred. The west end of the building contained a number of smaller rooms, including several sleeping areas. The east end contained the large family sleeping room and the bathing, washing, and waste disposal facilities. Although I had traveled widely in the last eight years, this was the only home I'd every truly known.

As I opened the house door, an unpleasant smell assaulted my nostrils, making me feel a bit nauseous. Burnt flesh. But worse than that, it was underlain by the smell of putrefaction, of a wound in which infection was beginning to develop. My heart banging against my ribs in dread, I stepped into the darkened interior of the house, closing the door behind me. I didn't turn on the lights. I could still see quite well in the darkness, the retroreflective *tapetum lucidum*[41] layer behind the retina of my eyes providing me with excellent night vision. Heading straight toward the west wing corridor, I stopped at the room where Dran normally slept and gently slid the door open. Leaning through the door, I could clearly see that the room was undisturbed and empty. So where was he? The smell was distinctly stronger at this end of the house. On a guess, I quietly opened the door to the room where I usually stayed when I was home—yes, definitely the source of the stench. I could see a form sprawled untidily face down on the bunk under the window, and after a moment, movement. With a gleam of silver eyeshine, Dran turned his head towards me.

"Darí," he rasped softly, "what in the mythical fifteen hells of Vorÿn are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help you, Dran," I answered simply. And judging from my first impressions, he definitely needed some help.

"Don't need any." His voice, though hoarse and raspy, was firm enough. He might be sick, but he certainly wasn't dying, or at least not yet. He turned his head away from me, the stubborn set to his shoulders telling me that he considered the matter no longer under discussion.

Touching the switch panel where it was located by the door, I turned the lights on dimly. I wanted to be able to see Dran clearly, but I didn't want to blind his dark-adapted eyes. I took a few steps forward so that I was standing beside the bunk. He was lying face down with good reason—a black strip of burned flesh as wide as my palm ran from his right shoulder blade down to the lower left side of his rib cage.

The wound was relatively shallow—once again Dran had been lucky. Had the laser cut a little deeper, it would have sliced through backbone and rib cage, leaving him crippled and dying.

Dran's shirt had been fused into the wound by the intense heat of the laser. This was a serious problem. Our people have very robust immune systems. The positive side of this is that we seldom get sick from bacterial or viral infections. The negative side is that our bodies are highly reactive to any foreign materials entering the body. Dran's body was mounting an intense immunological battle against the extraneous matter that was now fused into the wound—parts of the burn were red and pus-filled. He was obviously feverish. I could see that he was flushed, and his hair was plastered down where he'd been sweating. The pus and dead tissue made an excellent growth medium for bacteria, thus generating an infection and producing much of the odor that I had detected when I'd entered the house. While the infection was hardly likely to be life-threatening, as Dran's immune system would prevent it from spreading beyond the wound, it added to the stress load on his body. Dran had clearly been struggling to get his shirt off. I could see that the burn was torn and bloodied along his rib cage where his efforts had caused more damage. But at some point, exhausted, feverish, and in pain, he had simply given up and collapsed across the bunk.

It was interesting that Dran had chosen my room in which to collapse. This told me another part of the story, one that caused me more grief than seeing him lying there in pain. Hurt, alone, and seeking whatever little solace he could find, he had come to the place where sight and smell would remind him of me. Thus, his memories of me had served him when I could not.

With an effort, I pushed guilt and self-hatred away. I could follow that path again, Dran could run from me again, and we would be right back where we'd begun this terrible cycle. Conversely, I could get on with helping Dran—the burn needed to be cleaned thoroughly, but afterwards, I could heal it quite easily. This was not a particularly serious injury, as long as it was dealt with promptly.

I sat down on the bunk beside Dran, gently laying my hand on his head. He stirred slightly, mumbling, "Go away. Go back to your duties." His words stung, but I was expecting as much.

"Why are you doing this to yourself? Why are you acting so crazy?" I could feel the heat of his fever through my fingers. I wondered whether he was delirious or not.

"I'm not being crazy. I'm doing something that needs to be done," his voice was passionate. At least he believed that he was doing a good thing.

"And what if you get killed?" I asked the question that had been boring through my brain.

"I won't. I seem to be cursed with good luck," Dran made a cynical snort. "And if I do? Lots of Guardians get killed these days. What's one more?" Dran's words had a darkness that chilled me.

"Just what exactly do you mean by that?" I demanded.

Dran was quiet, breathing softly, but I could sense the pain and tension in him. After a while, he replied in a low voice, “Look, Darí, you know as well as I that our planet’s dying, our people are going extinct, and there are only a few Guardians left. I can’t see much worth living for when the last Guardian lays down eir Star.”

“But you’re my *deirfad*, my *anÿncára*,” I was shocked that Dran seemed to think that his actions would have no impact on me. This was not the Dran I remembered, the older *deirfad* who always looked out for me.

“Really?” Dran sighed, sounding tired. “We’re not *anÿncára* anymore. We haven’t been for years. You’re free to go. There’s nothing holding you to me now.” There was a sense of pain and loss in his voice that reminded me harshly of how I’d felt after Darriel had died. I didn’t want to go through that again. As I looked at Dran, I felt a flood of fierce determination fill me, determination to prevent my *deirfad* from seeking the beyond before it was truly his time.

“Is that what you think?” I snapped angrily at Dran. I found it hard to believe that he somehow couldn’t feel our bond, that he’d completely blocked himself away from it.

“Yes,” he replied, turning his head towards me again. “Don’t you?”

“No.” I moved my hands so that I had one on each side of Dran’s face, holding his head so that he couldn’t turn away, looking into his eyes. I wanted him to see the truth in my mind, but his grey eyes were hard, shuttered. I knew he wasn’t willing to make contact. Taking a slow breath, I brought my frustration under control. “Look, I’m going to clean the burn on your back. If someone doesn’t do that, you’re going to be seriously ill.” As if he wasn’t already. “It’s going to hurt. I’d prefer that you don’t play at being heroic and pass out on me. I want to be able to go into your mind and block the pain. I need you to release your shields.” I was trying to be clear and rational, hoping that he would agree without any further struggle.

Dran’s eyes went out of focus for a few moments. He seemed to be struggling with something, then he shook his head, “I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” I asked sharply.

“Can’t,” he shook his head again. Why was he so determined to be difficult?

Feeling my anger starting to rise up in response to Dran’s persistent lack of cooperation, I frowned at him intensely. There were shadows under his eyes. He looked exhausted, but at the same time, I could feel a faint vibration of tension. He was edgy and over-tired, wound up from pushing too hard. It was possible that he was just too uptight to let go and relax his shields. In that case, I wouldn’t be able to do much until he collapsed from exhaustion or illness, or I forced his shields, or … I thought for a while. Forcing his shields would be akin to psychic rape. I had absolutely no desire to inflict that upon him after

everything else I'd done. But there might be some *tírath* in the house … I got up and went over to a small cabinet in the corner of the room. The drawers held a miscellaneous selection of medical supplies that I kept at our home. After a bit of searching, I found a small red vial with tiny writing on the side. *Tírath* is a drug used to enhance telepathic contact, generally by removing any barriers or shields that might be in place. It's occasionally used in situations like Dran's, where a person is too emotionally or mentally over strung to relax, but it also has a bad reputation as a drug used in interrogations. However, it might just be what I needed right now to work on Dran's burn … and there was the faint possibility that it might help me deal with the larger issue of our relationship.

I went out to the common room, where I found a pitcher and a cup. I filled the pitcher with cool water, then brought both items back to my room. Once there, I added a drop of *tírath* to the cup. Filling it with water, I placed both it and the pitcher on a small inset shelf above the head of the bed. Sitting on the bunk next to Dran, I gently lifted his upper body, rolling him a little so that his shoulder was leaning against my side. Steadying him with my right arm, I was able to grab the cup and offer it to him with my other hand. I thought he might fight me, given his dark mood, but he was strangely passive. I could see that he was thirsty—dehydrated from the fever and loss of plasma seeping from the burn. He also knew the water was drugged. Looking at me, he raised an eyebrow. If I hadn't been feeling so miserable, I could almost have laughed. I did try to smile a little at him. "It's *tírath*," I told him. He would, with a Healer's training, know what I intended. He studied me again, didn't say anything, but took the cup from my hands and drank thirstily. I offered him a second cup of water, which he accepted gratefully. I left him resting while the *tírath* took effect, spending a few moments gathering the supplies that I would need—my surgical tools, a bowl of warm water and some sterile wipes for cleaning the wound.

By the time I got back to Dran, he had a slightly wide-eyed, wild look. I knew the *tírath* had made an impact. I sat next to him, and stroked his hair, trying to calm him. I've never been given *tírath*, but I could tell by Dran's expression that losing control over your shields was a frightening experience. However, for the first time in a very long time, Dran's mind opened up to me. Gradually, as his barriers faded away, I could feel the connection between us grow stronger. At first, Dran didn't seem to notice; he was still struggling with fear. Then he made a little strangled sound, rolled on his side, curling up like he was in pain. I was completely surprised by his reaction. I let myself sink deeply into our bond so that I could sense what was wrong. Dran twitched and moaned a bit, but I couldn't see anything amiss with the bond itself, or anything particularly wrong with Dran beyond the obvious laser burn and exhaustion.

"Does it hurt that much?" I must be doing something awful to Dran again, for him to be in such pain. I couldn't remember our *anÿncára* bond ever hurting him like that before.

"No," his voice sounded strangled. "No, it doesn't hurt."

"Then what's wrong, Dran? What have I done to you?"

"I thought it was gone," he answered hoarsely, then muttered, "It would've been better that way." He

was quiet for a bit, then finally said, very softly, “I know you don’t want to be with me.” As he said it, I could see in his mind the years when he’d been there for me, and I had just walked away from him. How do you explain actions like that? How do you justify yourself? I know I had been lost in my own misery, but I had had no right or cause hurting Dran like that. I found myself wishing desperately that Dran hadn’t been so gentle with me. Instead of stepping aside every time I blundered past him, blind in my own pain, he should have stopped me, forced me to come out of my shell and face our reality. Now maybe it was too late.

“Dran, I know what you think, but it really isn’t that way,” I had to try, at least. “I’ve been terrible to you, and I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to hurt you. I wasn’t trying to drive you away. I just didn’t know how to stop the pain,” I knew I was babbling, probably wasting my energy. I took a deep, calming breath, trying to focus on what I needed to do. “Just let me help you today. You can make up your mind about me tomorrow.”

I felt Dran tremble under my hands, but he seemed to make some sort of decision. Slowly, I felt him force his muscles to relax. He straightened out and rolled face down again. “Heal it then, if you will,” he said softly, and that was the last thing he said to me that night.

I gently reached into Dran’s mind, into his pain center, that region of the insular cortex where pain messages from the body are received and acted upon. Here, a trained Healer can place a temporary block, which prevents the pain from being detected. I felt Dran relax more completely as the intense sensory nerve impulses from his back no longer seared through his mind. Now, I could do the messy business of cleaning and debridement. And messy it was. I cut his shirt off to get at the wound, then carefully removed all the foreign material and dead tissue from the burn. It took a long time. Even with the pain blocked, I could still feel Dran twitch reflexively when I had to cut more deeply into his back. But eventually there remained only healthy tissue. The wound bled slightly, but I was able to control that without much difficulty. All through the procedure, Dran said nothing, but remained pliant and didn’t fight me.

Holding my Star in my right hand, I settled myself cross-legged at the top of the bunk next to Dran’s head, leaning against the wall, with my left hand resting lightly on his head. I breathed slowly and deeply, clearing my thoughts. Then I closed my eyes and sank gently into a healing trance. My focus was entirely on Dran, my mind sinking deeply into his body, seeking out the injured tissues that needed to be repaired. Healing uses a combination of empathy, psychokinesis, and energy manipulation to detect damage and encourage the body to heal itself. I visualized the muscle, nerve, and skin tissues that must be regenerated, then stimulated the healthy cells in the region around the burn to rapidly differentiate, divide and grow. My mental image of the body in an undamaged state formed the scaffold upon which the newly formed cells were arranged to create muscle fibers, skin layers, and nerves, thus replacing those that had been destroyed. A skilled Healer can completely regenerate tissues and damaged organs, leaving neither scar tissue nor other evidence of the injury. The only limitations are the amount of energy available to the Healer, and the patient’s reserves of metabolites from which to create new

tissues. Given a reasonably fit patient, I could accomplish some relatively impressive things using a Guardian's Star.

It took much less time to heal the burn than it did to clean it. When I opened my eyes again, I could see that the only remaining sign of the wound on Dran's back was a brighter pink strip of new skin. In a week or two, the pink color would fade, and the skin in the burn area would be indistinguishable from the rest of the skin on his body. Dran was breathing slowly and steadily, his eyes closed, but I knew he was still awake. Under my hand, I could feel that his skin was cool, and the fever was gone. He was trembling a little bit. I thought he might be slightly in shock from the effects of the injury and the drug I'd given him. The *tírath* was starting to wear off—while I still had the chance, before he could erect his shields, I did a quick scan of his entire body, looking for hidden injuries that I might have missed. He twitched slightly as I started, but stayed still. While I didn't detect anything especially problematic, I could see how hard he'd been pushing his body, feel his exhaustion from overworking. Dran and I have the same build. As active Guardians, we should have had about the same level of fitness and strength. In the past, this was probably true, but looking at Dran now, I could see that he had trained his body to a fine edge. His lean muscles were hard knotted cords, clearly defined along his shoulders, arms, and back. I suspected that he was easily stronger, and probably quicker, than I was. However, what really concerned me was his total lack of body fat. I had a feeling that not only was he working too hard, he also wasn't eating well enough to keep up with his energy expenditures. A person's body can only take abuse like that for so long …

I had done all I could do for now. I unfolded myself and slipped off the bunk. Dran shifted a little, but remained quiet, still sprawled across the bunk. I took a moment to pull off his boots and push him more securely onto the bed. Now what? I turned to go, maybe to sleep in Dran's room or in the common area. But this was my room. Dran had come here, consciously or subconsciously, seeking what? A memory? A hope? Not sure that it was the right thing to do, but willing to try anyway, I kicked off my boots and pulled my shirt over my head, tossing them in a corner where they were out of the way. The bunk was wide, wide enough for two—it had been used by the two of us together more than a few times during our childhood.

I slid beside Dran on the bed. He was still shaking slightly and felt a little cold. I wrapped my arms around him, bringing our bodies closer together, my chest against his back. He jerked again as I touched him, as though hit by a spark of electricity, but didn't complain or push me away. His shields were still down, although I thought he could close me out now if he wanted to. I opened my mind and heart up to him, felt our connection draw us together, make us one. I was tired. The warmth of our soul union lulled me to sleep, even as I felt Dran still trembling quietly against my body.

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Sometime later in the night, I was awakened by Dran shuddering silently in my arms, crying noiselessly. His thoughts were a chaotic jumble of emotions—pain, frustration, fear, hope, and underneath

everything else, despairing love. I remembered when he'd cried long ago, on that day I'd healed him after Rallandrí had sent him home to me from Davandrïa; how I'd tried to convince him to stay and how he'd tried to explain why he couldn't. At the end, even though we had no resolution to our dilemma, he had given his love unconditionally to me. That was all I could do now, and so I held him until he cried himself into an exhausted sleep.

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The warm yellow light of the early morning sun shining obliquely through the window gradually woke me up. I was relaxed and happy, more than I'd been in a long, long while. At first my half-asleep mind couldn't quite figure out why. Then, I realized that Dran was still in my arms, sleeping peacefully. His face was relaxed, the expressive eyebrows forming lazy arches. His muscular body, beautiful in an austerely athletic way, rested bonelessly against my chest. I knew his barriers were still down as I could hear his mind wandering through pleasant dreams. I stayed very still, not wanting to wake him, not wanting to end this fragile moment of peace in our lives. However, like many good things, it wasn't meant to last long. I don't know what woke him, but with a jerk, Dran went from being completely asleep to being wide awake. I was afraid that he was going to start fighting in my arms, but although his entire body went tense for a moment, he gradually relaxed again.

I could tell that Dran was thinking; could hear the surface thoughts in his mind. He was sorting through the events of yesterday, pulling himself together, trying to decide what to do. While all telepaths normally shield their thoughts from each other, the degree of this shielding varies depending on the person and the situation. Most telepaths shield their deeper thoughts and emotions, but keep surface "channels" open for telepathic communication with others. However, when a telepath feels threatened, they can completely barrier themselves. This was more or less the state that Dran was in last night, a condition brought on by stress, exhaustion, and physical and emotional pain. Today, I could see he was bringing his normal shields back into service, making choices about what he was willing to share and what he was not. Most importantly, as far as I was concerned, he was trying to decide how to handle the link between us. The bond between *anÿncára* is special—it's a unique bidirectional link between two people over which an entire range of thoughts, emotions, and even physical feelings, can be shared. It's much harder to control or block than other lines of telepathic communication, although clearly Dran was very good at doing what was normally considered impossible. I was waiting for the shutter to be slammed on the window that was now open between us. But strangely enough, Dran didn't lock me out. In his mind, I could sense a mix of fear, hope, and a willingness to see what could come of the situation.

Gradually, I became aware of another sensation—hunger. I had expended a lot of energy last night. Even though my Star had provided the bulk of the energy used in the healing, it was still necessary to control and guide that energy, and this had depleted my reserves. My body was demanding, rather insistently, that I do something about this. I suspected that Dran wasn't in much better shape—whatever mission he'd been on had probably demanded a great deal from him. I was pretty sure he hadn't eaten anything since he'd been injured.

“Hungry,” I mumbled in his ear. “Going to find something to eat. Want something?”

“Hmmph,” Dran responded, but started to roll onto his back. I slid off the bunk, grabbing my shirt from the pile in the corner.

I headed to the common room, on the prowl for something quick to eat. A food preparation area was located on the west side of the common room. Provisioned with a small vacuum cooling unit, powered by the dome’s solar panels and used for the storage of fresh food, an open flame cooker utilizing methane generated by our composter, a working surface, and various storage units for non-perishable supplies, it was similar to many I’d seen on planets throughout the Ll’Ellendrÿn. I immediately went to the cooler, quickly finding something to my liking—eggs, a round loaf made from ground grains, some soft cheese, a spread made from last year’s fruit. Both Kÿrrÿl and Farrwÿn tended to keep track of Dran’s comings and goings. Usually, one or the other would make sure that there was food in the house. Since Guardian work frequently demands much time and energy, our community always ensures that Guardians are supplied with whatever they require for a reasonable existence. Kÿrrÿl, our *ïdrÿlad*, usually determined what we needed, then made sure that it was available when we needed it. In addition, our food was partially provided through an exchange system. Long ago, our parents had planted an orchard in our dome—this now produced much more fruit than the family could consume. We shared some of this fruit, receiving other items in return, such as milk, cheese, and meat from a friend’s herd of *dervids*[42], and eggs from another friend’s flock of *chakars*[43]. So I was lucky.

The eggs I tossed into a pot of water, which I set to boiling on the cooker. Then I began to work on the loaf with my knife, carving it into slabs. About this time, Dran appeared, having found a clean shirt. Although he seemed a little indifferent, he picked up a slab of the loaf and smeared it with cheese when I indicated that it was my intent to share the meal with him. Possibly seeing my hunger encouraged him to eat—he certainly looked half-starved. After a while, I found the herb supply, and made up some tea to go with our meal. The next little while was spent in near silence as we intently consumed a goodly quantity of food—Guardians are rather renowned for their appetites.

We didn’t talk much that morning. I think we were both in a state of shock over the whole situation. I didn’t push Dran. He had good reasons for being reticent. I wasn’t sure that any explanations I could provide would improve the situation.

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Late afternoon found me in the grassy area behind our house. As at the front of the house, the grass was much more a meadow than a carefully cultivated lawn, ensuring that many wildflowers and native plants could survive. Although there were no large predators or grazers in the dome, there was a great deal of smaller native wildlife. Most families tried to preserve some of Ellendrïa’s plants and animals within their domes. Like us, they too were doomed to extinction when the sun finally scorched the planet into a dust ball. Many of Ellendrïa’s larger species were preserved in gene banks, possibly to be

salvaged from the brink of extinction if we ever decided to colonize a new planet.

Regardless of the planet I'm on, I always enjoy being outside in natural settings. On Ellendrïa, this meadow was just about as close to natural as one could come, although there were a few game preserves in some of the larger domes. I'd spent many hours of my childhood in this meadow, examining plants, exploring game tunnels through the tall grasses, catching the odd misfortunate small animal, which would then have to endure my inquisitive nature before being released. Today, however, I was trying to relax by going through a familiar routine. The work that Guardians do tends to be very demanding at times. It's important to keep in good physical shape. Therefore, most Guardians have several workout routines that they use, depending on the environment in which they find themselves, to maintain their fitness. Since I had the freedom of a good-sized meadow, I was using a pattern that started with some gentle warm up exercises, but ultimately got to some pretty challenging and active maneuvers. The activity was good for my mind, and the familiarity of the various movements soothed my nerves and brought some degree of calm.

In the center of the meadow was a small garden pond, the home of a number of water birds and various water plants. It had also been well used as a swimming hole by two young children. I still swam in it when I had a chance to come home, now that I could tolerate coming back to Ellendrïa regularly. Taking off my pants, shirt and underwear, I stood on the low rock wall that formed the edge of the pond. The pool was shallow—my head was just above the surface when I was standing on the bottom—but it was possible to dive into it, as long as you didn't dive too deeply. And that's what I did—enjoying the sudden coolness of the water on my skin, then swimming underwater until I'd reached the far side. There were a few large rocks on the bottom there where you could sit and still keep your head out of the water. The water was a comfortable temperature, more tepid than cold. It was possible to lounge around on the rocks for a good while before getting chilled. The water was also clear and clean, thanks to an efficient filter system.

I'd been sitting in the water for a little while when I looked up and saw Dran at the pond's edge opposite me. He looked hot and sweaty, like he'd been doing something similar to what I'd been up to, or possibly working in the gardens.

"Don't just stand there, jump in!" I called out. It was obvious that he too had been using the pond regularly as a place to cool off from the sun's heat.

Although I know from my travels that many cultures have some rather strange, even bizarre, taboos around the human body and nakedness, Ellendrí don't generally have any particular concerns over nudity, especially amongst family members. Telepaths can be quite reserved with strangers, but we are very close within our families where physical contact is the norm rather than the exception. In the past, I would not have expected Dran to be inhibited from joining me in the pool by either our nudity or the possibility of physical contact. However, now he exhibited an unusual shyness, which I attributed to the current state, or rather non-state, of our relationship. Finally, after some hesitation, he undressed,

balancing on the rock wall, lean, muscular body making a silhouette against the brighter background. In a fluid, graceful move, he dove, disappearing in the shallow water.

With the angle of the sun, I couldn't see Dran swimming underwater. I waited for him to surface somewhere in the pond, but he seemed to be taking a very long time down there. How long could he hold his breath? I was beginning to wonder if I needed to search for him, when I felt something tug at my ankle. Then, like a great sea monster, he surfaced next to me, pond weed draped over his head and shoulders, spraying me with water. He was laughing. My heart leaped at the sight—I hadn't seen Dran laugh in years. I sluiced my hand through the water, splashing him in the face. He responded by grabbing my arm and dragging me off my rocky perch. Suddenly, it was like the weight of years had been lifted off us—two adults tussling in a pool, playfully trying to drown each other like a couple of rambunctious children. Although Dran was definitely stronger than I, he didn't quite succeed in totally dunking me. I got in one or two good tricks of my own. When we both finally started tiring of the fun, Dran picked me up, heaved me over his shoulder, and without a great deal of effort, climbed up over the pool's rock wall and dumped me on the meadow grass. After he flopped down beside me, we both panted quietly, lying on our backs in the warm sun, drying off, but not saying anything.

A long time passed. I was half-asleep in the sun when I felt Dran's hand gently touch my shoulder. His fingers were very light and tentative, just a hint of a touch. I could feel a similar sensation in my mind. It had been a very long time since Dran had made any attempt to connect with me—even the events of the past night had all been initiated by me—so I stayed very still, keeping my mind and emotions wide open to him. I felt the gentle feathery caress of a highly skilled telepath, carefully tracing along that which held us together. At first, he lightly investigated the surface of our connection, staying shallow, exploring its extent, but suddenly, without warning, his mind dove into the depths of the powerful bond between us. I trembled slightly. It wasn't painful, but unexpected. I continued to stay as open to him as I could. It was important to me that Dran see completely all that I was—the scars left behind by the loss of Darriel, the total commitment of my love for him, the nature of my very being. After a while, he gradually returned to the surface levels of our bond, leaving us open and connected, but with the bond quiescent, momentarily stilled.

Dran sighed, rolled over onto his stomach, putting his head in his hands. "What are we going to do?" he groaned.

I countered, "What do you want to do?" I rolled over and put my hand on his upper arm, wanting the contact to help me sense clearly what was going through his mind.

Dran was quiet, apparently thinking how best to answer. Finally, he said, "I want to do the right thing, for both of us. I just don't know what that is."

Neither did I, but we'd certainly managed to do a lot of the wrong things in our lives. After I'd pondered on this a bit, I spoke slowly, "Long ago, before Darriel and I became *anÿncára*, I'd wanted us to

announce our relationship publicly." I paused, staring at the meadow grass, watching a small insect climb nimbly up the stem of a tiny white daisy. "I still want that. If we don't, our relationship will always come second to everything else in our lives."

"What if you meet another Darriel?" I could feel the fear in Dran's mind. Twice rejected, he didn't trust me not to do it again. Fair enough, I was condemned by my own actions.

Although I knew there was no simple way to engender trust, I did my best. "I will never let anyone come before you in my heart. Never." I looked at Dran directly, "Even Darriel didn't. If she had, I would've died with her. Only you had the power to hold me here," I mulled over what I'd said, then added, "We've always kept our bond private, so other people didn't see what we really were. If we're not regarded as *anÿncára*, we'll always be expected to do things that make us push our relationship to the back of our lives, rather than respect and value it as we should." Dran was looking at me steadily, but I didn't think I was having much impact. Finally, I added, "I doubt that I would ever meet someone like Darriel again, but should it happen, ey would have to accept our *anÿncára* bond as it is, and learn to live with us rather than try to change us."

Dran's grey eyes looked distant—he was remembering how things had been. "Hmmph," he snorted softly.

It occurred to me then that I was making a bit of an assumption. It hurt to think that maybe what I wanted was completely at odds with what Dran wished to do with his life. "Dran, do you want to be my *sïathcára*, or would you prefer that we just keep living our lives separate as we have for so long?"

At this, Dran smiled gently. "I've never wanted anything else but to be at your side. It just hasn't happened, and I'm not sure that it will."

Another thought came to my mind, "All those insane stories that I keep hearing about you—are they true? I saw the heat damage on your ship when I arrived yesterday. Did you actually try to drive a Cultaní raider off by threatening to ram it?"

Dran smiled a bit more broadly, and there was an audacious gleam in his eyes, "I guess that depends on which story you heard and who was telling it." He laughed. "I did charge the Cultaní ship, but I knew they were going to run."

"You saw it?" I asked, wondering just how strong his *turas* really was.

"More or less …"

"You're lucky they didn't burn your shields out first."

Dran laughed again, giving me a gentle shove. There were some changes in my *deirfad* that I was going to have to get used to.

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We spent the next 15 days together—the longest we'd been in the same place at the same time since I'd become a Guardian. At first, I thought that Dran might resume his work as Recorder for the Elder Council, although this was hardly a full-time occupation. Instead, he asked Kÿrrÿl to arrange for someone else to temporarily look after this duty, on the grounds that he was taking some time off to recover from a difficult mission. True enough, but totally out of character for Dran. Kÿrrÿl easily saw through it. He did, however, comply with Dran's request, making a muttered comment of "About time the two of you stopped tearing each other apart."

Dran was, for the most part, the same person I remembered from our youth. We were very alike in many ways—more introverted than extroverted, intensely curious, always interested in learning new things, active, playful at times and deeply thoughtful at others, with a quiet sense of humor bordering on cynical. However, in other ways, we'd grown apart. Dran had an internal strength that seemed to solidly anchor him, making him equally very powerful and very stubborn. He relied heavily on his inner senses to keep him safe, and took much greater risks than the *deirfad* I once remembered. And he was moodier, with darker depths and thoughts that ran in deep currents. He was often hard to read, sometimes difficult to comprehend. However, we seemed to get along well enough. I had some hope that things might go better for us. But we never discussed the future.

Farrwÿn visited us several times over that period. He was a good friend to us both. We spent long hours catching up on each other's lives, discussing some of the serious problems facing our people. Farrwÿn foresaw more that he would talk about, but that had always been the case. Dran and I knew not to push him for more answers that he was willing to give.

Eventually, I contacted Rallandrí, explaining all that had happened while I'd been on Ellendrïa. I think he was satisfied that Dran and I had managed to work out some peaceable arrangement between us. I had the distinct impression that he would have preferred to leave us alone for a while longer. However, the universe outside our dome was moving forward, and there were far too few Guardians left to carry out our duties to the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Reluctantly, he recalled me back to Lorril to continue my mission there.

Farrwÿn visited us on the evening before my impending departure. At some point, Dran had wandered out of the house on some errand for a few minutes, leaving Farrwÿn and I alone for a while. I'd been quiet during the evening, thinking about the Cultaní raiders, my work in setting up the Border Patrol, and the fact that Dran and I had not come to any particular resolution about how we wanted to continue with our lives. Looking up from my thoughts, I noticed that Farrwÿn was watching me intently, his head cocked to one side, clearly trying to decide whether he should interrupt my reverie. Finally, he said softly, "You'll be together soon. Dran will come to you when he's ready."

"Do you see that, or are you just trying to make me feel less depressed?" I challenged in return.

Farrwÿn smiled, the tawny streaks in his dark, shoulder-length hair catching the last of the evening's sun

as it shone through the common room windows. His smoky-grey eyes had that luminous quality I'd come to recognize meant that he was seeing something outside the present moment. "I've seen it."

"When?"

"Before the year is over." A gentle thump of a door sliding shut announced Dran's return. Farrwÿn's eyes lost their otherworldliness, and we once again became three friends discussing the woes of our world.

Chapter 5: Decisions Made

Farrwÿn—Date: 8936.112

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

I woke with a jerk, breathing heavily, trickles of sweat running down my chest. A quick glance out the windows told me that it was still many hours before dawn, but I knew from experience that I wouldn't be getting any more sleep tonight. I lurched out of bed and stumbled into the washroom, poured some water into a basin, and splashed it on my face and upper body. This had the effect of ensuring that I was awake, although it didn't do much for my confusion. I washed up a little more thoroughly, searched around to find the tunic that I'd tossed aside last night, and sat on the bed, waiting for the effects of the dream, or more truthfully, nightmare to wear off.

This dream has been recurrent since I was a child. It has always been exactly the same. At the beginning of the dream, I'm climbing up a narrow, twisting path, through a forest of odd looking trees, carrying someone in my arms. It's one of those dreams where I know that I'm myself, but at the same time, I'm different. For one thing, I'm stronger—the person I'm carrying is an adult, a tall, muscular one at that. And I'm a Guardian—I can feel the weight of the Star heavy on my chest as I'm panting up the hill. My name—sometimes it eludes me in the dream, but tonight it was clear and sharp in my mind—is Killarÿn of House Seabÿn. The person I'm carrying is Danaldrí of House Föalen, *ïdrÿlad* of my *anÿncára*, Turien, also of House Föalen. All three of us are Guardians, working together on a mission. Even though the dream always starts in the middle of the story, it brings with it memories of how the adventure began.

We'd been sent by the Elder Council to determine the whereabouts and activities of a person named Drÿfoch, a genetic engineer involved in some of the worst of the Genomic Enhancement atrocities. Originally, he'd been exiled from Ellendrïa, the Elders believing that this was sufficient punishment. However, further information about Drÿfoch had surfaced, suggesting that not only had he used genetic engineering to modify his own genome to the point where he might have the most powerful psi talents ever seen on Ellendrïa, but also that he'd been working on techniques for employing these abilities without the use of a *ferrïl*. It was believed that the Ellendorí were once masters of these techniques, but they had long been lost to the Ellendrí. This knowledge, in combination with Drÿfoch's known opportunistic, self-serving, and potentially malicious behavior, led the Elders to fear that Drÿfoch might still be very dangerous, even in exile.

The three of us had been nearly a year trying to find where Drÿfoch had disappeared—the trail was old by the time we started looking, and he had taken some effort to hide his whereabouts. Finally, having found no traces of Drÿfoch on any of the colonies in the First and Second Arcs, we turned our attention to the few colonized planets of the Third Arc. The planet we were on when the dream starts is called Erystarí, a pleasant place with lots of forests and mountains, and a fair bit of tectonic activity. Volcanic cones are common. In fact, it's a trail up the side of an old, extinct volcano that I'm climbing at the

beginning of the dream.

The inhabitants of Erystarí are primitive, barely at an Iron Age level. Like all of us, they are descendants of the Ellendorí, but they no longer remember where they came from or who they are. They have legends that refer to the “Star People”, powerful beings that come from the heavens, but no longer realize that they themselves are “Star People”. It isn’t our place to disrupt their beliefs and try to re-establish contact with this “lost” colony, so we moved amongst them disguised as traveling traders from a distant region, hoping that this guise would excuse our slight accents and lack of local knowledge. Their language, strangely enough, is a very pure form of what we believe is Ellendorí, and not too different from the Ellendrí that we speak. This was immensely helpful.

When we’d arrived on Erystarí, we found that one village was particularly agitated by the arrival of what they referred to as the “Death-Bringers”—foreign invaders of their lands who had killed a number of their village members without provocation, or so they claimed. Since this was just the type of lead we were looking for, it justified further investigation. Some discrete aerial surveillance located a small compound, not far from the troubled village, with some very recent looking architecture and several spaceships. If not Drÿfoch, at least this must be a group from one of the First Arc worlds. And if it was Drÿfoch, he must have regrouped with a few other exiled Ellendrí.

We were naive and foolish, not really expecting trouble. The three of us were still young in the service of the Guardians, having barely seen five years of duty. We had decided to split up and observe the compound from three different perspectives, in the hopes of quickly determining the nature of the situation. We thought we’d been clandestine, stealthy and unseen—in fact the observers had been observed.

Our first sign of trouble was a mental scream of agony from Danaldrí. Stalked by a hidden watcher, he’d been hit by a laser. Although in intense pain, he’d managed to bring his assailant down, but wasn’t sure he could make it unassisted back to our ship. I reached out to Turien, who assured me that he was still well hidden and not in any danger, then went to help Danaldrí, as I was much closer to him than Turien was.

The vegetation was thick and tropical, with lots of ferns in the undergrowth and a heavy canopy consisting of trees of varying heights—good cover if you needed to move without being seen. Forewarned by what had happened to Danaldrí, I was extremely cautious, sliding softly through the massive greenery, trying to move as silently as possible and keeping my thoughts guarded lest they give my position away. I heard a faint crackling noise and froze, ready to use my Star if necessary. The ferns parted a few feet away, and I relaxed slightly as I saw Danaldrí slip quietly out. I whistled a low trill, the call of a bird that lives on Ellendrïa. Danaldrí turned quickly towards me. He didn’t look very good—pale, and I could see he wasn’t too steady. At least he was still on his feet, clearly heading back to our ship. In a couple of steps, I was beside him. He was more than happy to see me, gladly leaning against me when I put a hand around his waist to steady him.

Danaldrí, Turien, and I go back a long ways. We grew up together, being more or less the same age. When Danaldrí decided to become a Guardian, it seemed natural that Turien and I should follow. While Danaldrí isn't *anÿncára* to either of us, he's been a lifelong friend and companion, our *avángri*. The three of us have been working together ever since we joined the Guardians. Seeing him now, I was gravely worried. I could see the laser burn on his tunic and hear his labored breathing, so I knew he was seriously wounded. Turien was the Healer amongst us. There was little I could do for Danaldrí. If I could get him back to the ship, Turien would be able to help him. Turien knew what I had observed—our link was deep and strong, and thoughts passed quickly between us. Already he was returning to the ship.

Danaldrí and I were able to make it back without being seen; however, by the time we got to our ship, I knew we had more problems to deal with. There was a group of armed sentries, quite likely Ellendrí, blocking Turien's route. He'd been unable to get past them. Although he didn't think he'd been seen yet, he wasn't sure he was going to be able to meet us there. Danaldrí was quickly weakening. I didn't think he was going to last much longer without help. We had a small portable stasis unit in the ship—I thought about placing Danaldrí in stasis until Turien could make his way back. Unfortunately, the ship was too visible—we'd be an easy target as we waited for Turien. I could use the ship's electromagnetic shields to protect us for a time, but this group was armed with lasers. Persistent laser fire would eventually exhaust the ship's energy stores. Then we'd be trapped. Danaldrí sat exhaustedly outside the ship, while I went in and quickly put the stasis unit into a pack. I needed to find some hidden spot where Danaldrí would be safe until the three of us could rejoin.

And this is where the dream starts. Not far from the ship is one of the many volcanic cones that are scattered like pimples across this planet's surface. It's an old cone, covered with lush forest, and there are game trails winding up its sides. I'm hoping there will be some old lava tubes or cave formations—someplace out of the way and hidden. Danaldrí has collapsed, and I'm carrying him in my arms. He's heavy, but my family lineage contains Gwÿrdrí blood, so I'm taller and broader than most Ellendrí. I've had to face a bit of discrimination from some of the more purist-minded of our people; however, today I'm thankful that I have the strength to carry Danaldrí. The trail is narrow and faint, and often I force my way through thick vegetation. I worry about being followed, but don't sense anyone on our trail yet.

Glimpses of a red rocky bluff are revealed through breaks in the vegetation. I take a fork in the trail that leads me closer to them. As I get nearer, I can see that the cliff is pockmarked with caves, some big, some small. Is it good luck, or a touch of *turas*? I don't know, but I am relieved. I find a larger, easy to reach cave at the base of the rock wall—it's conveniently screened by masses of ferns. Shouldering my way in, I lay Danaldrí on the cave floor. Fortunately, it seems unoccupied. In an attempt to keep Danaldrí warm, I place a thermal blanket underneath him to protect him from the cold stone, and cover him with another one. Emptying my pack, I fold it up and place it under his head as a pillow. Then I quickly get to work setting up the stasis unit. Scrambling up the cliff to a smaller, open cave, I unfold and discretely place the panel that powers the unit by collecting solar energy. Hopefully, it will remain unnoticed.

Carefully unrolling the thin power line from the panel, I disguise it as much as I can amongst the rock and moss as I climb down. Then I'm back with Danaldrí. He's still conscious, although barely, and knows what I'm doing.

"Find Turien," his voice is weak, just a whisper. He has pulled his Star free from his tunic, grasping it in his right hand. Using the energy generated by the *durrïls* of his Star, I know he will try to hold on as long as he can.

"I will," I smile reassuringly at him. "I'll be back soon. You'll hardly know I've gone." I touch the panel on top of the small grey box that is the main control for the stasis unit. Four small cubes, placed in a rectangle around Danaldrí's body, start glowing. A translucent, silvery bubble forms around them, completely encompassing Danaldrí. This bubble forms a micro-universe in which certain laws of physics operate differently than in our local brane[44]—specifically, time passes much more slowly within the stasis unit's gravitational field. Danaldrí doesn't have much time left, but the stasis field can keep him alive for many years, making each of his seconds last for hours or even days. In the meanwhile, I will reach Turien.

It may have been foresight that led me to the cave, and it may be foresight now that is making my heart clamp with terror. Whatever it is, I am running from the cave, back down the twisting jungle path, afraid that something terrible will happen. I'm no longer concerned about being seen. I need to get to Turien fast. When his mind send tells me that he is surrounded, that the compound's guards are closing in on him, and that he fears he will have to fight, I'm still too far away. I know when he starts to use his Star—my body resonates with the power he is channeling. The first time his defensive shield is nearly blasted away, the force of it shakes me. But he's fast, back on his feet, shielding for the next strike. His opponent is hurling massive amounts of raw energy at him, trying to burn through the shield that Turien is creating using the *ferrïls* and *durrïls* of his Star. I sense strike after strike, Turien staggering under the impact of the energy against his shield. He's weakening—I know he can't hold against this onslaught much longer. I'm nearly there. "*Hold on*, *just a little longer*," I tell him with my mind.

I feel the blast that takes Turien down. Pain searing through my nerves, I stumble and fall. I must keep going! Getting back on my feet, I stagger a little farther, breaking out of the trees and into a small clearing. This is the place that Turien chose to make his stand. I see people standing around the edges of the clearing, but no one has noticed me yet. Turien is on the ground, his opponent standing over him. I want to go to him, to help him, but I know that I'm too late. I sense that he's dying, burned beyond any hope. Drÿfoch, for I'm certain that's Turien's attacker, reaches down and grabs Turien's Star, twisting the chain so that it's jerked over Turien's head. Turien reacts to the touch of a stranger on the *ferrïl* that is keyed to his mind and screams hoarsely. The pain echoes savagely through my head. I'm almost overcome by nausea.

Now Drÿfoch realizes I'm here. I'm close, near enough to fight him. He turns to look at me, a slight, mocking smile on his oddly broad face. I know that he'll try to kill me, but I'm already dead, dying as

Turien dies, feeling my *anÿncára* reach out to me as the darkness reaches out for him. Only a few moments are left to me, and I realize that I don't have the power to stop Drÿfoch. There is only one thing that I can do. It's an act of suicide, but I don't care. With any luck, I'll take Drÿfoch to the beyond with me. I stare into the *ferrïl* of my Star, using the *durrïls* to draw in as much energy as I can. But instead of transforming the energy and creating something with it, I just charge the *ferrïl* up until it won't hold any more. It seems to take forever. However, Drÿfoch hasn't figured out what I'm going to do yet, probably doesn't realize that Turien and I are *anÿncára*, or what that means to me. When the *ferrïl* is charged, I use my mind to manipulate the lines of energy that exist in the crystal, making them twist, forcing them with brutal despair until they break. The energy releases catastrophically. For a moment, I see blue fire erupting from my Star, then nothing. I sense Turien, freed now from the pain, touch me. We are together.

… And this is where the dream ends.

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My heart was still pounding. I put my head in my hands, feeling as though it might explode. As always, when I wake up from this dream, I'm not certain if I'm Killarÿn or Farrwÿn. I've even tried getting up and looking at myself in the mirror that hangs on the washroom wall. It doesn't help … much. I see the same figure—tall and wide-shouldered, streaky ash-gold hair, blue-grey eyes so dark that they're almost black—that could, without detailed examination, pass for either. A gift of my unacknowledged *athairad*, to be sure. Only in the bright light of day can you see that I have the hands of an artist and the eyes of a dreamer, and besides, I'm much too thin and lanky to be a Guardian.

Of course, I've gone to the history archives, researching the names that I remember from the dream. That only succeeded in frightening me more. Drÿfoch was one of the genetic engineers exiled at the end of the Genomic Enhancement Interval, three thousand or so years ago. Killarÿn, Turien, and Danaldrí were three Guardians reported as never having returned from a mission shortly after the Genomic Enhancement Interval. Killarÿn and Turien were listed as *anÿncára* and shield mates in the registry where our people's important life events are recorded. They existed. So does the planet Erystarí—a distant world in the Third Arc about which little is known except that the original colony had regressed back to a state of barbarity.

So the dream is real—a memory of someone long dead. But why does it haunt me? I have *turas*, the ability to see future paths, but not what has happened in the distant past. I've searched for explanations, and have come up with two possible answers, but neither is comforting. Possibly my *turas* is somehow twisted and warped, so that I can see both the past and the future. I find that very disturbing. Already my "gift" is a tangled chaos of threads, showing possibilities and probabilities, everything wound together in a knotted skein. Often I must spend days sorting through all the paths in order to get any clarity at all. If some of those threads were also from the past … my head spun as I contemplated the effort it would take unwind it all. Alternately, the memory could truly be mine—from

a previous lifetime. Ellendrí believe in rebirth. In fact, there are some verified cases where people have been reborn many years after a previous life. However, rebirth is a rare event, and very difficult to prove. Most people who make such claims have relatively few memories of their past life. I have one recurrent dream. Is that enough to support such a belief?

Given how crazy it seems to me, I have spoken to no one about the dream. I'd hoped that it would eventually go away, become a memory rather than a regular occurrence. However, it seems that just the opposite has happened—as time has passed, the dream has become more intense, more real … and I've started to feel driven by it. What is it trying to tell me? Furthermore, somehow Turien has reached out to me in the dream, through the thousands of years that separate us, even though he is dead and long returned to dust—and I have fallen in love with him. How do you explain to family and friends that you are in love with a ghost, or worse, an image in your imagination? I don't know.

For many years, I just lived with my dream and the worries it brought to me. I had no real solutions. It just seemed to be one more neurotic part of my bizarre life. Then, about 10 years ago, shortly after Darriel died, I was asked by a friend to attend a meeting at which a person who'd been a homesteader from one of the newer colonies was going to give a presentation. There had been much talk about establishing a new home for the Ellendrí, as our sun is nearing the end of its life, and Ellendrïa has become a hot and desolate place to live. I was somewhat interested—not that I consider myself good colonist material, but rather that I'd be happy to live somewhere far enough from my *athairan* that she'd be unable to meddle in my life. There were a lot of rational and well-informed people interested in the colonist movement, many of them friends of mine, so I expected to enjoy the evening, even if I never became a colonist.

The evening began with much good-natured bantering and lively discussion amongst the group, which gradually quieted when the speaker, named Gryffÿth, entered the room. Although I'd heard of Gryffÿth a few times before, and he'd been living on Ellendrïa for something like 50 years at that time, our paths had never crossed. However, when he turned to face the group, I saw his features for the first time. My heart nearly exploded with fear! The face I recognized—I'd seen it so often in my dreams—was the face of Drÿfoch. Fortunately, the room was crowded, and he didn't see my reaction. That he could have survived the blast created by the *ferrïl* of Killarÿn's Star was amazing. That he was still alive after three thousand years was even more amazing. Not outright impossible … but extremely unlikely. Nonetheless, I had no doubts as to who he was.

I remember little else about that evening—I spent most of my time trying to behave normally while my mind was screaming for action. Eventually, I made it home without anything unusual happening. Clearly Drÿfoch, or Gryffÿth, was not expecting anyone to recognize him. His confidence gave me the safety to determine what I must do. Finally, it occurred to me that fate had placed me here for a reason. Whether I was Killarÿn or Farrwÿn or both, I was a piece in the great game of our universe, and I was being moved for a purpose. And I needed to figure out what that purpose was.

My *turas* is a bit of a wild talent—sometimes I can control it, and sometimes it controls me. I often see things far in the future much more clearly than something which might happen tomorrow. It gives me a sense of the direction the future might take, but seldom provides clearly defined details, unless I am familiar with the people whose future I am seeing. When it works well, I can cast my mind along all the possible future paths arising from a particular decision, determine which paths have good outcomes, and which do not, and calculate the likelihood of each path. On bad days, I get wild visions and dreams that leave me shaking and frightened. After seeing Drÿfoch, I had more reason than ever to struggle to make my sight work for me. With time and much practice, I eventually got better at using my *turas*—good enough to reliably visualize the many future paths arising from a choice. I learned to test every turning point, to check and double-check the flows of time, which greatly improved my accuracy. Ultimately, I realized that it was possible to influence the future, for indeed the future is not immutable.

Based on what I could foresee, I made a plan. Drÿfoch was not here for the good of the Ellendrí. In fact, his presence would bring about the end of our people's long journey. He needed to be stopped, and our people needed hope and a new beginning. My plan was tenuous, difficult, and full of shaky places where failure was much more likely than success; however, it was better than no hope at all. While I hated the possibility of risking their lives, I knew that I must draw on the assistance of the two people I could trust absolutely—Eldranth and Eldarí. Not only could I trust them, but by the union of their parents' bloodlines, they were amongst the most powerfully gifted of all the Ellendrí alive today. I knew that their destiny was twined with mine, and somewhere amidst it all, I was sure I could sense Turien's soul, weaving us all together.

Eldranth—Date: 8936.112

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

The sun was high in the sky, glowing fiercely through the translucent material of the dome. It would have been much more intense, but the photoelectrochromic compound that had been applied to the dome's outer surface had automatically adjusted its opacity in response to the solar radiation coming from the sun, and was now blocking a significant percentage of it. Still, it was a warm day, midsummer for Ellendrïa. Seeking a respite from the heat, I found the old orchard a cool and welcome retreat. Although the living quarters of the house could be completely climate-controlled, I preferred the almost natural setting of the dome's gardens. They reminded me of the diversity of other worlds I'd visited during my time as a Guardian, many of which were much more hospitable that Ellendrïa was now.

I was sitting with my back leaning against one of the tall, old nut trees at the edge of the orchard. It was one of those peaceful places—a quiet, cool spot where a person could meditate, or reflect on life, or simply sit and enjoy the songs of the birds that darted amongst the green foliage. The dome was a more or less self-maintaining ecosystem, and the birds, species that once flourished in the wilds of Ellendrïa, were some of the more visible animals inhabiting the system. Darí was sitting cross-legged in the grass next to me, absently stripping the seeds off the meadow grasses and scattering them in the sluggish air currents of the dome. We had been chatting sporadically throughout the morning, catching up on each other's adventures, but mostly just enjoying a companionable silence. Hearing the sound of the dome entrance opening and closing, I got up from my comfortable position and went to bring Farrwÿn, who had just arrived, back to our shady nook.

Farrwÿn looked relaxed and lighthearted today, reminding me that he had a life beyond just being the harbinger of future events. Indeed, Farrwÿn was one of the best Psi Techs amongst the Ellendrí. More impressively, he was an extremely gifted artist, bringing a level of craftsmanship to the items he created out of psionic materials that was rarely seen. He actively developed new materials that not only had unique and useful properties when activated by psychic energy, but that were extremely strong and durable and could be formed into objects of exquisite beauty. I could tell that Farrwÿn had spent the morning in his studio working on some project that had brightened his mood. He had a small bundle with him, something wrapped in an old scrap of white fabric, which he passed casually to me. Knowing what it probably was, I smiled and nodded my thanks, then sat back down against the tree, tucking the bundle beside me.

Darí rose lithely to greet Farrwÿn with the warm embrace of old friends. For a moment, I felt time become fluid. I could see us here, under the trees, 70 years and more ago, just as we were now. A long time ago … and it seemed as if nothing had changed, yet everything had changed.

Eldranth—Date: 8936.059

Ellendrïa (approximately a quarter-year earlier)

And so my life had changed again. Now I was drifting, anchor-less, uncertain of my course. I had backed myself into a corner, convinced myself that Darí and I were no longer *anÿncára*, then used my despair to whip myself into deeper and wilder acts of desperation. Creating the very thing that I feared, I had ridden that fear almost to the brink of self-annihilation. Darí had forced me to see reality—in spite of all the unintended hurt we'd done to each other over the years, our lives and souls were still inexplicably and unbreakably bound together.

But what course from here? I clearly could not continue down this path of self-destruction. Even if that was truly what I still wished, I now had to consider the impact that such a decision would have on Darí. Had our bond been destroyed by pain and neglect, as I had believed, my death would have been mourned by my *deirfad*, but he would have survived to go on with his life. If we were in truth still *anÿncára*—and I had little reason to doubt that now after all that had happened in the past few days—then my death could, quite likely, kill him. Regardless of how things had gone between us, I still loved my *deirfad* deeply and wholly. The thought of his death, particularly as an outcome of my own actions, was not something I ever wanted to consider. So racing down the heroic path to the beyond was not an option anymore.

What did I want to do? Darí had asked me that question. And I had replied that I wanted to do the right thing. I still didn't know what that was, but it was becoming clear that I needed to figure it out, and soon. I spent a couple of days contemplating the situation, thinking about possible courses of action. Nothing would be simple. I knew that. No choice would be without some potentially negative outcomes. Although I've always had a touch of the sight, it's mostly a yes-or-no kind of thing and is nearly useless for analyzing complex situations. It was no help to me now; however, in trying to understand the future consequences of my choices, I decided that a visit with Farrwÿn might be useful. By then, I'd worked out a couple of ideas. There was some hope that he could provide me with a bit of guidance.

Farrwÿn and I are close friends, and I knew that I could drop by his workshop to visit him without having to arrange anything in advance. So when I was finally ready to talk about the mess my life was in, I headed out the main entrance of our dome, into Ellendrïa's hot, dry air, and down the old roadway towards the center of the city. My destination was another family dome—this one belonging to the House Aurora, which was Farrwÿn's family. It was located closer to the main part of the city and was of much newer construction. Farrwÿn and his *athairan* shared the dome with his *athairan-deirfa's* family. Like many of the family domes, ours included, this one was designed to be able to house upwards of 20 people, but was now occupied by far fewer than that—a sad sign of our declining population.

The walk was not too long, less than a millirad[45], but the low oxygen level of the atmosphere made it into good exercise, forcing my heart and lungs to work harder than they did in our climate-controlled

dome. I'd always enjoyed the challenge of walking outside, but I knew that most Ellendrí seldom left the network of domes and underground passageways that formed the city and its surrounding resource base. The walk was very quiet—little sound made it through the material from which the domes were formed, and there were no bird calls or insect noises to be heard, just the soft sighing of the breeze and the tread of my own feet. It was a little eerie, actually, like walking on a dead moon, only here there was still an atmosphere that you could breathe, barely. Looking away from the domes, the landscape was a monotonous yellow-brown, flat along the old river valley, then rolling in dusty reddish hills to the mountains beyond. High up on the mountains, there was still green, and some life flourished, at least as much as was possible. I'd been up in those mountains, the last home for much of the native flora and fauna on Ellendrïa, collecting samples for a comprehensive tissue bank. It's different up there—even though oxygen is still limiting, there is water in small streams, and plants supported by that water. A few hardy birds and animals are able to eke out an existence, and high up in the mountains where there is snow on the ground during winter, the elusive *föalen* can be glimpsed, the large wild canine that is the top predator.

Without much thought, my feet took me along the path to my destination, a trip that I had made many, many times before. The main entrance to the dome had the typical square control panel mounted at breast height on the right side of the door into the airlock. I placed my hand flat against the panel. It scanned the patterns of my palm and fingertips, using biometric authentication to identify me, notifying the occupants in the dome of my presence. If Farrwÿn was there, he could activate the door by a simple voice command, even if he was busy with some project. I waited patiently. After a short while, the door slid open with a quiet swoosh. I stepped inside, and the door quickly shut behind me. A few moments later, I had cycled through the airlock and was in the dome proper.

Directly ahead of me was the main house for Farrwÿn's family, a low, stone building similar to the one that Darí and I lived in. However, I was headed to a small, square building, located further towards the rear of the dome. This structure was a composite of materials—broad vertical strips of dark blue polished stone alternating with narrower bands of a gold-colored metal, the walls pierced by large windows. This was Farrwÿn's studio. He had built it himself some years ago, partly to contain the collection of assorted materials that were an integral part of his craft, and partly as a personal sanctuary, a place to escape to when being in the main house with his *athairan* became too onerous. Farrwÿn's relationship with his *athairan* was difficult, to say the least.

The door to the studio was open, so I knew that Farrwÿn was expecting me to come in. I stepped inside the entrance-way and stopped, looking about to see what Farrwÿn was up to lest my sudden entrance disrupt him. The inside of the building was bright—the big windows let sunlight illuminate the interior during the day. I knew from previous visits that the workshop had good nighttime lighting as well, allowing Farrwÿn to work whenever the creative urge inspired him. The bottom level of the building was one single, open room, with benches and storage units along the walls and a large table dominating the center of the floor. Above the work area, in the rear of the building, was a half loft, where Farrwÿn lived.

The remaining half of the studio was open from floor to roof, letting light from the upper windows at the front of the building reach the lower level. Farrwÿn was sitting on a stool at the big table, just finishing some engraving on a flat piece of gold-colored metal that appeared to be a component of some larger project. I waited quietly in the entrance until he had completed his work and had raised his head to look at me.

“Dran,” he smiled at me, absently pushing a strand of his long wavy hair out of his eyes, “I’ve been expecting you.”

“Don’t you always? Have I ever surprised you yet?” Trying to surprise Farrwÿn was a game going back to our childhood, one that I seldom succeeded at.

“Oh, a couple of times,” Farrwÿn chuckled, a low bass rumble. Although he was thin and somewhat lanky, Farrwÿn had a surprisingly deep voice. “But I’m not going to tell you when.” His eyes held a gleam of amusement.

Thinking back to our childhood reminded me of the times when the four of us, Farrwÿn, Darriel, Darí and I, had been inseparable. Aleysïa, Farrwÿn’s *athairan*, was a rather arrogant person of the opinion that my *deirfad* and I were dastardly rogues, barely good enough to associate with her *darïlad*. However, as the years progressed, and the degree of Farrwÿn’s *turas* became evident, her opinion changed somewhat. Although Farrwÿn was well-liked by many, few wanted to be overly close to someone with Farrwÿn’s ability to see the future—a skill that was both a boon and a curse. From being marginally acceptable, we became potential partners for her *darïlad*. After Darriel and Darí had become *anÿncára*, Aleysïa had hoped that Farrwÿn and I might also bond. Of course, that had never happened. We both knew that it wasn’t possible. I was *anÿncára* with Darí, and Farrwÿn’s soul had already been claimed—somewhere in his visions he’d seen his *anÿncára*, and he would wait for as long as it took to find that person.

“Somehow, I don’t think you’re here to discuss harvesting the fruit in your orchard,” Farrwÿn’s dark blue-grey eyes still held a trace of humor. “What can I do for you?”

“Possibly a couple of things,” I walked into the room, taking a more thorough look around. Various projects were neatly organized along the benches that lined the walls—I recognized where Farrwÿn had been synthesizing *ferrïls* and *durrïls*, another place where he was working with a blue, metallic material, and yet another where he was drafting up artwork on a tablet, maybe for future engraving. A particular project that caught my eye was a set of four cylindrical objects, each about the length of my fingers, made of that same blue metal. Although I couldn’t see the details, I knew what they were. Only a Guardian would have commissioned such a work. I contemplated them a moment, as they might have some bearing on my discussion with Farrwÿn, then turned towards the table, pulled a second stool out from under it, and sat opposite Farrwÿn.

Farrwÿn had noted where my eyes had lingered, but said nothing, just waited for me to continue. “Some

things in my life have changed recently," I started out tentatively. Farrwÿn's attention was wholly on me. He made a small affirmative noise, encouraging me to go on. "I guess some of my decisions haven't been too good lately, and I'd like some advice."

"Personal or professional?" Farrwÿn chuckled again, and by professional I knew he meant the use of his *turas*.

"Both, I suspect," I stared down at the table, studying the piece of engraving work that Farrwÿn had been occupied with when I'd arrived. It consisted of a beautifully intricate design of twining vines, forming a twisting, braid-like pattern around the border of the flat metal plate, with pendant flowers drooping into the center of the artwork. It was typical of Farrwÿn's creativity, and his pieces were in high demand. "I have a choice to make, and I want to be sure that I make the right one this time."

"I hope that means that you're giving up on killing yourself by misadventure?" I looked up to see Farrwÿn gazing at me steadily. I raised an eyebrow in a "What are you talking about?" gesture, but Farrwÿn was completely unperturbed. "You didn't think we'd notice?" He laughed softly, obviously finding my attempt at solitary self-obliteration somehow wryly amusing. "If Rallandrí doesn't ground you, several of us are planning to sabotage your ship."

"Thanks." My tone was cynical. "It's good to know I have friends I can trust."

"At least to keep you alive long enough that you can start thinking rationally again." Farrwÿn shook his head, tossing his shaggy hair back out of his eyes. "But what choice do you wish to discuss?"

Farrwÿn was, of course, being polite. I was quite sure he knew exactly why I was there, but he was giving me a chance to explain myself. I appreciated that. "It's about Darí and I," I found myself studying the engraved metal again, the vines twisting like my thoughts, slippery, hard to hold and formulate into words. "For a long time, I've thought that we were no longer *anÿncára*."

I hesitated, maybe for too long, because it was Farrwÿn who spoke next, "Do you really think that the bond between soulmates can be broken?"

"I guess I did." My hands were sweaty. I rubbed them on my thighs.

"I suppose Darí did give you good reason to think that," Farrwÿn replied after some time. "He was mad with grief over Darriel. For a while there, I don't think he was able to feel much of anything for anyone. However, people do recover from grief. And, as far as I know, death is the only thing that can break the *anÿncára* bond. In fact, I've heard it said that the bond can survive death and rebirth—that *anÿncára* find each other again in their new lives."

I made a small huffing noise, then elaborated on my thoughts, "Maybe that's true. It seems that our bond survived Darí's grief and my stupidity, and that might have been worse than death and rebirth," I smiled a little at my grim humor. "In any case, it seems that we are still *anÿncára* in spite of our best

attempts to make a disaster of a good thing. But what do we do now? Darí wants me to be his *sïathcára*, his shield mate."

"And you're not sure if this is the right thing to do?" Farrwÿn prompted.

"No, I'm not," I tried to meet Farrwÿn's eyes, his disconcerting smoky gaze. I really wanted him to understand my complex feelings on the matter. "I'm afraid … afraid that Darí will seek someone else again, and we'll be back where we started," I shuddered as memories flooded through my mind. "And I'm not sure that I should bind Darí to me. Maybe it would be better to give him the freedom to make the choices he needs. At the same time, I desperately want us to be together. So that's what I'm here to ask. What's the right decision for both of us? Should we become *sïathcára*, or should we continue to live our lives separately?" I shrugged my shoulders, leaving the questions hanging.

Farrwÿn's eyes started to get that far away, luminous look that told me he was already mentally walking the strands of possible future choices. "You know that either choice will have its challenges," his voice sounded like it was coming from a long distance away.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" I asked. There was just enough of Farrwÿn still in the present that he gave me a small smile.

"If you choose not to become *sïathcára*, your lives will go on much as they have, but a little better," Farrwÿn continued, his voice still sounding strange, formal, like he was making a pronouncement. "You'll be happier than you've been, but you'll still be alone; maybe not so desperate or crazy, but working mostly by yourself. You've learned to take risks, and you'll continue to take risks. Eventually you'll make a mistake—not this year or next year, but sometime not long in the future. It'll cost you your life." Farrwÿn blinked, but I could see that his eyes were unfocused, that he was seeing things beyond the room we were in.

"What about Darí?"

"He'll follow you to the beyond. Regardless of anything you might believe, Darí is devoted to you." Farrwÿn shook his head slightly. I could see he was sweating, and his skin looked pale. He was seeing something he didn't like.

"What is it?" I was anxious and concerned.

"If both you and Darí die, the future of the Ellendrí will be altered. You are both part of an important juncture in time."

"And if we become *sïathcára*?" I posed the alternative.

"You'll have some difficult struggles, but in the end, you'll find happiness and be together for a long time," Farrwÿn paused for a moment, letting his words sink into my mind. "However, in the near future,

Darí will be pulled away from you by circumstances that are not his choosing. You'll have the power to follow him. It will be your choice that will bring you back together," Farrwÿn frowned, his dark brows drawing together. "Darí and you are destined to form a triad. You must overcome your fear. If you fight against your destiny, you will destroy each other. If you accept it, you will find that the universe holds much more than you have ever believed possible," Farrwÿn was starting to sound cryptic now, which was more typical of the way he presented his visions, although his predictions always turned out to be accurate.

"So you're saying that the right choice is to accept Darí's offer to become *sïathcára*?" I wanted to make sure of this answer, especially with Farrwÿn drifting away into vague generalities. Farrwÿn's eyes rolled up for a moment, then, with a jerk, he snapped out of his almost trance-like state.

"Yes, that's what I said," his eyes were focused on me. He absently rubbed the sweat off his forehead with his hand.

"I can't believe it," I cocked both eyebrows up in cynical amusement, "a simple answer from a seer." Farrwÿn rolled his eyes at me, and I laughed. Touching him lightly on the shoulder, I spoke with more gentleness and feeling, "Thanks, Farrwÿn. That gives me some hope."

"So … you said a couple of things. What else is on your mind?" Farrwÿn asked, referring back to my original comment.

"If Darí and I are to become *sïathcára*, and since you concur that this appears to be the right choice, then we need to acknowledge it properly, first with the Guardian's ceremony, and afterwards, with a registry at the archives," I replied. Inclining my head towards the project that had attracted my attention earlier, I added, "I see you are familiar with the requirements for the *sïathcára* ceremony."

I walked over to the bench where the four cylindrical objects were. On closer examination, I could see they were actually slightly conical, sized to fit comfortably around a wrist. They were, in their own way, anachronistic. Born of a time, far back in our ancient history, when differences were solved by dueling with swords and other primitive weapons, a time when your *anÿncára* was also the person who watched your back, they were a once common piece of ancient armor. Called bracers, cuffs, or wrist guards, their purpose was to protect the exposed tendons of the wrist from an opponent's blade, where an injury could be crippling. Over time, warriors who were *anÿncára* took to exchanging these wrist guards, calling them *anÿnbränne*, in a rite where they recognized their eternal love as soulmates and vowed to protect and shield each other from all harm.

In times less ancient, the Ellendrí had chosen a path away from war and violence, although on other planets in the Ll'Ellendrÿn, dueling and war still does occur on occasion. Thus, no present-day Ellendrí can claim to be a warrior; however, the Guardians adopted the old *sïathcára* ceremony, since the benefits of having your *anÿncára* shielding your back still hold as true for them as it once did for the warriors of ancient times. Ellendrí who are not Guardians have other ceremonies for recognizing their

status as *anÿncára*, but for Darí and me, both of us Guardians, the *sïathcára* rite was appropriate. As most Guardians tended to stay in their male phase, the *anÿnbränne* were usually engraved with the patrilineal lineages of the two partners. I didn't touch the *anÿnbränne* on Farrwÿn's workbench, but I did bend closer to examine the engraved pattern, a wonderfully complex series of curved lines that formed two creatures twined together, a bird of prey, and what I was certain was a *föalen*, my own patrilineal emblem. I didn't know many Houses that were symbolized by predatory birds—the only one that came to mind immediately was House Seabÿn, which was Thorven's patrilineal lineage. There also weren't that many Guardians these days, and I couldn't think of any potential pairs that could claim to combine House Föalen with House Seabÿn.

"Can you tell me who commissioned these?" I asked Farrwÿn curiously. He shook his head. "Too bad—I can see that it must involve someone from my own house, but I haven't any idea who it might be."

"You'll know in time," Farrwÿn commented enigmatically.

I sighed, "I'm sure I will. What's the metal? I thought they were usually made of silver."

"You're right," he concurred. "Guardians usually prefer silver, or sometimes copper or bronze, as metals for wrist guards. Since they serve a ceremonial function rather than acting as actual armor, it's not necessary for the metal to be especially hard or durable. However, I've been experimenting with a material that is similar to the substance from which the Guardians' Stars are made. It's actually a very strong metallic composite. Unlike the material in the Stars, it's psi-active. The Ellendorí used it in the ancient past for a variety of purposes—it's called *drurïan*," Farrwÿn picked up a small fragment of the blue metal from his workbench, handing it to me. I turned the material over in my hands, feeling it resonate slightly in response to my own psychic energies.

"Can it be keyed?" I asked inquisitively. Farrwÿn nodded as I examined the small piece more closely. Then I bent down, looking at the *anÿnbränne* again, reaching out with my mind to sense the psychic resonance of the metal. I felt the slight twisting sensation in my head that occurs when you stare too long into a *ferrïl* that's keyed to someone else's pattern—apparently they were already keyed.

"What's the purpose of that?" I stood up, looking at Farrwÿn as I contemplated what I'd seen so far. Very curious. I wondered what Farrwÿn was up to.

"A couple of things," Farrwÿn cocked his head, gazing down at his work. "Firstly, it makes the consummation of the ritual, consecrated by the exchange of the *anÿnbränne*, more personal, since they are keyed to the specific *anÿncára* pair. Secondly, and more practically, the *anÿnbränne* can be used to focus and direct psychic energy. This makes them useful for defensive purposes, and, I suppose, even offensive ones."

"And you see a reason for this …" I probed.

“I do,” Farrwÿn replied tersely. That was probably all I was going to get from him. Long ago, Farrwÿn had once explained to us that it was often difficult to tell people everything he knew; that, in doing so, he could cause the future to be changed in negative ways. I had to trust that the future he was guarding was the best one for all of us.

Bringing myself back to the reason for my visit, I summed things up with, “So … I’d like to commission you to make a set of *anÿnbränne* for Darí and I, *Föalen* with *Föalen*, traditional silver.”

“*Föalen* with *Föalen* indeed,” Farrwÿn made a sound of amusement deep in his throat. “The Elders aren’t going to be all that happy about it, but don’t worry, it’ll be the least of their concerns soon.” I smiled grimly in return. It was that very censorship that had caused much of the hardships that Darí and I had faced so far.

“However,” Farrwÿn continued, “like the set you’ve been studying, I would like to make the ones for you and Darí out of *drurïan* and key them.”

“Why?” I queried, surprised at his suggestion. A strange sensation stirred deep within my mind. Somehow, I knew that my destiny was intertwined with the *anÿncára* pair for whom the *anÿnbränne* I’d just examined were intended. I shivered slightly.

Farrwÿn sensed my flash of *turas*. His humor turned gentle, “It’s a hard path that we must follow, but in the end, it will work out. That’s my hope and my faith.” He paused, regarding me more directly, “The *drurïan* will prove itself valuable to you and Darí.”

“Hmmph,” I snorted. Farrwÿn was arming us. And I didn’t even know who “we” were—certainly not any of the other Guardians on active duty that I knew. It was a good thing that I trusted Farrwÿn with my life, as it seemed quite likely that my life, and Darí’s as well, were going to be at stake.

Chapter 6: Cultaní Raiders

Eldranth—Date: 8936.112

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

"I was just thinking about how we used to hide out in the orchard on hot days when we were children, and dream about the future," I waved my hand at the grass beneath the trees, suggesting that we enjoy the comfort of the shade. Darí happily sprawled back onto the grass, while Farrwÿn took a seat leaning up against the same tree as I was. "I don't know about our dreams these days, but I'm sure we have lots of stories to share."

Farrwÿn chuckled, a deep throaty sound, and shook his shaggy hair back from his face. Farrwÿn's hair was a darker color than most Ellendrí, ashy with tawny streaks, and he wore it down past his shoulders, in a style more common amongst the older Ellendrí. It gave him both an appearance of dignity, but also a slightly ferocious air, almost like a mantling bird of prey. "Indeed. I'd like to hear what Darí has been doing out in the star lanes this last quarter-year."

I turned my head to watch Darí. "He hasn't been here long enough to tell me much, so maybe there's a tale or two I still haven't heard," I speculated, my eyebrows arching up in query.

"I'm not sure that the telling will make a good story," Darí smiled wryly, "and I doubt that I'm much of a storyteller, but I'll do my best." He sat up, stared off into the distance for a moment, organizing his thoughts, and then began, "I've been in meetings with representatives from many of the worlds in the First Arc[46]." He paused for a moment, looked directly at Farrwÿn and me, and then continued, "It seems that there have been an increasing number of attacks on traffic in the space lanes by the Cultaní."

I frowned. This wasn't a new problem, but an issue that seemed to be getting progressively worse. "We were starting to see some Cultaní piracy 10 years ago," I muttered. The Cultaní lived on a handful of planets just outside the Ll'Ellendrÿn, close to the First and Second Arcs. They were one of the few truly alien races that we knew about, having evolved along a completely separate line from the Ellendorí. Although their carbon-based biochemistry was similar to ours, their physiology was radically different. They were radially symmetrical, had eight limbs, a thick, cylindrical torso surmounted with a head-like structure, and looked like something that could have come from one of Ellendrïa's seas. However, they seemed quite comfortable in atmospheres that could support the Ellendrí, nor did they seem to have any particular requirements for a watery environment. Furthermore, they were highly predatory with well-developed space flight technology, making them dangerous adversaries. They had recently begun pirating in the Ll'Ellendrÿn space. "Has it been getting worse?" I asked, speaking more clearly so that both Darí and Farrwÿn could hear my question.

"Much." Darí shook his head, an expression of frustration. "And unfortunately, the Guardians were never meant to act as an anti-piracy force. Most of our ships aren't even armed. We've lost two people

to pirates in the last two years." Darí took a deep breath, blinking. He shifted his eyes away from us. "It seems that the Cultaní have decided that the Guardians are their most serious impediment to unhindered pillaging. They've been targeting us. More than one Guardian has had a very narrow escape. As of two days ago, there were only 20 of us patrolling out there."

Twenty out of an original group of 120—over time, Guardians had died doing their duty. Sometimes their bodies, and the Stars they carried, had been recovered. Sometimes they hadn't. The loss of Stars had been a gradual process, and it had mirrored the decline in the Ellendrí population. A decision had been made not to replace the lost Stars, since there were fewer and fewer Ellendrí who volunteered to undertake Guardian duty.

"I've asked all the Guardians who are still using unarmed ships to return to Ellendrïa and get their crafts refitted with weapons suitable to deal with the Cultaní. Some of them aren't very happy about that. It goes against our nature to meet violence with violence, but if we don't defend ourselves, there won't be any of us left very soon. I suspect that a few of the Guardians will lay down their Stars over this." Darí was staring down at his tensely clenched hands—I could see that he was willing himself to relax.

"Is this why you designed your ship with weapons?" I gazed at Darí, wishing my *deirfad* had been more willing to share his concerns years earlier. "It seemed like an unusual precaution at the time—we had all hoped that the Cultaní would quit harassing us after a few of them had been caught."

Darí looked up again, cocking his head towards Farrwÿn in acknowledgment, answering, "Farrwÿn finally convinced me, although at the time, I was strongly opposed to it. I had hoped never to need such weapons."

"And you've had the need?" Farrwÿn asked.

"Yes." A noticeable tremor ran through Darí's frame. "And it wasn't pleasant. The Cultaní may be alien, but they experience death like any of us. I felt one of them die violently when I destroyed its ship in order to escape from an attack. It's not something I want to do again."

Eldarí—Date: 8936.092

Ll'Ellendrÿn Space Lanes (approximately 20 days earlier)

When I left Ellendrïa and my *deirfad*, it was not with a light heart. Not only had we not been able to bring some resolution to our personal problems, I was headed off to Lorril to begin what was essentially a war by default against the Cultaní. No Ellendrí contemplates war lightly. Guardians, in particular, are oath-bound to prevent it, rather than start it. Although I could claim, and rightfully so, that the Cultaní were attacking us, that our actions were simply defensive in nature, nonetheless, the whole situation was morally repugnant to me. There had to be some other way … and yet we had made many attempts to communicate with the Cultaní. All had failed. What bothered me even more was that the Cultaní were clearly out to kill any Guardians they could find.

My ship was armed, and much faster than any of the Cultaní ships, so I had a fairly good chance of keeping myself alive. However, most of the Guardians had unarmed vessels. While they might be able to outrun the Cultaní, they were at a serious disadvantage against an armed opponent. Even worse, as a result of my own actions, my *deirfad* was flying one of the oldest, most disreputable ships of the Ellendrí fleet. He was skilled, and incredibly lucky, but I feared that he was going to be a casualty of the armed conflict. Originally, I'd hoped that he might come with me in the *Föalen*; now I just hoped that he would stay away from the Cultaní.

My work on Lorril was largely tedious—hours of negotiations with representatives from the various First Arc planets that still retained space flight capabilities. Agreements needed to be drafted up for the newly formed Border Patrol that set out which nations supplied ships, which provided food and other equipment, and which could offer skilled pilots. Emissaries from the Second Arc planets were flown to Lorril to participate in the discussions as well. Although most of these planets lacked space travel, they were still able to supply resources and people to the cause, and many were willing to do so given the threat the Cultaní posed. I spent 28 days on Lorril … until I couldn't tolerate the boredom anymore. Rallandrí sympathetically allowed me to fly patrol for a while. The nicest thing I can say about my time on Lorril is that I loved swimming in the warm ocean water at the end of a long day of frustrating arguments.

The space lanes, as we call them, of the Ll'Ellendrÿn are actually a series of nodes, or jump points, which connect one location to another by a passage through the between. Although it's not absolutely necessary, we tend to use the same jump point coordinates for particular journeys, partly to avoid mishaps and partly so that we can meet up with one another easily in space—after all, trying to find a tiny spaceship in the total volume of the Ll'Ellendrÿn is like trying to find a single grain of gold in a white sand beach. Not easy. However, once our patterns of travel became known to the Cultaní, the risks of being attacked by a raider at one of the jump points increased exponentially. The points closest to the border of the Ll'Ellendrÿn with Cultaní space were the most likely targets, but more recently, the Cultaní have become bolder, attacking ships at some of the jump points deep within the First Arc.

Flying patrol was essentially a reconnaissance mission. Our task was to locate any Cultaní raiders lurking around the border regions while trying not to be seen, then report their whereabouts to the mission control center on Lorril. If spotted, run and don't engage. Those were the instructions that all the Guardians had received. Ultimately, the Border Patrol was going to provide the firepower necessary to deter the raiders. At present, there was little that an unarmed Guardian could do against Cultaní weapons. Of course, reality often takes directions that we seldom expect.

My plan was to do five jumps, with the fifth jump placing me in the Corrÿn solar system, where there are two habitable, colonized planets. I would spend a couple of days on each of the planets, looking after several small issues that the Guardians had been requested to mediate, then go back out on patrol again. At each jump point, after exiting out of between, I would immediately power my ship down to minimum levels, put up deflector[47] and invisibility[48] shields, and sit quietly, watching for potential raider activity. While I wouldn't be totally invisible, I would be very hard to spot unless the raiders had their instruments focused directly on my ship.

Unfortunately, for every trick we devise to avoid being detected by the Cultaní raiders, they can just as easily come up with a means to thwart us. Whatever the Cultaní may be, stupidity is not one of their traits. On my third jump, there were two raider ships watching the jump point, waiting for the twisting and warping of the fabric of space that preceded someone exciting from the between. Coming through, I saw them. Quickly, I cut all power, going into "invisibility mode", letting my ship drift in a slightly out of control spiral so that they couldn't track it readily. I held my breath as the raiders started swinging back and forth, searching.

The ships of the Cultaní raiders were, in their own way, as alien looking as their makers. Squat, flat, and oval-shaped, they reminded me of a particular species of blood-sucking insect that occurs on Ellendrïa. The landing gear, located on the underside of the vessel, articulated like legs. I knew from stories of survivors that those "legs" were capable of grasping other ships and holding them, while cutting tools peeled open the hull. The Cultaní never painted their ships—they were always a dull, metallic grey and had no markings of any kind.

The raiders that were hunting me appeared to be blind. There were no obvious viewports or canopies on the ships, but clearly they were using some type of sensor system to detect their surroundings. Although examinations of dead Cultaní had found structures resembling eyes, we really didn't know what their visual range might be or how dependent they were on sight. In any case, I knew the shielding, which bent electromagnetic radiation around my ship, thus creating the effect of invisibility, was not perfect. A trace signature could be observed with the right equipment. Suddenly, one of the raiders ceased its search pattern, turning directly towards me. I guess they knew what to look for.

Time to run. I dropped the invisibility shield, bringing the *Föalen*, and its deflector field, up to full power—only just in time. The *Föalen* shuddered as the raider fired its lasers at me. I knew the shield would hold, at least for a time. All I needed to do was get myself out of range, then I could easily outrun

them. I rolled the *Föalen* to one side, diving downward, hoping to elude my two attackers by a sudden change in direction. Before I could get straightened out, the second raider charged diagonally in front of me, firing several times. The shield held, but I was rapidly draining the energy stores in my ship. I tried another dodge maneuver, spinning quickly and darting in a different direction. But as fast as I could twist and turn, the two raiders were just that tiny bit faster. If I could just get myself stabilized enough to engage the main engines, I'd be watching them disappear in my rearward monitors. They seemed to know this, working as a team to ensure that I never had enough time to make a dash. I checked the ship's energy levels and realized that I wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer. Nor was it likely that anyone was going to come to my aid before my deflector shield dropped.

I had one other option—it wasn't one that I liked. Farrwÿn had insisted that the *Föalen* be armed with lasers. In the eight years I'd been flying the ship, I'd never used them once, although Kÿrrÿl had assured me on numerous occasions that they were in good working order. In those same eight years, I'd never had to kill anyone either. Guardians very seldom kill. If they do, it's in self-defense. I guess that was applicable in my present situation, but it didn't make me feel any better.

On the rear edge of the oval-shaped hull of a raider were two raised bulges, one on either side of the center-line of the ship. These were the ship's drives. Some of the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn were less inhibited about killing the Cultaní than the Guardians, and they'd had some practice. Reports from these experiences claimed that there was a weak spot in the raider's shielding just in front of the bulge housing the drive unit.

I took a deep breath, focusing on what I needed to do. I rolled the *Föalen* again. This time, instead of rolling away from the pursuing raider, I rolled towards it, flying straight at it. It fired at me several times as I approached, then seemed to hesitate, possibly unsure of my intentions. I aimed my lasers at the supposed weak point, and fired a single blast. Then I was rolling away from the raider just before our ships could collide. Coming around in a sharp turn, I prepared myself to do a second attack run. Suddenly, I realized that the raider's drive was glowing white-hot. This was followed by a brief, eye-searing explosion, which must have almost instantly used up most of the oxygen in the ship. I blinked until I could see again. As the afterimages faded, I saw that the ship was crumpling and starting to break up, the twisting forces generated by the explosion tearing the hull apart.

There's a reason why empaths don't like to kill. I'd been told this many times. As a Healer, I knew what it was like to feel someone die. But I'd never experienced violent, traumatic, sudden death. When the raider's hull split open, its alien pilot was exposed instantaneously to the merciless forces of outer space. It screamed—a shriek of agony that crossed the full range of empathic frequencies, bridging the distance between alien species. I felt that scream, felt it scorch through my brain. As the echoes resonated through my mind, my body curled up in pain . I blacked out, probably only for a few moments, but when the screaming finally stopped, and I came back to myself, I was retching.

Fortunately, the second raider had decided that I was armed and dangerous. I could see it disappearing

in the distance. I didn’t bother with the rest of the patrol, but headed straight for Corrÿn, reporting to the mission control center on the way. I spent a couple extra days in the Corrÿn system, recovering from the shock of that particular misadventure. The experience further reinforced my aversion to killing, yet I knew that the Cultaní situation was going to make it virtually impossible to avoid.

Chapter 7: A Future Path

Eldranth—Date: 8936.112

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

I felt my *deirfad's* anguish over the battle with the Cultaní raider, and its violent conclusion. "Do we have any choice?" I wondered out loud. Although I've been up against the raiders a few times, it's pretty much all been bluff. I've had neither the desire nor the capacity to do them much harm. The Ellendrí have embraced a peaceful existence for so long that the need to carry out acts of violence is difficult to accept. Guardians are trained in self-defense, knowing that we might have to fight or die, but we all fervently hope that we'll never need to kill another intelligent being. "Is there any possibility of communicating with them?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer. However, I wanted to draw out Darí's knowledge for Farrwÿn's benefit, giving him a chance to learn as much as we knew about the situation.

"We've captured some of them over the past few years, but they're so completely alien …" Darí shook his head. "They communicate with each other using a combination of body language and sounds we can't articulate. We've developed a device that replicates their acoustics; however, it seems that they either can't or won't respond to it," he shrugged, running his hand through his closely-cropped hair in an act of frustration. "We've tried telepathy of course, but their thought processes are so different that the best we can manage is some limited empathy—a sense of basic emotions and that's about all." Meeting my gaze directly, Darí asked, "How do you try to convince an alien that it shouldn't kill you if you can't even begin to understand what it wants or needs in the first place?" He frowned, shaking his head again. "My best guess is that they're after metals. After each successful attack, all that's left behind is a bunch of corpses floating in space. Every speck of metal is gone. If their home worlds are metal-poor, it could be that their space technology has seriously depleted their resources."

"Has anyone tried offering one of the captives some bars of refined metals and seeing if there is any recognizable empathic response? It might help us see if your guess is correct." Since my duties for the Guardians have not been directly involved with the issue of Cultaní piracy, I didn't actually know the details of the communication attempts, only that they had failed. Offering up a simplistic solution, I was giving Darí a chance to fill us in on the details. Figuring out needs and wants, working out trade arrangements, finding compromises—this is how Guardians are trained to operate. It wasn't that all the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn were completely peaceful. The necessity to have a force like the Guardians attested to the need for intra-, and inter-, planetary arbitration. And sometimes war broke out anyway. More than once a Guardian has had to work surreptitiously to diffuse warring factions.

"We have. At first there seems to be some slight interest. Then they just shut down, like they've been instructed not to cooperate," Darí looked tired, unhappy. "After that, they usually die within a day or two. Although it's hard to know for sure, we think the cause of death is suicide."

“Hmmm,” I stared out across the dome towards the house and the mountains beyond, wondering why problems always come in clusters, like fruits hanging on a vine. “Seems like they might be able to communicate with us, but are completely unwilling to try. I wonder why they prefer piracy to the possibility of trade, even though it’s now clear that we’ll kill to defend ourselves. What’s driving them?”

“I wish I knew,” Darí replied sadly. “It seems that the Cultaní operate under the principle that force is the only means to get what they need. They just don’t seem to have a desire for peaceful coexistence.”

“So … have any of the other peoples of the Ll’Ellendrÿn brought forward any ideas to prevent further raiding? I haven’t heard much about this from the Elder Council. Do they even know?” Working as a Recorder for the Elder Council, I was surprised that so little information about the Cultaní raids was being presented to the Council for discussion.

“The Guardians haven’t brought this up with the Council yet. With all the unrest here, it seemed that the Council was far too inwardly focused to cope with this now,” Darí smiled slightly. I think he caught the hanging fruit analogy from my mind, and found it somewhat amusing. “One thing is very clear—the Cultaní are not willing to be reasoned with. Maybe this will change, but at present, the only way to stop them is to kill them.” In my head, I heard Darí’s voice answering my earlier, almost rhetorical, question. “*No, we don’t have a choice*,” and I could feel how much it hurt my *deirfad*, still a gentle Healer at heart, to admit that to me.

“The Guardians are not going to be able to hold up under the Cultaní attacks.” Darí had pulled up a stalk of grass, absently winding it around his fingers. His eyes looked distant as he thought about the other Guardians, our friends and companions. “Even if all 20 of us were willing to accept violence as the only solution, we wouldn’t last long under a continuous onslaught. As it is, I expect that there will only be about 10 or 12 of us who are going to carry on; the rest will be coming home to lay down their Stars as soon as they have completed whatever tasks they’ve been working on.”

Recently Darí had become the spokesperson for the Guardians. Even though he had the least experience of us all, somehow we all trusted him, and he’d become our voice. Of course, that didn’t surprise me—regardless of all our personal difficulties, I found that I still trusted my *deirfad*, even if I clearly needed to understand him better. Although I knew that many of the other Guardians weren’t happy with his request to arm their ships, they could understand the need. We’d seen it coming. Like the fading of the Ellendrí, the time of the Guardians was reaching its conclusion. Some would lay down their Stars and go peacefully; others, like me, would fight to the very last.

“I’ve spent the past two years traveling from planet to planet in the First Arc, trying to gauge the willingness of the different peoples to help set up an armed Border Patrol,” Darí continued, coming back to the moment. “Not every race has the capabilities or resources to get armed ships into space, but there are enough that could. The remaining people are willing to provide other resources—food and equipment for those who will form the Border Patrol fleet. It’s not a solution that I like, but I think it will

save lives, at least for the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Maybe once we start putting up a fight, the Cultaní will find piracy less to their liking. There is always that hope."

I could see why Darí had looked so tired when he'd arrived—he'd been covering a lot of territory. However, over the past eight years, the Cultaní crisis had given him focus and purpose, and with the hard work and long hours had come healing and acceptance of loss. Even if the final years of the Guardians were in sight, it was clear that the service had been good for Darí. Farrwÿn was right again.

"So that's a brief account of the situation in the Ll'Ellendrÿn. What's going on here? I keep having bad feelings about this place," Darí stretched out on the grass, eyeing both Farrwÿn and I equally.

It was starting to get warm, even in the shade of the trees. I could feel a trickle of sweat down the back of my neck. The heat reminded me of the crisis that was taking place on Ellendrïa. I leaned back against the tree, trying to draw strength and equanimity from its ancient trunk, focusing my thoughts on yet another set of problems. Finally, I answered with a single word, "Gryffÿth."

"What's he been up to this time?" Darí's hands were still restless, a sign of barely contained nervous energy. No longer twisting grass through his fingers, he was now abstractedly stroking a fuzzy seed head amongst the grass stalks.

"Same thing, only it's getting harder to ignore," I replied. Nobody on Ellendrïa was in denial about our planet's precarious situation. Our sun was gradually expanding outwards, and soon, geologically speaking, it would engulf Ellendrïa. The planet, and anything still left on its surface, would be incinerated. The final event wasn't going to happen tomorrow—we probably had a thousand or so years yet before conditions on the surface became intolerable, and the domes would protect us. However, the end was inevitable. The real problem was that our people were also in decline. The issue was whether to stay and die with our planet or to leave our home and hope to find a resolution for our current decrease. At the moment, the population was split. Most of the older Ellendrí were ready to pass to the beyond along with our planet. The younger Ellendrí were hoping for a solution. And Gryffÿth was a leader amongst them, firing them up, driving them on.

"What gives him the right to lead our people? He is an outlander after all," Darí reflected challengingly. Clearly, something about Gryffÿth made Darí edgy. Outlanders were Ellendrí who were born off-planet, either to parents who had permanently left Ellendrïa to find some other home, or sometimes to Ellendrí who were traveling and had children during their journeys. Ellendrí born off-planet were welcomed back to Ellendrïa, although they generally weren't expected to take leadership roles, primarily because they lacked the in-depth understanding of the planet, its people, and the web of interconnections between them.

Gryffÿth had arrived on Ellendrïa just shortly after I had become a Guardian. According to his personal account, Gryffÿth's parents had been homesteading on a planet in the Third Arc. He'd been out tending livestock when a fire had swept through the buildings and surrounding forest, trapping and killing his

family. Their spacecraft, which had been kept on a flat and treeless landing field, was unharmed by the fire, so he was able to return to Ellendrïa. As a Guardian, I had investigated his story, but not fully confirmed it. The people that he claimed were his parents had been recorded as leaving Ellendrïa permanently to begin a new life on a more hospitable planet over a thousand years ago. The planet he indicated as his place of birth does exist in the Third Arc, but there are no records of the homestead or his birth on that planet. Ellendrí can live for thousands of years, and records are sometimes lost over such long time periods. So far, neither I nor anyone else had questioned him further about his past. At least not yet.

“Gryffÿth is more than he seems,” Farrwÿn stated, suddenly joining the conversation. “And he knows more than he’s telling.”

“Have you seen him in the future?” Darí asked, referring to Farrwÿn’s *turas*, his interest sharply focused.

“Yes, I have,” Farrwÿn stared absently off into the orchard. “However, it’s his past that’s worrying me now. He’s old—possibly the longest-lived person now living on Ellendrïa—old enough to have played a role in some history that maybe he wants to be forgotten.”

“What are you saying, Farrwÿn? What history?” Darí’s questions were direct and clipped, reflecting his uneasiness.

“I suspect he’s been around long enough to have lived through the Genomic Enhancement Interval, to have been involved in some of the happenings of that time,” Farrwÿn met Darí’s eyes, “and to be very dangerous.”

“How do you know this?” I asked, giving Farrwÿn a sharp glance. “That’s a pretty serious accusation. If Gryffÿth hears it, he’d have a good reason to force you to come up with some proof before the Elders.” The Genomic Enhancement Interval, as the Historians referred to it, was a period in Ellendrí history some three thousand years ago—long enough ago that it was on the very edge of living memory for the Ellendrí. Possibly one or two of the Elders might have been alive during part or all of that time, but they would have been very young, and it was a very long time ago. Memories fade. If Gryffÿth was involved in that time period, he might not be recognized now.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have proof that would stand up to the Elders’ questions,” Farrwÿn answered quietly. I turned my head to look at him where he sat beside me. Unlike Darí, who was radiating nervous energy, Farrwÿn was still and quiet, his eyes staring off into the distance. I suspected that I was seeing yet another example of Farrwÿn’s stern self-control. “That’s why I’m talking about it here with you, because I can trust you. I’m certain that Gryffÿth was once called Drÿfoch, that he was exiled as a result of very serious charges associated with some of the worst offenses that occurred during the Genomic Enhancement Interval.” Farrwÿn’s eyes came back into focus. Tilting his head to look at me, he continued “My *turas* confirms that he’s dangerous. The path that he’s embarking on will change our future.”

If Farrwÿn was right, then Gryffÿth would now be positioned in a pivotal point of Ellendrí history for the second time in his life. Why would one person's actions be so entwined with the history of our race? The strands of the past and the future were tangling. I felt that the answer to that question would soon be very important.

The Genomic Enhancement Interval had begun with the rediscovery of an old healing skill—the ability to repair genes that had been damaged through mutation. This useful healing talent, still practiced today, allows Healers to repair accumulated DNA damage, thus stopping cancers or returning the body to a healthy state by re-establishing normal enzyme functions. Where mutations have occurred in the germ cell lines, Healers are able to repair this damage, preventing the transmission of genetic diseases from one generation to the next. However, once the ability to alter genes was developed, it started a chain of events that the Ellendrí have lived to regret.

The psychic abilities of the Ellendrí are known to be controlled by genes at several loci on different chromosomes in our genome. Having a dominant allele at one or more of these loci gives an individual some level of psychic abilities. However, before the Genomic Enhancement Interval, it was extremely rare that a person would have dominant alleles at all of these loci—a situation that would give rise to extremely powerful psi talents. With this new healing skill, it was possible to replace recessive alleles with dominant ones for each gene. Once a number of individuals had been modified in this manner, selective marriages could maintain these allelic patterns in the population. Possibly an extreme and radical use of healing, but having a greater number of people with powerful psychic talents meant that our reliance on the technology bequeathed to us by the Gwÿrdrí could be reduced. Technology was resource-demanding, and even the gentlest forms of resource extraction had caused some environmental damage to Ellendrïa's biosphere. By reducing our resource requirements, we were able to maintain a lower and more sustainable level of technology on Ellendrïa for longer, resulting in less damage to the planet. It seemed like a reasonable thing to do at the time …

I knew that my family line was derived from these genetic manipulations. Inbreeding between the various "altered" lineages had "fixed" the genes so that now the members of these families had not one dominant allele, but in fact two, at each locus. This homozygous dominant situation guaranteed that every child born to these families would inherit a full suite of psychic abilities, but at what price?

After such a successful genetic manipulation, it seemed that anything might be possible. People with bold ideas and weak ethics started to experiment with animals. Legends from the Ellendorí had told of strange chimerical creatures, compounded from many different animal forms. Were these legends analogies for some spiritual journey, or were they descriptions of Ellendorí genetic engineering? Were the zoomorphic beasts described in myth actually transgenic animals created by talented Ellendorí Healers? Experimentation showed that a skilled Healer could fuse DNA from one creature into another, and if done carefully, recognizing how the form and function of the engineered creature would work in a world bound by the laws of physics, viable transgenic animals could be created that would survive and breed true. For a short while, our race was fascinated by the potential of such genetic tinkering, but

then those with foresight started to see the dangers that such meddling could bring. Further genetic manipulations on both animals and people were strongly discouraged.

Unfortunately, even though our society may express its disapproval of certain activities, this does not necessarily stop them from happening, especially if unscrupulous individuals are involved. Our people are not bound by infrangible laws that impose penalties on such activities. Individuals engaging in them are usually socially censured, excluded from community activities, and find themselves rejected by the society at large. But what is unseen cannot be repudiated. Clandestine genetic engineering projects continued. They were often supported by Ellendrí who had survived long enough to become bored with their lives, who were looking for excitement and new experiences, who didn't particularly care about personal risks. Some died for their temerity. The genetic engineers who opposed them were imprisoned, held incommunicado under psychic dampers, their fate unknown to the rest of the Ellendrí population. Human experimentation was carried out on both these prisoners and the willing volunteers from Drÿfoch's group as they became prototypes for completely new psi abilities, including such unusual capabilities as shape-shifting.

The ability to shape-shift resulted from a bizarre combination of genetic engineering and psychic manipulation of energy and matter. Additional chromosomal segments, coding for the physical appearance of an animal, and a shape-shifter initiation sequence were fused to one of the normal Ellendrí chromosomes, often the X^M chromosome[49], making this ability sex-linked. When the initiation sequence is triggered, it activates the genes coding for the animal form, and deactivates the corresponding genes that normally code for the human form.

The actual shape-shift is accomplished using psychokinesis, which briefly loosens the attractive forces holding the cells of the body together, thus allowing the cells to move into their new positions in the animal form. Where functional changes in cells are necessary, psychokinesis transforms those cells into a temporarily totipotent state, allowing them to assume new roles in the animal form.

Deactivation of the initiation sequence allows the individual to return back to their human form.

Of course, there are limitations to the shape-shift ability. To prevent unexpected environmental consequences, the combined total amount of matter and energy is conserved as closely as possible during the transformation. This is easiest if the two forms, animal and human, have similar masses. Additionally, the animal form is chimeric and superficial, as no changes are made to the brain, personality, sensory structures or instincts of the individual. Thus, using the new shape requires a period of learning in order to acclimatize to the differences in body shape and function, and to develop "natural" behavior patterns.

Genetic engineers involved in the Ellendrí Genomic Enhancement Interval tested this new shape-shift ability on themselves, but there were also less willing participants in these experiments. A few of these transformed Ellendrí found this new ability useful. Others quickly lost interest in the ability after

realizing the amount of effort it took to become proficient at shape-shifting. Since the original creation of the shape-shifting genes was carried out in secret, few of the people involved, either the genetic engineers or the resultant shape-shifters, both willing and unwilling, were ever definitively identified.

Eventually, as interest declined and the censure on genetic manipulations remained in place, the Genomic Enhancement Interval came to an end. An unfortunate legacy of this period remained, however. Initially, many of the unsanctioned genetic manipulations were unstable, particularly those involving shape-shifting, resulting in injuries, deaths, and mental traumas. An attempt was made to identify and apprehend the perpetrators of the genetic engineering. The few who were caught were exiled from Ellendrïa. Others, seeing the potential of being exposed, gradually left the planet on trading or colonization expeditions and never returned. Some individuals who had been genetically modified were identified and forced to undergo treatment to return their genomes back to the "normal" Ellendrí state. However, many Ellendrí with stable genetic alterations remained in the population. These alterations entered the gene pool with deleterious consequences—the already low birth rate of the Ellendrí was pushed even lower as incompatibilities between normal chromosomes and "modified" chromosomes led to infertility between couples. While it was possible to reverse much of this damage, the disgrace associated with being identified with the Genomic Enhancement Interval was such that many Ellendrí refused to come forward for treatment. Even today, the shape-shifting gene complex is considered a deleterious mutation, and those who carry the trait are very secretive about it.

"Why would someone implicated in the Genomic Enhancement Interval experiments want to come back to Ellendrïa?" I finally asked, breaking the heavy silence that had settled on us. "Surely, if Gryffÿth were such a person, he would fear being exposed, and the actions that the Elders would take."

"Power, I think," Farrwÿn responded slowly. "Gryffÿth has been on his own, isolated from our people, for thousands of years. His warped mind craves power. By himself, he had power over no one. However, if he takes over a newly formed colony, he will have power over an entire world. I don't think he's worried about the Elders' justice. I suspect that he has enough psi abilities to do whatever he wants, and there will be little that the Elders can do to stop him."

Farrwÿn placed his hands palm downward on his thighs with his fingers spread out. "When I look at the future, it's like my fingers spreading out away from the palms of my hands. My palms are what we see today. My fingers are all the possible futures than can arise from this moment. Each one comes from a different decision or choice. Some futures are very probable, some are very unlikely. When I tell someone what I think the future will be, what I'm describing is the most probable future, the one most likely to occur." Farrwÿn blinked slowly, almost like he was about to enter a trance. "Our future is not immutable—if someone knows what a possible future might be, they could make a choice that would change the probability, and thus some other future might become more likely." He shook his head slightly, and the faintly glazed look in his eyes disappeared.

"I've been studying the patterns of the future for many years—trying to understand the changes; trying

to see what stays constant and what is ephemeral," Farrwÿn continued with more animation. "What I've seen over that time concerns me. Where once there had been many futures branching out, now there are only a few." Farrwÿn brought his fingers together, symbolically closing off possible futures. "Someday, there may only be one—we are very near a tipping point that, once reached, there will be no turning back from."

"And the tipping point is Gryffÿth?" I asked, shifting restlessly against the tree, agitated by Darí's nervous energy.

"Yes, or at least the actions he takes. And the outcome will be whether the Ellendrí continue as a living race, or become a record in some history archive." Farrwÿn stared intently at his hands. "Even now, I think I might have waited too long to speak about this, to take action. Our choices are becoming fewer, and the probability that Gryffÿth will end up compromising the new colony is becoming very large."

"How can Gryffÿth do this?" Darí queried, looking pale, tense, like he'd seen a glimpse of something that worried him.

"Then you sense it too?" Farrwÿn looked up from his fingers and directed a piercing look at Darí.

"Not as clearly as you do," Darí shook his head, as if he could clear the fog away from his vision. "Mostly, it's just a sense of wrongness, like something very important has gone awry, and that my future is somehow entangled with Gryffÿth's actions."

"Have you tried to trace the path of the future that you see?" Farrwÿn held Darí's gaze, challenging him. Both Darí and I have *turas*, but not nearly as strongly as Farrwÿn, although Farrwÿn claims that neither of us uses our skill to its fullest.

"No." Darí broke away from Farrwÿn's sustained gaze.

"I know you don't want to see the future clearly," Farrwÿn spoke gently, with understanding, "but the survival of our people depends on making the right choices now, and *turas* could help us do that." Darí was clearly not willing to pursue this line of conversation any further. Standing up, he moved a few steps away, putting some distance between himself and Farrwÿn.

Farrwÿn sighed and shook his head, letting Darí go. Continuing the conversation, he said, "Gryffÿth is in the process of dividing our people in two. Some will follow him eagerly because he represents change, the chance to leave this dying planet and have a fresh start. Others will stay on Ellendrïa because our Elders refuse to leave. And some will stay on this planet because they have no choice." Farrwÿn raised his eyebrows, giving both Darí and I a rather pointed look. Although not as highly arched as ours, Farrwÿn's dark brows could be just as expressive. He used them to good purpose now, a reminder to us that not all is as it seems.

"Gryffÿth has been making a list of people who want to start a new colony. To get on this list, you must

undergo complete genetic screening. If there are any gene sequences that might result in infertility, you won't be accepted. The rationale that Gryffÿth gives for this screening process is that the new colonists must be free from the genetic problems that are creating our current crisis." Farrwÿn smiled, rather cynically.

"There are people who would refuse to undergo genetic screening, who would feel that it was an invasion of their privacy," I commented darkly, feeling a chill pass down my spine. This discussion was making me distinctly uncomfortable.

"And then people could ask why their privacy is more important than the future of our race," Farrwÿn pointed out. "Since it is easy enough for a Healer to repair damaged genes, I think someone in that position would either have to explain what they were hiding, or else make the choice not to become involved in the colonist movement."

Darí made an inarticulate noise in the back of his throat. I looked up at him, and our eyes met. *If Gryffÿth were Drÿfoch* … "That's a rather convenient situation for Gryffÿth," I noted. "If he was truly involved in the Genomic Enhancement Interval atrocities, this screening process will keep any of the families that might have had a grievance with him from becoming involved with the colonists."

Farrwÿn nodded, "True. Gryffÿth is creating an artificial barrier so that he has control over the selection process." There was a long moment of silence, as our comments settled in the hot morning air.

Thinking about how the circumstances must look to many young Ellendrí, I made an effort to approach our discussion from their perspective. "Regardless of whether or not Gryffÿth is planning something that might cause trouble for our people, it appears that at least he's trying to do something about the situation," I observed. "Doesn't it seem logical that selecting a healthy population and moving them to a planet that isn't on the edge of extinction might actually allow our people to survive?" I resisted the urge to get up and wander around, to allow Darí's anxiety to infect me. It was clear that something, probably his *turas*, was bothering him, but I also knew my *deirfad* well enough to know that if he wasn't willing to discuss it, there was no use in trying to force him to talk. Drawing calm from the cool tree bark at my back, I attempted to focus on rationality rather than emotion. "What do you see that makes this scheme unworkable?" I queried.

"That's exactly the issue—it seems like it should work, but every time-line that branches off from this situation leads to a future where the colony fails." I could hear concern and worry in Farrwÿn's voice, as he continued, "For some reason, the colony will lack the necessary vitality to expand. In fact, our real problem isn't genetic—it's a lack of will to survive. As a people, we've given up." Farrwÿn looked down at his hands where they still rested on his thighs, obviously thinking about what he wanted to reveal to us. Looking up, he added, "Whatever Gryffÿth's plans are, they don't fix this problem. The colonists won't prosper. In fact, Gryffÿth's hunger for power may actually consume what energy and vitality the colonists have. Until something stirs up our survival instinct, we're doomed. We need fresh blood and a

renewed purpose."

"You think that there's some hope, some other path that we haven't taken yet that will make a difference?" I wanted to know. "Most of the Elders are not in favor of Gryffÿth's call for colonists. They believe that our time is over as a people, that we should accept a graceful decline." I had spent many days amongst the Elders, listening to their discussions of the fate of the Ellendrí race. It was not time spent creating optimism.

"I've asked myself that same question." Farrwÿn smiled sadly. "I've traced every path I can see as far into the future as my sight will allow. And the future does look very bleak. I would've agreed with the Elders, except for one path that has some hope. It's not an easy path, nor, at present, is it a very likely path. The reason I wanted to meet today is that I'd like to suggest that we take some actions to make this path our future."

"It's that simple?" Darí had been drawn back into the conversation. "What is this future? Can you tell us what it will look like? And how can we make an improbable future become a probable one?" I sensed cynicism in Darí's voice.

"It is, in fact, not simple at all," Farrwÿn admitted. "I can tell you parts of what I've seen, but not everything. There will be some difficult choices. In some cases, knowing too much will cause the wrong decisions to be made. I've studied this path very carefully, seen the branch points where each decision is made, and seen what factors influence those decisions. What I can do is provide you with the information you will need to make the correct choice when the time for that choice comes." I could tell by the look on Farrwÿn's face that this wasn't easy for him. He plainly knew that he wasn't offering us much on which to base our support. Seeing the skepticism in my expression, he entreated, "You'll have to trust me—trust that I have our people's best interests in mind, even if the path seems strange."

Darí was the first to respond, always easy to forgive Farrwÿn for the awkwardness that his *turas* creates. "I've always trusted your advice before—it's saved my life a time or two. I can't see any reason not to trust you now," he smiled wryly. "Although I'm not sure what we can do to change a future that seems fated to lead to the extinction of our people. What do you want from us?"

Farrwÿn raised his eyes to Darí's, smiling his thanks for the support. Taking a breath, he answered, "The first step is one that I'll take. I'm going to get myself on Gryffÿth's list of colonists."

"You think that he'll accept you?" I exclaimed, staring at him in surprise. "Knowing who you are?"

"His screening barrier won't work on me," Farrwÿn chuckled. "I've already undergone a genetic analysis. I'm clear of the problems that would allow Gryffÿth to reject me based on his DNA testing. If he doesn't want me on his colonist list, he'll have to make it a personal issue. I'm friends with many of the people who are already on his list, and this will make it very difficult for him to rationally refuse me without potentially losing the support of his followers. Getting on the list will be the easy part."

“If Gryffÿth is as dangerous as you think, that doesn’t sound like a very good position to put yourself in.” Darí expressed the concern that immediately came to my mind as well. “It would be better if it was one of us—at least we’ve been trained as Guardians,” Darí briefly touched the Star that he wore.

“You both know that you wouldn’t get through Gryffÿth’s genetic testing,” Farrwÿn grinned conspiratorially. “After all these years, and as stable and productive as your lineage has been, no one would ever guess what’s been lurking in your genome. But DNA analysis would find it.”

“You know the history—we didn’t ask for it, we just ended up with it,” I pointed out, somewhat defensively.

“Whether the acquiring of your modified genes was accidental or purposeful, they do have some benefits. But getting onto Gryffÿth’s list isn’t one of them.” Farrwÿn was still smiling, but in a gentle way that eased my defensiveness. “So, it will have to be my task to follow the colonists.”

“And after that … what then?” Pushing aside the tangle of thoughts that always arose when our family’s peculiar secret surfaced, I tried to focus on the important points of our discussion.

“I’d like Darí to take me planet hunting.” Farrwÿn had a bright gleam in his eyes, like he found something about all of this personally exciting. “If our people are going to make it through this crisis, we must have a new home. In a thousand years or so, Ellendrïa is going to be virtually uninhabitable. Gryffÿth wants to take the Ellendrí to a new planet. I want to make sure we find the right one.”

“You … planet hunting?” Darí was laughing gently. “That seems as unlikely as you becoming a colonist. I never realized that you had a yearning for off-world adventure.”

“Maybe I just haven’t had a chance to experience any yet,” Farrwÿn’s gaze was opaque and unreadable.

“Are you sure?” Darí peered at Farrwÿn closely. “I could take Dran with me instead. He has a pretty good sense of our peoples’ needs, especially after working with the Elders.” My heart jumped for a moment at the thought of finally having a chance to travel with my *deirfad*. I caught his eyes, smiling tentatively, and he returned the smile with a warm grin. Obviously, he thought it might be a good thing too.

Farrwÿn shook his head. “No … since he’s a member of the Historian’s Guild, I want Dran to do some more research on Drÿfoch and Gryffÿth. He might have better luck than I’ve had. But more importantly, I have a mental image of the planet we need to find. Once I see it, I’ll know we’ve found the right one.”

My sudden hopes plummeted. I gave Farrwÿn a sharp look, realizing that once again I was going to be left behind … and feeling a sudden surge of emotion—frustration, pain, loneliness. Farrwÿn shook his head just slightly. Darí was frowning, but he hadn’t noticed the interchange between Farrwÿn and I—he was still busy contemplating a proposed exploration mission. I heard Farrwÿn’s telepathic voice in my head, “*Not now, but soon*.” I turned my head away, forcing my clenched fists to relax.

Chapter 8: Problems Without Solutions

Eldarí—Date: 8936.113

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

The display screen embedded in the polished crystalline surface of the common room table was showing a star map of the Ll'Ellendrÿn, divided up into the three Arcs—the First Arc shown in blue, the Second Arc in green, the Third Arc in purple. I was seated with Farrwÿn at the table. Dran was standing nearby, watching us both with an inscrutable expression on his face. It was the day after our meeting in the orchard, and we were studying the star map while discussing the nature of a planetary exploration expedition. I could see that Dran was not happy about something, but I wasn't sure what. While our bond seemed strong and active, he still retained the disconcerting ability of submerging his thoughts so deeply that I couldn't tell what he was thinking without forcing myself into his mind, something that my ethics seriously precluded. I suspected that he had hoped I'd stay on Ellendrïa for a while, but Farrwÿn's plans had quickly co-opted my time. We both knew that I would be underway again soon. Beyond simply keeping track of each other, Dran and I hadn't made any plans that might have been disrupted by a potential change in my schedule, so I guessed I would have to wait until Dran felt like talking.

Our discussion was focused primarily on the Second Arc. Farrwÿn tapped the controls for the screen, concealed along the edge of the table, and a number of the stars in the Second Arc changed to a bright red color. "I've been spending a few days in the archives, studying what we know about Ellendorí planet bioengineering and colonization." Indicating the red-marked stars, Farrwÿn continued, "All of these stars have been recorded as having planets that have undergone at least preliminary bioengineering. They are suns of the type to which we are adapted. The bioengineered planets orbiting them are in the comfortable habitable zone and are roughly the same size as Ellendrïa. Most of these planets have one or more moons, which seems necessary for long-term stability in planetary rotation and day length. They also have significant amounts of surface water and are protected from wandering asteroids by gas giants in the outer orbits of their solar systems. Essentially, they have the right basic conditions to be habitable." A second tap on the panel caused about a third of the red stars to change to dark blue. "The stars that I have marked as blue are ones where the habitable planet is already colonized." Farrwÿn touched the control panel a third time and six of the remaining red stars turned grey. "These grey stars are ones where I've found a report that flags the bioengineered planet as being potentially unsuitable for colonization for one reason or another."

I leaned over the table, looking closely at the star map. "Hmmm … that still leaves 12 candidate stars, scattered over the entire Second Arc. I hope you weren't expecting this to be a quick task. How much of a look are you going to need in order to be sure we've found the planet you've seen in your visions?"

Farrwÿn closed his eyes, apparently formulating an answer. "I think we'll have to do some flights over the surface to see the land masses, maybe do a surface survey to see what the vegetation is like. That

should be enough information to match up to what I've seen. We should know fairly quickly if any of these planets are totally inhospitable."

"I should hope so." I absently tapped the screen with my finger. "I won't be able to devote my entire time to the search—I still have some work setting up the Border Patrol, and whatever other duties I get assigned. I think Rallandrí will give me a bit of a break, since I've been on duty for quite a long stretch without much time off. Still … Farrwÿn, if you want to come with me, I'm going to be dragging you around a good bit of the Ll'Ellendrÿn before the search is over."

"That's all right," Farrwÿn's eyes had that strange opaque look again. "Maybe I'd like to see some new places." Talking about inscrutable, Farrwÿn could be even more difficult to comprehend than my *deirfad*. Even after growing up with him, I still wasn't entirely certain what skills and abilities Farrwÿn actually possessed. Possibly Farrwÿn didn't know himself. However, I had observed over the years that whatever tasks Farrwÿn chose to accomplish, he was always successful in the end, quietly and without any pretensions. I'd long ago come to the conclusion that there was considerably more to Farrwÿn than anyone realized.

"I really can't predict how long this is going to take," I warned Farrwÿn. "In part, it's going to rely on luck, whether the planet we're looking for is the first one we go to or the last one. It's also going to depend on how busy things get out there for the Guardians, and how often I get assigned to missions. If I get called out to something dangerous, I'm going to have to drop you off somewhere safe, then return for you when I'm finished." I paused a moment, looking at Farrwÿn to see if there was any reaction to what I'd just said, but as far as I could tell, he seemed untroubled by the thought of being potentially abandoned for an unknown length of time. So I continued, "We could find what we're looking for in half a year, or maybe as long as two years. I don't know. And that's only for preliminary surveys … it'll take longer if we need to collect data on planetary conditions."

"Preliminary should be fine for now," Farrwÿn confirmed. "If we find the right one, we can do a full survey later to gather all the necessary information to convince Gryffÿth and his colonists that we have what they need." Farrwÿn scratched his head, smiling wryly. "It does sound like we're going at this backward … knowing the planet we want to find, then doing the survey work in order to make everyone else believe us, but that's the paradox of foresight." He sighed.

Dran was staring at the purple region demarcating the Third Arc. "How do you know that there's nothing in the Third Arc?"

"I don't really," Farrwÿn admitted. "We don't have a lot of information on the bioengineered planets in that region of space, so I thought that it would be easier to start our search in the Second Arc." Farrwÿn ran his fingertips lightly over the area on the star map showing the Third Arc. "Some of my visions have been about a planet that might be out here, but that's not the planet we want to find for our new home."

“I’ll let you continue with your planning then,” Dran stepped away from the table. “I’ve been called to an Elder Council meeting, so I’m going to be out for a while.”

“I’m sure we’ll still be here working on things when you get back,” I chuckled. “This looks like it’s going to be a rather prolonged adventure.” Dran inclined his head in a gesture of leave-taking, turned, and went out the common room door.

Eldranth—Date: 8936.113

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

Outside the house, paths led to the various areas within the dome. The widest one led to the main dome entrance, located on the side of the dome facing away from the city. This was where Darí had landed his ship yesterday. Another path, almost as wide, passed under the orchard trees, ending at the dome's rear subterranean entrance. As always, I chose the path that led to the main entrance.

Exiting from the main entrance airlock, I felt the dry heat wash over me and the momentary tightness in my lungs as they worked to adapt to the lower oxygen levels. Although it presented some level of discomfort, walking outside kept my body at a much higher level of fitness than always staying within the domes and their interconnecting tunnels. In any case, the sun was well past its zenith now. The day was beginning to cool, making the trip much less onerous that it might have been.

The walk would also give me some time alone to get my emotions under control. I was angry and frustrated. Farrwÿn knew what I was trying to do, yet he'd snatched my opportunity away. Why had he encouraged me when he'd planned to head off on an extended search expedition with Darí? Was he somehow suggesting that I should wait another two years? My mind kept going back to the two pairs of *anÿnbränne* that I'd seen on Farrwÿn's workbench. Föalen and Seabÿn. Farrwÿn was House Aurora—if he had a patrilineal house, no one knew what it was—so it wasn't Farrwÿn and Darí. But did Farrwÿn intend to introduce Darí to someone belonging to House Seabÿn? Other than Thorven, I didn't know of anyone else from that house. I tried to push these thoughts out of my mind. They only increased my agitation. I took several deep breaths of the hot, dry air, trying some mental exercises to still my overactive imagination.

Earlier today, I had changed into a tunic with the yellow trim denoting a Recorder or Historian. Each guild had their own specific color—green for Healers, blue for Guardians, red for Elders, purple for Artisans, and so forth. Fine needlework in bright yellow thread, creating a complex pattern of intertwined plants and animals, formed the trim at both the cuffs and collar of my tunic. The pattern of the trim was specific to my heritage. Since ancient times, each Ellendrí lineage, both patrilineal and matrilineal, had its own emblem, usually a plant or animal found on Ellendrïa. The symbolic meanings associated with these emblems were drawn from ancient Ellendrí history, and were seldom known outside the family to which they belonged. I could easily visualize the two components of my own personal design—the *föalen*, a large wild canine once common on Ellendrïa, but now only surviving in mountaintop refuges, which I had inherited from my patrilineal lineage, and the *iverÿn*, a tough and enduring vine that produces purple flowers in the Ellendrïan spring, which I had inherited from my matrilineal lineage. The *föalen* was supposed to symbolize loyalty and endurance, whereas the *iverÿn* was a symbol of wisdom and faithfulness. How these particular traits related to individuals from my family was somewhat open to interpretation. In any case, the formal patterns on tunics were largely to allow an observer to identify, at a glance, both the wearer's profession and their family.

Unlike most Ellendrí, who tended to stay within the confines of the domes, wearing sandals or even walking barefoot, I always wore sturdy high cut boots. Where once the parkland surrounding the city had been carpeted in soft grass, now there was only dust, sand, and gravel. Good footwear was a necessity outside the domes.

I tried to visualize what the city and its surrounds must once have looked like, as I walked around to face it. Certainly different than it looked now, different than I had ever remembered it looking. Spread out ahead of me was dome after dome, one after another as far as the eye could see. Once, there had been many cities on Ellendrïa, when the Ellendrí had been more numerous. Now, there was only the one city, and maybe 30,000 Ellendrí. The number of domes made it seem like the population was much larger, but many of the domes were agricultural, housing crops, orchards, and forests. Other domes were game sanctuaries, protecting the last of the native Ellendrïa plants and animals. A few of the domes provided space for community services, archives, academies, parks, and other shared facilities. Only a small percentage of the domes were family domes, with living quarters and small subsidence gardens and orchards. The city center was nearly two millirads from where I lived. When the domes had become necessary, a very large dome had been erected over the old city center buildings, thus protecting them and allowing the center to continue to function. Most of the domes on this side of the city were older; many had been built nearly a thousand years ago. Newer agricultural domes had been constructed mainly on the side of the city farthest away from my family's dome.

In order to carry out my duties, I needed to walk to the city center, where the Elders had their enclave. Not too far, but long enough to be a good workout given the conditions outside the domes. Just to the west of our dome was the old roadway, made of a colorful mosaic of carefully cut and fitted stone blocks. Stepping out onto this still smooth surface, I started walking towards the center of the city. Once the city had a name—it was called Dïarven and was the administrative center of Ellendrïa—but now it was just the city, the only remaining inhabited site on the planet. The road led past several smaller domes on the outskirts of the city. To the east, I could see an area of larger and more tightly spaced domes that formed the manufacturing and agricultural section. Skirting the northwest side of the city, the ancient highway eventually took me to my destination—the immense central dome. Underground tunnels connected to this dome from all sides, providing covered, climate-controlled access to the city center from various locations. However, the dome also had airlocks opening out onto the surface. I headed to a small airlock located on the side of the dome nearest the road, pressing my palm against a panel beside the entrance door. The door hissed open and, after a few brief moments spent in the airlock, I strode into the heart of Dïarven.

The dome housing Dïarven's main city center is over a millirad in diameter. With self-sufficiency in mind, this huge dome covers not only various service and recreational facilities, but much of the multifamily housing where most of Dïarven's population dwells, as well as a wide green-belt where significant amounts of food are grown. Entering the dome, I followed a road that passed by fields and orchards, through stretches of parkland, with the city proper rising up out of the horizon. A pleasant stroll brought

me to the edge of the city center, where the road was now lined with buildings that were a mixture of styles, ranging from utilitarian to highly creative.

From here, it was almost possible to visualize what the whole city must have looked like long ago. Graceful old buildings composed of stone, metal, and other composite materials faced out onto broad boulevards. Walking paths wound between green spaces with trees, gardens, and public areas where people could rest, eat, and talk together. I took a quiet path down towards the center of the dome until I reached a two-story building that had two vertical red panels, one on each side of the main entrance. Broad steps, cut from a reddish stone, led up to the entrance door, which was open, welcoming anyone who wished to speak with the Elders. Since the Elders were preparing for a Council meeting, any visitors coming now would be asked to return tomorrow at a scheduled time when they could be guaranteed a hearing. However, I knew I was expected, and headed up the stairs, down a broad corridor, and into the back meeting room.

Entering the room, I could hear the Elders talking in quiet voices. Several stopped their discussions to greet me as I took my place at a small table along the back wall of the room. I pulled my tablet out from a pouch at my belt, inserting a fresh recording disk. As I settled myself down at the table, the Elders started to drift towards their accustomed positions in the room. Their tunics were richly embellished with red needlework, an indication of the honor given to their positions, each one with their own unique family design. There were 10 of them. As their name implied, they were selected from amongst the oldest Ellendrí living on Ellendrïa. Like all Ellendrí, they showed no signs of aging; however, they had a certain grace and dignity that spoke of many turnings of experience, tended to wear their hair longer as was common practice amongst the older Ellendrí, and most visibly, almost all of them were androgynous, neither male phase nor female phase.

As I watched the Elders, my mind drifted back to my early biology lessons on sexual reproduction. The determination of gender in the Ellendrí follows the same pattern as in the ancient Ellendorí. Both races, which compose a part of the human spectrum referred to as the Dasení, are hermaphrodites, and can be male phase, female phase, bisexual, or androgynous at any point in their life[50]. As Ellendrí age, they often develop a preference for the androgynous phase, which explains why most Elders are androgynes. Mutations and evolution in some of the earliest Ellendorí colonists[51], and the races derived from them, now referred to as the Sfoení, have modified their reproductive biology. In the Ll'Ellendrÿn of today, the Ellendorí pattern is relatively uncommon.

Working as a Guardian, I've always remained in the male phase. Once, long before I was born, when peacekeeping work was mostly mediation and facilitation, Guardians were fairly evenly split between male and female phase individuals. In more recent times, however, the work that Guardians do is frequently hard and dangerous. Although some Guardians still start out in female phase, very few stay that way, as there are few benefits in retaining the female form under these conditions.

Guardians who are *anÿncára* often do go through *ërïol* together, but since they are both in male phase,

they are sterile and don't bear children. I wondered briefly what Darí and I would do if we should actually become *sïathcára*. Incest was not strictly forbidden, but we would face strong disapproval. However, living in close contact with each other, could we truly remain chaste? Would anyone believe us if we did? And in the end, if the real concern was inbreeding, who would we be harming so long as no children were conceived?

Looking up from my position, I could see that the Elders were now settling down in preparation for the meeting. I needed to bring my mind back to the work at hand. My usual task with the Elder Council is to record discussions during a Council meeting. Usually, an audio recording is sufficient, although occasionally, depending on the issues being addressed by the Council, I might also be asked to make a video or even holographic recording. As my tablet is recording, I generally make additional notes regarding any nonverbal communications that are significant to the issues at hand. The tablet is keyed to my psychic pattern, and records any information that I telepathically send to it. Later, after a meeting, I check through the recording to ensure that it accurately represents the discussion before filing the recording disk with the Historians for archival purposes. Today, my recording would strictly be audio.

Like many members of my family, I have a good memory—in fact, I'm cursed with nearly perfect recall—which has made it easy for me to take a position as Recorder in the Historian's guild. I say cursed because if I could figure out how to convince Rallandrí that I can't do this work, I would. My recall abilities have given him the justification to keep me grounded on Ellendrïa more times than I would have liked, only letting me carry out off-planet missions when the need has been extreme. Of course, I've disobeyed orders a few times too. Not because I have a flagrant disregard for the system, but rather because some things are more important than Rallandrí's attempts to keep me out of dangerous situations. I suppose, looking back, some of my actions have justified Rallandrí's concern.

I started my recording as Thorven, who was acting as spokesperson for the Elders, stood and announced the topics for discussion. Thorven was the only Elder who was still clearly in male phase. Not that I find this surprising—Thorven's family is renowned for being independent and intrepid adventurers, and Thorven himself has spent more than a few years as a Guardian, amongst many other professions. Even though he is old enough to be selected as an Elder, there is little about him that I consider elderly. Unlike some Elders, who gradually lose interest in the world and start yearning for the beyond, Thorven is still very active, intense, and involved in the affairs of the Ellendrí. His long life and many experiences have granted him a great deal of wisdom. For this reason, he has been selected to speak for the Elders.

There was nothing particularly surprising about the topics for discussion either—the ongoing debate about whether any attempt should be made to find another habitable planet for evacuation of the Ellendrí population, concerns about Gryffÿth's growing list of people wanting to be colonists, upgrading needed on older buildings to withstand the increasing intensity of earthquakes, a crack in agricultural dome seven that needs immediate attention … While a part of me knew that what I was doing here on Ellendrïa was useful, I ardently wished that I was working on some mission way out there somewhere … Thorven gave me a sharp look, and I turned my focus back to my tablet. I wasn't missing anything, I'd

just learned to let a small unoccupied part of my brain daydream about more exciting things than recording meetings in which problems were raised and solutions seldom found. That was the toughest part—working as a Recorder allowed me to get a sense of the peoples' needs and concerns, but I was unable to participate in finding solutions to those issues. I'm a problem solver, a person of action. All this endless talking with no decisions in sight was exhausting.

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Evening was approaching, with the sun only a couple of finger widths above the edge of the distant mountains, when I retraced my path down the red steps of the Elders' enclave and out onto the central boulevard. A small group of people were gathered in one of the larger open grassy areas, clearly the remnants of what had been a much larger crowd, judging from the trampled state of the grass. Someone was standing on a table talking to the group. What particularly drew my attention was the unusual clothing that the orator was wearing. I had seen enough of these gatherings from a distance to suspect that what I was seeing was the end of one of Gryffÿth's colonist rallies, but I had never actually gotten close enough to get a good look at Gryffÿth himself. He was wearing a dark brown tunic and pants, more tightly fitted than was typical for the warm temperatures on Ellendrí, with a total absence of any designs indicating profession or family. Both the color and the lack of acknowledgment of affiliation, either to family or guild, was highly unusual for Ellendrí in public situations. He was clearly trying to portray himself as the experienced outland homesteader who could lead a group of colonists to successfully settle a new home world for the Ellendrí. I wandered closer, trying not to be too obvious in my interest, but Gryffÿth spotted me easily. I got a quick impression of hair so pale that it was almost white, flat, emotionless silvery eyes, and a face somewhat broader than was typical for most Ellendrí. I quickly turned my eyes away and started walking along the path I usually took when homeward-bound.

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The day was drawing to a close—sunset was beginning to color the sky. I was sitting in the pilot's seat of my ship, which still waited patiently outside our family dome for my next adventure. Ostensibly, I'd come out here to check on a few things that I would need Kÿrrÿl to repair before I was ready to head off-planet again. In reality, it put a little distance between Darí and me, thus making it easier for me to shield my thoughts from him. Cradled in my lap was the bundle that Farrwÿn had given me the previous day.

As I struggled to remove the wrappings from the bundle, I had to stop for a moment and take a deep breath. My hands were shaking slightly. What was I afraid of? Calming myself, I tugged at the last layer of fabric, which slid away to reveal a box made of a striking red wood, about as long as my forearm, and a hand's width in breadth and depth. The top and sides of the box were ornately carved, with the incised lines of the carvings painted in various shades of blues and greens. The whole box was coated in a glossy finish, clearly meant to protect the artwork from the ravages of time and use. The workmanship was superb, the artistry breathtakingly beautiful. I knew that Farrwÿn had put much time and creativity into

this project.

Tentatively, I traced the designs on the top of the box with a fingertip. Yes, there was a *föalen*, colored in the forest-green of a Healer. Below it was a second *föalen* in mirror-image, upside down and facing the opposite direction, colored in the bright Guardian blue. I assumed that the *föalen* were meant to represent Darí as the Healer and me as the Guardian, or, since I had completed my Healer's training, the symbolism could be reversed as well. But there was more … between the two *föalen* was a third creature, some kind of bird, outlined in a dark blue. I looked at it closely. It clearly wasn't a bird of prey, so it wasn't House Seabÿn. In fact, it wasn't any House crest that I could identify. The design suggested a longish tail, short, broad wings, and a head with a distinctive crest. Certainly, I knew of a number of bird species that had once lived on Ellendrïa that might be symbolized by this design; however, none of them were associated with any Houses. So what was Farrwÿn trying to tell me? The pattern of two mirror-image *föalen* bracketing a bird was repeated many times on the different surfaces of the box, although the stances of the creatures differed, and none of the designs were exactly identical. Along the edges of the box, a green *iverÿn* vine with dark, almost purplish-blue flowers formed the framing for the animal motifs.

On each end of the box, near the top edge, I found a small depression about the size of a fingertip. Pressing on these at the same time released the catch mechanism, enabling me to lift the top of the box off. Inside, carefully packed in a soft, fibrous, grass-like material were six objects—*three* pairs of *anÿnbränne*. My breath caught in my throat. I quickly slammed my mental barriers shut as tightly as possible. I didn't want to let Darí know what I'd commissioned Farrwÿn to do, and I most especially didn't want him to feel the confusion in my mind over what Farrwÿn had created. Indeed, what had Farrwÿn done, and why? Was this something to do with the triad that he'd foreseen?

All three pairs were composed of *drurïan*, the blue metal Farrwÿn had shown me. Without touching them, I moved my hand above them slowly. Yes, they were already keyed. That didn't surprise me—Farrwÿn knew our psychic patterns from our childhood together, and had done other work for us involving the keying of small psi-active locks, tablets, and such. Carefully, I touched my finger to one of the *anÿnbränne* in the first pair—and immediately recognized it as keyed to my own pattern. A light touch confirmed that the second pair was keyed to Darí, his pattern very nearly identical to mine. I hesitated before touching the third pair—they were slightly smaller than the first two, clearly made to go on wrists that were smaller in diameter than either Darí's or mine. This, therefore, was the third member of the triad—the person who was not yet with us. Very cautiously, I reached out to touch one of the *anÿnbränne* in the third pair, curiosity overcoming fear for the moment. I expected the feeling to be somewhat uncomfortable. Touching an object keyed to someone else's psychic patterns could be quite unpleasant; however, someone who was to be our *anÿncára* should be immediately compatible, albeit new and strange. I wasn't prepared for what actually happened. My mind instantly recognized Darriel's pattern. I jerked my hand back as though I'd touched something hot, almost knocking the box off my lap. I shuddered as I felt the ache in my soul where once I had been bonded to Darriel. "May your

balls freeze in the seventh hell of Vorÿn," I cursed Farrwÿn when I had breath enough for words. What was he trying to do to us?

Picking up one of the *anÿnbränne* that was keyed to me, I examined it more closely, my hands still trembling slightly as I recovered from the shock of encountering Darriel's pattern and the memories it evoked. Along the top edge of the *anÿnbränne*, a row of *föalen* linked head to tail in a complex pattern, formed from a single unbroken line, traversed around the cylinder to the right. Along the bottom edge, a second, similar, but upside down, pattern of *föalen* traveled around the perimeter to the left. In between the two rows of canines was the bird design, again formed from a single unbroken line, but with the birds alternately joined head-to-head and tail-to-tail. As I studied the fine detail of the artwork, engraved precisely into the metal, I could see that, in fact, the entire pattern, both *föalen* and crested birds, was formed from one single, intricately drawn line with no beginning or end. Clearly the significance of this design was that all three were bound together, linked to form a single whole. Carefully feeling around the *anÿnbränne*, I pressed a small indent on the surface that activated the cleverly hidden catch. The cuff opened, revealing that it was hinged on one side. Soft, supple leather lined the inside of the *anÿnbränne*—this protected the wrist from abrasion, allowed some adjustment to provide a better fit, and was obviously designed to be replaced when worn.

I stared at the *anÿnbränne* for a long time, my thoughts in turmoil. Darriel's paternal house crest was the *tarálon*, the wild equine, and her maternal house crest was the *queralïon*, a large deciduous tree that bore nuts and often grew to great size and age. Neither had any relationship to a crested bird. Did the bird motif have something to do with her death? And what did it mean? That we were to remember her as the lost part of our triad? Yet Farrwÿn spoke as though the triad was a thing of the future and not the past. Was he referring to the beyond, where Darriel might well be awaiting us, or to the reality in which we now existed? How could she be part of our future in this actuality? Perhaps Farrwÿn was hinting at rebirth, an almost mythological concept—it apparently did occur amongst our people, but very rarely. I was doubtful, yet I couldn't provide any rational explanation for what Farrwÿn had created. I could ask him for clarification, but knowing Farrwÿn as well as I did, I suspected that he wouldn't be likely to say much more. For a moment, I seriously began to wonder if Farrwÿn had wandered off into some form of insanity, especially after the events of yesterday. At the same time, I felt sure that I could trust Farrwÿn; that he was not playing warped mind games with us.

Cautiously, I reached deep inside myself, seeking the place where my *anÿncára* bond to Darriel had once existed. The sense of longing, of brokenness, of painful loss was still there, as it had been since Darriel's death. Had the link been broken by death? Or was it just quiescent, as my bond with Darí had been only a short time ago? Would it awaken when I died and went into the beyond, or was it waiting for some event in this lifetime to reactivate it? I had no answers for these questions either.

I sighed, gently returning the *anÿnbränne* to its place in the box. Closing the box, I replaced the protective wrappings and stored the bundle in my collection of personal items on board the ship.

Hopefully, Darí hadn't been too disturbed by my thoughts. I had no idea how I was going to explain all of this to him, should we ever get the time to talk of such things. I knew that the presence of Darriel's psychic pattern was going to be even more painful for him than it was for me. Should I forget the whole thing, just carry on as we had for so long? Certainly, it looked as though Darí was going to be extremely busy for the next couple of years. Maybe I should just give up on it and get on with my life.

I shook my head and set to work on the task that I was supposed to be doing—checking over my ship for servicing. There were some issues, to be sure. The ship was old. It had been constructed when my *athairad* was a Guardian, had been in service for the better part of a thousand years. Ellendrí ships are tough, built to last a long time, but this ancient ship was coming near to the end of its useful life. Not only was it old, but our technology had changed a lot over those years. The parts that I needed to service the ship were no longer manufactured. Usually, I gave Kÿrrÿl a list of components that I needed to have overhauled or replaced, and he would spend some time searching through a few of the wrecks that he kept at the shipyard specifically for this purpose. However, I'd pretty much used up his old parts inventory. The last couple of times I'd taken my ship in for servicing, he'd had to manufacture new pieces. Since Kÿrrÿl's facility had been totally retooled to produce more modern components, creating an antiquated part for me was both frustrating and time-consuming for him. I hated having to ask him to do it again.

After noting the various problems that I was having with the ship's systems on my tablet, I headed outside to do an external inspection. This was where I had my greatest worries. I was becoming more concerned about the damage to the heat shielding on the forward edges of the wings. I knew the damage was the result of my own foolish actions; however, at the time, I'd managed to prevent the deaths of 10 people whose only mistake was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'd been depressed, possibly even a bit suicidal, and my life had seemed like a small price to pay in order to save 10. So I'd been careless, my ship had suffered, and ultimately, Darí would have suffered had my ship's shields failed. I suppose, in defense of my actions, my *turas* had shown me that I was likely to succeed. Then again, my *turas* is not always infallible. In any case, the situation had changed dramatically since that time. Not only had my inclination for foolishness been repressed, but I'd also come to appreciate how seriously I'd damaged my ship. The last few atmospheric reentries I'd done had been difficult, with the ship threatening to overheat and turn into a molten glob of miscellaneous materials. The problem was bad, and it was clearly getting worse. It had only been by careful piloting using a very shallow re-entry approach that I'd been able to land at all this last time coming home to Ellendrí.

I walked around to the front of the ship, looking closely at the leading edges of the wings. Originally, the damage had been visible as an iridescent discoloration on the surface. Now, I could see fine fracture lines in the heat shielding, even a few small chips. I laid my hand on the wing, gently rubbing the surface. I could feel roughness where the material should be glassy-smooth. "I am a misbegotten whelp of a deranged *föalen*," I cursed myself softly. The ship and I had gone many light years together. While it had never been given a name, I was fond of the old craft. Unfortunately, I could see that it wasn't going to be

flying again without major repairs. I seriously doubted that Kÿrrÿl would consider rebuilding something that old. That meant I was grounded, potentially for the unforeseeable future, unless Rallandrí made it a priority to put me back on off-world duty. Since he clearly wanted me staying on Ellendrïa, I didn't think I could put much hope in that happening.

I rested my head against my ship, feeling a combination of frustration and self-loathing. I was certainly reaping the consequences of my previous actions. It wasn't just that I didn't want to be trapped on Ellendrïa recording very tedious Elder Council meetings; I had hoped that I could somehow spend more time with Darí, even if it meant chasing him around the Ll'Ellendrÿn in my ancient ship. However, with Darí planning on traveling off-world with Farrwÿn for some time to come, and with my ship in dangerous disrepair, I suspected we weren't going to be seeing much of each other. All I could do was talk with Kÿrrÿl. With so many Guardians laying down their Stars, maybe I could beg Kÿrrÿl for one of the older ships that would be coming out of service. It might not be armed, but of course neither was my ship, and anything would be better than nothing at all.

Chapter 9: Preparations

Eldarí—Date: 8936.115

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

I checked in with the city flight control center as I readied my ship for takeoff. Not that I expected much of concern—other than the Guardians, very few Ellendrí went off-planet these days, and the amount of intra-city air traffic was very low. A few moments later, flight control gave me permission to fly over the city on route to the domes on the far side. It had been a couple of years since I'd last had my ship in for any maintenance work. My *ïdrÿlad*, Kÿrrÿl, who was in charge of the space flight facility, was extremely insistent that it be brought in for a check over. Besides, I had a few questions to ask him.

Kÿrrÿl was a bit of an oddity in my family. While most of us were Healers or Psi Techs, and a few were Guardians, Kÿrrÿl was a Scientist-Engineer, heavily involved in the technological side of our culture. Lighthearted and fun-loving, I suspected that Kÿrrÿl's youthful demeanor often belied the depth and breadth of his knowledge. He was thin and wiry, lean even amongst our people, who were not generally of heavy stature. I always thought that he seemed more suited to lead a subdued life rather than engage in anything physically demanding. And yet, he was probably the best pilot on Ellendrïa, having traveled to almost all the inhabited planets of the Ll'Ellendrÿn at some time during his life. Nor was he inclined to leave all the hard work of ship building and maintenance to the junior members of his guild. Each ship was hand built and carefully inspected by Kÿrrÿl on a regular basis—he was most frequently found with a tool in his hand working on one of his many projects.

I engaged the antigrav unit, rotated the main EM drive in the tail section downward toward the pavement below the ship to provide thrust for a vertical liftoff, and gently brought the ship up to flight altitude. Bringing the engine back to its regular position for flight, in line with the horizontal axis of the fuselage, I flew slowly over the city. Unlike the rockets used by some of the races with more primitive space flight technology, the electromagnetic drives we use are quiet and require no propellant, thus they produce no pollutants during flight. Solar energy is captured by the surfaces of the ship's wings, which are composed of an outer layer of a clear crystalline heat shielding substance, a middle layer of highly efficient photoelectric film, and an inner metallic alloy that provides the structural strength for the wing. This energy is retained in large storage cells, from which it is drawn as needed to drive both the antigrav units and the electromagnetic drives.

The domes became larger and more widely spaced as I approached the farthest reaches of the city. Many of these domes were agricultural, housing crops and animals, but a few were used by guilds that required large amounts of space for their work. I could now see the dome housing the space flight facility, operated by the Science and Technology Guild, in the distance. The courtyard in front of the dome was empty, and the large cargo doors were wide open. Kÿrrÿl was expecting me. Bringing my ship directly over the courtyard, I reversed my takeoff procedure to execute a neat vertical landing in the

center of the space. Keeping the antigrav unit powered up, I hovered the ship just above the ground, using the auxiliary electromagnetic thrusters, situated at the bases of the four wings, to maneuver the craft through the cargo doors. As I passed through the doorway, I could feel the faint tingle of the force field that was preventing the dome from losing its atmosphere while the doors were open. I brought my ship to a stop in the center of a cleared space just inside the dome's entrance, and slowly decreased the strength of the antigrav field, settling to the ground. A few quick touches on the flight console powered all the systems down and opened the landing ramp.

I could see Kÿrrÿl and a handful of others already heading my way. I slipped out of my ship just as one of the technicians was heading up the ramp. A quiet whir told me that the ship was being powered up again. I stepped away quickly when it began to hover. Moments later, the tech started to move it towards one of the spaces along the side of the dome, freeing up the entrance area for the next incoming craft. While I was trying to get out of everyone's way, Kÿrrÿl caught up with me, giving me an enthusiastic hug.

"Welcome home, *ïdrÿlad*!" Kÿrrÿl was wearing a nondescript grey tunic and pants, clearly work clothes that had already seen some action. His pale hair was fine and straight, a little too long, with some tucked behind his ears and the rest falling forward into his eyes. He'd obviously just crawled out of one of the ships that was in for repair, but he didn't seem unhappy about being disturbed. "It's good to see you! You spend so little time on Ellendrïa these days that I thought you were taking up homesteading in the Third Arc."

"Little likelihood of that, although it might be a more enjoyable pastime than chasing the Cultaní," I smiled and returned my *ïdrÿlad's* hug. "This place looks busy."

"A little more than usual. It seems that you had something to do with it. Most of the Guardians have come back home, some to stay and some to get major ship upgrades. So we're almost full in here. What exactly did you do?" Kÿrrÿl pushed the hair out of his eyes and looked up at me.

"I told them to get their ships armed if they wanted to survive the Cultaní attacks. Some will head back out once their ships have weapons; others are giving up their Stars. No one is very happy about all of this, least of all me." I sighed. I knew that I had just presented the reasonable options to the other Guardians, but it still made me feel as though I was personally responsible for our demise.

"Well, it's certainly keeping us busy," Kÿrrÿl did a wide sweep with his arm, indicating all of the various ships parked around the dome's perimeter. I followed Kÿrrÿl's gesture with my eyes. It was a rare opportunity to view so many Ellendrí ships at one time. They varied in age and size, markings and coloration. Some were sleek and fast, others designed more for comfort. A few had bright, almost garish, colors and detail work; most, however, were grey or black with simple family designs on the main body section. Each was highly individualistic—a disparate fleet they were.

In general, most of our ships are not capable of long space voyages at sub-light speeds. They have

sufficient power to climb out of the gravity well of a planet, and heat shielding designed to allow safe re-entry into a planetary atmosphere. Ellendrïan ships are fast enough that travel between planets within a solar system in a reasonably short period of time is possible, but for longer distances, they employ passage through n-dimensional space.

By creating a temporary gravitational anomaly, a spaceship forms a "warp bubble". This protective bubble moves the spaceship off our local brane and into the higher-dimensional bulk space. This is referred to as opening a "gate"[52]. Collapsing the bubble forces the ship to be ejected back out of these higher dimensions into normal four-dimensional spacetime. N-dimensional space is often referred to as *airï* or "between"[53], since it is perceived as a black, empty void between one physical location and another. Distance and time are experienced differently in the between than in normal spacetime. Thus, a short trip in between that takes only a few moments can result in great distances being traveled in real space. The distance traveled and the location at which the ship exits from between into normal space is determined by the velocity of the ship when it passes through the gate into the between and the length of time before the ship's protective bubble is collapsed. In order to travel throughout the galaxy in this manner, it's only necessary for a ship to get sufficiently far enough away from any planets that their gravity wells do not unnecessarily complicate the formation of the gravitational anomaly that allows entry into the between. Thus, our ships do not require long distance capabilities.

I was always happy to listen to Kÿrrÿl talk passionately about his work. His discussions of the different projects that were underway, the new design work that he was incorporating into some of the older vessels, and some of the challenges that they were facing with many of the aging ships, was accompanied by a tour around the dome. I've always been deeply curious about the world around me, and I've learned to make these trips to Kÿrrÿl's domain a learning experience. More than a few times, I've had to make repairs on my own ship while off on Guardian duty. It's been the things I've learned from Kÿrrÿl that have salvaged a mission, and in a few cases, possibly saved my life.

Most of the ships in the dome had a long narrow nose cone, with an upper canopy of a clear, crystalline, heat-resistant material that allowed the pilot a wide-angle view of the ship's flight path. The nose section generally had seating for one or two people. Just back of the nose cone was a single pair of wings, aerodynamically sweeping towards the rear of the craft, with an electromagnetic engine at the base of each wing. Behind the wings was a cylindrical tail section, bearing a long tail fin and terminating in a single large electromagnetic engine. The tail section also contained the antigrav/gravitational field generator. Except for the heat shielding and their capacity for interstellar travel, these ships were very similar to the atmospheric crafts that were used to travel the skies of Ellendrïa. A few of the ships, mine included, had four wings instead of two, forming an X-shape when viewed from the rear. These are a more modern design, one that Kÿrrÿl had developed after studying some of the spaceships being used by other races in the Ll'Ellendrÿn. They are, in part, a response to the threat posed by Cultaní piracy, being both fast and highly maneuverable. The newest ones are now armed with lasers powerful enough to cut through metal. Originally, our ships didn't carry weapons—the carrying of arms has long been

considered contrary to the pacifistic beliefs of the Ellendrí. However, after Farrwÿn's insistence that my new ship be armed, this is starting to change.

We stopped for a while to look over one of Kÿrrÿl's personal projects. After he'd built the *Föalen*, Kÿrrÿl had started working on a second, similar ship. This one was a bit larger than the *Föalen*, designed to carry four or five people, whereas the *Föalen* can only take two. Kÿrrÿl had been working on it quite slowly over a number of years. It hadn't been a priority project, and he'd enjoyed taking the time to make it as perfect as he could. The last time I'd seen it, about a year ago, it had been far from complete. However, today it looked like it was close to being finished—a surprise to me, since more had been accomplished on it in the last year than in the preceding six.

"What got you so energized on this project?" I smiled at him, raising my eyebrows in query. "Last time I was here, I thought you'd be at least another 10 years."

"Ah, I was just playing with it before," he stroked the hull gently. To Kÿrrÿl, these ships were almost animate. "I finally realized what I was building it for, and that I'd better get the job done before it was too late. So, I got more serious about it."

"You certainly did," I chuckled. Kÿrrÿl could work many days with little rest when a project grabbed his interest or needed to be completed. Still, the new ship hadn't suffered any lack of attention to detail in spite of its recent priority status. "Who's going to fly it?"

"Not going to tell you that right now," he gave me a conspiratorial squint. "I've already shown you too much. You'll see it in action someday, no doubt."

Having walked almost completely around the circumference of the dome, Kÿrrÿl and I finally came to where my ship was now parked, with a crew of techs already running various checks and disassembling components that Kÿrrÿl felt needed replacing. The *Föalen* was a deep, gleaming blue-black, except for the upper wing surfaces, where the blue showed a hint of silvering due to the presence of the photoelectric film. The only marking on the ship was a stylized figure of a *föalen*, drawn in gold, on each side of the nose. Although the design was meant solely as a House emblem, everyone now called my ship the "*Föalen*", largely because it had a much more predatory appearance than most Ellendrïan ships and its kinship to the *föalen* crest was easily envisioned.

"I'm putting your ship on high priority," Kÿrrÿl said as we approached the ship, and I could see the flurry of activity.

"Why? You have lots of projects that were underway before I got here." Having just seen the many different ships in various states of disassembly and reassembly, I could only shake my head.

"Ah, but I know you. You won't be here more than a few handfuls of days, then you'll be off again. If I haven't started work on it, you'll just fly off once again with no maintenance done," Kÿrrÿl smiled

brightly at me. “I do believe we’ve been through this before.”

I chuckled. It was true—more than once over the years, I’d come in at night and taken my ship out of the dome before Kÿrrÿl had been able to do any work on it. I had been needed elsewhere and hadn’t wanted to have an argument with Kÿrrÿl about long overdue maintenance. “I see you have me figured out.”

“And I’m going to sleep in the *Föalen* until the work is done, just to make sure you don’t try another midnight departure.” For a moment, Kÿrrÿl looked more serious. I could see worry in his eyes. “You work too hard. You should take a break for a while. We don’t want to lose you out there.” Kÿrrÿl paused for a moment, blinked, “I’ve been told to gear the *Föalen* up to carry two this trip.”

“By whom?” I arched my eyebrows in surprise.

“Farrwÿn. Quite some time ago, in fact. I’ve just been waiting until you came home to find out what this is all about.”

“Farrwÿn isn’t wasting any time, I can see. I only found out three days ago myself,” I watched the chaos erupting around the *Föalen* for a few moments, thinking about the trip to come. “In fact, I wanted to ask you about outfitting the *Föalen*—is it possible to rig the ship to carry three?”

Kÿrrÿl shook his head, “Not for any extended trips. You might squeeze three in for a jump or two, but there’s no way that three could live in the *Föalen* for any length of time. It’ll be a cramped space for two. I hope you and Farrwÿn still get along!” Kÿrrÿl eyed me thoughtfully, “Why do you ask?”

“I’m pretty sure Dran would like to come along, if we had the space. And to be honest, I’d like to spend more time with my *deirfad*,” I shrugged. Kÿrrÿl knew well enough the struggles that Dran and I had been through, although I wasn’t entirely sure how sympathetic he was towards me. “I guess I can ask him to join us once he gets maintenance done on his own ship. It’ll be a little more planning with two ships. I’ll have to convince Rallandrí to let us use the extra resources for Farrwÿn’s project, but definitely there would be more safety with two,” I was talking mostly to convince myself that such a scheme might work. Unfortunately, even I wasn’t really convinced. While I had sensed Dran’s desire to come along with us on the *Föalen*, and might have been able to encourage his interest further, I was uncertain whether he would choose to follow us if left to his own devices. Focusing on Kÿrrÿl, I could see he was shaking his head again, clearly not in agreement with something I’d said.

“Dran won’t be flying anywhere in that old wreck of his,” Kÿrrÿl stated emphatically. “I’m grounding that thing. He hasn’t got enough heat shielding left on the wings to survive another landing. I took a quick look at his ship a couple of days ago when he was busy at one of the Elder Council meetings. He’s lucky to have made it home,” Kÿrrÿl was still shaking his head, as if his disapproval could somehow change Dran’s actions. I felt bad for Dran—this time he really didn’t deserve the rebuke. The Ellendrí fleet, like the Guardians and our people, was in decline, with fewer and fewer serviceable ships each year. Dran’s

ship should have been replaced years ago. I was very fortunate to have one of the few new ones that Kÿrrÿl's small facility could manufacture. Not for the first time, feelings of guilt tore at me; originally the *Föalen* was meant to be the ship that Dran and I flew together.

"You're not going to force him to stay on Ellendrïa?" Not only was I concerned about what virtual imprisonment, whether merited or not, would do to my *deirfad's* emotional health, I was also now beginning to realize that my hasty decision to travel with Farrwÿn might totally erode the closeness that was beginning to develop between Dran and I, especially if my trips back to Ellendrïa became infrequent, and he was unable to travel off-planet. "Surely with some Guardians laying down their Stars, there must be a ship that Dran could use?"

"Most of them aren't in much better shape than Dran's old ship," Kÿrrÿl's eyes were sweeping over the ships already filling the facility. "They'll need to be completely checked out. Any of them that are still serviceable will need to have lasers installed. That'll take time, probably 15 or 20 days before I can get the first one back into action again."

I sighed—that was better than no ship at all. Then I looked sharply at Kÿrrÿl, "You will let Dran fly one, won't you?" I was beginning to wonder if Kÿrrÿl and Rallandrí were working together to make sure that Dran stayed firmly ensconced on Ellendrïa.

Kÿrrÿl smiled, bright and cheerful again, "Don't look at me like that. I'm not plotting to imprison Dran in the Council chambers. If Dran wants to fly, even if he's breaking Rallandrí's orders again, I'll make sure that he has something to fly with, and it'll be a good deal better than what he has now. You don't realize how much of a technician your *deirfad* has become just to keep that old derelict going."

Feeling like there might be some hope that Dran could catch up with us, if he chose, I tried to smile encouragingly at Kÿrrÿl, although tension still made my expression stiff. I leaned against the landing ramp of my ship. "Send your crew off on another task for a little while, and show me what new equipment you're going to install in the *Föalen*. While you're doing that, I'll tell you what Farrwÿn is up to."

Eldranth—Date: 8936.115

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

I was sitting at my usual table at the back of the Council chamber when Darí, dressed formally in a tunic trimmed in Guardian blue, arrived. This was not one of the regularly scheduled meetings of the Elders, but rather one called specifically to hear the issues presented by the Guardians.

Yesterday, all the remaining Guardians had held their own council. Most, already on planet, had been able to attend in person. The few who were still on active duty had been able to participate through gated communication relays, appearing as life-sized 3D holographic images to the rest of us. Officially, there would be only 12 Guardians going back on duty after this Council meeting. A sad and bedraggled lot we were—overworked by trying to carry out the tasks that once were done by 10 times our number, and hard-pressed by Cultaní attacks. Clearly we were not going to survive in our current configuration much longer. So we devised a simple plan, one that would make the loss of our services to the other worlds of the Ll'Ellendrÿn as painless as possible. A new Border Patrol fleet would be based out of Lorril, a planet circling a sun that was centrally-located in the First Arc. From there, it would be deployed along the borders of the First Arc. Ten of the remaining Guardians would spread themselves out amongst the Border Patrol to assist in any way possible. Hopefully, the Border Patrol would be an effective deterrent to the Cultaní. Should that be the case, the Guardians would gradually withdraw, return to Ellendrïa, and ultimately disband. In the meanwhile, Darí would split his time between working with the Border Patrol and carrying out Guardian duties in the Second and Third Arcs. This would place at least one Guardian in those sparsely populated regions to be on watch for trouble. It would also allow Darí to start looking for colonizable planets with Farrwÿn. I would remain on special assignment, which apparently meant that I was to carry on with my duties as Recorder for the Elder Council.

Darí walked to the center of the room, and stood respectfully, waiting to be acknowledged[54]. Once all the Elders were settled and ready, Thorven announced Darí in his role as voice for the Guardians. As he had done a few days earlier for Farrwÿn and me, Darí described the situation with the Cultaní, its impact on the Guardians, and our decisions. He did, however, leave out any mention of his plans with Farrwÿn—this was not the time to engage the Elders in yet another argument on whether the Ellendrí should leave Ellendrïa. A few of the Elders questioned him for specific details, which he provided. Then there was a general discussion amongst the Elders. In reality, there was little the Elders could say to alter these decisions, as the Guardians are self-regulating and not bound politically or legally to any planet in the Ll'Ellendrÿn. The possibility of an immediate recall of the Guardians was presented and discussed, but in the end, the Elders supported our decision for a gradual withdraw. The arming of the Guardians' ships was debated more heatedly, but again, the Elders were quick to see the need for this. Since Darí had already set a precedent, it was hard to debate the Guardians' right for self-preservation. Ultimately, it was a relatively short meeting, but not one that left anyone in an optimistic mood.

Darí waited quietly for the Elders to leave the room after the meeting was finished. Earlier this morning,

before we had headed off on our separate tasks, we'd agreed to walk home together after the Council meeting, so Darí was content to stay as long as was necessary for me to finish up with my recording duties. Thorven stood by the Council room door, speaking a little with the other departing Elders, but also apparently in no hurry to leave. Watching Thorven, I had the feeling that there was something more to come, but was puzzled as to exactly what. Finally, after the last of the other Elders had left, Thorven turned to face us.

"Eldranth, this is outside of Elder Council, so you can stop recording." I nodded and made a careful show of turning my tablet off and putting the equipment away. Thorven turned to look at Darí. "Rumor has it that you're taking Farrwÿn with you on your next trip."

In a society where most people are telepathic, secrets are hard to keep. However, I was surprised at just how fast word about our plans had gotten out. Darí knew there was no point in denying it. People selected for Elder Council were generally highly accomplished psychics, who could detect deceptions faster than the words could be uttered. Thorven was no exception. "I am," he replied, keeping his voice and demeanor respectful.

"I've also heard that Farrwÿn has gotten himself signed up on Gryffÿth's colonist list. Is that true?" Thorven smiled, albeit somewhat grimly. "Don't be so apprehensive. I'm not asking as an Elder, but out of my own curiosity."

Darí lifted his eyes briefly to meet Thorven's gaze, "Farrwÿn did tell me that he was going to do that. I'm assuming he was successful then?"

"So it seems. Now, privately between us," Thorven moved his head to include me, "I believe you two and Farrwÿn are scheming something." Thorven eyed us carefully. "I've watched you grow up together, and I've mentored the two of you. I know that you're trustworthy and responsible, so I'm going to believe that whatever you're working on will be for the best interests of everyone. However, I am concerned about Farrwÿn's role in your plans." Thorven gave both of us a hard look. "He has never been off-world before. Unlike you, he has no Guardian training, and probably not much of an understanding about what it takes to survive on another planet, especially one that is wild and uncolonized. He's a dreamer and an artist, not an adventurer. I doubt that he knows what the path he's taken involves." Thorven turned away, but not before I saw a gleam of moisture in his smoky-grey eyes. "Farrwÿn is very important to me. I need you to watch out for him."

"Thorven," Darí spoke quietly, intently, "Farrwÿn is very important to us too. I'm sure you know that he is *avángri* to us both—we will do anything that we can to make sure that he is safe. That's the least we can do. His *turas* has saved my life more than once."

"You do that." With a quick, firm nod, Thorven turned away from us and walked towards the door, all signs of emotion gone.

“Did I just see that?” Darí breathed after the sound of Thorven’s footsteps had faded away.

I shook my head as I stared at the now empty doorway. Farrwÿn was something of a mystery. His *athairan* belonged to one of the very old matrilineal lineages—one that claimed to trace its descent from pure Ellendorí blood. Like many of her line, she had a rather vaulted opinion of herself and her lineage, which meant that most other Ellendrí lineages were not suitable as potential lovers or companions. In fact, as far as I knew, she had shown no interest in pairing at all—not totally uncommon amongst the Ellendrí, whose reproductive urges are often few and far between. Somehow, though, she had managed to become pregnant with Farrwÿn, but she had never acknowledged his *athairad*. It was generally assumed that she must have had a secret tryst with an unknown partner during a time of reproductive readiness, since she refused to publicly show any preferences for lovers or mates. Farrwÿn’s *turas* and empathy were most likely inherited from his *athairan’s* lineage. No one knew what, if anything, he had inherited from his *athairad*.

I had known Thorven all my life, as a teacher and mentor, and later as an Elder. Sometimes the easiest way to hide something is to put it in plain view. It had never occurred to me to compare Thorven’s and Farrwÿn’s physical appearances, and yet that smoky-grey eye color and darker, gold-streaked hair was rare amongst the Ellendrí. Thinking about it more, I realized that Farrwÿn actually had a physical build not too unlike that of Thorven. It wasn’t obvious at first. Farrwÿn was so thin whereas Thorven had retained the musculature developed from years of work as a Guardian. However, Farrwÿn had the same height and breadth of shoulder. Strangely, I had never seen either one show any signs of familial affection. Surely Farrwÿn must know who his *athairad* is, particularly since Thorven apparently seemed to care for his *darïlad*. I wondered if Aleysïa, Farrwÿn’s *athairan*, was forcing Thorven and Farrwÿn to keep silent. What a burden it must be for the two of them to keep this hidden. Looking at Darí, I remarked softly, “I do think we’ve just met Farrwÿn’s *athairad*.”

Darí shook his head, as though clearing the dust from his eyes. “I can’t believe that I didn’t figure that out a long time ago,” he chuckled.

“I think they worked very hard at trying to ensure that no one made that connection. It’s amazing what subtle suggestions can do to lead the mind away from the obvious, especially if the person making the suggestions is a talented telepath,” I too laughed softly, amazed at my own blindness. Clearly, Thorven was concerned enough about Farrwÿn that he’d just included us in the very limited group of people who knew about this particular secret. Well, that answered some of the mysteries about Farrwÿn’s abilities. With Thorven as his *athairad*, he probably had more than a little psi talent, whether he expressed it or not. I shrugged, gathered up my tablet and headed for the Council room door, Darí falling into stride comfortably beside me.

We walked leisurely through the city, enjoying the cool greenness of the tree canopied walkways as old Hauldrÿn touched the horizon and sent out streamers of orange and gold. Once it had been very difficult for us to spend time in this dome, but 10 years had finally buried our memories deeply enough that we

could take some joy in walking along the paths and through the exuberant gardens that made the heart of our single remaining city such a beautiful place. At the edge of the city proper, before the start of the agricultural green-belt, we entered a small garden with a tiny pond and a playfully tinkling fountain, trellises covered with brightly flowering vines making the place very private. At this late hour in the day, there was no one else around. We had this small microcosm all to ourselves. Darí stopped for a moment, taking pleasure in the sights, sounds, and smells of the place, then he turned to face me.

“Dran, I’m sorry about how all this is working out.” I could see worry clouding his eyes. “I know you’re not happy about me leaving with Farrwÿn.”

“It’s all right, Darí,” I shrugged my shoulders. “You’re doing what you have to do. I’ll just do whatever it is that Rallandrí assigns to me.” I couldn’t totally hide what I was feeling from Darí, but there wasn’t really much we could do about it now.

“If I had the room in the *Föalen*, I’d ask you to come with us. I’d really like the chance for us to work together.” Darí gave me his self-deprecating half-smile, “After all these years, I’ve never actually been on a mission with you. You’ve just appeared when I needed you, and disappeared just as quickly.”

“Maybe it’s better that way,” I tried to smile back, but I’m sure my expression was as limp as I felt inside. “The rumors you’ve heard about me have made me out to be much better and more exciting than I really am. I suspect you’d probably find that I’m really quite a bore.” I turned away and stared intently at one of the trellises that was draped with palm-sized, tubular, purple-blue flowers, their dusty yellow anthers trembling slightly in the gentle airflow of the dome. I was struggling to keep my deeper emotions and thoughts from rising to the surface of my mind where Darí would be able to sense them easily.

“I never found being with you dull when we were younger. I doubt that you’ve changed so much that I would find your company tiring,” Darí’s smile brightened. He laughed softly, caught for a moment in the happier memories of our childhood together.

“How can you be so sure?” I asked, watching an insect crawl out of one of the flowers, the soft hairs on its body carrying a payload of yellow pollen. “I can hardly stand myself most of the time these days.”

“I know I can be sure of you,” Darí radiated confidence in that statement, although I wasn’t at all sure that it was merited. “Once you stop beating yourself up, you’ll realize that too.” He reached out and put his hand on my shoulder, pulling me gently but firmly back to face him. “Dran, I’d like you to join us as soon as your ship gets refitted with lasers.”

“Hmmph,” I snorted. “You’ll be waiting a long time for that. I’m afraid my old ship won’t be making another flight. Rallandrí’s sure to take advantage of that to keep me here on Ellendrïa.” I could feel my hands wanting to clench into fists as I felt frustration wash over me, but I forced them to remain relaxed.

“I think Rallandrí will loosen some of his restrictions on you if he knew you were traveling with me. He’s only been trying to keep you from risking yourself all the time. If you’ve finally given that up …?” I could hear the question in Darí’s voice.

Trying to project my sincerity, I met his eyes, “I have … Darí, I’m truly sorry that I’ve hurt you so much.” I wondered if my actions would haunt me for the rest of my life. “I promise you that I’m not doing anything foolish anymore,” I paused a moment to let the seriousness of my emotions reach Darí, then I gave him a sardonic smile, and added, “The most dangerous thing I’ve had to face lately is the possibility of expiring from utter boredom in the Council chamber, or worse, having Thorven catch me daydreaming and being sent home in disgrace.”

Darí chuckled wryly, “I could see that happening.” He looked at me more seriously, “Ask Kÿrrÿl if you could take one of the other ships that are coming off duty. I’m sure he could find one for you to use. Besides, since when has Rallandrí’s orders kept you planet-bound for long?” With a laugh, Darí thumped me on the back. Together, we headed out along the road that cut its way through fields and grassy meadows dotted with small clumps of trees. In the distance, the hazy edge of the dome merged with the green and gently undulating landscape, the dome’s exit door waiting to lead us out into the searing atmosphere of Ellendrïa. I wasn’t totally convinced by his optimism, but since I’d already planned on having a visit with Kÿrrÿl, I would just have to wait and see what the outcome would be.

Farrwÿn—Date: 8936.115

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

I prowled restlessly around my studio, trying to decide how best to organize everything for my prolonged absence. Even though I had keyed her out of the building, I knew well enough that my *athairan* would try to enter my workspace while I was away, as her curiosity about my activities would far exceed her morals. A number of my projects I would simply leave out on the benches—those things that were in the regular purview of a typical Psi Tech, which would convince Aleysïa that there was nothing unusual about my work. However, a few things needed to be carefully hidden. When I'd built the studio some years ago, I'd known that the need for secrecy was a possibility, and had built a number of carefully concealed false bottoms into some of the storage units under the benches. These all had hidden locks that were keyed to my psi patterns only.

I collected up all the pieces of *drurïan* that were scattered about from work on several projects, carefully stowing them in one of the hidden spaces. At the same time, I gathered the two pairs of *anÿnbränne* that had attracted Dran's attention. As I picked them up, I felt the keying on one of the pairs vibrate through my fingertips—Turien, my *anÿncára* from a time long ago, his psi patterns so clear in my memory that I could key the *anÿnbränne*, or even a Guardian's Star, to it three thousand years later. The pattern trembled along my nerve fibers, bringing mixed feelings of sorrow and joy—sorrow because I knew Turien was dead and long-lost to me, joy because somewhere in the future I hoped to find him again. For a moment, a face flashed in my mind. Not the Turien that I remembered from my dream, but a person with wild yellow-gold hair highlighted with streaks of red, intense blue eyes set under high arching eyebrows, wide cheekbones above a strong jaw line, and a much squarer chin than common amongst the Ellendrí. I know his *athairad*, and I know where and when his *athairan* will be born, but who is this Turien-to-be really? Will he even remember me? I set the *anÿnbränne* down on the main work table, along with several other items that I intended to take with me on my journeys.

At another bench were 12 *durrïls* and two large *ferrïls* that I had synthesized. Next to them was a large square block of bluish metal. Those definitely needed to be hidden. No one had manufactured a Guardian's Star in nearly nine thousand years. I didn't think that the Elders would be terribly happy to find out that I was going to attempt it. Not that I didn't appreciate the seriousness of my audacity. Stars were dangerous. In the wrong hands, they could cause great harm and damage. However, my *turas* had shown me that there was going to be a need for two Stars that were outside the purview of both the Elders and the Guardians as they had existed in the past. Those Stars would be used for the benefit of the Ll'Ellendrÿn, but they needed to be wielded by individuals whose claim to Ellendrí blood might be questioned. Thus, the Elders would oppose their rights to be given Stars. While I knew that the Elders had no real control over the Guardians, their counsel was always considered when decisions such as these were made.

I stored the Star materials in another hidden compartment.

Finally, I made another walk around the studio, gathering up a small reader, which had been loaded with texts from the archives that I had been studying, and my sketch tablets, which I used for working on new ideas. These were carefully locked in a third hidden space.

For a while, I kept myself busy neatening up my workspace, not that it was particularly messy, but rather because I needed something to do. I had spoken to Aleysïa this morning. Things had not gone very well. Of course, things seldom went well between my *athairan* and me. My relationship with her was full of contradictions. In public, she expressed a false attitude of solicitous over-protectiveness, to the point that I was made to feel as though I was too young to be responsible for my own actions. After 88 years, I was far from the innocence of my youth, but my *athairan's* behavior often made people think that I was incapable of looking after myself. In private, she had made it clear to me that I was completely inferior, a *darïlad* of unacceptable lineage, born from a tryst with an *athairad* that she refused to acknowledge. Far from being coddled, I was generally neglected, left to figure things out for myself. Fortunately, I'd had the benefit of growing up with Darí and Dran, and their *r'athaira* had happily accepted me as a member of their family. This morning's episode had been much the same as always. Aleysïa was angry that I'd taken the initiative to do something on my own, that I was in fact going to leave Ellendrïa for a time, while simultaneously, she was equally happy that I wasn't going to be sharing her space, reminding her of what a fool she'd made of herself long ago when she'd accidentally become pregnant. So, I was very glad to be leaving, but Aleysïa had again left me filled with the angst and frustration that I'd come to associate with our encounters.

Going off-planet was finally becoming a reality. My life had been so filled with research, planning, and bringing the pieces of my tenuous scheme together that I'd hardly had time to consider how it might feel to leave Ellendrïa. Was I prepared? I didn't know. Certainly, what little gear I was taking had long since been packed, except for the couple of items that I was gathering from my workshop today. Did I know what I was getting myself into? Did I have the knowledge and skill to handle situations off-planet? That's what everyone around me was asking. In my present life, I had never been away from Ellendrïa; however, I had read and studied a good deal, and probably knew more than most people realized. As well, although many saw me as being largely unskilled outside of my work as a Psi Tech, I had quietly spent time learning a good many different skills and abilities, some of which I hoped would help me as I traveled with Darí, and later, when I became a colonist. But possibly even more importantly, I had this deep-rooted feeling that I'd done this all before. Even though I had no memories of my life as Killarÿn, other than the dream, somehow I felt that hidden inside me was the knowledge that I needed to succeed. All I had to do was find the key.

Chapter 10: Underway

Eldarí—Date: 8936.118

Ellendrïa and Lorril

Kÿrrÿl had brought the *Föalen* out into the courtyard of the space flight facility in preparation for departure. I was doing a last minute check of the ship's systems and the supplies that were now stored onboard. I'd spent the morning with Dran, enjoying our last chance to be together for a while. I could tell that he really wanted to be coming along. I would've welcomed his companionship; however, we both knew how things stood with his ship. Farrwÿn had also been insistent that he wanted Dran to do some more research in the archives for him. Dran did promise that, if he could persuade Kÿrrÿl to let him use one of the older ships, he would join us in less than a quarter-year. He felt that surely, by that time, he would have done justice to Farrwÿn's request, and that Kÿrrÿl would have had ample time to get caught up on the maintenance of one of the out of service ships. In any event, we agreed to keep each other abreast of all of our findings. Our telepathic link was particularly useful in these circumstances. Although attenuated by distance, telepathic communication is essentially instantaneous[55]. It doesn't suffer the time lag issues associated with radio waves, nor is it as cumbersome as transmitting through interdimensional gates. So I left our family dome with Dran's promise firmly locked in my heart, hoping that he would find the means to let us travel together.

Kÿrrÿl was busy showing me all of the modifications that had been made to the *Föalen*, giving me careful instructions on the new equipment. Included in the overhaul were an expanded repair kit and a container of spare modules for most of the important ship's systems. Kÿrrÿl noted wryly that dodging the Cultaní seemed to put more than the normal amount of stress on the Ellendrïan ships, and the need for off-planet repairs had been increasing significantly.

I heard footsteps on the boarding ramp, and looked over my shoulder to see Farrwÿn standing in the entrance with two bags of gear. "Farrwÿn, come in. Bunks are at the rear of the cabin. Just put your stuff back there," I indicated the direction with my head.

As Farrwÿn made his way past us, I looked at Kÿrrÿl, giving him a cocked eyebrow and a smile, "Well *ïdrÿlad*, it looks like the time has come for us to depart." I gave Kÿrrÿl a rough hug.

"Fly well and come home sooner rather than later," Kÿrrÿl responded with a smile, but I could feel sadness behind it. I hadn't had nearly enough time for family, hadn't had for far too long, and we all felt it.

"Someday, Kÿrrÿl, things will be better." I returned my *ïdrÿlad's* smile, acknowledging the things left unsaid. "For now, keep watch over Dran for me."

"And you look after Farrwÿn," Kÿrrÿl gathered up his tools and headed down the ramp.

Farrwÿn was studying the interior of the ship with some curiosity. “It looks quite different from the last time I was in here.”

“Yes … Kÿrrÿl has done some amazing renovations,” I marveled. “I’m impressed at how he managed to find the room to make a comfortable cabin for two—this layout is really space efficient.” I finished stowing the last of the equipment, and brought the landing ramp up, sealing the ship in readiness for flight.

“So Farrwÿn, are you really certain you want to do this?” I asked, giving him a last chance to change his mind. “You can still choose to stay on Ellendrïa, and I can take Dran with me.”

“Yes, I am,” Farrwÿn replied sharply. “This is new to me, a bit frightening at times, but really, I’m not quite as pathetic as my *athairan* has led people to believe. I’ll learn what I need to know quickly enough.” There was a little bit of an edge to Farrwÿn’s voice. His *athairan* tended to treat him in a strangely overprotective, yet paradoxically neglectful, manner. I was sure that she wouldn’t have been supportive of our current plans. Farrwÿn was more than old enough to be completely independent, but he had probably suffered some unpleasant moments with his *athairan* when she’d heard that he was going off-planet. More than that, the lack of a second acknowledged parent had left Farrwÿn vulnerable to criticisms about his parentage and the weaknesses that were apparently being hidden.

Immediately contrite, I tried to apologize. “Farrwÿn, I’m sorry. That wasn’t meant as a personal insult. I just wanted to let you have the opportunity to change your mind.” I shook my head. This could be a long trip if Farrwÿn was going to be touchy. Of course, it wasn’t going to help any if I kept wishing it was Dran who was with me rather than Farrwÿn. I realized that I was going to have to keep my own emotions in check as well. Trying to get things off to a better start, I suggested, “Come up front here. I’ll show you how to strap yourself in for the flight. It can be a bit turbulent going up through the atmosphere.”

I spent a few moments getting Farrwÿn settled in, then started firing up the ship’s systems in preparation for lifting off. My mind was busy, but I kept finding my thoughts drifting back to Thorven’s comments from a few days past. It seemed that everyone was convinced that Farrwÿn was inadequately prepared, or possibly insufficiently skilled, for this journey. Yet, if he truly was Thorven’s *darïlad*, he should have inherited some rather powerful psi talents in addition to his foresight. Certainly, he was an excellent Psi Tech, and that vocation required significant training and talent. Maybe, hidden behind the persona that had been created for him was an adventuresome nature inherited from his *athairad*. More importantly, if we were going to work together closely, Farrwÿn needed to know that I had faith in his abilities. I looked over at Farrwÿn where he sat, clearly tense and preoccupied. It was probably best to deal with the issue now rather than later. “Farrwÿn, we’ve been friends since we were children. You know I trust you with my life,” my words broke the heavy silence that had settled over us.

“You trust me here, on Ellendrïa, but will you trust me out there, if things get difficult?” Farrwÿn gave me a penetrating look, his dark eyes sharp and focused. “Or will I just be a burden to you, someone you

have to watch out for?"

Clearly Farrwÿn had heard Thorven's concerns. It wasn't surprising that he was so sensitive about his choice to come. "Thorven spoke to Dran and me a few days ago," I admitted. I waited for a few moments, but Farrwÿn made no signs of responding. I sighed. It was clear that Farrwÿn had become obstinate in reaction to the lack of faith in his abilities that people had shown. "Look Farrwÿn, I've never doubted you before. If Thorven is your *athairad*, it certainly doesn't make me trust you any less. If anything, it probably means that you have abilities that you've never had the chance to use before, and as you said, you'll learn quickly enough." Farrwÿn remained silent. I decided that I'd probably said enough, maybe too much. Farrwÿn would just have to work it out for himself.

Checking in with the city flight control center, I received permission to takeoff. I powered up the antigrav unit and the main engine. The *Föalen* lifted off vertically from the courtyard. Gradually, the ship gained elevation, and the city fell away below us, the afternoon sunlight glinting off the reflective surfaces of the domes. Once the ship was well clear of the city, I brought the engine into its horizontal position, and the *Föalen* started moving forward with increasing speed.

In a conversational tone, I explained, "I'm going to make a couple of orbits around Ellendrïa before we head out of the gravity well to our first jump point. I want to check out all the new systems that Kÿrrÿl installed—not that I don't trust him, but it's always good to do a few additional tests." I also knew that the test flight would give Farrwÿn an opportunity to see Ellendrïa in a totally new way. As hot and dry as the planet had become, she was still a beautiful jewel when set against the black backdrop of space. As our perspective increased, the snaking ridges of the mountain systems became visible as vibrant green lines in a sea of yellow-brown sand, like canals in reverse. Water vapor in the atmosphere created a blue veil around the planet, the edges curving away from us as the *Föalen* increased altitude. There was still life on the planet, if not for too much longer.

Reaching the thin edges of the atmosphere, I could feel the subtle changes in the forces acting on my body as the planet's gravity lessened, and the gravity generator on the *Föalen* started compensating—gravity onboard the ship was always maintained at more or less Ellendrïa normal. I could see that Farrwÿn was watching intently as Ellendrïa became a round sphere far below us. Although he was obviously excited, I sensed that some of the negative tension was draining away from him, something that I'd hoped would happen as we got underway, and the beauty of the flight captivated him.

Once the *Föalen* was in a stable low orbit, I busied myself with various system tests, letting Farrwÿn absorb the grandeur and wonder of the experience. It's been said that once a person has seen their home planet from space, they never feel the same way about it again. Seeing their world stand out in stark contrast to the inimical blackness of space, they are overwhelmed by a passion to protect the incredibly delicate and exquisite orb that is so vital to their existence. Only when a person has experienced the magnitude of interstellar distances, do they begin to realize how each planet is a tiny,

contained and isolated system, and how integrated all the planetary processes must be for life to survive at all. Certainly, I could still vividly recall my first flight off-planet, watching Ellendrïa slowly vanish from view.

Everything checked out fine, which was no surprise to me, as Kÿrrÿl was meticulous in the maintenance of the ships under his care. Powering up the engine again, I brought the *Föalen* out of orbit, pulling away from Ellendrïa in a long, slow arc, giving Farrwÿn time to appreciate the effect of our home planet receding into the darkness behind us. It wasn't necessary to leave our solar system—I was headed for a region of space about halfway between Ellendrïa and Indrïan, the fifth planet in our system. Here, the gravitational effects from the planets were small enough that they wouldn't interfere with the calculations necessary for the jump through n-dimensional space to Lorril. Provided with start and end coordinates, the ship's systems would automatically compute, and then perform, the necessary maneuvers to execute the jump. Like all pilots of the Ellendrí space fleet, I had been trained to do the calculations and perform the jumps manually if a system failure occurred; however, it was always safest to let the ship carry out the jump, as velocity and timing were critical. I cut the engines, using the auxiliary thrusters to bring the *Föalen* to a complete stop. The coordinates had already been entered into the ship's system. A couple of quick touches on the main systems panel started the jump calculations. After a short while, a green light on the panel started flashing, indicating that the ship was ready to perform the jump. Usually, there would be a verbal announcement as well, but I had instructed the ship to remain silent today. The *Föalen* was one of the few Ellendrí ships that was fully intelligent[56], and I had yet to introduce Farrwÿn to this feature.

"I'm sure you've heard people describe what it feels like to go between." I broke the long silence. Farrwÿn pulled his eyes away from the tiny point of light that was Ellendrïa far off in the distance and focused on me. He nodded, giving me the look of a student who, having read copiously, thinks they know something but aren't quite absolutely sure. I chuckled, saying, "Well, I'm going to tell you to forget everything you've been told. Everybody experiences between differently. All I can say is that whatever you experience, it's likely to be … disorienting, at best." Farrwÿn raised his eyebrows, inviting me to explain. I expanded with, "People who stay in between too long can go insane, it's that strange. This is a relatively short jump. The ship will maneuver for a few moments to get the correct entry velocity, then you'll see the gate open up in front of us. Once that happens, start counting. By the time you reach four, we'll be on the other side."

"Counting?" Farrwÿn echoed.

"Just do it this time," I advised. "Once you've been between a few times, you can decide how you want to make the transit, but counting is the surest way to keep your mind focused."

Looking a little nervous, Farrwÿn nodded again. I touched the main panel, and the ship's engines fired up again, now working on autopilot. After a few moments, I heard an ascending whine as the grav unit came to full power. Although useful for creating artificial gravity in the ship when outside a planet's

gravitational field, the primary function of the grav unit was to create a temporary gravitational anomaly, or gate. Suddenly, the patch of space directly in front of the ship started to distort and twist. At almost the same moment, a new hum indicated that the electromagnetic shields had come up to full force. Then the ship was plunging through the heaving, buckling region of space. I started counting. I was peripherally aware of colors that I couldn't describe, sounds that made no sense, but I focused on counting. At two, I knew the jump was halfway through. I could still feel the ship around me—the pressure of the seat against my back and legs, the harness that kept me firmly in place, but those sensations were nearly overwhelmed by the complete otherness of this alien space. At three, I felt the thrumming of the ship cease, as the electromagnetic shields dropped, and the grav unit powered down. I knew that the warp bubble around us would now be collapsing. At four, the world became real again as we were ejected back out into normal four-dimensional spacetime.

I took a deep breath as the *Föalen* came to a full stop, waiting for me to take manual control again. I glanced over at Farrwÿn, who had a distinct greenish caste. I was vaguely amused. The first time through between was never easy, but I genuinely hoped that Farrwÿn wouldn't get sick. "Are you going to be alright?" I asked as I prepared to make a quick exit from my seat to help Farrwÿn should he really become ill.

"I think so," Farrwÿn drew a shaky breath. "I tasted that. No one said anything about taste."

At this, I laughed gently. "I did say that everyone experiences it differently, but that's a new one for me. Based on how you look right now, I'm going to guess that it didn't taste very good, either."

"No," Farrwÿn gave me a faint smile, and took a deeper breath.

Giving Farrwÿn a few moments to get his equilibrium back, I went into lecture mode. "The experience of being between is outside our normal perception. When we go between, our brains struggle with the stimuli they receive. This tends to trigger several of our senses at the same time. It's called temporary synesthesia, and usually stops as soon as the jump is over." I could see that Farrwÿn was starting to relax—the color was returning to his face. I waited until he was breathing normally again. "Ready to go on?"

"I am now." Farrwÿn looked determined, albeit a bit grim.

"Don't be concerned about feeling nauseous. Lots of people get sick the first time they go between," I commented as I saw the potential for Farrwÿn to start worrying again about his ability to cope.

At this, Farrwÿn smiled with some real humor. "I guess I did alright then."

Looking forward, it wasn't very long before I could see our destination—a black orb back-lit by a yellowish sun. I flew the *Föalen* around to the daylight side of the planet in a long curving arc. As we came in closer to the planet, a blue light started to blink above a blank section of the ship's console. I

swiped my fingers across the communication screen, acknowledging the warning that a message was being received. The empty screen resolved into a visual of a dark-skinned, lithe woman with intense green eyes and a thick wavy mane of glossy black hair. I smiled, and said crisply “Guardian Eldarí reporting in for the Border Patrol council.”

The woman’s expression brightened as she recognized me. “Welcome, Eldarí. You are the eighth Guardian to arrive.”

“The others should be coming within the next two days. There will be 11 of us in total,” I conveyed.

“Is that all?” she asked disappointedly. “We were hoping for a few more.”

“Sorry,” the smile I’d been giving Tanish, the communications officer for Lorril’s flight control, turned grim. “It was a tough decision for many of the Guardians. Those of us who are coming know that the Cultaní will be targeting us specifically. It could be a suicide mission, so it had to be a voluntary choice to continue with our duties.”

“I know,” the woman smiled sadly. “Truly, we are glad to have any of your people come. We know how few Ellendrí there are these days.”

“We’ll do what we can.” I checked the *Föalen*’s flight path, adding, “I’m just starting my final approach. Is there anything I need to watch out for?”

“No. We have you on our sensors now,” Tanish replied. “Your route is clear.”

“Good. I’ll be landing shortly,” I tapped the console to end the communication, and focused my attention on entering the atmosphere with the *Föalen*.

Lorril is a breathtakingly beautiful planet, a water world. Whereas yellows and browns are the dominant colors on Ellendrïa, Lorril is arrayed in blues and greens. Rather than large continents, Lorril has many little archipelagos scattered randomly throughout the single large ocean that covers the planet. This sea is shallow and warm, providing a perfect environment for tiny colonial organisms that form reefs by secreting calcium carbonate as part of their exoskeletons. Many of the islands on Lorril are actually massive accumulations of this biologically created reef material, usually capping a small underwater seamount. When eroded by surf, this material creates a white, shelly sand. Seen aerially, the water around the islands is a spectacular turquoise blue as a result of these white sand beaches. Wherever there is land, the warm tropical environment, with plenty of rain, ensures that plant growth is dense and lush. Thus, each island is a bright green gem, surrounded by a ring of white, in a setting of brilliant blue.

I looked over at Farrwÿn as we started down through the atmosphere. Coming in for a landing on any planet is an exhilarating experience, but Lorril is especially entrancing, as it’s such a contrast to our home world. While I doubted that Farrwÿn, tightly controlled as he always was, would show gape-mouthed wonder, I was happy to see that his eyes were eager and alert. He had a definite smile of

pleasure, having completely recovered from his greenish aspect of a short while ago. I took my time bringing us down, keeping our angle shallow, making my turns wide and gentle, giving Farrwÿn the best viewing opportunities that I could. However, as always, it was over too soon. Shortly, we were making a low approach to an archipelago that contained a number of islands, including one that was quite large. This was the location of Lorril's government, as well as the mission control center for the Guardians and the new Border Patrol. Historically, the Guardians have based much of their activities out of Lorril, as it is both central to the First Arc, and truly a planetary delight for the desert-born Ellendrí.

I brought the *Föalen* down in a neat landing, wingtips and nose touching down on the broad flat beach that fronted the mission control building, constructed from pale pink sandstone in the shape of a convexly arching clam-shell with fluted edges. There were many other ships already present, which meant that there would be a good turnout by the various peoples who supported the creation of the Border Patrol. While I was not happy about the need for such a force, I was relieved to see that the concept was well-supported. I contacted Tanish to let her know that I'd arrived safely.

Tanish … now that was an interesting one. There was more than a little humor in my thoughts. The Lorrilei, the people of Lorril, are, like the Ellendrí, long-lived and psychically gifted. However, in many other ways, they are very much different. A dark-skinned people, they have adapted well to the hot, sunny climate of Lorril, where pale skins are easily burned. I knew this from experience, having gotten more than one bad sunburn during my stays on Lorril. They tend to be taller than the Ellendrí, willowy, with an easy grace that I find very beautiful, as though they are all trained dancers. Unlike the Ellendrí, who are hermaphroditic, the Lorrilei are dioecious, having separate males and females, and the two sexes are definitely dimorphic[57]. Tanish is clearly a female Lorrilei … and a very attractive one at that, I have to admit. That being said, while I can recognize and admire her beauty, I'm in no way sexually drawn to her. Unfortunately, I'm not so sure that Tanish is equally Platonic in her interests. Although I could be wrong, not being completely familiar with Lorril customs, I've suspected that Tanish harbors an infatuation for me, and quite likely for Eldranth, as I rather doubt that she knows, or cares, that we are two unique individuals.

Having checked in, I released the buckles on my harness, got up and headed for the hatch controls. Farrwÿn quickly figured out how to free himself. In a moment, he was quietly shadowing me, which I figured was as good a place as any for him to be. I pressed my palm against the controls, and the hatch obediently opened, forming a ramp. I breathed deeply, enjoying the moist tropical air, filled with too many scents for me to easily identify and categorize. I knew some of the spicier fragrances were from the masses of flowers that bloomed in profusion around the base of the building; others were from fruit ripening in bushes that lined the paths that meandered around the structure and its associated grounds. The plant diversity of Lorril is staggering. Just in close proximity to the mission control building, there were over a hundred species. In fact, one of Lorril's primary trade items is plant products—herbs, spices, perfumes, and medicinal drugs. A couple steps took me to the bottom of the ramp, where I turned and stood waiting for Farrwÿn, watching to see how he fared.

Farrwÿn stood at the top of the ramp, his rangy frame tall and erect, his head held high as he scanned his surroundings. There was a sense of determination in his movements, but more than that, in some strange way, he actually seemed almost at ease, as if this place was somehow familiar to him. Not for the first time, I wondered what was really going on in Farrwÿn's head. I could see his nostrils flare as he took in the odors and richness of this strange, new atmosphere—at 20 percent oxygen it's definitely rich by Ellendrïan standards. He took a cautious step forward, then stopped, reacting to Lorril's lower gravity, approximately 85 percent that of our home world. He pondered this for a moment, then looked directly at me, giving me a resolute smile. Without appearing to show any further concern over this new environment, Farrwÿn finished walking casually down the ramp to join me. I smiled at him. It was clear that he was going to take up the challenge of proving that he could handle the rigors of being an itinerant adventurer.

"Does it live up to your expectations?" I asked when Farrwÿn was beside me.

"Quite," he replied, his eyes carefully observing the lushness of our surroundings. Far from being disinterested, I could see that Farrwÿn was rapidly absorbing the reports from his senses. I could feel the buzz of mental energy as his mind tagged, questioned, and categorized. I took this as a good sign. We would need to be alert and observant as we surveyed uninhabited planets.

I started walking up the path leading to the entrance of the mission control building, Farrwÿn falling into step one pace behind me, a strangely comforting shadow. Again, my mind hesitated for a moment. Why should I find Farrwÿn's presence comforting? He certainly had no training as a Guardian. Should we find ourselves in a difficult situation, it was likely that I would need to protect him. Maybe it was just a reminder to me of how seldom I'd been able to travel with a friend at my back. Maybe my mind was pretending that it was Eldranth who was trailing me, remembering all those times when he'd practically materialized out of nowhere to be there when I needed him. I snorted quietly to myself and kept on walking.

I headed for the main council room, which was where most people would be gathered. There would be no official meetings until everyone had arrived two days from now; however, there would be lots of informal discussions amongst friends, trade partners, and representatives of various groups who had an involvement in the new Border Patrol. These unofficial meetings were, if anything, more important than the official meetings to be slated later. Knowing this, I had dressed, if not formally, at least recognizably in Guardian blue—a crisp new shirt, white with blue edging on the sleeves and collar, although the narrow band of edge stitching was unobtrusive. Still, it contained my familial pattern of *föalen* and *iverÿn*, should anyone want to look closely. In addition to the blue trim, I had the shirt secured around my waist with a blue sash. It was this that would readily identify me as a Guardian. I had warned Farrwÿn about the semi-official nature of this trip, and he too was dressed in his guild colors. At the time, I'd wondered what color he would choose. Now I could see he was wearing the aquamarine trim denoting a Psi Tech, although he could equally have worn the purple of an Artisan. I couldn't tell what the house pattern was, but guessed it was likely to be some variation on Aurora. Until recently, I had no

idea that Farrwÿn's patrilineal house was Seabÿn.

The council room was half filled with a chattering crowd, representatives of a number of races from the Ll'Ellendrÿn. It was a good cross-section of human diversity, with skin colors ranging from fair to almost black, many tall races and a few that were shorter than the Ellendrí, and a wide spectrum of hair and eye colors. Working with this group had been a stark reminder of how little diversity there is in the Ellendrí stock—little wonder why many people can't tell us apart, why my *deirfad* and I are often considered identical twins, even after I explain that twins never occur amongst the Ellendrí. I looked around for other Guardians, and spotted five blue sashes, so I knew we were well represented.

It didn't take long before I'd attracted a crowd. As spokesperson for the Guardians, people were quick to ask me questions about our current status, how many Guardians would be available for the Border Patrol, whether we would be available for other duties, and so forth. It seemed like I answered the same questions repeatedly until I felt exhausted. At some point, a person came by with a tray of drinks, some kind of refreshing fruit juice. I was tremendously thankful, having nearly talked myself hoarse. I'm not a particularly outgoing person, and I was doing more socializing at this meeting than I might do over the course of a deciyear during my regular duties. Farrwÿn followed me patiently, a stride or two to one side or the other, listening intently and replying tactfully to the occasional question that was directed his way.

I was grateful when a commotion outside drew most of the attention away from me. At first, I didn't think much about it, figuring that a late comer was providing some excitement to the crowd. However, a short while later, I looked up to see Tanish cutting through the crowd, looking very official, and clearly on an intercept course with me. Reaching me, she caught my eyes, saying, "Guardian Eldarí, you've been requested to attend the ship that has just landed. They have a Cultaní prisoner onboard." She gave me a small smile, then continued, "Apparently the prisoner is injured. I suggested that you might be able to help, given your experience as a Healer."

With a self-deprecating smile in return, I motioned with my hand for her to lead the way. Maybe I'd misjudged Tanish a little—she does seem to know which one of us is the Healer.

Farrwÿn—Date: 8936.118

Lorril

I suppose choosing to begin my life of adventure by accompanying a Guardian, particularly one as involved in the Border Patrol as Darí, meant that I would have little chance for a gentle introduction to traveling the Ll'Ellendrÿn. The term "trial by fire", in all its variations as used by the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn, comes to mind.

Darí had warned me that our first day would start with a meeting on Lorril, so I was mentally prepared to face a crowded room full of strangers on a new planet. I'm something of an empath, preferring to avoid crowds whenever I can. However, I long ago learned to shield myself from the chaotic emotional storms generated by groups of people, to conduct myself with a certain level of aplomb under most circumstances. I followed Darí into the mission control council room, and stood quietly behind him, watching, listening, and trying to learn as much as I could. No one questioned my presence, or why a Psi Tech should be tailing behind Darí, for which I was immensely grateful. I suspect that my state of near invisibility was largely due to Darí's authority as a Guardian key to the formation of the Border Patrol. The obvious respect that he was given apparently allowed him the freedom to drag a stranger into the midst of the meeting without eliciting any comment.

Even though I've known Darí almost all of his life, there are still facets of his personality that I've never had a chance to observe. Watching him step up to his position as spokesperson for the Guardians gave me a greater understanding for the depths and abilities of my childhood friend. He had an inner strength that might once have surprised me, had I not known that a great deal of Darí's talents had lain dormant during his career as a Healer. Even so, the tension soon had him sweating. I suspected that he was not enjoying this stressful situation, although he handled it well. However, I could tell he was relieved when the communications officer requested that he attend the newly arrived ship.

It was clear that the question-and-answer session was over. The crowd obligingly stepped back to allow Darí to follow after the dark-skinned officer. I slipped quickly into his wake, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. In a few short moments, we were outside the building, blinking fiercely as our eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight. Then I blinked a few more times as I tried to make sense of what I saw. In front of us, taking up most of the remainder of the landing area on the beach, was a huge deep-space-faring ship.

It was a cargo ship—pitted grey metal, heavy, boxy, built for economy rather than beauty. On the side, near the front of the ship, were some garish red symbols in a language I didn't recognize. A name or just a warning? I didn't know. The ship squatted, like a sunning reptile, radiated heat shimmering in the air. Ominous tube-like structures protruded from its nose region, and I suspected that it was well-armed. A ramp extended down to the ground from the center of the ship. At the base of the ramp clustered a small knot of similarly dressed people. Their clothing was dark grey and utilitarian-looking, likely

uniforms of some type. I guessed that they were probably members of the ship's crew. All of them were of the same racial type—short, with broad shoulders, sandy-brown skin, and curly dark brown hair. I searched through my memories of anthropology lessons, and came up with a name—Thalandrïans, one of the peoples of the First Arc who specialized in trading and transport.

A crew member stepped forward, a male whose uniform had a pair of diagonal red stripes across the chest. Since he was the only person in the group with distinguishing markings, I assumed that he was probably the leader, maybe the pilot or commander.

While I'd been busy gawking, Darí had gotten several paces ahead of me. The communications officer stepped to one side, and Darí came to a halt directly in front of Two-Stripes, bowing his head in formal greeting. Although we often touch during greetings with friends and family, telepaths don't normally make physical contact with strangers unless it's unavoidable. Two-Stripes returned the greeting, then smiled, showing a mouthful of strong white teeth with pronounced canines. Not exactly reassuring, but since he didn't growl or offer to bite, I figured he was probably safe enough.

"Guardian Eldarí?" Two-Stripes asked in Ellendrí, which has long been the trade language of the Ll'Ellendrÿn. When Darí nodded in confirmation, Two-Stripes continued, "Tanish said you were here. You're the Guardian that finally got up enough nerve to shoot down one of the Cultaní?"

I could feel that Darí was uncomfortable at this reminder of his recent adventures, but he looked Two-Stripes in the eye, and replied, "It takes more nerve not to shoot. Ask my brother sometime."

"Ah, the legendary Eldranth," Two-Stripes laughed. "I've heard a story or two about him on my sojourns planet-side. He's still alive then?"

"Quite," Darí gave Two-Stripes a tight smile. "And you are?"

"Salander of Thalandrïa." He shook his head. "Amazing. You Ellendrí must be pretty tough, for all that you look like a wind could blow you over," Salander laughed again, more jocular than insulting. "We've got a Cultaní captive aboard that you might want to take a look at." He gestured up the ramp, clearly giving Darí permission to come aboard his ship.

Letting Salander take the lead, Darí followed him up the ramp. Still working at being his quiet shadow, I took up my position a stride behind. Tanish, for I now knew her name from Salander, came behind me, the rest of the crew trailing after.

"So, what's the story?" Darí inquired as Salander led us through the inner maze of his ship. I was keeping a careful mental map of the ship's layout, just in case we needed to find our way back out unassisted.

"Not much of one," Salander commented, shrugging. "Routine cargo transport. We came out at a jump point, and the Cultaní were waiting for us," he smiled toothily at Darí. "As you can see, we're not into passive resistance … so, we blew them up. Only one of them didn't quite break up like we'd expected it

would." Salander waved his hand towards a side passage, "This way—I'll take you to the infirmary, and you can see what you will." We all made the turn. Salander continued, "Anyway, we got curious and pulled the wreckage into our biggest cargo bay. Figured maybe we could learn something from the remains. Turns out the pilot was still alive … kind of mangled, but still amongst the living, as they say."

The passage ended in a big double door, painted green. Salander touched the controls beside the door. The two halves of the door slid back into the walls, letting us enter the room. Inside, the area was large and so full of equipment with unrecognizable purposes that it was visually overwhelming at first. Although I couldn't be sure, I thought that much of the machinery was medical in nature. I knew from my teachings that many of the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn are completely dependent on technology for healing, rather than the psychic healing that we use, albeit we supplement it with some technology, usually when surgery is required. As we moved through the room, I kept thinking of how frightening it must be for a patient, injured and in pain, to be faced with this inhuman array of devices.

At the far end of the room were a few beds, separated with movable dividers that could be used to change the room layout. Several of these had, in fact, been shifted around to make space for what looked like a large shipping crate, just slightly taller than my waist height. Two Thalandrïans were standing alertly, one on each side of the container, clearly doing guard duty. Salander pointed at the crate, and his meaning was clear enough. Darí stepped past him, moving close enough that he could see over the edge. He stopped. I could see the muscles in his throat twitch a few times. He obviously didn't like what he saw. Making a decision, he took two strides forward, placed his hands on the edge of the crate, and hopped over the side so that he was standing inside.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing," Salander challenged, more worried than angry. I moved forward to the side of the crate so that I could see what Darí was up to.

"Trying to help," Darí replied, now bending over something. "But I think this one is too far gone for me to do much. Certainly, it isn't going to put up much of a fight." I could see the creature now, looking past Darí. Initially, all I could make out was a confusion of grayish, slightly bumpy skin. Then I started to discern legs—long, thin, and flexible, like tentacles, but without any suckers. Although I couldn't see them clearly, I knew there should be eight of them. A thick, cylindrical torso was centered between the legs, and an oblong bulge topped the torso, which was presumably the head. As Darí touched the creature, some of the legs quivered. Two very large eyes opened on one side of the head. The pupils were star-shaped, dilated, surrounded by a pale purple iris. Those alien eyes were rather beautiful in their own way, not particularly aggressive-looking. I could sense fear and pain, but nothing that indicated that Darí was in any danger. As I looked closer, I could see that one side of the torso was burned, with a bluish ichor oozing out. I thought that possibly a leg or two on that side was missing.

Salander was standing beside me now, looking very agitated, "Watch out," he warned Darí. "That thing was putting up quite a fight earlier today. It managed to bite one of my crew." I could see a beak protruding from what must be a mouth hidden amongst the legs at their junction with the torso. There

were several holes on the sides of the head that I thought might be ears or nostrils, or possibly some other sensory structure. A ridge of course hair running along the top of the head, from front to back, might also have been sensory in nature.

Darí was on his knees now, running his hands along the creature's body, scanning it for injuries. "Can you heal something that alien?" I asked.

Darí spared me a brief glance, then went back to what he was doing, replying, "They're really not all that alien. We must share a common ancestor with them somewhere far back in time."

"Really?" I questioned doubtfully. The Cultaní certainly didn't look much like any of the life forms I'd seen on Ellendrïa.

"Yes," Darí was focusing his examination on the creature's injured side. "Their cell structure is fairly similar to ours, with a few modified organelles and some slight changes in their DNA composition. Instead of an internal skeleton composed of a protein-calcium complex, their skeleton is formed from chitin reinforced with carbon nanofibers. Otherwise, their bodies are made of the same basic materials as ours."

"Certainly organized a bit differently from anything I've seen," I commented. Darí reached into his shirt and brought his Star out. The creatures eyes opened wider. I could sense its fear level increasing. "It's afraid of your Star," I cautioned Darí. "It might try to fight you out of terror." Darí stopped moving, speaking very softly and gently to the Cultaní, so quietly that I couldn't catch the words, but I guessed they were mostly meant to be soothing.

I started projecting feelings of calm towards the creature, hoping to communicate our benign intentions. The head turned towards me, pale purple eyes meeting mine. For a moment it seemed as though I was falling into those large orbs as our minds touched. It knew we were trying to help, but it was afraid—afraid of us, but also of its own people somehow. I could feel the pain increase, and a terrible sense of hopelessness, as the Cultaní realized it was dying. Vaguely, I was aware that Darí was trying to use his Star to heal the Cultaní, but it was too late. I sensed an intense swirl of emotions from the creature, which cascaded into blinding pain as my mind overloaded. The world went black as I quietly fainted.

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"Farrwÿn!" someone was calling me. "Wake up!" It was Darí's voice. I opened my eyes, then wished I hadn't as a pounding pain rolled around between my ears. I pressed my hands against the sides of my head in a desperate attempt to keep my brains from flying out.

"Farrwÿn, are you all right?" Darí's voice asked, muted by the roar of thunder in my head.

"No," I hissed between my teeth. "Headache … bad," I wheezed out, not wanting to move my jaws. I felt

Darí's hand, cool on my forehead. Gradually, the pain started to recede. As the last boom of thunder rumbled around inside my skull, I felt my body begin to relax, and took my hands away from my head. My eyes were now able to focus. I could see Darí bending over me, looking worried and more than a bit contrite.

"Farrwÿn, I'm sorry," he said apologetically. "I didn't think you would try to reach out to the Cultaní like that. I would've warned you …" he trailed off.

"It's not your fault, Darí," I carefully sat up on the edge of the bed. Gazing about, I saw that I was on one of the bunks in the *Föalen*, so Darí must have carried me here after I fainted. "I was just trying to help," I explained, feeling somewhat guilty for having created more difficulties. "I didn't realize that the Cultaní was going to die, or that I was going to get so much empathic backlash that I overloaded like that. I'm the one who should be sorry," I stared at the floor between my feet, feeling an embarrassed flush creep along my cheekbones and up to the tips of my ears.

Darí laughed gently, breaking my mood. "Don't worry about that," he put a hand on my shoulder. "You made better contact than any of us have so far. I could sense the Cultaní beginning to respond to you. It was just unfortunate that it was already dying when we arrived." A shadow of sadness passed over Darí's face—he never liked losing patients, not even alien ones.

Darí gave my shoulder a friendly squeeze, saying, "Enough for today. You're doing fine. Let's go find something to eat."

Eldranth—Date: 8936.118

Ellendrïa, Midsummer

It was strange, after all the years of our comings and goings, that Darí's departure this morning should leave me feeling so lonely and depressed. Of course, maybe I *had* felt this way before, but just refused to acknowledge it. In any case, I was in a dark mood as I prepared my ship for what would most likely be its last flight—its final journey to Kÿrrÿl's facility.

I was also mulling over what I'd learned three days ago after the Elder Council meeting. So Farrwÿn's lineage was House Seabÿn and House Aurora. That meant that those *anÿnbränne* that I'd seen on Farrwÿn's workbench were probably for him. Föalen and Seabÿn. Someone from my family was going to be Farrwÿn's *anÿncára*. Who? And what was Farrwÿn up to? I trusted him … had to trust him if we were to have any hope of ending this downward spiral for our people, but still, there were just too many things that I didn't understand.

It's amazing how sentimental we become over inanimate objects. My ship was old, and had been in service for a long time. It was more than due to be replaced. Yet, as I stood beside it, the ramp down and waiting for me to board, my mind was filled with memories of the adventures I'd had with it for over 60 years. I remembered the stories my *athairad* had told me as a child about his journeys in that same ship. It had outlived one of us, but not quite the other.

I gently touched the tired old hull, worn and chipped where abuse and time had taken their toll. It had not been named by either my *athairad* or I, but in my mind's eye, I always pictured us soaring together like a hawk, riding the solar thermals of the star fields. I smiled a little as pleasant thoughts lightened my mood slightly. I was getting as poetic as Farrwÿn. I closed my eyes for a moment, said my goodbyes to the old ship, and climbed aboard to fire up the engines.

The flight over the city was uneventful. Kÿrrÿl had the doors to the space flight facility open and waiting for me. In a short order, I had my ship parked in the receiving area of the dome. However, there was no rush of technicians coming over to inspect the ship and move it to one of the work bays for maintenance, only the normal hum and buzz of a busy facility that was apparently uninterested in my arrival. I got out and stood beside my ship, not sure what Kÿrrÿl wanted me to do, watching and waiting.

It seemed like many millidays passed, and I was starting to worry if I'd misunderstood the time at which Kÿrrÿl had wanted me to arrive. Eventually, however, I saw his lean form coming towards me at a fast walk, worn shirt covered with grime from working in a less than savory location on one of the ships in for maintenance. He smiled cheerily, and I began to relax.

"Sorry, Dran," Kÿrrÿl looked down at the condition of his shirt, clearly deciding against a full contact greeting. "I got delayed pulling an engine out—a burned up mess that none of the other techs could get free," he laughed as he studied the state of his clothes and hands. "Come back to my apartment with me

while I get changed into something a bit cleaner."

At the back of the dome was a two-story building constructed of the ubiquitous yellow sandstone. It was divided up into a number of small apartments where Kÿrrÿl and some of the other techs lived, largely a residence for people without partners and families. This was where we were headed, and Kÿrrÿl clearly meant it as a chance for us to talk.

"Things still pretty busy?" I asked as we walked together.

"It's quieting down a little now," Kÿrrÿl spoke with amusement. "We've managed to get enough of the best ships outfitted to get the Guardians back on duty—everything that's left here is lower priority." We had reached the residence building. Kÿrrÿl placed his palm on the door control panel, triggering the door to slide open, and letting me go through ahead of him.

As the door closed behind us, I commented, "So it seems. Nobody was in a rush to move my ship after I brought it in." The inside of the building was bright and pleasant, with a partially glassed roof that allowed sunlight to beam down into the cathedraled central walkway. We turned left and started walking, passing doors to individual apartments on both the left and right sides.

Kÿrrÿl chuckled, "Yes, I told the techs to leave it there. I'll have someone move it to the salvage section later today." About halfway down the corridor, Kÿrrÿl stopped and opened a door on the left, again letting me step through in front of him.

"So you don't think you can repair it?" I inquired, more wishful than hopeful. Kÿrrÿl's apartment was a two-story affair, with a common area on the lower floor and a bedroom and washroom on the upper floor. A large panoramic window, dominating the outside wall, looked out into the interior of the dome, where the activity around the ships could be viewed. It was a nice enough place. I'd been here many times before, but I preferred the more natural setting of our family's dome.

"Not a chance," Kÿrrÿl shook his head in a strong negative. "We'd have to replace all the old heat shielding—an awful lot of work for an ancient ship that needs to be replaced anyway." Kÿrrÿl kicked off his dirty shoes and headed for the stairs at one end of the room. "Enjoy the view," he waved at the big window. "I'll be back shortly."

I stared out through the flawless glass. I could see a number of the old Guardian ships that hadn't gone back out on duty, ones that had belonged to Guardians who had laid down their Stars. They looked rather forlorn, mostly ignored by the busy techs who were working industriously on a number of newer, and probably more capable, ships. I was starting to feel a bit like those old ships. Even though Ellendrí don't age, maybe after 60 years, it was time for me to give up at Guardian duty and try to do something else with my life. But what? I had been such a wanderer for so many years that I couldn't envision settling down in one place for any prolonged length of time. The love of adventure was in my soul. I didn't know if I could ever shake it out. I wondered if Darí felt the same way now, after eight years of

being a Guardian.

I gave my mind a mental shake. I was here to ask about ships, not ponder whether I wanted to start a new career. And ask I would. I could hear rustling sounds from the upper floor. Kÿrrÿl was quickly washing up. He would be done soon, and I would study the ships while I waited.

Sometime later, I heard Kÿrrÿl's quiet barefooted steps behind me. I turned to see that he was now dressed in something cleaner, albeit still old and worn. Smiling warmly, he enthused, "Ah *ïdrÿlad*, now I can greet you properly," promptly giving me a friendly hug. I was happy that Kÿrrÿl wasn't thoroughly annoyed at me for the state of my ship, returning his enthusiastic embrace with pleasure. Standing back from me, Kÿrrÿl looked out the window towards where my gaze had been focused before, musing, "So you're hunting for a new ship."

"It would seem that I am," I waved my hand in the direction of the older ships. "Are any of the ships that have just come off Guardian duty suitable?"

"Well … not very," Kÿrrÿl responded slowly. "Most need a fair bit of maintenance. Some aren't much better than your old ship," he paused, letting the implications of his words swirl through my thoughts. "But I'll show them to you, and you can see for yourself." He grabbed a clean pair of boots by the door, pulled them on, and we headed back out into the dome.

We spent most of the remainder of the afternoon looking at each of the old ships in turn. True enough, they were a tired looking lot. Most of the other Guardians hadn't either the time, or the skill, to do much maintenance for themselves, relying on infrequent servicing by Kÿrrÿl to keep their ships in working order. As a matter of safety, I had long ago learned to do much of my own repair work, only requiring Kÿrrÿl for serious problems that needed parts manufactured or salvaged. As a result, except for the major issue with the heat shielding, my ship was actually in much better condition than many of the ships I was now viewing. It wasn't heartening. None of the old ships were armed either, something that all the remaining Guardians had agreed was necessary. Depending on which ship I might be interested in, Kÿrrÿl estimated that it would be at least 15 to 20 days to outfit it, possibly longer if something unexpected came up. Well, time I had, since I was indefinitely assigned to work on Ellendrïa. I had promised Darí that I would catch up with him in a quarter-year or less, so that gave me 55 days to work with.

"You want me to choose one?" I asked Kÿrrÿl after he'd shown me the last of the older ships. It was hard to have a preference—they all had different issues, and none of them was outstanding in any particular way. I probably would do just as well to select one randomly.

"Think on it for a little while longer." Kÿrrÿl gave me gleeful grin, then suggested, "Let me show you what I've gotten done on my own project." Kÿrrÿl always had at least one personal project that he worked on with love and attention. Most recently it had been a newer, larger version of the *Föalen*. Given how busy Kÿrrÿl was, these projects often took years to complete, but they allowed his creative

spirit to flourish. He was always happy when someone had the time to let him expound on his work. Kÿrrÿl was my favorite *ïdrÿlad*. Even if he hadn't been, I certainly owed him a chance to show me the best of his efforts after he'd spent the afternoon describing the merits of various almost wrecks. Besides, the new ship was definitely a work of art. I would enjoy seeing it. Maybe it would brighten my thoughts for a while before I had to make a decision.

"Certainly," I responded enthusiastically. Kÿrrÿl ushered me off to one of the quieter areas of the dome where longer duration projects were located. As we approached the new ship, I could see that Kÿrrÿl had accomplished a great deal since the last time he'd shown it to me. In fact, it almost looked finished. "It's done," I said in awe.

Kÿrrÿl laughed and shook his head, "Not quite. But I'm hoping to test fly it in less than 20 days."

"I'm impressed," I'd reached the ship, gently touching the gleaming surface with a fingertip. Like the *Föalen*, this ship was also a deep blue-black, with a trace of metallic glitter. "What brought on this sudden burst of work?" I asked as I continued to admire the ship. I could see that it had the same markings as the *Föalen* as well—a stylized figure of a *föalen*, drawn in gold, on each side of the nose.

"Someone needs it, so it was time to get the job done," I could feel Kÿrrÿl come to stand close by my shoulder.

My fingers came to rest on the gold-painted *föalen*, "Why did you put a *föalen* on it?" I wondered. "Is it for someone from our House?"

"It is," Kÿrrÿl confirmed. "I call it the *Sn'ënne ó ed Föalen*[58]." At the name, a tingle went down my spine. I turned to look at Kÿrrÿl, my attention drawn away from the ship and focused on what he'd just said.

Kÿrrÿl was looking at me steadily, a slight smile on his face. "You and Darí have done the best you could to live up to our society's expectations. Even though the Elders may express some disapproval, after all that's happened to the two of you, no one is truly going to be critical if you follow your own path." I was listening to Kÿrrÿl intently, still not certain that I understood what he was saying. Seeing my confusion, he continued, "Farrwÿn said that you needed to choose your destiny. I'm making sure that you'll get there without killing yourself."

While I'm not loquacious, generally I don't lack for words entirely. However, I found myself making strange incoherent noises as my mouth tried to articulate the mass of confused thoughts that were spinning around in my head. Kÿrrÿl smiled more widely, grabbed me by the arm, and led me up the ship's ramp, saying "Let me introduce you to a part of your destiny."

Chapter 11: Encounters with Evolution

Farrwÿn—Date: 8936.131 to 8936.148

LLell2-2, LLell2-4, and LLell2-7 (unnamed planets in the Second Arc)

I woke up slowly, stretching, feeling relaxed in the bunk that had now become my home. I could hear Darí moving around, probably doing his morning workout. Although I still had my eyes closed, holding on to those last few precious moments of sleep, I could see him in my mind—lean, hard-muscled, naked from the waist up, beaded with sweat as he forced himself to his physical limits. Guardians, I'd recently learned, tend to sleep with their pants on, ready for action at a moment's notice. Getting out of bed, Darí would have started his morning with a short period of meditation, then warmed up with some stretches, and finally gotten into the more physical part of his routine. By the sounds that I was hearing, he was well along in his morning, and I was late awakening.

I was strangely happy and content, even though my current situation was totally outside any of my previous 88 years of experience. Darí and Dran were the closest I would ever come to having *deirfa* and a real family. While we hadn't had many opportunities during the last 10 years to spend much time together, Darí and I were quickly falling into a comfortable, easy pattern. In fact, I found this environment both exciting and mentally stimulating—a chance for exploration and adventure. However, it seemed to me that if I was going to travel with a Guardian, I might do well to emulate their lifestyle. So here I was, sleeping half-dressed like Darí, ready for action. And when I finally got out of bed, I would do my own set of exercises, a much gentler version of the ones Darí was currently engaged in. A few muscles wouldn't be a bad thing in a tight spot. I was only too aware of how thin I'd become—the result of many years living with the stress of both my *turas* and Aleysïa's twisted mind.

Finally awake enough to move, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up. Sure enough, there was Darí, pretty much as I'd pictured him. Beyond him, looking up and out the *Föalen*'s canopy, I could see the most breathtaking view. I'd been looking at it for three days now, and it still filled me with awe. We were in a low-elevation heliosynchronous polar orbit around a planet in the Second Arc. Upside down with respect to the planet's gravitational well, the planet rotated above our heads as we precessed rapidly in a direction opposite to the planet's spin—16 orbits a day with ever-changing scenery. For two more days, the sensors studding the *Föalen*'s hull, some of which were just newly installed by Kÿrrÿl specifically for our search, would continue to collect massive amounts of information. By the time we were finished, the planet would be mapped. We would have data on its gravity, magnetism, weather, climate, atmosphere, oceans, plant life, and much more—a greater amount of information than I had originally thought would be possible in the time frame that we had.

However, as important as getting good, factual scientific data is, it was the beauty of the planet that captivated me. A mountainous desert planet, it wore a mantle of many hues—browns, reds, yellows, even purples. Without any plant life, the bones of the world lay bare, the ripples, curves, and ridges

created as the surface buckled and heaved to the forces of plate tectonics were plain to see. The patterns were surreal, even mesmerizing, the scale grand. As I watched, a huge symmetrical volcanic cone swung into view, like a gigantic breast, frosted at the nipple with a layer of snow. Then we were out over the ocean—a deep, dark blue expanse of water. Here, there was life—our sensors detected chlorophyll, that all important molecule that marked the presence of the base of the food chain. But what lived deep under the surface, even the *Föalen* couldn't tell us.

I realized then that Darí had stopped moving, watching me, head cocked a little. "It's pretty amazing, isn't it?" he commented with a smile. I could tell by the expression in his eyes that he felt the same wild attraction, the same joy of sensation that I was feeling. I guess that's what draws people to travel to remote locations in search of adventure and new experiences. I felt something in me reach out to this life. I wondered, not for the first time, how much of Killarÿn there was hidden within me.

I nodded, struggling for a moment to find my voice. "It is," I finally murmured softly, my words small and insignificant against the vastness of the planet above us.

Darí entered the tiny washroom, a cubicle barely large enough to stand in, but that accommodated sink, shower, and toilet. This left the central space of the cabin free for me to work on the few simple exercises that Darí had shown me. So far, I hadn't managed to work up much sweat, but I'd definitely created a few sore muscles. Darí assured me that the painful phase would soon pass. Working on altering my diet, he insisted that I eat more, and increased the amount of protein that I was consuming. His concern reminded me that while Darí was a Guardian now, he still remained a Healer. I'm not sure what changes he was expecting to see in me, but maybe after traveling with him for a year or two, we'd both find out.

As I struggled, I marveled at how quickly my life was changing. Thirteen days since my experience with the Cultaní captive, and almost every aspect of my life was different. I thought back for a moment. After my first day on Lorril, there had been three more days of chaotic meetings with people from all over the Ll'Ellendrÿn, the last day of which had been formal scheduled meetings and discussions. Darí and I had slept onboard the *Föalen* for those first few days, getting used to each other and the close quarters of the ship. I had spent most of my time trying to adjust my mind to the breadth and diversity of the people around me. It's one thing to read about other cultures, quite another to experience them. Then Darí was asked to spend five days with the new Border Patrol. He and the *Föalen* left Lorril. I had to stay behind; Darí refused to take me on anything that he considered to be dangerous. However, he took me to a small beach house, one of several that were used by the Guardians when they needed a break, so I had a place to stay and some time to myself. It gave me a few days to truly experience what life is like on a different planet—one with a lower gravity, more oxygen, and an abundance of water that was almost unfathomable to someone born on Ellendrïa. I experienced rain. I must admit somewhat ashamedly that when the first rain fell while I was staying at that little house on its quiet strand of white sand beach, I took my clothes off and ran naked, luxuriating in the feel of warm rain on my body.

In time, Darí returned. We went back to living onboard the *Föalen* again. I was more relaxed now, less stressed, but starting to feel the pleasant itch for adventure under my skin. There were two more days of meetings, at which everyone seemed to express a degree of positivity about the newly formed Border Patrol. Apparently, this freed Darí from some level of responsibility. As he had speculated, Rallandrí did indeed give him some release time, 30 days and possibly more, if he needed them, to go exploring. I think Rallandrí was quite aware of the purpose of our search, and felt that it more than justified releasing Darí from his duties.

Looking at my lanky form, I wondered if my body would change as much as my mind already had. While I was surprisingly strong, I certainly wouldn't consider myself muscular by any description. I've always regarded myself as more intellectual than athletic, and have never really had any great expectations about my physical abilities; however, now something seemed to keep me motivated, so I found myself working hard. I would probably suffer the consequences tomorrow, but that would be as it may.

Freshly cleaned, Darí stepped out of the washroom, pulled on a fresh shirt, and went to sit in the pilot's seat, head thrown back as he watched the unfolding diorama above him. I sweated a little while longer, then staggered into the cubicle of claustrophobia—the cramped washroom facilities were still something that I hadn't yet adjusted to—and practiced bashing my elbows and knees into the walls as the warm cleansing mist soaked my body. Sometime later, I joined Darí at the front of the ship.

Darí was checking through the data collected during the time we were asleep, looking up occasionally to admire the scenery passing overhead. Tapping the control panel, he made a few slight modifications to the *Föalen*'s flight program, fine-tuning the orbital parameters and the swath patterns of the sensors. I could hear the *Föalen* query him occasionally as it confirmed the new settings in its quiet, melodically androgynous voice. I was lucky to have Darí working on this project—he was one of our best pilots. And interacting with the *Föalen*, a strange and unexpected third entity in our crew, widened my narrow perspectives even more.

A huge canyon system slipped by above us, banded patterns of rock on sheer cliffs showing brightly in the sunlight. Once this planet had running water on its continents; long enough to form sedimentary deposits, create sandstone from those deposits, then erode that sandstone into deep river valleys. Now it had none. What had happened to this world to change its climate so dramatically? Like Ellendrïa, the moisture in the atmosphere condensed high in the mountains. Unlike Ellendrïa, only snow was formed. Not even plants were found in the frozen snowfields that iced the tallest peaks. Unfortunately, this planet would not be our new home. However, Darí had suggested, and I had agreed, that we collect a full remote sensing profile for each planet we visited. Five days spent in orbit at each planet would help provide data that could make our argument all the more convincing once we found the right planet.

What was the right planet? I closed my eyes, shutting out the fascinating views of planetary terrain, trying to summarize what my *turas* had indicated were the key features of the planet we were hoping to locate. Picking through the various visions I'd had, I knew we were looking for a world that had a

continent in a temperate zone with enough planetary tilt that there were distinct seasons. In some of my visions, I'd seen snow; in others, at the same location, there had been deciduous trees green with their summer foliage. The landscapes that I could see in my mind's eye were varied, although generally the terrain was mountainous or hilly. The high peaks were stark and slatey, dotted with bogs and fens, their shoulders mantled with moorlands. At lower elevations, the mountains were covered in forests of coniferous trees, their flanks incised by glens containing streams and lakes. These mountains transformed gradually into rolling, forested hills. The high elevation streams, with their gorges and waterfalls, grew into large rivers that flowed lazily through wide valleys. Eventually, these rivers made their way to an ocean, one that was clearly tidal, based on the wide, sandy beaches and water-carved rock bluffs. I wasn't sure, but I thought the planet had at least three moons, which would definitely provide the forces necessary to generate tides. One of the most vivid images I had was of a large, slow-flowing river snaking sinuously through a wide plain that formed the base of a flat valley bottom. My viewpoint was somewhere high on the valley wall, looking out over the meandering river, towards the broad, arc-shaped estuary where land and sea met. Past the estuary was a mountainous island offshore, with seven distinct, toothy peaks, possibly ancient volcanoes. Was that enough to identify both the planet and the location for the initial colony? I wasn't sure, but my *turas* had guided me this far. I had some faith that it would continue to provide me with the information I needed to make the right choices.

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Sliding down through the atmosphere, the grassy highland plains and glacially-eroded fjord systems below us grew in size, the small details of rock and vegetation becoming sharper. This planet had clearly experienced at least one ice age, and not so long ago, judging from the sharp, hard valley walls and the glaciers still in retreat on the northernmost land masses. We had already collected five days of data orbiting around the planet. While I was fairly certain it was not the one we were looking for, it had some of the right features. Darí felt that we should land and take a closer look.

The grasslands were vast and rich, supported by a deep layer of loess, soil carried and deposited by the winds associated with the recent glaciations. Where the valleys had been carved by the flowing ice, the thick layer of soil on the highlands could be seen in cross-section. It was early autumn in the northern hemisphere. The grass was drying golden on the stalk, a standing crop of food that would support many herbivores until the coming of the next spring. As we flew over, we startled huge herds of grazers. I watched intently, trying to discern the types of animals. Although it was hard to tell without capturing them, I suspected that several were bovine[59] in nature, and at least one herd appeared to be equines[60]. Since the final stage of planet bioengineering involved introducing many animal species from Ellendorïa, it was not surprising that there would be similarities between the animals on these planets, and those on Ellendrïa, which had also been bioengineered long ago. However, much time had passed since these introductions. The evolution that had occurred meant that the species on different planets were seldom identical.

Darí flew the *Föalen* in a long, slow sweep around a large expanse of open plain, giving the sensors on the hull adequate time to record ground imagery before we landed. Although the *Föalen* made little noise as it glided downward, it cast a dark shadow across the grassland, frightening more of the grazers, causing them to charge off wildly in different directions. Something about the shadows and perspectives of the fleeing animals seemed a bit odd to my eyes, but I couldn't quite figure out what exactly was bothering me.

After we'd made a complete loop around the plain, Darí landed the *Föalen* more or less centrally in the expanse of tall grass. And what grass it was! As we settled down to the ground, I could see that the seed heads of the grass would be waving over my head if I were to try to walk through it. A forest of thin golden stalks swayed in the breeze, tall enough that the grass was brushing the ship's sides, its lower set of wings lost from sight, so that we appeared to be floating on a sea of yellow waves.

As the ship quieted, the nearest herd of grazers became more curious than frightened, approaching us cautiously. Darí touched the control panel, and sensors on the ship's hull allowed us to hear the sounds from the surrounding plain. The wind whistled softly through the grass. Making various snorts and grunts, the grazers wandered around the ship. Long whistled notes drifted through the air, suggesting the possible presence of birds.

Darí alternated between keenly watching our surroundings and checking information from the ship's sensors that was scrolling by on a display screen. "Atmosphere's looking good," he commented. "Nothing toxic detected so far, about 18 percent oxygen, the remainder mostly nitrogen. Temperature's reasonable and the weather is clear and sunny, so we should be able to hike about without needing much protective clothing." He smiled at me, "I could use a bit of a stretch. Some time exploring on the surface would be fun."

As Darí was talking, one of the grazers, a creature with a pair of wide, forward-curving horns, came up close to the ship. Wide-chested with a muscular shoulder hump, it's back sloped downward to a narrower hind section. In color, it was a uniform tan, except for a stripe of black fur that started with a tuft of hair on its forehead, formed a standing ridge of black mane on the neck, then traveled along the backbone and down the tail. The tail itself ended in a black tassel, which the beast was using with good affect to dislodge biting insects that were landing on its flanks. The grass was tickling its belly as it ambled towards us, occasionally distracted by the need to crop a mouthful of grass heads. My eyes widened as the perspective of the scene finally sank into my head. The beast snorted, then stuck its huge black nose against the clear canopy on the side of the ship where I was sitting, leaving a slimy wet patch. The horns, seen at near range, were as wide across as the forward section of the *Föalen*.

"Ummm … Darí, should we be concerned about the wildlife?" I asked, a bit worriedly. Darí looked my way, and I saw his eyes widen slightly, then narrow as he pondered the situation.

"A little on the large size, perhaps," Darí murmured. "But it's an herbivore, and shouldn't be too

dangerous, provided that we stay out of its way."

"It looks bovine to me. Don't bovines have a tendency to charge when they feel threatened?" I inquired as I studied the 30 or so fellow members of the beast's herd. I didn't know much about megafauna—most of Ellendrïa's were kept in a tissue bank—but if there was any relationship between size and ferocity, exploring might prove to be problematic.

Suddenly, the herd scattered like water droplets in the wind. From the ship's sensors came a rumbling growl, deep, almost low enough to be felt rather than heard. One of the bovines let out a bawling cry, the terror in it making my hair feel prickly. I quickly looked about. A huge tawny shape clung to the back of one of the herbivores, sharp-clawed fore-paws leaving bloody gashes on the shoulder and flank of its intended victim. I saw the large mouth open, exposing gleaming white scimitar-shaped teeth. Biting deeply into the crest of its prey, the massive feline[61] shook its great head. I could almost feel the snap as it broke the herbivore's neck. Both predator and prey crashed to the ground, lost from sight in the tall ocean of grass.

I shuddered and looked at Darí, who was staring rather fixedly at the herd of grazers that were coalescing some distance from the ship, now smaller by one member. Sensing my eyes on him, he turned towards me.

"Are you certain this isn't the right planet?" Darí inquired, almost casually.

"Quite," I replied emphatically.

"Well," Darí gave me a quirky smile, "maybe a ground survey isn't necessary right now." He glanced back at the location where the struggle had taken place, "That was one big feline …"

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The third planet we visited looked promising. We had completed our five days of remote sensing data collection. Everything I'd seen so far suggested that it could possibly fit all the criteria I had for my selection. On the other hand, we hadn't spotted any of the specific landmarks that were in my visions. I'd been hoping that my *turas* would be sparked by what we'd seen, that it would give me a more definite indication that I'd found the right place. Unfortunately, I didn't get any sense whatsoever that this was the planet we were looking for. However, I felt a bit uneasy about the place. I wondered why.

By now, I'd been 17 days on Darí's diet and exercise regime, with the level of exercise ramping up a little more each day. I was no longer sore. I had, in fact, gained a little weight. But more importantly, I could feel myself actually getting stronger, as I found myself able to do some of the harder exercises that Darí had given me. In some strange way, I felt as though I was training for a new life. I wondered if I was destined someday to become a Guardian. I'd had dreams of holding a Star in my hands, but I was never sure if those dreams were showing my past or my future.

Early this morning, we had landed the *Föalen* beside a lazy, muddy river flowing through a wide river valley. Again, atmospheric analysis was positive—20 percent oxygen, and nothing that seemed worrisome. It was late spring or early summer in the northern hemisphere. The weather was mild, a bit crisp just after dawn, but rapidly warming up. Where we had landed, by the river, the ground was covered in knee-high green grass. However, as I looked towards the valley walls, I could see that the grass was quickly overtaken by shrubs, and eventually trees, which ultimately formed forests at the base of the steep cliffs confining the valley floor. The narrow, grassy verge along the river was probably maintained by annual flooding. So far, there were no signs of larger-than-normal animal life.

In the distance, along the eastern valley wall, I could just discern a scattering of black spots—mouths of caves, I thought. I wondered what sort of animal might inhabit them, if any. I had been glancing up at them once in a while, but hadn't seen any movement or other signs of life. For some reason, they drew my attention, but I didn't know why.

Darí was assembling a pack with some sampling equipment. Our plan was to hike from the river, across the valley, to the base of the cliffs. We were hoping to sample a representative cross-section of plant life, pass through several ecosystems, and have the opportunity to observe their associated animal life. It would also be a pleasant hike on a sunny, but not too hot, day.

Unlike Lorril, the gravity on this planet was close to that of Ellendrïa. As I followed Darí down the *Föalen*'s ramp, I didn't have that strange feeling like I was air walking, as I'd had when we'd first landed on Lorril. The gentle breeze was warm, humid, with a muddy smell from the river. The damp grass added its own greenish chlorophyll aroma to the ambiance. I heard several chirps and whistles, which I assumed were birds. Looking around me, I didn't see anything that looked hazardous, and took the last couple steps down the ramp to the grass.

Both Darí and I wore belt knives with reasonably long blades. They were useful tools, and could potentially be used for self-defense should something try to attack us. Darí also carried a stun weapon strapped to the side of his pack, which could be used to deter larger animals. And of course, he had his Star, should we have to deal with something particularly dangerous. While I wouldn't say that I felt totally safe, I thought we had the situation fairly well covered.

As we began our hike along the grassy floodplain, we tried to sample as many species of vegetation as we could. This was a relatively quick procedure. I used a tablet to record images of the plant in its native habitat, along with some closeup images of various vegetative features that could be used for identification. Darí would then take a small sample of the plant, drop it into a hand-held chemical analyzer, and produce a chemical profile for it. This would tell us whether the plant was toxic, as well as give us a good idea of the plant's potential properties and uses. Due to the nature of planet bioengineering, it was not uncommon to find plants on these worlds that were quite similar to those on Ellendrïa.

Not only did I enjoy the chance to explore a new world, I had some personal reasons to be particularly interested in the biology of the planets we were studying. Long ago, as a young child, I'd spent many hours in the various preserves and garden spaces contained in the domes on Ellendrïa. At the beginning, it had primarily been a way to escape from Aleysïa. However, I quickly discovered that I enjoyed the contemplative solitude of these almost natural places. And I found that I had a rather interesting ability. I seemed to be able to connect with the plants and animals that made these spaces their homes. Not exactly communicate with them, as I would with another telepath, but rather, I seemed to have some type of empathy with them, an ability to understand what they were—their specific role in the web of life. Animals never feared me, and would allow me to touch them. Plants had a strange, slow, ebb and flow of life force that often provided me with a sense of their purpose and function. Like my *turas*, this was another of my odd wild talents, but a private, comforting one that I never bothered to tell anyone about. More recently, I'd been wondering if it was an ability that might have some potential uses.

Shortly after I'd undergone genetic analysis to ensure that I could get on the list for colonists, I also chose to have a complete screening of my psi talents. This is often done when children are young so that they can receive training appropriate to their abilities. However, in my case, Aleysïa had never bothered to have me tested as a child. After my *turas* had tormented me for years, I hadn't really been all that interested in finding out if I had any other hidden abilities. Only recently, with the plan of becoming a colonist in mind, had it occurred to me that it might be a good idea to have a full understanding of my capabilities.

Thankfully, the person who tested me was someone I trusted to keep the results confidential, as they were somewhat unexpected. At least I was able to confirm that my strange communion with plants and animals was a manifestation of a relatively rare talent, *nwÿfödad*[62], which allowed me to sense the connections of the web of life more clearly than most people. Supposedly, these connections gave me the ability to understand or empathize with elements of the web that were nonhuman. Additionally, I tested positive for several other latent psi talents, quite likely the result of my Seabÿn heritage. It was comforting to know that I had considerably more potential than Aleysïa had ever credited me with, but I also knew that without proper training, those abilities were likely useless or possibly even dangerous. As well, the examiner warned me that as I'd lacked adequate instruction as a child, I'd most likely acquired patterns and habits that would make developing my latent talents much more difficult. If that were so, I had only myself to blame. Eldarkÿn had strongly encouraged me to get tested, and had offered to provide whatever training he could. It had been my decision to focus only on the talents that had so clearly manifested themselves in my childhood—my *turas* and the psychokinesis that allowed me to become a Psi Tech. Plainly, I had some challenges ahead of me.

I found myself wishing I'd spent more time with Dran and Darí when they were being mentored in the use of their psi powers as children. Thinking myself relatively talentless, I'd spent those hours with Darriel as we waited for our childhood friends to finish their lessons. Little did I know how valuable some of those teachings would have been to me now.

In any case, I decided to start working with what I called my “plant sense”. It seemed like something that could be reasonably useful on a new planet, where foraging might well make up a part of a colonist’s life. While I was still on Ellendrïa, I repeatedly tested this ability against documented information, specifically selecting plants with which I was unfamiliar. Although I was a bit dubious when I started, I found that my sense of a plant’s characteristics was surprisingly accurate. It was now my intention to keep testing this talent on the worlds we were exploring.

Gradually we worked our way across the grassy flat. The air was warming, and the morning dew was quickly evaporating. Pungent scents were replacing the wet muddy smell as the heat drew out aromatics from the surrounding plants. We disturbed a few birds and a great many insects, none of which seemed terribly interested in biting us. We probably smelled a bit too alien for them. Darí was smiling and relaxed, enjoying the chance to get out of the ship. The sun was warm on my back as I worked. I felt a glow of happiness and contentment.

“Here’s a new one for you,” Darí called out to me. I wandered over to where he was kneeling beside a patch of dark green herbaceous plants. Grinning, he pointed to one of the leaves where a brilliant iridescent green and purple beetle about the length of my thumbnail was quietly resting. As my shadow crossed the plants, the beetle spread its wings. With a loud buzzing, it took flight, spiraling around me. I held out my hand, and the beetle landed on my palm, paused for a few moments, then took to the air again and disappeared from sight. I knelt beside Darí, recording some images for our records. Picking one of the plants, I looked at it closely. The stalk was square in cross-section. Its dark, glossy leaves were attached in pairs to the stem, opposite each other. Pulling off a leaf, I rubbed it between my fingers, releasing an invigorating aromatic scent that swept through my sinuses. I could remember drinking a tea that smelled like this. Closing my eyes, I chased that image for a moment, letting the plant show me it secrets.

Eyes open again, I handed the remainder of the plant to Darí for chemical analysis. “It’s related to some of our garden herbs,” I commented. “We sometimes use it in teas. It’s good for digestion.”

Darí plucked a second leaf off the plant, and dropped the leaf into a small opening at the top of the chemical analyzer. A short while later, the screen on the front of the unit lit up, displaying a number of chemical structures. Darí tapped the screen with his finger, bringing up more information—a pictorial list of plants found on Ellendrïa that had similar chemistry. He smiled at the results, touching one of the images and bringing up a screen of detailed information on that plant. “You’re right,” he confirmed. “This plant is very similar to one that we grow in our herb garden at home—a few subtle differences in chemistry, but nothing that would make it toxic. The major compounds responsible for its biological activity are all present.” Looking towards me, the sun catching glints in his grey eyes, he chuckled. “You’ve been studying up on your botany.”

“Seems like a useful subject for a colonist to know,” I replied. We both got up and walked a little closer towards the line of bush that demarcated the edge of the floodplain, once again watching for plants we

hadn't yet sampled.

It was mid-morning by the time we reached the brush. We had seen no large animals, either herbivores or carnivores, although Darí had pointed out some tracks left by a cloven hoof. I'd flushed a small, short-tailed rodent that I was able to catch, allowing Darí the opportunity to observe and record data on it. It rested calmly on the palm of my hand, velvety grey-brown fur soft against my skin as its shiny dark eyes watched us intently. When I put my hand down on the ground to release it, it almost seemed reluctant to go, leaving only after I gave it some gentle encouragement. Then it stayed crouched, watching us as we continued onward.

The bush edging the forest was surprisingly free of thorny vegetation, making it fairly easy for us to push our way through. Many of the shrubs were in flower. I could sense that a number of them were going to produce fruit during the summer. As we worked our way deeper into the brush, the shrubs started to get taller, and some small deciduous trees made an appearance. The vegetation on the ground thinned out, making walking easier. Gradually, the trees increased in height and number until the canopy closed over our heads, surrounding us completely by forest. It was darker under the trees, although the occasional shaft of sunlight made it to the forest floor, illuminating the undergrowth, bringing a splash of color to this grey-green world. The forest was a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees. The still air had the resinous tang of pitch as well as the earthy smell of decaying fallen leaves. Without the gentle breeze that had been our constant companion on the floodplain, the forest was quiet. Our footsteps and the trills and warbles of a few birds were the only sounds.

By midday, we had worked our way to the base of the cliff. Here, the trees were massive conifers, with trunks large enough around that they were wider than the wingspan of the *Föalen*. These were the ancient ones. Touching them, I could feel my mind being drawn back in time thousands of years, the weight of the millennia heavy on the boughs of these giants. I felt a deep sense of respect for the years these old ones had weathered. Long ago, a large piece of granite had fallen away from the cliffs above, and now lay nestled amongst the trees. There we sat, eating our lunch, our backs against the rock. The trees kept their council around us, like a group of elders.

"Impressive!" Darí spoke in a hushed voice, respecting the stillness of the place. I nodded, but couldn't bring myself to speak. We ate our meal in silence, each pursuing our own thoughts.

As we were finishing, something started bothering me, a strange nervous apprehension. I looked around slowly, feeling as though I was being watched, but not wanting to disturb Darí unnecessarily. I tried to see if my *turas* would tell me anything, but it was as quiet as the trees. Unfortunately, my *turas* is not particularly reliable for warning me about things that might happen immediately. It seems to work much better when I am trying to scry out events that are many days or even years in the future. In any case, it was definitely unhelpful at the moment. I glanced at Darí. He was rubbing the back of his neck and looking around, so obviously he was feeling something odd as well.

“Do you think we’re being watched?” I asked in a quiet murmur.

“Maybe,” Darí looked around again. “I can’t sense anything nearby that might want to harm us.” I could see that he was holding his Star now, scanning around us for any emotional emanations that could warn us of an impending attack.

We sat very still, tense and braced, for a long time. Eventually the feeling faded. Packing up the remains of our lunch, we were ready to hike back to the ship. The event had disturbed both of us, but by the time we got back out onto the grassy plain, the warm afternoon sun had restored our good mood and the strange moment, if not forgotten, was relegated to the back of our minds along with the other unsolvable mysteries of our lives.

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Our second day of surveying started out in much the same way as the first had. Again, we decided to hike out from the ship towards the valley wall, only this time we chose to go in a direction towards where I had observed the caves. The distance was a bit longer, but we would travel faster, as part of the goal of the day’s trip was to take a closer look at the caves.

Our trek across the grassy floodplain was pleasant and uneventful. We startled a small herd of cervids[63], delicate creatures with highly branched antlers that were probably responsible for the tracks that Darí had observed yesterday. They bounded away from us in all directions, graceful leaps showing us their flashing white bellies. The rest of their bodies were yellowish-brown, probably adapted for camouflage in tall autumn grasses. The underside of their tails, which they carried high over their backs, was a white warning flag to the other members of their herd—beware, predators have been spotted.

It wasn’t long before we were walking under the forest canopy again. We hadn’t reached the ancient giants yet, but were walking in a grove of older deciduous trees, when I started to notice something peculiar. There was some strange regularity about the arrangement of the trees and shrubs. However, when I stopped and looked intently at the plant life, I couldn’t see anything that suggested a pattern. It took me three tries before my mind finally grasped what I was seeing. There was no specific spatial arrangement, no grids or rows, but certain kinds of plants were always clumped together. That clumping pattern might occur randomly, but in this grove, I saw it repeated over and over, too often to be just a random coincidence.

“Darí, take a look at this,” I called out. Darí had been a few paces in the lead, but quickly turned back and came beside me. I pointed out one of the big trees. In the autumn, it bore nuts. The husks of some of those nuts could be seen scattered on the ground below the tree. Around the tree were three shrubs, each of a different species. Each of those species was one that produced berries. A vine wrapped itself around the trunk of the tree. My plant sense told me that it too yielded an edible crop. At the base of the shrubs were five different herbaceous plants, all adapted to the low light conditions of the forest floor, several of which we had already identified as either edible or medicinal. As I described the plants, I

could see Darí's eyes widen when he understood the significance of the pattern. We were looking at a garden, carefully planted and tended.

We walked around the grove, finding the same arrangement of 10 plants repeated many times. Darí looked at me, raising his eyebrows. "Human?"

"Maybe," I answered quietly. "There's no way of knowing for sure." I was starting to get that nervous feeling again. This time, although I had no visions, my *turas* was clearly sending me danger signs. "I think we should go back to the *Föalen*," I warned Darí. He looked at me, and seeing the fear in my eyes, nodded. We started back the same way we'd come, moving fast, but not running.

As we walked through the forest, the sensation of being watched intensified. My hands were sweaty, my scalp itched as my hair tried to bristle—old instinctive reactions, even after millennia of intensive breeding programs. I could hear the occasional crackle in the forest far behind us. I suspected we were being followed. By whom? What were their intentions?

Finally, we were breaking through the brush at the forest's edge. The snap of branches was loud, concealing other sounds. We didn't care. We just wanted to reach the clearing. The need to see what was following us was overwhelming. Even though we weren't running, I could feel myself beginning to pant, more from fear than exertion. Darí could easily have outpaced me, but he stayed close beside me. We were covering ground rapidly, still not running, but our strides were long, almost loping. About halfway across the floodplain, I risked a look over my shoulder. And almost froze.

Tall humanoids—six, eight, maybe ten. My quick glance didn't give much detail. Not human. White-furred, with a long tail, but standing upright on two legs. Not human, but possibly still simian[64]. "Behind us, at the edge of the grass," I gasped at Darí.

Darí's head flicked back for a moment. "Run!"

And run we did. But our pursuers were faster. They moved like graceful shadows, almost too fast to see. Darí kept glancing back, checking the distances. We weren't going to make it back to the *Föalen*. Close, but not close enough.

"Back to back!" Darí shouted as he stopped, spinning to face the threat, whipping his pack off and grabbing the stun weapon. I whirled around so that I could watch his back in case any of the humanoids circled behind us. Alert and ready, Darí didn't shoot. He was working with his Star. I could feel the tingle of psychic energies. He was trying to convince the creatures that we were harmless. We just wanted to go away and leave them alone. Peering over my shoulder, I could see several of them shaking their heads in response to Darí's projected empathic messages. Up this close, their eyes were greenish, with slitted pupils, more feline than simian. A crest of longer white fur went from their foreheads down to the back of their necks. Their hands were long-fingered, and their tails were clearly prehensile. Probably tree climbers.

Either Darí's message wasn't getting through, or the creatures weren't willing to give up the chase. They kept moving in closer. Darí was trying to frighten them now, sending feelings of fear and terror radiating outwards towards them. Again, there was some head shaking. A few of them dropped back a step or two, but the rest held their ground. Once it was clear that no further harm was coming, our attackers starting pressing in further. I noticed now that some of them had simple belts—and weapons. A few had oddly shaped, black-bladed knives, others had heavy sticks. Primitive, but effective.

Darí shook his head sadly, lifting the stun weapon. Fully charged, he would have six shots. I could now clearly count 10 of the humanoids. If he was accurate with each shot, we would still be outnumbered two to one. Better than what we were facing now. Maybe they might give up the attack after a shot or two.

Darí's first shot brought the closest one down. It stumbled and lay twitching on the ground as the electrical charge played havoc with its nerve impulses. Usually the effect was short-lived, but hopefully it would last long enough to let us get away. Darí paused, giving the rest of the white simians a chance to back off. Luck wasn't with us. They just kept coming, more aggressively now. In quick sequence, Darí fired off five more shots. Five more of the humanoids lay spasming on the grass. Darí was clearly a good shot.

Four left. My heart was thudding in my chest so hard that I was sure I was trembling with each beat. I felt the flush of adrenaline, the tingle waiting for an action. Run or fight?

"Stay close," Darí grabbed his pack, holstered the stun weapon, and slid the pack straps over his shoulders in a single fluid motion. He stepped back so that we were touching. I felt a crackle of energy. Although I couldn't see it, I knew there was now an energy shield surrounding us. As I looked over my shoulder at him, Darí said softly "Move backward slowly towards the ship." He had a deep, concentrated look. Holding a full hemispherical shield was hard work, and would drain his resources very quickly. We needed to get to safety fast.

The ship was not far. We started edging backward, making good progress. Then the first of our attackers contacted the shield. Or rather slammed into it—and bounced off. The force of the impact translated back to Darí, but he was braced for it, holding firm. However, I could feel the shield flare, and knew that each impact would drain more energy from him, even with the use of his Star. Two more impacts followed in close order. Puzzled, the simians regrouped. Their body language told me they were communicating. Then two of them circled behind us, cutting us off from the ship.

This was not good. If they came at us from both sides, they could just keep hammering Darí's shield until he was too exhausted to keep it up. Then we would be in a melee, and outnumbered. I didn't know much about hand-to-hand combat. Could Darí fight them off if he wasn't protecting me? I felt cold fear sweat trickle down my chest. I knew I was a liability. What would Killarÿn do? In desperation, I drove deep down into myself, looking for a wisp of memory, a fragment of a self that I might once have been,

a solution to our crisis.

Eldarí—Date: 8936.148

LLell2-7 (unnamed planet in the Second Arc)

When I saw two of our attackers cut off our retreat to the *Föalen*, I knew the situation was going to become challenging. It didn't matter if they kept on charging my shield, or just decided to surround us and wait—in either case, I would eventually tire, and the shield would come down. My only choice was to drop the shield now, while I still had the energy to put up a good fight, or to hold out on the hope that they might eventually get bored and leave. I was worried about Farrwÿn. If I went into offensive mode, he would be very vulnerable.

Even as I analyzed the situation, I felt Farrwÿn shift position behind me. I looked over my shoulder at him. He seemed calmer, with an odd focused look. Standing in an easy, balanced position, it seemed like he was prepared to deal with whatever might come his way. He must have figured out our situation and found the courage to overcome his fears—he no longer looked pale and sweaty. Sensing me watching him, Farrwÿn turned his head and met my eyes. "Drop your shield," he replied quietly to my raised eyebrows.

I wasn't sure if I could take down all four of the simians before they could reach Farrwÿn. He looked like he was willing to try to protect himself. If I was fast enough, I might be able to get at least two or three of them before he had to try. With a snap of energy, I let the shield collapse.

Our attackers quickly realized that the barrier between them and us was down. An aggressive, but unarmed, individual rapidly closed in on me. Obviously a veteran scrapper, it had a scar down one side of its face. I didn't give it a chance to work out a plan. Charging, I rammed my head into Scar Face's midsection. Scar Face made a woofing sound as my impact momentarily knocked the air out of its lungs. A second simian, identifiable by a small patch of black fur at the base of its throat, lunged at me with a knife. I turned slightly and kicked out hard, slamming its midriff with my heel. As it doubled over, I spun to the side, sliding away from the knife blade. Coming up fast on the outside of Black Patch's knife arm, I chopped my hand across its wrist. The knife spun away into the grass. Still moving, I kicked low and nailed Black Patch in the knee. It stumbled to the ground as my momentum carried me out of range. I didn't want to kill these creatures, but I wanted them on the ground long enough that we could make our escape back to the *Föalen*.

Scar Face was starting to recover a bit, and shambled towards me, arms outstretched in an attempt to grapple. It was both taller and heavier than me. I definitely wasn't about to let it clinch with me. I grabbed one of Scar Face's wrists, twisted around, and flipped it over my shoulder. It hit the grass with a satisfying thump, once again deflating its lungs. Fortunately for me, our attackers appeared to have little knowledge of good fighting techniques. Staying clear of Scar Face's vague flailing motions, I turned to see what had happened to Farrwÿn.

Just as I spotted Farrwÿn, a simian with a stick was lashing out at his head. Deflecting the stick with his

forearm, he kicked out and caught his attacker low in the abdomen with the toe of his foot. As his assailant staggered, Farrwÿn wrenched the stick from its grasp. Stepping to one side, he whacked the creature soundly across the back with the stick, dropping it to the ground. Conveniently, it curled into an agonized ball and stayed grounded.

I was quickly scanning to find the last of the creatures, but Farrwÿn was already in motion. Not smart enough to run, this one still thought it had a chance. These beings were clearly very single-minded. Last Stand charged at Farrwÿn, swinging its stick wildly. Grasping his appropriated stick in both hands, Farrwÿn blocked the creature's blow. As Last Stand recoiled for another swing, Farrwÿn snapped one end of his stick forward, striking it sharply across his assailant's knuckles. It released its stick, backing up a step. Farrwÿn was still in motion. Letting his momentum carry him forward a step, he jabbed the end of his stick into Last Stand's abdomen. As Last Stand started to fold, Farrwÿn sidestepped, swinging a final blow to the back of its knee. Last Stand stopped standing.

A few steps away from his collapsed opponent, Farrwÿn stopped for a moment, glancing rapidly around, a little wildly. I caught his eyes and jerked my head towards the *Föalen*. Farrwÿn spun, dashing towards safety. Still high on adrenaline, I was only seconds behind him. Shouting out the voice command that activated the ship's hatch, the ramp was almost to the ground by the time we pounded up it. Once in, I slammed my hand against the control panel, bringing the ramp back up and sealing us in. We were both panting hard, as much from fear as from exertion, and looking feral. Farrwÿn seemed a little stunned by it all. I was more than a bit puzzled. Where had Farrwÿn learned to fight like that?

Chapter 12: Time to Fly

Eldranth—Date: 8936.148

Ellendrïa

I was sitting at a table in a study room in the archives building, a stack of recording disks in front of me, each carefully labeled as to date and content. The disks gleamed brightly in the soft lighting, as though trying to catch my attention, which had been wandering far from my research. If I hadn't already perused the information stored in their organo-crystalline matrices several times before, they might have had more success. As it was, I was entirely too familiar with the contents of those particular disks.

The archives building still smelled new to me. It had been built the year after the old building had collapsed—a year after Darriel had been killed in that tragedy. Fortunately, much of the archival material had been recoverable from the wreckage, and duplicate records had been housed in various facilities throughout the city, so no information had been irretrievably lost. But every time I came here, it was hard not to think about Darriel and how life had once been for me.

I'd been investigating both Drÿfoch and Gryffÿth, as Farrwÿn had requested, but without a great deal of success. Drÿfoch was indeed recorded as one of the genetic engineers involved in the Genomic Enhancement Interval. He was exiled in the year 5940, having been found guilty of atrocities resulting in mental derangement, physical injury, and death. Interestingly, I couldn't find any information about where he was exiled to, nor could I find any visuals on him. It was almost as though the information in the records was incomplete, as if some of it had been removed or deleted.

There was no mention again of Drÿfoch or any of the other exiled genetic engineers in the archives until 5945. In that year, I found a brief account of the Elders' concerns over rumors that some of the genetic engineers had modified their own genomes, thus creating extremely powerful psi talents, and that they'd also been working on techniques for employing these abilities without the use of a *ferrïl*. Given the unprincipled behavior of these people, the Elders felt that if the rumors were true, they might still be very dangerous, even in exile. Therefore, three Guardians were sent out to specifically track down, observe, and possibly apprehend Drÿfoch. They were Danaldrí and Turien of House Föalen, and Killarÿn of House Seabÿn.

I was able to find images and information on the three Guardians. All three were quite young, between the ages of 30 and 35, and had only been in the service of the Guardians for five years. Killarÿn showed his Seabÿn heritage very clearly, looking almost like Thorven. Danaldrí could have been a *deirfad* to Darí and me, except for a lack of our highly arched eyebrows. Turien, however, was built more like Kÿrrÿl, shorter and thinner than was common amongst members of House Föalen. In addition to being a Guardian, Turien was also a Healer. Turien and Killarÿn were acknowledged *anÿncára* and shield mates.

Thinking about Turien and Killarÿn brought to mind the pair of *anÿnbränne* that I'd seen in Farrwÿn's

workshop. Turien and Killarÿn—House Föalen and House Seabÿn. Were those guards somehow related to this piece of history? Or did they indicate a future joining of those two Houses?

In any case, the three Guardians apparently searched for Drÿfoch for a year without any success. Then, in 5946, all reports from them ceased, and they disappeared. Neither their bodies nor their Stars were ever recovered. No one knows what happened to them.

I'd found even less information on Gryffÿth's past. Other than his personal account of his history as a young homesteader on a Third Arc planet, there was no other information recorded about him prior to the 60 or so years he'd lived on Ellendrïa. It was hard to tell if this was a good thing or not. While there was no evidence to support his story, there was nothing in the records to discount it either. Up until 10 years ago, Gryffÿth's life on Ellendrïa had been pretty quiet and inconspicuous. He appeared to have a good understanding of history, which is not unusual in people who have been involved in homesteading, and had become a member of the Historian's Guild. Beyond his guild membership, nothing else was mentioned about him in the records. Then, 10 years ago, an interest in finding and colonizing a new planet as a possible future home for the Ellendrí emerged. Whether Gryffÿth initiated this concept, or simply became part of the movement based on his previous experiences, is unclear. However, shortly after the idea became widespread, Gryffÿth was recognized as a leader amongst those who were investigating the possibilities. He appeared to be knowledgeable and rational. Many of the people who had joined the movement were apparently satisfied with his leadership. The biggest issue against Gryffÿth was that the Elders didn't support the belief that it was necessary to leave Ellendrïa at some future time. It wasn't that they denied the fact that our planet was slowly dying. Rather, the Elders felt that our people had reached their natural conclusion, that there was no need for another home world. If individuals wished to leave Ellendrïa, that was their choice, but the Elders refused to support a plan for a mass migration to a new colony.

However it had come about, Gryffÿth was now leading a movement that threatened to divide our people into factions. With our numbers somewhere around 30,000, there were already too few Ellendrí to be a truly viable population. If that population was split on different planets, it might well be the downfall of our race. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. Certainly some of the younger races in the Ll'Ellendrÿn felt that the Ellendrí were relics of an ancient past, an old and spent race that no longer deserved their position of respect and power within the spheres of Ll'Ellendrÿn politics. And maybe they were right.

I shook my head, clearing away thoughts that circled in endless, unanswerable loops. I was here now, and I still had hope for my people, regardless of opinions to the contrary. Unfortunately, all of my research had yielded no links between Drÿfoch and Gryffÿth. I still didn't know if they were the same person. It is very rare for one of our people to live nearly three thousand years—rare, but not completely impossible. There were a few recorded cases of people making it into their third millennium. I suspected that Thorven must be well into his second. So … no supporting evidence, but nothing that disproved Farrwÿn's hypothesis either.

I stared at the pile of recording disks, willing them to somehow answer my questions. Of course, they just remained inanimate objects, refracting light in a colorful display of optics. Emerging out of my thoughts, I could feel the hairs on my scalp start to bristle. Suddenly nervous, I looked quickly around me, but nothing was amiss. The room was quiet, peaceful. If not here, where? An old instinct surfaced out of the depths of my being. Unconsciously, I reached out to Darí. With an almost electrical snap, I was suddenly in full rapport with my *deirfad*, sharing his senses and thoughts.

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My head was resting on my arms where I had collapsed on the table, my heart thudding powerfully in my chest. I was breathing heavily, as if I too had been fighting and running. Guts clenched with fear for my *anÿncára*, I reached out to Darí's mind, mentally shouting "*Get out of there!*"

"*Gladly*," Darí's mental voice came back crisply. He was already strapping himself into the pilot's seat of the *Föalen*, glancing to see that Farrwÿn was getting safely into the passenger's seat. I could feel the throb of adrenaline still hot in his veins, the puzzlement in his mind over Farrwÿn's unexpected performance, and overriding all else, his focus on getting the *Föalen* in the air and out of danger. Looking out the canopy through Darí's eyes, I could see that none of their attackers had yet regained their feet, although several of them were twitching and struggling to get up. The *Föalen* rose gently off the grassy meadow, the antigrav units whining quietly. The main engine engaged, and the ship pulled up and away from the river valley. I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, trying to calm my still racing heart.

"*Not the planet we were looking for*," Darí commented with dry humor.

"*Definitely not*," I responded. I knew I should let our rapport fade back to the usual background awareness that we had of each other, but I was reluctant, still a bit frightened for Darí's safety. My body and mind strained with the ache to be there with him, to help and protect. Slowly, as I forced myself to pull out of the intense connection, letting Darí regain his privacy, I added, "*Be safe, my anÿncára*," remembering all the times he had said that to me, years ago before he'd become a Guardian.

"*Always*," Darí's voice was gentle in my mind. I sensed that rather than feeling my presence as an intrusion, he was actually comforted by it. I sighed and opened my eyes, coming back to myself in the archives building.

There was nothing more I could do here. I couldn't find evidence to support Farrwÿn's beliefs, but neither was there any data that suggested that he was wrong. All I had was a vague sense that something was missing, that maybe there had been more, but it had been carefully removed. Certainly, Gryffÿth would have had access to the archives—if he was sufficiently skilled, he could have altered the data …

It was time to go. My heart said that it was long past that time. Suddenly, I feared that I might lose Darí

before we had a chance to forge our lives together.

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I was heading to Kÿrrÿl's space flight facility, a fairly long walk from the archives building, but I was happy for the exercise. Twelve days ago, Kÿrrÿl had begun the test flights on the *Sn'ënne ó ed Föalen*. He'd had the ship in and out of his facility for several days, doing minor adjustments, until he had convinced himself that it was fit for service. For the last nine days, I'd been spending my afternoons with Kÿrrÿl as he trained me to fly the new ship, and showed me how to service all the ship's systems. I'd been incredibly impressed—the technological advancements in the *Ënne*[65]—we'd already given the ship its short name— made my old ship look like something out of the Bronze Age. Flying it was truly like becoming a bird—the ship was fast and highly maneuverable, an experience of freedom in three dimensions. I might never be as good a pilot as Kÿrrÿl and Darí, but flying the *Ënne* had given me the encouragement to try.

Walking rapidly down one of the paths in the central dome, wrapped in my own thoughts, I got that strange shivery feeling down my spine that tells me that someone is watching me intently. Trying not to act twitchy, I brought my focus back to my surroundings, gazing slowly about. I was past the city center, in the northern part of the dome, heading towards the tunnels that would ultimately connect this dome with Kÿrrÿl's facility. Many of the buildings here were smaller and less elaborate than those near the archives building and the Elder Council enclave, mostly serving as offices and facilities for various social services. Although there was still a lot of green space at this end of the city, mostly small grassy areas, there were fewer gardens.

As my eyes swept over my surroundings, I spotted an individual standing on the steps of a smallish brown building that gave no particular indications as to its purpose. Dressed in an undecorated, nondescript white tunic and loose white pants, I didn't recognize the person at first. As I drew closer, however, I could see the broad facial features and colorless hair that were the identifying characteristics of Gryffÿth. I had never personally met him, but his menacing stare clearly indicated that he knew who I was, and wasn't at all happy to see me. Meeting his silvery eyes, I could sense his simmering hatred. I wondered what I'd done to cause his reaction. Returning my concentration to the path, I walked past him, trying hard to hide the twitching of the skin along my spine. A telepathic voice cut through my mind, "*Curses on you and all your kin, Eldranth Föalen*." I kept walking, refusing to show any reaction to his words or the fact that he addressed me by my full name as a Guardian.

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I ran my hands caressingly along the sleek composite hide of the Ënne, feeling the itch in my soul to be off-planet and catching up with Darí. The ship looked almost black in the late afternoon sunlight, showing blue gleams only where the light reflected off edges. After a moment, Kÿrrÿl popped out of the hatch, having heard my footsteps, and came down the ramp to meet me.

“So where are we at on the project?” I asked Kÿrrÿl as he came to stand beside me, watching me as I admired the beauty of his work.

He cocked his head, looking at me more directly, “You’re ready to leave?”

“I’ve found all I can for Farrwÿn at the archives,” I looked down at my hand where it was resting on the ship. “And I’m worried about Darí and Farrwÿn. They just had a bit of a brush with an intelligent species on one of the worlds they were exploring.”

“Are they all right?” Kÿrrÿl’s eyes reflected his immediate concern.

“Yes, surprisingly,” I shook my head, still not quite believing what I’d observed through Darí’s eyes. “It seems that Farrwÿn has a few skills no one knew about. Apparently, he’s quite competent in self-defense.”

“They had to fight?” Kÿrrÿl queried worriedly.

“Ten natives came at them,” I replied. “Not terribly well-armed, sticks and primitive knives, but still more than dangerous enough. I guess they were feeling territorial.”

“At least they weren’t hurt,” Kÿrrÿl’s voice held a hint of a question.

“Not a scratch as far as I could tell,” I tried to smile reassuringly at my *ïdrÿlad*, but I was still feeling pretty shaken up myself about the whole episode.

Kÿrrÿl let out a sigh of relief, putting his hand on my shoulder, a gentle touch of friendship and compassion. “You’ve been very patient with me. I can see that you really want to leave. Just give me five more days. I promise that the *Ënne* will be outfitted and ready to fly.”

I looked up from my hand. Kÿrrÿl must have seen the lump in my throat as I tried to swallow my disappointment. Five more days … the time had already dragged on interminably. As much as I’d enjoyed training with the *Ënne*, I felt stretched out, pulled thin. I’d made my decision. Now I just wanted to get on with my life and try to make something out of the wreckage of my past.

“Five days?” I repeated softly.

“I want to install the same set of sensors that I put on the *Föalen* for the planetary survey work,” Kÿrrÿl explained. Seeing my questioning look, he added, “You’re going to need them if all three of you are going to continue working together. And I think you’ll find some of the equipment useful for other purposes.” Pausing, he gave my shoulder a gentle shake. “Don’t worry so much. Darí knows what he’s doing, and so, clearly, does Farrwÿn.” I nodded reluctantly. It was true. Darí didn’t need me behaving like an overprotective older sibling. “Besides, it’s going to take a couple of days to stock the *Ënne* with supplies,” Kÿrrÿl finished off.

Swallowing hard, I forced my fears away, seeking calmness and rationality. “I’ll start shifting my gear over to the *Ënne*.” I smiled weakly at Kÿrrÿl. I should be happy—I was finally going to get off-planet, I might see my *deirfad* in a few more days, and I was incredibly lucky to be allowed to fly the finest spaceship in the Ellendrí fleet. I simply needed to trust my *anÿncára* to look after himself and Farrwÿn. “Anyway,” I continued, “I still need to talk with Rallandrí. I’m not sure what he’ll think about my plans …”

Kÿrrÿl chuckled. “I’m sure he knows that he can’t stop you when you get your mind made up to do something. I’m certain he’ll give up gracefully, and assign you back to active duty with Darí.” He gave my shoulder another squeeze, then turned back towards the *Ënne*. “Besides, he’s been trying to get the two of you together as a team ever since he started working with you.” True enough. I gave Kÿrrÿl a bit of a lopsided grin as I remembered my discussion years ago with Rallandrí on Davandrïa.

We were quiet for a bit, each occupied with our own thoughts. Then I shuddered, remembering my walk over to the space flight facility. “Do you know much about Gryffÿth?” I asked abruptly.

Kÿrrÿl looked at me with curiosity, obviously wondering about my sudden change of topics. “Not a lot,” he replied.

Feeling rather disturbed by my meeting with Gryffÿth, I ran my hand through my short-cropped hair in a nervous reaction. Taking a deep breath, I described the strange event to Kÿrrÿl. He listened quietly, clearly troubled by the threatening nature of the encounter. I ended up by asking, “What reason could Gryffÿth possibly have to hate me like that?”

“I have no idea,” Kÿrrÿl replied after a moment. “You’ve never met him before?”

I shook my head, “I’ve seen him once before, but never talked to him. As far as I know, nothing I’ve done as a Guardian had anything to do with him.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like House Föalen,” Kÿrrÿl suggested thoughtfully. “No one from our house made it onto his colonist list, and I know that a few of my distant *r’ïdrÿl* tried. Some of us should have passed his genetic screening.”

“Odd,” I muttered. “I’ll ask Farrwÿn. It seems like I might have a dangerous enemy, and I’d like to know why.” Even as I thought of Farrwÿn, I remembered our discussion in the orchard. If Gryffÿth was truly Drÿfoch, would this be the source of his hatred? Jareth Föalen and his *deirfad*, Danoldí Föalen, my *redasbad*[66], were imprisoned by Drÿfoch at the end of the Genomic Enhancement Interval when they opposed his decision to experiment on humans. Was this cause enough for Drÿfoch to curse me, or was there something else?

Chapter 13: Finding What We Seek

Farrwÿn—Date: 8936.148 to 8936.154

LLell2-7 (unnamed planet in the Second Arc) and Dochasïa

After our adventures on the planet, I wasn't too sure that Darí was going to continue with our plans. We were both pretty shaken up by the attack—we hadn't really been expecting to find intelligent life on these planets, much less hostile inhabitants. He'd clearly been worried about my safety, and I'm not sure my actions had relieved those worries, or simply compounded them. Fortunately, Darí had been too busy during takeoff to ask questions, especially since I wasn't sure I could have explained what I'd done in any case.

Once back in orbit above the planet, Darí shook his head like someone waking from a bad dream. Looking intensely at me, he said, "I suppose you want to keep looking?"

By then, reaction to the day's events had set in. I was trembling with shock and fear. But I was determined to go on—it wasn't just my life that was at stake, but the future of our people. Shakily, I nodded an affirmative.

In the days that followed, I occasionally felt Darí staring at me, an unvoiced question in his head. He never quite resolved to ask me about what had happened; he'd just shake his head again and go back to whatever he'd been doing at the time.

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A part of me still finds going between a somewhat disturbing and not entirely pleasant experience; another part just accepts it as a normal course of events. Strange how that is.

Six days ago, as I recovered from the nausea induced by another jump through between, I felt a strange stirring sense of excitement. Our next destination, the fourth planet on our survey list, lay before us, a small bright dot in the black distances of space. Gradually, it grew in size while the *Föalen* soared soundlessly towards it through the airless vacuum of space.

As the planet expanded in our forward view, it took on color and pattern, becoming a blue and green globe hanging like a jewel against a black backdrop. Land masses developed shape and definition. I could see several large continents in the northern hemisphere, a smattering of small island archipelagos in the south. Clearly, there was lots of surface water. The green vegetation that I could see on the continents suggested that the climate was reasonably hospitable. In many ways, it looked much like the last planet, but rather than feeling frightened, I felt buoyed by a sense of optimism, almost euphoric.

Following our protocol, we spent five days in orbit, collecting data. I found myself watching the planet roll by overhead almost constantly, with little interest in eating or sleeping. At first Darí was concerned

about my obsessiveness, but eventually he gave up his attempts to get me to sleep, and brought food to me where I sat in the passenger's seat, eyes scanning the planet intently.

Halfway through the fifth day, I saw the island, its seven volcanic peaks iced with the remains of winter snow, quickly melting as the northern hemisphere neared its midsummer. Luck or fate was with us! I closed my eyes, collapsing into an exhausted sleep. I don't remember Darí carrying me, but when I woke again, some many hours later, I was in my bunk.

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I stared into the dancing flames of the small fire, tired enough to be mesmerized by the weaving, ever-changing patterns of orange and yellow. Two small fish were skewered on sticks, leaning into the heat of the fire, cooking. Their smell was enticing, and I realized how hungry I was. It'd been an excellent day, but a long one. I was still a bit sleep-deprived. The planet was looking very good as a potential colony world—17 percent oxygen, gravity similar to Ellendrïa's, and so far, no megafauna or hostile sentient species. All the plants and animals that we'd cataloged today had been similar enough to those on Ellendrïa to feel almost familiar. Beyond the dangers expected in a wilderness, neither Darí nor I had seen anything that we felt would be problematic for the colonists.

The *Föalen* crouched behind us, carefully perched on a flat spot next to a small stream whose cheerful splashing and gurgling sounds were a constant background to the fire's crackling. Climbing up along the stream, we'd reached the top of a knoll that overlooked a wide river valley spreading out down below the *Föalen*'s landing site. Behind the knoll was a pool. Darí had shown me how to catch fish bare-handed, moving so slowly and carefully that the fish hadn't been aware of his approach until it was too late. Clearly, he'd lived in the wilderness more than a few times during his adventures as a Guardian. With quick ease, he had the fish cleaned, spitted, and roasting beside a small fire.

The sharp crack of a breaking stick startled me out of my nearly hypnotic state. I looked up sharply to see Darí approaching. He dropped down onto one of the rocks we'd dragged over by the fire to serve as seating. Checking the fish for doneness, he seemed satisfied. Handing one to me, he took the other and started worrying the meat from its bones. Although I'd cooked and eaten fish before, nibbling fish off a stick by an open fire was definitely a new experience for me. A long day in the sun and wind made the meal well appreciated, however primitive it was.

I watched Darí for a moment as he concentrated on his meal. His expression had an abstracted look. I suspected that something was bothering him. Although we ate in silence, I knew that he wanted to talk to me. Finishing my fish, I tossed the bones in the fire, got up, and washed my hands in the stream. Darí did likewise, then we both settled back to our positions at opposite sides of the fire. Sunset was just beginning, the small clouds that floated overhead were turning red and orange. Finally, Darí looked directly at me. I could see that the question that had been on his mind for days was ready for asking.

"Where did you learn to fight?" Darí's query was direct. His grey eyes, often gentle, now held a glint of

steel, sharp and penetrating.

I met his eyes, swallowing to moisten a suddenly dry mouth. Would I never be able to tell anyone the whole truth? Not even my closest friends? A sense of loneliness and isolation almost overwhelmed me, but I pushed it back, giving Darí a half-smile. “Having spent most of my life around you and Dran, I’ve picked up a thing or two,” I replied, trying to sound casual and relaxed.

“Not that you didn’t,” Darí contradicted. “Fighting like that takes training and practice. Did Dran teach you?”

I shook my head. Outright lying would only make the situation worse, and cause Darí to distrust me. I stared at the flames for a moment, then said softly, “I doubt that you would believe me if I told you the truth.”

“Why don’t you try to let *me* decide if it’s believable or not?” Darí suggested, sounding a little hurt by my lack of faith in our friendship.

I shook my head again. “I will … someday. Just not tonight.” Once again, I was imposing on my friends, asking much of them and providing little in return. It left me feeling miserable. I put my head in my hands, staring at the sand between my feet. I could hear Darí shifting restlessly on his rock, shuffling his boots against the ground.

“Another Farrwÿn mystery, then?” he asked at last.

“Yes,” I replied quietly. We sat in silence for what seemed a long time. The colors in the sky became darker, more intense, the air and even the sand around the stream taking on an orangish tint. I heard Darí shift again, and make a small breathy sound, a sigh maybe.

“I’m worried about Dran,” he said at last, his words sounding out of place amongst the evening bird song and quiet sounds of fire and water. I looked up at him, beginning to realize that my unusual behavior might well be the least of his concerns.

“Why?” I asked softly. I hadn’t thought much about Dran during the last few days, mostly because I’d been too absorbed by this planet and its significance. And when I did think about him, I felt confident that he would be joining us shortly.

“We’re in communication regularly, but … I thought he would be here by now. He hasn’t told me when he’s coming, or even if he still wants to,” Darí tossed a stick into the fire from a small pile of wood that was stacked behind the rock where he was sitting. “Surely Kÿrrÿl has had enough time to get something fixed up for him to fly.” Sparks flew up in the rapidly darkening air as the fire snatched eagerly at the new fuel. I was thinking of something reassuring to say when Darí added, “He was with me during that fight we had on the last planet. I didn’t realize he’d dropped into full rapport with me until I started powering the *Föalen* up for takeoff.” Darí had a second stick in his hands, staring at it blankly. “It felt so

good to feel him there, almost addictively good," he smiled wryly. "It made me feel whole for a few moments. Then he was gone, and I felt like half a person again." Looking at the stick he was grasping as though he'd forgotten it was there, he threw it into the flames. "And I was left wondering '*Why hasn't he come? Why is he still waiting?*'"

"He's just had a few delays," I replied, trying to project my own confidence. "He will come. He wants to come." Feeling a strange sense of anticipation, I looked up at the sky, its bright colors already fading to a dark blue. For an instant, something seemed to glint, reflecting the last of the sun's light. Maybe tonight, I thought. "Soon," I asserted, trying to be encouraging, but not wanting to mention what I'd possibly seen, for fear that it might be my imagination at work.

"You've said that before," Darí gave me a cynical smile.

"I mean it." We both fell silent again. The night grew dark around us, soft and warm. As I began to relax again, I felt tiredness creeping into my body, but none of my senses warned me of any potential danger. The stars grew bright in the clear night sky. I knew that if I looked hard enough, I could see Hauldrÿn out there, but my eyelids felt like they were sagging. My head jerked as I nearly fell asleep on my rocky perch. Not wanting to fall into the fire, I knew it was time for me to get some much-needed sleep.

I got up, stretching a little. "I'm almost asleep on my feet," I muttered. "I'm going to find my bunk," I apprised Darí.

"Don't worry about me," Darí glanced up from the fire and met my eyes. "My head is too full of thoughts to sleep right now. I'll sit out here until I get tired."

I turned towards the *Föalen*, leaving Darí to his contemplation of the flickering flames.

Eldranth—Date: 8936.154

Dochasïa

It was hard to contain my excitement. I felt like a child going on a new adventure, not someone with enough years of experience to have at least a few grains of wisdom. I smiled sardonically. On second thought, maybe not quite so much wisdom either.

The *Ënne* flew like nothing I'd ever piloted before. It ignited my love of adventure, gave me the inspiration to once again find a purpose for my life out amongst the stars. But most importantly, it gave me a way to find my *anÿncára*, to travel with Darí at last.

As I pulled away from Ellendrïa's atmosphere, I knew that finally I was leaving with Rallandrí's full approval. I hadn't been sure of that, not after all the years that I'd pushed the boundaries of what he'd been willing to accept. I hadn't been sure that my posting on Ellendrïa wasn't just some form of retribution for my unruliness. And maybe it was. But the sentence seemed to be over. I was free to fly throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn again. At least I hoped so …

It didn't take long to reach the jump point between Ellendrïa and Indrïan. I knew which planet Darí and Farrwÿn were on, had briefly connected with Darí before they'd landed on the surface, and had already programmed the coordinates for the jump into the *Ënne*'s system. I was as ready as I could be. Even the four counts of mind twisting between did nothing to still my excitement.

An old saying came to mind—"*anywhere is a tenth-day away*". All it takes is a half a tenth-day to leave the gravity well of one planet, and a half a tenth-day to fly down the gravity well of the next planet. Now I was on the second leg of that old adage, flying the *Ënne* towards a small pinpoint of brightness. As that dot expanded into a world, my excitement morphed into a complex mixture of emotions. I was filled with the nearly overwhelming urge to find Darí as quickly as possible, desperately wanting to reconnect with him. And at the same time, I wanted to surprise him, make him laugh, to bring some lightness to the darkness which had plagued us. Even odder, I felt *shy*, almost afraid to see my *deirfad*. It had certainly taken me some time to get here—would he be angry or upset? Would he forgive me? Or had he finally given up on me? The swirl of emotions made me unsure of myself. Logically, I knew that most of my concerns were just self-induced fears. But I also know that logic seldom truly overcomes emotions, it just buries them. I breathed deeply, trying to calm myself. I wanted balance—to be sensitive to my emotions, yet not be overrun by irrational fears.

The planet was unfolding below me, vibrant blues and greens marking the presence of water and chlorophyll, sure signs of life. A brief tremor passed through my body, like a small electrical shock. I knew that this wouldn't be the last time that I would be flying through the atmosphere of this world. However, right now I wanted to live in the present moment, enjoy the ride down. Powering up the sensor array that Kÿrrÿl had installed in the *Ënne*, I tuned the system to detect a tiny spacecraft that should be somewhere on the surface below. Then I brought my ship into a low orbit, watching the

scenery roll out.

As I orbited this unknown world, I could see that most of the land masses were in the northern hemisphere. The tropics were predominantly oceanic, with a few scattered islands. In the southern hemisphere, there were a handful of island archipelagos. The northern continents were largely mountainous, but the mountains were older, worn, low-elevation ranges, with long smoothly rolling foothills that gradually gentled out towards the coastal plains. The hills and peaks were dotted with irregular blue shapes—ponds, lakes, tarns. There was a plentiful supply of water, and no deserts. Clearly, it was good land for agriculture, a place where homesteading might be successful. I wondered what Farrwÿn thought about this planet. Was it the one?

It didn't take long to find Darí's ship. The sensors were easily able to distinguish the obviously artificial lines of the *Föalen* where it crouched on a rock ledge, even though I was still fairly high up in the atmosphere. The twilight zone was fast encroaching on their location, and they would soon be in darkness. I wheeled the *Ënne* around, dropping elevation rapidly as I searched for a landing site just ahead of that moving line of darkness. I wasn't sure that there was room enough where Darí had landed the *Föalen* for a second ship, and it felt almost intrusive to crowd in on their tiny camp. However, I quickly spotted another suitable area of flat, slatey rock—a geological formation that seemed common in this region—not too far from where the others were located. By the time I was shutting down my ship's engines, the night had settled in.

So here I was. Now what? I had visions of sneaking up on Darí and Farrwÿn in the darkness and surprising them, assuming they hadn't just heard me land. Alternatively, it might be best if I just stayed in my ship until morning, waiting to meet with them in the daylight. It was only a short hike to where they were camped. Were there any dangers that I couldn't manage? Certainly, if there had been problems with the survey that Darí and Farrwÿn had carried out today, I would have known. That didn't make the place safe, but they hadn't found any serious or obvious dangers. I paced restlessly around inside the *Ënne* for a while, then made up my mind. I was already wearing my belt knife, but I pulled on my jacket, which had an assortment of emergency equipment stashed in its pockets, and grabbed the stun weapon that I carried on board. Its holster was attached to a shoulder strap, which I slipped over my head. Hopefully, I wouldn't meet any unfriendly wildlife in my short jaunt through the wilderness.

Darkness was not much of a problem to me. Even weak starlight would provide enough illumination for the *tapetum lucidum* layer located behind the retina of my eyes, which gave my eyes their silvery eyeshine, to reflect the dim light and enhance my night vision. Tonight, the sky was clear, with two moons overhead and a bright starfield. While it wasn't exactly like walking in daylight, I wasn't worried about tripping over branches and falling into creeks. My greatest concern was simply the unknowable and unexpected nature of a new world. While this stimulated my desire for caution, it also gave me the adrenaline rush that comes with embarking on a new adventure.

The brush where I'd landed wasn't thick. It didn't take long to reach the bank of the small stream that I

knew would lead me to my destination. Walking softly, I followed the bank upstream, traveling mostly on soft mossy ground and occasionally over reaches of flat slate. It was easy going, and soon I reached Darí and Farrwÿn's camp.

As I came to the edge of the clearing where the *Föalen* was resting, I could see a small fire flickering against the darkness. Momentarily blinded by the glare of the flames, I didn't see anyone in the clearing, and thought that Darí and Farrwÿn must already have retired to their bunks in the *Föalen*. Feeling somewhat disappointed, I almost turned back towards my own ship before my eyes had fully adjusted, before the black shadow beside the fire resolved itself into the shape of a person crouched motionlessly against the darkness of the night. Almost. And then I felt my heart clench in my chest.

It was Darí. Although his thoughts and emotions were heavily guarded, probably to avoid disturbing Farrwÿn, I was close enough now that his barriers couldn't stop me from sensing a deep aching loneliness, a loneliness with which I was far too familiar, having experienced some degree of it most of my days as a Guardian. Somehow, I'd never thought that Darí was still so afflicted, so many years after Darriel's death.

Darí was too lost in his thoughts to hear me come up behind him. I didn't walk silently, but I didn't make much noise, either. I knew that whatever I did, I would startle him. Suddenly my visions of trying to surprise him lost their sense of humor. Now, all I felt was the need to comfort him. Even as I came to stand directly behind him, he was completely lost to my presence. I reached down, gently placing both hands on his shoulders. He jerked, suddenly sitting upright on the rock where he'd been perched, flinging his head backward and thumping solidly into my thighs. As a trained Guardian, he might have erupted into action at that point, come up fighting. I tensed momentarily. However, as quickly as he'd reacted, he suddenly relaxed, recognizing my touch, and leaned his head against my legs.

"I'm sorry," I murmured quietly. Sorry for startling him, sorry for coming so late, sorry for so many things. I wasn't sure he would understand the many levels of my sorriness. I could see the tears on his face gleam in the firelight now that his head was tipped back. "I'm here now," I said simply.

"Are you really … or have I just fallen asleep, and this is all a dream?" Darí's voice had a distant, not quite here, quality, as though he might actually be asleep. He leaned harder against my legs, testing to see if I was actually substantial. I stood still, supporting his weight, letting his breathing return back to normal.

"I didn't realize you were still so terribly lonely … I thought you'd recovered a little in all the years since Darriel's death," I said softly, after what felt like a long time.

Darí snorted quietly. "Since Darriel's death?" his response had a sarcastic note to it. "You are such a fool sometimes, Dran. I've been lonely like this ever since you left to become a Guardian." Darí's words had teeth, and guilt clamped my heart. I stiffened, my body responding to a sudden stab of emotional pain. Darí twitched against me, sensing my reaction. He reached up, touching my right hand where it was

resting on his shoulder. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you,” his voice had lost its hard edge. He sounded apologetic, clearly realizing how deeply his words had cut.

Again, silence settled around us, a thick heavy cloak that made speaking difficult. I wasn’t sure I could trust my voice to be steady. I could feel dampness around my eyes … I always thought I was past crying—it wasn’t something I did very often in my life—and then Darí would open up that hole in my soul again, and the tears would come flooding out. Staring at the fire, I watched it waver through the film of wetness. Swallowing, I tried to find my voice and something meaningful to say with it.

It was Darí who broke the silence this time. “Darriel helped me a lot,” he began hesitantly. “When we were going through puberty … even then, I knew you were going to leave. You were so concerned about what might happen to me if we …” he trailed off, leaving the things we never did unspoken. “Too concerned,” he continued more sharply. “Darriel was just trying to help. Later, when you did leave, she eased the loneliness a bit, but it never went away. Darriel knew I was just half a person without you. That’s why she wanted you to come home.” Darí sighed, the tired sound of someone who had tried to change their world, and had failed.

I felt wretched, but knew I needed to respond in some way. “You wanted to be a Healer so badly,” I rasped out, my voice hoarse with emotion and tears. “How could you be a Healer on Ellendrïa with the Elders’ disapproval on your head? You would have been stigmatized.” Darí, my gentle *deirfad*, had always dreamed of being a Healer like our *athairad*. I had been less certain of my direction, interested in everything, but drifting, uncommitted. Only later, when it seemed that I needed to get off-planet, did I make up my mind to become a Guardian. Only later, after I’d been a Guardian for some years, did I discover that amongst the Guardians, Darí and I could have stayed together without judgment and criticism, but it was much too late to fix the damage already done.

“How much could they really have done to me?” Darí asked. “People would have made up their own minds about us, despite what the Elders might have said.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I countered. “Some of our people are pretty intolerant. Imagine what Aleysïa would say,” I could only too vividly picture the reaction that Farrwÿn’s *athairan* would have if she knew. Not that I really cared, but then, I’m not a Healer who has to work closely with the people on Ellendrïa. Thoughts of our childhood and the Elders brought other unpleasant memories to mind. “The Elders tried to take you away when we were young,” the words slipped out before I’d thought them through completely. I’d never talked with Darí about this. I’d been seven and Darí four, and I’d thought I was going to die. It had scared me so badly that I’d never talked to anyone about it since.

> *The grass behind the house was tall—so tall that it was falling over. Underneath these untidy heaps, the small animals made little tunnels. We’d been enlarging some of these passageways for our own uses—a little hidden universe where we could play our games of imagination …*

I was a great warrior on a primitive planet in the Third Arc, swinging my stick sword wildly about me, trying to save the King's Child (Darí) from a huge reptilian monster with great horns coming out of its nose and forehead. I stumbled in the grass, and the beast was upon me, skewering me with its horns. But wait … the Healer Magician (Darí) could save me. With a flick of his powerful hand, the terrible beast was transformed into an enraged, but largely ineffectual, flying insect with gossamer wings. Then, just as I'm about to die horridly, Darí healed me with a touch. Then ey turned me into a tarálon, jumped onto my back, and we galloped (rather, I crawled on my hands and knees) off to our next adventure …

The day was warm, and after a long string of incredibly dangerous adventures in the tall grass, Darí was beginning to yawn with tiredness. I made a snug nest for em in the dry moss at the edge of the orchard, and ey curled up, quickly falling asleep. Usually, I would curl up with em, and we would dream together, our minds linking to become one. Today, however, I was restless, and didn't feel like sleeping. Not wanting to disturb Darí, I left em drowsing, knowing ey would be safe, and headed to the house, looking for something to eat.

I'd nearly reached the open door into the common area, when I realized that there were visitors in the house. I wasn't sure if my presence would be welcome, so I stopped where I couldn't be easily seen through the doorway, cautiously peeking around the door frame to see what the situation was. Inside, my parents were talking to another person, an Elder from eir tunic color. Listening carefully, I could hear their conversation. At first, I thought that I should go back to Darí, as it wasn't a good thing to spy on people, but when I heard my name mentioned, I froze. What were they saying about me?

"Eldarí and Eldranth shouldn't be raised together," the Elder was speaking. "We don't want them to become anÿncára. There's been too much inbreeding in both your lineages already. And we know how powerful the bond between Föalen siblings can be."

"That bond is the price that our lineage pays for being bred to be some of the best Healers on Ellendrïa," my athairad responded. "That same high degree of empathy that makes us good Healers also tends to cause our children to bond together. We've known that, and accepted it, for generations."

"True," the Elder agreed, "but if we split them up while they are still young, we can prevent that bond from developing."

"They've already been together for four years," my athairan pointed out. "I'm certain that they've been bonded since shortly after Eldarí's birth. You can't separate them now."

"Eldarí's too young to have bonded completely," contradicted the Elder.

"You're wrong," my athairad growled angrily. "They sleep together, dream together, and think together. If you take Eldarí away, it will hurt both of them, possibly even kill them. Once formed, the bond can't be broken, and they're too young to cope with separation."

"Regardless, I have a request from the Elder Council to place Eldarí in another home. We have several families who would be more than willing to raise em," the Elder stated.

"Only a generation ago, the Elders would have been happy to see such a pairing, knowing the strength and power that is inherent in such a bond," my athairad countered. "House Föalen has never brought any harm to the Ellendrí. Why castigate us now? If inbreeding is truly your concern, we can ensure that no offspring are produced by such a coupling."

"If you have concerns about Elder Council's recommendation, you may bring them up at the next Council meeting," the Elder remained unruffled by my athairad's anger.

I couldn't listen to any more. My heart was throbbing in terror. I could hear the blood roaring in my ears. I must've made some small sound, as my athairad looked up and realized that I'd been standing next to the door. For a moment, I met his eyes, then, panicked by what they intended to do, I turned and ran.

My *athairad* eventually found me, many hours later, curled up semi-comatose in a hollow at the base of one of the old orchard trees. It was days before I would talk to anyone. Eventually, I came to understand that my *athairad* had fought with Elder Council and won—Darí would be allowed to remain. But I never got over the fear of losing him, and spent the rest of my young life on Ellendrïa trying to convince everyone that we were just "normal" siblings. Probably many people suspected the truth, but as long as we didn't make it obvious, I always hoped that we would escape censure.

"I know," Darí's voice dragged me out of my dark thoughts and back to the present. I looked down at him in surprise. He tipped his head back, catching my eyes and arching an eyebrow. "Eldarkÿn told me when I was 20. He said that you'd known since we were small children, that the Elders had terrified you with the prospect, and that's why you were so secretive about our *anÿncára* bond. I find it hard to imagine you as terrified, but you certainly told me often enough not to let anyone know about our relationship." Darí gave me a mostly pathetic smile. "Dran, there's nothing left to fear. I'm far too old for the Elders to interfere in my life, you can't ruin my reputation as a Healer on Ellendrïa, and Darriel's gone. There's only the two of us now, and the choices we make."

"I know," I bowed my head down and closed my eyes, accepting Darí's judgment on the situation. "I've made my choice. I'm here to stay—for as long as you want me around."

Darí was silent again. I guessed maybe he was a little surprised by what I'd said, taking a moment to let my words settle in. However, before I could say anything more, I heard him draw in a long, slow breath. "And if I ask you to stay with me for an eternity?" Darí exhaled the question softly into the night air. I

opened my eyes and met his—soft grey, a passageway into his soul.

“Then I will stay an eternity, in this reality and in the beyond,” I replied, feeling the warm tears roll down my cheeks once more.

“And if I ask you to stand at my side and face the world boldly with me, as my *anÿncára*, will you?” Darí’s eyes opened wide, deep, searching.

I felt like I was falling, our minds coming together. “Yes,” I said simply. I bent my head down until my cheek touched his, our tears mingling in the gentle intimate touch of lovers.

We held the rapport for a while, but I could feel that Darí was tired. The fire had died down to embers, and he was feeling the need to find someplace more comfortable than a rock to perch on. Without totally letting the link fade, we both came back to an awareness of our individual bodies. Darí stood up and stretched, stiff from being in one position too long. He turned and faced me, embracing me in our more usual greeting, which I returned with a firm warmth. I could see questions in his eyes. Where? When? How?

“Get some sleep, Darí. You’re exhausted,” I told him kindly. “I’ve landed my ship just a little further downstream from here. I’ll stay there for the night—the *Föalen* doesn’t have space for three. I’ll be back here in the morning. We’ve got a lot to talk about and decisions to make, but everything can wait until the sun rises.” I gave Darí another hug, and stepped back. He looked at me with an odd glance, like he still wasn’t sure that he was awake.

“You *will* be back?” he asked. I could hear a little catch of uncertainty in his voice.

“I promise,” I said firmly. He looked at me again, then turned away and started walking towards the *Föalen*, looking over his shoulder every so often, just to see if I was still there. Calling out the voice command that activated the ship’s hatch, Darí was tired enough that he almost stumbled when he reached the lowered landing ramp. Once he was safely inside the *Föalen*, and had closed the ship up again, I headed back downstream to where the *Ënne* was awaiting me.

Chapter 14: Shield Mates, Soulmates

Eldarí—Date: 8936.155

Dochasïa

With a lurch, I roused from deep sleep to sudden wakefulness. An early morning ray of sunshine had struck the *Föalen*'s canopy, penetrating far enough into the interior of the ship to illuminate my bunk. I felt so thick-headed with sleep that at first I thought I'd slept well into the morning, but a quick glance through the canopy assured me that the sun angle was still low. Listening for a moment, I could hear Farrwÿn breathing softly, still slumbering. Then my head flooded with memories of the previous night.

Did I dream about Dran, or had he actually been out there last night? My memories seemed strangely out of focus, made fuzzy by the intensity of my emotions. Would he be back this morning? I felt my heart start to race as I sat up on my bunk and pulled my shirt on. Trying to avoid waking Farrwÿn, I moved quietly to the *Föalen*'s door, touching the control panel to activate the mechanism that swung the door down into its ramp configuration. Fortunately, the system operated very quietly—Farrwÿn's breathing continued softly without signs of disturbance.

Standing in the opening, I looked out over our camp. The small fire had been rekindled. Sitting on the same rock that I'd used last night was my *deirfad*, back facing me. Had he stayed there all night? No—a small pack lay beside the rock, and I knew he hadn't been carrying a pack last night. So he must have returned to his ship, at least briefly. Hearing the faint sound of the *Föalen*'s ramp crunching down onto the rock, he turned to look at me, a small tentative smile lighting his features. He inclined his head, clearly an invitation to join him. I walked barefooted down the ramp and sat down on a rock next to him.

We didn't say anything for a short time, just sat in companionable silence and enjoyed the warmth of the fire in the cool of the early morning.

"So, this is the place," Dran finally broke our silence.

"That's what Farrwÿn says," I confirmed. "How did you know?"

"My *turas* gave me a little twitch on the way down yesterday," he shrugged his shoulders, giving me a bit of a half-smile.

"Your *turas* seems to work pretty well for you," I commented. My own *turas* was mostly sporadic and not terribly dependable. I knew Dran relied on his considerably more than I did on mine.

"Hmmph," he snorted quietly. "I think I've just learned to make it work for me. I'm always willing to use anything I have to keep myself out of trouble," Dran smiled wryly, "though I've gotten the impression that you think I'm more often in danger than not."

“I guess that’s how things looked when viewed from Ellendrïa,” I smiled a little to take the sting out of my words.

“You know, for my first 50 or so years as a Guardian, I had a pretty good record of getting out of dangerous situations without anyone on my team getting hurt,” Dran looked at me, raising one eyebrow, challenging me to disagree.

I dropped my head. “I know,” I responded, acknowledging the truth of what he’d said. “I guess the stories just sounded more frightening than they really were.”

“Sometimes,” Dran chuckled. He stiffened suddenly, looked over his shoulder, then stood up slowly. I turned around quickly on my rock seat to see what had caused his reaction. Farrwÿn stood at the top of the *Föalen*’s ramp.

“Farrwÿn,” Dran’s greeting was neutral, with no sign of warmth or friendliness. Looking up, I could see that his eyes were hard, cold, steely. I could sense tension in his body, feel a mixture of frustration and anger. His stance had that balanced, fluid feel of a trained fighter. I wondered briefly if he might actually attack Farrwÿn. Looking up, Farrwÿn met Dran’s eyes, then walked slowly down the ramp. He didn’t flinch or show any sign of fear, in spite of Dran’s forbidding appearance.

When Farrwÿn reached the bottom of the ramp, Dran said quietly, “You’ve always been my best friend, and I’ve trusted you with my life. But by all the Great Deities of the Ll’Ellendrÿn, if you’re playing with our lives now …” The unspoken threat hung heavily in the air between them. Farrwÿn continued to hold eye contact with Dran, not backing down or giving way to his anger. I realized that just as Dran and I had grown and changed over the years, Farrwÿn was no longer our hesitant childhood friend, but had finally developed strength and capacity in his own right.

Dran stood completely motionless, only the faint movement of his chest with each breath belying that he had not simply become a lifeless statue. An aura of power crackled around him. It was a forceful reminder to me that Dran was a very powerful Guardian. Thankfully, I could also now sense the tight control he held over both his emotions and the psi power that surged through his body.

Farrwÿn spread his arms out, palms facing Dran, in a peaceful, placating gesture. Quietly, but clearly, he responded, “I swear by the great Web of Life that connects us all, that I have every reason in this universe and beyond to keep you and Darí alive, well, and happy. You are my family, my best friends.” He paused for a moment. I could feel his emotions clearly—anguish, concern, sadness, a sense of loneliness and isolation, but no guilt, no evidence that he wasn’t telling the truth. Taking a breath, Farrwÿn added, “I have never, and will never, play with your lives.”

Dran inclined his head very slightly, “If that’s so, then you’d better start making sense. And you’d better have some good answers to my questions. I’ve had enough frustrations.”

“I’ll do the best I can,” Farrwÿn smiled crookedly. “I don’t have the answers for everything, you know.”

Dran dropped his eyes, releasing Farrwÿn from his intense gaze. He stepped away from the fire, letting Farrwÿn come by him to find a seat, then resumed his position on the rock next to me. He added a couple sticks to the fire, staring absently into the flames. I could tell that there was a lot on his mind. “Why did you give me the advice that you did, then put so many obstacles in my path?” His words sounded loud after the quiet crackling of the fire. I knew the question was addressed to Farrwÿn, so I stayed as quiet and unobtrusive as I could.

Farrwÿn had also been staring at the fire, but now he dropped his head, closing his eyes tiredly. “You seem to think my *turas* reveals everything to me. It doesn’t. It’s not infallible. I see the paths, the directions, the big things.” He shook his head slightly, but still didn’t open his eyes. “I don’t perceive all the little details. I don’t know the exact timings of the events in my visions. My foresight doesn’t always show me things that are just about to happen.” Farrwÿn hesitated, then continued, “The advice I gave was the best that I had. At that time, I didn’t know when Darí would be coming back, or how long he would stay. I also didn’t know that your ship was so badly damaged, or that it would take you as long as it has to sort that out.” Farrwÿn shook his head again, “I’m sorry that these things happened the way they did. I wasn’t trying to give you poor advice, and I wasn’t responsible for the obstacles that arose.”

Dran pondered what Farrwÿn had said. I could see that he was working at calming his emotions, trying to be as rational as possible. Dran had always endeavored to maintain that cool, composed, logical demeanor in the face of challenge. He wasn’t always successful—I’d seen him lose his temper on occasion when we were young, but I suspected that he’d gotten much better at it over the years. “You spoke of my destiny when you gave me that advice,” he said a little while later. “Is that destiny waiting for me in this reality, or in the beyond?”

Farrwÿn opened his eyes, the dark grey-blue irises appearing almost black in the early morning light, and looked at Dran. “This reality, this life,” he answered softly. I wondered what Farrwÿn thought Dran’s destiny was. A little jolt of fear shot through me as I realized that a foreseen destiny might not be a good thing.

Dran raised both eyebrows. “When? Where?” he challenged.

Farrwÿn blinked slowly, probably recalling the vision. “Sometime between 20 and 30 years from now,” he replied, sounding a bit distant, “on a planet in the Third Arc. I don’t know which one, but I could give you a few details from my vision that might help identify it. However, I expect you will know it when you get there.” Just as Dran had known this planet was the one that would be colonized, I thought.

Dran snorted, “If I’m lucky enough to live that long.” I looked at him sharply, and he continued, “I had a rather unpleasant encounter with Gryffÿth the other day. It seems that he doesn’t like me very much. In fact, his exact words were ‘*Curses on you and all your kin, Eldranth Föalen.*’ A rather interesting thing to say to me, particularly as I’ve never actually met him before, and, as far as I know, I’ve never done

anything to merit his hatred. It seems that I have an enemy, potentially a very powerful and dangerous enemy." Dran gave Farrwÿn a penetrating look. "What do you know about this?"

Farrwÿn sighed, "This isn't good." I could sense that he was definitely unhappy about this development. "I don't know anything for sure," he added, "but I can tell you what I think might be happening." Farrwÿn stared into the fire for a while, then asked, "When you were researching in the archives, did you come across the names Killarÿn, Turien, and Danaldrí?" Dran nodded. "So you know that they were sent out to find and apprehend Drÿfoch?" Dran made an affirmative grunt. "I have some reason to believe that they found him, and were killed when they attempted to capture him."

"That seems like a reasonable hypothesis," Dran agreed. "All three disappeared. There are no records indicating what happened to them."

Staring sightlessly into the fire, Farrwÿn said, "I think they nearly killed Drÿfoch in a fight. Probably they injured him very severely; badly enough that it took him a long time to recover; badly enough that he has psychological scars from the event. As a result of that time, I think Drÿfoch carries a hatred for all Guardians, especially Guardians from Houses Föalen and Seabÿn." Farrwÿn shook his head, his shaggy hair standing out like a mane. "I was hoping after so many years, he might have forgotten, but apparently not."

Dran was rubbing his left wrist with his right hand, a distracted movement. "House Föalen and House Seabÿn," he murmured. "That means something more to you, Farrwÿn. What?" he probed.

Farrwÿn shifted uncomfortably on his rocky perch, dropping his eyes down to the sand at his feet. "It's personal," he replied. Dran didn't say anything, just cocked a single eyebrow—a nonverbal request for more information. "It's just a hope," Farrwÿn added eventually. "A hope that maybe somewhere down this long path, I might meet my *anÿncára*. Nothing is certain, especially not where love is concerned," Farrwÿn lifted his head, giving Dran a wry smile.

Dran seemed to think this over for a while longer, then apparently decided to let it go. "So, Gryffÿth wants vengeance on Houses Seabÿn and Föalen. Is it just him we have to watch out for, or is there more?" I could see that Dran was starting to think about the future, to worry and plan.

Clearly relieved to move away from personal issues, Farrwÿn responded, "I think there is more. I've tried to see the full situation with my *turas*, but it's very cloudy, nebulous." Picking up momentum, Farrwÿn spoke with more animation. "Gryffÿth is part of some type of network, quite likely the leader. It's like a fungal mycelium spreading throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn. I can sense it's there, but I can't trace the strands. I think the purpose of this organization is to destabilize the Ll'Ellendrÿn, bring chaos to our region of space, which may help Gryffÿth take control of part or all of this area. It may also be his way of attacking the Guardians. This network is very dynamic—a mushroom pops up here, the crisis is dealt with, another pops up somewhere else, and that too is dealt with, and on it goes. We can't see how the events are related, or who is causing them." Farrwÿn shook his mane again, a worried look on his face.

“If Gryffÿth has decided to pursue revenge against Houses Föalen and Seabÿn, then you and Darí are in serious danger. You’ll have to be very careful.”

“Can you give us any specific warnings?” Dran inquired, focused and concerned. I felt the tingle of anticipated danger travel down my spine as I realized that this involved me as much as it did Dran.

“No,” Farrwÿn replied sadly. “I really wish I could, but the network shifts too fast—every time I try to see it with my *turas*, it’s doing something different. It doesn’t seem to have any long range goals. It’s just an opportunistic entity that takes advantage of any situation, then disappears underground whenever it might be detected.” Farrwÿn looked directly at Dran. “The *turas* that you and Darí have seems to work better at picking up things in the short term than mine does. For all of our sakes, use it as fully as you can,” he enjoined, smiling grimly at Dran.

“And what about you,” Dran countered. “You’re House Seabÿn. Won’t Gryffÿth come after you, especially if you become a colonist?”

Farrwÿn shook his head, “I hope not, at least not yet. He doesn’t know who my *athairad* is. The longer I can remain the bumbling and incompetent Farrwÿn Aurora, the longer I’ll be safe from his attacks.”

Dran’s eyes had finally softened—his anger had burned itself out in the face of Farrwÿn’s openness. “Bumbling and incompetent you are not, although what you really are, I’m not sure,” he refuted, the beginnings of a small smile starting to tug at the corners of his mouth. “You’ll need to be watchful, too,” he added.

“I know,” Farrwÿn’s grimness faded, as he realized the storm was over, and we were once again three good friends sailing on calm waters. “I wouldn’t ask you to help me, to take risks, if I wasn’t willing to do the same. I’m really hoping that all of us survive this great misadventure.”

“You think that’s possible?” Dran asked, pulling his pack between his feet and opening up the top flap.

“I do—if we’re cautious.” I wasn’t sure if Farrwÿn meant that as a warning to Dran specifically, or just as a general precaution. In any case, Dran chose to ignore any suggestion that the statement was personal, and started taking things out of his pack—fresh fruit, bread, and cheese from our home. Since Farrwÿn and I had been living on ship’s rations for some time now, this was definitely a treat.

“Eat,” Dran invited with a smile. “We can talk more later.” None of us needed any further urging.

The camp became quiet, the snapping of the fire and the tinkling of the small stream blending with the sounds of three hungry people enjoying a meal together. The birds gave us an early morning chorus of song, then quieted as they got about their business of foraging for the day. The sun rose higher, and the sky brightened into an intense, cloudless blue.

As we were cleaning up the remains of the food, Farrwÿn broke our silence, “I want to go over some of

the aerial imagery this morning. I'm still matching up planetary locations with some of my visions. Maybe you two could continue with the ground survey work?" I could tell that Farrwÿn was offering Dran and me a chance to spend some time together. I also knew that Farrwÿn was still pretty tired from having so little sleep in the last six days. I suspected that he would be happy to spend a quiet day in the *Föalen* while we hiked about.

"Sounds like a good plan," I agreed.

Dran gave Farrwÿn a sharp look, then smiled and nodded. "I'd like to take a closer look at this place—it certainly seemed very suitable from the few orbits that I made before landing."

I went into the *Föalen* and gathered the survey equipment and gear that we needed. Dran, I had already observed, was equipped with knife and stun weapon. I suspected that he had a fair bit of gear stashed away in his jacket and pack. He seemed sufficiently outfitted to take on a short wilderness hike, so I figured we should be reasonably well-prepared. Of course, I had thought that when we were attacked by the simians. Hopefully, our luck would be better this time.

I suggested that we follow the creek upstream to the knoll where we'd stopped yesterday—it made sense to continue from there, and the viewpoint was a good location from which to show Dran the river valley down below. Dran readily agreed, and we set off.

It felt strange to be walking with Dran on an unfamiliar, new planet. Even though I'd been a Guardian for eight years, he and I had never worked together. And before that, I'd only been with my *deirfad* on his occasional visits home, when he took time off duty. It really had been 60 years since I'd spent much time with Dran. Could we actually start our lives together from where we'd left off after we'd decided to go our separate ways when I was 22? Of course, we'd had our *anÿncára* bond that had provided us with some limited comfort, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. We just hadn't spent much time together physically.

As we clambered up alongside the stream bed, Dran frequently stopped to study the vegetation or geology, or look for animal signs. He was obviously keenly interested in the work, keeping me busy with questions pertaining to what Farrwÿn and I had observed the previous day. His actions only served to emphasize how little I knew about my *deirfad's* specialties. I'd become a Guardian after I'd already spent many years as a Healer. Naturally, I still carried out my Healer's duties even as a Guardian, but I also worked as a Xenobiologist and Psi Tech when required. These were all skills that I'd acquired during my life on Ellendrïa. Dran, however, had been a Guardian since he was 25. If he'd picked up any particular skills or specialties, it was during his time away from Ellendrïa. I found myself wondering what the full range of those might be. Certainly, although Dran had shared many things about his life as a Guardian with me, I realized now that that exchange had been biased, that Dran had only shared those experiences that he'd felt were within my comfort zone. I knew that he'd often said that he did a little of everything, but I was also aware that he was very knowledgeable about weaponry and fighting

techniques, and that he'd completed his Healer's training. Although he'd refused to take the Healer's Oath, I had been told by his instructors that he'd showed every indication of being as good a Healer as our *athairad* had been, given some practice and experience. Suddenly, not only did it seem that I had much to learn about Dran, but also that knowing what Dran might be capable of was an entirely different thing than actually working together with him.

The scenery as we climbed was varied. Sometimes the stream skittered along bare stretches of slate, other times it plunged through small groves of trees, with moss and ferns growing thick along the banks in the cool shade. In places where the slate was flat, small, clear pools formed, with fish darting through their depths. As we gained elevation, the trees were gradually replaced with tough, hardy shrubs. By the time we'd reached the top of the knoll, the vegetation was reduced to a knee-high, densely matted tangle. Fortunately, we were able to follow an animal trail, which made the going much easier. Many of the shrubs were in blossom, cladding the hill with tiny bell-like flowers in pink and white. The wilderness was resplendent—I was glad when Dran stopped to spend some time just absorbing the whole of it all.

We walked together to the edge of the hill, where we could look down into the valley. Far below us, a large river flowed sinusoidally through a landscape of gentle hills and old river benches carved during eons long past. The hills were forested in the lighter greens of deciduous trees; the narrow floodplain was carpeted in sedges and grasses. Far off in the distance, the valley widened as the river reached the coastal plain and the ocean. A huge, fertile delta spread outwards, the river branching and forming many fingers as it reached for the sea. Blue-grey, almost lost from sight, seven snow-covered peaks rose out of the sea just past the edge of the estuary. Dran sat on the crest of the hill, staring out at the panorama spread below him for a long time. Standing behind him, I could smell the faint sweet scent of the flowers—they were closely related to a plant on Ellendrïa that we called *stad thába mépt*[67]. Memories of time spent in the Ellendrïan mountains flashed through my mind—a time of long days spent with Dran and a rite of passage for us both.

> *My feet padded almost soundlessly as I trotted down the game trail, clearly visible to me even in the dense predawn darkness. We traveled single file, each stepping neatly in the footprints of the one ahead, hindfeet placed in the depressions made by the forefeet, so that all 11 of us left a single set of tracks. The wild föalen pack were in front, the breeding pair leading the way, followed by the three pups that had been born this year. Behind them were two of last year's pups, not quite ready to leave the family pack and set out on their own, and bringing up the rear of the pack, on older male and female, possibly brother and sister to the breeding female. Dran and I tagged along behind, accepted by the pack, almost, but not quite, one with them. I could just barely hear Dran's steps as ey followed close behind me.*
>
> *It was fall—the rank smell of vegetation dying from the first early frosts filled my nostrils. Soon there would be snow in the mountains, and life for the föalen pack would become much harder. But for now, the trails were still clear. It was time for the young pups to be*

taught how to hunt. They had been watching the other members of the pack bring down game from a distance, but we knew that tonight the pups would be allowed to participate in the kill. So too would we—an initiation for all five of us.

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Hunting with the föalen was the culmination of nearly a half year's intensive training for Dran and me. It had all begun early in the spring of this year, just after the last snow had melted from the mountains. Every five years, a group of researchers is sent up into the mountains of Ellendrïa, where the last functional terrestrial ecosystems on the planet remain. Their task is to record any changes that have occurred in these remote wilderness fastnesses since the previous study, and to collect samples for the tissue bank, in the hopes of increasing the diversity of the genetic material housed there. This year, our r'athaira had agreed to be the ones assigned to this task. And to our great excitement, Dran and I were to come along as well.

I was 15 and Dran was 18—both of us old enough to be well mentored in our sciences—and we were more than happy to participate in the research. Besides, it had all the thrill of an exhilarating adventure. Wilderness was not completely unknown to us—our r'athaira had been taking us along on short trips since we were old enough to travel on our own two legs. Once, long ago, long before he'd met our athairan, our athairad had been a Guardian. He still had his old spacecraft from those days. The four of us would crowd into it, and he would fly us to the few wild places left on our home world. But those were mostly day trips. His old ship was much too small for the four of us to live in comfortably for anything more than a day or two. Now, however, we would be staying in a rustic camp in the wilderness from the time the last snow had melted off the mountains until the first snows of the year had fallen again.

As it turned out, our athairad had much more in mind for us than simply participation in a research project. House Föalen carries shape-shifting genes. They are sex-linked, located on the male chromosome, and passed to the new zygote by way of the athairad's sperm. Since Eldarkÿn had played the role of male in the procreation of both Dran and I, we had inherited his shape-shift genes. Now, he had decided it was time to teach us how to use them.

The first two tendays were spent mostly just getting acclimatized to the low oxygen levels of Ellendrïa's atmosphere. As the hemoglobin concentration in our red blood cells increased, our bodies gradually adapted . Our wilderness forays, initially short hikes, became longer and more arduous as we grew stronger and tired less quickly. Eldarkÿn and Anaduviel, our r'athaira, had spent a great deal of time in the wilds of more than one planet, and were well versed in wilderness living. Anaduviel was a Science-Researcher,

belonging to the Science and Technology Guild. Her focus for many years had been Ellendrïan ecology, which had taken both her and Eldarkÿn to the remotest corners of our planet. Thus, during those first tendays, they taught Dran and me the basics of how to survive—finding food, making shelters, starting fires, staying warm, dry, and healthy.

The old spaceship became our base camp, the place where supplies were kept and samples stored. From it, we ranged outwards. Initially, my deirfa and I thought that we would help our r'athaira with the survey work, but our athairad quickly assigned us to the task that took up much of our time. Find the nearest wild föalen pack. Observe them closely. Learn all their behavioral patterns. Get to know them. Understand them so well that you can become one of them.

In time, we found our pack of nine föalen. The pups had only just begun to come out of the den, spending the day playing and sleeping near the den entrance, while the other six pack members came and went. Over the summer, they grew, first fed by their mother's milk, later by food brought to them by the pack, regurgitated from the stomachs of those individuals who'd had successful hunting. As the days shortened and fall approached, the pups started following the pack when they went out to hunt, observing but not yet taking part.

With great wonder, we watched them, the elusive, mythical föalen, the creature for which our House was named. At first, we kept our distance, not wanting to disturb the pack. Eventually, they became accustomed to us, realizing that we intended no harm. After a while, they became friendly enough to approach, allowing us to touch them and physically interact with them. Thus, a tacit trust was established between human and wild beast.

At the end of each day, our athairad would ask us what we'd learned, and we'd tell him. Most times, he would query us about the things we'd seen, then challenge our understanding with unanswerable questions, leaving us with more things to learn. Eventually though, one day shortly past midsummer, he ended the evening's discussion with a nod, commenting that it was now time to start the next phase of our training.

We still spent much of each day observing the föalen pack, but now our athairad worked with us for a part of the day as well, teaching us the psychokinetic techniques necessary for the shape-shift—how to loosen the attractive forces holding the cells of the body together, how to make cells become temporarily totipotent, even how to convert matter to energy and back to matter in a different form. These techniques can be highly dangerous, and Eldarkÿn drilled us intensively until he was certain that we could do them safely, even under difficult conditions. More than that, although both Dran and I had small ferrïls that we'd been trained to use, our athairad made us learn and practice the shape-shift techniques unaided, using the ancient Ellendorí methods for psi work. It

wouldn't be the first time during that half-year that I realized how difficult it was to shape-shift. I often wondered then why anyone would want to do it at all, given the amount of effort it took to learn the necessary skills.

Then one day, our athairad changed shape. I'd never seen any of our family do that. The ability to shape-shift is a dangerous secret that only a few trusted friends of the family know about. No one practices it openly. But here, deep in the wilderness, we were safe. I didn't realize what he was going to do—he'd taken off his clothes and was standing naked in front of us. A strange thing to do, but nudity is not an issue amongst Ellendrí families, and I had assumed that he was about to teach us something to do with human anatomy in relation to shape-shifting. However, what he actually did was draw the two of us into rapport with him. Suddenly, all the skills he'd been teaching us came into play. With my mind, I felt him walk us through each step of the change. With my eyes, I saw our athairad's body start to glimmer with an odd, flickering light. His form started to flow, twist, reshape. I felt nauseous, frightened. The light brightened, then faded. Standing where our athairad had been was a föalen, just like one of the pack members we'd been studying. I realized that I was still in rapport with our athairad, that the mind had not changed, only the body. He held the föalen form for a few moments, then reversed the process, leading us through his change back to human form.

Over the next few days, our athairad went through his shape-shift with us until he was certain we knew where the initiation sequence was, how to trigger it, and how each stage of the shift was carried out. Finally, we knew it was our turn to try. Dran and I were both naked—our athairad had explained to us that carrying objects or clothing through a shape-shift was very difficult. As we stood there, vulnerable and exposed, I was both excited and terrified. The terror won out. I looked at Dran, and I could see the fear in eir eyes. Our athairad smiled kindly at us. I could feel his encouragement, but I also knew that he, too, harbored some small seeds of fear. It hadn't happened often, but a few members of House Föalen had died during a shape-shift.

Dran reached out and caught my arm, turning me so that our eyes met. "Stay with me," eir voice in my mind was both entreaty and order. Then ey let go, turning to face our athairad. I could see em swallowing nervously, trying to find eir voice. Finally, ey said, "I'm ready."

Through my link with Dran, I could feel our athairad coming into rapport with em, carefully guiding em through the steps of the shape-shift. Almost, I could feel myself starting to change with Dran, but our athairad firmly forced me to stop, to hold my human form. "One at a time," his mental voice bid me. I realized that it was too dangerous for both of us to go at once. A few moments later, it was over. Dran took a tentative step forward and collapsed.

My heart hammered with fear for Dran. I was on my knees beside em, cradling eir head in my lap as ey flopped about uncoordinatedly. Eir fur was soft and thick against my hands, a dense woolly undercoat topped with long, silky guard hairs. The coat color was typical of föalen—a grizzled grey along eir back, on eir tail and ears, in a mask around eir eyes, and a stripe down eir long nose. In contrast, eir legs, belly, throat, and chin were a creamy white. However, Dran's eyes were exactly the same color as they'd always been—grey rather than föalen amber, with patches of lighter fur highlighting eir eyebrows. I could still feel our minds linked together, realizing that whatever body ey wore, ey was still the person I loved and knew so well.

I could feel our athairad's hand on my shoulder. I spared a brief glimpse away from Dran to see that he had a slightly amused look on his face. "Don't worry Darí," he quieted me. "Dran is fine. Ey'll just need to learn how to use eir new shape." I looked back at Dran. Ey'd stopped thrashing about, and our eyes met. Ey gave me something that might have been a nod. I sighed in relief. At that point, our athairad took control of the situation, guiding Dran back to eir human form. Ey still had eir head in my lap, and was breathing heavily, but I could see that ey'd taken no harm from the experience, at least not physically. After a few moments, ey looked up at me, smiled wryly, and said, "Your turn."

Following after my deirfa, the experience was probably a little less frightening for me, but not much. My body felt strange—my arms and legs were different in length and position than what I was used to, and my center of mass was way off from where it was in my human form. Thankfully, my senses remained the same. Like most members of my House, as a result of genetic manipulation I had acutely sharp hearing and a very keen sense of smell, in addition to the normally sharp vision found in all Ellendrí. These senses would assist me in the role I would play as a wild föalen.

Dran was there, physically as well as telepathically, which kept me from being totally terrified, but still, I was happy when our athairad helped me shift back to human form. I had yet to see the value of shape-shifting.

Now we practiced the shape-shift over and over, day after day, until we could each shift effortlessly without our athairad's assistance. Each time we shifted, we stayed in föalen form longer, learning how to use our new bodies, applying our time spent studying the föalen pack to developing appropriate natural behaviors. Although we would never actually think like a föalen, we were trying to live like one as much as possible. In that attempt to emulate a wild föalen, I finally came to understand one of the reasons why our lineage has kept the shape-shift genes. In my struggle to learn how to "fit" into the föalens' role in their world, I stripped myself of that attitude of remoteness that separates humans from their environment. I learned how to become one with the wilderness, how to feel the ebbs and flows of the life around me. It changed my perception of my place in the

universe, and I know it touched Dran the same way, as we talked about our experiences late into the evenings.

We spent our last two tendays in the mountains entirely in föalen form, mostly staying with the föalen pack. They seemed to know who we were—maybe our scent was still the same—but were initially wary of our new physical forms. However, in time, they came to accept us again. Now we traveled with them, slept with them, and watched them hunt. We returned to our base camp for food, having not yet learned to hunt for ourselves, and not wishing to put pressure on the föalen pack's limited resources by consuming portions of their kills. But soon we must learn to feed ourselves.

Gradually, Dran and I came to love the joy of running four-footed through the wild lands. The föalen form was designed to travel for miles in an effortless lope. We could readily travel much greater distances than we could hike in human form, our sure-footed bodies making easy work of rugged terrain. And we blended in—the creatures around us took little note of our passing. It was a special kind of freedom.

We didn't lack for company either. As we'd always been, we were happily complete and satisfied with each other's companionship. Although we couldn't communicate verbally, as föalen vocal cords and lips weren't designed to recreate human phonemes, our bond was strong and comforting, and we conversed telepathically about the many things we experienced or thought about during our travels.

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The föalen ahead of me on the trail stopped. I quickly halted, not wanting to crowd it. I sniffed at the air, trying to determine what was happening. Ah, yes. A rich, musky, slightly acrid smell—a rutting male cervid. I shifted position so that I could see past the föalen. My eyes were better than those of the wild föalen—in addition to being able to see well under low light conditions, I still had color vision and a much higher resolution. Not that color vision would help me now in the near darkness. However, I was able to see the bulk of the cervid up ahead, grazing nonchalantly in a patch of mountain meadow. We were downwind from it, and our silent approach had not alerted it to our presence.

Suddenly, the patriarch föalen broke from cover, charging out at full speed towards the head of the unsuspecting animal. Hearing the sounds of the föalen for the first time, the cervid stopped grazing, standing erect and alert. It swung its head, heavy with a rack of antlers, from side to side, trying to locate the direction of the attack. However, it was too late. The male föalen made a leap and grabbed the cervid by the nose, dragging its head down, trying to immobilize the potentially lethal sweep of antlers. Although I'd missed seeing her break cover, the matriarch föalen was now in the fray, jumping on the cervid's

rump and hanging onto a mouthful of fur and hide. With the weight of a föalen on each end, the cervid was struggling to fight, having difficulty raising its feet to strike out against its attackers. Now the three pups rushed in, each trying to grab and hold a part of the violently bucking, thrashing animal. Not wanting to see the pups get injured in the attack, Dran and I charged out, quickly adding our weight and teeth to the task of bringing the prey down.

It was over very quickly. With the weight of seven föalen, the cervid was pulled down to the ground. The male föalen shifted its hold to the cervid's neck. Shortly afterwards, the animal ceased to struggle. Now the feeding began. The breeding male and female ate first, ripping open the gut cavity and consuming the choice bits. When they were satiated, the pups were allowed to feed, followed by the other mature adults, and lastly by the two of us. It was a large animal and had provided more than enough meat for the pack. If there had not been sufficient, I think Dran and I might easily have foregone the meal—I wasn't sure that I was going to like eating raw meat. However, this was the last step to truly becoming a föalen—we must learn to hunt and feed like the creatures we were trying to emulate. I closed my eyes, firmly pushed down any twinges of nausea, and began my mantra—"I am one with the föalen".

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We lay in a patch of meadow at the edge of the evergreen forest, early morning sunlight just starting to feel warm where it was striking our fur. All around us, I could hear small sounds as the rest of the föalen pack settled down for a nap. I was pleasantly full, sleepy from being up most of the night. My head was resting on Dran's flank, and I could feel em, warm and relaxed, against my body. We were deeply in rapport with each other, to the point where I wasn't sure whether a particular thought was eir or mine. I closed my eyes, knowing that we would dream together, happy that this rite of passage had brought us to a new level of awareness of each other and the world around us.

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Strange how so often it's the sharing of food that brings people together, closes the distances between minds, and opens the doors to the soul. So it was for Dran and me. We'd spent the morning cataloging more plant samples, quietly industrious. Now we were sitting on a large rock that jutted up from amongst the tangled masses of *stad thába mépt*. I'd dug a container of water and some wrapped bars of ship's rations out of my pack, which I'd shared with Dran. The rations weren't bad, actually surprisingly tasty for something that's designed to last in storage for years. Maybe not as good as the fresh fruit we'd had for our morning meal, but I was hungry enough to have no complaints. It seemed that Dran was in a similar state.

After we'd chewed in silence for a while, I finally asked the first of many questions that were swirling around in my brain like debris picked up by a tornado. "What advice did Farrwÿn give you that made you so angry this morning?"

Dran took a long drink of water, then stared out across the vista of bell flowers, eyes narrowed as he contemplated what I'd asked. I almost thought he wouldn't respond, when finally he said, "You remember when I burned my back?" I nodded. "We were talking out behind the house. I'd said that I wanted to do the right thing, but just didn't know what that was."

"Mmmph," I acknowledged noncommittally. Dran passed the water back to me. I took a sip, put the lid back on the container, setting it on the rock behind us.

"Well, I asked Farrwÿn what the best thing was to do." Dran was still staring vacantly out over the top of the knoll.

"And his answer was confusing?" I probed when Dran didn't elaborate. I smiled crookedly, remembering only too clearly how difficult some of Farrwÿn's advice could be, especially if he was using his *turas*.

"Quite," Dran replied dryly. "And it got more confusing as time progressed." Again he went quiet. I could sense the tangle of thoughts that were crowding his mind. Eventually, he added, "I've been wondering a lot about Farrwÿn."

I snorted. "You and me both. Sometimes I think he's gone crazy, but when you finally get an explanation out of him, he's entirely too sane." I rested my elbows on my thighs, propping my chin on my hands, watching the tiny flies pollinate the small bell flower blossoms. There were so many things I wanted to know, but I didn't want to pressure Dran. So I tried to look nonchalant. Whatever it was that Dran was willing to tell me, he would weave his own way through his thoughts.

"When I went to see Farrwÿn that time, he'd been working on a set of *anÿnbränne*—to be used in a *sïathcára* ceremony, I assumed," Dran absently rubbed his right wrist with his left hand, as though he was feeling the presence of a metal guard there. "From the design, I could see that the *anÿncára* bond was between members of House Föalen and House Seabÿn. I asked him who had commissioned the work, but of course he wouldn't tell me."

"Mmmph," I grunted, my mind turning over what Dran was saying. "And we now know that Farrwÿn is House Seabÿn." I added another piece to the puzzle. "So you think the bracers were for Farrwÿn and his *anÿncára*, whoever that is?" I put forth my hypothesis.

"Farrwÿn admitted as much this morning," Dran turned a little, looking at me. "Only there are a couple of problems with that idea. Firstly, the *sïathcára* ceremony is only used between Guardians, and Farrwÿn is definitely not a Guardian. And secondly, other than the two of us, there are no other Guardians currently in active duty that are from House Föalen." Dran had an intense look in his grey

eyes, and I knew he'd spent more than a little time pondering this particular problem.

"So," I sat up straight again, giving Dran my full attention to encourage him. "Maybe Farrwÿn sees his *anÿncára* sometime far off in the future—long enough for both him and someone else from the Föalen lineage to become Guardians?" I ended with a question in my voice.

"That's what I've been thinking," Dran confirmed. "But there is something even stranger about this," he paused for a moment, and I met his eyes. "Farrwÿn mentioned Killarÿn, Turien, and Danaldrí this morning. They were the three Guardians who disappeared while tracking down Drÿfoch," he continued. I nodded. "Killarÿn and Turien were *anÿncára* and shield mates. Killarÿn was from House Seabÿn and Turien was from House Föalen. I've seen images of them both." Dran shook his head a bit, as though having a struggle with what his logic was presenting to him. He looked away from me, back out over the field of bell flowers, blinking a couple of times. "When I saw Farrwÿn this morning, he'd changed. He's put on some muscle, and looks a lot stronger and tougher. But more than that, he walks with confidence, like someone who's comfortable in their skin." Dran paused, then added, "And he looks exactly like the image of Killarÿn."

Silence fell over us for a few moments, disturbed only by the faint buzzing of the tiny flies busy at their work. After a while, I countered, "That could just be a family resemblance. I think Farrwÿn looks a lot like Thorven as well."

"True," Dran agreed. "But where did Farrwÿn learn to fight?" He dropped the same mental bombshell that had been bothering me.

"I don't know," I replied softly.

"Neither do I," Dran confirmed. He'd placed his hands on his thighs, staring down at them. I could sense that he had an answer to this puzzle, but it was a disturbing one. I was starting to see it too, and it frightened me a little.

"What are you suggesting, Dran," I needed to hear him say it to believe it.

"That Farrwÿn is Killarÿn, reborn nearly three thousand years after his death," Dran replied, very softly.

"Why?" that one word echoed through my brain.

"Probably to finish what he started—to stop Drÿfoch," Dran was still staring at his hands. I was wide-eyed, not really seeing anything. Farrwÿn was my childhood friend. I knew him better than I knew anyone else except Dran and Darriel. How could he have been Killarÿn all these years, and I didn't know?

"Does he know?" Somehow, I just wanted Farrwÿn to be my trusted best friend, as he'd always been, not some strange personification of a rare spiritual phenomenon. Maybe we were just creating bizarre hypotheses to fit facts for which there were more rational explanations.

“Yes,” there was certainty in Dran’s voice, and a sense of resignation. “He knows too much about Drÿfoch, more than exists in the records these days.”

“How much do you think he remembers?” I’d heard about the rare cases of rebirth. Usually the people who affirmed that they had been reincarnated had very limited memories of their past life.

“Enough, but probably not everything,” Dran was looking at me again, sensing how disturbed I was. “I doubt he remembered much when we were growing up together. And whatever he remembers now, I think he’s still the Farrwÿn we’ve always known. Memories won’t change his personality,” Dran tried to smile reassuringly at me, but it was pretty shaky. He was obviously as bothered by the concept as I was.

“Do you think he’s waiting for Turien to be reborn and join him?” I asked. That would explain the *anÿnbränne* that Dran had seen.

“Yes,” Dran answered.

“Should we tell him we know?” I wondered what that would do to our friendship, how Farrwÿn would react.

Dran shook his head, “No, if he wants it out in the open, he’ll tell us.”

We sat in silence for a long time, our thoughts weighty. The sun moved visibly from its position high overhead, as the afternoon slid along. It was warm on the rock. I could almost have felt sleepy, if my mind wasn’t whirring so badly. Another question slowly burbled to the surface, and without thinking, I asked “What destiny did Farrwÿn predict for you?”

Dran stirred out of his thoughts, glancing at me with a raised eyebrow. “Our relationship,” he answered.

His response was nearly as opaque as some of Farrwÿn’s predictions. But it reminded me of other questions that had been arising in my mind. “Did you really mean what you said last night?”

“I did,” Dran was still looking at me, but now both his eyebrows went up. “You don’t believe me?” he queried. I could hear a tone of sadness in his voice.

“Binding yourself to me won’t restrict your freedom?” I asked sharply. “I thought you couldn’t live without that?” There was an old hurt in my voice, an old memory stirring from the times when Dran refused to join Darriel and me.

“That’s not exactly true, Darí,” Dran’s eyes were closed as he felt pain from my verbal jab.

“Then what is the truth? Which do you value most, your freedom or our relationship?” It was a question that needed to be asked, but not one I enjoyed putting to Dran. However, I needed to know where I stood with him, conclusively.

Dran opened his eyes, meeting mine directly and frankly, “I’ve always valued you more than anything else in my life.” He looked pained, but I didn’t get a sense that he was being evasive.

“Then why did you refuse to join Darriel and me?” I queried tersely.

Dran sighed, saying, “It’s complicated.”

“Maybe it is,” I concurred, “but I want you to tell me your reasons … now. I don’t want to have to dig this out of your head while I’m trying to figure out what you’re doing to us.”

“If we’d both chosen to be Guardians right from the beginning, everything would have been much easier,” Dran commented quietly. “As it was, I was trying to figure out how we could have a life together without disrupting your ability to be a Healer.”

“So you said last night,” I pointed out. “I still think we would have coped.” I was wondering if Dran had gotten himself into some kind of psychological rut over his concern about the Elders’ disapproval and my ability to function as a Healer.

Dran snorted self-deprecatingly. “I might have figured that out by myself, if I’d had the time.”

“Time?” I questioned. Where was Dran headed with this? “What do you mean?”

“Only that before I could get my head around a solution, Darriel was in the middle of it all.” Dran shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of defeat.

“She was just trying to help,” I said defensively. “You know that she loved both of us, not just me.”

“I know now,” Dran responded wearily. “I probably knew then, in my own way,” he admitted.

“So what was the problem?” I had to work hard at controlling my emotions. Sometimes, I just wanted to shake Dran, make him stop being so dense. And yet, I knew I needed to see this issue from his perspective in order for us to move forward.

Dran took a deep breath, and I knew this explanation was going to be difficult for him. “What I needed, what I wanted then was you, not Darriel. I needed to make things right between us. Darriel was offering us a way to interact with each other through her. That might have made the Elders feel better about our relationship, but it wasn’t what I wanted. I needed to have a direct connection with you. I was afraid that having Darriel in the middle would just make it worse, and ultimately make us hate the whole situation.”

“I don’t think that’s what we intended,” I tried to justify the plan that Darriel and I had come up with.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Dran ran his fingers through his close-cropped hair, a nervous gesture. “However, there’s still more to it.” He sighed, a clear sense of sadness in the action. “I don’t think I really

understood how insecure Darriel was about her limited psi talents. That only became clear to me just shortly before her death. I'd always wondered why she wanted so badly to become pregnant. For many years, that had become the focus of your relationship with her. I was curious why Darriel didn't just sire a child on you—it is possible, you know." Dran chuckled a little.

"She didn't want it that way," I said quietly. I'd brought it up with her more than once, but it had been clear that she wanted to be the one to bear the child.

"I know," Dran looked at me, his eyes gentle. "She needed to justify herself, to prove that she was good at something. She had you so convinced of her need that you even suggested that I could sire a child on her. Darí, you're a Healer! You know that my sperm will carry the shape-shift genes, just like yours do. And you know that, for some unknown reason, Darriel's eggs were genetically incompatible with our sperm. Short of doing an *in vitro* fertilization with some significant bioengineering, there's nothing we could have done to give Darriel her baby. I couldn't deal with her desperate need. Always the two of you came together, and I could only cope with one relationship at a time," Dran shook his head again.

"So you left," I accused. However, some of the fire behind my hurt was starting to cool. Dran was, as always, very rational.

"No," the self-deprecating smile was back, "I went into low orbit, forever held within your gravitational well."

"You left," I repeated. "What if you'd gotten yourself killed?"

"A very good question," Dran admitted. "Old Thorven didn't want to accept me into Guardian training unless you and I became Guardian's together. He said that the Föalen *anÿncára* bond was particularly powerful, that if I should get killed while on duty, you would surely die as well. He felt that it wouldn't be fair to you unless you had also chosen to take the risks of being a Guardian."

"And you went anyway?" I asked, feeling hurt by Dran's apparent selfishness.

Dran looked at me hard, and I felt the bite of the steeliness in his eyes. "To that, I have three things to say," he responded, and the coldness in his voice made me shiver in spite of the bright warmth of the sun. "Firstly, you had a very strong *anÿncára* bond with Darriel. There was a fairly good chance that had I been killed, she would have held you here, just as I kept you from going to the beyond when Darriel died. Secondly, I made a promise to Thorven that if I became a Guardian, I would do my utmost to be the most competent and risk-adverse Guardian that I could possibly be. And I kept that promise, working harder that you'll likely ever know to keep myself safe and alive, just in case Thorven was right. Thirdly, I needed a life. I needed a place where I was valued, where I could do something useful. I wasn't finding that in our tangled web of relationships. You had your healing. Darriel was busy trying to make a baby. Why should it be wrong if I wanted to do something with my life?"

Our minds touched for a moment. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by the terrible feelings of loneliness and estrangement that Dran had suffered during his life. I became aware of the stubborn determination that had kept him walking that fine line between carrying out his duties and making sure that he always came home to us alive, and the keen fear that came from the acknowledgment that he might be holding my life, and by association, Darriel's life, in his hands each time he went back on Guardian duty. Balancing this, I could feel the comradeship, the sense of purpose and belonging that grew out of his work with the other Guardians. Truly, his situation *had* been complex. I realized that he'd been very aware of the risks he was taking. Having heard more of his story, I was starting to feel guilty for doubting him so much.

"Dran, I'm sorry …" I started to say, but he stopped me with a quick shake of his head. The iciness had melted from his eyes, and now there was just sadness and loss.

"No, it's my fault. It always was," he smiled tiredly, sadly. "I was too much of a coward to deal with our relationship when we were young. Everything just kept getting more complicated after that."

We were quiet again, momentarily worn out by the intensity of our interaction. I wasn't sure what to say to Dran, but finally I found my voice again. "I don't think that what you did was wrong," I said slowly. "And, although misguided, I don't think that Darriel and I tried to hurt you either. But if you need it, you have my forgiveness." I looked at Dran. He still had a wan smile.

"And you have mine," he stated firmly. "I never could stay angry at you. Maybe we can move forward from here and try to be kinder to each other?" I could hear the hopefulness in his question.

"I want to do that," I gave Dran a wry smile. "But for the record, Thorven was right." Dran raised both eyebrows in an unspoken question. "If you'd gotten killed, I would have died with you. I knew that, and so did Darriel. She wouldn't have been able to stop me."

"So our bond really is that strong?" Dran's eyes widened for a moment. "When we were children, I thought it was. After Darriel became part of our bond, I wasn't so sure. And then later, after Darriel's death, I kept losing connection with you. I really did believe the bond was broken, or else irreparably damaged in some way. The fear of losing you was slowly killing me. I went a bit crazy for a while there," he admitted.

"You did," I replied, feeling the pain of the memories. "I'm sorry. We should have pulled together after Darriel died, and instead, I pulled away from you. I almost killed both of us."

"Hmmph," Dran snorted. "It seems I'm pretty hard to kill. I've worked so long at staying safe that even half-crazed, I somehow managed to stay out of any serious trouble."

"I'm lucky you did," I remember the fear I'd felt when I'd learned that the stories about Dran's wild escapades had been true.

“Me too,” Dran agreed, and I could sense that his comment was heartfelt. Then he cocked his head to one side, clearly struck by another thought. “Survival isn’t always correlated with degree of risk, you know.” Somewhat perplexed, I wondered where he was taking our conversation now. He continued, “Of the three of us, Darriel was exposed to the least amount of risk, yet she was the first to die. I think sometimes there are things outside our control, no matter how safe or how dangerous our actions are, that ultimately determine the outcome of our lives.” He smiled for a moment, “Not that I’m suggesting that either of us should take more risks than are absolutely necessary.”

“What do you mean by ‘things’?” Something about his wording made the skin down my spine tingle. “Like random events? Or are you referring to some kind of directed outside force?”

“Maybe a bit of both,” Dran had a distant look on his face, remembering events of the past. “I do occasionally ponder why things happen the way they do. At times, it almost seems like we are the playing pieces in somebody’s game. I’ve always wondered if there was some fate involved when Darriel died.”

“That’s interesting,” I found myself murmuring in response to Dran’s philosophizing. “I’ve always believed there was something uncanny about the way she died.”

“Her story isn’t over yet,” Dran commented, an odd tone in his voice that brought my eyes back to him, eyebrows raised in an instinctive request for more information. Dran didn’t elaborate, but opened his pack. Rummaging around in the contents, he brought out a bundle wrapped in an old scrap of white fabric. He handed it to me.

Carefully, I took the wrapping off, revealing a box made of a red wood, ornately carved with an inlay painted in various shades of blues and greens. I immediately recognized Farrwÿn’s artistry. It was an exquisitely beautiful piece, and I took some time to admire it. I readily identified some of the motifs in the carving—*föalen* in Healer-green and Guardian blue, a green *iverÿn* vine with dark purplish-blue flowers. However, there was also a strange crested bird that I couldn’t identify, outlined in dark blue. I puzzled at the box a bit longer until I found the location of the catch mechanisms. Just as I was about to open it, I felt Dran’s hand on my arm.

“Before you look inside, I want you to know that this isn’t exactly what I asked Farrwÿn to do,” Dran had a pained look on his face. Hesitating for a moment, I had a sense of being a part of a greater whole, moving to music being orchestrated by an unseen conductor. Dran went on, “He’s given us our destiny. We have to decide if we want to accept it.” Dran removed his hand, leaving me to continue my exploration of the mysterious box.

Feeling more than a little uneasy, I pressed on two small depressions, one on each end of the box, near the top edge, which released the top panel of the box. Inside, carefully packed in a soft, fibrous, grass-like material were six objects—three pairs of *anÿnbränne*. I caught my breath and sat motionless. Two things immediately came into my mind. The first was that Dran was accepting my proposal to be

sïathcára, shield mates. This filled me with an incredible sense of joy. The second was a largely inarticulate confusion regarding the three pairs.

The bluish metal used in crafting the wrist guards was unfamiliar to me. Even without touching them, I could feel the hum in my nerves that warned me that the objects in the box were psychically keyed. I looked up at Dran, querying, "What is the metal?"

Dran stared down at the box's contents. "Farrwÿn calls it *drurïan*. As you can see, it's psi-active. Each pair of *anÿnbränne* is keyed to one member of the *anÿncára* bond."

I moved my hand over each pair, quickly finding the pair that was keyed to my own pattern. Another pair, similar in size, was also easily recognizable as keyed to Dran. The third, slightly smaller pair was a mystery for a moment, until I touched it. Then my mind instantly recognized Darriel's pattern. I let out an incoherent cry, feeling pain in that never quite healed place in my heart where I was once bonded to Darriel. As memories washed through my mind, I could feel Dran's hand on my shoulder, could hear him trying to comfort me, but nothing registered distinctly.

Gradually, my head cleared. I took a deep breath, trying to regain control of my emotions. Somewhere, a part of my brain was trying to tell me that Farrwÿn would never have done this with the intention to cause us more pain and grief. I wanted to believe that his actions were meant to be a sign of hope. What had Farrwÿn said this morning—"*Sometime between 20 and 30 years from now on a planet in the Third Arc*"? He was referring to Dran's destiny, which obviously would be fulfilled when all three of us were together again. So that must be when and where we would meet Darriel. But she was dead! Just as we had invoked the condition of rebirth to explain Farrwÿn's behavior, was he invoking it as a part of our destiny? I felt a tremor of fear run through me. What was happening to us? Then I began to realize that it didn't really matter. Whatever our destiny was, it was offering us the chance to make a life together, to find our right relationship with each other. There truly was nothing else in life that I wanted more than that. Slowly, a feeling of relief washed through my tense body.

I picked up one of the *anÿnbränne* that was keyed to my pattern. There were three rows of engraved designs around its circumference. Along the top edge was a row of *föalen* linked head to tail traversing around the cylinder to the right. Along the bottom edge, a second, similar, but upside down, pattern of *föalen* traveled around the cuff to the left. In between the two rows of canines was the bird design, with the birds alternately joined head-to-head and tail-to-tail. Looking closely, I could see that the entire pattern, both the *föalen* and the birds, was formed from one single, intricately drawn line.

I touched one of the birds on the cuff. The design suggested a longish tail, short, broad wings, and a head with a distinctive crest. It didn't look like any house crest that I knew. "What's the significance of the bird?" I finally queried Dran, my voice soft and dry. He just shook his head, clearly as mystified as I was.

After some further exploration, I found the small indent on the surface that activated the cleverly

hidden catch, and the wrist guard opened. It was hinged on one side, lined with soft, supple leather that was designed to protect the wrist from abrasion and provide a better fit.

I replaced the *anÿnbränne* back in the box, and looked at Dran. He raised his eyebrows—I could hear the question in his mind, "*Do you still want to go through with this?*" And my mind added the unspoken, "*Now that you know what Farrwÿn has foreseen*." There was only one answer to that question. We had been struggling to reach this point all our lives. The fact that Dran had chosen to present the box to me, knowing what it contained and what Farrwÿn had predicted, meant that he too had made his choice. I smiled a bit shakily, and nodded.

Dran stood up. I put the box down on the rock, and got to my feet as well. Facing me, Dran reached out with both hands, clasping my forearms so that our arms were locked together. Dropping his barriers, he stood mentally naked before me, all his thoughts and feelings open to my mind. I immediately responded by opening myself up completely to him, letting nothing stand between us. Our minds fell comfortably into rapport.

My eyes met Dran's. I could see a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. In spite of all the confusion, all the weird elements of fate and destiny, I could feel that Dran wanted this as much as I did. Slowly, heavy with emotion, his voice began the ancient and beautiful words of the *sïathcára* ceremony. "As the sun rises each day, I shall think of you. As the stars shine each night, so shall you be constantly in my thoughts. As night follows day, so closely shall we share our separate thoughts. I shall know you as completely as you shall know me. You shall be my *anÿncára* and best friend, my *sïathcára* and companion, my beloved. This I swear to you."

Dran paused, giving the words their full measure, letting the significance of what he was saying soak into the One that surrounded us. He blinked, and I could see that there were tears in his eyes. I knew that mine too were misty, softening everything in my sight. Dran continued with the second part of the vow. "As the blood of our hearts mingles, so shall our souls be one. As our hearts beat together, so shall our spirits be united. My loyalty shall be yours. My courage shall be yours. The strength of my heart shall flow through your veins. When there is need, I shall be strong for us both. My sword shall be at your service, to fight at your side. The skills of my mind and body shall be yours to summon in need. My strength shall be the defense at your back. My power shall be the shelter for your soul. I shall be a shield for your heart and your hopes. This I swear to you."

Again Dran paused, letting the universe bear witness to his vow. His hands were warm on my arms, substantial, solid. His voice steady, he began the last part of the vow. "There shall be no end of my love for you, for you and I shall dwell within one another forever. And when our time comes, may we go to the beyond together. And may we be reborn that we may meet and know and love again, and remember. This I swear to you."

Dran squeezed my arms gently, and I knew it was my turn. Trying to be as steady as Dran had been, I

repeated the three parts of the shield mate vow, pausing as Dran had, between each part. I could feel my voice trembling slightly with intense emotion, feel happiness building and expanding in my chest, as though my heart wanted to explode with joy.

Dran released his hold on my arms, pulling his knife from its sheath at his belt with his right hand. Holding out his left hand, he made a small, shallow cut across the heel of his palm near the base of his thumb. With a flick of his right hand, he flipped the knife, catching it by the blade, offering it to me hilt first. I repeated his actions, making a similar small cut on my left hand, then placed Dran's knife on the rock beside us. Clasping our left hands together, we let our blood mingle.

Holding my hand tightly, Dran met my eyes and smiled. He finalized the oath, saying, "By the blood we share and the breath of life that we breathe together, we are blood sworn."

I smiled, tears flowing freely down my face. "By the blood we share and the breath of life that we breathe together, we are blood sworn," I echoed.

Dran reached out to Farrwÿn's box where it was sitting on the rock, and extracted the pair of *anÿnbränne* that I knew were keyed to my pattern. Sliding the sleeves of my shirt up, he gently fitted one on each of my wrists. The weight on my wrists felt strange, new. At the same time, I realized, even after I became accustomed to their presence, that they would always be a comforting reminder of our shared existence. We really were two halves of a whole, and now, finally, after far too many years, we would be complete. I reached into the box, finding the *anÿnbränne* that were keyed to Dran. I could feel the faint, familiar tingle of his pattern chase through my fingers pleasantly. With equal gentleness, I locked the bracers around Dran's wrists. The third set of *anÿnbränne* I knew we would leave in the box, waiting.

With a gesture of happy release, Dran wrapped his arms powerfully around me, pulling me close and resting his head on my shoulder, our cheeks touching. I grabbed him around the chest, returning the embrace, feeling his strong, muscular body against mine. We sank more deeply into rapport, and for a moment, our thoughts and feelings were one.

Chapter 15: The Flight of the Föalen

Eldarí—Date: 8936.155

Dochasïa

The day was drawing to a close. The sun had just slipped below the horizon, and the few small wispy clouds were developing pink edges. Farrwÿn, Dran, and I were sitting around the fire, talking quietly. We'd finished our meal some time ago, and were mostly just catching up on the events of our lives since the last time the three of us were together. We were all starting to get a bit tired. The conversation was beginning to lag, little spurts of talking interspersed by longer spells of silence.

Finally, Farrwÿn smiled at us, yawned hugely, then headed towards the *Föalen*. Although I'd thought he would spend some part of the day catching up on his sleep, we'd arrived back at the *Föalen* to find him still thoroughly engrossed in his work with the remote sensing imagery. Clearly, he'd be happy to spend some time in his bunk tonight.

Dran stood up, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I'm going back to my ship for the night," he informed me quietly. "You're welcome to join me," I felt him squeeze my shoulder slightly. He paused for a moment, then added, "But if you need some more time to get used to things, and want to sleep in the *Föalen*, that's good too." I reached up and caught his arm, giving him a gentle clasp. Then he was gone, leaving me to my thoughts.

I found myself uncertain, thinking about what the boundaries of our relationship might be. Most *sïathcára* were sexually active, but not all. Dran and I had had a strictly platonic relationship in the past. While we may have felt the occasional physical drawing towards each other, particularly when Darriel and I had been in *ërïol*, we'd never allowed ourselves to express that physical aspect of our bond. With our actions today, we had clearly stated our intentions to defy the Elders' ruling against *anÿncára* bonds between siblings. Whether we consummated that bond sexually or not would add no further weight to our defiance.

Of course, whether we actually could become physically intimate was another question entirely. Although sex outside of *ërïol* was possible, most couplings occurred only when both individuals were fully aroused by their hormones at the same time. Even amongst young partners, freshly bonded and filled with romantic intentions, that didn't always happen. For Dran and I, there were many issues stacked against us. I'd been in an *anÿncára* bond with Darriel, and that bond had been painfully broken. Under such circumstances, where one member of the bond survives, that person seldom takes another partner or enters *ërïol* again. This was possibly quite true for Dran as well, since he had also been bonded to Darriel. While Dran and I have always been *anÿncára*, whether that could now stimulate us into *ërïol* was not something I could predict. Dran himself had firmly resisted *ërïol* time and again, even when exposure to my time of heat had nearly driven him to his limits. I knew, without asking, that Dran

was still a virgin. After so many years of fighting against it, I wasn't sure if Dran was even capable of going into *ërïol*. Add to these issues the fact that we were nomadic travelers, seldom spending more than a few months at a time on any one planet, and our chances only got worse. Although it could be triggered by strong emotion and even stress, *ërïol* was more typically a seasonal event, often occurring twice a year, once near midsummer, and again near midwinter. Without the seasonal patterns of our home world to drive our biological clocks, Ellendrí who spent significant amounts of time away from Ellendrïa seldom went into *ërïol*, although apparently some of the *anÿncára* pairs amongst the Guardians did manage it on occasion.

Thinking about it all, I wondered whether things would be better for us if we never did experience *ërïol* together. For one thing, going into *ërïol* could be extremely disruptive. The exact timing of when it might occur was always hard to determine, even for long-standing couples such as Darriel and I had been. Although it was possible to fight against the hormonal surge, as Dran had done in the past, if we truly wanted to have a sexual relationship, we would need to be prepared to respond when our opportunity arose. But even more important to me at the moment was the knowledge that our relationship had never been based on sexual desire and need, rather it had always been a deep sharing of our basic oneness. Whatever we did and wherever we went from here, that would always remain our reality. So did we even need *ërïol*? It seemed to me that the answer was possibly not.

In any case, I needed to make a decision about where I was going to sleep tonight. I had challenged Dran with a question a quarter-year ago, and he had given me his answer this afternoon. We were now *sïathcára*. What happened next was clearly up to me.

We had made the choice to travel together, and for Guardians, that meant living together in the tight confines of a small ship. As I had with Farrwÿn, I would need to learn to live and work closely with Dran. Once, long ago, that would have been an easy task. Now, I wasn't so sure I really knew my *deirfad*. I huffed out a sigh, getting to my feet. Carefully, I pushed sand around the remaining coals of the fire with my foot, banking it for the night. An old saying came to mind, one that is found on many worlds in one version or another—"*There is no time like today*". I left Farrwÿn to his slumber and turned downstream.

I knew that I didn't have far to go. Two moons were high in the sky, starting to become visible as the sky darkened, one at half full, and the other just a tiny sliver. The stars were brightening, and the light was just transitioning from the deep reds and purples of late dusk to the silvery shades of full night. A few night birds were beginning to call, but otherwise, the late evening air was still and quiet. I walked surefootedly along the edge of the stream, watching off to the right for signs of Dran's ship. Eventually, a flash of reflected starlight off polished metal gave me the clue that I needed. I turned away from the stream, pushed through a scraggly barrier of brush, and entered a small clearing.

And stopped, eyes wide in surprise. I suppose I didn't really know what I was expecting. Knowing that Dran's old ship had been grounded by Kÿrrÿl, I thought he would have been able to get one of the older ships that had been recently retired from the Guardians' fleet. But what I saw was not an old and tired

spaceship. A dark blue-black shape rested in the clearing, almost invisible against the blackness of the forest beyond except for starlight gleaming off the finely polished hull. I recognized the shape, patterned after the *Föalen*, only larger and newer, and knowing Kÿrrÿl, likely packed with the most recent technological advances in spacecraft design. It was Kÿrrÿl's project, completed, tested, and on its first voyage. That he'd given it to Dran said much about his trust in Dran's abilities and judgment. It reminded me sharply of how my own opinion of the circumstances during the last few years was quickly being revised. Dran may have been depressed and frustrated by our situation, driven to his limits by emotional stress, but he had never been a fool.

I slowly walked up to the ship, admiring the clean, crisp lines of the quad-wing design, the long slender nose with its clear upper canopy, and the large engine nacelles located rearward of the wings. Like the *Föalen*, it was a work of art, a product of Kÿrrÿl's love and attention. And like the *Föalen*, it also sported a stylized figure of that wild canine, drawn in gold, on each side of the nose. As I approached closer, circling around the new ship, I could see that it had the same typical hatch/ramp configuration as the *Föalen*, but in addition, it also had an airlock on the side opposite to the main hatch. Clearly, this ship was not just a planet hopper, but was designed for deep space work as well.

I returned to the side with the main hatch. The ramp was up, the hatch closed, sealing the ship up against nighttime intrusions by wandering animals. If Dran was already asleep, I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to wake him up by shouting at him telepathically, or worse, pounding on the ship's hatch. Maybe I should just go back to the *Föalen* …

I hesitated for a moment, then with a faint sense of hope, softly called out the command that I used for opening the *Föalen*'s hatch. For the ship to respond, I would need to provide not only the correct command word, but the ship would also need to be programmed to recognize my voice. As similar as we were, my voice was not exactly the same as Dran's. The ship would be able to discern the difference, and unless Dran or Kÿrrÿl had already supplied it with my voice recognition patterns, the hatch was very likely going to remain closed. However, I heard a faint whir. Smoothly, almost silently, the hatch opened and lowered downward. Dran was apparently expecting me.

I walked quietly up the ramp. At the top, I cautiously stuck my head in through the open hatch, looking around at the interior. Everything was dark, lighted only by the silvery starlight and moonlight coming in through the canopy. Dran didn't greet me. I felt that somehow this door was a threshold that I needed to cross. I stepped into the ship, reaching out to the wall beside the hatch for the control panel. Finding it in the same position as the one in the *Föalen*, I closed the hatch behind me. Inside, the space felt roomy, at least twice the size of the *Föalen*'s interior. I could see seating for four people, a reasonably sized eating and work area, a small washroom, two bunks along the sides of the ship past the eating area, and lots of storage space. I couldn't see them clearly yet, but I suspected that there were more bunks at the rear of the ship. And I still hadn't found Dran. Where was he?

Quietly, feeling like an intruder, I walked down the central aisle. As I neared the back of the ship, I saw

that the narrow passageway widened, providing more sleeping space. Although presently set up as a single large bed meant to accommodate a family, typically this configuration could be modified for differing sleeping arrangements and numbers of crew. Unless he was sleeping in the pilot's seat at the front of the ship, something that we'd both probably done from time to time, Dran was likely to be back here. Little starlight from the canopy reached to the back corners of the sleeping area. My eyes were working hard to adjust to the almost blackness. It was only when Dran turned his head to look more directly at me, and I saw the glimmer of his eyeshine, that I was finally able to make out the shape of his body, a dark outline against even deeper darkness. He was sitting in one of the corners, back against the ship's hull, legs drawn up, with his arms loosely draped about his knees.

"I was hoping you would come," Dran greeted me quietly. "Welcome to the *Sn'ënne ó ed Föalen*."

I laughed softly, genuinely happy at Dran's good fortune. "What did you offer Kÿrrÿl to get to fly his latest work of art?" I inquired jokingly. Cautiously, I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting to see what Dran would do.

"Nothing," Dran replied softly. A flash of white teeth gave me a hint of his smile. "We do need a bigger ship if we're going to take passengers." There was silence for a few moments, then he added, "I think Kÿrrÿl was happy to encourage us to fly together. I think he feels it might be safer for both of us."

"Hmmph," I snorted. "This is certainly heartening. Did you come up with the name?"

Dran laughed. "I wouldn't be so audacious. Ask Kÿrrÿl how he named it." He shifted slightly, and I could see that his eyes were clearly watching me, "I'll give you the full walk through tomorrow." I was quiet for a while, not quite sure what to do next.

"If you're tired, take off your boots and climb up here," Dran finally suggested. "There's lots of space. I'm sure you can find a comfortable spot." I must've hesitated slightly, because I could see Dran shaking his head. "I hope you're not afraid of me," he teased, but I sensed a slightly serious undertone to his words.

"No, of course not," I replied quickly. Taking a deep breath, I kicked off my boots, swinging my legs up over the side of the bed. Up closer, I could see that Dran already had his shirt off, and had probably been sleeping before I arrived. Truly, the interior of the *Sn'ënne ó ed Föalen* was comfortably warm, and I really was quite tired. I could almost sleep on a bed of rocks. I pulled my shirt off, tossing it into a far corner. Sighing, I flopped on my back not far from where Dran was sitting. I closed my eyes, remembering all the times we had shared a bed together when we were young, innocently companionable. Dran shifted, and I knew he was stretching out beside me. He put his hand on my upper arm. I could feel the cool metal of his *anÿnbränne* against my warm skin, sense the gentle tingle of the keyed *drurïan*. The contact made me fully aware of the weight of the *anÿnbränne* on my own wrists, of their significance.

“Darí,” Dran’s voice was soft, gentle, like he was trying to calm something wild and anxious. His breath tickled against my cheek. “I swear that nothing we do will be without your complete willingness and consent.” He took his hand away, and the sudden loss of contact made a cold shiver run down my spine. Almost unconsciously, I shifted over slightly so that my body touched Dran’s lightly. His radiating warmth increased my drowsiness. I yawned, feeling the heaviness of impending sleep. Dran sighed and relaxed beside me. I doubt that I could’ve counted to 20 before the two of us were completely asleep.

Eldranth—Date: 8936.156 to 8936.158

Dochasïa, Lorril, and the Ll'Ellendrÿn Space Lanes

Farrwÿn, Darí, and I spent two more days completing the survey of the planet. We had started calling it Dochasïa, an old Ellendorí word meaning hope, and it certainly was our hope. One of those days we spent down on the river valley floodplain; the second we spent out in the estuary and along the coast. Nothing we saw made us change our minds about the planet—it looked to be very suitable for the development of a sustainable, agriculturally-based society, and the resources appeared to be rich enough to allow careful use of advanced technology. Beyond that, this world was a beautiful place, abounding in life and geologically diverse. Coming from Ellendrïa, stark with its impending doom, this place, lush with greenery and wetted by myriads of springs, pools, streams, and lakes, seized our hearts.

For the first time in more years than I care to remember, the three of us were completely happy, the tensions between us finally released, leaving us relaxed and companionable. I think we could have easily spent months on Dochasïa, exploring and taking joy in each other's company. Unfortunately, we had only days, as Darí's release time was quickly coming to an end. We did, however, come to a few decisions. Even though we'd found the planet that Farrwÿn had foreseen, we felt that it would be wise to survey all 12 of the potential candidates. With a complete data set, we would be better prepared to argue our case for Dochasïa with the colonist movement. So, we would return to Lorril, and Darí and I would go back into service for a time. Farrwÿn intended to stay on Lorril, having hopes of finding some useful work to keep himself busy while we were away on our Guardian duties. Once we had more time off, we would return the *Föalen* to Kÿrrÿl's safekeeping on Ellendrïa and continue our explorations using the *Ënne*, which was quickly becoming a comfortable home for us.

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We had barely been a day on Lorril when things started to get lively. A message had been received from a Thalandrïan cargo ship, pulsed by radio wave through the relays of n-dimensional gates. They had just completed a jump through between, only to find themselves surrounded by a predatory pack of Cultaní raiders. Thalandrïan ships travel well-armed these days, so they were putting up some strong resistance. However, they felt that the number of raiders was somewhat excessive for their capabilities, and had requested that the newly organized Border Patrol provide some assistance.

Although Darí was much more familiar with the workings of the Border Patrol than I, it had been my impression that they hadn't been in operation for very long. In fact, according to Darí, the Patrol had not yet been fully organized before he left with Farrwÿn. It sounded like there was the potential for some degree of chaos and disorder. Therefore, I wasn't surprised when Rallandrí suggested that Darí and I join them, to provide whatever advice and assistance that we could.

We had to move fast. Even at full speed, we would still be something over a hundredth-day getting to the Thalandrïan ship. We had to hope that they could hold off the raiders until then. The Cultaní

typically wore down the defensive capabilities of their larger, more heavily-armed prey through a prolonged attack, their smaller, more maneuverable ships darting in and out, scoring strikes against the shields of their prey until eventually those shields collapsed. This type of attack could go on for a tenth-day or more if the ship being attacked had sufficient energy storage to keep their shields up that long, and the Cultaní ships didn't manage to damage any essential systems in their strikes. So our hope wasn't unmerited.

Rather than trying to shift Farrwÿn and his gear out of the *Ënne*, Darí and I simply took the *Föalen*. I was happy to let Darí take the pilot's seat—not only was he better acquainted with the conceptual operation of the Border Patrol, he was intimately familiar with the *Föalen*, and a much better pilot than I. I flung myself into the second seat in the forward section of the *Föalen*, quickly strapping myself in for our flight. This was generally the passenger's seat, or sometimes, as in our recent work, the position for the person monitoring the sensors. On rare occasions, a second pilot might assist with the actual flight controls from this position. Today, I was pretty much just along for the ride, providing encouragement to Darí while trying to learn as much as I could from the situation.

In contrast to our previous exploratory trips on Dochasïa, this flight was neither slow nor pleasant. As soon as we were far enough off the ground that Darí could safely engage the main engines, he pointed the *Föalen*'s nose straight up, and we flew, rocket-style, almost vertical. The *Föalen*'s antigrav system couldn't compensate for acceleration this extreme—I could feel the additional gravity pushing me forcefully back into the seat. The ship would sound an alarm if the gravity generated from our acceleration exceeded our tolerances, but I knew, without asking, that Darí would push as close to the edge of safety as he could. Time and speed were essential if we were to be of any help.

Even as we were climbing, the communication screen lit up, and Tanish's face appeared. Something seemed odd about her. I blinked, then my mind resolved the strangeness. The backdrop behind her face was clearly not Lorril's traffic control room, but rather a bulkhead of what appeared to be a compact spaceship. Nor was Tanish dressed for Lorril's warm tropical weather, but was clearly garbed in the more durable clothing that space farers prefer. And I could tell from the way she was moving that she was piloting the ship. Strange … I never knew that Tanish was a pilot. I looked over at Darí—his raised eyebrow conveyed his surprise as well.

"We're just coming up to the jump point," Tanish informed us. "We'll wait for you there before making our transit." Darí nodded. I knew we were a little behind the Border Patrol in getting off the ground, as it had taken longer for us to get our orders from Rallandrí. However, the *Föalen* was faster than most of the ships that comprised the patrol, so we would quickly make up for lost time.

Tanish had more to say. "We have 10 ships here. The *Föalen* will be the eleventh. We'll jump according to our flight order—the *Föalen* will be the last ship to go. After the transit, we'll go into V-formation. I'll take the lead position." Tanish smiled tightly at us, then continued, "Darí, please take the last position on the left wing." The communication screen went dark. That was it—our orders had

been received. I shook my head as the various elements of that exchange sank in. Not only did Tanish fly, but clearly she was leading this squadron, possibly the entire Border Patrol, for all I knew. And she'd placed us in the most protected position. Why? Was she worried about us or concerned that we might interfere? I wasn't sure.

Already, we'd reached the edge of Lorril's atmosphere. Looking out the side of the canopy, I could see the hazy blue-white of the stratosphere curving away from us. I always felt a small twinge of anxiety each time I left the comfortable womb of a planet and headed out into deep space. Outer space was alien to us. Only our technology allowed us to survive out here. Punch a hole in your ship, and you're dead in an instant. Fortunately, that momentary spasm of fear hasn't kept me from making many trips like this one.

As we pulled away from Lorril's gravity well, Darí reduced our acceleration. I no longer felt pinned in my seat. We were still flying at a good velocity, so it wasn't long before I could make out a cluster of bright specks up ahead—the Border Patrol squadron. Darí brought the *Föalen* to a neat stop just at the outside edge of the group. Even as we were decelerating, the first ship was already making its jump. As I watched each ship disappear, carefully keeping count, Darí entered the coordinates for the jump point from which the Thalandrïan cargo ship had made their distress call. When the tenth ship had vanished into a twisting hole in space, I called out, "Our turn."

Darí touched the controls, and the *Föalen* maneuvered briefly. Then, with gut-wrenching familiarity, our universe disappeared. I counted my way through the four indescribable moments that constituted the passage between. With equal suddenness, the universe became normal again. Directly in front of us, the Border Patrol was going into formation. Darí promptly swung the *Föalen* into our assigned position on the left wing, far to the outside and above Tanish in her position as point. Looking beyond our formation, I could see the huge Thalandrïan cargo ship, heavy and boxy, but bristling with armament. Swarming around it, like flies around a dead carcass, were tiny bright specks—the Cultaní ships. They moved so quickly, dancing in and out of range of the Thalandrïan's lasers, that it was impossible to make an accurate count of their number. Every so often, one would dart in, and a brilliant laser beam would slice out towards the cargo ship, contacting its shields with a bright flare. Before the large ship could react, the tiny raider would be out of reach again. However, not all the attackers were so lucky. There were some skilled people manning the lasers on the cargo ship. As I watched, the massively powerful beam from the Thalandrïan ship engulfed a raider that wasn't fast enough, causing the little vessel to instantly explode into a heap of molten wreckage. Fortunately, knowing what to expect, I had my mind barriered against the empathic backlash that can occur during a battle situation in which there may be injuries or death. Glancing over at Darí, I could see that he too had now learned to keep himself solidly shielded.

Looking more closely at our formation, I could see that we were a real heterogeneous mix of ships, no two exactly alike. All were more or less the same size as the *Föalen*, but that was the only similarity. Hull shapes, orientation and number of wings, markings, armaments—all varied widely. Not so good for

formation flying, I thought, as each ship would have its own particular strengths and weaknesses, and all would have differing capabilities for speed and agility. I prayed to whatever deities that might listen that all of our pilots were very, very good.

The communication screen came alive again, and Tanish was giving us our final orders. “We’re going to make several passes over the Thalandrïan cargo ship in an attempt to drive the Cultaní away. Follow my lead. I know it will be difficult, but try to stay more or less in formation.” Unlike her previous communication to us specifically, it was clear that she was now broadcasting to the entire squadron. She smiled encouragingly, “Watch out for your wing mates and try to look after each other.” Then the screen went black. Looking forward out the canopy, I could see Tanish’s ship, in lead position, starting to move.

I can’t say that the squadron’s formation flying was tight—we looked rather more like a straggling flock of migratory birds than a carefully trained flight of spaceships. However, we certainly did cause the Cultaní raiders some concern. As we bore down on the cargo ship, the Cultaní fled before us, whirling away from their prey. Unfortunately, as soon as we passed, they quickly returned to their attack, hungry like a horde of blood-sucking insects.

After three passes, it was apparent that we were having some impact on the battle. The Cultaní number was down by 10, and miraculously, no one in our squadron had been hit, although there had been more than one close situation. Darí was flying with his usual grace and precision. Somehow, he had managed to avoid blasting any Cultaní ships, although he had frightened off one that was pursuing our wing mate. The Cultaní were clearly becoming a little more wary, and were starting to stay well clear of us.

At this point, the Cultaní changed tactics. The entire swarm balled up into a mass, like they were reevaluating the situation or receiving new orders. Now that they were relatively still, I could count 15 remaining. As I watched them, I hoped that maybe they would leave. But no, suddenly they erupted outwards, like angry insects, driving straight towards the left wing of our formation. Under the intensive barrage of the Cultaní lasers, the left wing crumpled back. Pilots from the right wing swung around to help us, and the whole formation became a chaotic mess of diving, twisting, rolling ships interconnected with bright streaks of laser fire.

Seeking some maneuvering room, Darí pulled the *Föalen* into a climb up and out of the seething mass. As we momentarily pulled free of the pack, a very strange thing occurred. Almost like a single organism, the Cultaní broke free from their various engagements, turning to follow us. As a young child, I had once had the misfortune of treading on a nest of stinging insects. Irritated by my lack of respect, they had boiled out at me with vengeance, pursuing me as I’d run around in the confines of the dome trying to escape their attentions. Eventually, I’d had to flee into the house, shut the door, and wait until they’d finally returned to their nest. This was exactly what the Cultaní appeared to be doing. “*Run!*” I shouted mentally at Darí.

I heard the *Föalen*’s main engines fire up to full capacity as Darí took us out and away from the cargo

ship. The Cultaní ships came at us from all angles. We barely managed to get far enough ahead of the swarm to avoid being surrounded. Like beads on a string, the Cultaní ships trailed out behind us, following close and hard. We were still within laser range, taking a lot of hits on our shields. I knew we couldn't keep this up for long. Darí started a series of evasive tactics, trying to shake the Cultaní off, or at least get far enough ahead of them that we were out of laser range. I could feel the force of acceleration slam me from side to side as Darí rapidly changed direction, twisting and rolling to avoid laser fire. He was pushing the *Föalen* to its maximum capacity, and I could hear a strange whine to the engines that didn't sound good to my ears. Where was the rest of the squadron?

Suddenly, a light on the console started blinking yellow, demanding our attention. The *Föalen*, which normally remained silent when Darí was busy piloting, gave warning, "Darí, we have a problem." Its modulated androgynous voice actually managed to sound worried. A screen lit up with some additional information. Darí glanced at it, turning pale. After my recent experiences with the *Ënne*, I was familiar with the modern console layout and knew we had a serious problem. One of the energy relays on the upper right auxiliary EM drive was overheating. If it melted, we would have a partial loss of power in that drive. Given the demands that we were putting on the ship, this could be a very serious issue. Even as I watched the blinking light, it turned a bright, eye-catching orange. The *Föalen* immediately became sluggish, wallowing instead of turning gracefully.

"May the Fire Serpents of Graalw blast us all," I swore. A quick glance at the screen showed that the upper right auxiliary drive was down to 50 percent capacity, a serious disability for maneuvering. Looking out the canopy, I could see that the Cultaní were slowly catching up to us. They wouldn't overtake us immediately, and our screens could hold for a little while longer. We had a few moments to deal with the situation.

"*Spares?*" I asked Darí telepathically. He nodded, immediately flashing me an image of where the spare relays were stored. "*Try not to fling me around too much*," I suggested as I quickly unstrapped from my seat. I had done more than a few spaceship repairs during my years as a Guardian, and I'd spent a good deal of time not long ago with Kÿrrÿl going through the systems on the *Ënne*. I was pretty sure I knew what needed fixing and how to get it done.

Underneath the right bunk at the rear of the cabin was a storage unit. Kneeling down, I went directly to the drawer that Darí had visualized. Opening it, I rapidly found the new relay unit, a metallic component the size of my hand, clearly designed to be plugged into a specifically configured slot. Getting back to my feet, I could feel the *Föalen* shudder and sway around me. We were still running, and Darí was maneuvering in wide gentle arcs, trying to strike a balance between avoiding some of the laser fire and not throwing me around too violently. I went to the very back of the ship, between the two bunks, locating a square panel mounted in the wall that was about half my height. Pressing my fingers into a series of indents along the two sides of the panel, I heard a sharp click. The panel came free in my hands. I tossed it up onto one of the bunks, and crawled into the drive access space.

If there was a sixteenth hell in Vorÿn, I imagined it would be as hot as the *Föalen*'s access compartment. I could smell a sharp metallic odor, and the residual smoke in the crawlspace made the back of my throat burn. Lying on my side with copious quantities of sweat trickling into my eyes, I faced the controls of the upper and lower right EM drives. Visually, I quickly scanned the components laid out in ordered rows along the faces of the two drives. They weren't exactly like the drives in the *Ënne*, and the component I was looking for was not immediately obvious. My heart pounded in response to both fear and the tremendous heat in this tight space. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to concentrate on my search. There! I could see it now.

Unfortunately, the misbegotten piece of scrap was probably going to be very hot. I hadn't had time to search for any gloves. Steeling myself, I reached out and grabbed the back of the burned out relay with both hands, giving a hard pull. Thankfully, the relay came loose with a snap; however, the smell of burning flesh immediately filled the hot air. Pain brought tears to my eyes. I nearly screamed, but I kept my jaws clamped shut. The last thing Darí needed right now was to be distracted by me. Fumbling with my burned hands, I slammed the new relay in place, and it engaged with a comforting thunk. The whine of the engine quickly changed pitch, indicating that it was now operating at full power again. Still biting my lower lip against the pain in my hands, I felt relief flood through me. "*Fixed*," I reported back to Darí. I crawled out of the drive compartment, staggering upright.

"*We're about to lose our shields*," Darí's mental voice informed me worriedly. "*I've got to maneuver now! Hold on to something!*" I futilely grabbed at the edge of the nearest bunk as the ship lurched violently, but my seared hands couldn't keep a tight grip. Fleetingly, I realized that Darí didn't know I'd burned my hands. Holding on wasn't an option. I felt myself slam into the bunk on the opposite side of the ship, smashing my head into something solid. Blackness engulfed my world.

Eldarí—Date: 8936.158

The Ll'Ellendrÿn Space Lanes and Lorril

The rest of the squadron had finally caught up to us, and were starting to break apart the string of Cultaní ships on our tail, but enough remained that our shields were still taking a beating. Dran's drive repair barely came through in time. Giving Dran a mental warning, I pulled us hard away from the last of our pursuers, hoping to outrun them as they started to worry about the Border Patrol on *their* tails.

And suddenly, like a tight rope being cut by a knife, my connection with Dran was severed. Caught between the need to fly us to safety and the desperate fear that something terrible had happened to Dran, I was nearly immobilized. Then another dose of adrenaline shot through my veins. I quickly set the *Föalen* on autopilot, running full speed out into deep space. Touching the communication screen, I brought up a link to Tanish. When her face appeared, I said tersely, "Something's happened to Dran. I'm on autopilot heading out of the system. Try to keep the Cultaní off our tail." I shut down the communication link, but not before I saw a look of shock in Tanish's eyes. I would worry about that once I knew what was wrong.

My hands were shaking as I struggled with the catches on the straps that held me securely in my seat. Why are things so difficult when you're about to panic? The *Föalen* must have observed my ramping anxiety, as it chose that moment to say, in what was clearly meant to be a calming voice, "Dran is unconscious but still breathing." Then I was free, rushing to the rear of the ship, glad that we were no longer pitching and rolling, but still fearing to feel the shudder of another laser strike. I could see Dran, lying on the cabin floor between the two bunks. There was a small pool of blood forming around his head.

In an instant, I was on my knees beside Dran. He was lying on his side, slightly curled. I placed my hand gently on his chest, and was relieved to feel his heart beat, strong and steady. Even as I touched him, I could feel him twitch, and begin to move.

"Stay still, Dran," I ordered. I carefully started to scan over his body, looking for injuries. His eyes flicked open, then blinked a couple of times. Happily, his Healer's training took over instinctively, and he remained quiet, clearly assessing his physical condition.

"Darí, don't worry," he rasped out after a few moments, his voice sounding hoarse, rough. I could smell acrid smoke in the cabin. It was likely that Dran had inhaled some during his time in the drive compartment. "I've just hit my head on something." He raised his hand to touch his head, where a gash was still trickling a little blood, then pulled his fingers back sharply. I put my hand on his shoulder in an attempt to restrain him.

"Don't move," I commanded sharply. "Let *me* see whether you're hurt." Dran relaxed under my touch, and I continued with my scan. I could *feel* his head ache, the pain intense enough to make by eyes blur. I

needed to check if he had a concussion. I also sensed a dull throbbing coming from both of his hands. There appeared to be no other injuries. My fear dropped back to a more manageable level. I caught the wrist of his left arm, holding onto the guard, the gentle tingle of the keyed *drurïan* resonating deep inside me. Without touching his hand, I gently rotated his wrist so that I could see his fingers and palm. My breath hissed out as I saw the seared whiteness of his fingertips and the red flesh of his palm, blisters just starting to form. Badly burned. No wonder he was thrown by the *Föalen*'s sudden acceleration.

"I'm sorry, Dran," I uttered distraughtly, tears of grief and self-anger blurring my vision.

"Not your fault," Dran countered. He coughed a couple of times, clearing his throat. "There wasn't time to tell you." At least his voice was getting stronger. "I'd sooner have a headache than be dead," he gave a small laugh, still sounding a little shaky. There hadn't been time to tell me, but if I'd been paying more attention to Dran and our psychic link, I would've known the moment he'd burned his hands. I felt careless of the trust that Dran had placed in me.

I released Dran's wrist and touched his head lightly with my fingertips. I couldn't sense any intracranial bleeding or swelling, and he'd only been unconscious for a few moments, so it appeared that the head injury was minor. I rechecked his lungs, worried about smoke inhalation, but again, all seemed well. We were lucky.

"Can you get up?" I asked, having finally confirmed for myself that Dran's injuries would not be further exacerbated by movement.

"If you let me," Dran chuckled, sounding a bit more like his usual self. I stood up to give him some room, and he rolled to his knees. Trying to keep him from grabbing anything with his hands, I slid my arms under his armpits and helped him up. It also placed me in a position to support him, should he be unsteady on his feet. Upright, he shook his head, and leaned back against me slightly, but otherwise seemed likely to remain conscious. Feeling a distinct release of tension, a tremor ran through my body as the let-down from the adrenaline high began. We were *so* lucky.

I got Dran into his seat, making sure that he was securely buckled in. Back in the pilot's position, I took the *Föalen* off autopilot and brought us to a stop. We had almost exited the solar system. Swinging the *Föalen* around in a gentle arc, I faced us back towards the jump point and the remains of the battle, now far distant from us. No Cultaní ships were visible. I heaved a sigh of relief. However, a small pinpoint of light moved against the backdrop of stationary stars. I watched warily, but it was still too far away to identify.

Suddenly, the communication screen flashed on. In it, I could see Tanish's worried face. "Are you two all right?" she asked immediately.

"Well enough," I replied, nodding.

“What happened?” Tanish demanded, still sounding very concerned.

“We had a problem with one of our auxiliary EM drives,” I replied, keeping the explanation succinct. “Eldranth was doing repairs and was knocked unconscious for a few moments during one of our maneuvers.” I looked over at Dran, and he smiled crookedly back at me. “*With blood in your hair and that smile, you look totally disreputable*,” I shot at him mentally. He smiled more broadly. I almost felt like laughing in spite of the lingering tension that still tightened my muscles.

“Are you good to go now?” Tanish inquired. I nodded. Fortunately, the visual pickup for the communications system was not positioned so that she could see Dran or his quirky smile.

“I need to do a little healing on Eldranth,” I supplied, “but I want to get back to Lorril first.” I took a breath, then asked, “What happened to the Cultaní? And why did they chase after us like that?”

“Once our squadron caught up with them, the raiders broke and fled,” Tanish smiled grimly. Shaking her head worriedly, she added, “I have no idea why the Cultaní decided to focus on the *Föalen*. It seemed as though they received orders to attack you.”

“Hmmm,” I pondered. I stared off into the starfield, watching the small pinpoint grow and shape itself into a spaceship—Tanish’s, in fact. “Maybe they’re just targeting Guardians again,” I postulated. “It does seem strange that all of them came after us at once, almost like destroying us had just become their highest priority.”

Tanish’s face was starting to become more expressive as her command persona faded. “We’ve all been worried about the number of casualties amongst the Guardians during the last few years,” her voice was soft, concerned. “There are so few of you left.”

“Is that why you placed us in the most protected position in the squadron?” I inquired, glancing quickly at Dran to see his response. He arched an eyebrow back at me. Briefly, I wondered if everyone read Dran’s eyebrows the way I did, or if that too was part of our *anÿncára* bond.

“Yes,” Tanish looked mildly discomforted. Sighing, she looked directly at me. If she was embarrassed, it was hard to tell—her dark skin hid any signs of flushing. However, she didn’t try to prevaricate. “You two are … well, favorites of mine. I don’t want to see you get killed,” she elaborated.

I chuckled. “It doesn’t look like your plan worked so well.” I shook my head, half in amusement, half in sufferance. “I think you might just have to let us look after ourselves,” I smiled gently at Tanish, trying to take the sting out of my words.

Tanish smiled back, a little shyly. “So it seems,” she capitulated gracefully. “Would you accept an escort back to Lorril? Everyone else has already made the jump.”

“Gladly,” I gave a small laugh, looking at Dran and thinking about what a disaster our first assignment

together had been.

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I landed the *Föalen* gently next to the *Ënne*, once again back on Lorril. Glancing over, I could see that Dran looked pale and drawn. The trip through between had clearly been very painful for the burns on his hands. While he hadn't complained, I could feel the sharp throbbing from both his seared skin and the bump that was forming on his head, like an overlay on my own body. Looking out the canopy, I saw Farrwÿn running down the ramp of the *Ënne*. Quickly, I powered down the *Föalen*'s systems, unbuckled myself, and went over to help Dran.

Standing beside Dran, I put my hand on his shoulder. Closing my eyes for a moment, I deepened my connection with him, reaching into his mind to temporarily block the pain. He shuddered as his body was released from the mind-numbing throb.

Licking his lips and swallowing, Dran admitted rather ashamedly, "I didn't think such small burns would be so painful." He still looked very pale, and I hoped he wasn't going into shock.

"Hands are pretty sensitive," I responded, trying to be reassuring. "There are a lot of nerve endings in your fingers."

"I know," Dran smiled crookedly. "I just hadn't experienced them quite like this before." He grimaced. I reached over his shoulder and released the catches on his safety harness.

With a slight whir, I heard the *Föalen*'s hatch open and start lowering. A few moments later, Farrwÿn was beside me, looking distinctly worried. He glanced at Dran, then at me, his eyes full of questions.

"It's not that bad, Farrwÿn," Dran spoke first. Farrwÿn looked at me for confirmation, and I nodded. I could see relief washing through him as his mind and senses started absorbing the situation.

Farrwÿn pushed a few strands of hair out of his eyes. "After you left, my *turas* warned me that something was going to happen, but I couldn't see any details," Farrwÿn frowned in annoyance at himself. "I tried to reach you, but your minds were too busy. I didn't want to interrupt, lest I distract you and make the situation worse."

Yes, my mind was busy, I agreed mentally, too busy even to pay attention to Dran. Responding to Farrwÿn, I said, "Don't worry, Farrwÿn. We managed to get through. Dran's pretty impressive at fixing things under pressure." Dran snorted somewhat self-deprecatingly at my comment. Eyeing him, I directed "Let's get you up on a bunk, so I can get a better look at your hands."

Looking up into my eyes, Dran said, "You don't need to. I can look after myself." It was a gentle reminder that Dran was Healer-trained too.

I gave him a sympathetic smile. “I know you can. But it was my fault that you got hurt. I should have been paying closer attention to what you were doing.”

Dran snorted, “And I should have let you know what was happening. The outcome was just as much my fault as yours.”

Farrwÿn made a harrumphing sound. When I glanced over at him, he rolled his eyes in exaggerated suffering. I looked back at Dran. “So maybe we were both at fault a bit,” I conceded. “I guess we should learn to work together better,” I laughed, a bit sadly. “However,” I put my hand on Dran’s shoulder, “I *am* going to heal your hands. Shield mates look after each other.”

Dran met my eyes again, almost a bit shyly, then laughed with true humor, “My turn next time.”

Chapter 16: The Calm before the Storm

Farrwÿn—Date: 8938.150

LLell2-17 (unnamed planet in the Second Arc)

The early morning pink of sunrise was fading from the sky, and a cool breeze was blowing gently across the water, bringing the smell of salt and weed. Small waves lapped at the strand, a gentle susurrous of water on sand, a relaxing sound. I walked slowly down the beach, watching the sun gradually clear the horizon. This place reminded me a lot of Lorril, a world belonging to the sea, with only scattered bits of land dotting its surface. The island we were on was not as tropical as the ones where I'd stayed on Lorril, but still beautiful, the wild edges where land meets ocean chaotically diverse. In its season, the cool breeze would become a violent storm, as evinced by the gnarled and twisted forms of the upland trees. My eyes scanned over the beach, taking in heaps of cast up seaweed and the scurry of many small marine creatures, some with intricately convoluted shells.

Amidst all this pleasantness, I was feeling melancholy. The past two years had been a blur of positive change for me, but that was soon to come to an end. This planet was the twelfth one we had surveyed, and it was the last. Tomorrow we would return to Lorril. Soon afterwards, I would be going back to Ellendrïa.

Twelve planets surveyed, and what had we learned? Of the candidate worlds, only one was clearly uninhabitable, and that was due to a lack of surface water. The remainder all had potential. One had sentient life—the ethical quandaries of sharing a world with another intelligent species would likely keep it off the list of possibly colonizable worlds. Three of the planets were metal-poor. While in other aspects, those planets were very hospitable, the lack of metals would severely restrict the use of advanced technology. Three of the planets were climatically outside the optimum range for the agricultural species that we normally rely on—two on the cold side and one that was very hot and excessively rainy. Again, these limitations could be overcome, but that would take some serious adaptations involving the breeding of new crop species and modifications to the colonists' lifestyles. Another planet was agriculturally unsuitable based on the lack of well-developed soil. It was a world of rock and sand, where geological conditions simply hadn't been appropriate for significant soil production. One world had impressive and potentially dangerous megafauna. What else can I say! The planet we were on today, as beautiful as it was, had very little landmass. So, after all the survey work was done, Dochasïa still remained the best, if not the only, choice.

It had taken us two years to complete the surveys, largely because Darí and Dran had been very busy with their Guardian duties. With only 12 Guardians, there always seemed to be more than enough work for all. In fact, Rallandrí had to strictly enforce release time to prevent the remainder of the Guardians from working themselves to exhaustion. In response to the recent rise in violence towards Guardians, Rallandrí now always deployed them in teams of two. As a result, although the length of time taken per

mission varied widely, ultimately each pair was expected to take one-sixth of every year as time off, either in short stints or as one long break. Of course, reality seldom matched up with expectations.

Thus, I spent a lot of time on Lorril. Actually, I didn't mind. I was happy to be away from Aleysïa's unpleasant influences, and I actually found that there were useful things that I could do. Dran and Darí had a tendency to push themselves too hard. This often worried Rallandrí. Knowing that I'd grown up with them, and was as close to them as any sibling could be, Rallandrí quickly put me to work as a telepathic relay for them. Although I'd seldom had need for mind-to-mind contact with them in the past, my connection to them was strong and largely effortless, even over long distances. Keeping track of my friends' whereabouts and circumstances eased Rallandrí's concern for them, as well as my own, and gave him more time to deal with the many other issues confronting the Guardians.

However, acting as a relay certainly wasn't a full-time occupation. A bit of inquiry led me to the discovery that Guardians use a fair bit of equipment that relies on keyed *ferrïls* and other psionic materials. My trade as a Psi Tech turned out to be valuable—I was often kept busy keying and repairing small locks, tablets, and other such items. I also ascertained that much of the technology on Lorril was based on organometallic crystals that were quite similar in structure to *ferrïls* and the other materials that we use in our tablets and various computer systems. It wasn't terribly hard to learn how to work with these components and the machines that used them. Soon I was able to assist with maintenance and repair in the traffic control center. Since there always seemed to be one system or another that wasn't functioning optimally, I was well occupied with this task whenever I wasn't doing anything else.

After returning from Dochasïa, finding useful employment hadn't been my only concern. While I'd told Dran and Darí that as long as I remained the bumbling and incompetent Farrwÿn Aurora, I would be safe from Gryffÿth's attacks, I knew that I wouldn't be able to avoid attracting his attention forever. Eventually, the things that I needed to do would place me in positions where I would have to be very good at looking out for myself. I needed to learn as much as I could about anything that might help me stay alive when Gryffÿth finally realized what I was doing. Darí had once pointed out that it would be best if the person who kept watch on Gryffÿth was a Guardian. He was right. But while I had gotten through Gryffÿth's screening for colonists, neither Darí nor Dran would. Therefore, I would need to be as much of a Guardian as I could, surreptitiously and discretely. And so, on an evening not long after we had arrived on Lorril, I asked my friends to teach me what they could, and I knew that in the asking I had given myself away to them.

> *Dran, Darí and I sat companionably around the small table in the Ënne, sipping our tea as the evening wore on into night. Darí had healed Dran's hands, and other than the slightly pinker color of new flesh on his palms and in a thin line on his forehead just at the edge of his hairline, Dran looked little worse for his misadventure. However, it was a stark reminder to me of how quickly a simple mission can go awry.*
>
> *Darí and Dran had been discussing the need to train together as a team. I knew Dran had*

been working solo for many years, and likely wasn't used to working with another Guardian anymore. But it was also clear that the two siblings had been separated by circumstances for so long that they needed time to become familiar with each other again. It seemed strange to me, remembering how tight the foursome of us had been as children.

I had been listening quietly to my friends talk when it occurred to me that I had an opportunity to bring up something that had been increasingly on my mind. In a lull in their conversation, I asked, "Would it be possible for me to join you in some of your training exercises?"

Dran looked at me, raising an eyebrow. "Why?" he inquired.

I looked down into my cup of tea, contemplating the best answer. Finally, I replied, "I think it would be wise if I could look after myself."

"You seemed to be pretty capable of doing that when we were attacked a little while ago," Darí pointed out, looking at me intently with both eyebrows raised.

I flushed a bit, embarrassed by the fact that I'd been unable to tell Darí the truth about my strange abilities, and stared more intently at the surface of my tea. "I'm not sure how much I can rely on that," I said softly after a while. "I'd like to learn more." Secretly, I was also hoping that some training might evoke more of my memories as Killarÿn, which could provide additional benefits.

"How much more?" Dran questioned. He had put down his cup, and was unconsciously rubbing the palm of one hand with the thumb of the other, still remembering the recently painful burns.

"As much as you can," I responded.

"Hmmm," Dran murmured thoughtfully. "We could teach you a lot, as much as any Guardian knows. Do you think you have the necessary abilities to learn all that?" he queried gently.

Essentially, Dran was asking if I had the requisite psychic talents to become a Guardian. Killarÿn had been a Guardian, and I now knew, having had my psi talents tested, that in this life, I too had those abilities. I nodded. Raising my head up from my cup, I met Dran's gaze directly.

Raising both his eyebrows, Dran remarked, "I see." I wasn't sure exactly what he envisioned, but I suspected that it was considerably more than what I'd been telling him. How much did Dran and Darí suspect about me?

Darí was frowning. "If word gets out that you've been training as a Guardian, won't that make your situation as a colonist more risky?" he questioned, clearly concerned about my safety.

I smiled a little sardonically, "I'm hoping word doesn't get out." I tilted my head slightly, looking at my two friends. "Is it possible to keep the training sessions secret?"

"So you want to be an unavowed Guardian?" Dran asked directly.

"Something like that," I replied, feeling awkward, constrained.

"If you won't take the Guardian's Oath, you can't receive a Star, you know," Dran pointed out. I knew the disadvantages of not doing this openly, but my turas warned me that Gryffÿth must be given no reason to suspect me until well after the colony had been established.

"I know," I confirmed.

"Do you have a ferrïl?" Dran unconsciously touched his Star. "I've never seen you use one."

"I do," I responded. "And I know how to use it," I added. My psi abilities were strong enough that I hadn't usually required the assistance of a ferrïl for much of my Psi Tech work; however, certain advanced techniques for creating alloys and composite materials required a significant amount of power and precision, and for these operations, I had learned the use of a ferrïl. I still had that keyed ferrïl with me now.

"Hmmph," Dran snorted. He looked at Darí, and I could tell that they were communicating telepathically. After a few moments, he looked back at me, saying, "I think we can give you some unofficial training, and keep it as quiet and hidden as possible." He shook his head, not totally happy about the situation. "I'd still feel better if it were the two of us who were watching Gryffÿth," he asserted. "However, I'm beginning to sense that this is something you have to do. And I'm starting to suspect that you have what it takes to make it happen." Dran smiled at me, a strange, knowing smile that made me feel twitchy.

The beach had narrowed into a spit. My feet had carried me to its end as my mind had wandered. The waves lapped at both sides of the sand, still calm and gentle. I turned around and looked back the way I'd come. I could see the single line of my tracks going back down the spit, along the beach, and finally up the shore to where the *Ënne* sat, well above the line of wood and debris tossed by storm waves. Past the ship, I could see Dran and Darí, walking side by side, going along the beach in the opposite direction. Looking at their paired tracks, I felt momentarily happy as I remembered how well the two of them had come together. They were tight now, not only as a highly integrated team of Guardians, but as a truly functional *anÿncára* pair, linked mind, soul, and body. Their personal struggle, which had caused them

so much pain, was over now. And my *turas* had shown me that this union would save their lives—that together they could withstand difficulties that they would have been unable to survive alone.

Again, I looked at my single line of tracks in the sand. Would there ever be another set of footsteps beside my own? Sometimes I despaired. So many years had gone by, and I knew so many more were yet to come. I felt an insatiable loneliness, an emptiness that longed to be filled by a memory, a ghost. “Oh Turien”, my mind cried out, “why didn’t you return with me?” Depression rushed in, threatening to overwhelm me, dark wings beating at my soul. Then, for a moment, I heard again the calming sigh of sea on sand, and a voice in my mind, real or imagined, saying, “Wait. I am coming.” A quick flash of a face, intense blue eyes set under high arching eyebrows and wild yellow-gold hair highlighted with streaks of red. I sighed, echoing the sound of the sea—I would wait.

Eldranth—Date: 8938.150

LLell2-17 (unnamed planet in the Second Arc)

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes with my arm. I was panting, although the cool sea breeze helped keep me from feeling too hot. The gravity on this planet was slightly higher than Ellendrïa normal, making my muscles strain a bit more than usual in our regular exercise routine. I glanced up at Darí. His hair had grown longer in the past few tendays, and some strands clung wetly to his forehead. I could see his chest expand and contract as he worked to catch his breath.

“Enough?” I asked between breaths.

“I think so,” he chuckled wheezily. We’d been sparring gently, but energetically, with each other for a good part of the morning, working as always to perfect our moves, the various strikes, blocks, holds, and throws that we’d learned over our years as Guardians. It was good exercise—by constantly changing up the combinations and throwing in new techniques when we acquired them, it kept us agile, both mentally and physically.

I stepped back, barefooted in the warm sand, shaking the tension out of my arms and back. Darí stood up straight and, taking a deep breath, stretched languorously. A couple steps took me to one of the sea-worn logs that formed the boundaries of our impromptu arena where a water bottle was resting. Taking several gulps, I closed the bottle and tossed it to Darí. He caught it deftly, smiled, and drank his fill.

Farrwÿn stood outside the logs, observing us intently, as he always did. He was one of those unusual learners who could absorb as much from watching as from the actual training. However, his turn in the ring was coming. Usually after Darí and I had gone through our personal practice, one or the other of us would work with Farrwÿn. Today, it would be me. At first, our sessions with Farrwÿn had been fairly easy, mostly teaching him various defensive and offensive techniques, drilling him until he could do them safely and effectively. Lately, though, a workout with Farrwÿn could be as exhausting as one with Darí. I knew I was going to sweat. At least it kept me in good shape.

Farrwÿn was already limbered up and ready to go. I nodded, and he stepped over the log to join me on the sand. Darí sat down happily to enjoy the show. I valued his observations—he would provide useful critiques on our skill and form.

Although we had instructed Farrwÿn in the use of a variety of weapons, today I was focusing on hand-to-hand self-defense. He stepped closer. We both took a fighting stance, feet apart, weight balanced comfortably, arms up and ready. I feinted a couple of times, testing his readiness, seeing if I could distract or confuse him. Farrwÿn watched me steadily, body ready for sudden action, but refused to be baited. Good. He was using his mind, and probably his empathy, to analyze the situation and not let himself be drawn into a trap.

Suddenly, Farrwÿn energized, coming at me with a series of kicks and punches. I knew he was keeping the blows light, as we always did during our sessions, that I had no fear of being hurt, but by the Baking Sands of Azula, was he ever getting fast! I was able to block, barely. By then, he was in close. I slid underneath his last blow, twisted around, and grabbed him from behind, clinching with him and pinning his arms to his sides. I could feel the muscles in his arms and shoulders strain as he tried to break free. Farrwÿn was a little taller and broader than I, and with two years of training, was finally starting to build some muscle on his lanky frame. We were very nearly the same weight now. I could tell that one day soon, I wouldn't have the strength to hold him like this. Today, however, he couldn't quite break my hold. After a few moments of exertion, he went limp in my arms, yielding the round to me.

I released Farrwÿn, and we separated. Going back to our starting positions, Farrwÿn gave me a slight smile, brushing a stray strand of hair out of his eyes. Since our first few training sessions, in which Farrwÿn's long hair had refused to be confined by a simple queue, he'd taken to wearing it plaited tightly during our practices. Even then, Farrwÿn's hair seemed bent on escape, and a few strands always came loose, but he could never be convinced to cut it short.

The first round set the mood for the rest of the session. Farrwÿn came very, very close to taking me down more than once, but each time I was able to block and slip free. I never managed to pin him again. Likewise, he managed to counter my attacks, and I was unable to score any significant strikes. We were almost evenly matched. As we wheeled around, looking for weaknesses in each other's defenses, I realized that Farrwÿn was essentially ready, that I'd taught him all I knew. Practice and experience would make him better, but he would achieve that on his own.

Farrwÿn was saving the best for last. It was a move that I wasn't expecting, and not one that he'd learned from Darí or me. As I staggered off-balance, he caught me with a blow to the midriff. Although not hard, it was enough to make me exhale sharply. Before I could grab another breath, I was on the ground, Farrwÿn on top of me, his knee pressing into the small of my back and his forearm around my throat. I went limp, panting too hard to put up much resistance.

That one move reminded me forcefully that training Farrwÿn to be a Guardian had been a very strange and unusual experience. Sometimes Darí and I would show him a particular technique, and he would be able to repeat it perfectly the first time. I'm sure, on a few of those occasions, that the look in his smoky-grey eyes was one of remembering, that he, as Killarÿn, had used that skill before. Other times, we would teach him something, and it would be just like working with any novice Guardian. He would get the concept after a try or two, then progressively work at getting better with it. At those times, I figured that we had shown Farrwÿn something that Killarÿn hadn't known, either because he'd been quite young when he'd died, or because, after nearly three thousand years, Guardians have learned a new thing or two. Then, on rare occasions like now, Farrwÿn would come up with something that neither Darí nor I had taught him—some technique that Killarÿn had known, but that was no longer in general usage by the Guardians.

Darí and I never discussed our hypothesis regarding Killarÿn's rebirth with Farrwÿn, and Farrwÿn never said anything to us that might positively confirm that hypothesis. Yet, even though the words were never spoken, I think we all agreed tacitly that Killarÿn and Farrwÿn were the same person. Like the training that we were giving Farrwÿn, the knowledge of his identity was something that must be kept secret, concealed, lest Gryffÿth discover the truth and kill Farrwÿn, putting an end to our hopes before we'd even gotten started.

Farrwÿn released his choke hold, taking his knee off my back. I spit out the mouthful of sand that I'd acquired during my sudden landing on the beach, and rolled to my feet. Farrwÿn was looking at me expectantly. A quick glance at Darí showed that he was trying very hard not to smile. I made an odd, gaspy laugh, still a bit winded from Farrwÿn's shot to the stomach, and capitulated, "I think that's enough for today."

Farrwÿn gave me a thin, tentative smile. I could see there was concern in his eyes. "I wasn't trying to hurt you," he apologized.

"Don't worry, Farrwÿn," I reassured, still sounding a bit wispy. "You didn't. Just winded me a bit." I made another one of my odd not-quite-laughs, then added, "I'd say that you've become quite good at looking after yourself." Farrwÿn's smile brightened at my praise. I sucked in another breath of air, and stated, "I'm going to sit down," promptly joining Darí on his log.

Chapter 17: Braving the Beast

Farrwÿn—Date: 8938.170

Ellendrïa

The way to the future is a strange journey. Sometimes, the smallest action can have a tremendous impact on the paths of what is to come. Other times, a major life-altering decision of today has no affect on the future-to-be at all. I can only hope that my trust in my *turas* is justified, as I use it to guide me through the complex web of time, knowing even as I make my choices, that my sight of the future is fuzzy and incomplete.

Thus, it seemed that I'd been given a choice, one that had little impact on the future—to return to my past life on Ellendrïa or to remain on Lorril. Although apparently insignificant in the long-term, I was happy that my destiny was going to allow me at least this much control over my life. I'd enjoyed my time on Lorril, and I wanted to continue my work there, free from my *athairan's* domination. However, my days on Ellendrïa would not be complete until after I'd returned there to present the planetary survey data to the colonist movement.

So, I'd been 15 days on Ellendrïa now, and hectic days those had been. Much of that time I'd spent with my friends here, explaining my decision, convincing them that I still wanted to be actively involved in the colonist movement, even though I would be living on Lorril. In my free moments, often late into the nights, I'd been working industriously to complete several important projects that I'd left behind in my studio more than two years ago, knowing that I might never get another chance to finish them. When I leave Ellendrïa this time, I must leave nothing of importance behind. I wasn't sure whether I would ever be coming back.

Today was not a good day. It was, in fact, the day on which I had to face my worst fears—I was to present the data from the planetary surveys, and as a consequence, I would come face to face with Gryffÿth for the first time in this life. I could feel the stir of terror deep down in my guts, and cold sweat prickled my skin.

Gryffÿth was expecting me, of course. Even before I'd left Ellendrïa with Darí, I'd explained to my friends in the colonist movement that my relationship with Darí and Dran provided me with the ideal situation for collecting data on the various potentially colonizable planets. It was a sound plan, one that had been well-supported. There was little point in dreaming about establishing a new colony without some hard factual data, and I had the connections that could provide that data. Although I'd not spoken directly with Gryffÿth, it was obvious that my intentions were known to him. Any information I could provide would be welcomed by the group. When I'd arrived back on Ellendrïa, I'd contacted the movement, and a date for the presentation of the results had been selected.

Now I was faced with the truly difficult part of the task. Not only must I convince the movement that

Dochasïa was the planet that was best suited to be our new home world, I also needed to be sure that Gryffÿth saw only Farrwÿn Aurora. He must not find out who I had been, who I had become, or what I intended. Fortunately, the data supporting Dochasïa was good. I felt that all I had to do was present it well, and let the data speak for itself. However, making sure that I didn't reveal myself to a person who had extremely powerful psi powers was going to be much more difficult.

I had set aside most of the day to prepare for this meeting, and I was going to need it. Sitting on my bed in my studio loft, I went through a series of breathing exercises, forcing myself to relax. Gradually, I put aside my fears, reaching a state of calm centeredness from which I could access the various levels of my consciousness. Although I'd learned this type of mind control years ago, often using it to work with my unruly *turas*, today I was going to try something new and potentially dangerous. Darí and Dran had taught me a technique that I hoped would get me through the presentation this evening undetected. Carefully, I reviewed my plan, giving myself one last chance to see any fatal flaws. In this state of deepened consciousness, with my mind fully open and accessible, I would carefully sort through my memories. Those pertaining to Killarÿn and Turien, my training as a Guardian, my true heritage, my knowledge of Gryffÿth/Drÿfoch, or anything else that might give away my plans I would submerge as deeply into my psyche as I could. If I was successful, when I roused from this trance I would be, in every practical sense, only Farrwÿn Aurora. I would remember nothing that could incriminate me—the memories that I'd buried would be so completely hidden that only a deep mental probe would uncover them. Gryffÿth would be very unlikely to probe me in public—it was a violent, invasive procedure, and such an unethical act against me would leave him open to severe criticism. I didn't think Gryffÿth was ready to reveal himself just yet. For that reason, I believed my plan would work. Of course, I would need to recover my memories after the evening was over. In the process of concealing my memories, I would link them back to a key phrase, one that was already embedded in my mind. I had arranged for Darí to contact me telepathically early tomorrow morning. He knew the key, and if all went as expected, I would quickly have my memories restored. If not, well, Darí would have to decondition me. My *turas* wasn't warning me of any danger associated with this plan, although it wasn't always reliable this close to an event. However, I couldn't think of a better plan, so I cleared my mind and began.

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The sun was two fingers above the horizon and falling rapidly. This close to the end of the day, the walking paths in Dïarven's city center were nearly empty, only a few people heading home or on their way to evening entertainment. I was walking quickly, feeling nervous and not a little fearful. Hoping to arrive early at the hall where the evening's meeting was to be held, I wanted to give myself a chance to settle down before people started to arrive. Although I wasn't antisocial, I never enjoyed large crowds. The fact that everyone's attention would be focused on me this evening made me cringe inwardly. Looking up, I realized that I had nearly reached my destination—a large building faced with white stone. Small crystals in the stone sparkled in the reddish light of late day. The two large doors on the front of the building were open, probably to allow whatever air currents there were to cool and freshen the

interior of the building.

I stood on the wide steps leading up to the building's entrance, hesitating for a moment. The tension in my body made me want to hunch my shoulders forward and bow my head down, the result of some primitive instinct to make myself as small and inconspicuous as possible. Of course, given my height, being inconspicuous wasn't particularly easy to do. I sucked in a deep breath, tried to straighten up as much as possible, and walked up the steps and through the doors.

Already there were a few people inside, early comers milling around, greeting each other and conversing in small groups. Looking around, I spotted the display screens' control center along one side wall. Not wanting to get caught up in discussions with anyone yet, I made my way directly to the controls, pulling my tablet out of its pouch at my belt. With a sense of relief, I could see that the system was a standard design and should be simple to operate. On the top of the control console was a rectangular indentation designed to hold a typical tablet, such as the one I carried. Placing my unit firmly into the indentation, I activated it, watching as three large screens located around the peripheries of the room suddenly became visible in response to the presence of my tablet. I could operate my tablet telepathically—through it, I would be able to control the displays shown on the screens. Using a mental command, I quickly shut the screens down. Once again, they became indistinguishable from the surrounding parts of the walls, awaiting further commands when my presentation started.

"Farrwÿn!" a cheerful voice called from behind me. Recognizing the voice, I turned towards it with a smile. Kaldrin, a long-time friend, gave me a happy grin in return. I hadn't had a chance to see him since I'd returned from Lorril, and I knew that he would want to talk with me.

"I was hoping I'd see you here," I greeted him. "I haven't had a chance to visit you at your studio." Like me, Kaldrin was wearing a purple trimmed tunic, indicative of his calling as an Artisan. Indeed, the intricate and beautiful designs that formed the edge-trimming on both our tunics were his handiwork.

"No," Kaldrin smiled, "but I see that I got the fit of your tunic right from the measurements you sent to me." His eyes raked over me, giving me a head-to-toe inspection. "Being off-world seems to be good for you. You've filled out a fair bit since last I saw you."

I smiled, slightly embarrassed. I'd been more than a little surprised when most of my old tunics had been too tight across the shoulders. In fact, I'd had to commission a new one from Kaldrin for this evening's event.

"That's what happens when you travel with a Healer," I made a short laugh. "Eldarí's always complained that I was underweight. Our time together gave him ample opportunity to put me on a regimented diet and exercise program." It almost seemed like I'd forgotten what the new me looked like when I was getting dressed only a short while ago. The lean, muscular body that was reflected in the mirror didn't look like my own. The height and breadth of shoulder … yes, those were still mine. But I could hardly remember where the muscle had come from. I guess Eldarí's plan had been effective—the gradual

changes in my physique had gone largely unnoticed by me until I'd arrived back here on Ellendrïa and tried to fit into my old clothes.

"Well, it looks good on you," Kaldrin approved. "And a little muscle will probably be useful when we get to establishing the new colony." He eyed me quizzically, "I do hope you have some good news for us today."

I raised my eyebrows, smiling at Kaldrin's eagerness, "I do indeed."

Kaldrin chuckled gleefully for a moment, then stopped and looked at me with slightly narrowed eyes, "You *are* still interested in being part of the new colony?" he asked.

"Of course," I answered firmly. "Why do you think I just spent two years watching Eldarí and Eldranth do planetary surveys?"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," Kaldrin looked a little less suspicious. "The rumor is that you're going to return to Lorril in a tenday or so," he added.

I chuckled, "For once, the rumor is fairly accurate. I am going back to Lorril, but not because I'm abandoning the colonist movement. It's going to be quite a few years before we start sending people to a new planet. In the meanwhile, I've discovered that I'm very happy to be living somewhere far away from my *athairan*." I smiled grimly in emphasis of my point.

Kaldrin laughed in amusement. He knew me well enough to understand that my relationship with my *athairan* was somewhat strained, to put it lightly. "Too bad," he deplored. "We'll be losing the skills of a fine artisan."

I shook my head. "I'm sure if someone really wants to commission me for my work, I can arrange to have materials shipped from Lorril to Ellendrïa," I smiled crookedly. Looking up and around, I could see that the room was getting quite full. People were starting to find places to sit. There was a swirl of humanity near the entrance, and in its center was a person dressed in dark, unadorned clothing—Gryffÿth. My stomach twisted into knots. I could feel myself start to sweat. The presentation was about to begin.

Sensing my sudden mood change, Kaldrin smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry so much, Farrwÿn. We're all friends here. Just tell us what you know." I nodded, giving him a somewhat wilted smile in return. I wasn't so sure about the friendly intentions of everyone in the room—I'd always felt intimidated by Gryffÿth's presence. With another warm smile, Kaldrin went to find a seat, leaving me to take my position front and center, feeling the weight of far too many eyes watching me.

I waited until everyone had settled, then maybe a few moments longer than was necessary. People were eyeing me expectantly. Gryffÿth sat at the back, a silent, inscrutable figure that for some reason raised the hairs along my spine. I'm not a Mentor or a Historian or a person who engages with the public

on a regular basis. I have no oratory skills. I stared wide-eyed back at the crowd, and my throat went dry. What do I say? Where do I start? Just as I was beginning to wish that I could make myself invisible, or teleport myself to someplace far from here, a strange stillness welled up inside me, and I thought, "You *can* do this". Not can, but must.

I drew a shaky breath, closed my eyes for a moment, then focused on telepathically activating the display screens. Knowing that I was going to be nervous in front of a large audience, I had organized my visuals for the presentation to essentially tell the story by themselves, even if I was at a complete loss for words. As the initial image appeared on the screens, I stared at it, remembering how the first real adventure of my life began. Slowly, in a hesitant voice, I started describing the expedition plans that I'd made with Dran and Darí, the goal of the exploration surveys, and the methodology we'd used. My voice was low and husky, and I was glad that I'd attached a small sound receiver to my tunic. It would transmit my spoken words to the tablet, which would amplify the volume, adjusting it to the correct level by measuring the intensity of sound being reflected back from the room's walls. I tried smiling at the ranks of people sitting in front of me, but their attention was too overwhelming for me. In the end, I simply focused on the back wall, trying to keep the tremor in my nerves from showing in my enunciation.

At some point, presenting became almost automated. Each visual elicited a series of memories—from those, I selected the choice bits that I wanted to impart to my audience. As I had hoped, the data really were self-supporting. However, as though heard in the distance, I became aware of my own voice gradually becoming more animated as I warmed to the tales of adventure that went along with the collection of the data. And in some strange way, it was my story-telling that seemed to catch the crowd's imagination far more than the important, but impersonal, scientific results.

Thankfully, there is an end to all things, and so my presentation came to its closure. I quietly sighed, finally turning my eyes back to the crowd. Everyone was sitting in respectful silence. I nodded to them, smiling my thanks for their patience. Kaldrin stood up, flashing me a happy grin. I was so dizzy with relief that I didn't hear him clearly, but I knew that he was inviting everyone to stay for further discussions and enjoy the food and drink provided. There was a swirl of motion as people got up, forming small clusters, excited voices making the room buzz. A table set against the far wall was laden with edibles of various types, and I could see that it had become the center of some serious discussions as well.

I didn't realize that Kaldrin was at my elbow until he lightly touched my shoulder. I turned, and he held out a glass to me, which I gratefully accepted. My throat was dry, scratchy, unaccustomed to so much talking. The cool, slightly alcoholic fruit drink pleasantly eased the tightness. The alcohol was a byproduct of the fermentation process used to prepare and preserve the beverage, but I now knew, from my time spent on Lorril, that on many planets ethanol was a choice pleasure-inducing drug. I found that rather amusing. We Ellendrí apparently have relatively high levels of alcohol dehydrogenase in our bodies, thus making us quite insensitive to the "pleasurable" effects of alcohol.

As I glanced up from my drink, I realized that Kaldrin had been joined by his partner, Arlend. I smiled a

greeting at Arlend, then felt a pleasant jolt of surprise. The last time I'd seen Arlend, he'd been in male phase, but today, it was evident there had been some changes. Arlend was clearly female, and very obviously well advanced in pregnancy. I smiled happily at the pair—children were rare these days. I was glad to see such fecundity amongst the potential colonists.

"You two have been busy, I see," I commented with a chuckle.

Kaldrin smiled his happy grin at me again. "We've been working at this for a couple of years. It seems we've finally got the formula down right." Arlend laughed at her partner's humor, her voice just slightly higher than I remembered it the last time we'd met.

"When are you going to find yourself a partner, Farrwÿn?" Arlend asked, still laughing lightly. "Surely you don't intend to start a homestead all on your own?"

I felt a hint of heat in my cheeks, but I refused to be embarrassed by my choices. "I'm working on it," I replied in a soft, low voice, with just enough of a smile to suggest that maybe I knew something they didn't.

"Still holding out for your *anÿncára*?" Kaldrin teased. "Don't wait too long … you might end up living a lonely life." Kaldrin laughed merrily. Looking up, I realized that there were lots of people clustered around us, plainly waiting to ask me questions about the survey. I shrugged my shoulders at Kaldrin, and entered the fray.

I lost track of how many people I talked to, how many questions I answered. The event was vaguely reminiscent of the first few days I'd spent on Lorril with Darí, shadowing him as he explained the Guardians' role in the newly created Border Patrol, only now I was the one that was the center of everyone's attention. It felt intense … and tiring. I admired Darí's stamina all the more.

Eventually, it appeared that the meeting must be drawing to a close: the crowd was thinning out, and there seemed to be fewer questions needing answers. I was exhausted. My throat was dry again, so I went to refill the glass that Kaldrin had given me. There was still some food left on the table, but I was too tense to eat, although I knew I would be starving in the morning. In my mind, I could almost hear Darí berating me about not eating enough, but he would have to wait until I got back to Lorril before he could make his comments.

Just as I finished filling my glass, I could feel that someone was behind me. I turned around with a tired smile pasted to my face, ready to answer more questions … and froze. Gryffÿth stood calmly behind me, as though he'd been waiting some time for my attention. His face was expressionless, his blank eyes unfathomable. The smile on my face became brittle and fell away. I swallowed dryly, then took a sip of my drink to give myself some time to gather my composure.

"Good presentation, Farrwÿn," Gryffÿth's voice broke the silence between us. He smiled, but there was

no warmth behind it. I didn't know Gryffÿth well enough to know if he was normally cold and reserved, or whether he was just having some sort of issue today. I nodded, accepting his compliment. "So, you didn't give us your opinion at the end. It seems like the fourth planet you surveyed was the most likely candidate. What do you say?" Gryffÿth probed.

I smiled crookedly, taking a firm grip on my nerves. "I'm not a Scientist or an Agriculturalist, so I'm not sure how valid my opinion is," I hedged.

"Don't worry, it's not a test," Gryffÿth assured me. "I just want to know what you think. You observed each of these planets closely."

"Hmmm," I took a moment to take another sip of my drink. Not wanting to seem too reluctant to engage in the discussion, I replied, "The fourth planet definitely looked like it would be the easiest planet to colonize, and seems to meet our needs the best. It's a very pleasant place," I smiled at my memories. "We've been calling it Dochasïa because it seemed such a hopeful candidate." I chuckled, as though our name might be considered silly.

"Dochasïa," Gryffÿth rolled the name off his tongue. "That's not a bad choice. It just might stick." He seemed to ponder the name for a moment, then gave me a sharp look. I knew there were more questions to be answered. "How did the Guardians get involved in these surveys?" Gryffÿth's question was direct and a bit unexpected.

I pulled my brows together in puzzlement, then answered, "I just asked Eldarí and Eldranth if they could do the survey work for us. It seemed the logical thing to do. After all, they are like siblings to me—we grew up together." I smiled, trying not to feel defensive.

"Yes, that's right," Gryffÿth frowned. "I remember someone telling me that the three of you were best friends." There was a pause, then Gryffÿth inquired, "What do the Guardians think about the colonist movement?"

I tried to read Gryffÿth a bit, get a sense of his emotions to figure out where he was taking the conversation, but he was a complete blank to me, hidden behind his barriers. "I can't speak for the entire group, but Eldranth and Eldarí are strongly supportive of the colonist movement," I replied.

"I've heard there aren't many Guardians left," Gryffÿth commented. "With so few remaining, it seems rather odd that they could spare two of their best to go off exploring with you," he added. Somewhere under his words, I could feel an accusation, but I wasn't sure about what.

I shook my head, "It wasn't quite like that. Eldarí and Eldranth weren't given any special time off to help me. They just did the survey work in their usual release time. That's why it took two years to get to all the planets—I spent a lot of time on Lorril waiting for them to get off duty," I chuckled, trying to make the conversation feel lighter.

“Ah, I see,” Gryffÿth responded. I wasn’t really sure that he did, but I also didn’t understand why he might be concerned about the Guardians’ involvement in the survey. The interrogation continued, “Did Eldarí or Eldranth ever talk to you about future plans for the colony? Do the Guardians foresee a role for themselves in the colonist movement?” I just shook my head.

Gryffÿth gave me another of his cold, empty smiles, “Enough questions for now. I’m sure you’re tired after that presentation.” He nodded politely at me, then quietly faded into the remainder of the crowd.

The rest of the evening faded into a muddled blur. I was surprised at how tired I felt. After a while, my exhaustion slowly morphed into an odd sensation of remote dizziness. There were still lots of questions being asked, but my answers were mechanical, automated. I hardly seemed to know what I was saying. As the remaining lingerers coalesced into a single group around me, Gryffÿth reappeared, joining them. Counter to his earlier comment, he seemed to have a great many more questions to ask. Strange that I can’t remember what any of them were …

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There was a bright light shining on my eyelids, and it hurt. Groaning slightly, I instinctively raised my arm up to cover my eyes. The motion brought me more fully awake. I winced as I became aware of the pounding in my head. At about the same time, my stomach grumbled and cramped in sympathetic protest. I opened my eyes blearily, blinked until they started to focus, then gradually lowered my arm. After a few moments, I was sure that I recognized the ceiling of my studio lit by morning sunlight flooding in through the windows, and the bed underneath me felt familiar. Good. I was home. The frightening thing was that I had no recollection of how I’d gotten here after my presentation the previous night. I didn’t remember walking home. In fact, I didn’t have any memories of leaving the public building. Did I pass out? And who brought me back to my studio?

I lay still on the bed, hoping my body would settle down, that I wouldn’t be sick. Why was I feeling so dreadful? I’d only had two glasses of fruit drink, and had eaten nothing. I didn’t think that I’d acquired anything infectious—no one had appeared to have a contagious illness last night, and Ellendrí immune systems are very seldom overwhelmed by infectious diseases anyway. So what was wrong with me?

“*Farrwÿn*,” a voice resonated painfully inside my aching skull. I flinched. When I didn’t answer immediately, the voice continued in a concerned tone, “*Are you all right?*”

“*Yes*,” my mind finally answered in a very small voice. “*Please … think quieter. My head hurts*,” I finished weakly.

“*Are you drunk?*” the voice asked, modulated to about half its original volume

“*Drunk?*” I responded somewhat more energetically to the accusing voice, which I now recognized as Darí’s. “*Ellendrí don’t get drunk. Besides, I only drank two glasses of the fruit beverage they were*

serving," I added defensively.

"*Hmmm*," the voice responded, setting up a vibrational frequency that made my stomach squirm in discomfort. "*We can if we drink a sufficient amount … but I don't think two glasses qualify as sufficient*." The voice stopped for a few moments, and I took some comfort in the brief silence. Then Darí said, very clearly and precisely, "*Remember Turien and Killarÿn*."

Fleetingly, my brain tried to make sense of this out-of-context phrase. As if in reaction to my attempts, my thoughts swirled away from me, like leaves whipped up by a whirlwind. My stomach heaved in response to this newest assault. I rolled quickly out of bed, landing on my knees just in time to commence vomiting on the floor.

My thoughts regained some semblance of order about the same time I was reduced to retching. This was clearly not one of my better mornings. I could still hear Darí's worried voice in my head, asking questions.

"*Slow down, Darí*," I pleaded softly. "*Give me a moment to get my head together*." Gradually, the bits and pieces in my brain started coming together like a puzzle, my memories reorganizing themselves into a linear sequence … and I remembered all the things that I hoped I hadn't told Gryffÿth last night.

Somehow Darí could sense when I'd finally fit everything back into its correct place—all the memories that I'd hidden yesterday coming back sharp and clear. I sighed in relief, but I could only hope that my trick had worked, that our secrets remained unknown. "*If it makes you feel any better, I think you were drugged*," Darí asserted after I'd stopped retching and began to recover a bit.

"*Drugged?*" I echoed.

"*Something added to your drink, probably a psychoactive drug to make you talk uninhibitedly*," Darí affirmed. Then he asked, "*Are you at home now?*"

"*Yes*," I replied as I stared down between my knees at the familiar floor of my loft, not yet ready to graduate to sitting on the bed.

"*This is good*," Darí said with some relief. "*The fact that you are both alive and back in your studio suggests that you didn't tell Gryffÿth anything that could cause him to suspect you. He would surely have done you some harm if he knew the truth*."

"*Thanks, Darí*," I responded sardonically. "*You're very reassuring*."

Eldranth—Date: 8938.182

Lorril

I always thought that maintenance should be easier on a new ship. Parts shouldn't break as often. Components that require regular servicing should be located in easy to access spaces. That seems simple, logical, and sensible. So why was I hanging upside down from the pilot's seat trying to reach behind the front console of the *Ënne* in order to install a handful of "upgraded" components that Kÿrrÿl kindly delivered to me yesterday?

I paused a moment in my work, stretching my arms to release a painful knot in my shoulders. I could hear Farrwÿn and Darí talking softly in the background, companionably busy as they sorted through our new medical supplies. We'd retrieved Farrwÿn from Ellendrïa yesterday, and had picked up a load of new supplies, parts, and other equipment while we were there. I was glad to have Farrwÿn back on Lorril with us—his recent experiences with Gryffÿth had left me very worried about his safety. On the other hand, having been drugged and thoroughly questioned by Gryffÿth, maybe he would escape further attention for a while.

I returned to my task, my mind only partially occupied with what my hands were doing while my thoughts drifted idly through recent events. Farrwÿn was clearly here to stay. When we'd picked him up outside his family's dome on Ellendrïa, he'd had a number of boxes and bundles to be loaded aboard, salvaged bits and pieces from his old life. Earlier today, he'd been out arranging permanent accommodation for himself on Lorril: a small house not far from the mission control building. We would transport all of his belongings and supplies to his new home as soon as he was ready to move in, but for now, he was still staying with us onboard the *Ënne*.

"Blasted blazing fireballs," I muttered under my breath as my fingers lost their hold on the piece I was trying to install, and my hand slipped, banging painfully against a sharp edge. I pulled my hand out from under the console, observing the thin trickle of blood running from a small cut just below my knuckles. Within moments, the flow ceased as my body promptly got to the task of repairing the injury. Fortunately, Ellendrí heal very quickly from small injuries. It's only the serious ones that require the intervention of a Healer. I stuck my hand back under the console, firmly grabbed the recalcitrant component, growling under my breath as I wiggled it into its correctly installed position.

I was just finishing up my task, trying to squirm myself out from under the console, when I heard a faint tap on the hull of the *Ënne*. From my still upside down position, I could see the screen displaying the visuals from the external sensors on the hull. "It's Rallandrí and Kerredrÿn," I called out as I recognized their faces. A moment later, I could hear the hatch open and lower down to the ground as Darí triggered the controls. Completing a few more contortionist maneuvers, I finally got upright and staggered towards the main working area of the ship.

Rallandrí and Kerredrÿn were already onboard, and Darí was closing the hatch by the time I reached

them. Farrwÿn quickly cleared the table of boxes of supplies, making enough space so that there was room for us all to sit down. I greeted them with a crooked smile, knowing that I looked totally disheveled. Rallandrí eyed the blood on my hand, “Repair work again?”

“Just some upgrades,” I chuckled. “It seems that components that require frequent upgrades are never put in locations where they can be easily worked on.” I held up my hand. “And the *Ënne* has teeth.” I went past the table towards the washroom, intent on cleaning up a bit.

When I returned, Farrwÿn, Rallandrí, and Kerredrÿn had settled themselves, and Darí was brewing some tea. I sagged happily onto one of the two remaining seats, listening to the conversation ebb and flow around the events of the last few days, as we caught up on each other’s news. Darí returned to the table with cups and a pot that emanated a pleasant herbal scent. Quickly, he seated himself and rejoined the discussion, animated with curiosity. For a moment, I watched as Darí’s facial expressions and body language communicated his interest in the discourse around him, happy that my universe now contained my *anÿncára*—my life’s companion, my closest friend.

My eyes flicked over the remainder of the group, coming to rest briefly on Rallandrí, wondering why he was visiting us today. Although Rallandrí was a good friend, he seldom did anything without a purpose. I suspected that we would soon be hearing the specifics of our next assignment. Rallandrí’s eyes were on Kerredrÿn as he listened to Farrwÿn convey an edited version of his time on Ellendrïa—we had all agreed not to reveal our concerns about Gryffÿth just yet. Something in Rallandrí’s eyes spoke of the same emotions I’d just felt as my gaze had rested on Darí. I pondered that while the conversation swirled around me. When was the last time I’d seen Rallandrí without Kerredrÿn? Even 10 years ago, they were together more often than apart. I wondered if my own struggles had blinded me to the evolution of relationships around me. I felt saddened that I’d missed such meaningful details.

In a sudden change of topic, Rallandrí turned to me and asked, “You remember our assignment on Davandrïa, 13 years ago?” At the mention of Davandrïa, I felt a twinge in my chest, a phantom reminder of an assignment gone wrong. How could I forget? The unanswered question still lingered in my memory—why were we called in to help, and then attacked? Was it an accident or a carefully laid plan?

“Hmmph,” I acknowledged noncommittally. After Darí had healed me, I’d returned to Davandrïa. The negotiations between opposing factions had been successfully facilitated without further incidents, establishing a new government for the planet. However, the situation on Davandrïa had remained unstable. Only a few years later, they were asking for assistance again. This time, the Guardians refused—there had been too few of us, and the situation had been deemed too risky since it appeared that at least some Davandrïans had been expressing anti-Guardian sentiments.

Rallandrí cocked his head, watching me intently for further reactions, but I kept my expression carefully neutral. “I had an interesting surprise two days ago that brought that incident back to mind.” Rallandrí poured himself a cup of tea, took a sip, then placed the cup on the table in front of him. As he curled his

hands around his cup, I could feel Rallandrí's mind shifting modes, from friend to dispatcher. Meeting his eyes, I raised my eyebrows.

"Four days ago, a Thalandrïan cargo ship stopped at Davandrïa to deliver supplies," Rallandrí began. I could see that Darí was eyeing him as intently as I. I nodded, encouraging Rallandrí to continue. "Supply trips to Davandrïa have been quite infrequent lately. I suppose you probably know—the government has been having problems again, and their economy has crashed. I've heard that they're suffering shortages of medical and technological supplies, but without a method of paying, there's little interest in the rest of the Ll'Ellendrÿn to ship materials to them." Rallandrí took another sip of his tea. "In any case, while the cargo ship was unloading, a single Davandrïan slipped aboard, managing to stay hidden on the ship until after they'd taken off and gone between. Of course, it didn't take long for the Thalandrïans to catch their unwelcome guest; they have sensors throughout their ships to prevent just that sort of problem." Rallandrí paused, waiting to see if his story was engaging our interest.

"So what did they do with the Davandrïan?" I asked the obvious leading question.

"Threatened to take him back to Davandrïa, of course," Rallandrí smiled sardonically. "Apparently, he didn't want to be returned, but begged the Thalandrïans to bring him to Lorril so that he could talk to the Guardians."

"And now you have a house guest?" I chuckled.

"I do," Rallandrí tapped a forefinger on the table. "There is more to this story. My guest claims that the repeated collapses of Davandrïa's social systems are the result of influences from off-planet. He believes that there are uninvited off-worlders on Davandrïa who are responsible for the disintegration of their culture. Simply stated, he wants the Guardians to remove these people."

"And that's why he hid himself on a Thalandrïan cargo ship?" Darí queried, his voice holding a slight edge of disbelief.

"I did suggest to him that he might just be some sort of criminal, trying to escape his planetary justice system," Rallandrí smiled, evidently remembering something humorous about the questioning of his guest.

"And?" I prompted, sitting up and stretching, working out the last of the knots from spending half a day in awkward positions.

"He seemed much too timid to be a hardened criminal. He was clearly frightened of me, and looked like he wanted to fade into the furniture each time I asked him a question. However, when I suggested that he give me some evidence to support his story, he handed me this." Rallandrí dug around in a pocket, coming up with a small bundle of whitish fabric, about the size of my palm, which he placed in the center of the table.

Farrwÿn was the first to move. “Insulator silk,” he murmured, poking gently at the bundle with his finger. I looked more closely at the fabric, recognizing it now that Farrwÿn had named it. It was used as a wrapping for psi-active objects in order to isolate them, effectively making them undetectable and inoperable. Rallandrí reached out and unwrapped the object, revealing a small, teardrop-shaped *ferrïl* clearly meant to be worn as a pendant. The *ferrïl* was not keyed to a living person—its depths remained dark and lifeless. Farrwÿn reached out and touched it carefully with his finger, nodding when he’d confirmed that it was inactive.

“Where did he get this?” I asked. *Ferrïls* were an Ellendrïan technology. Although several other planets, such as Lorril, employed similar organometallic crystals, none looked exactly like a *ferrïl*. Finding one on Davandrïa suggested the presence of an Ellendrí with sufficient psi talents to use it.

Rallandrí smiled grimly, showing his canines in an expression that came close to a grimace. “He says they caught an assassin at one of their governmental assemblies. Apparently there was considerable chaos and bloodshed, and when they finally apprehended the individual, he was nearly dead from wounds he’d taken as he resisted arrest. He died shortly afterwards, refusing to provide any information about himself. They found the *ferrïl* on his body.” Rallandrí sighed deeply, then continued, “I asked my guest if the assassin was a Davandrïan. He said they couldn’t tell conclusively what planet the assassin had come from, as they no longer have the technology to do a full DNA analysis. However, a physical examination showed that the assassin was a fully functional hermaphrodite, and Davandrïans are dioecious.”

Darí made a soft sound in his throat, then stated, “So the assassin was either a mutant Davandrïan, or a Dasení, and therefore an off-worlder.”

“I would say that sums it up,” Kerredrÿn agreed, speaking up for the first time since Rallandrí had assumed his dispatcher persona.

“A hermaphrodite with a *ferrïl* is almost certainly an Ellendrí,” Farrwÿn stated the thought that was in all of our minds.

And I stated the other thought that occupied our minds. “So we have a problem.”

“We do,” Rallandrí confirmed. “If the Guardians no longer have any other duty to the Ll’Ellendrÿn but one, that duty is to ensure that our people act rightly and justly. If we let Ellendrí behave in a way that is detrimental to the other peoples of the Ll’Ellendrÿn, we become sullied ourselves, and lose the trust that has been placed in us for so long.” Rallandrí shook his head sadly. “If this sort of thing is truly happening, we have to stop it, and stop it fast.”

We sat quietly for a long time, thinking about the problem, thinking about the ramifications of the problem. Finally, Rallandrí raised his eyes to Farrwÿn. “What do you make of this?” he queried. I knew he was probing for information about the larger context, for clues about the situation that Farrwÿn’s *turas* might reveal.

In a quiet voice, Farrwÿn replied, “It’s part of a bigger problem.”

“And does that problem have a name?” Rallandrí’s voice was quiet as well, but hard-edged.

“Yes,” Farrwÿn’s dark eyes were large, almost black. I felt like I could be swallowed by them, like falling into a black hole. But I knew Rallandrí had reached Farrwÿn’s limit, and that Farrwÿn would not elaborate.

Rallandrí shook his head, smiling toothily again. “And you’re not going to tell me,” he stated softly.

Farrwÿn shook his head, breaking the eeriness of his gaze, “I can’t.”

“Too bad,” Rallandrí remarked more loudly. “I hope we all live long enough to find out what we’re fighting against.”

“I hope so to,” Farrwÿn closed his eyes. I knew that he was finding the situation painful.

“So what do you want us to do about this?” I inquired brightly, trying to sweep away the darkness of our mood with my energy. I caught Rallandrí’s eyes, making it clear that now was the time to tell us about our new assignment.

Taking a sip of his tea, Rallandrí took both Darí and I in with his gaze. “I want you to go to Davandrïa. Not openly as yourselves, but surreptitiously. I want you to find out what’s behind this, and report back to me.” He smiled at us, trying to project positivity, but I could sense tiredness and pain behind the smile. Rallandrí had sent too many Guardians to their deaths in the past few years. He was not happy about asking us to do this task. “Then I want to do whatever it takes to stop it.”

“Does your plan have any details to work with?” I questioned. I had worked undercover many times in my years as a Guardian. The more information I had before I stepped on a planet’s surface, the better our chances for success.

Now Rallandrí’s smile warmed up a little. “My guest came well-prepared. His supporters were hoping that the Guardians would send someone to help. They have a cover already set up, and as it turns out, it will fit the two of you perfectly.” Rallandrí seemed very relieved to get to this point in the discussion. I looked at Darí, and his eyes told me that he too was willing to take on this assignment. My mind kept thinking that it must be terribly hard to send your friends out on missions knowing that you might never see them again. Rallandrí looked a little brighter, recognizing the nonverbal communication that Darí and I shared, knowing that we were accepting the task that he was giving us willingly. “I’ll set up a meeting between the two of you and the Davandrïan so that he can give you all the details.”

Chapter 18: Entropy Always Wins

Eldranth—Date: 8939.099 to 8939.100

Davandrïa

The late afternoon sun was hot on my bare back: it was only a handful of days until Davandrïa reached its summer solstice. Now properly cooked, I was being swallowed alive by a giant monstrosity of metal. My arms were deep inside its gullet, my darkly tanned skin stained tarry black by its lubricating saliva. I had already tried kicking the beast several times during my day's activities, but it seemed that I was destined to be consumed, bruised and chewed by the ancient mechanical components that made up its digestive system. With an effort, I fought back, dragging my battered body out of the maw of the beast, the broken component clenched triumphantly in my hand.

Once firmly back on solid ground, I frowned at the now quiescent beast, stretching out cramped muscles. If it had had eyes, I'm sure that the six-wheeled contraption would have stared back with an expression of innocent mischief. While I knew the transport had nowhere near the processing capacity of the *Ënne*, I wasn't entirely convinced that it didn't have enough to develop something of a personality. It remained silent. I laughed, holding up my hard-won trophy.

"You won't be up to any tricks until I get this fixed," I warned it. *Entropy* laughed silently back. I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my not very clean hand. Before I could help Darí with the clinic, I was going to have to wash up—I could feel more lubricating fluid in my hair.

For a moment, the scene before me seemed surreal, bizarre, unfamiliar, then it snapped back into focus as my current reality. Had it only been half a year since we started this assignment? It seemed like we'd been here for ages. And yet, for all of that, we hadn't discovered anything that could help us stop the chaos that was threatening to overwhelm the Davandrïans. Time was running out, for them and for us.

I stared at the six-wheeled ground transport hulking in front of me. It was painted a dull brown-grey color, matt and dusty. Three diagonal blue stripes, the Medic's symbol, were painted on each side. The transport was ancient technology, based on one of the many versions of a combustion engine that have been invented, forgotten, and reinvented again. This one was a relatively efficient and nonpolluting model, except for the excessive amounts of lubricant that it seemed to require.

The transport was basically a box with wheels. Photoelectrochemical panels covered the top of the vehicle, generating hydrogen in a process similar to the electrolysis of water. In the rear section, a series of metal-hydride containing tanks stored the hydrogen until it was required as fuel. Then it was combusted with atmospheric oxygen in the engine, generating the power necessary to operate the vehicle. The engine was located in the front of the transport, which also featured windows and the drive controls. An access hatch located below the front windows, propped open at the moment, permitted servicing of the engine. It was from out of this hatch that I'd just pulled myself.

Entropy, as we'd humorously named the vehicle in response to its propensity towards increasing chaos, continued to remain silent, its combustion engine unable to function without the part that I held. Transports were rare now on Davandrïa, and I knew we were lucky to have one. However, most of them, like *Entropy*, were old and constantly requiring repair. Fortunately, when we'd acquired *Entropy*, we'd also gotten a good selection of spare parts. With some luck, we had a replacement for the piece I held. But that would be tomorrow's work … right now I needed to clean myself and help Darí pack up the equipment from the clinic, which would be closing soon.

The interior of the *Entropy* comprised a small living space, in addition to storage for medical equipment and supplies. Doors on either side and at the back of the transport provided entry into these areas. The *Entropy*'s chassis was well above the ground, designed to provide good clearance when traveling in regions where the roads were poor to nonexistent. Opening one of the side doors, which was at waist height, I simply hopped inside rather than take the time necessary to unfold and lower the steps that would reach down to the ground. Once inside, I immediately headed for the washroom.

A mirror in the lavatory confirmed my suspicions—I did indeed have black lubricating fluid in my hair. It still felt strange to look at my reflection these days. The face I saw was not quite what I expected. The shape, the angles of cheek and jaw, the arched eyebrows—those were still familiar. The rest … not so much. Thanks to a drug that promoted increased melanin production, my hair was now a medium shade of brown, with lighter, sun-bleached streaks. I no longer wore it cropped short, like most Guardians, but had grown it to a length that brushed my shoulders. My skin, which is normally very pale, was a tanned golden-brown. But the most disconcerting change was my eyes. Instead of the pale grey that I'd grown up with, the eyes that stared back at me were a warm, light brown. Every tenday, Darí and I took another dose of the melanin-enhancing drug to maintain our "new" appearances. To reduce our similarity and thus avoid the frequent misconception that we were identical twins, with all the mythos and beliefs that accompanied that fallacy, I was receiving twice the dosage as Darí, who now had yellow-gold hair and blue eyes. Fortunately, the effects of the drug were both temporary and harmless—we would happily return to our "normal" selves once we stopped taking it.

I had given up on wearing shirts when I worked on *Entropy*. The engine compartment had destroyed more than a few of my tunics. It was easier to wash the dirt, blood, and lubricating fluid off my skin than spend hours patching torn clothing. Today's mess was typical for an afternoon of transport repair—my upper body was splotched with black and covered with a fine grey-brown dust. I didn't see any red, so I must have escaped the day without the normal selection of cuts and scrapes that seemed to be a natural outcome of working in the *Entropy*'s cramped engine space. With some vigor, I applied soap and water to the situation, and eventually felt acceptably clean. Pulling on a shirt and changing into a fresh pair of pants, I was ready for the remainder of the day.

We had been asked to come to this village to vaccinate children between the ages of three and five against several childhood diseases. The "clinic" in this tiny hamlet was simply a room in someone's house. We didn't arrange the facilities; that was always done individually by each community. Our task

was to set up the schedule for the various stops that we would make along our route, and do our best to arrive on time at each location.

Entropy was currently parked in the yard associated with the house that was hosting the clinic. After jumping out of the transport, a couple strides took me to the door of this building. Just as I was about to reach for the handle on the door, it swung open. I stepped back in surprise, only to feel something collide firmly with my legs. Looking down, I found myself peering into a small face with bright greenish-brown eyes and ragged, light brown hair. Realizing his situation, the small boy child started to blush. I smiled crookedly at him, and patted him gently on the back, trying to reassure him that I was harmless. He dropped his eyes, then pushed quickly off my legs and darted away. I wasn't sure if he was frightened or just eager to get to his destination.

I stepped quickly through the now open door, sliding to the right once I was inside to insure that I would be clear of any further rapid exits. I blinked a moment as my eyes adapted to the lower light levels, then quickly spotted Darí where he was seated on a stool in the center of the room. He turned his head towards me, giving me a quick smile, then went back to his patient, a small girl child sitting on a chair in front of him, her legs dangling freely in the air. Darí was good with children—the child was smiling and chattering away at him in the local Davandrïan dialect. Darí responded occasionally, often with a remark that made the child giggle. He had managed to roll up the sleeve on the girl's left arm, and was swabbing a patch of skin on her shoulder with some alcohol. Then he quickly pressed an injector against the cleaned area of skin. As the tip of the nozzle touched the child's arm, the injector delivered a high pressure stream of drug through the skin. The child winced slightly, but Darí was already distracting her from the slight sting caused by the injection. In a moment, she was laughing and chattering away again. Fortunately, we were using a combination vaccine, only needing to give each child a single injection. Darí lifted his head, smiling at a woman who was hovering nearby. She came over to the child, lifted the smiling girl off the chair, and holding the girl firmly by the hand to prevent another rapid charge on the exit door, thanked Darí warmly.

I looked around the room, assessing the situation. There were four more children, and associated adults, sitting in chairs at the back of the clinic, talking amiably with each other. As Darí was cleaning up the injector for the next patient, I headed to the "waiting area" and started chatting with the group, looking for the next volunteer. After a bit of discussion, a little boy bounced out of his seat, grabbing the hand I offered to him. I took him over to the chair in front of Darí and lifted him up onto the seat. His father trailed behind me, watching us carefully. The people here were happy to see us, but with all the political upheaval and social unrest, everyone was wary, cautious of strangers.

Darí was already working his Healer's magic on the child. I smiled reassuringly at the worried parent. We found that the patients were much more relaxed when both Darí and I could be present, possibly because we were both accustomed to projecting feelings of calmness and compassion. Darí claimed that it was the effect of having two Healers at work, although I hardly consider myself a Healer. I may have the training, but very little wisdom or experience. In any case, when I could drag myself away from

Entropy, I was always willing to give Darí as much help as he required in the clinic.

It didn't take long before the last child was vaccinated. All that remained was the cleanup. Darí packed up the medical equipment while I swept the floor and tried to put the room back to a semblance of order. After a clinic, we always tried to leave things more or less as they had been when we'd arrived, keeping the burden on the house owner as light as possible.

Hearing a sharp click, I looked up in time to see the door connecting this room to the rest of the house open. A middle-aged man with sharp, slightly haggard features entered the room. He gave us a relatively friendly smile. Nodding his head towards me, he greeted me with, "Ah, Lyell. I see you've finished working on your machine. I was going to help Rori pack up if you were still busy."

"I've had enough of that for today," I chuckled wryly at the man, who was in fact the owner of the house we were using as the clinic. Like everyone else in the population, he was thin, not starving, but clearly not well-fed either. Distribution of food was starting to become problematic, and everyone in the community had been on rations for nearly a year now. "I'll be back at it tomorrow. I need to check through my spare parts to see if I have something that will work." The house owner smiled knowingly at me—improvisation was the reality of most communities on Davandrïa these days.

"Rori" looked up from his packing, smiling warmly at the man. "We're just about finished here. Thank you for letting us use your home." Darí and I were posing as native Davandrïans—two brothers, Rori and Lyell, who operated one of the governmentally-funded mobile medical units. Darí was a "Medic", a position equivalent to an Ellendrïan Healer except with an emphasis on medical technology rather than psi healing. I was the "Medical Technician" and general all round repair person. "We'll be using the transport for drop-in visits tomorrow," Darí continued, his voice cutting through my thoughts.

The man, whose name I believe was Alexsis, seemed quite happy about this, although I wasn't sure whether it was our future absence from his home or our confirmed presence in the community tomorrow that was responsible for his good humor. He nodded his head. "I'll make sure that everyone knows you'll be staying another day," he offered. The mobile medical units were the only form of health care for the remote communities on Davandrïa. Their visits were a welcome opportunity for anyone with health problems to get medical treatment.

"Thanks," Darí replied with another smile. Even though our primary purpose on Davandrïa was not to supply medical aid, Darí and I took our apparent role with the communities seriously, trying to provide as much assistance as we could. Of course, that just strengthened our cover. Rallandrí had certainly matched this assignment well to our particular proclivities.

With an air of finality, Darí snapped the packing case he was working on shut. Our equipment was actually quite compact. One case contained vaccine, the injector, and various spare parts for the injector. A second case held emergency medical equipment in case someone arrived at the clinic ill or injured, or one of the children had a reaction to the vaccine—a very rare occurrence, but something we

needed to be prepared to deal with just in case. As general handy person and pack animal, I grabbed the case with the emergency equipment, the heavier of the two cases, and let Darí take the other one. We headed outside, Alexsis trailing behind. Reaching *Entropy*, I opened the rear doors, and we stowed the cases into their appropriate niches.

Alexsis seemed inclined to talk for a while. We happily encouraged him. It was through these moments of relaxed conversation that we hoped to learn more about the current situation on Davandrïa. I always paid close attention to the subtle body language and behavior patterns of the people we chatted with, watching to see if they were suspicious about our identity or behaved in any way that might warn us of potential trouble. However, today's gossip seemed neither exciting nor worrisome. Having fulfilled his social obligations, Alexsis eventually wandered back into his home, leaving us alone.

I gave Darí a cheerful glance, glad once again that we seemed to be accepted by the Davandrïans for what we appeared to be, in spite of their wariness. Even the slight accents that we'd come to the planet with had almost entirely faded. I had learned the Davandrïan language 14 years ago in preparation for my first assignment here. I'd become quite articulate over the course of my duties on Davandrïa, but it had been a few years since then. When Rallandrí had announced his plans for us last year, it had taken a day or two of practice to remind myself of the rhythm and flow of the language, but it had come back to me well enough. Darí had never worked on Davandrïa, but fortunately it had been easy to teach him the language patterns through our rapport—we'd spent our sleeping hours dreaming how to speak Davandrïan. As a result, we'd arrived on planet tired, but fluent. It's hard to pretend to be a native if you can't speak like one.

Darí opened the side door of *Entropy*. We both climbed up into the living quarters of the transport. The evening was quickly winding down into night, and I was tired and hungry. I suspected that Darí felt much the same. I busied myself searching about for something to eat. Our supplies were a bit low, but we'd stopped at a homestead a couple of days ago. I knew we had fresh eggs and cheese, and a half loaf of hardy bread made from home-ground grain. That would do for tonight. Tomorrow, I would have to go to the local market and see what I could find.

"Could I offer you eggs fried in engine grease topped with a dash of road dust?" I asked Darí with a wry grin.

Darí laughed at my grim humor, his blue eyes both strange and familiar at the same time. "How about I make supper," he offered. "Then we can forego the engine grease, but I won't make any promises about the road dust." He chuckled, and his meaning was clear. Everything in the transport was saturated with dust, even though we tried to keep it as sealed as possible when we were traveling.

"I won't complain," I responded as I settled into one of the seats in our cramped living space. "It's been a long day in the sun, and I've expended all my energy trying to find new and imaginative ways to curse."

Darí's glance met mine for a moment, his look filled with more gentleness than I deserved. "I'm sorry you keep getting all the unpleasant jobs on this assignment," he said softly, and I knew he meant it. Unlike me, Darí seldom employed sarcasm.

"Hey, don't worry about it." I gave him a tired smile. "It'll all balance out in the end."

Darí made an inarticulate snort, then went about the task of cooking eggs and making tea. I leaned back in my seat, closing my eyes as my mind worried over the lack of progress we'd made so far. We'd traveled a lot of distance and talked with a good many Davandrïans, but had heard nothing confirming the presence of off-worlders on the planet. Of course, they could be undercover, just as we were. Or maybe we just hadn't talked to someone close enough to the upper echelons of what remained of the Davandrïan government. I didn't know, and I was beginning to wonder if we would be able to find out using our current approach.

The click of a plate on the tiny surface that served as our table startled me. I jerked my head up, realizing that I'd dozed off. I guess I was a bit tired. Darí was looking at me with raised eyebrows.

"Eat," Darí commanded as he added a second plate to the table, following it up with two cups of tea. He slid into the only other seat in our living quarters, across the tiny table from me. Without further comment, he applied himself diligently to his meal. I shook the sleep out of my head and began to eat, remembering again that I was actually quite hungry.

We didn't say much for a while, both concentrating on eating. The food was simple, but good. Darí had added a few herbs to the eggs, which made them taste even better. I smiled my appreciation at him, thankful as always that he was my *anÿncára*. When our appetites were finally satiated, and we were sitting back enjoying our tea, Darí said, "I think I might have learned something today that could be useful." I arched my eyebrows, inviting him to continue.

"At the next village, there's a young girl who is apparently quite ill," Darí resumed. "Rumor suggests it's some kind of wasting disease that's been going on for some time now. Apparently other Medics have seen her, but they haven't been able to do much to help her. They say she needs to go to the main medical center in Gavaldrïn for treatment." Darí paused, taking a sip of his tea.

"That's quite a ways from here," I stated.

Darí nodded in confirmation. "Yes, that's part of the problem. The Medics don't think the girl is strong enough to survive such a long, difficult journey. No one can free up a transport to take her the entire distance, so at least part of the way she'd have to be transported by cart and beast."

"And you're thinking we might be able to help?" I asked, giving Darí a chance to expand on his information.

"Possibly. It sounds like she could have cancer. If we aren't too late, we might be able to stop it, reverse

the damage." I could feel how strongly Darí wanted to do this. He hated seeing people die when he thought there was something he could do to stop it. However, except for surgery and a few very crude drug therapies, Davandrïans could do little to treat cancer. If we were to help the child, it would require psi healing, and that could easily destroy our cover.

"That could be risky," I commented, stretching my legs out across the width of the transport, trying to find a comfortable position.

"Yes, definitely," Darí agreed. "But there is something more to this," he added with a smile. "The child's father has just returned from his position with the government to stay with her. Apparently, he's the local political representative for the region. This might give us some of the information we've been looking for." Darí looked happy, not only because he'd heard something that might get us past our current impasse, but also because it would involve a potential act of kindness. I could sympathize with him. Even though I often felt more inured by my experiences than Darí, it still felt good to be able to truly help people.

"We're scheduled to be here for another day, but we could be in the next village by the day after tomorrow," I reflected, staring down at my booted feet in contemplation of the tasks I would need to complete to get us ready for travel in a day. "I'm hoping to have this collection of loosely associated parts in operational condition tomorrow, if I can find or make a replacement for the broken component I removed today."

Darí gave me a wry look. "So, more time spent in the engine compartment?" he asked sympathetically.

"I'm afraid so," I shook my head tiredly. It was time to get some sleep. I finished my tea, got to my feet, and started cleaning up our dishes. Darí joined me, and we quickly had everything washed and stowed away. Only moments later, I climbed the short ladder that led to our bunk, located above the cab. I pulled my shirt off, folded it away in a corner, and was asleep before Darí even made it up.

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I pushed a big black button on the panel in front of my seat, and *Entropy* roared to life. The engine was noisy, with a deep, throaty sound, a grumble that I could feel vibrate throughout the entire transport. However, it sounded more or less normal for what it was. The fact that it started on the first try was a good beginning to the day.

In front of me was a control lever mounted on a horizontal panel that extended outwards from below the front window, essentially a metal shaft that could be moved in a variety of directions. Depending on how you moved the lever, the transport would turn right or left, speed up, or slow down. Small buttons studded the top of the lever—these controlled the various accessory functions of the vehicle. The engine drove the six wheels through a complex series of gears, and the gear ratios, and hence the maximum attainable speeds of the transport, could be changed using a pair of levers that I moved with

my feet. Controlling the *Entropy* was quite different from using the touch panels in the *Ënne.* It had taken me a few frustrating weeks to become reasonably proficient at it. Darí could also run the transport, probably better than I, and we usually took turns driving when we were on long trips.

Yesterday had turned out to be a quiet day; apparently the community had very few people in need of healing, which was always a good thing. I'd had plenty of time to search through *Entropy*'s numerous storage hatches, eventually finding a replacement part. That I was able to find a part was good; however, the part was in no way new. It wasn't broken, but how long it would last was definitely a question for which I had no answer. I installed it, asked for the blessings of whatever gods or goddesses there were that might consider human-built mechanical contrivances their purview … and then spent the evening mentally planning how I might keep *Entropy* operational should the new old part fail.

Entropy wasn't fast, but it was persistent. The recent weather had been hot and dry, so as we lumbered our way along, we created a billowing yellowish cloud of dust. On days when the wind was in our face, this wasn't much of a problem, as the dust just trailed out behind us. Today, however, we had a light breeze at our tail. That meant that I had to keep *Entropy* going fast enough that our dust cloud didn't overtake us. This was often challenging, and when I failed, we ended up traveling in a dense, yellow haze that nearly obscured the road ahead.

All around us, grassy plains undulated in the hot sun, the tall green grass starting to turn to yellow as midsummer approached. The road stretched, more or less straight, from horizon to horizon. We were the only moving thing on it; a tiny speck in a seemingly empty land. Ahead of us, blue with the distance, was a barely visible range of mountains. It was hard to believe that there were human communities in this vast grassy land, but I knew from experience that the apparent desolation was deceptive. As I stared across the gently waving grass, I could see occasional clumps of trees. These marked the locations of small springs and creeks. Often isolated homesteads could be found nestled within them, sheltering from the sun and wind. In some places, the trees formed long linear features, which I knew marked the edges of river valleys. It was possible to drive right up to the edge of one of these valleys, and not realize it was there—then suddenly, the road would dip down, and you'd get your first glimpse of the river, running deep in its eroded bed. If the river was large, the valley could be quite broad, with the muddy water making slow, lazy meanders from bank to bank. It was in these hidden valleys, where agriculture was most productive, that the small villages were often found.

Once, before all the political upheaval on Davandrïa, these roads would have been moderately busy, with transports moving back and forth between the towns, hauling farm produce into the cities and essential supplies out to the remote communities. Now, we seldom passed another vehicle. The villages, and the people within them, were quickly becoming isolated from one another. Originally designed to be self-sustaining, many of these communities had lost the practical elements of sufficiency as a result of reliance on the transport of goods from community to community. The village we were just leaving had suffered a poor growing season last year. They should have been able to survive the crop shortfall until the coming harvest; however, poor planning led to an insufficient amount of stored food, and now

the village had been on rations for nearly a year. Their situation was not unique.

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Slowly rumbling along in our yellow haze, I watched as the sun gradually reached its zenith. Earlier this morning, the road had wound steeply down into a small river valley, with only a single homestead located near the road where a bridge arched across the thick yellow-brown waters. Stopping briefly, as we always do anytime we come to a place where people are living, we checked to see if any medical assistance was required. Happily, the farm was home to a healthy family.

Now it was time for a break. My eyes were dry and dusty, tired from squinting in the sun. I could use some water. I pulled *Entropy* over to the side of the road, not that I expected another transport to be coming along any time soon, and shut the engine off. Pushing open the side door, I jumped down to the sandy surface of the road, glad to stretch my legs for a bit. I could hear Darí opening the door on the other side of the cab, escaping from the hot, thick air inside. Whether we kept windows open for airflow or sealed the cab up to prevent the influx of dust was always a difficult choice. *Entropy* had an ancient, mostly defunct, air cooling system, but it was often more frustrating to get it to work than to simply tolerate the heat that built up in the transport as we drove.

Hearing the crunch of footsteps in sand, I glanced up with wry amusement as Darí rounded the front of the transport. He handed me a bottle of water from which I drank thirstily. I returned the container to him, smiling my thanks. Grabbing my left wrist with my right hand, I raised my arms up over my head, stretching my back and shoulder muscles. A crinkly sound made me turn back towards Darí. Giving me his own dryly amused expression, he held out three colored packages.

“I believe the menu plan for today is prepackaged survival rations in a choice of flavors—red, blue, or green,” he chuckled. My attempt at resupplying us at the local market yesterday had been a failure; even the early season produce had already been redistributed to needy families.

“Do you know what the colors mean?” I asked. So far we’d managed to avoid using our stored rations, and had been able to purchase or forage what food we required. As a result, I hadn’t even looked closely at them to determine what they claimed to be.

Darí peered closely at the wrappings. We could both read Davandrïan script, but there was very little information on the packages, other than the identification that they were indeed rations. Darí shook his head. “They seem to claim to be equivalent to a single meal, flavor apparently unknown.”

“And possibly unknowable,” I added. I closed my eyes, grabbing one of the bars at random. Opening my eyes, I found that I had the blue one. Darí selected the red one. “We can compare experiences once we’re back on the road again and bored with the scenery.”

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Darí took over driving *Entropy* for the afternoon. I sat in the passenger's seat, half-dozing in the heat of the cab. With any luck, we would arrive at our destination before nightfall. The roar of the transport dulled my senses; my eyes were closed against the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows. Suddenly, there was a brief hesitation in the engine growl, followed by a coughing noise as the engine starved for fuel, then silence. My ears ringing in the sudden absence of noise, I jerked fully awake.

"Blazing hells" I muttered as *Entropy* gradually rolled to a stop. That marked the demise of the replacement part. I opened the side door, jumped down onto the hot road bed, and shut the door behind me with possibly a bit more force than was necessary.

The broken component was part of a safety valve. When the engine was in operation, the valve was open, and hydrogen gas could flow into the combustion chamber. When the engine was turned off, the valve was closed, thus preventing the leakage of hydrogen gas while the transport was parked. With the part broken, the valve defaulted to the closed position. The result: the engine no longer ran.

I had worked out a method to force the valve into a permanently open position, which should allow us to restart *Entropy* and continue on our journey. Unfortunately, my plan also had a certain likelihood of causing the entire engine, and potentially the rest of the transport, to explode. I pulled off my shirt, tossing it in the grass alongside the road, then opened the hatch to access the engine. Somehow, *Entropy* always wins …

Chapter 19: The Heart of the Matter

Eldarí—Date: 8939.100

Davandrïa

It was after sunset when *Entropy* rumbled its way down the steep road that carved back and forth across the valley wall until it reached the floor of the river basin. Although my night vision was more than adequate to see where I was driving, I had turned *Entropy*'s lights on, mostly so that the village below could see us as we drove down towards them. That we were able to get to this point in our journey was once again the result of Dran's amazing capacity to intuit his way through the repair of various mechanical devices. I don't know when, in his many years as a Guardian, he had developed this skill, but we certainly relied heavily on it now.

Dran himself was sitting across the cab from me, looking tired and dirty, his eyes staring out at the road, but I knew his mind was far away from our present reality. Probably working out plans and alternative plans—his mind was seldom still except when exhaustion and sleep overwhelmed him. Although we'd been working together for nearly three years, I was still only just beginning to understand how he'd managed to survive so long as a Guardian. His mind had a sharpness to it that I doubted I would ever be able to achieve, no matter how many years I spent in Guardian duty.

The road leveled out, and I knew we'd reached the valley bottom. I could see trunks of large trees on both sides of the road, reflecting whitely in the bright beams of light from the transport. With a ready supply of water, the trees here were much bigger than anything I'd seen on the plains above. The sound of *Entropy*'s engine changed as we entered the forest, becoming louder as the trees reflected the roar back towards us. I slowed down a bit, knowing that soon we would come to the river. According to what I'd been told, we would enter the village before reaching the bridge that crossed to the other side.

Suddenly, a person jumped out on the roadway, some distance ahead of us. He, for even at this distance I could see that the person was a male Davandrïan, was waving something white, clearly trying to get my attention. I slowed *Entropy* down to a crawl, and the man ran towards us. In a moment, he'd reached the transport. I brought *Entropy* to a halt, letting it idle while I opened the door and jumped out.

"Follow me," the man gasped breathlessly.

"Medical emergency?" I asked, as I looked around more carefully. I could just see the first of the village's houses along the road not far ahead.

"It's the *Chiara*'s daughter. He wants you to see her as soon as possible." The man had caught his breath, but was clearly impatient to be on his way. *Chiara* was the official title for those people who were elected as political representatives. Apparently, in this community at least, the *Chiara* was an important person.

“Lead the way,” I told our guide as I jumped back into the transport. He was already running down the road ahead of me as I eased *Entropy* into gear and started rumbling slowly behind him. I glanced over at Dran, who gave me a terse smile.

“Looks like the situation is serious,” he commented. “I hope we can do something to help.”

“So do I.”

Our scout led us past the first few houses along the road, then turned left onto a smaller road. I slowed *Entropy* down, carefully navigating the turn, picking up speed again when I saw the man waving us on. We made several more turns, and were finally directed to park outside a rather impressive looking home. Another man, presumably the *Chiara*, was waiting by the house’s entrance for our arrival. Leaving the engine running (there was a good reason for this), I grabbed the portable medical kit that we kept in *Entropy*’s cab, and launched myself out the side door.

“*I’ll shut Entropy down, then wash up quickly and bring the emergency equipment*,” I heard Dran’s voice in my head. “*Tell me if you need anything specific*,” he finished.

The *Chiara* looked tired, and very worried. When we’d set out this morning, we’d used *Entropy*’s communication equipment, a system that operated using radio waves, to confirm our expected arrival at the village sometime late in the day. However, we were a good many hours later than we’d hoped to be, thanks to *Entropy*’s breakdown. The expectation of our arrival, with its inherent hope, as well as the disappointment when it appeared that we might not be coming, must have been difficult for the man to bear. His lips tightened as I approached him—not a smile, but a grim recognition of my presence.

“*Chiara*,” I greeted him respectfully, with the bow of head due to a member of the government. His light brown eyes raked over me, attempting to get a measure of my abilities. I was not the first Medic to see his daughter. If rumors were correct, none of the others had been able to stop the wasting disease. He still had some hope, but clearly he wasn’t allowing his expectations to become too high, given his previous experiences.

“Come,” he ordered gruffly, leading the way into his home. I quickly followed him inside, walking through an entrance hall, with stairs on both left and right leading to the second floor, and down a hallway to the back of the house. I passed a number of doors on both sides of the hall, until the *Chiara* stopped at the last door, opened it, and entered the room. Quietly, I stepped in behind him.

Although the room smelled of soap, flowers, and fresh air, my nose immediately caught the unmistakable odor of sickness. The lights in the room were dim, possibly in an attempt to induce sleep, but I could see the scene clearly enough. A child’s bed occupied the middle of the room, and on that bed, a small form lay sprawled. As I watched, the child twisted and made a slight moaning noise, obviously in distress.

I turned to the *Chiara*, “Have you given her anything for the pain?”

He shook his head, shaggy brown locks with traces of white making a disheveled mane. “We ran out of medication two days ago. The local herbalist has been brewing a bark tea for her, but it hasn’t been nearly as effective at controlling the pain.”

I knelt beside the bed, placing my hand gently on the girl’s forehead. It was cool, no fever. Her eyes opened, blue and clear, but seemingly much too large for her face. She tensed for a moment, but seeing her father standing next to me, relaxed.

“I’m here to help you,” I reassured, sending out feelings of comfort. She gave me a slight smile, and for a moment I could see the echoes of the happy child she might once have been. I touched Dran’s mind, giving him information on the drugs and equipment that I would require immediately.

“My partner will be here shortly with some medication,” I informed the *Chiara*. “May I examine your daughter?” Davandrïans were a fairly conservative people, and children were well guarded from strangers. I would need her father’s permission before I could make any attempt at diagnosis or treatment. He nodded his head briefly in acquiescence, but remained standing close behind me, carefully watching my actions.

Given the level of tension in the room, I wanted to handle the situation carefully. Since I could do a preliminary scan without removing the girl’s delicately embroidered purple tunic, this seemed like a safe way to begin, and might give everyone a chance to get accustomed to me. Starting from her head, and working down to her feet, I ran my hands lightly over her body, looking for any physical abnormalities. From the perspective of an observer, my examination appeared much like that given by any Davandrïan Medic. However, as my fingers searched for external clues to the child’s illness, I used my psi abilities to scan more deeply, looking for signs of internal disease, checking body chemistry and function. In the background, I heard soft steps. I knew Dran had arrived, but I kept focused until my scan was done.

Dran already had the injector out and loaded with the analgesic that I’d requested. I could have reached into the girl’s pain center and temporarily blocked the sensation of pain. However, on Davandrïa, such techniques are unknown—pain can only be relieved by the use of less effective pain medications. Dran handed me the injector and an alcohol wipe. I looked up to meet the *Chiara*’s eyes, seeking permission to give his daughter the injection. Again, he gave me a terse nod. I quickly swabbed the girl’s arm with alcohol, then injected her with the analgesic. She twitched slightly in response to the hypodermic sting, then lay still, body taught with suffering. I picked up her hand, checking her radial pulse while waiting for the medication to take effect. Gradually, I felt her body relax and her pulse slow as her discomfort eased.

Releasing the girl’s hand, I turned to face the *Chiara*. “What is your daughter’s name?” I inquired. It’s always been important to me to know the names of the people I’m treating. That tiny bit of familiarity seems to strengthen the connection between Healer and patient, encouraging the trust necessary to

bring about healing and recovery.

“Seychen.” He hesitated for a moment, then added, “You needn’t call me *Chiara*. My name is Trevern.”

I smiled, hoping to further allay the tension. “Thank you. I’m Rori.” I inclined my head at Dran. “My brother is Lyell.”

Trevern nodded a greeting to Dran, then quickly got back to his concerns, “Can you help her?”

I looked down at Seychen. Her frail body was limp, her eyes closed. She was quickly slipping into sleep, probably the first significant rest she’d had for some time. Pale yellow hair spread out around her head like rays of tepid sunshine. Her arms were thin, mostly bone and skin, an indication of the degree of emaciation that the disease had wreaked upon her body. She looked like she might be a slight 10-year-old. However, I suspected that she was actually older, although I couldn’t guess by how much.

Turning back to Trevern, I spoke more softly. “Is there somewhere we can talk? I’d like to let your daughter sleep, if she can,” I tilted my head towards the girl, now evidently asleep.

Trevern’s eyes rested on his daughter, watching her chest rise and fall slowly. The lines of tension in his face gentled, and he nodded his head in response to my question. “I’ll take you to the library. No one will disturb us there.” He opened the door to the room, ushering us out, then quietly closed it.

Taking a few strides down the hallway in the direction towards the house entrance, Trevern reached another door, pushing it open to reveal a large room whose walls were lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves. Obviously someone in the house liked to read. A large table occupied the center of the room, and a number of comfortable looking chairs were randomly arranged throughout the space. Large windows took up most of the wall opposite the door, probably providing good lighting during the day. However, as it was well into the night, illumination was generated by electrical lights. The room was empty, and Trevern pulled one of the chairs up to the table, motioning for us to do likewise.

Once we were seated, Trevern placed his hands on the table, and looking intensely at me, led off with, “Well?”

Wanting to learn how much the *Chiara* understood about his daughter’s condition, I countered with my own question, “Have the other Medics explained your daughter’s illness to you?” Dealing with family members was often more difficult than dealing with the patients themselves, and I knew little about this particular case, which had clearly been ongoing for some time.

“That she has cancer? Yes, I know,” Trevern sighed, a sound of exhaustion mixed with resignation. It didn’t make me feel any better, but I was glad that he was aware of the nature of the disease. My preliminary physical examination had quickly spotted the hard swollen lump located in the girl’s abdomen, just below the ribs on her right side. Liver cancer, far progressed, which my internal scan confirmed. I didn’t know if the cancer had metastasized yet—I would have to do a deeper and more

detailed examination to determine that.

“Has she been given any drugs to combat the cancer?” I was still probing, trying to determine what the best approach to treatment might be.

“Several drug therapies were tried over the last year,” Trevern answered, his voice flat. “They may have slowed the cancer down, but they didn’t stop it. The last Medic suggested that she be taken to Gavaldrïn for surgery, but I fear we are long past that stage now.” He stared at his hands, and I detected a faint tremor in his fingers where they splayed out across the table. Sensing the strong protective love he had for his daughter, I could easily imagine how terrible it had been for him to watch her waste away slowly and painfully.

“Then you know that the cancer is in an advanced stage.” I hated saying this, but I didn’t want to encourage false hope. Trevern nodded. “I can’t promise anything at this point,” I continued. “We carry the same standard treatments that the other Medics have already tried. I don’t recommend trying them again. Those drugs are very stressful on the body, and in her current weakened state, they would only hasten her death.” Having said that, I wasn’t totally without hope, but I needed to be very careful in what I was planning to do.

“So there really is nothing you can do?” Trevern met my eyes, willing me to offer him something, anything. He was not a weak man—his actions and demeanor spoke otherwise. That I could see the pleading in his eyes was a measure of his devotion to his daughter.

I waited a few moments before responding. “There is something I can offer, but I’m not sure if you would be willing to have me try.”

“Tell me then, and let me decide,” Trevern was firm now, not the desperate father, but rather the competent decision-maker.

“A few years ago, I came across an old traditional treatment for cancer,” I began. This was true enough—after Farrwÿn had shown an interest in the edible and medicinal properties of plants on the worlds we’d explored together, I had spent a good deal of time with him researching some of the old uses for many of the plants that have followed humans throughout their expansion across the Ll’Ellendrÿn. I did, in fact, know several herbal recipes used to treat cancer.

Trevern was starting to shake his head. I didn’t think he had much appreciation for herbal remedies. “Wait,” I raised my hand, stopping him before he could comment. “Let me finish.” He nodded, and I could see him working hard to reign in his disbelief. “Many of our modern medicines have their origins in traditional herbalism,” I informed him, unconsciously slipping into my lecturing persona. “I’m not talking about using magic or witchcraft. It’s well known that some plants contain substances that can assist in healing and treatment of diseases.”

I took a breath and released my focus on Trevern for a moment, briefly looking around the room. Dran had been so quiet that I could almost have believed he was gone, but there he sat, only a short distance away, his expression alert as he worked out what I was trying to do. I detected a faint gleam of amusement in his eyes. He was highly skilled in wilderness survival, and his knowledge of plants was probably as detailed as mine. I didn't doubt that he believed me, but would he agree with my full intentions?

I turned my attention back to Trevern. "We don't have a lot of other options," I informed him. "My suggestion is to try this treatment for a tenday. It won't harm her, and we can continue with it if she starts to show improvement." I met Trevern's eyes with a steady gaze. "Otherwise, we have sufficient drugs with us to make her comfortable until the end." Trevern blinked, and I knew he was struggling to maintain his composure. I sincerely hoped that the end could be avoided. Not that I had complete confidence in the herbal remedy I was suggesting, although I suspected that it would definitely increase the likelihood of recovery, but rather that this treatment would provide the necessary cover to allow us to use our psi healing.

Trevern swallowed visibly, working at regaining control over his emotions, then nodded tersely. "If you can offer nothing else, I can't refuse your suggestion," his voice was low, rough with pain lying just below the surface. "You're certain the treatment won't hurt her?"

I gave Trevern what I hoped was a comforting expression, "I promise you that we will do nothing to make her condition worse. At the very least, we can relieve her discomfort and let her rest more easily."

"When will you start?" With an effort, the *Chiara* resumed his aura of leadership. I knew the consultation was over, the healing was soon to begin.

"Tomorrow morning. I need to find the necessary herbs for compounding the remedy. We'll also have to notify the government of our intentions to stay here for an unspecified length of time. They'll need to deploy another mobile medical unit to take over our route for a while." I stood up, indicating that we were ready to get underway. Dran moved smoothly to my side, a quiet shadow. It felt strange when I took the lead—Dran had so much more experience than I that it seemed he should always be the one making decisions.

"Good," Trevern got to his feet. "Please feel free to ask for anything you need. My home is your home," he ended with the traditional phrase that meant he would assist us in any way he could. I smiled my thanks, and he led us out of the library.

Chapter 20: Fixing Things

Eldarí—Date: 8939.101

Davandrïa

Mid-morning found me walking down the main street of Eorithrin, the village associated with the *Chiara*'s home. Shops lined both sides of the street—small two-story structures with rounded corners made of concrete and painted in a variety of pastel colors. The bottom levels of the buildings contained wares for sale, while the top stories were generally where the shopkeepers and their families lived. The center of the road was marked off for the use of large transports, but narrow strips on both sides of this medial lane were the domain of people on foot and a number of small, non-motorized wheeled conveyances.

I was specifically looking for the shop of the local herbalist, but I was also making note of what types of goods were available in the community, should we have future needs. The streets were clean, the buildings well-maintained, and the people that I passed as I walked looked to be in good health. Clearly, Eorithrin was fairing much better than the last community we had stopped at, whether because of better luck or better leadership, I didn't know.

About halfway down the street, I found my destination shop. Although Davandrïa has a fairly advanced medical technology, there are always some people who prefer more natural remedies for various ailments, a phenomenon I'd seen in most places I'd visited. Thus, herbalists who understood the uses of the local plant species were always to be found. In Davandrïa, now that the supply of drugs and other medical technology had been curtailed by governmental chaos, these wielders of old wisdoms were quickly becoming essential. So the shop that I was now entering was much larger and fuller than I'd expected.

Once inside the shop, my nose was assailed by a variety of odors, an olfactory kaleidoscope of pungent, sweet, spicy, and musky scents, all converging into one another. The shop felt crowded, although at present, only one other customer shared the space with me. The room's lack of capacity was due largely to the immense variety of supplies that filled it—the walls were lined with shelves containing bottles of herbs and spices, a counter in the center of the room displayed various pieces of equipment used for grinding, compounding, distilling, and other less obvious tasks, and overhead, yet more plants hung drying in bunches from the rafters. I was both overwhelmed and thrilled—I had a good chance of finding what I needed.

I waited patiently while the shopkeeper dealt with the previous customer's needs, then made my way to the counter where she was seated.

"Ah, a Medic," she commented as I approached, her voice low and throaty, deeper than I was expecting given that she wasn't a particularly large person. Her easy identification of my assumed profession was

not surprising—I was wearing a tunic with three diagonal blue stripes running from shoulder to hip, the Medic's symbol. I grinned at her and chuckled.

"And you've come to Eorithrin to see the *Chiara*'s daughter," she continued. Her eyes were a bright green, sharp, but with a look that suggested she liked to laugh a lot. Her hair was long, grey, and worn in a single braid down her back. She was not a young woman, but exactly how old she was, I couldn't guess.

"So, you know everything about me," I observed as I leaned casually against the edge of the counter opposite to where she was sitting.

"Hardly," she smiled. "But I do know that the *Chiara* kept the last three Medics who passed through busy treating his daughter." Her smile changed into a look of sadness. "It's unfortunate that none of them have been successful. I hear that Seychen is not long for this world."

"I think there might still be some hope," I tried to sound reassuring. I had visited Seychen early this morning to administer another dose of pain medication. She'd looked much more alert after getting a good night's sleep, and her nurse had even managed to get her to swallow a little broth. I'd been able to use the opportunity to give her a much more thorough examination, and was happy to find that, although the cancer was large, it had not yet metastasized. Our chances of success were good.

"I wish I could believe that," the herbalist responded, her green eyes flicking rapidly over me, as if she were assessing my competency. "Seychen is well-loved by this community. Her suffering has been terrible for us to watch." I had the feeling that the herbalist knew Seychen well, and spoke from her own heart. It was also clear that she had little faith in the medical system, as it was currently operating on Davandrïa, to provide a cure.

"I will do my best," I raised my eyes, challenging her critical appraisal. She held my gaze for a long moment, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle. After a time, she dropped her eyes back to the counter.

"You have a sense of the old ones about you," she murmured quietly, not looking up. This made me wonder just exactly what *she* was. There was power in those eyes, the ability to see beyond the surface. Even amongst people who refused to acknowledge the existence of such things, the old Ellendorí talents still ran deep.

"Hardly," I chuckled, making an attempt to dismiss her observation. "I'm just a Medic." I hoped to dissuade her from this line of thought. While I definitely wasn't Ellendorí, if she guessed I was Ellendrí that would blow our cover. "And one with very limited access to medical technology these days. That's why I'm here."

"Hmmph," she snorted. "What can I do for you then?"

It was time to get down to business. “I have nine herbs that I require. Seven are quite common, two are somewhat more difficult to obtain. Your shop looks very well stocked, so if I’m lucky, you will have all nine.” I smiled brightly at her.

“We’ll see,” she reached under the counter and extracted a piece of paper and a writing stick. “List the herbs you need. I’ll look through our stocks for them.” The writing tool felt strange in my hand—I seldom employed such things on Ellendrïa—however, I knew how to make use of it and was familiar enough with the Davandrïan script that I could scratch out my list without looking awkward.

She picked up the paper and studied it for a moment. I had written the local common names for the plants I needed, and she queried me on their more formal scientific names, surprising me with the depth of her knowledge. She chuckled, a deep low sound of amusement. “I do believe that I have all of these. Give me a few moments to gather them together,” then she was off, searching through the various shelves. She was much more agile than I was expecting, given her apparent age. Clearly, I still wasn’t able to judge the effects of aging in a people who succumbed to its effects.

After a while, she had a variety of containers arranged on the counter. She questioned me on the amounts that I required, and efficiently bundled my order into packages created from neatly folded sheets of paper, precisely labeling each one to avoid misidentification. I relaxed as I watched her work, recognizing her expertise.

“Are you the herbalist that’s treating Seychen?” I asked as she was finishing up the packaging.

She nodded, “Only one in this village.”

I remembered my discussion with Trevern last night. “The *Chiara* didn’t think your pain remedy was very effective,” I noted.

The herbalist gave me a wry smile, “And that makes you think I don’t know my trade?”

I shook my head, “I didn’t say that. I just want to hear what you have to say.”

She looked at me sharply. “I have other herbs that are stronger, but I usually only recommend their use when the end is very near. They have side effects that are not always compatible with healing.” She paused, shaking her head in a way that made me realize she’d considered giving stronger medication to Seychen, but had decided otherwise. “We knew you would be here shortly, and the *Chiara* hoped that maybe there was still a chance.”

“And I think there still is,” I confirmed, “so your decision was a wise one.” I looked down at the tidy bundle of herbs, reaching into a pouch attached to my belt for a handful of the local currency. The herbalist caught my arm in a firm grip, shaking her head.

“For Seychen, you don’t need to pay. We all want her to be well again.” She didn’t let go of my arm,

however, and I looked up, meeting her disconcertingly green eyes again. “If you have the healing skill, save her. I will not give you away. If they ask, I will only say that you are wise in the ways of herbal medicines.” She released my arm, handing the packages to me. I slid the pack that I’d been carrying off my shoulder and carefully stowed the herbs in it. The herbalist smiled at me, and I tipped my head in a brief acknowledgment. The implicit warning in her words was clear … use your powers, but beware. In many cultures where psychic abilities were not acknowledged as real, their use could be deemed as evil, frightening, or unnatural, and people in possession of such powers could face serious condemnation and punishment. Davandrïa had become one of those cultures—I was well advised to be secretive with my healing abilities.

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The farmer accepted my coins, and I carefully loaded my selection of vegetables into my pack. The market, located at the end of the main street, was large and vibrant, far different from what I’d seen in Kyadairin, the village we’d just come from. The offerings at the various stalls were diverse, plentiful, and of good quality. I’d already picked up some meat, bread, and a variety of fresh fruit from several of the other vendors. I was beginning to think that the village benefited from the *Chiara*’s careful leadership.

Dran and I would be happy for the fresh food. We’d both come to the conclusion that *Entropy*’s rations were designed to keep a person alive, but otherwise had no redeeming features. The colors on the wrappers were largely for entertainment value, but had little, if anything, to do with the flavor of the substance they contained. Thankfully, the rations that we carried aboard the *Ënne* were considerably better, and were actually quite tasty.

My morning’s tasks done, I contemplated finding Dran. He and I had headed out on separate tasks today—I was wondering how successful he’d been with his project. Turning off *Entropy*’s engine yesterday had been a somewhat dangerous task. With the safety shutoff overridden, I couldn’t just turn the engine off from inside the cab. To do so would have allowed hydrogen gas to escape into the hot engine compartment—something that could’ve had serious consequences. Rather, Dran had to open the engine compartment while the engine was still running, reach in past various moving components, and shut the valve off manually. Today, he was working on a more permanent repair. The likelihood of finding a replacement part in the village was probably close to nil, but Dran thought that if he could find something resembling a smithy, it might be possible to reforge the broken parts.

I could reach out telepathically and ask Dran where he was, but I didn’t want to disturb him if he was in the middle of something important. Instead, as I’d often done as a child, but considerably less often in the years since then, I opened my mind up to our bond, using it like a compass to guide me to him. Winding my way out of the village via a series of side roads, I soon reached the beginning of the farmlands. Not far from the village outskirts, my ears picked up the sound of metal striking metal. Dran had found a smith.

A small dirt track turned off from the road I was on, leading through a grove of trees in the direction of both Dran and the melodic racket of the smithy. I followed the track, passing a garden and fenced areas containing livestock as I approached a complex of buildings. A large shed, separated from the main buildings and formed from what appeared to be sheets of metal, was the source of the noise. I approached cautiously, not wanting to startle anyone in the midst of working with hot iron.

The hammering had stopped. Two people were standing near the forge, their bared backs facing me as they conversed. One of them reached into the forge with a pair of tongs, snaking out a glowing chunk of metal, then dropping it onto the anvil and picking up a hammer to continue working the metal into some particular shape. It took a few moments before I realized that the shaggy brown hair and tanned muscular back of the person with the hammer belonged to my *deirfad*. I watched with considerable interest as Dran heated and worked the piece twice more before he was satisfied with its shape. After quenching the piece in a bucket of water, he worked at it with a file, cleaning up the rough edges and doing the remaining detail work. Finally, he heated the piece again, sprinkled powdered charcoal over the surface, reheated it a last time, and quenched it. Although I'd never seen this done before, I was vaguely aware that this last step hardened the surface of the metal, hopefully producing a component that would last longer. I suppose by now I shouldn't have been surprised by Dran's abilities, but I stood there for a long time wondering where and how Dran had become a blacksmith.

Turning around to face me, Dran pushed the hair out of his eyes with the back of his hand, grinning. "So what do you think?" he asked, holding the reforged part up in his hand so that I could see it. "Think this will keep *Entropy* running for a while?"

I also shouldn't have been surprised that Dran knew I was there, had probably been aware of me since I'd arrived, but I was. With an expression of admiration on my face, I walked up to him. The part that he held in his hand looked precisely like the piece he'd installed two days ago, only with no signs of wear or potential fracture lines. "That looks like a brand-new component," I complimented him with a grin.

The smith, who'd been watching Dran work, came up beside us and took the part from Dran's hand, examining it critically. "Not bad for a Medical Technician. I'm impressed!" He handed the piece back to Dran.

"Thanks for letting me use your shop," Dran responded. He walked over to a hook on the wall of the building where his tunic was hanging, and pulled it on over his head.

"It was a good chance to watch someone else's techniques," the smith commented with a laugh. "I'm always keen to learn new methods, especially since we need to make more of own parts these days."

Dran turned towards me, eyes filled with curiosity. "Did you get all the supplies we need?"

"Yes, my day at the market was a complete success," I lifted my pack off my shoulder, hefting it up to show that it was full. "We won't have to face eating rations again for at least a couple of days."

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It was evening—Dran and I were sitting beside Seychen's bed. I had spent the afternoon grinding the herbs I'd gotten from the herbalist's shop, mixing them in the correct ratio, then brewing a strong decoction from them. The resulting fluid was dark and bitter, so I sweetened it with honey, hoping to make it more palatable for the patient. However, I needn't have worried. Seychen had been through much worse, and didn't complain.

"Do you think this will really help me?" she asked with a wry twist to her lips, her voice very quiet and soft, but still carrying the measure of her personality. Seeing her awake and animated, I'd quickly upped my estimate of her age to something closer to 16, in spite of her frail appearance.

"We haven't given up yet," I pointed out, "and I hope you haven't either." I was busy loading her next dose of pain medication into the injector.

"No, not yet." She shifted her head slightly against the pillows that I'd used to support her in a more upright position in her bed, looking us both over. "You two are … different," she said after a moment's hesitation. "I like you," she gave us a bit of a smile.

"That's good," I reached over and gently lifted her arm, preparing it for the injection. "It'll make putting up with us for the next few tendays a little easier." She laughed lightly as I gave her the shot. I'd given her a sufficient dosage that I knew she would fall asleep shortly. This was good because she needed the sleep, but also because she wouldn't be awake for the next phase of our treatment.

I had informed the *Chiara* that we would sit with Seychen for a while after giving her the decoction in order to ensure that she wasn't having a negative reaction to the herbal mixture. While this was certainly true, I also intended to use the time to start the healing process. I watched as Seychen began to get sleepy, her eyes closing, her breathing finally becoming even and steady.

Once I knew that she was deeply asleep, I nodded to Dran. His job was to keep watch, warning me if anyone was coming. I gently placed my hand on Seychen's belly, directly over the tumor. Sinking into a healing trance, I visualized the cancer cells, making sure that my mind's identification of them was clear, that I could easily distinguish them from her normal healthy cells. Once I was sure of myself, I caused the cancer cells in the outer layer of the tumor to undergo certain metabolic changes that would trigger apoptosis. By tomorrow, that outer layer of cells would be dead, causing the tumor to shrink slightly. It was my intent to do this each night, thus gradually reducing the tumor over a period of days, coinciding with our herbal treatment. If this worked out as I planned, no one would realize that her recovery would largely be the result of psi healing.

Chapter 21: Complaints about Government

Eldarí—Date: 8939.122

Davandrïa

It's easy to get lulled into complacency. Everything had been so quiet on Davandrïa during our time here, almost mind-numbingly. There had been no disagreements, no skirmishes, no real indications of problems other than a slow and steady decline into chaos. It was almost as if this were some sort of normal phenomenon of cultural death. We still hadn't found out if there was any root cause behind the disintegration of the Davandrïan government, or whether this was just some natural outcome of the people themselves. If it wasn't for our work as Healers, Dran and I would probably have been thoroughly bored and ready to move on.

My first sign of trouble was a roar of rage followed by a crunch of feet on gravel. I'd walked into Eorithrin earlier that morning, more for exercise than any particular need, and was now returning along the road that led to the *Chiara*'s home. My mind had been filled with thoughts of satisfaction—Seychen was much improved, likely to make a complete recovery. I was happy, free of worry. I shouldn't have been. I turned sharply to face the sound.

"Kill the government's bloodsuckers," a voice shouted maniacally, as a man armed with a knife launched himself at me. I didn't know if he was drunk or crazy or both, and I really didn't care as his eyes rolled wildly at me.

A word of warning: try to avoid getting into knife fights. It doesn't matter how good a fighter you are, the probabilities are high that you'll get cut. The crazy man had surprise on his side—I had no way to avoid the fight. I reacted instinctively, throwing up my left arm to ward off the attack … and felt the knife shear through fabric and flesh, slashing my forearm open to the bone. Fortunately, a sudden surge of adrenaline temporarily blocked the pain. I whirled away from my attacker's knife arm, letting him stumble off-balance past me.

My assailant was taller and heavier than me, but clearly not a trained fighter. He charged at me again, muttering what sounded like a string of obscenities, building up momentum. I let him come at me, then sidestepped at the last moment, bringing the side of my right hand down hard against the wrist of his knife hand. His hand opened reflexively, the knife clattering to the ground. I stepped past him, turned, and kicked at the back of his knee. This brought him down to the ground. A second kick, aimed for his kidneys, left him groaning in pain.

A searing pain in my arm reminded me that I still had problems to deal with. There was blood on the ground surrounding my attacker, more leaking profusely out of the gash on my arm. I grabbed my forearm with my right hand, closing the wound and putting pressure on it. Shutting my eyes for a moment, I willed the blood to stop flowing. As I opened my eyes again, I could hear multiple sets of

footsteps in the gravel. I hoped the crazy man didn’t have any friends.

Eldranth—Date: 8939.122 to 8939.142

Davandrïa

Entropy's interior was starting to heat up, even with one of the side doors opened to allow a little airflow. I looked up from my work, out through the door to the eastern horizon, noting that the sun was midway to its zenith in a sky yellowish with dust haze. Darí should be back from his walk soon. It looked like it was going to be another swelteringly hot day. We would probably spend most of it sheltering in the *Chiara's* library, where fans distributed water-cooled air, providing relief with both cooling and a little humidity.

I was busy reorganizing *Entropy's* storage areas—we were restocking the transport in preparation for our imminent departure. Darí's treatments had worked wonders on Seychen. She was well on her way to a full recovery. Not that I was surprised—Darí is an excellent Healer. My only concern about the situation had been the possibility of blowing our cover. Fortuitously, that had not happened. However, we'd learned less than I'd hoped, although it had been good to confirm some of the things we had been told by Rallandrí's "guest".

Since the beginning of the days spent with Seychen, Trevern had invited us to stay with his family, had provided us with a room, and encouraged us to eat our meals with them. Trevern's partner had gone to the beyond some years earlier, thus the big house was now occupied by Trevern and his daughter, his brother's family, and his unbonded sister. The house was frequently filled with the sound of youngsters at play, as the brother and his partner had three children between the ages of eight and thirteen years. Only recently, with Seychen's illness, had unnatural silences filled the corridors and rooms. Gradually, as it became apparently that she would recover, the joyous uproar of happiness had returned to their home.

Darí and I had wondered why Eorithrin had weathered the current economic crisis so well, and as we sat with the family during their meals, we quickly learned how much Trevern had given of himself to this community. Good advice, careful planning and management had been part of it, but much of the family's personal wealth and material surpluses had gone to assist those in greater need. It was very clear why the *Chiara* was so highly respected. Recently, Trevern had resigned from his position as representative on the government council in Gavaldrïn in order to spend more time with Seychen, initially in hopes of seeing her recover, but later simply to share what little time might remain to her. So, in fact, Trevern was *Chiara* no longer, but the community continued to use the title as a sign of respect for one who had worked so hard for the benefits of others.

Trevern had confirmed what we already knew about the political situation—three attacks on the government council had taken place in the past 14 years, each one targeting the elected spokesperson as well as killing several of the other Councilors. Naturally, the government was thrown into a state of chaos each time this happened. After a sufficient period of mourning, elections refilled the positions.

However, time and again, the newly elected Councilors seemed to lack the strength and motivation to govern well, often initiating days of discussions over minor issues, stalling the ratification of important policies. Eventually, stronger people would be elected. The situation on Davandrïa would start to improve, only to be disrupted by yet another attack. The identity of the assassins remained a mystery. Gradually, the government ceased to govern, and the Davandrïan society fell into confusion, disorder, and dysfunction.

Interestingly, the Ellendrí operate without any governance at all, but we're raised from childhood understanding the necessity of a balance between personal freedoms and societal responsibilities. I suspect that people who have never known individual autonomy and direct democracy would feel completely bewildered if the system that they relied on to order their lives suddenly became nonfunctional.

I had a suspicion that Trevern wasn't telling us everything that he knew, that there were things that worried him about the situation that he wasn't willing to put into words. Although Trevern kept his emotions well controlled, I occasionally detected something like fear. What was going on?

I stowed away the last package of some new, and hopefully improved, travel rations into a freshly cleaned storage locker—*Entropy* would never be free of dust, but today I'd made a significant reduction in the amount that was being carried around inside the transport. Wiping sweat out of my eyes with my tunic sleeve, I gave a sigh of satisfaction and relief. We were ready to move on tomorrow, heading south through the plains to visit another three villages before reaching the first major city on our route. From there, we would follow the coastal road southward to Gavaldrïn, a place that engendered feelings of both of hope and dread in me. Hope because, as the central seat of Davandrïa's government, it might hold more answers to our questions that we'd found so far, and dread because I remembered only too well what had happened to me in Gavaldrïn before.

Standing up from my crouched position in front of the storage lockers, I turned, stepped through the open side door, and jumped down to the ground below, glad for some fresher and slightly cooler air. Even as I took a deep breath, I felt a heightened sense of awareness combined with an odd feeling of displacement that always accompanied an episode of my *turas*. The hair along my spine tingled. Darí! A quick flash of a wild-eyed man with a knife facing my *deirfad*. Then I was running, using our bond as a directional link, not sure what to expect, but very worried about my *anÿncára's* welfare nonetheless.

Fortunately, I didn't have far to go. Darí had evidently been on his return trip from town when I reached the finale of the scene that my *turas* had shown me. I suppose I shouldn't worry so much about Darí, but I do—that's what happens when you love someone. His attacker was on the ground, obviously incapacitated. Although Darí himself had plainly taken some hurt—I could feel a sympathetic ache in my left arm—I knew instinctively that he had no life-threatening injuries. However, even as I was arriving, I saw two other ragged looking individuals running towards the scene, accomplices to the one on the ground or just more outlaws trying to take advantage of the situation, I didn't know. I cut towards them,

bringing myself into a position between their advance and Darí. They paused in their charge, looking at me for a moment. I suspect that what they saw in my eyes made them back up, turn away, and flee. If Darí hadn't been injured, I might have been inclined to chase after them and see some justice done, but now that the threat was over, my thoughts were solely on Darí's hurts. As I turned towards him, the attacker on the ground stumbled, groaning, to his feet. Wildly glancing at the two of us, he understood that he was outnumbered, and staggered away down the road.

"Darí!" I was standing in front of him, my left hand reaching out to rest on his right shoulder. He looked up, met my eyes, and grinned crookedly.

"You know what they say about getting into knife fights," he replied to the worry in my eyes. "I'll be fine."

"Hmmph," I snorted. I gently caught Darí's left wrist in my free hand, feeling the warmth and tingle of his *anÿnbränne* against the skin of my fingers, and rotated his arm so that I could see the cut. I glanced at him, letting him know that I needed to ascertain the extent of the injury. He slowly removed his right hand as we both watched to see if the bleeding had been stopped. The wound gaped a little, but no more blood welled out of it, although I could easily see that it was deep, down to the bone, and painful. There was a fair bit of blood on the ground around Darí. I hoped he hadn't lost too much.

"Can you make it back to *Entropy*?" I was scanning around us with all my senses on alert, concerned that there might be more attackers lurking about. Darí nodded in reply. He looked a bit pale, but I sensed that the wound had not seriously affected his strength. He clamped his right hand back down over the gash, stabilizing it to prevent it from re-opening, and we started walking back the way I'd come. I stayed close at Darí's side, offering my support and strength, but also prepared to take immediate defensive action should his attackers reappear. Thankfully, good luck prevailed, and we made it safely back to the transport.

Several people were milling around outside of *Entropy's* open side door. Obviously, my sudden dash had been observed by the household. People were wondering what had caused my reaction. As we arrived, they stepped back, shocked at the sight of Darí's bloodied arm. I heard more footsteps crunching in the graveled area where *Entropy* was parked, and looked up sharply to see Trevern, with Seychen at his heels, coming over to investigate.

"Rori, what happened?" Seychen spoke slightly breathlessly, her soft contralto voice conveying her concern and worry much more effectively than all the other voices raised in query around us.

Darí looked up, met her eyes, then glanced at Trevern, "I was attacked by a crazy who had something against people hired by the government."

This anti-government sentiment was something new to me. I looked at Darí, and he responded with a raised eyebrow. Shifting my attention back to Trevern, I added, "There were at least three attackers.

They've temporarily scattered, but I doubt they've gone far."

Trevern scowled darkly, grunted out, "Drifters." Then he was speaking to the people who had gathered around us. Everyone except Trevern and Seychen quickly departed. I suspected that there was going to be a hunt for the offenders. Clearly they were not welcome in this community.

Darí shifted his position, grimacing. I put my arm around him, intending to help him up into *Entropy* and away from further attention. I canted my head at Trevern, saying, "I need to get Rori's wound cleaned and dressed." He nodded back, and moments later I had Darí aboard *Entropy* with the door safely closed behind us.

Once Darí was comfortably sitting in one of *Entropy's* chairs, I was able to give my full attention to him, doing a careful scan to determine if he had any other injuries. Luckily, there was only the one deep slash.

Darí was shaking his head as I worked, "I can look after this Dran. It's my fault for getting hurt. I was careless, daydreaming, not paying attention to my surroundings." He sounded annoyed with himself, but I could sympathize with what had happened. We had been lulled into a false sense of security and complacency.

Then it was my turn to shake my head, "Remember, it's my turn this time. Shield mates look after each other. Besides, this could have happened just as easily to me."

Darí chuckled grimly, "I seriously doubt that. You have eyes that see in all directions at once, and I've never seen you wander around absentmindedly."

I smiled back, "You just haven't traveled with me long enough yet." With that, I set to work cleaning the wound. Fortunately, the blood hadn't dried completely—getting Darí's shirt off was not the unpleasant ordeal that it might have been. The cut was free of dirt, and the blade that had created it had obviously been sharp, for the edges of the wound weren't torn or jagged. This was very good, as healing the gash would be quite simple. Once I was sure that there were no foreign bodies in the wound, I settled down on the floor in front of Darí, placing my hands on either side of his injured forearm and closing my eyes in preparation for entering a Healer's trance.

Just as I was taking a deep breath, I felt Darí touch my shoulder. "*Not all the way. Leave something to be seen. They don't know how deep the wound was, but there was lots of blood. We don't want them to know about our psychic healing abilities. There would be too many questions. Too dangerous*," his voice spoke in my mind. After a moment, I nodded reluctantly. It would be a struggle to keep myself from healing my *anÿncára* fully, but he was right—we needed to maintain our cover.

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Another delicious meal—I was comfortably satiated and mostly relaxed, sitting at the long rectangular dining table in Trevern's home. Through the window, I could see the sky coloring with the first ruddy

hues of sunset, long streamers of cirrus clouds showing pink against the darkening blue. Beside me, Darí sported a well-bandaged arm, but seemed otherwise little worse for his day's adventures. The younger children had been allowed to leave the dining room and were off playing in the courtyard—we could hear their animated voices as they engaged in some boisterous game just outside the window. The rest of us took part in a desultory conversation, enjoying our tea and the moment.

During a lull in the ebb and flow of voices, I turned my eyes to Trevern, asking the first pointed question of the evening, "You seem to know something about the people who attacked Darí today. Who are they?" I figured that since Darí had been injured, we had a right to know something about what was going on.

"Drifters?" Trevern met my eyes. "They come and go. They're mostly outlaws, often violent, and not welcome in any of the communities." Trevern snorted, something of a statement on his opinion of the moral character of these people. "We usually drive them out. If we catch them, they're punished according to the community laws."

"So why was this one spouting anti-government sentiment?" I queried further.

Trevern gave me a penetrating look, "You haven't met any of these outlaw groups on your travels through the other villages to the north?" I shook my head. We'd been servicing small communities since we'd arrived, and hadn't yet been in any of Davandrïa's larger cities. Trevern cocked his head slightly, apparently giving this some thought, "That's probably for the good. With all the problems we've been having lately, there are a lot of unemployed people in the cities. Poverty is a serious issue—some people have become bitter and disillusioned. I can't say that I'm unsympathetic towards them, but that's still no reason to resort to violence and crime. A few of them have formed gangs that range out from the major city centers. It's good to know that they haven't spread to the more remote regions yet."

"So they blame the government and its employees for their circumstances?" Darí's voice joined the conversation.

"That appears to be the case," Trevern nodded, looking pensive, like he was considering how much he should say. "The government has made some pretty poor decisions lately. When I was still on the government council, I opposed those badly designed policies, but to no avail—the majority ruled in favor of them. It doesn't surprise me that people are speaking out against the government … and those who have turned to outlawry will express their feelings violently."

We sat quietly for a little while, each person occupied with their own thoughts. Eventually, little spates of conversation picked up again, people discussing all the small things that keep household and farm going. Trevern's brother and sister-in-law got up, said their evening farewells, heading outside to check on the children. Shortly afterwards, his sister starting clearing the table and washing up. Trevern looked up from contemplating his tea, "So you will be heading south tomorrow?"

“Yes,” I confirmed. “We still have more communities who need their children vaccinated, and some of the Medics who have been covering for us while we stayed here need to continue with their regular routes.” Nor was there any need to stay longer since we weren’t learning anything more towards our purpose.

“I’ll miss the two of you,” Seychen voiced quietly. She was beginning to look more like a healthy 16-year-old now. Although still much too thin, the sharp angles of her face were starting to soften, and her eyes were bright with curiosity and life. She was mature for her years, obviously intelligent, with a strong interest in anything we could tell her about the places we’d traveled to on Davandrïa. We’d enjoyed more than a few afternoons together while she was still bedridden. Once she was strong enough to get about by herself, she’d eagerly accompanied us into town on several occasions, particularly to visit the herbalist, who appeared to be a close friend of hers. I harbored some suspicions that Seychen had a few psychic abilities, that the old herbalist was tutoring her in their use and concealment. However, we kept our thoughts to ourselves, as it had become apparent that people with such abilities were considered abnormal, freakish, and unnatural in most Davandrïan communities. Darí and I had become quite fond of her.

“We’ll miss you too,” I replied, looking into her sad eyes. I hoped she would get the life she deserved.

“Will you go all the way to Gavaldrïn?” Trevern’s voice brought us away from sad farewells, back to the business at hand.

“Ultimately, yes,” Darí answered.

“Hmmm … if it’s useful, I have a friend who’s a Medic there,” Trevern added after a moment. “We got to know each other while I was on the government council—his clinic covers the region of Gavaldrïn that includes the government complex and the residences of the elected Councilors. I’ve kept in touch with him since then. He’s helped me with the many questions I’ve had about Seychen’s illness, amongst other things. In any case, he’s been feeling a bit restless, and would like to trade out with one of the traveling Medics for a while. So, if you are interested, I’ll give you his name and address.”

“Thank you,” I responded happily. “That could be a good opportunity, particularly if Rori and I are tired of traveling about. We’ve never had an opportunity to work out of a clinic.” And a position like that would certainly get us closer to the action, possibly give us a chance to finally figure out whether there has been off-worlder interference in the Davandrïan government. I wondered if this offer was just a coincidence, or if Trevern suspected something of our mission.

Night had fallen outside; the evening had grown quiet now that the children were no longer playing their games. Darí and I started making our evening partings, going through the polite pleasantries before we left to go to our rooms for the night. Just as we were about to leave the dining room, Trevern gave us another of his penetrating looks.

“If you do end up working in Gavaldrïn, be careful around Sevellin,” he warned us as we hesitated by the entrance leading into the hallway.

“Who’s Sevellin?” Darí asked, eyebrows arched in question.

“You don’t know?” Trevern gave us an odd glance as if this should be common knowledge.

“No,” Darí paused for a moment, and I knew he was carefully weighing his words, trying to avoid exposing our lack of knowledge. “We’ve been too busy working in the villages to pay much attention to the city politics. Besides, everything has been changing so fast, it’s hard to keep track of who’s doing what anymore.” Darí chuckled, and Trevern seemed willing to accept his explanation.

“He’s one of the Councilors,” Trevern replied in a manner that suggested that he found this person distasteful in some way. “He has far more power than he should, and he likes to use it. Somehow, he’s managed to get himself elected as spokesperson, even though most of the Councilors that I know well don’t like him. In my opinion, his ethics are questionable. He’s a good person to stay away from.” My empathy told me that we had just been given a very important piece of information, one that should be received carefully and kept in strict confidence.

I tipped my head to one side, and smiling my acknowledgment, thanked Trevern again, then headed out into the hallway with Darí.

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The early morning sun shone through the trees that shaded the *Chiara’s* house, creating bands of light and dark across the yard. The sky was a pale white-blue, cloudless, a promise of a hot day to come. *Entropy* purred quietly behind us, staying out of trouble for the moment. Trevern and Seychen had come out to see us off. Behind his usual stoic calm, I could sense that it was an emotional moment for Trevern. Seychen was obviously saddened by our imminent departure.

Trevern smiled at us, blinked watery eyes in the sun, “I owe you two more than I will ever be able to repay. I’d given up hope. You gave both Seychen and hope back to me.”

Darí’s face shone with a gentle radiance as he responded, “It’s our calling as Medics to heal those in need. We were just doing what our hearts’ knew was right. You owe us nothing.” In most of the cultures of the Ll’Ellendrÿn, a Healer’s needs were either provided for by the government, or in the case of the Ellendrí, were met by the freely distributed production of the community as a whole. Our patients were never expected to pay us. Any obligations they felt were solely spiritual and moral in nature.

“Then I thank you with all my heart,” Trevern bowed his head in gratitude. Raising his eyes to us again, he said, “Travel safely. Be careful … the dangers increase as you get closer to Gavaldrïn. Not everything is as it should be. Be especially wary of those who have power.” I knew he was giving us fair warning. There were things that he could not say openly, for fear of his family’s safety, but I knew he was giving

us the best advice he could. I respected that. Trevern stepped back, and Seychen rushed forward, not as repressed as her father. Blinking back tears, she hugged Darí soundly, spoke her quiet farewells to him, then turned and gave me a similar hug. As she held me tightly, I heard her soft quiet voice in my ear.

“You two are different … in a good way,” her breath tickled my ear. “Sevellin is different in a bad way. He frightens me. Please be careful. I think he might want to kill you if he knew what you were.” I could feel a tremor run through her body as she spoke.

“We will, I promise,” I tried to sound as reassuring as possible, although her warning sent a cold tingle down my spine.

“I hope we can meet again someday,” Seychen gave me a dampened smile, then released me and went to stand by her father, showing the beginnings of the strength and composure that I could see she would develop as an adult. As they raised their hands in a final gesture of farewell, we climbed aboard *Entropy*, and the road unfolded ahead of us.

Farrwÿn—Date: 8939.142

Lorril

I tossed and twisted in my bed, caught in that place between dreaming and waking where my *turas* torments me. Images flashed, short scenes played behind my closed eyelids. I struggled to awaken, to escape from knowledge I didn't wish to have. Finally, I surfaced, gasping as though I was trying to breathe water.

I sat up, shaking, in the predawn stillness. My mind wanted to retreat from those almost-dreams, to quickly forget them, but I knew I couldn't allow myself this kindness. Instead, I forced the visions to the forefront of my thoughts, where I could examine and analyze them.

Darí and Dran. Different potential futures flickered through my mental lens. Darí lying dead with his throat cut and gaping. Dran in a pool of blood, abdominal cavity slashed open, struggling amidst his own gore. The flash of a knife blade. Both dead … or neither. With a sense of relief, I saw that there was another possibility, one in which they both survived.

I took deep breaths to calm my shuddering. Gradually, my heart stopped pounding, and my breathing eased. I shivered slightly as the warm tropical air dried the sweat on my skin. Reaching out with my telepathy, I touched the minds of my two friends. "*Danger!*" my warning was sharp. Then I followed up with the images I'd seen. Hopefully, they would recognize the situation quickly enough when it came upon them, taking the actions that would keep them both alive.

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The mid-afternoon sun found me sitting on the sandy beach close to the small house I was currently calling home, sheltering in the shade of a tree. I was attempting to meditate, to find some calmness after the bloody chaos of my visions early this morning. I still felt tense, the muscles of my back and abdomen tight. Earlier in the day, I had tried to place the images in time, to determine when they might happen and provide a better warning to Dran and Darí, but I was unsuccessful. The lack of detail and temporal position in the time-line of the future gave me the feeling that the events I'd viewed might occur sooner rather than later—I always had the greatest difficulties interpreting my *turas* when it was accessing the near future—and I warned my friends to be particularly vigilant in the tendays to come. As my mind rehashed the violent images once more, I realized that I had failed my meditation exercise completely.

At the quiet crunch of shell in sand, my eyes flew open, and I looked up sharply. A stride away, Tanish stood, hands on hips, casually at ease, a slight sheen of sweat on her deeply brown skin giving it an almost iridescent gleam. Although she wore the dark fitted pants and high boots typical of the border patrol, the black jacket displaying the brightly embroidered representation of the Three Arcs had clearly been left behind in recognition of the heat of the day. Instead, she wore a sleeveless tunic, exposing

long, well-muscled arms. At this moment, she was watching me with a wry smile.

“Do you always sleep out under the trees?” she asked with a humorous lilt. I could feel my cheeks redden slightly as I felt a wash of embarrassment flow over me. This obviously wasn’t the first time she’d seen me mediate under this tree. I enjoyed the beach—the murmur of the waves softly breaking along the shore was an ideal background against which to calm my thoughts and make my mind receptive to the great oneness.

Smiling to show that I wasn’t trying to be surly, I answered, “I was trying to meditate.”

“Oh,” her green eyes looked me over brightly, “it’s hard to tell the difference.” She laughed, a soft musical sound, then gracefully eased herself into a sitting position beside me. “So it’s been a few tendays since last I saw you …”

Tanish is a good friend of mine. Though she often likes to tease me, we get along well and have had many long, and frequently philosophical, discussions. Today, our conversation started out touching on many familiar themes, but after a short while, I realized that Tanish had something on her mind, something that kept her preoccupied.

During a brief lull in our friendly discourse, I met her eyes and queried, “What’s really bothering you today?”

She smiled, a little sadly, “Am I that easy to read?”

“To a trained empath?” I cocked an eyebrow at her. “Yes.”

“I was hoping to hear the current news about the Föalen Twins,” she elucidated. She often referred to Darí and Dran as that, even though she knew that Dran was the eldest by three years. It was another gentle tease, and a sign of affection.

“They’re safe and well,” I tried to make my voice as reassuring as I could. I knew that she had strong feelings for Darí and Dran, and worried about them, not only as Guardians on a difficult assignment, but on a personal level as well. Settling back against the tree, I recounted all that I knew about their recent adventures, based on their regular communications with me. Tanish listened raptly. When I’d finished, her face was filled with happiness, like a youngster who’s been told a good bedtime story.

“I’ve been concerned about them. It’s good to know that they’re doing well. So many Guardians have been lost in the last few decades …” her smile faded as darker thoughts filled her mind. “I had a dream a few days back—no, a nightmare really—about them. You know how dreams are … sometimes they’re windows into different times and places … possibly more real than you realize.” Tanish looked down at the white sand we were seated on, absent-mindedly picking up a seashell and turning it over in the palm of her hand, bright against the darker pink of her skin.

I nodded. I knew only too well what she meant. It was possible that Tanish had a touch of *turas*, certainly many of the Lorrilei had psychic abilities of one type or another. “You worry more about Darí and Dran than the other Guardians still in service.” It was a statement, an opening for her to elaborate on her feelings.

She snorted self-deprecatingly, “So I do.” She stared at the shell in her hand, deep in her thoughts for a moment, then looked up, directly into my eyes. “As you have certainly guessed, I’m quite enamored with them. I fell for Dran years ago, long before Darí became a Guardian, totally unintentionally. I didn’t think I’d feel the same way about Darí, but whatever it is that attracts me to Dran, Darí has it too.”

“You know they’re bonded to each other,” I didn’t really want to say that to Tanish, but it was something she needed to know.

“Oh, yes, deep-bonded. I knew that right from the beginning,” she shook her head and gave a sad, cynical laugh. “Rallandrí caught me looking moon-eyed at Dran one day, and took me aside for a little chat. He said that Dran was *anÿncára* with his brother, that their relationship was further complicated by a third member in the bond. Basically, it was a gentle warning not to make things worse for them.” I was still looking into her eyes, seeing reflections in her irises from the play of light that flickered through the leaves on the tree. It was easy to sense her feelings of self-reproof and frustration. She looked away, out over the ocean with its calming endless susurration, “So, I keep things friendly, but professional, try not to add to their burden. But it’s hard, oh so hard!” She tightened her hand around the shell she held, making a fist. “I can’t change the way I feel. I can’t stop myself from being attracted to them.” It was a confession of her love, not something I could hold against her. In my own way, I too loved Darí and Dran, not enough to be their *anÿncára*, but much more than simply as friends—I was their *avángri*.

As I watched Tanish, saw the moisture gleam in her eyes, she seemed for a moment to fade from sight, and a different image filled my eyes. Tanish sitting on the white sands of Lorril with another person, shoulders brushing, hand in hand, talking animatedly. The person in the vision turned towards me, and I saw blue eyes set in a heart-shaped face with highly arched eyebrows and silky silvery hair, a face that I could almost, but not quite recognize. Not Dran or Darí with their soft grey eyes, not my Turien-to-be with his red-gold hair, but someone from their family, someone not yet born. The vision faded, leaving me with a gentle smile on my face and Tanish staring at me quizzically.

“What did you just see?” she queried directly, a look of intensity now in her eyes. Unfortunately, my reputation as a seer is known quite far and wide throughout the Ll’Ellendrÿn—I must have phased out to that place where I go when my *turas* comes to me. But at least this time, the news was good.

“I think there is a Föalen for you still,” I replied happily, glad that this time the visions were kind.

“Not Darí or Dran?” she cocked her head, curious.

“No,” I hesitated for a moment as I considered the face I’d seen, “maybe a *darïlad*, second or third

degree."

"So long a wait!" I sensed frustration, disbelief, happiness, all swirling together in her mind. Then she gathered herself together, "Well, I suppose that's better than nothing at all." She gave me another of her bright, but slightly sad expressions, "I guess I'd better hope that I live until that day."

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The end of the day was fast approaching. After Tanish had departed, I'd finally managed to achieve a state of meditation, calming my inner churnings. Feeling quieter and more centered, I could have watched the waves break against the shore until darkness fell; however, I wanted to get back to the house while there was still light. I'd learned how fast the tropical night came to these islands … not like the long hours of twilight in the northern hemisphere of Ellendrïa. The birds were ramping up their songs, getting ready to go into full orchestral mode shortly before the thick, humid blackness of night rapidly blotted out the last of the light.

Climbing to my feet, I headed along a well-worn sandy path that took me upwards through the shoreline fringe of trees to the flat interior of the island. I didn't have far to go. Rising up on stilts ahead of me was a small wooden bungalow with a wide veranda running around the full circumference of the building. Apparently, the elevated design allowed air to flow under the house, providing natural cooling during the hot tropical days. I followed the path through a small garden brilliant with blossoms of many colors, and climbed up the stairs that accessed the main entrance. Standing on the porch, I turned and looked back the way I'd come. Some of the shoreline trees had been carefully pruned to provide a view of the ocean from the deck. As I stared westward, the sun dipped quickly into the silvery depths of the ocean.

Luckily, this had been a rest day for me. I had been able to take the time I needed to sort out my *turas*. Now, I could also appreciate the beauty of this island world. While I will always have a special attachment to Ellendrïa, the planet of my birth, the incredible living diversity of Lorril will forever be breathtaking to me. This bungalow is one of several that are maintained for the use of the Guardians and their families, and I think the Lorrilei went to a special effort to build them at locations that are particularly resplendent.

Turning, I opened the door and entered my home. The cabin layout was simple—a small bedroom and washroom on the left, and a large multipurpose room on the right, with a standard food preparation area and eating and working space—a plan that was ideal for me. Large windows and another door opened out onto the rear deck of the house. From here, I could look out over a space that contained more gardens, surrounded by a shelterbelt of tropical trees that gave a sense of complete isolation, although I knew that another house was only a short distance beyond that leafy perimeter. To one side of the gardens, but still within the boundary set by the trees, was a graveled space for parking a hovercraft or ground transport. A gravel road led from there through the trees towards the community center located on this island. A gentle sense of humor twitched the corners of my mouth as I looked out

at this space—no simple hovercraft was in occupancy; rather, the *Sn'ënne ó ed Föalen* crouched there, patiently awaiting its next adventure.

Memories flowed through my mind as the setting sun briefly flashed red light across the reflective surfaces of the ship. In that strange subjective way that we perceive the passage of time, my time here has been passing very rapidly. I'd been busy … and happy, two things that make time flit by quickly. It seemed that only a handful of tendays had passed, and yet it was over three quarter-years since I had returned the *Ënne* from Davandrïa. The three of us, Darí, Dran, and me, had taken the ship to that world at the beginning of their undercover operation. Darí had flown us to an abandoned farm site on the north coast of the largest continent. There, as promised, awaited a transport and all the required papers necessary for them to operate as two brothers, Rori and Lyell, running one of the governmentally-funded mobile medical units. Darí was acting as a "Medic", a position similar to that of an Ellendrïan Healer. Dran was the team's "Medical Technician". Already, they had been in character, virtually unrecognizable as Ellendrí, speaking the native language fluently. Longingly, I'd wished I could join them—I am truly starting to develop a taste for adventure. However, my role there had been simple. Rallandrí had not been surprised to learn that Darí and Dran had taught me how to pilot the *Ënne*. Leaving it on Davandrïa, where it might be discovered while Darí and Dran were elsewhere, had not been the best option. But I'd been available, and able, to fly the ship back to Lorril. Now it sits here awaiting its future.

The sudden night had fallen, darkness was complete. My dark adjusted eyes could still see the *Ënne*, pale gleams of moonlight and starlight reflecting off the hull. Although not discussed in any great detail with Rallandrí, there was another reason why the ship was resting here. With my *turas* and my telepathic links to Dran and Darí, I was their backup, the rescue operation should they need one. I hoped fervently it wouldn't come to that, hoped that this mission would go smoothly and no one would get injured or killed, but after this morning, I was beginning to think that they might well need my assistance in the end.

Chapter 22: Past and Present

Eldranth—Date: 8939.172

Davandrïa

Dust swirled lazily around my feet as I walked, stirred up by the gentle breeze. In the distance, a voice cried out repetitively, hawking late fall vegetables from a transport parked along one edge of the square. Turning my head, I could see the brightly colored awning that provided shade for the farmer's produce. A couple of people were heading his way, and I knew he would soon have customers. Otherwise, the big open square was mostly empty. In the center, a fountain tinkled away musically, but the benches surrounding it were unoccupied. This plaza was the heart of Gavaldrïn, and evidently it was not beating.

Two-story buildings surrounded the square on three sides, shading sidewalks with canopies that artistically informed passersby of the names and natures of the facilities within. The north side of the square was taken up by a long building made from a dull reddish-colored concrete—the governmental buildings. I stared at it for a moment, shuddering as memories forced their way to the surface of my thoughts—pain, guilt, feelings of failure. Almost, I could smell spilled fuel and the sulfur tang of gunpowder.

Darí, striding at my side, looked sharply at me, "This is where you were ambushed." It was a simple statement, no hint of blame or reproof. Whatever had happened between us since, Darí was finally able to accept the person I'd become.

I nodded. I felt a twinge in my chest, tightness, a slight difficulty taking a breath as my body responded sympathetically to my memories. Today, though, I'd come here fully alert and prepared … and I could sense no signs of danger.

Our goal was not the government complex; rather, we were headed for one of the many little shops on the west side of the square. We walked past the fountain, enjoying for a moment the cool dampness of the air as droplets splashed outwards from the arching streams of water and the rippling pool at the fountain's base. The sculpture in the center, comprised of a greenish-blue veined marble-like stone, appeared to be a fish with wings. Whether it was realistic or fantastical, I had no idea. It soared out of its pond, which was filled with carved representations of water plants, amidst geysers of water. This feature of the square was new—the last time I'd been here, the plaza had been violently vandalized. I felt heartened by this small improvement, even though the economical woes of the city were obvious from the emptiness of the streets and stores.

Reaching the west sidewalk, we traversed along it until we came to a building that had a canopy bearing three diagonal blue stripes and the words "Medical Clinic". The day was quickly coming to an end, the sun was getting low in the sky, and we had come here for an "after-hours" interview with the Medic,

Larri, who ran this clinic. I placed my hand on the well-worn metal handle of the clinic door and pulled, feeling momentarily surprised when the door opened easily. Although showing signs of age, the building was clearly still well-maintained—the hinges of the door had been recently oiled. I held the door open for Darí, then entered quickly on his heels.

As the door closed behind us, I scanned the room, my instincts always on the alert for trouble. Normally, Medics go about their duties unarmed. Since Farrwÿn had given us warning of his visions, I'd started wearing a small boot knife, hidden and discrete, but still there if I needed it. Not that a tiny knife could do much against firearms or multiple well-armed opponents. However, at the moment, all seemed quiet in the clinic. We stood in a small room, scored wooden flooring under our feet, with several simple chairs along the wall to my right, and a desk along the opposite wall. At the far end of the room was a second door, most likely leading into an examination room and possibly some office space. Sitting at the desk, head raised in reaction to our entry, was a youngish-looking Davandrïan male. A large book occupied most of the desk's surface. A quick glance told me that it was an anatomy text, easily identifiable by its artwork regardless of the language in which it was written.

The man gave us a welcoming look, warm brown eyes with tousled hair a few shades lighter lending him a friendly aspect. "Rori, Lyell?" he asked. Darí nodded, beaming brightly in return. "You're expected. Go on through that door. Larri's in his office to the right." The young student, if my guess was correct, gave us another pleasant expression and went back to his studies.

Quickly, we passed through the indicated door into the building's inner sanctuary. The clinic was not large—the short hallway in which we found ourselves had only two other doors, one to the left and one to the right. As directed, we cautiously opened the one on the right and peered in.

"Come in!" a voice called out to us in a deep, rich timbre. Darí opened the doorway fully, and we both passed through. The room, like the rest of the clinic, was small and cramped, but still warm and welcoming, full of the mementos that an interesting life accumulates. A worn, albeit solid, wooden desk took up most of the room, covered with various bits of paper, a couple books, and a radio communicator. Behind the desk was Larri, an older man, still strong and healthy, with a width and height that surpassed my own, although not unusual amongst the Sfoení. In his youth, his shoulder-length hair must once have been very dark, but was now streaked in equal measure with grey. His eyes, however, were still bright, surprisingly blue in color, with crinkles at the corners that matched those bracketing his mouth, a sure sign that he enjoyed the occasional laugh. Already my empathy was giving me positive feelings towards this person, and we had yet to start a conversation.

Larri indicated a pair of old chairs, wood with leather upholstery, pulled up to the front of his desk, "Sit down. Be at ease." Once we had seated ourselves, he continued, "So, you're Rori and Lyell? Brothers, right?"

I smiled, and Darí responded, "Yes," with a nod of his head. I was looking around the office, taking in the

pictures on the walls that were clearly those of family members and scenic places somewhere on Davandrïa, obviously reminders of happy times. With all the chaos and violence that had been happening on this planet over the last 13 or so years, I could imagine that a person might need those reminders to stay sane during progressively tougher times.

“I’ve been talking with Trevern lately. He has some very good things to say about you two,” Larri gave us a friendly glance, clasping his hands loosely on the desk in front of him.

Darí cocked his head to one side, his brows drawn down slightly. “We were very lucky with Seychen. If the cancer had metastasized before we’d begun treatment, things might have turned out very differently.”

“True enough,” Larri acknowledged, the corners of his lips pulling downward into a slight frown as I sensed memories of his own failures chasing across the surface of his mind. “It can happen to any of us, losing a patient. It happens more often than it should these days. However, you certainly knew a treatment that worked, and that was after several other Medics had failed, so I congratulate you.”

Darí bowed his head slightly, gracefully accepting the compliment. Larri looked up from his hands, where his eyes had drifted momentarily, focusing a keen, assessing gaze on each of us in turn. “I’ve never met either of you before,” he commented, a statement that was clearly asking for further clarification.

“I’m not surprised,” Darí responded. “We were trained in the northeast, at Tellakin on the Lake, where our family lives.” This information had been provided to us as part of the cover under which we were operating. I wondered where Rori and Lyell were now, or if they had ever existed and weren’t just some fabrication created for the purpose of getting us on the ground on Davandrïa. “We decided we wanted to see a bit more of the continent, so we signed up for one of the mobile medical units,” Darí continued.

“Hmmph,” Larri snorted softly. “Have you seen enough dusty grassland yet?”

Darí shook his head, chuckling softly, “And you say you want to trade places with us?”

“Change of scenery is often a good thing,” Larri smiled, a look in his eyes that suggested there was more to this than he was going to articulate. “And it will only be for a short while, until you two tire of the comforts of our great capital,” he added with a bit of a wry grin. The whole situation seemed a little too contrived to me, yet my empathy was telling me that I could trust Larri.

When we had arrived on Davandrïa, there had been minimal contact with the people who had set up our undercover operation—just the hand-over of *Entropy*, our necessary documents, and a quick briefing about our “past”. After that, we’d had no communication at all with the group. I had assumed that, in order to prevent bias, they’d left us on our own to discover what we could. But now I was wondering if their silence also provided a measure of safety for their members. If there were illicit

Ellendrí here, with the psi powers so typical of our people, these “dissidents” might well fear the discovery of their plans as a result of telepathic mind probing. They may have learned to mask their deeper thoughts with mundane surface trivia, but they probably also kept the distribution of important information to the minimum number of people necessary, reducing the likelihood that someone might accidentally relinquish crucial information to a seeking mind. I wondered if Larri and Trevern were part of this underground organization, smoothing the way for our arrival in Gavaldrïn, although I’d never caught any hint of such an involvement in their surface thoughts. Nor would my ethics allow me to probe more deeply in order to satisfy my curiosity. Circling back around in my head, my thoughts returned to the last time I’d been in this city, and the sniper who had shielded his mind completely from us. As often happened lately, my thoughts led me to unanswered questions. Had the sniper been an Ellendrí? How many of our people were here, and what were they doing? Why?

I realized that we’d all fallen silent for a moment, each of us busy with our own thoughts. Larri’s face took on a serious cast, and he eyed us once again, “Well, let’s see what the two of you know so that I can decide if you are competent enough to take over the clinic for a while.”

For the next two hours, we underwent a detailed interview involving much of our knowledge of anatomy, physiology, diagnosis, and treatment. Fortunately, we’d both carefully studied Davandrïan medical technology. That, in combination with our own comprehensive training as Ellendrí Healers, enabled us to answer, at least to a sufficient degree, all of Larri’s questions. Clearly, whatever may have been his reasons for wishing to exchange duties with us, Larri’s first responsibility was to his patients. If we were not adequately qualified, we weren’t going to be working at this medical clinic.

I shifted in my chair, stretching to relieve a cramped muscle. Darí was describing in careful detail the testing and possible therapy for a suspected case of diabetes. Although such conditions were virtually unknown amongst the Ellendrí, we were still trained in the recognition of these disorders. Rarely, a new mutation can result in the re-emergence of an old disease, thus our Healers are well versed regarding current health issues in our populations, as well as those problems that had afflicted us in our past history. As Darí finished up, Larri looked over at me. “Long day?” he asked with a rather mischievous grin. I nodded, trying to look more alert than I was feeling.

“Well”, he remarked as he stretched his arms over his head and something in his back audibly cracked, “I’m satisfied. Rori,” Larri rested his gaze on Darí, “you clearly know your medical theory. Based on what I’ve heard from the reports of your work during the past half-year, you’re well-liked by the patients you’ve treated.” Turning his gaze to me, he continued, “Lyell, you’ve been pretty quiet during this interview, only answering the questions that I asked you directly, but even from those responses, I suspect that you have more training than just as a Medical Technician. Is that right?”

I gave Larri a crooked smile, raising one eyebrow, “I may have the training, but I’ve not taken the Medic’s Oath yet.” That stated it pretty fairly, on my world as well as here.

“Still apprenticing?” he cocked his head as he studied me more closely.

“Yes, more or less,” I looked down at his desk, feeling the self-consciousness that comes when questions get too personal. “I haven’t decided if I’m ready to take my oath.”

“Ah,” Larri nodded. “Some people never do. It’s probably best if you wait until you feel the calling,” he gave me a friendly gaze. “In any case, you’re certainly an excellent technician, and a good assistant to Rori.” He paused for a few moments to let us gather our thoughts, then, stretching back in his chair, added, “This is what I’m offering for the exchange. I’ll take over your work with the medical mobile unit, bringing Belar, the Medical Technician who works here at the clinic, with me. He’s been looking forward to a little adventure—I think this will be a good experience for him. In return, you’ll get to work at the clinic with my patients and anyone else who needs assistance in the region that this clinic covers. I’ll leave you with Garvin, the Medic-In-Training that you met when you came in. He’s been apprenticing with me for two years now, knows his theory well, and is familiar with the operation of the clinic. He’s also an excellent receiver and does a pretty good job at keeping the clinic’s books. I’ll spend the next tenday introducing you to all of my patients that come in during that time, and take you over the records of the ones that don’t so that you’re as comfortable with them as possible. Then you’ll be on your own. When you think you’ve had enough, radio me and let me know. We’ll return to Gavaldrïn as quickly as we can. Does that sound like a fair deal to you?” he finished, watching us closely to gauge our reactions.

Darí looked at me quizzically. I shot an affirmative thought back at him. “Sounds more than fair to me,” I replied. “What do you think, Rori?”

Darí glanced from me to Larri, looking pleased, “I think it will be an excellent learning experience for all of us.”

“Good!” Larri exclaimed. “The evening is getting late. I’ll let the two of you go off about your tasks.” He stood up behind his desk, holding out his hand for the traditional hand clasp that Davandrïans use when closing a deal. Although I usually avoided physical contact with strangers as much as possible, I carefully shielded myself and returned the clasp firmly. Darí followed suit. “Be here tomorrow morning at the start of the working day,” Larri directed, then, with a happy grin, waved us towards the door with his hand.

It was dark when we left the clinic. The plaza was quiet. Even the farmer had driven his transport away. We were headed for Gavaldrïn’s Medical Academy, also located in the core of the city, but a brisk walk from the central plaza. We had left *Entropy* parked at the facility, where it would be cleaned, given much needed maintenance, and restocked for the next run. In addition to training Medics, the Medical Academy also provided basic accommodation for traveling Medics who were visiting the city temporarily. Darí and I had a small room together, access to hot water, and would be fed at the facility’s cafeteria as required. I was definitely looking forward to a shower and some good food!

Eldarí—Date: 8939.176

Davandrïa

Ten Davandrïan days had passed since our arrival in Gavaldrïn. I found those short days, slightly less than half of the Ellendrïan day to which I had become accustomed in my youth, were over so quickly that time almost seemed to blur. We had settled into something of a rhythm—early mornings doing whatever discrete calisthenic and exercise routines we could fit in, the working day spent meeting Larri's patients at the clinic, evenings studying the records of those patients we would not be seeing before Larri departed with *Entropy*, and nights in exhausted sleep at the Medical Academy. But that pattern was quickly coming to an end. Tonight would be the last evening we would spend with Larri. Earlier in the tenday, we'd taken our few possessions out of the *Entropy*. Shortly afterwards, Larri had moved all of his personal belongings onboard the transport or into storage at the Medical Academy, leaving the upper story of the medical clinic cleaned and ready for our occupancy. We would move into the clinic tomorrow.

Dran was sitting on one of the now familiar wood and leather chairs in Larri's office, a book-like folder open in his lap, exposing several pages filled with Davandrïan script—one of the patient records. He had just asked a question about the therapy requirements of that particular patient, and Belar, who was perched on the edge of Larri's desk, was describing the procedures they'd been using. I was quietly listening, making my own mental notes. After he'd finished, Dran turned to me, raising his eyebrows in query. I shook my head, indicating that I had no further questions, and Dran slipped the sheets of paper back into the folder, passing it to Larri, who was sitting behind the desk, where a large drawer held the ranks of patient files. Larri put the file back in its correct position and took out another one.

"I've been saving this one for last," he said with a sigh. "I suspect this will be your most difficult patient—a person with an unusual and …" Larri paused, searching for words, "sensitive problem. His name is Sevellin." Larri glanced up to observe our response to the name.

"One of the Councilors?" Dran asked in reply to Larri's meaningful look. Trevern and Seychen had warned us about Sevellin's potentially dangerous nature. Several days previously, during a period when there had been no scheduled appointments at the clinic, Larri had taken us on a walk through the region that his clinic served, pointing out various landmarks and the homes of some of his patients, as well as the residences where the Councilors dwelled during their time in the capital. He'd named the current group of elected Councilors as a part of his description of Gavaldrïn during our tour, but had not made any more specific references to their characters. I didn't know if he shared Trevern's concerns regarding Sevellin or not.

"In fact, the newly elected spokesperson for the Councilors, as of a quarter-year ago," Larri shook his head as if he found this fact disturbing. "We've had a rather high death rate amongst the Councilors in the past few years—two just this year, one falling from his mount while riding, another in a transport

collision. That second death was the previous spokesperson, whose position Sevellin now holds." Yes, I thought, I could sense that Sevellin was not well-liked by Larri. I wondered how many other Davandrïans also had a dislike for the man.

"What is Sevellin's complaint?" I cocked my head, indicating the file that Larri now held in his hands. In response, he placed the file on the desk, opened it up, spreading out its contents where Dran and I could see them.

"He came to me 12 years ago, just after he was elected by his district as Councilor." Larri paused for a moment, and I interjected a question, "Isn't that a rather long period of service for a Councilor?"

"It is indeed," Larri replied. "However, there's no law against serving that many years, as long as the district the Councilor serves keeps re-electing them each year." He looked down at the pages spread out in front of us. "Surprisingly, even though he's been my patient for 12 years, I still know very little about him, apart from the issue that he came to me for treatment." Larri sighed, "In any case, he told me that the previous Medic he'd been seeing had treated him for erectile dysfunction resulting from a testosterone deficiency." Larri looked up, meeting our eyes. "I suspect this type of problem is not uncommon in our population, especially amongst older men," he gave us a small, tight smile. "However, most people suffer without treatment." True enough … while I wouldn't exactly describe Davandrïans as prudish, they considered a person's sex life to be a very private affair. At the same time, like many Sfoení races, expressions of virility, particularly in men, were considered normal and healthy when kept within their own homes. Men with sexual dysfunctions were seen as weak, disabled, or unmanly, thus these problems were seldom made public. That Sevellin had sought out medical treatment for this issue suggested that his need to be seen as a functional man outweighed his concerns about exposing his condition to a person outside his private household.

Larri was continuing, "The treatment Sevellin requested involves injecting slow-release testosterone pellets subcutaneously into the thigh region once every half-year. This is a fairly standard way of managing this deficiency, but, as there may also be physiological causes for erectile dysfunction, I asked to examine him before I would consent to his request." Larri shook his head again, and snorted. "Well, Sevellin became quite belligerent, telling me that a simple blood test would be diagnostic, and that he refused to submit to any type of physical examination involving his genitalia." Larri paused for a moment, took a deep breath, then added, "Really, that's not terribly surprising … most people wouldn't even come to a Medic in the first place."

"So what did you do?" Dran encouraged.

"Did a blood test. What else could I do?" Larri picked up one of the sheets on his desk, handing it to me. It was the test results, clearly showing low blood testosterone levels.

"You gave him the treatment he requested?" I inquired.

“Yes, I did,” he replied ruefully, eyes downcast. “With all the political chaos going on, it’s not wise to make an enemy of a Councilor. Friends in positions of power can be very necessary when you need assistance—enemies in those same places can be very destructive.” There was another long pause, then Larri added, “Besides, although I dislike making treatment decisions on a single test result, that result did confirm what Sevellin had told me.”

I reached over to the desk and collected the remaining documents from Sevellin’s file. Glancing over them, I didn’t see anything particularly outstanding given the condition he was being treated for—twice yearly visits to the clinic for his testosterone injection, annual blood work showing that, with treatment, his blood testosterone levels were within the normal range. “Have you had any further problems with him?” I inquired.

“Not exactly,” Larri answered slowly, choosing his words with care. “He is belligerent, disrespectful, surly, but not to the point of being violent or behaving unlawfully. I’m just warning you to handle him carefully,” Larri smiled grimly. “And you will get to meet him … his next appointment will be in 13 days.”

“How does a person who is that unpleasant get elected by his district year after year?” I wondered out loud, carefully putting Sevellin’s file back in order and handing it back to Larri.

“Hmmph,” Larri put the file back in his desk and closed the drawer. “There are more ways to get elected than just on the basis of popularity … and Sevellin does seem to be able to get people to do what he wants.”

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Night had fallen as we walked past the fountain on our way back to the Medical Academy. The air was cold and crisp. The temperature had dropped below freezing—frost crunched softly under our feet. The fountain was still running, water spraying in cascades over the glossy back of the flying fish, only the fact that it was being heated keeping it from becoming an ice sculpture. From Larri, I had learned that it would be turned off once the first snow fell, sodden snow-ice being more than the fountain’s heaters could handle.

By agreement through our ever-present mind link, our route was taking us close to Sevellin’s residence, although we were being careful to stay in the shadows and keep our thoughts well shielded. My mind mulled over what I’d learned about Sevellin. Could he be one of the Ellendrí who were causing such harm to this society’s governance? Certainly, he was in a position to either enact change or become a target himself.

What of Sevellin’s condition, and the treatment Larri was providing? It was possible than an Ellendrí might take testosterone to enhance their disguise if they were trying to remain unrecognized. That would push them to the far extreme of the male phase, making them appear more like a male Sfoení. However, it was hardly necessary. Dran and I were successfully posing as Davandrïans without having to

go to such lengths. Nor would testosterone treatment be pleasant. Occasionally, mostly during times far in our past, estrogen and testosterone were used to trigger ërïol in individuals who were being asked to mate in order to genetically fix specific traits into a lineage, in situations where no bonds of love or friendship existed to encourage that mating. Today, such forced ërïol is considered a gross violation of a person's freedom of choice. Continuous treatment with testosterone would cause a state of unremitting ërïol and constant sexual arousal. I couldn't imagine why someone would want to do that to themselves. How could they focus on the daily activities of life? To be in that state would be exhausting to the extreme. Although I knew the Sfoení existed in a condition that approximated continual ërïol, I suspected that it was less intense than the biyearly seasonal cycle of our people.

We were now on the street opposite of Sevellin's home, a good-sized two-story building, looking black in the dim light from a dark and heavily overcast sky, although I knew from our earlier tour through the city that the color was actually a dull red. There was no light over the entrance door, but the windows in the upper story glowed brightly. We had not quite reached a position directly across from the house when Dran reached out and touched my shoulder. Sensing what he wanted, I turned, following him into the shadows created by a narrow alleyway between two buildings. While cleaner and less noisome than some alleys I'd been in, I heard the scurrying sounds of small feet, most likely rodents of some type, as we took up a position where we could observe without being seen ourselves.

I wasn't sure what Dran and I expected to learn tonight … what was the likelihood that we would observe anything of value on a single evening's watch? If we truly felt that Sevellin was an issue that required surveillance, we would need to follow him more closely. Yet somehow, we both felt that a piece of the puzzle would be here tonight. Was it our *turas*? I didn't know, but whatever the feeling was, it kept us crouched, waiting for something, anything, to happen.

I felt the cold slowly sinking into my bones. Consciously, I used my biocontrol to warm myself. As people were coming home for the evening, and later going to sleep, more and more of the lights along the street were being extinguished, deepening the darkness, although Dran and I still saw well enough. Davandrïa's single large moon provided sufficient light, even through the dense cloud cover, for my eyes to see glistening from the ever thickening frost layer.

It seemed that we crouched, leaning against each other for shared warmth, in that cold alley for a long time. I was beginning to feel hungry. I thought, with regret, that we had missed the evening meal at the Medical Academy's cafeteria. We would have to scrounge for leftovers when we got back. A slight sound, the crunch of a foot on frost some distance away, alerted me. No one had come along the street for quite a while now. The only remaining light was in the upper story of Sevellin's house. Was he waiting for someone? I felt Dran's hand on my arm, and joined his thoughts, sensing both warning and excitement. A figure came into view, walking quickly along the street, wearing a warm and elaborately embroidered coat that came down past the knees in acknowledgment of the cold night air. Loose, bright hair fell in waves across the person's shoulders. That, along with their silhouette, convinced me that I was seeing a woman rather than a man. She stopped by the darkened door of Sevellin's house, and

tapped softly on the wood panel.

Women on Davandrïa were generally well protected. Most worked from their homes, or occasionally from family-owned shops. Seldom did they travel alone at night, or outside of their familiar community. While not illegal, those that did faced serious reprobation. I'd been on enough planets that I had a fairly good idea what I was seeing. Where there were Sfoení, with their strong and continuous reproductive drive, there were always those who would offer sexual favors for a price. The names for this vocation, and the respect that it was given, varied from place to place. However, I was sure that this woman was the Davandrïan equivalent of a prostitute, a sex-worker.

The woman knocked gently on the door a second time, and almost immediately the door opened a crack. A glimmer of light came through the narrow opening, probably from a small hand-held light, and the door opened further, just enough to allow the woman to enter. The person inside remained hidden from view, but I suspected it was Sevellin himself. A short while later, the light in the upper window was dimmed, but nothing further happened. In the faint light, I could see Dran shaking his head, then he squeezed my arm. I knew it was time for us to leave. Rather than walk where we could be seen from Sevellin's windows, if he wasn't already sufficiently occupied, we headed back the way we'd come, taking another route to the Medical Academy.

As we were walking through the dark, empty streets, I wondered—what had we learned? That Sevellin had an unhealthy sexual fetish, which he satisfied through the use of hormone therapy and paid sex? While that might indicate some type of psychological illness, his actions weren't illegal by Davandrïan law, as long as they weren't carried out in a public place. So, I might not like what he was doing, but there was little I could or should do, given our assignment. What if he were Ellendrí? No. I couldn't believe that was possible. I felt nauseated trying to imagine how one of our people might do what Sevellin was doing. Telepaths can hardly tolerate the touch of a stranger. Why would a telepath want to copulate with one? In my experience, Ellendrí always chose their partners carefully from amongst compatible friends, people they knew well. Further, why would anyone want to deny their hermaphroditic nature by using drugs to force themselves to be extremely, aggressively male? That thought, too, sent chills down my spine. For us, such actions were disturbing, frightening, disgusting. Surely, if nothing else, we had learned that as sick as Sevellin was, he wasn't one of ours, and for now, not our concern.

I reached out and touched Dran's mind, sharing my thoughts. Although I could sense that he also felt sickened by the possibility that an Ellendrí could be engaged in such activities, I didn't feel his complete support for my conclusions. "*No*," his mind voice spoke in my head, "*it just might be possible, and that frightens me even more.*"

Chapter 23: An Unpleasant Meeting

Eldranth—Date: 8939.182

Davandrïa

The first snow of the winter crunched crisply beneath my feet. Earlier this morning, the snow had been pristine, clean and white. Now, it was becoming trampled and grey. However, the weather was cold enough that the snow wasn't melting. As I passed the governmental buildings, I observed a knot of people standing huddled together against the cold. Protesters. They'd been here every day this tenday. At first, there had only been one or two. Now, the group had grown in size to 10 or more. The people were cold and hungry, and they wanted change.

I walked by, laden with several bags and a pack full of supplies, having made a trip to the dispensary at the Medical Academy. There was nothing I could do for the demonstrators, not now, but my heart went out to them. I'd seen enough of the situation on Davandrïa to know that things were getting dire. Passing by the fountain, so cheerful only a short while ago, it felt bleak and still to me, hidden under a cold rimy blanket. The sidewalk in front of the medical clinic was free of snow, carefully cleared by Darí after I had left on my errands earlier this morning.

As I stopped in front of the clinic door, it swung open, and Darí let me in. The dry warmth of the reception room contrasted pleasantly with the cold morning air. Darí relieved me of the bags in my hands, and I carefully cleaned the muddy snow off my boots while standing on the entrance mat. Garvin came forward from his position behind the reception desk as I swung my pack off my shoulders and took it from me.

"If you'd like, I can start unpacking the new supplies into the storage cabinet," Garvin offered, looking at Darí with his head tilted questioningly.

"Yes, thank you," Darí replied with a smile. I sensed the tension in the room, hidden behind a forced cheerfulness. Sevellin was due to arrive for his biannual appointment shortly, and none of us were feeling comfortable. Garvin turned to me with an apologetic look.

"It's alright, Garvin. I'll stay at the front desk while you organize the medicinals." He gave me a look of relief.

Returning to the area behind the desk, Garvin put his hand against a section of wood-paneled wall and pushed with a sideways motion. The hidden door slid smoothly open, revealing a narrow room bounded by the interior and exterior walls of the building and running its length. Inside this dimly lit space was the building's mechanics, as well as the stairs that led up to the second floor where both the storage and our living quarters were located. Garvin began climbing up the stairs, and I followed quickly behind him. At the top of the stairs, the landing opened rightward out into a corridor, painted in tired off-white,

which ran the length of the building. Entering this access way, I turned left, opening the first door I came to—this was the living space I shared with Darí. Garvin went right, continuing to the end of the hallway where the last door provided entrance to the room where the clinic's medical supplies were kept. I pulled off the heavy coat I'd been wearing, warmly made from the brown felted wool of some type of caprinid, and hung it on a wall hook next to the door inside our residence. Carefully closing the door behind me, I made my way back down to the clinic's reception room.

For a while, I kept myself busy cleaning the water and mud off the scarred wood floor that had arrived with me when I made my earlier entrance. Then I bustled around neatening things up, even though everything was in perfectly good order. Without checking, I knew that Darí was doing the same thing in the examination room. Finally, I took my place behind the desk, and taking a couple of deep breathes, I started reciting a calming mantra in my head.

Time passed slowly. I wanted to fidget, but forced myself to be still. Now was not the time to appear undisciplined. My internal time sense eventually told me that Sevellin was late for his appointment. Would he be coming? Certainly, he had not sent word to us indicating a need to reschedule. Just as I was about to get up and set off on some other task, I heard the clinic door rattle. I raised my head with a jerk, and the door flung open wide with a gust of cold wind.

A person wearing a dark grey, knee-length coat strode into the room accompanied by a swirl of snow. The door, caught by the wind, slammed shut with an echoing boom. Sevellin, for that was who I assumed this person to be, shouldered out of his snowy coat, tossing it onto one of the chairs in the reception room.

"Who are you?" he demanded as he turned to face me. Without waiting for me to respond, he asked "Where's Garvin? Are you a new medical student?" Sevellin was a short man, shorter even than I, but broad across the shoulders, with a brusque and forceful carriage. His complexion was dark and tawny, with hair that was nearly black falling in heavy waves down to where it brushed his shoulders. His cheekbones were high and sharp, but his jaw line was obscured by a beard of soft, curling dark brown hair. Eyes the color of dark polished wood were almost hidden by his thick black eyebrows, which, at the moment, were drawn down into a frown.

Although I was trying not to be biased by what I'd already heard about Sevellin, my dislike for him was almost immediate. His actions and tone of voice were intentionally grating. I didn't need to be a telepath to know he didn't like coming here or having to deal with Medics for what he required. "Garvin is busy sorting out new supplies," I answered after a moment. "I'm the Medical Technician replacing Belar. My name is Lyell."

"What happened to Belar?" Sevellin stared at me darkly, clearly not happy that the staffing change meant more people would know about his personal affliction.

I forced my eyes down to gaze at the desktop, trying to appear relaxed and noncommittal. I didn't want

my actions to challenge Sevellin now. We needed him to see us as nonthreatening and inconsequential. “Larri and Belar are running one of the mobile medical units for a time. My brother Rori, who is a Medic, is running the clinic until they return.”

“I didn’t give Larri permission to leave Gavaldrïn.” Sevellin drew his brows even lower over his eyes in a manner that was obviously meant to convey his disapproval.

“*Chiara*,” I gave him his formal address, bowing my head to him in acknowledgment of his status, “it is the prerogative of the Medical Academy to assign Medics to various postings. If you have any concerns about these assignments, please consult with the Academy.” I lowered my head to him again, trying to appear as submissive as possible. To head off any further complaints, I added, “Rori is waiting to see you in the examination room whenever you’re ready.”

Sevellin huffed. Still keeping my head lowered, I glanced sideways at him. Emotions of frustration and anger rolled over me as I sensed them passively with my empathy. However, any deeper thoughts or feelings he may have had were hidden to me. To try to probe for these actively would be too risky. If Sevellin was indeed Ellendrí, he would quickly detect any attempt to read his mind or breech his barriers, and we would be exposed as the spies that we were. I watched as Sevellin grimaced, giving vent to his disapproval of these recent changes, then nodded his head. I slid out from behind the desk and opened the door that led into the back section of the clinic. Gesturing for Sevellin to precede me, I let him take the lead, closing the door behind us. As he passed me, I made a quick movement with my hand, indicating that Sevellin should turn left and go through the open door into the examination room.

As we entered the white walled room, Darí looked up from where he was sitting in front of a small desk tucked into one corner, giving us a pleasant professional smile. “*Chiara*,” he bowed his head in respect, “it’s good to meet you in person. I’ve heard a great deal about you.”

“Humph! I’m not here to gossip or discuss policies,” Sevellin responded gruffly. “Do you have the injection ready for me?” He glanced around the room as though expecting to see the necessary equipment laid out on the examination table that occupied the central space.

“I’ll need to take a blood sample first,” Darí spoke firmly, meeting Sevellin’s gaze.

“Do you have the permission form for me to sign?” he frowned.

“It’s right here.” Darí lifted a piece of paper off the desk, handing it to Sevellin, who spent some time reading it over carefully. On Davandrïa, a person must sign a document legally allowing specific laboratory tests to be carried out on their blood and tissue samples. This is meant to protect a person’s rights and privacy. In this case, Sevellin was giving us permission to analyze his blood only for its testosterone concentration and nothing else.

Sevellin nodded tersely. Leaning over the edge of the desk, he slapped the paper onto the desktop, took

the writing tool that Darí offered, made a few scratches in Davandrïan script at the bottom of the page, and handed it back to Darí. Examining the signature closely, Darí looked at me and cocked his head in a slight nod.

Reaching into a shelf underneath the sheet-draped examination table, I withdrew a fiendish looking contraption consisting of a tubular metal barrel about the length of my hand that terminated in a sharp, hollow needle at one end. Around the circumference of the cylinder were long rectangular openings that formed viewing ports. This archaic device, a phlebotomy syringe, was already preloaded with an empty glass vial that that could be seen through the windows in the sides of the syringe. A moment later, I retrieved a small strip of elastic material, a bottle of alcohol, and some swabs from another shelf under the table. “Please sit down, *Chiara*,” I waved at the chair situated next to the open door.

With a sigh, Sevellin took his place on the chair, rolling up his left tunic sleeve to expose a darkly tanned and muscular forearm, sparsely covered with fine black hairs—not the coarse body hair that some Sfoení males have, but not the downy, nearly invisible hair that grew on my own arms either. Using the alcohol, I swabbed the skin on the inside of his arm, then with a quick twist, I wrapped the elastic strip around his upper arm snugly, forming a tourniquet. Familiar with the procedure, he placed his arm on the armrest of the chair and made a fist. I slipped the protective cover off the sterile needle of the syringe. As the vein on the inside of his elbow swelled, I quickly slid the sharp needle into it, then immediately removed the tourniquet. Sevellin relaxed his hand and dark red blood started filling the ampule. I knew there were less intrusive ways to obtain a blood sample, but unfortunately, Davandrïans had lost that technology. In a few moments, the vial was full. Deftly, I removed the needle and had Sevellin press a swab over the tiny wound to stop the bleeding. I snapped the steel barrel of the syringe open and popped out the vial, which was self-sealing. With a small writing tool, I marked the vial with Sevellin’s name, the date, and my initials.

As I held the vial of blood in my hand, thoughts raced through my mind, but I kept my shields up. If Sevellin was a telepath, he must not know what was in my head: the fervent wish to be able to solve a mystery. A simple antigen test, or better yet, DNA analysis, of this blood sample would rapidly and conclusively determine whether Sevellin was Ellendrí. If I had access to the equipment onboard the *Ënne*, I would know the answer in less than a deciday. However, the *Ënne* was on Lorril, and the labs here on Davandrïa lacked the ability to carry out either test. In any case, Sevellin would have to give permission before the lab in Gavaldrïn would carry out any other tests with his blood, and that, of course, wasn’t going to happen. I went to a section of the wall beside the desk where Darí sat, opposite the open door. Locating a tiny hidden depression in the wall, I hooked my fingertips into it, sliding a small panel leftward to reveal a cooling unit built into the wall. Opening its door, I placed the vial in a rack, closed the cooler door, and slid the panel back into place.

As I turned away from the wall, I saw that Sevellin was on his feet, tunic sleeve rolled back down and looking impatient. “You’ve got your sample,” he eyed Darí sharply. “Let’s get this business finished. You have the injection prepared for me?”

Darí nodded and opened a drawer of the desk where he was sitting, extracting a much larger syringe than the one I'd used to draw the blood sample. The slow-release testosterone pellets were quite big and required a large-bore needle for delivery. Looking at the device in Darí's hands, I couldn't imagine the procedure being pleasant.

Without being asked, Sevellin laid on his right side on the examining table, sliding his trousers down far enough that his left thigh was exposed. Like his forearm, his thigh was covered in soft black hairs. He wore loose underclothing that covered his body from waist to upper thigh, leaving his genitals well hidden. Looking discretely from the sides of my eyes, there was nothing about the way the contours of the fabric draped to suggest that his anatomy was in any way unusual from Sfoení norm. I could use my Healers training to quickly scan his body, even from this distance without touching him, which would determine if he was Ellendrí or not; however, once again, I dared not use my psi abilities for fear of detection. I felt a surge of frustration building up and firmly tamped it down under my shields. If Sevellin had any empathy, I didn't want him detecting errant emotions that might lead him to become suspicious.

Darí was now standing beside Sevellin holding a bottle containing a clear fluid in one hand and a swab in the other. I knew that the solution he was applying to Sevellin's thigh was more than the simple alcohol I'd used—it contained compounds designed to numb the skin in preparation for the injection—and Darí had put on a pair of thin, protective gloves to keep his hands from being anesthetized. After he was finished, Darí tossed the swab into the medical wastes container, wiped his gloves off with a square of cloth impregnated with detergent, then capped the bottle and put it aside. Retrieving the large syringe from his desk, he walked back over to Sevellin's side.

Although Sevellin had not been pleasant towards us, Darí was very professional, quick and humane with the injection. I saw Sevellin twitch, and knew that the procedure was painful, even with the skin numbed. If we had been working as psi Healers, rather than Medics, Darí would have blocked the pain sensors to make the injection more tolerable. I could tell that it bothered him to use such crude techniques, but we truly had no choice if we were to remain undetected amongst the Davandrïans. With aplomb, Darí applied an adhesive bandage to the injection site, then stepped away from the examination table. Moments later, Sevellin was on his feet, pulling up his trousers and securing them. Darí handed him a small sealed paper pouch. "That's probably going to ache tonight. I'm giving you some pain medication that should keep you comfortable for the next few days until the injection site heals up." Sevellin accepted the package, nodded tersely, and without saying anything more, strode heavily out of the room. Shortly thereafter, I heard the front door of the clinic bang shut.

Darí stripped the disposable gloves from his hands, throwing them in the waste container. All the medical wastes from the clinic would be taken up to the Medical Academy and incinerated to eliminate any possibility of contaminants escaping from our facility. Washing his hands in the sink located in the corner of the room just past the cooling unit, Darí looked at me, "Nice fellow. I wonder who elected him?"

“I’m sure they didn’t do it out of love,” I replied. “Coercion of some type, I suspect.” Indeed, I could see no other way. I had yet to meet someone who actually liked Sevellin. I wondered what information or abilities he had that could force his entire district to vote for him time and time again.

Darí nodded, a grim look on his face. “He’s not Ellendrí, so there’s nothing we can do about that.” He was right—our only purpose here was to apprehend illegal off-worlders. We had no jurisdiction to deal with Davandrïan politics.

“I’m not so convinced,” I shook my head. Staring out the doorway into the hall, my mind was still focused on the long departed Sevellin, aggravation and nagging suspicion surged through my emotions.

Darí’s expression changed to one of surprise. “Even with all that hair?” he queried. “I can’t believe he’s Ellendrí, at least not fully.”

I shook my head again. “I’ve seen some Ellendrí who have done deep undercover work where their disguise needed to be undetectable. There are substances, hormones and other biochemically active compounds, that can make some pretty impressive changes to the body. Testosterone treatments alone might be responsible for the hair growth.” But why such an extreme action, when it was so unnecessary? If Sevellin was indeed the person responsible for much of the political chaos happening on Davandrïa, and he was certainly in a position now to effectively sow confusion in the government, why this elaborate ruse? The hair on the back of my neck prickled as my *turas* gave me scant warning. No, there was something more here, something deeper and darker.

“I’ve always used drugs to help normalize a patient, not do something like that,” Darí commented finally, with a shudder, bringing me back to the moment at hand.

“Nonetheless, it is possible,” I could feel myself frowning. “However, I have no proof, one way or the other. I didn’t dare try scanning Sevellin in any way. It was too risky.”

“I know,” Darí gave me a faint smile. “We’ll just have to keep watching him, and see if we can find some other evidence that either convicts or acquits him.”

Chapter 24: An Unfortunate Event

Farrwÿn—Date: 8939.190

Lorril

The sun was just starting to make glimmering diamonds out of the droplets left on the trees from last night's rain as it pushed its way up over the eastern horizon. I sat at the table, staring out through my window into the newly transformed garden, bejeweled in tiny glints of coruscant color. The temperature in the bungalow was cool, but not unpleasant; however, the warm cup that I held in my hands was comforting. I took a sip of the brownish liquid it held, savoring the bracing, redolent, bittersweet taste. It was not the morning tea that I was so accustomed to from my years on Ellendrïa, but rather a brew called *dranché* enjoyed by the Lorelei, made from the ground beans of a local tropical tree. I had come to enjoy *dranché*, having spent much time in the last few years over cups of it, socializing with my friends amongst the Lorelei. This morning, the slightly stimulant nature of the drink was also much appreciated.

I hadn't been getting enough sleep lately, and the past night was no exception. Insomnia, caused by nightmares brought on by my *turas*, was to blame, an inconvenience far more frequent than I liked. My darkling dreams had been getting progressively more intense the last tenday or so, which most likely meant that either the situation that was triggering my *turas* was getting closer in time or was developing a larger impact on the future. Shaking my head, I took another sip of my *dranché*. By the great Web of Life, I wished I had never been "gifted" with *turas*. At times, it plagued me so badly that all I wanted was to have a Healer burn out my psi centers … if I didn't know what was at stake. To be without any abilities would be a relief. No, I was lying to myself. To lose my telepathic links to Dran and Darí, the ones I loved most, to lose any future ability at becoming *anÿncára* … no. The price for a release from my *turas* was too great.

The sun hovered into view over the tops of the trees bordering the garden, evaporating the tiny gem-like drops, bringing an eye-searing brightness to the multihued vegetation arrayed in joyous profusion around the *Ënne*, where it crouched predatorily, waiting for action. Turning my eyes away from the intense light, I looked down at the cup in my hands, fanciful underwater scenes rendered in delicate pastels circling around its outer circumference. It was a thing of beauty, like so much of the culture here on Lorril. Inside, only a few swallows of *dranché* remained. Ah …

Swallowing the last dregs, I took a deep breath. I needed to deal with my *turas*. The intensity of my nightmares had much to do with the fact that I was seeing Dran and Darí in grave danger. I ached with the need for action, but for that I must have more details. My original vision showing their deaths was becoming more frequent—the other dreams in which they survived were quickly being swept away. That meant a shift in probabilities, one that was not in our favor. Furthermore, I kept seeing images of a small unmarked courier-style spacecraft. Where was it from? And where was it going? How was it tied

into the fates of my friends?

Sighing deeply, I closed my eyes, starting the breath control exercises that would allow me to enter a meditative state from which I could better access both my dream memories and my *turas*.

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The sun was high over the tropical trees, and the room was starting to get uncomfortably warm when I opened my eyes again. I stumbled to my feet, stiff from sitting several centidays in one position. Two steps took me to the first window. Grabbing the frame, I pushed it outwards, allowing the inflow of a freshening breeze. A simple electromagnetic deterrent field let the air enter while keeping the animal life out. I went around the room, opening three more windows to provide a good cross-draft that brought immediately cooling. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I was very hungry. A bowl of fruit that I'd gathered from the garden yesterday was the first thing I spied. Soon my mouth was full, sweet juice running down my chin and fingers as I chewed while slicing off more pieces of fruit with my belt knife. It was a messy and undignified way to slake my appetite, but I cared little as I considered what new information my seeking had brought me.

I could now clearly envision the little spaceship that had flashed through my dreams. In my mind's eye, I viewed it against the backdrop of a planet showing bright amongst traceries of constellations. The planet was near enough that I could see the patterns of continents and oceans, and recognize them—I had observed those same landforms when I had delivered Dran and Darí to Davandrïa. The viewing angle and distance suggested that I was seeing Davandrïa from a position on its only moon, Dasenïl. An unconnected fragment of imagery showed me an arid, reddish plain stretching off to the horizon, features sharp in an airless void. Long shadows lay sharply black across dusty ground, indications of a crater edge not far distant, and in the foreground, several small metallic domes, old, pitted, and worn.

I washed the sticky juice from my face and hands in the small sink that serviced the multipurpose room, letting the warm breeze from the windows quickly dry my skin. Picking up my tablet from where I'd left it on the table, I called up the star charts for the region of space around Davandrïa. Once I had the viewing orientation more or less correct, I ran a model that calculated the positions of the stars forward in time, looking for a match with the constellations I'd seen in my visions. Gradually the star alignments starting looking familiar as the modeled patterns converged with the ones I remembered. There! The constellation orientations that I'd observed. I stopped the model and read the date … 8939.194 … four Ellendrí days from now. Giving myself some room for approximation errors, I needed to be underway as soon as possible.

The sudden release from waiting felt good, a sense of relief to finally be active, doing something constructive. Hurriedly, I rounded up my few possessions from the little cabana, then sent quick telepathic messages to Rallandrí, Darí and Dran, letting them know where I was going and why. There were the usual concerns over my safety, but I knew it would take too long to explain the importance of

what I needed to do to everyone's satisfaction. By the time I was seated at the pilot's position in the forward section of the Ënne, Lorril's hot sun had hardly moved from its zenith high overhead. After a quick call to Lorril's flight control center to get clearance for my flight plan, I began warming up the antigrav unit and the main EM drive. Moments later, I was flying in clear skies over the intensely blue tropical ocean, my destination clearly in mind.

Somehow, it was hard to imagine that I was once a simple Psi Tech living in my *athairan's* dome back on Ellendrïa …

Eldarí—Date: 8939.191

Davandrïa

Old Manarel, one of the *Chiara* who came to our clinic for treatment, sat patiently on the chair in the examination room while I carefully studied his hands. I'd been treating him for a condition caused by the Sfoení disorder of aging, one that was causing pain and inflammation in the joints of his hands. I still struggled with the concept of aging, that the body could slowly stop repairing itself until it reached a state of eventual collapse. I could think of no worse way to die, watching your body slowly disintegrate, becoming less and less capable and productive as the years passed. It was so unnecessary! With a few simple genetic modifications, the faulty alleles causing aging could be repaired. But I couldn't do it here and now, not on Davandrïa and still stay concealed from those who must not know there is a Guardian presence on this planet. And I knew there was more to the issue, a conundrum of ethics. Populations that chose to stop the aging process amongst their members must also, ultimately, embrace population control. Those two aspects of the human life cycle must be engaged together, lest humans overpopulate their worlds, destroying the supporting web of life. Time and again, various of the Sfoení races had refused to undertake the necessary steps to control their reproduction. For this reason, the Dasení had refused to assist them in any aging-related genetic engineering. It had been a difficult decision, and to those of us who must work alongside the Sfoení, one that had resulted in much grief, as friends aged and died.

Suppressing the urge to sigh in frustration, I finished my examination of Manarel's hands. The swelling was much improved—the fingers were even becoming straighter. The symptoms were caused by an autoimmune disease, a condition in which the immune system starts attacking the body's own healthy cells. The Davandrïan Medics had several drugs that helped treat the symptoms, reducing the swelling and pain. Manarel had come to the clinic seeking this treatment, but I had been unable to resist applying a little Psi Healing as well. For the moment, the autoimmune response had been stopped, and Manarel's hands would continue to improve. However, I knew that without the genetic repairs, the disease would eventually come back. Still, it was the best I could do.

Standing up, I asked, "How have your hands been feeling?" I walked over to the desk where I had an injector containing the standard medication prepared and waiting.

Manarel gave me a wide grin, showing an even row of strong, healthy teeth, albeit a little worn, "Better than they've felt for years. What magic potion have you been giving me?"

I smiled in return, trying to keep the sadness lingering in my heart from showing on my face. What I had done was more than he would have expected, even if it was less than I might have been able to do. "No magic," I assured him. "It's something new I've been trying that should suppress the autoimmune response for a while. Be warned, however; the swelling and pain will eventually come back someday. The cure's not permanent."

“Too bad,” Manarel cocked his head to one side, strands of black hair mixed with white falling across his forehead as he watched me pick up the injector. Then his cheerfully grin returned, “But I’ll take any treatment I can get. If this lets me use my hands for a few more months or years, I’m very happy!” Manarel rolled up the shirt sleeve of his loose, hand-woven brown tunic, exposing a shoulder still burly with muscle.

“So, what’s the news from the Council these days?” I asked as I swabbed his shoulder with alcohol.

“News?” Manarel shook his shaggy head. “You’ve heard about the accidents amongst the Councilors?” I nodded, encouraging him to continue. “Two dead this year—one from a riding accident a few months ago; the other more recently in a transport crash. Ever since that last accident, the Council has been in total disarray. Sevellin’s taken over the spokesperson’s position, but that seems to have just made things worse. Chekchakin, our previous spokesperson, was well-liked by everybody, and I think most of the Councilors are still grieving.”

“Take a deep breath,” I instructed. As Manarel responded, I pressed the hypodermic injector against his skin. With a hiss, the injection was complete, leaving only a small patch of slightly reddened skin. “So what’s going to happen?” I inquired as Manarel unrolled his sleeve.

“I’m not sure,” Manarel stared at his sleeve as he fussed with the wooden buttons on his cuff. I was glad to see that he could manage the task—when I first started treating him, his hands had been so twisted that he’d been unable to wear clothing with buttons. “There are a lot of rumors going around,” he continued. “People don’t think the deaths were accidental. And then there have been the demonstrations ….” I nodded as I started disassembling the injector, placing the parts in a metal tray for cleaning later. I’d seen the people standing out in front of the government buildings, and knew that the crowds were growing larger and larger each day as more people arrived in the city from outlying areas.

“Anyway,” Manarel stood and straightened up his clothing, “Sevellin has unilaterally announced that the current session of Council is going to end in seven days.” He raised his head, meeting my eyes with his dark brown ones, “This is in flagrant disregard of tradition. The Council always votes on its commencement and closure dates, with the decision carried by the majority. Unfortunately, it seems like only us oldsters are bothered by this.” Manarel huffed. “Sevellin has sweetened his order by granting the Councilors leave to return to their homes for winter solstice. Of course, with all the snow on the roads and few snowplows in working condition to clear them, it’s unlikely that many of us will be able to enjoy this boon,” he snorted derisively.

“Well,” I responded, drawing out the word as I put down the last piece of the injector and turned to face Manarel. “That doesn’t sound much like good news.”

“No,” Manarel shook his head, “I don’t believe it is. What’s worse, at least for those of us who won’t be able to make it home this winter, Sevellin has declared that he will be taking his time off at the chalet that’s usually reserved for Councilors on vacation. Again, no vote, no draw to see who the lucky person

will be. He just declared that the chalet is his to use, as if it is some sort of unalienable right, and the rest of us can just go and fight our way home through the winter storms. And you know what is truly strange? I've never known Sevellin to take any kind of time off his duties before." He huffed again as he reached for his heavy woolen coat where it hung on a hook by the examination room's door. Pulling it on, he smiled at me, "Happy solstice. Let's hope for better things in the new year." He headed out the door with a jaunty stride, cheerfulness over his improved health evidently outweighing any political angst.

I leaned against the door, mulling thoughts over. Sevellin would be at a private chalet outside of Gavaldrïn seven Davandrïan days from now. I did a quick conversion in my head—seven Davandrïan days was roughly three Ellendrïan days, or about the same time that Farrwÿn had warned us to expect an off-world visitor. Was this a coincidence?

Eldranth—Date: 8939.192

Davandrïa

The sky hung over us, heavy and silvery-grey, the sharp smell of an impending flurry prickling my nose. Wherever the old snow hadn't been arduously scraped away by some conscientious shopkeeper, it was hard-packed, grey and slick. I wasn't sure if a fresh snowfall would be a blessing or a curse—it might brighten up the dark and dingy streets of Gavaldrïn, but at the cost of making everyone's lives more difficult.

Darí and I were making our way slowly back to the clinic, having spent the morning at the Medical Academy, looking after the paperwork that trailed behind a patient transfer. With hope, that patient, now in the tender and merciful hands of the greater system, would recover, although I would happily consign all the unnecessary forms to some deity's hell.

Even though we had yet to reach the central square, I could hear voices—some chanting slogans, some yelling loudly and ardently, and some even singing a few breaths of a song that floated our way. The protesters were still going strong. They had been gathered in front of the government buildings when we'd left the clinic early in the morning, traveling along with the transport that had carried the critically ill man away to the better facilities of the larger medical center. In fact, they had been arriving early every morning at the plaza for more than a tenday now, the crowd getting larger each day. I'd estimated more than a hundred people were in the crowd today.

Rounding a last corner, the plaza came into view. Darí stopped, apprehensive. Sensing his mood, I halted at the same moment, so that we stood tightly together, shoulder to shoulder. A scene of disorder and ugliness spread out before us. While not yet completely full, there were more people in the square than I'd ever seen there at one time before. Most were standing on the sidewalks, with the greatest concentration directly before the government complex. Others were milling around, seemingly at random, in the open area of the plaza. Intermingled amongst the people on the sidewalks were portable metal fire pits. From these arose dark plumes of smoke as people clustered around them, trying to warm their hands. Snow in the square was churned up and black with mud and soot, footprints and tread marks visible in areas frozen during the night and as yet undisturbed. The last two days, enforcers with transports had been brought to the square to drive the protesters away each afternoon. There had been no firearms, but the patrollers had used some type of explosive that released an acrid eye-stinging gas to force the protesters out of the plaza. I hadn't liked watching that. The enforcers had seemed callous and careless, the transports had roared around the center of the square at high speeds, and it was amazing that no one had been seriously injured … yet. Although noisy, so far the demonstrations had been peaceful, just unhappy people shouting out their needs for change. The Guardian in me felt that they were being treated unjustly.

Taking a deep breath, Darí stepped forward, out into the square and onto the sidewalk that would take

us back to the clinic. I stayed close by his side, keeping watch. As the crowd noticed us, they made a little space to let us through. Initially, when the protests had first begun, there had been some negative reactions in response to our government-issued Medic tunics, as protesters saw us as part of the problem rather than potential assistance. That had quickly turned to grudging respect when Darí and I patched up the inevitable bruises, scrapes, and cuts that occurred when people slipped and fell in the icy winter conditions. Now, they let us pass freely wherever we needed to go.

We were almost to the clinic door, moving slowly and nodding in recognition at those whose faces we'd come to know, when the first transport entered the square. It showed little sign of slowing. I wondered who was driving it—surely an organization whose task was to protect the people would engage individuals that would operate a vehicle more safely. The transport itself was painted a shiny black, with no markings of any type, and was clearly in much better condition than old *Entropy*. Obviously, those protesters in the center of the square were expecting this. Quickly, they dodged out of the way, jumping up to the sidewalks. A second transport, also beetle black, entered the plaza. Both made high-speed circuits around the perimeter. By now, everyone was milling about on the sidewalks. That's when the patrollers started shelling the crowd with their supposedly nonlethal deterrent explosives. I heard loud shouting and swearing, and I could feel anger building. The demonstrators wouldn't take much more of this before they broke out into violence. Was that what the enforcers were trying to do? Trigger violence so that they could have an excuse to use deadly force? People were scrambling to clear the square. Some were slipping and falling on the ice, but those that I could see were able to get back on their feet. It wasn't really our problem, but I felt the need to do something, anything …

We were only a few feet from the clinic entrance, and our escape from the crowded sidewalk, when a shrill scream bit through the heavy air. Darí's head jerked around. Almost immediately, I sensed it too. Pain, fear, protectiveness … someone was badly injured. The mood of the people was shifting, from passive anger to reactive rage. Without pausing to consider the consequences, I gently sent out thoughts of calmness, trying to ease the tensions and prevent an eruption of violence. I wasn't as good at this as Kerredrÿn, but anything that could help diffuse impending fury could save lives. Darí touched my shoulder, starting to move back the way we had come, towards the place from which the scream had emanated. I heard sobbing now, interspersed between outraged shouts. As we moved, the people around us shifted enough that occasionally I could snatch a glimpse of the front of the governmental complex. A knot of people were huddling on the sidewalk, a splash of red against the snow along its edge. I suspected that someone had been struck by one of the transports.

I always feel like time is slowing down when danger comes like a crushing hand. Darí shouted something. The crowd, seeing where we were headed, opened up, forming a narrow corridor along which we rushed. Still, it felt like the air around us was thickening, impeding our motions. I couldn't see the transports anymore—either they had left, or at least had stopped circling. All about us, people were quieting and beginning to disperse, possibly in response to my empathic sendings … or so I hoped. The sidewalk was treacherous under our feet as we started running slowly, patches of ice alternating with

cleared sections, the ever thinning ranks of protesters allowing us more freedom to move. We reached a circle of people, standing guardian over the victim, stiff with fury. Again, I tried to sooth them with my thoughts, as Darí stepped forward to thread his way between them.

As the ring of protectors parted to let us in, I stopped, my eyes aghast at what I saw, a sense of impotent rage pounding through my head, mine or others I didn't know. It was just a child, sprawled limbs askew, an innocent, too young to have truly understood what was happening, what the protest was about. Why was she here? Who would have exposed their child to such violence? And then the person huddled beside the child looked up, met my eyes. I recognized the face, even though it was reddened and twisted with grief—one of the female shopkeepers in the square. A flash of imagery filled my mind. With no one available to assist in caring for her child, she had been forced to take the youngster out with her when she went into the city to buy food, a scarce commodity in Gavaldrïn these past few tendays. Now I could see the two bags of food that she had been carrying, carefully guarded by another shopkeeper, a friend who had come too late to lend a hand when she had needed one. Returning with her meager supplies in her arms, her child, a little girl, had been running alongside and had slipped on the ice. The mother, dropping her bags, had grabbed for her daughter's hand, but too late to stop the disaster as the girl fell under the wheels of the transport.

Darí was on his knees beside the child. I could sense him already scanning her body with his mind as he carefully straightened her tumbled body. Someone, maybe one of the people standing around us, must have lifted her back onto the sidewalk, leaving the trail of blood that I'd seen on the snow. I focused on the child, letting my Healer's training take over. A crushing injury, my psi senses reported, lung and organ damage to the right side. But there was still breath, and where there was breath, there was still hope. I could see frothy blood, brightening the pale child's lips as she strained to breath. The analytical part of my brain diagnosed broken ribs penetrating the lung. The emotive part was still struggling against shock and anger.

Darí grabbed my hand, pulling me down beside him, his voice in my head demanding, "*Help me!*" I opened up to him, and our minds locked together. Suddenly, I could see through Darí's eyes, feeling all the nuances he brought to play as a highly trained Healer going through diagnosis and treatment. Then came the sharp hard pull on my vital energies. I quickly drew on my Star, using it to feed Darí's healing work, just as he was using his own, feeling the warmth against my chest where my Star rested under my tunic as the *ferrïls* and *durrïls* came to life.

How long? How long did we kneel there, focused on saving a life? I don't know. I had closed my eyes, working hard to be the most perfect conduit for the energy being drawn in by my Star and passing through my body into Darí's where our hands clasped together. I only knew it ended when Darí released me, and I felt the momentary wash back of weakness as he came up from his Healing trance.

I opened my eyes, looking first to our patient. The girling was breathing regularly now, without struggle. The color had returned to her face. Her pale blue dress lay about her like the feathers of some ethereal

creature, sharply contrasting against the dirty snow as the fading light made everything appear monochrome. Widening my focus, I saw the grieving mother, tears still wet on her cheeks, where she kneeled beside her child opposite us. Her blue-grey eyes were wide, filled with grief and terror and hope. She had known—had known that her child was dying. How could she have not? And now there was life where there had been impending death. No miracle drugs or incredible technologies had been employed, only Darí's hands and mind, and the strengths of our combined wills. Would she fear and hate us for our display of psychic healing, something dreaded and forbidden on Davandrïa? Would she reveal us as what we were?

Now that the crisis was over, my mind was rapidly assessing our options, deciding what actions I might have to undertake. I felt Darí next to me, breathing deeply and gathering his strength to cope with whatever might come next. The mother met my eyes for a moment, and something flashed between us, an understanding, a trade-off in the domain of life and death. She would say nothing about what had just happened. The life of her daughter was sufficient to buy our safety.

Looking up, I widened my attention to the people surrounding us. They looked worried and tense, but they knew we were Medics, and the skills of Medics were as mysterious to them as Psi Healing. They were waiting for us to tell them what needed doing.

Finally, I scanned the rest of the square. It was nearly empty. Except for those who were ringed about us, the protesters had vanished into the rapidly approaching winter's darkness. A few shopkeepers were still in evidence, some standing in their doorways watching, others clearly closing up for the day. But what caught my eyes, made the breath catch in my throat, were the three people who stood closest to us, just outside our circle of protectors—Sevellin and two of the burly guards who now accompanied him wherever he went. He'd been watching us. What had he seen or sensed? I raised my eyes, meeting those dark brown orbs that stared at us. His mouth quirked up at one corner, not really a smile, but maybe something more sinister. He gave me a sharp nod, then turned back toward the entrance to the government buildings, his guards quick on his heels.

Fear sent cold shivers down my spine. We needed to create a sense of normalcy, a feeling that things were progressing as they should. The townspeople around us were restless. I wasn't sure how long we'd been caught up in the desperate task of healing, but it couldn't have been too long, else the spectators would have either disrupted us or dispersed. Darí's thoughts flashed through my mind. The healing had been the most minimal possible, enough to save the child's life, to stabilize her for transport, but no more than that. He'd forced the tissues to regenerate as quickly as they could, and driven by our combined energies, he thought that the time that had passed had been little more than a couple of millidays. I sucked in cold air, looking up at the people standing around us.

"Someone contact the Medical Academy," I spoke loudly, as clearly as possible, putting a sense of authority in my tone. Several heads turned and eyes met mine. "Tell them we have a medical emergency in the central square and need a transport here as soon as possible." I caught the eye of the

most attentive individual. He nodded, then rushed off towards one of the closest shops. I suspected that most of the people who were remaining in the square were actually shopkeepers, regardless of whether or not they had been involved in the protest. I pulled off my winter coat, and while Darí lifted the small girl up, I slid it underneath her body, giving her at least some protection against the cold icy snow covering the walkway. Initially, the cold has been in our favor, slowing the hemorrhaging until Darí could get blood vessels knitted back together. Now, however, she needed warmth. As I wrapped the coat around her, one of the onlookers brought a blanket from somewhere that we laid over her for additional insulation.

The child's mother finally moved, quivering as if coming out of shock, asking in a shaky voice, "What can I do?"

"Hold her hand. Let her know you are here," Darí replied, looking up from where he'd been monitoring the girl's heart rate and breathing. "She needs your reassurance, even if she seems to be unconscious."

The woman reached under the blanket, finding and holding the tiny hand. The child moved her head slightly, and I thought she might actually be reaching towards consciousness. "Will she be alright?" her mother questioned softly, watching Darí intently.

Darí nodded, "In time. She will need to be cared for at the medical facility until her injuries have healed. Her lungs have been damaged. She will need drugs to prevent infection while she recovers." The woman nodded, then reached out tentatively and put her hand on her child's forehead, smiling when she felt the warmth of life flowing under her fingertips.

Darkness was quickly settling over us. The watchers started wandering off to their own homes and duties. The man guarding the groceries remained, clearly a faithful friend, although I didn't think he was the life partner of the woman or father of the child. My empathy sensed that those two were alone in the world. The knees of my trousers were soaked with melted snow, and I was starting to feel cold without my coat. I closed my eyes for a moment, reaching inside myself with a thought, triggering my mitochondria to produce more heat. A shiver ran across my skin as I recognized the cold, then I felt warmth flooding through my body. I would be hungry at the end of this day, but not hypothermic.

Except for a few soft voices, the plaza was quiet. The patrolling transports had gone, although the eye-irritating tang of the deterrent aerosols still wafted on the breeze, along with the smell of wood smoke from the fire pits. After a while, I heard the sound of a vehicle in the distance. I hoped that it was not the patrollers returning to clear us away from the governmental complex. The sound grew louder, and I knew it had turned a corner and entered the square. Looking over my shoulder, I could make out three dark diagonal stripes against a grayish background along the side of the approaching transport, and gave a relieved sigh. It looked like we'd be off to the Medical Academy, and more paperwork, for the second time today.

Chapter 25: On Four Legs

Eldarí—Date: 8939.194

Davandrïa

Sitting behind the large desk that took up most of Larri's office, I was busy making entries in the daily appointment log, recording who'd been to the clinic and what advice and prescriptions they'd received, when I heard familiar, but unexpected, voices. Dran was out in the reception area, chatting with Garvin while I was busy with the paperwork, their voices creating a lulling and comfortable drone, but now I heard a flurry of activity—the front door opening and closing, a brief moan of wind, and two new voices, raised in excitement and greeting. Closing the log book, I was on my feet and out the office door without a thought. I'd hardly entered the clinic's outer room when I was struck by a snowy whirlwind, and hugged soundly.

"Seychen," I welcomed her warmly. "What are you doing here?" She took a step back, a little abashed now by her emotional greeting, the blossoming young women in her at odds with the carefree child. I smiled gently, letting her know that her enthusiasm was appreciated. She tilted her head towards the reception desk. Looking away from her, I could see her father standing beside Dran. Now that my focus was broadened, I observed that both of them were wearing long heavy woolen coats that were thoroughly coated with snow. Beside the clinic door rested two snow-covered packs. Through the windows, I could see that it was dark already, although the light streaming out of the clinic illuminated swirling white eddies. The gentle snowfall of earlier in the day had changed to a wind-charged blizzard.

Dran gave me a quick grin as he helped Trevern take off his snow laden coat, hanging it by the door where it could dry. Catching up with the moment, and full of curiosity, I assisted Seychen with her coat, then brushed the snow off of my tunic. She grinned at me ruefully.

"Let's all go upstairs," I suggested. "It's warmer up there, and I'm sure there's much to catch up on. I'll close up the clinic. We don't have any more appointments booked for the day." With that, I went over to the door, shooting the bolt that would keep it closed. Dran and I picked up our new arrivals' packs while Garvin ushered them through the now opened door behind the reception desk. I knew, from their lack of surprise at this hidden way, that they had been guests at the clinic before. We all clambered up the narrow stairs to the landing at the top, then turned right and immediately right again, through another open door and into a large common room. Various chairs and couches were scattered about in the open space, and a small food preparation area was off to the left. Like the rest of the clinic, this room was worn, but clean and well-maintained. The walls were painted a soothing forest-green, with the furniture in complimentary tones of green, gold, and natural wood. During the day, the room was lit by several overhead skylights, but now that it was dark, sconces along the walls held lights that were powered by electricity.

“Make yourselves at ease,” Garvin waved Trevern and Seychen towards the seating area. “I’ll brew up some *chaco*. I’m sure you could both use something warm to drink right now.” *Chaco* was another of the many slightly stimulant beverages for which humans throughout the Ll’Ellendrÿn seemed to have a predilection. On Davandrïa, *chaco* was served hot and heavily sweetened, often with milk of some type added, to mask its less pleasant bitter principles. During the winter season, fragrant spices were also sometimes part of the mix. Garvin had the skill of *chaco* brewing mastered, and I could tell by the nods and smiles he got from Trevern and Seychen that they were appreciative of his offer.

Although it was hard to keep my curiosity in check, I waited until Garvin had brought mugs and a large pot of *chaco* out to a table in the center of the common room, and we’d all been served and seated, before I started to let questions float to the surface of my mind. Trevern and Seychen, much more relaxed and warmed than they were on arrival, were clearly worn from a hard journey. I was glad to see that Seychen looked well, in spite of her exhaustion. It seemed that my healing had continued to be successful.

Finally, Dran broke our polite, but expectant, stillness, “Not that I’m unhappy to see you, but I must admit that you two are the most unlikely visitors to the clinic. How did you get here? I thought the roads were blocked.” Dran took a sip of his *chaco* while peering intently at Trevern.

“We rode,” Trevern had his hands clasped around his drink, warming them. “It’s not pleasant out there. The roads are all drifted over. There’s no way wheeled traffic can get through.” I nodded in understanding—most of the Davandrïans living outside the main cities now raised equines as part of their livestock. The use of these animals for draft work and riding was becoming more common as machinery broke down and parts for repair were unavailable. Strong, long-legged equines might be able to make it through the snow where other forms of transport failed. Trevern smiled grimly, “We left our mounts at a stable on the outskirts of the city. The poor beasts were nearly finished—it will be more than a few days before they will be fit for riding again.” Trevern took a sip from his mug, staring contemplatively into the dark liquid. “I’m sure that you’re all wondering why we’re here, especially with winter coming on hard and early.”

“I expect that the need must be great, to drive you out into that weather!” I commented, tipping my head towards the outside wall of the room in recognition of the storm that was raging outside. Then a worry struck me, and I glanced again at Seychen. She looked well, but had I missed something?

Trevern must have seen the sudden look of concern on my face, as he smiled warmly at me, “Don’t worry, Rori. Seychen is fine. She simply refused to stay home.” At that, he flashed a sharp look of frustrated parental disapproval towards Seychen; however, she simply responded with a serene gaze that was clearly meant to mask a deeper, hidden level of determination. Trevern was shaking his head … I was sure there were a few more strands of white in his shaggy brown mane. “No,” he continued after a short while, “it’s not personal matters that bring us to Gavaldrïn, but rather politics, ethics, and my responsibility to our people.”

“But you’re not *Chiara* for Eorithrin anymore,” Dran commented, tipping his head quizzically. “I thought your responsibilities ended when you resigned your position.”

“Officially, they did,” Trevern nodded, “but I can’t hide in my home, watching my world collapse around me. We’ve been lucky in Eorithrin. With good management, and a bit of luck, we’ve avoided some of the worst problems that have afflicted other communities, but we can’t keep this up indefinitely. Not when chaos and disruption spin out of Gavaldrïn and threaten our homes and our livelihoods. Our people need good leadership now, before violence breaks out and we go through another round of civil war.” Trevern’s tired face looked stark, but determined.

“So you’ve come to do what?” Dran inquired intently. “Organize the protesters? Assail Sevellin? What can one person do?”

Trevern gave a grim smile, “It’s not one person—there’s a group of us, an organized underground, you might say.” The look he gave Dran and I was both piercing and direct, an admission and a recognition. “The situation is becoming dire. We need to act now. In many communities, supplies are scarce. There are suspicions that the government has been hoarding food in warehouses in Gavaldrïn for some unknown purpose. With winter coming on fast, these resources must be redistributed to those in need, or else there will be starvation.” Trevern studied his cup for a moment, then met our eyes again. “So, in answer to your questions, we will do whatever is necessary to survive this crisis. Now is the time for the people, for us, to come together and stop our society from falling into chaos, before it is too late.” It didn’t escape my notice that Trevern referred to “us”. Was he simply including us as Rori and Lyell, employees of the Davandrïan medical system, or was he making an appeal to us as Guardians to help his people? Did he know who we were? Dran and I had wondered about that before. As I thought about how to respond, Seychen, who had been sitting quietly next to Trevern on the couch throughout this discussion, brought her head up and focused on us where we sat on the couch opposite. As her eyes brushed mine, I could clearly hear her plea, “*Help us!*” in my mind. I didn’t know if she was aware of her telepathic projection or not, but the meaning of her thoughts was clear.

Normally, the authority of the Guardians extended only to interstellar issues, and not to planetary politics. However, when asked to assist at a local level, we were ethically obligated to consider the request seriously. In the past, a selected group of Guardians would deliberate over such a request, and their response would be based on whether peaceful negotiations could be undertaken. Now, with so few Guardians left, decisions to assist were often left to those of us who were on the planet. Furthermore, I knew, as we all did, that frequently the help we now provided placed us in violent conflicts, even if this was not officially condoned. Were Trevern and Seychen requesting the assistance of the Guardians? Who did they represent? Clearly not the so-called “elected” government. What was our duty to them? How did this relate to our original assignment on Davandrïa? So many questions …

It was Dran, with his many years of experience as a Guardian, who provided our response. “We are here in Larri’s stead. We will fulfill his obligations.” Dran’s voice was steady, affirming. I knew he’d been

struggling against our inaction. This agreement would provide us with more scope for positive assistance. At the same time, Dran had not openly committed our capabilities as Guardians, only as Rori and Lyell. I didn't think he was holding back our participation in the struggles to come, but for the moment, maintaining our cover was still important.

Trevern met Dran's eyes, holding his gaze for a long moment. Finally, he nodded his head, accepting the offer. The quick flash of his thoughts that I caught made me certain that he understood the hidden meanings behind Dran's words. "Good," his expression held relief. "We need a place to stay."

"Our home is your home," Dran gave the house blessing, the ancient expression of hospitality that is used throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn.

Eldranth—Date: 8939.194

Davandrïa

The five of us had talked long into the night, mostly about politics and the worsening situation on Davandrïa, but also about our varied and interesting experiences since last we'd been together. Finally, as Seychen began to fall asleep on the couch, we'd known it was time to rest, to recharge our bodies and ready ourselves for the days to come.

In addition to Larri's apartment, where Darí and I now stayed, the clinic had a visitor's suite, used both for patients and friends, as well as two additional rooms where Garvin and Belar normally stayed. The visitor's suite had a small bedroom with a single bed, but the couch in its tiny common area also served as a place to sleep, so that it could accommodate two people. It was obvious that Trevern and Seychen were familiar with this arrangement, having stayed here before, so it had been an easy task to see to their needs. Families on Davandrïa were close, but had strong feelings regarding matters such as incest and homosexuality. Without asking, I knew that Seychen had been assigned the private bedroom by her father, and that Trevern had made his bed on the couch.

As tired as I was, sleep was eluding me. Lying on my back, staring up at the ceiling, I tried to stay still and keep my thoughts shielded. At least Darí slept serenely, his head on my shoulder and his body pressed tightly against mine, several fluffy woolen blankets forming a cozy cocoon around us. Even though we'd both spent time on planets that had cold winters, we were still desert dwellers at heart, longing for the hot Ellendrïan sun. Since we couldn't justify keeping the clinic any warmer, especially with fuel rationing, curling up together not only provided emotional comfort, it also kept us warm. As the Medical Technician on staff, I'd been offered Belar's room, but had declined, claiming that I would be happy sleeping on the couch in Larri's apartment, since Darí and I were quite accustomed to close quarters, having spent a great deal of time traveling in the medical transport that we called *Entropy*. Larri had laughed at that, but allowed us our idiosyncrasies. If he'd realized that we shared a bed, even though quite celibately, he might have felt differently about the matter. Of course, if he'd realized that we were hermaphroditic, that would have blown our cover. Still, by Davandrïan morals, while we might not be considered homosexuals, we were engaging in an incestuous relationship. In any case, we'd learned to keep our personal lives well hidden.

However, it was not concern over our sleeping arrangements that kept me awake now. Rather, my *turas* had been wearing away at me like a sore tooth. Some five tendays ago, Farrwÿn had warned us that we were in danger, had given us the images that he'd seen with his much stronger *turas*. They'd been unpleasant viewing, and both Darí and I had been worried. But as time passed, our fears had waned. We'd begun to hope that maybe something had happened to change the future that Farrwÿn had seen. But now I was not so sure … something terrible was going to happen. I trusted the warning I was getting from my *turas*, even if it was ambiguous.

I turned the images over in my head, my eidetic memory keeping them as clear and sharp as they'd been when Farrwÿn had telepathically transferred them to my mind. He'd assured us that we could overcome the danger, but hadn't been able to provide us with any specifics about how. Somewhere in these awful images was the key to our survival … and I needed to figure out what it was.

Turas seldom seems to provide a complete and coherent vision of the future. Rather, it frequently presents itself as a series of discrete images, possibly related, possibly from the same future, and just as likely from different potential timelines. What Farrwÿn had given us were three still images that were connected in some way to our future actions. One or the other or both of the first two had shown up in virtually all the timelines that Farrwÿn could detect. The last image, the one that gave us any hope at all, was apparently from further forward in time, and appeared in only a few of the possible futures.

I studied the first two visualizations again. Clearly they were from the same time period and location, depicting a fight scene. The background for both was a room with dark rich wood paneling highlighted with bands of gold-painted scrollwork at floor and ceiling, various pieces of large and ornate looking furniture partially visible, although clearly not the focus of the event that Farrwÿn's *turas* had captured. I didn't recognize the room—it wasn't a place that we'd been to yet. In that future time, Darí and I were both there, wearing our Medic tunics, white with three diagonal blue stripes across the front from shoulder to hip, so the location must be Davandrïa. Beyond that, the images were depictions of pain and possible death.

In the first scene, Darí lay collapsed in a heap on the floor, blood pooled around him, his neck slashed open. From the position of the wound, I knew that the attacker had been a professional killer, and had intended the injury to be lethal. Probably done with a sharp knife, Darí's right carotid artery and jugular vein had been severed, along with his trachea. I was unable to tell if the wound carried through to the left side, and had sliced through the blood vessels on that side as well, although the way his throat gaped open, that was likely. The person who'd done this had not only been skilled with the knife, but also very strong. I felt nauseous, bile rising in my throat, a cold shiver running down my spine. This type of injury was almost always lethal, even with a Healer in attendance. Darí would have lost consciousness in moments, would have bled out in a couple millidays. Although it is possible for a Healer to heal themselves, it is much more difficult than healing another person, and it requires consciousness. Darí clearly could not have healed himself from such an injury. I was not at his side, and that meant that I'd been unable to reach him for some reason. Even if I had been, I doubted that my healing skills would have been sufficient to save his life. I was looking at Darí's death, and by the love that bound us, my own. I shivered, struggling to keep my fear from waking Darí.

The second scene was very similar to the first, only it was me who was lying injured on the floor. The wound was different, although possibly made by the same weapon, a slash to the abdomen. Was this why I had not been able to reach Darí? Was the wound lethal? That largely depended on which organs had been damaged, whether any of the large abdominal blood vessels had been severed. Based on the gore in the image, it was obviously a deep wound, causing significant damage and immobilizing me. But

could I heal myself, or at least keep myself alive until help arrived? Without assistance, how long could I hold out? Possibly decidays or even days without healing—abdominal wounds were often slow to kill. Were these images of Darí and myself sequential moments in the same timeline, or were they from two alternate timelines, branching out from one specific action? Farrwÿn had seemed to suggest that in some timelines, these scenes did not occur together. If that was the case, then it was possible that they were two different outcomes from a choice that we had made.

Finally, I let my mind peruse the last image that Farrwÿn had left with us. It calmed my racing heart, encouraging me to believe that there was a way out of this crux, that a choice made, however painful, would result in us surviving to see another day. Together, we sat on a white sand beach. A small building, raised on stilts, was in the background. The vegetation looked tropical—I was fairly certain that the location was Lorril. We seemed relaxed, even joyful. Was this the happy ending that would result from making the correct decision? If the first two visions were the outcomes of a juncture in time, and if one of them led to this peaceful moment in our lives, it was clear to me what choice I would have to make.

I looked down at Darí where he rested against my shoulder. His open eyes, still blue rather than grey, returned my gaze. How long had he been awake? And how much of my thoughts had he been following?

“You’re worried,” his voice was soft, gentle. “*Turas*?”

“Yes,” there was no point in hiding much from Darí. “And those visions that Farrwÿn showed us.”

“I was hoping we’d gotten past that point in time,” Darí responded in a wistful voice.

“I don’t think so,” I shook my head slightly. “I think they’re still in our future.”

“You’ve figured out how to get through them?” I knew then that Darí had only sensed the surface of my thoughts, not sounded deeply enough to see my final decision or the rationale behind it. It stung to know that our bond was not as deep as it used to be … there was a time when we were young that I’d never have been able to hide such thoughts from Darí. However, for now, it was a relief that Darí would not have to share with me the dark desperation behind my choice.

“Maybe …” I didn’t add anything further. I couldn’t talk about the details. Darí would surely disagree, would push to find a better way, but my own *turas* wouldn’t be worrying me like it was if there was a safer, easier, simpler way out of this knot. I met Darí’s eyes with my own. “After all we’ve been through, do you still trust me? Trust me to do whatever I can to save our lives?”

If I’d expected Darí to respond immediately, I was disappointed. Instead, he held my eyes, reading something there, and the long moments passed by. I don’t know what he saw in me, but after some time, he finally nodded his head slightly, “Yes, I trust you.” He hesitated, then added, “But I know you’re still trying to hide your thoughts from me. I could force my mind into yours, see the things you don’t

want me to see, but that's not the *anÿncára* way. That you're still trying to hide your thoughts from me is also not a good thing. However, I assume it's because you're trying to protect me, and not for some other nefarious reason. So, yes, I trust you with my life, but when are you going to realize that I don't need to be protected?"

I dropped my eyes from his, feeling the warmth of blood across my cheeks and a sense of guilt as his criticism sank in. Yet I trusted my intuition. Darí wasn't ready to accept self-sacrifice as a sometimes necessary solution to a problem. He would still think that I was playing the foolish hero, but I could see no other way out. More time drifted away before I responded to his question, "When you are able to see all the possibilities in a situation, not just the ones that fit comfortably into your personal world view." Darí shuddered. I thought my words would anger him, but instead, he brought his arm across my chest and hugged me firmly.

"We've still got a long ways to go," he murmured sadly.

"Trust is a good start," I reached over and stroked his hair with my hand. "Understanding will come with time. Finding the balance between our calling as Guardians and our soul bond won't be easy. Being *sïathcára* is more than simply being *anÿncára*." I rolled over onto my side, bringing my face close to Darí's for a moment, our cheeks brushing in an intimate caress, then I wrapped my arms around him and held him tightly. I could only hope that my reading of Farrwÿn's visions was correct, that there would be happiness and peace in our future.

Farrwÿn—Date: 8939.196

Dasenïl, Davandrïa's moon

Sitting in the pilot's seat, I stared forward towards the *Ënne*'s canopy, my hair damp against my shoulders, still drying from an early morning shower after a hard workout. Even though it portrayed a stark world outside the ship—the bottom of a huge crater filled with reddish dust—the canopy was actually opaque at the moment. Rather, it was acting as a view screen showing visual data from the *Ënne*'s sensors. The lighting of the scene was harsh and crisp. Davandrïa's moon, Dasenïl, was too small to hold an atmosphere, so there was no reflection and scattering from intervening gas molecules. The *Ënne* was carefully parked between an ancient dome habitat and the base of the crater wall. In addition to being physically hidden by both the dome and the looming red cliff, I had the *Ënne*'s light bending shield activated. Unless someone was searching for me, the *Ënne* would be very hard to see. Several more display screens were active in the console area in front of the pilot's seat relaying information from a number of the *Ënne*'s other sensors, which were mounted on thin, almost invisible antennae that protruded out beyond the shield. These provided much more data than I could get through my eyes alone, but nonetheless, I found it hard to depend solely on the instruments for all my information.

This was my sixth morning, Ellendrí time, on Dasenïl, and I'd definitely have to say that the scenery wasn't getting any more interesting. I'd been curious about what might be in the old abandoned domes, but didn't trust the worn looking airlocks or the potential quality of the air inside to risk connecting to them with the *Ënne*. If I'd had another person onboard as a backup, I think I would've tried a space walk to check them out, but that wasn't going to happen on this trip. Between workouts, long philosophical discussions with the *Ënne*'s intelligent computer system, and catching up on my reading list of topics that I thought might be useful to me as a colonist on Dochasïa, I had narrowly avoided a severe case of boredom. However, I had a feeling that all that was about to change. A tense energy thrummed through my nerves.

Looking at the view screens, I could see Davandrïa, a partially-lit globe, hanging brightly against a background of stars, the single inhabited continent spreading amoeba-like across the equator. The planet was just coming into full phase, with only a slender crescent of darkness visible along its western edge. A centiday passed as I watched, and I could just discern the planet's rotation as the continent slowly drifted eastward. Somewhat below the equator, on the west coast of the southern half of the continent, was Gavaldrïn, the city where Darí and Dran were staying. One of the smaller screens in the forward console had a much magnified view of Gavaldrïn and its surroundings. Overlaid on this image were data showing roads and buildings. As a part of an agreement with the Ll'Ellendrÿn trade confederacy, that information had been submitted by the Davandrïan government some years ago. I'd recently received it from Rallandrí, sent by pulsed radio wave relays from the Guardian's mission control center on Lorril to a tiny communications drone I'd launched that was holding position near the standard jump point for Davandrïa.

“Approaching craft detected,” a soft voice announced. In spite of *Ënne*’s attempt not to startle me, I jumped. “Shall I put the flight path up on the main screen?”

“Yes, please,” I nodded, taking a deep breath to still my sudden trembling. The view of the planet across the canopy disappeared to be replaced by a starfield. It took a moment for my eyes to locate the tiny moving spark of light that was an incoming spaceship. *Ënne* helpfully drew a small green circle around the ship, highlighting its path with a curved line, also in green. In the six days I’d been hiding out on Daseníl, there had not been a single ship that had passed by. With the current chaos taking place on Davandrïa, there was clearly no interest in trading. Even vital supplies were not being transported for fear of the cargo ships being caught up in an outbreak of war.

“I’m putting an image of the spacecraft at maximum magnification on the right console screen,” *Ënne* reported, and a visual quickly superseded the data that had been streaming across that screen. At first, this image didn’t look much different than the one on the main canopy screen, but quickly the bright speck grew in size. Obviously, the ship had recently transited a jump point just outside the gravity well of Davandrïa, and was now coming in on an approach course. As I watched, the spot enlarged, developing a pair of wings. It was probably a fast courier-style craft, not unlike Dran’s old ship. After a few moments, *Ënne* added a scale bar to the screen. I could see that the ship was at least as large as the *Ënne*, if not a bit bigger—something of a size to transport three or four people comfortably. I studied the vessel intently as the resolution of the image increased. Its design looked familiar. Many of the older Ellendrí ships had similar outlines. However, that same basic plan had been adopted by a number of the space-faring cultures within the Ll’Ellendrÿn, so that provided no conclusive evidence regarding the origin of this particular ship. Looking up at the main screen, I could now see the ship clearly at that magnification as well. Millidays passed … it swelled until it became the focal point of the image, overwhelming the background stars. As the *Ënne*’s sensors tracked the vessel, Davandrïa came into view at the left edge of the visual field. The spaceship was now passing between us and the planet. All the sensor feed for the imagery was passive, so there should be no detectable electromagnetic radiation coming from the *Ënne*. I hoped that I had hidden us well, because now was the critical time when we could be detected.

“The ship is altering its course to enter Davandrïa’s atmosphere,” *Ënne* said softly. I exhaled a breath I had not remembered holding. “Do you want me to track it down to the planet’s surface?”

“Definitely. Let’s see where it’s going to land.” I was fairly certain I knew what was going to happen, but we needed specific facts before taking action.

“Increasing magnification on the main screen,” *Ënne* reported as the canopy’s image suddenly jumped to a view of Davandrïa’s surface, the spacecraft, now seen from above, approaching the eastern coastline of the continent. Clearly, the ship was not hiding itself from anyone on the planet who might be looking. Was the pilot not concerned, or did they simply think it would be unlikely, under the current conditions, that anyone on Davandrïa would be in a position to worry about incoming off-planet traffic?

In a very short time, the ship had crossed over to the western shore, looped out over the ocean, and began a descending approach to a location just north of Gavaldrïn. The display screen that showed Gavaldrïn and its map overlay now had a bright red flashing light tracking across it. The speed of the craft had decreased dramatically, and it was obviously going to land. After a few moments, the flashing red light stopped moving, coming to rest along the shore of the bay just past the city proper. *Ënne* expanded the scene so that the roads and buildings around the landing site were visible. It looked like some type of resort area located on a shoreline bluff at the city outskirts, just south of the mouth of the Gavaldrïn River.

I studied the visual on the screen until I was certain that all the salient points were sharp and clear in my mind, then I reached out, touching the minds of my *avángri*, Dran and Darí. "*Our mystery ship has arrived*," I warned them telepathically, then sent the image of the map showing where it had landed.

"*Hmmm*," Dran acknowledged. "*The location is pretty much what we expected—the Councilors' reserved chalet. That's where Sevellin should be just about now.*"

"*So you think he's involved in an off-world scheme, possibly trying to destabilize the Davandrïan government?*" I queried, not so much because I didn't already believe that, but rather to confirm if Darí and Dran had gathered enough evidence to support the hypotheses I'd been creating from my *turas*.

"*Doubtlessly*," Dran stated. "*He makes me uneasy … he's definitely not a pleasant person*."

"*Do you know if he's Ellendrí like the assassin that was captured?*" this was the question we really needed to answer.

"*We still don't have irrefutable evidence.*" It was Darí who replied. I could sense his uncertainty and concern.

"*We haven't reached a concordance on that*," Dran added, sounding wry. "*I believe that he is, but Darí doesn't think it's biologically possible. I suspect that we'd need a medical examination to be certain, and we haven't been able to do that without making Sevellin suspicious*."

"*Then we need more information*," I concluded with a sigh.

"*Yes*," Dran confirmed, "*but I have a plan in mind that should let us gather intelligence on whatever is happening between Sevellin and the ship that just landed*."

"*Be careful*," I warned. "*There could be three or four people onboard it*."

"*Don't worry*," Dran responded. "*We'll stay out of sight. Sevellin has been traveling with a pair of guards. I'd prefer not to start a skirmish unless we must. The odds might not be in our favor, especially if some of them have psi abilities*."

I let my telepathic connection with Dran and Darí fade out, knowing that they were already in motion, carrying out some predetermined course of action. Reaching out again, I touched Rallandrí's mind, quickly reporting all that I'd learned. I might not yet be a Guardian, but there were still things that I could do. And I knew my wait on Dasenïl was not over yet …

Eldranth—Date: 8939.196

Davandrïa

The old transport rumbled and rattled around us where we huddled in the cargo hold, sliding about on the mixture of ice and sand that coated its floor. I was surprised that Trevern could find a transport at all on such short notice. I wasn't sure that walking out of the city wouldn't have been faster; however, the transport provided us with some degree of secrecy. He hadn't asked any questions when I'd told him we wanted to spend a day or two at the shoreline resort, leaving him with the care of the clinic building. We'd all seen the ship flying low overhead, and it was easy to see where it had landed. If he had wondered why we wanted to go to the landing site, he kept his thoughts to himself.

The afternoon air was chill—Darí and I kept close together, sharing our warmth, conserving our energy. I expected the coming night would be long and cold, and it would tax our strength. Darí was very quiet. I didn't probe his thoughts, but I thought that he wasn't entirely happy with my plan. This assignment was quickly becoming the most dangerous situation that we had been in together. Worse, it seemed that Darí was seeing my decisions, which I believed to be rational and acceptably risk-adverse, as unbalanced or self-destructive. Was Darí viewing me through the lens of my previous depressional behavior, or was I still acting inappropriately?

The transport shuddered to a halt. I heard footsteps crunching through the snow, then some loud banging as the mechanism keeping the back doors of the transport shut was being operated. Suddenly, the doors swung wide open, one to each side, and a flood of light entered the cargo compartment, momentarily blinding us. Stiff with the cold, we stumbled to the opening, managing to jump down to the ground without slipping on the treacherous icy snow. I noticed that the transport, although ancient and sporting a rusting grey paint job, had steel studs in its tires—the only thing that had allowed it to take us this far given the current road conditions. As we stepped away from the hulking machine, the driver closed the doors.

All around us were trees, some bare of leaves, others with dark green needles showing under a heavy load of snow. On other planets, the weather this close to the equator might be subtropical, but Davandrïa was a cold world. Snow was common even at the equator during certain times of the year. The road we were on ended just beyond the transport, and a narrow path continued onward under the arching boughs of the forest. In other seasons, this road probably went further, but at the moment, its conclusion was a small cleared circle, just enough room for the transport to turn around and return the way it had come.

The driver came up to us, pointing a gloved finger towards the trail, "There's an inn just a short walk up that path. Nice place … in the summer." He gave us a friendly smile, and Darí thanked him for the ride. I suspected that he was a part of Trevern's underground—they had their own good reasons for wanting to get us out here to investigate off-world activities.

The sound of the roaring engine fading into the distance was still echoing in our ears as we scrambled our way up the partially cleared track. I wasn't sure what to expect, but after a short hike, the path turned sharply to the left, depositing us into a large courtyard. Surprisingly, someone had spent a good deal of energy clearing away the snow, exposing the cobbled surface, which had been carefully sanded to provide safe footing. As we entered the yard, I looked out to the west, taking in a scenic view of the ocean, the sun a fiery red orb just touching the horizon. On the other side of the courtyard, there was a large, centrally-located, two-story building with a series of smaller cabins flanking it. All the structures were built from wood, rather than the commonly used concrete we'd seen in the city, and seemed quite attractively decorated. From what I'd gathered, this region was a popular recreation area, with a number of inns, cabins, and chalets hidden amongst the forest providing spectacular ocean views.

Darí and I walked up to the main building. Even before we could tap on the door to announce our presence, a balding, middle-aged man opened it for us, welcoming us in. Between the winter weather and the poor economy, business was clearly lagging. The innkeeper, dressed in a richly-embroidered, belted green tunic and black woolen leggings, was full of questions as he led us into the warm dimness of the building. Obviously, news was a commodity. We were well-received as we told him what we knew about the weather, the state of the roads, and the events in Gavaldrïn. After an amiable exchange, we were offered our choice of rooms in the main building or one of the small cabins. Although it was obvious that we were the only guests in the complex, privacy was essential to our plans, so we chose a cabin on the northern edge of the facility. The innkeeper gave us a knowing smile—I can only guess what he thought we were up to—and sent a young man who'd been sweeping the floor, most likely his son, out to the cabin to light a fire in the stove and start warming the place for us. In the meanwhile, he led us to a great hearth located at the rear of the inn, which was crackling warmly. Arranged around the hearth were a number of tables, all solidly built from a dark and intricately-grained hard wood. The innkeeper seated us at the one closest to the fire, offering to serve us a meal, which Darí and I gladly accepted. The cold trip in the transport was unquestionably an appetite stimulant.

Our supper was a hearty stew. I could tell from the flavor that the inn had been supplementing its food supplies by hunting in the surrounding forests. The taste complemented the rustic style of the place, and we were only too glad to get a filling dinner. Rationing had begun in Gavaldrïn, and while neither Darí nor I were starving, we could truly appreciate what we were being given.

Even though it was still relatively early in the evening, the sun had set and darkness was complete by the time we entered the cabin where we would supposedly be spending the night. While I feared that the off-worlders would leave before we could do a reconnaissance, and felt the pressure to move quickly, I knew we needed darkness to accomplish our task safely.

Tonight would be the culmination of research I'd done much earlier during our stay on Davandrïa. Like Ellendrïa, one of the top predators of this planet was a large canine. I'd seen pictures of this animal, called a *rowerk*, and it was similar enough to a *föalen* as to be indistinguishable without DNA analysis. This was not unexpected, really, as both Davandrïa and Ellendrïa had been seeded with organisms from

Ellendorïa as a part of the process of planet bioengineering. *Rowerk* were moderately common in the forested regions of Davandrïa, found along the coasts and in the mountainous areas. Luckily for us, *rowerk* had been seen this winter, not far from Gavaldrïn.

Darí and I had discussed my plans for tonight, and while we'd agreed to do our surveillance on four feet, I wasn't sure what he truly felt about my strategy. Although I've shape-shifted regularly to keep in practice, it had been many years since I'd used my ability in an assignment as a Guardian or run four-legged in the wilderness for sheer joy. It had been even longer since Darí and I had padded the trail together. I didn't know if he had ever shape-shifted as a part of his Guardian duties. I didn't even know when the last time was that he wore his four-footed form. All I could remember were the times when once we had run together in the mountains of Ellendrïa. However, what I did know tonight, based on Farrwÿn's visions, was that we would be in the greatest danger while we were in human form. If we went as *föalen*, we would leave tracks that would be interpreted as those of a common wild predator. If we were seen, we would not be identified as human.

In the heat from the stove in that little cabin, Darí and I undressed, readying ourselves for shifting. The only objects that I regularly carried with me through the change were my Star, and more recently, my *anÿnbränne*. While these were not things that would be found on a wild animal, they would be mostly hidden in the thick fur of my *föalen* form, not visible except under close inspection. The rest of my clothing would have to remain here, waiting for my return.

There was no electricity at the inn, and the single oil lamp, held in a bracket on the wall opposite the black wood stove, cast flickering shadows over our bodies as we moved. I reached out, touching Darí's arm lightly with my hand. He looked up at me with a smile. I was surprised that his eyes conveyed more excitement than anxiety. I let my barriers drop enough to feel his emotions, then, unexpectedly, we were in full rapport, the warmth of his thoughts washing away my concerns and worries. Now, I realized that Darí had understood my rationale for suggesting this evening's undertaking, agreed with my reasons, supported me fully, and was prepared to do what was necessary. My nagging doubts were simply phantoms I'd created from my own fears. Why hadn't I reached out to Darí earlier? My own words echoed in my head, "Trust is a good start". We were still struggling to regain that trust, both of us, and there was indeed a long way yet to go.

Stepping outside the cabin, the cold night air raked across our skin, leaving us shivering. That wouldn't last long. I closed and locked the door, carefully hiding the key under the entrance steps. We walked around the back of the building where we were out of sight of anyone who might be able to see us. Breathing in the sharp air, I closed my eyes and concentrated, experiencing the almost frightening sense of my cells loosening, coming adrift, and sliding past each other as they took up new positions. The intensity of the change peaked, reaching the moment when even the cells themselves underwent physiological changes, morphing into new forms as required. This would be accompanied by a flare of light, as psychokinetic energy danced over my body—manipulating, adjusting, modifying. Then it was over. My eyes snapped open, seeing the trees that stood behind the cabin from a slightly different

angle, closer to the ground. My shivering had ceased—thick, dense, grey and white fur covered my body, insulating me from the winter's breath. Looking to my right, I could see a *föalen* standing shoulder to shoulder with me, similar in color and markings. Darí had made the change with ease. Ahead of us, the forest was dark, welcoming.

In my mind, I could visualize the map that Farrwÿn had given us. Not far from us, just a little north, was the place we needed to reach. Recreational trails and beach accesses had been marked out as well—I had made particular note of these for the purposes of getting in and out unseen. The tide would be falling during most of the night. That meant that we could travel along the beach on our return trip, and the waves would erase all traces of our tracks. In the morning, I would obfuscate whatever footprints we had left near the cabin as an additional safety measure.

"*Through the woods?*" Darí's mind reached out to me easily. I realized now how much my worry and concern had been shutting him out for the last few days, how little of his voice I'd actually been hearing. No wonder he'd been so upset.

"*Yes. There should be less snow under the trees, and the going will be easier.*" I stepped out, feeling the snow crunch softly under my pads. It had been snowing lightly during much of the day, but the sky had cleared just before sunset, and the powdery snow gleamed in the light from the cabin window. Otherwise, it was a dark and still night, the moon overhead a black coin against the stars with a thin crescent along one edge. Looking up at it, I wondered about Farrwÿn and what he was doing up there. I resisted the urge to reach out to him … I needed to focus on the task at hand. I loped forward, the snow squeaking underfoot in the cold, and Darí moved into position beside me.

As we moved away from the shore, the forest transitioned to larger trees, probably a climactic seral stage composed mainly of coniferous species. Their branches, high overhead, caught most of the snow before it reached the forest floor, so we were traveling in depths that seldom reached higher than our hocks. There was little undergrowth around the giant trunks, making our passage less difficult. Under the tree canopy, it was very dark, with only a stray gleam of starlight reaching us. Even with good night vision, there was just light enough that our eyes could discern the trunks standing out darkly against the snow.

There was little sound other than the padding of our feet. Once, I heard a quiet rustle, air flowing against soft feathers, followed by a tiny squeak of terror—an owl hunting in the night. Distant murmurs might be human voices, but we were still too far to hear anything clearly.

Although my ability to identify scents was just as good in my human form, having a large, damp nose intensified my capacity to detect those odors. It was this ability that informed me that we were getting close to our destination. After atmospheric re-entry, the heat shielding of a spaceship radiates a particularly identifiable smell for more than a deciday—this pungent, slightly metallic scent was becoming stronger as we moved northward through the forest.

“*This way*,” Darí turned his head towards me, his eyes gleaming very faintly silver in distant starlight. He turned back towards the shore, and I fell in behind him, stepping into his tracks so that we left only one set of prints. Anything that we could do to confuse the signs of our movement would be helpful if someone should choose to investigate. I found myself enjoying the cold crispness of the night, the smooth action of my muscles as we ran in tandem. We’d been caught up for too long in this assignment, circling without finding the answers we needed. It felt good to be taking action.

The forest ended abruptly, the sharp edge of a paved clearing coming almost up to the trunk buttresses. The thin sickle of moon hung over the darkling ocean as we looked out across the opening to the edge of the sea cliff. Although obviously swept clean earlier in the day, there was fresh snow from the afternoon’s sporadic blizzard covering the paving cobbles. We would be leaving tracks, but there might also be a story for us to read.

Off to our left, and closer to the cliff, a dark structure loomed, blocking out the stars. Several windows bled light out over the clean snow, leaving tracks of illumination. The murmuring we’d heard earlier differentiated into two voices engaged in a discussion, too muffled to make out words at this distance. I thought I could catch the occasional mutter from one or two other people in the building as well. Another dark object occupied the center of the cleared space, the source of the odor I’d been tracking, still giving off faint pings as it cooled down. That would be our first investigation site.

Surprisingly, Darí again took the lead. We loped single file over to the spaceship, then started circling around it very slowly, sniffing carefully for any scents, listening for any sounds, watching for any signs left in the snow. The ship was completely unmarked, a basic silvery-grey in color. In style, it was a standard courier design, with a pair of swept back wings and a small sharply pointed tail fin. Three large rearward mounted engines attested that it was built for speed. We reached the area where the entrance ramp had been lowered, then raised back up. The ship was sealed—it would be unlikely that we could get in without the correct password spoken in a voice that the onboard computer recognized. However, the snow around the area where the ramp had been lowered was churned up by feet. Darí had his nose in the tracks, making very slight woofing sounds as he drew the air through his nose and up into his sinuses to get the most information out of the scent. I came up behind him, being careful not to obscure any of the tracks, carrying out my own scrutiny of the narrative in the snow.

“*Three people*,” Darí reported. I sent back a confirmatory thought as my nose caught the scents. I took another deep inhale of air from around the tracks, noticing something else. After over a year of living amongst a culture of Sfoení, I’d gotten used to the smell of the pheromones that were always present. Male Sfoení were essentially in constant rut, and female Sfoení went through a regular repeated fertility cycle that occurred 10 to 15 times over the course of a year. In both cases, there was a persistent release of pheromones. Dasení only produce mating pheromones twice a year, when they come into ërïol. As a young Guardian working and living with Sfoení, it had taken me some time to learn to ignore their constant barrage of pheromones. After the past year, I rarely noticed them, except when they were absent. And they were missing from these tracks. Young Sfoení children lack sexual pheromones,

but the footprints were obviously those made by adults.

"*Dasení?*" I asked Darí.

"*Yes*," he sniffed again. "*I think specifically Ellendrí. There's a racial scent. It's very mild, but I know it well from my work as a Healer. I think that I can detect it here.*"

That finding was both good and bad. We'd been looking for the Ellendrí link since the beginning of this mission, and had been unsuccessful so far. This was the first definite evidence we had. It also meant that we were up against our own people, with abilities that could potentially match or exceed our own, should it come down to a fight.

We finished our circumnavigation of the ship, then followed the footprints as they led to the chalet. Now we needed to be especially stealthy. Any sound could alert the people inside of our presence. Furthermore, with three Ellendrí being involved, we would also have to keep our thoughts shielded.

As we approached the building, we encountered more tracks. These were slightly larger in size, and heavily scented with male Sfoení pheromones, one of which I recognized immediately as Sevellin's. His odor rankled in my nose—it was too male, an excessive production of pheromones as a result of his hormonal treatments. If he carried the faint racial Ellendrí scent, it was completely overwhelmed. I looked at Darí with that though in my mind, and he shook his head—he didn't detect anything that would identify Sevellin as Ellendrí, but it was obvious that his two bodyguards were Davandrïans.

We crept up to the wall of the building, staying low, trying to get as close to the windows as possible without exposing ourselves in the light that escaped through their partially drawn curtains. Darí and I managed to find a sheltered location below one of the window ledges where anyone looking outwards would be unable to spot us. Leaning against the wall, I tried to become silent, invisible, but my heart pounded so loudly in my chest that I was sure a passerby would be able to hear it. However, our efforts were worthwhile, as now we were able to make out the murmured conversation. My first impression brought a sense of sad confirmation—the language spoken was unaccented Ellendrí. While Ellendrí was often used as a common trade language, for most it was not their native tongue. These people spoke my language as if born to it. Initially, though, the words were out-of-context and provided little information. We were listening to the end of a discussion, after all the facts had been presented, rather than the beginning. Then the conversation paused, and I was certain we'd been heard. After a few breathless moments, it resumed, clearly with intent to change the topic. This gave my brain a chance to catch up and assemble meaning out of the words I was hearing.

Unknown person #1: "I don't like the location you chose for our meeting. It's too close to Gavaldrïn. I'm sure hundreds of people in the city saw us coming in today."

Sevellin: "If you were so worried about being seen, why didn't you use your shields?"

Unknown person #1: “They wouldn’t have made much difference … our engines were surely audible as we made our final landing approach.”

Sevellin: “You don’t need to be concerned. What policing Davandrïa has these days is completely under my control. They’re under orders not to disturb me while I’m “vacationing”. With the roads snowed in, no one else is likely to come wandering up here.”

Unknown person #1: “You seem pretty certain of yourself.”

Sevellin: “I am. Davandrïa’s government is in shambles. There are a few protesters who have converged in Gavaldrïn to complain. However, I have an eye on their leaders, and have a plan to deal with them in the next few days. Once they’re out of the way, I intend to turn the enforcers loose on the mob and clear them out.”

Unknown person #1: “And that’s it, then?”

Sevellin: “Davandrïa is ours. These people have no fight in them. They’ll do what I tell them to do.”

Unknown person #1: “With a little pushing, I’m sure.”

Sevellin: “You can’t fight against something you don’t believe exists.”

Unknown person #1: “Hmmph … in any case, I’m going to leave here shortly. No point in exposing ourselves more than we must.”

Sevellin: “I’m not sure why you had to come here at all … I’ve been sending regular reports. The inventory of my stockpiles has been submitted.”

Unknown person #1: “You know Drÿfoch likes to check in on his people occasionally. There are things that can be learned from a meeting in person that can’t be read in reports.”

Sevellin: “Well, surely you know I’m telling you the truth by now.”

Unknown person #1: “At least the truth as you believe it, yes.”

Sevellin: “Then tell Drÿfoch that I’m truthful about needing the supplies I’ve requested. Until we take over the government completely, and re-establish industrial manufacturing, certain items will remain in short supply on Davandrïa.”

Unknown person #1: “I’ll let him know about your request …”

Unknown person #2 (interrupting): “There’s something outside, watching.”

“*Blazing fireballs, one of the Ellendrí has a touch of turas*,” I mind sent to Darí, using a very narrow and focused telepathic frequency to avoid being overheard, “*or else eir hearing is far better than ours*.”

Unknown person #3 (in very heavily accented Ellendrí): "It's those misbegotten *rowerks*. They've been slinking about ever since the snow came. Must be hungry. I've got a fix for that."

I heard footsteps and some scraping sounds. It was time to go. "*Head for the beach access, just to the north of the clearing. Use the spaceship as cover,"* I advised Darí. I waited a moment to watch him slip away from the wall, sliding into the darkest shadows as he moved towards the ship. His outline seemed to break up and become indistinct as he used his psychic skills to bend the light around him and help disguise his movements. A good decision. I quickly copied his actions, ghosting along just behind him.

Just as we passed behind the ship, I heard the door to the chalet creak open, and a broad band of light flooded much of the clearing. There was a sharp ratcheting noise … the sound of a projectile being chambered into a firearm, then a loud crack as it was fired. I don't know if the person who was shooting had any idea what they were aiming at, or if they were just hoping to frighten the "*rowerks*" away. We weren't going to wait around to find out. Together, we shot out from behind the ship to the closest edge of forest, using the long, projected shadow of the ship to conceal us as much as possible. We must have made some slight noise, as the shooter fired into the woods ahead of us. However, he had to aim high in order to avoid hitting the ship, so we were temporarily safe. Running hard now, we put several trees between us and the hopeful marksman. Turning sharply to the left, we came out onto the landing of a long series of stairs that led down to the beach.

The stairs were covered with snow, of course. Fortunately, it was deep enough that it helped more than hindered us. Half leaping, half sliding, we skidded down the slope, frequently careening off the railings, but not with enough force to hurt ourselves. I only hoped that we would reach the beach before someone came out this way looking for us—our dark coats would be easily seen against the long snowy slope. In spite of my fears, exhilaration filled me. I was actually having fun! If I wasn't so worried about one of us getting shot, I could have given myself over completely to the joy of the experience. With one last slide and bump, I landed on the wet sand of the beach, cleared of snow by the high tide just past.

A light flashed out over our heads, bouncing off the gentle surf of the falling tide. A pursuer was at the landing, shining a portable lantern down onto the beach. "*Stay against the cliff*," I warned. We ran southward, remaining in the shadows of the bluff where it would be hard to aim a light from above.

The sand was firm and smooth under our feet, a pleasant contrast to the snow only moments before. The air smelled briny, with a hint of iodine, chlorophyll, and something a little fishy. I sucked it in with great breaths, feeling its enlivening energies. Still nervous, we traveled with caution, but I knew the outing was a pleasure to us both. We galloped, leaping along the sandy beach in bounds, covering the distance back towards the inn much faster than on our earlier trek through the woods. I knew this run would soon be over, and felt the need to experience each moment fully. Darí ran at my shoulder, close enough that sometimes our fur brushed. We hadn't done this for many years. At one point, Darí looked over at me, and I could see the thrill in his blue eyes. Times like this were compensation for all the fear, worry, and danger that were a part of the duties of a Guardian.

There were several stairways providing access to this stretch of beach. We went past the one nearest the inn where we were staying—no need to lead a tracker directly to our lair—and turned up the next one. Climbing the stairs was much harder than sliding down them had been. The snow was deep enough to be up to our chests. As we waded uphill, we had to search for purchase on the steps with our feet, often slipping backward as much as we were moving forward. Fortunately, there was no sign of pursuit on the beach below as we labored upwards. The tide had turned and was coming in, soon to erase the evidence of our journey. With a last heave, I reached the landing, Darí scrabbling in the snow behind me. After a pause to catch our breaths, we headed into the forest, and much easier traveling, for the last leg of our round trip.

The night's work had been a good bit of evidence gathering. Finally, we had the information we needed to act on. There was clearly off-worlder involvement, and we were within our rights as Guardians to capture the perpetrators and deliver them to a Ll'Ellendrÿn council of justice for judgment. However, I was very worried about Trevern—we would need to warn him about Sevellin's intents.

Darí and I reached out to Farrwÿn and gave him a short summary of what we'd learned.

"*You're both alright?*" Farrwÿn asked, not for the first time. He was obviously very worried about us, and I knew that we still had difficult times ahead.

"*We are*," I responded. "*Everything went according to plan. Keep watch for the spaceship when it leaves. I think they were planning to takeoff very soon.*"

"*Yes, I've been watching. Rallandrí has several of the Border Patrol on alert and waiting to catch them at the jump point as soon as I give the word.*"

"*Good*," I concurred. "*Take care of yourself, Farrwÿn. Things could get a bit more exciting from here.*"

"*I'm more worried about you*," he replied. "*Be very careful.*"

"*I'm warned. Thank you, Farrwÿn.*" Just as we ended our connection with Farrwÿn, we reached the little cabin at the inn, light still radiating out its windows from the lamp we'd left lit inside. I would be happy for a deciday's sleep beside a warm stove before we returned to Gavaldrïn!

Chapter 26: A Moment of Sacrifice

Eldarí—Date: 8939.201

Davandrïa

Morning of the fifth day since our snowy night's espionage … and our feelings of tension were only increasing. Somehow, we'd expected Sevellin to have taken action by now.

The Council's spokesperson had returned from his "vacation", and Drÿfoch's people had taken their unmarked ship off-planet. Gavaldrïn seemed eerily quiet, the government prorogued, the Councilors officially sent home for the winter season. We'd warned Trevern about Sevellin's plans to deal with the leaders of the protesters, and while he took our warning seriously, he was still out in front of the government building each day with the demonstrators. However, the people were calmer now, more organized, with a number of the Councilors standing amongst them, showing their support.

When the storm finally broke, Sevellin's actions were unexpected.

I was working in the clinic's office, finishing up my report on an early morning patient. Dran was out on his regular trip to the Medical Academy's dispensary to restock our supplies. Hearing the rattle of the outside door, I got up and stepped out of the room, just in time to be faced with two large male Davandrïans, Garvin trailing behind in an attempt to stop them from forcing their way into the office. I had no difficulty recognizing them—they were a couple of Sevellin's darkly clad bodyguards.

"There's a medical emergency at the government complex," one of them stated. "We need you to come with us." The second man placed his hand firmly on my arm. I gritted my teeth at the unwanted intimacy and increased telepathic sensitivity that came with the touch. Strengthening my psychic shields, I damped down his barrage of thoughts, which had little to do with medical concerns. The second guard grabbed my other arm. It was clear that they intended to walk me over to the governmental facility like a prisoner. Garvin tensed as if to take some action, but I shook my head very slightly, and he backed down.

In hindsight, the situation was obvious. It was Dran and I whom Sevellin intended to take action against. Clearly, he knew who we were, and somehow he'd come to believe that we were inciting the protests. He'd bided his time until we were apart, then sent his guards over to apprehend me.

What action should I take? While the guards were bigger than me, I was probably stronger, and with the assistance of my Star, I would most likely be able to free myself. But what then?

We needed to remove Sevellin from his position of power in order to allow the people of Davandrïa to re-establish their government. Knowing Sevellin's violent and aggressive nature, I suspected that the guards would take me directly to him, giving him the opportunity to deal with me personally. Would I be

able to overpower him? Would Sevellin be expecting me to try? We needed to end this stalemate before violence erupted in the city and more people lost their lives.

I made my decision. Turning my thoughts to Dran, I realized that he was already aware of the situation, and coming as quickly as he could. I was glad that he was no longer shutting me out; that we were slowly regaining what we'd lost. My fear and worry ebbed a little. I reached out to Farrwÿn a moment later. He, too, was prepared, already in action. Forewarned by his *turas*? I didn't know. However, even my foresight, poor as it was, cautioned me that the finale was near.

Shaking the second guard off my arm, I asked, "What's the situation? Who's injured?" I would stall as much as I could. Dran and Farrwÿn needed time to get here.

"Sevellin knows the details," the first Davandrïan replied, still keeping his grip on my arm. "He has ordered us to take you to him."

I looked up, meeting his eyes, brown like so many of the Davandrïans. "Am I under his orders, too?" I inquired. "Since when are Medics commanded by a Councilor?"

The man smiled slightly at me. It was not an expression of pleasure. "We're all under Sevellin's orders now. A State of Emergency has been declared, and the spokesperson of the Council assumes the leadership role," he asserted. "Come," he jerked my arm forcefully. I knew that any further hesitancy would result in violence.

"Garvin," I turned to face him where he stood, still blocking the door. "Grab my medical kit." His eyes caught mine with a brief knowing look before he darted away. I knew I could depend on him to do whatever he could. But for now, we would keep playing our parts …

The guards had walked me to the clinic door by the time Garvin reappeared, medical kit in hand.

"Just you," the talkative guard commanded. The second guard's role was clearly only as a source of muscle.

"I understand." Garvin pushed the door open, handing me the medical kit as I was forcibly exited from the building. I cocked my head very slightly towards the crowd of demonstrators. Garvin gave me the slightest of nods back. He would spread word of what was happening.

Events moved rapidly. There had been no snow for the last few days—the old packed snow and ice on the sidewalks had been thoroughly sanded, giving the square a grey and dingy appearance, but making the footing much safer. There would be no chance of pretending to slip in order to slow my progress.

As I walked along, I could see people recognize me. My fate was written in their expressions. Nearing the entrance to the governmental complex, Trevern and a knot of Councilors stood out from the others, evidently in consultation. Trevern's head came up as I approached, and he too gave me a tight nod. They

knew. Trevern had probably guessed that Sevellin would come after us.

The Guardians had been asked to help, and we had all the evidence we needed to take action. It was time to drop our disguises, take up our true roles. Hopefully Trevern and the other Councilors could guide Davandrïa's people through whatever was to come.

Two more guards flanked the main entrance doors of the governmental building. Helpfully, they opened the doors wide, letting me and my escort through. Turning my head, I saw them fall into place behind us, bringing my entourage up to four.

We strode along a wide hallway, large windows to my right opening out onto the square, letting in tepid winter sunlight. Our footsteps were deadened by thick red carpeting on the floor. On my left were a series of doors, probably leading to various offices where bureaucrats carried out their tasks. The walls were paneled in dark wood with ornate frames around windows and doors. At the end of the hall, a stair led upwards to the second floor, and that was where we were headed.

Beginning my climb up the stairs, still held firmly between two guards, I realized that my head was aching. Stress? No, it had started quite suddenly.

We were now on the upper floor of the building … more red-carpeted hallway and dark, rich wood, doors on the right and windows on the left. Gold-painted scrollwork stood out along the tops of the walls. This was the most affluent building I'd been in on Davandrïa.

My headache was increasing in intensity as we progressed down the hall. Worse, I felt a sense of congestion, like my sinuses were blocked, or my head was filled with stuffing. As we came to a halt in front of a door mid-hall, I was sure my head was going to blow apart. I tried to control the pain, but I couldn't seem to get my mind to work properly. As I tried to channel my psi energy, everything seemed fuzzy and out of focus. Finally, my sluggish brain determined the nature of the danger I faced.

One of the new guards opened the door, and I was thrust forward, staggering into the room, the full force of the psi damper nearly driving me to my knees. I was held upright for a moment, long enough to see Sevellin standing against the far wall, a silvery torc around his neck. He made a sharp gesture with his right hand, and the guards released me. I slipped to the floor.

Crouched down, my throbbing head hanging between my knees, I could hear old Thorven Seabÿn's words echoing in my head, lecturing me during the time I was training to become a Guardian:

> *"A smart person who wants to capture or kill a Guardian will most likely use a psi damper. We've all heard about them, even though they're rarely used. Most Ellendrí, unless they become Guardians, will never experience the effects of one. Psi dampers create white noise in the psi frequencies that most Dasení commonly use, blocking all localized use of psi in the region around the damper. What I'm going to teach you is how to overcome*

these effects. The technology is not perfect. Most units only block a narrow band of psi frequencies, but this is the frequency range that is most comfortable for us to use. It is possible to work outside this range. Psi dampers block localized use of psi. Any psi energies that can be channeled through n-dimensional space will elude them. However, these techniques are not easy to use. I'll show them to you, force you to learn them, but I know you'll never practice them. No one ever does … not until they get trapped in a psi damper field and learn what it means to be utterly helpless."

A psi damper … Thorven's words were only too true. I'd been such a fool to think I could challenge one of Drÿfoch's followers so easily. I'd known about this technology. I'd been warned. Why had I forgotten? Drÿfoch knew the Ellendrí well, knew our strengths and our weaknesses. He was smart enough to have prepared for situations where Guardians might be involved.

Nausea rolled around me, and I nearly blacked out. "Fight it!" I thought to myself harshly. I might not have use of my psi abilities, but I could still employ biocontrol to bring my struggling body back under my command. Taking a deep breath, I brought my heart rate and blood pressure back to normal. I couldn't affect my pain center directly, but I could block the pain out, force my mind to ignore the assault beating down on it. The dizziness backed off, and I stood up. I still felt strange, crippled, like half my brain was dead, but I could move, try to do what I could.

"Ha!" I heard a voice, distantly it seemed. "So there is some fight left in the Guardians these days." I looked up, meeting Sevellin's dark eyes. The torc about his neck, an artfully crafted piece of work, drew my eyes again … and I recognized another piece of Dasení tech, a device that nullified the damper field in a very small region around the wearer. Sevellin was, of course, Ellendrí, in spite of his appearance and behavior. More to the point, he retained his psi abilities in this room, whereas I'd lost mine. Not a fair contest by anyone's standards.

I glanced around quickly. The four Davandrïans stood in a ring around me, with Sevellin directly in front of me, back against the dark wood of the wall. Beams of light, falling from small windows located high up near the ceiling of that wall, illuminated the room. Something in his hand glinted. I forced my attention to focus on the object … a knife, sharp, dangerous looking. Sevellin wanted more than just my death. He wanted to kill me slowly, to torture me and savor it. My stomach clenched, and I felt like retching. I'd never faced someone who enjoyed violence.

My foggy brain registered a thought … not mine. "*I'm coming*." Just two words, attenuated as if they'd traveled some distance. I worked hard to hide the feelings of relief that cascaded through my body. Somehow Dran had figured things out and managed to contact me.

Sevellin must have caught a flicker of my feelings, some change in my face. One corner of his mouth twitched upwards, but it wasn't an expression that I would describe as a smile. "You still believe you're going to win this fight," he snorted derisively. "You Guardians are such elitists. Think you can act like

gods. Scorch yourself!" He stepped forward, swinging the knife out in an arc before him. Even dulled as I was, I saw it coming. Sevellin was playing with me. I sidestepped. The blade whipped past me. Sevellin was in the ring, and the fight had begun.

"Ellendrïa is full of perfectionists like you … homogeneous genetic freaks. Everyone has to be the same." Sevellin circled. I could see anger and hate in his eyes, but it was controlled. He was baiting me, trying to take my attention away from his movements. At the same time, I was working hard at following Thorven's teachings, trying to find my way around the psi damper. Sevellin came at me again, slashing low towards my stomach. I slid away from the blade, but it was a near thing. My struggles with the damping field were slowing me. If I could not master it soon, this fight was going to become strictly physical. Without giving me a chance to recover, Sevellin whirled on his heel, knife slicing upwards. I leaned back, turning my face away from the stroke. The tip of the blade nicked the edge of my eyebrow, drawing first blood. I felt the blockage in my psi channels shift, tremble. Maybe …

There was a bang on the door.

Sevellin stepped away from me, raising his off-hand in a small gesture. Invisible arms grabbed me, psi energies transformed into a physical energy field that held me fast. I struggled to breath. In the next moment, I felt Sevellin's breath on my cheek as he grabbed my hair, pulling my head back. The knife blade was cold against my exposed throat.

Farrwÿn—Date: 8939.201

Daseníl

Another restless night, recurrent nightmares cycling through my brain … I tried desperately to grab at the thin veil of sleep. Finally, the dreams reached an intensity that brought me to full wakefulness, dripping with sweat. I could stay still no longer. I needed to take action.

Five days ago, the Border Patrol had apprehended the insurgent's ship just before it reached the jump point outside of Davandrïa's gravitational well. We'd all hoped that capturing some of Drÿfoch's followers would give us more information. How wrong we were! When the ship was boarded, all that remained were three corpses. Fanatics who committed suicide? We'll never know. That moment of intense discovery was followed by days of stillness, as we all waited apprehensively for Drÿfoch's reaction.

My day-night cycles were chaotic, following neither those of Lorril nor Davandrïa, but rather driven by my *turas*, exhaustion, and depressing inactivity. Looking down at Davandrïa's partially lit globe, I could see that it was approaching mid-morning in Gavaldrïn. Something was already underway …

Settling into the pilot's seat, I started up the *Ënne's* drives, readying for a liftoff. Flying down to Gavaldrïn in broad daylight was going to blow Darí and Dran's cover, but it was time to end this assignment. More than time.

Even as I started to engage the antigrav unit, I felt Darí's thoughts touch me. Sevellin's guards had come to take him prisoner.

The time for hiding was over. I needed to get down there now, provide whatever backup I could. Or pick up the pieces if all else failed …

Lifting off the desolate moon, I passed my information onto Rallandrí. I expected he and Kerredrÿn would be on their way as soon as they could get to their ship.

Eldranth—Date: 8939.201

Davandrïa

Too late. Always too late …

Those words kept slamming through my head as I ran full out, striving to reach Darí before anything terrible could happen. Rounding a corner, I entered the central square. Demonstrators packed the sidewalks and streets, but a path opened up before me, whether out of fear or respect I didn't know.

Above, the sky was threatening, piles of dark grey clouds promising more snow scudding across the blue, rays of sunshine breaking through at odd moments. Like my *turas*, threatening but with signs of hope. My destination, the government complex, was in sight now. I could see Trevern, standing near the entrance, a large group of people surrounding him, waiting …

My head hurt. There was a wrongness … and I felt Darí's mind slipping away from me. Fear clamped at my heart. Gasping, I slowed my head long rush, then stopped, the crowd forming a curious circle around me. Darí wasn't dead … I would know with certainty if he was. I scanned outwards with my mind, searching for my lost connection with him.

Blankness … an area of nothingness … somewhere just ahead …

I'd felt this before. I recognized the aura of a psi damper in operation. Darí was trapped within its field. I wasn't surprised. Sevellin was nothing if not smart.

I could see the main entrance of the government building with its elaborately carved double doors, old varnished wood shining even in the dim winter light. There were three of Sevellin's beefy bodyguards lounging around the doors. I was expected.

I focused my mind on my Star, using it to enhance my telepathy. The least violent option would be to simply put the guards to sleep using *ürïrëtálc*[68], mind-influence. I reached out to them, but my psi energy faded as it interacted destructively with another energy source. Fireballs! They were just inside the region covered by the psi damper. I was going to have to do this the hard way.

Without lifting my head from my attitude of concentration, I charged forward, giving my foes little warning. Head still down, I rammed the middle of the three guards midsection, driving him back against the doors, winding him. Before he could respond further, I brought my hand up under his chin and thumped his head against the wood with enough force to stun him. Guard number two came too close and got an elbow in his midriff for his efforts. As the third one tried to punch me in the side of the head, I dropped down low, whirling towards him. My shoulder caught him in the crotch and flipped him over my back. He flopped into guard number two, who was still gasping, and they tumbled into a tangled heap. I made my break for the doors while they were busy sorting themselves out.

Slamming the doors behind me, I dropped the metal bar on the inside into its slot, locking them. There were obviously other ways to get into the building, but that would slow my welcoming committee down long enough for me to get to Darí and figure out what to do next.

Looking down the long hallway I was now standing in, I saw a rank of doors on my left, probably opening into offices. I couldn't waste time checking each one.

My head was starting to ache, and I knew that I was now fully within the damper field. Using any psi skills within this field would be challenging. Not impossible, but very difficult. Contrary to popular belief, I had practiced the techniques used to overcome psi dampers … enough to know what I could do, and what would be impossible to attempt in a fight situation. However, *anÿncára* bonds operated, at least in part, in a non-localized manner through n-dimensional space. So too did telepathy across distances of light years. Therefore, both of these functioned under a localized damper field.

Reaching out along our bond, I could still sense Darí. I breathed a sigh of relief, almost losing my concentration. Focusing again, I tracked the bond, locating Darí's position within the building. Using my telepathy in long distance mode, as though Darí was far away, like he'd been on Ellendrïa long ago, I spun my searching thread of thought through the between, reaching, reaching, until it touched that which I sought. "*I'm coming*," I sent, as the connection snapped into place. Then it was time to go.

Darí was somewhere directly overhead. I rushed down the hall and up the stairs. My head throbbed mercilessly, but I forced the pain away from my consciousness. Our bond was like a magnet. I could feel it pulling at me, growing stronger as I moved along the upper hallway until I was standing outside a closed door, knowing that Darí was just inside. I grabbed the handle and twisted, but the door refused to open. Locked, of course. Stepping back, I threw my shoulder into the door with the force of my weight behind it. The wooden frame groaned. On my second attempt, the old wood splintered around the lock, and the door flew open.

Catching my balance, I froze, taking in my surroundings. The scene was familiar … far too familiar … the dark wood paneling, the delicate spiraling gold-painted scrollwork bordering the ceiling, the heavy, ornate furniture … and Darí, with his head forced back at an uncomfortable angle and a knife pressed hard enough against his throat that the sharp blade was drawing tiny droplets of blood. Even as I took this all in, two guards converged on me, grabbing my arms and dragging me back, away from my *anÿncára*.

Sevellin's dark gaze bored into me. "Did you think you could prowl the streets of Gavaldrïn unrecognized?" His tone was gloating. "Your facial features are most obviously Ellendrïan. You might have fooled the Davandrïans into thinking you were one of them. You haven't deceived me." He paused a moment, studying me intently. "Yes … taking a very close look at the two of you again," he tipped his head towards Darí, "I can see that you are almost identical in appearance." His lips quirked into a small smile, as if he found something in this thought vaguely amusing. "Is the Ellendrïan gene pool so weak

now that they are forced to reproduce by cloning?" He chuckled, a deep throaty sound. I stayed quiet, not daring to move or speak, lest he press harder on the blade resting against Darí's throat.

"Drÿfoch warned me to watch out for Guardians. Not that there are very many of you now, eh?" He was quiet for several heartbeats, letting that sink in. "So here I have two Guardians who look like genetic twins, homogeneous products out of a test tube. It didn't take much research to find your identities … Eldranth and Eldarí Föalen. Am I right?" I nodded very slightly, playing his game until I could see a clear way out. Sevellin was evidently in a mood to talk, and we were a captive audience.

"Two members of the family Föalen … what a coincidence," Sevellin continued on his monologue. "The Guardians sent some of Drÿfoch's own handiwork to track him down. You know, of course, that the Föalen were Drÿfoch's experimental animals? Your lineage owes much of its abilities to his inspired engineering. You are his creation, his creatures. You should know where your loyalties lie." Sevellin was guileful, trying to draw some response out of me. I wanted to shake my head, to deny what he was saying, but I was afraid to aggravate him. There was some truth in his words, but only some. The Föalen had freed themselves. We had earned the right to chose to whom we gave our loyalties.

Sevellin turned his head to study the knife in his hand where it lay along Darí's throat. Throughout this exchange, Darí had remained totally motionless. Sevellin ran his eyes from Darí's face to mine, contemplatively. "Such fine craftsmanship," he commented quietly. "Is that why someone chose to clone you? Because no Ellendrí now living can duplicate Drÿfoch's work?"

"We're not clones," the words slipped out before I could stop them. Cloning is not encouraged on Ellendrïa, as it only further reduces the genetic variability of our people. "Darí is my *deirfad*, born naturally from the union of our *athaira*." I knew I shouldn't let Sevellin bait me, but defending Darí was something I did instinctively, without thinking.

"Hmm … I would check your facts on that statement," Sevellin said with a snort. "Not that you are going to have an opportunity for that." He pressed the knife more firmly against Darí's throat, eliciting a slight wince from him as a few more drops of blood were released. Darí met my eyes, giving me a look of hopeless regret that I could read without any telepathy.

With a shock, I had an epiphany. The final piece of the puzzle that Farrwÿn had shown us fell into place. Sevellin took joy in others' pain. At the moment, Darí and I were completely under his control. He wouldn't slash Darí's throat unless circumstances forced him to do so in defense. Rather, he would prolong our deaths, torturing us to satisfy his twisted desires. I could use his sickness against him.

"So what sort of experiment are you then?" I enquired softly, while at the same time letting my eyes rove over the parts of the room I could see without moving my head. I was looking for the psi damper, certain that it was located in this room.

Sevellin gave me a sly smile, "Why none at all. I was born long after the Genomic Enhancement Interval,

to *athaira* of unaltered Ellendorïa stock." There was pride in that statement. Was he once like Aleysïa then, a purist who believed that the ancient lineages were superior? However, I suspected that he was lying. To have chosen to align himself with Drÿfoch, he would have accepted that such an alliance would leave its mark. I doubted that any of Drÿfoch's confederates would have remained untouched, unaltered by his genetic tinkering.

I forced myself to relax against the hands holding onto my arms. The more I tensed, the more tightly the guards would grip me, expecting me to struggle. I needed to resist the urge to fight them.

"Then why are you here? Why are you working for Drÿfoch? Surely life on Ellendrïa would be more pleasant?" I used my words to dig in a bit deeper, seeing if I could sting Sevellin just a little, enough to attract his attention away from Darí.

Darí rolled his eyes, trying to catch my attention. Reaching through the between, I struggled to send what comfort I could, "*Darí, trust me. Please. You can do what needs to be done.*"

"More pleasant on Ellendrïa?" Sevellin scoffed. "Hardly. If you do anything outside the expected norm, they censure you. Go too far, and you're exiled. Why would I want to live on a planet of perfectionistic freaks?"

"So you were banished," I commented, keeping my voice level. Another gleam of understanding lit my mind. How many of Drÿfoch's followers were Ellendrí who had been exiled because the culture perceived their behavior as unacceptable? Had not Darí and I tasted some of that censorship? More to the issue at hand, had we, the Ellendrí, created our own demise?

"Banished?" Sevellin growled. "I would have left on my own terms if they'd let me." I could see that he was starting to get aroused. Was he not completely happy here on Davandrïa?

"The Ellendrí didn't like your little fetishes? Were you a bit too lascivious for someone's tastes?" I was needling now, trying to get a further response.

"Fetishes? We've let ourselves become dry, sexless husks. I've just done some remediation," Sevellin stared at Darí's face, which looked pale with worry and fear. Then his look turned predatory, and I knew the game had changed.

Sevellin nodded sharply at the two remaining guards. They closed up on Darí, yanking his arms sharply behind his back. As he lifted the knife blade away from Darí's throat, Sevellin made a slight releasing motion with his left hand. Darí sagged against his captors, stumbling to keep on his feet. I hadn't realized that Sevellin had been holding Darí using his psychokinesis. He was clearly still able to use his psi abilities, regardless of the damper. Looking more closely, I spotted a torc around his neck, not something I'd seen him wearing previously. I surmised it was generating a field that nullified the damper, one that conformed so tightly to Sevellin's body that Darí had been unable to take advantage of

it.

Darí's eyes met mine again, and I heard his voice, traveling through our bond, "*Do what you must. I understand*." He closed his eyes—I could see the pain that this acceptance brought. However, I could also tell that much of his apparent helplessness was a façade, that in actuality, he was readying himself for the action to come. "*I will be there when you need me*," he affirmed.

Sevellin took a step towards me, smiling grimly, "There seems to be a little more life in you than in your *deirfad*." His voice was cool, but I could hear a trace of excitement behind the words. The predator in him had switched its prey. "Shall we play?" He raised his knife in something akin to a salute.

"What game do you have in mind?" I inquired, playing at innocence. Sevellin's approach allowed me to move my head in a natural way as I watched him, giving me a chance to see more of the room around me without arousing any suspicion. That's when I saw what I was looking for. A small, silvery icosahedral object was fastened to the wall just below the gold-painted border, slightly to my right.

Sevellin was moving towards me slowly, deciding what he wanted to do, how he would respond to my question. His eyes had a sickening look of lust in them, a sadistic desire for violence.

My guards had relaxed their holds slightly, as I suspected they would. With a sharp lunge, I pulled myself free. In a single, fluid motion, I stepped forward, reached down and grabbed my boot knife. I had only a brief instant for action. Focusing my entire awareness on what I needed to do, I straightened and threw the small knife with as much accuracy and force as I could. It struck the psi damper full on, knife blade sinking deep into the thin outer casing of the unit. Sparks erupted. A sense of lightness rolled over me, so heady that I almost fell over.

Returning situational awareness warned me of danger, but I knew it was too late to save myself. Hands grabbed my arms roughly, wrenching them painfully behind me. Another hand twisted into my hair, pulling my head back, forcing me to arch my spine in an awkward and unbalanced position. I tried to find the moment of concentration that I needed to shield myself, to throw off my attackers.

Even as I gathered my thoughts, Sevellin's mind knifed into my brain, scattering my wits like leaves before a wind. There was no interest in play now that I was a danger to him, unbound by the psi damper. I felt him physically slam into my body. A sharp stabbing pain drove deep into my belly. I made a strangled gasp. With an experienced sideways twist, Sevellin finished his work and freed his knife, leaving me gutted.

Eye to eye with me, Sevellin glared, angry and flushed. "*In return for that little trick, you'll get to watch me kill your deirfad as you die*," his mental voice was harsh and intense in my head. At some signal from him, the guards released their holds, and I fell gracelessly to the floor. Their attention would be focused on Darí now.

“*Go!*” I shouted telepathically at Darí. Rolling into a ball, I clasped my hands over the wound, trying to hold myself together and staunch the bleeding. I would have to trust Darí to finish this fight. My task was to keep myself alive.

Eldarí—Date: 8939.201

Davandrïa

I finally did understand what Dran was doing … and I didn't like it. I didn't want to accept his actions as necessary. I'd convinced myself that Farrwÿn's visions had simply been nightmares rather than reflections of reality. How wrong I'd been! Now, I could only hope that Dran had somehow seen his way through this tangled knot of destiny.

The moment the psi damper field went down, I was ready. The two guards holding me were easy victims. Linked as we were through physical touch, it was simple for me to use my Healer's abilities. From the points where their hands were in contact with my arms, I directed my psychic energy along their nervous systems, traveling up towards their brain stems and the location of their reticular activating systems. A quick psychic touch, and they slumped to the floor, unconscious. I felt a momentary stab of guilt—an invasive use of the Healing skill was most certainly unethical.

The pain that knifed through my abdomen as my telepathic connection with Dran flared to life drove away any such concerns. A flood of emotional anguish was immediately followed by a flaring of anger greater than any I'd ever experienced before. *I would not let Dran die!* In that moment, I knew I would kill to save his life.

As I reached for my Star, I saw the Davandrïans release Dran and step away. I braced myself, expecting more pain, but only felt a slight twinge. Dran was already controlling his body's reactions, freeing me to finish the fight. His shout of "*Go!*" echoed through my head, releasing my anger. I lashed out, driving the Star with my psychic energy. The *ferrïl's* blue glow intensified, and the *durrïls* came to life in a brilliant flash of golden light. The two Davandrïans had no chance against my wrath. Their minds were slammed ungently into unconsciousness. It was only with the barest edge of control that I kept myself from burning out their brains, killing them. Sevellin, however, appeared to be impervious to my psychic blast, shielding himself in some manner.

Wheeling to face me, Sevellin bared his teeth in a rictus of rage, gripping the bloodied knife. This was no time to allow my anger to dull my wits. Sevellin's hand seemed to glow for a moment, then light flashed outward along the knife blade. Quickly, I threw my energies into a psychokinetic shield, blocking the beam that lanced at me. Not a mental thrust like I'd used … this was a psychic cutting torch that could burn through flesh.

Even as I reacted, Sevellin was circling, trying to get behind me. I swiveled around, just as another light ray came at me. My shield flared red with heat as it dissipated the energy. In such an enclosed space, with Dran lying injured and vulnerable on the floor, simply deflecting the energy would be too dangerous. Unfortunately, I doubted that Sevellin was worried about collateral damage.

As Sevellin gathered himself for another attack, I struck out at him empathically, thrusting at him with

emotions of dread and panic, trying to rattle him. He shook his head slightly, but seemed otherwise unaffected, continuing to circle around behind me. I had to keep moving, bracing for another blast. Blood from the cut along my eyebrow mingled with sweat and trickled down the side of my face, not quite blinding me. The room was getting warm. Sevellin showed no signs of tiring. To use more force against him might risk harming Dran in the backlash. However, if we remained in an impasse, this fight could go on for a long time. Too long. Dran could be dead before it was over. Worry rose to chew at my anger.

Sevellin wasn't shielding against my empathic attacks. He didn't fear them … his rage was the overpowering emotion. I met his eyes briefly as energy flared out at me again, seeing the testosterone-driven madness blazing from them as my shield absorbed the blast. Not increased force, but something more subtle was needed.

Once more, I used my empathic projection. This time, I worked to heighten Sevellin's emotions. I tried to encourage his blood lust, his desire for vengeance against a race of people he now despised. Insidiously, I sent out images of his hands gripping my throat, strangling me slowly, of his knife cutting into my flesh. Struggling against myself, disgusted by the violent emotions I was emanating, wanting to vomit, I almost gagged as I forced the images across the space between our two brains.

Sevellin hesitated. His circling stopped. He took a step towards me. I staggered as though exhausted, letting my shield flicker in apparent weakness. I needed to lure him towards me.

Sensing an opportunity, Sevellin pointed the red-stained knife at me. Again, a beam of blue energy lanced out at me along its blade, brighter even than before. I brought my shield up to full power just in time, barely absorbing the energy. Letting the shield collapse in a smoldering wave of heat, I stumbled back, gasping.

Sevellin's face contorted into some expression I couldn't comprehend, some mixture of desire, hate, lust, even joy. He charged towards me, striking out with his knife. I moved quickly, slipping to one side. If I made this too easy, he would become suspicious. Sevellin whirled with me, tracking my motion. He was fast, experienced. Feinting high, with the knife coming up towards my face, he suddenly dropped low with a wide swing towards my belly. Instinctively, I kicked out, catching his arm with bruising force. He staggered, but held his grip on the knife.

Switching the blade from right hand to left, Sevellin swirled in for another knife sweep. This time, I was ready with my plan. As he came in towards me, I grabbed his wrist with my right hand, twisting it as though to disarm him. He was strong. I doubted that I could wrest the knife from his grip, but I had what I wanted. Skin contact. Gently, gently, using the soft touch of the Healer, I slipped through his mental shields, touching his mind, even as he was struggling to break free of my grasp on his arm.

Suddenly aware of my ingress into his mind, Sevellin bucked in my hold. I managed to grab his injured right arm with my left, holding him more firmly as I delved deeper into his brain. Realizing what I was

doing, Sevellin was frantically fighting me at all levels. I was barely able to control his knife hand as he slashed wildly at me. His mind was a crushing force slamming against my thoughts. Not a neophyte in the ways of psychic power, he was a highly trained adept desperately struggling to repair a momentary lapse in judgment. I held on. Using my anger as fuel, I forced my mind and body to grip him more tightly, fighting against his attempts to escape.

Time stalled. I thought Sevellin would win. He was stronger than anyone I'd pitted myself against before. Had Drÿfoch bioengineered him in some way? I didn't know. Fear grew in my mind. Our grappling, tangled bodies twisted around the room. At the edge of my vision, I saw Dran, lying still, blood pooling around him. My heart stuttered for a moment in dread. With a slight twitch, Dran took a breath. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, releasing whatever hidden reserves I had.

I found the strength I needed … somehow. I was like the *föalen*, my teeth clenched doggedly in my prey. Slowly, as I had with the guards, I drove the light of consciousness from Sevellin's eyes. His body started to go limp. A surge of relief shot through me, and I almost released my grip.

Abruptly, another mind thrust into Sevellin's darkening thoughts, pushing me aside like flotsam. Sevellin jerked against me, his eyes opening wide, staring sightlessly at me. I pulled myself out of his mind, slamming my mental barriers in place, but not before I heard a voice in his mind declare, "*Fool!*" Sevellin's spine arched as his body spasmed. Ripping free from my grasp, he collapsed to the floor. His dark brown eyes stared glassily at the ceiling. I knew instinctively that Sevellin's body was now just an empty husk. The soul had fled. His mind had been blasted.

I shuddered. What had happened here? Whose mind had taken over Sevellin's body from a distance, effortlessly snuffing out his life? I knew of none within the Ll'Ellendrÿn who had power this frightening, save in legend and myth. But I could guess. If Drÿfoch was truly alive and active, then this horrible act was the mark of his mastery over his acolytes.

A foot scuffed against the wooden floor. I whirled to face the doorway, alerted to new danger. Three Davandrïans had just entered the room, their burly bodies and dark clothing identifying them as more of Sevellin's guards. How long had they been there? Had they been watching the fight, awaiting the outcome before taking action?

Even as I grabbed my Star, readying myself for further actions, something strange was happening. The guards were shuffling, staggering. The first one fell to his knees, then slowly tipped over sideways. The next one seemed unable to stop, tripped over the man on the floor and fell full length. The last one sagged against the door frame, sliding down to rest on his rump. Once down, their eyes closed, and none of them moved. More of Drÿfoch's terrible actions at a distance?

Some slight motion caught my eye. I twisted around again. Dran had his Star out, held in a bloodied hand, with a grim smile on his face. "*Finished that job properly*," he remarked, his voice in my head slightly unsteady. Abruptly, my world narrowed down to the only thing that was truly important.

“Dran …” I faltered. Even as I spoke his name, I was kneeling beside him.

“*Don’t worry. I’m alive*,” again that shaky voice spoke in my head. Dran’s eyes were open, but he was very pale. There was too much blood on the floor, in a puddle under his body, draining away in little trickles. Underlying the blood’s coppery smell was the stink of feces, a sure indication of a perforated intestine. I put my hand gently on his shoulder, trying to fill my head with reassuring thoughts in spite of the tremors of fear that kept running through my body.

“*I’m afraid you’re going to have to live up to your reputation as the best Healer on Ellendrïa*,” the corners of Dran’s eyes crinkled. I sensed that he was actually trying to be grimly humorous.

“*I will*,” I replied gently, lapsing into mind speech. I had no humor in me … my focus was on insuring that Dran would survive. Already I was scanning his body, trying to ascertain the extent of the injury. Sevellin’s knife blade had entered the upper right quadrant of Dran’s abdomen, and had then been twisted brutally upwards to further exacerbate the damage. Both the large and small intestines had been perforated in that region, and the blade had been driven high enough that it had damaged Dran’s liver as well. This explained the heavy bleeding. However, the hemorrhaging had ceased, and while Dran’s blood pressure was lower than normal, it wasn’t dangerously low. He was shaky, but his skin was still warm and dry. For the moment, he wasn’t in shock. I didn’t know how long he could maintain his biocontrol. I needed to take him somewhere safe, a place where I could perform the surgery that would be necessary to put Dran back together.

The emotional and physical effects of the fight with Sevellin were catching up with me. I could feel my hands tremble. Dran obviously noticed it too.

“*Sevellin?*” he inquired. He hadn’t seen what had happened, not while he was dealing with the three guards at the doorway.

“*Dead. Not by my hand.*” I’d explain that later.

“*We need to go before the living regain consciousness*,” he reminded gently.

I shook my head in indecision. “*You can’t walk*,” I stated.

“*No, I don’t think I can … not without losing my grip on things*.” Dran quirked an eyebrow at me.

“*How can you find any humor in this situation?*” Dran’s emotions were unfathomable to me.

“*Better humor than giving in to fear and hopelessness*,” he countered.

I felt overwhelmed. “*I can’t get you out … I need a stretcher*.”

“*You can carry me*,” Dran sounded calm, reasonable.

"*That will hurt you too much*." I could imagine how much pain it would cause Dran for me to lift him and carry him down a flight of stairs. And then where? To the clinic?

"*Darí*," Dran looked me in the eyes, "*do it. I can manage*." I realized that I was on the verge of falling apart. Dran was right. We needed to get out of this dangerous place as fast as possible, before we had to fight again.

Carefully, I slid my arms under Dran, lifting him as gently as I could, cradling him against my body. I could feel him wince as I moved him, although he said nothing. His weight was solid in my arms, but I knew I was strong enough to carry him at least as far as the clinic. I started walking, dodging around the unconscious and sleeping bodies on the floor, trying to tread as lightly as possible. I felt like I was moving through a fog, dream walking. Each step took an eternity, yet I eventually found myself through the door, moving forward, and finally going down the stairs. Dran was tense in my arms, blocking the pain as much as he could, clinging tenaciously to life. My vision was blurry. I blinked, tears and blood rolling down my cheeks.

When I reached them, the main doors to the building had been flung open. Just outside, I could see a mob of people swirling chaotically about. I hesitated, fear rising like bile in my throat. Would we have to fight our way through the protesters? Then a figure I recognized stepped through the entranceway … Trevern. Over his shoulder, I caught a glimpse of someone else. Seychen? I heard a clear voice call out commandingly. Trevern stepped back, and the way was clear.

I kept walking. As I passed through the doorway, I could see that the mass of people had split, forming a path. Trevern and Seychen were standing by the doors, looks of worry and concern on their faces that barely registered on my consciousness. At the end of the human-formed corridor, in the center of the plaza, the *Ënne* sat. The ramp was down. Farrwÿn stood at its base, clearly organizing people so that the way was clear.

Hope touched me like a ray of sunlight on a stormy day. The facilities onboard the *Ënne* would make my work as a Healer much easier, and our chances of surviving this misfortune much greater. Exhausted as I was, my steps grew lighter.

Partway to the ship, I realized that Farrwÿn was at my side. His face was drawn with deep-set worry. How much had his *turas* been tormenting him? He had one hand on my arm, reaching out tenderly with the other to touch the top of Dran's head gently … an unspoken query.

"*I'll live*," Dran reassured Farrwÿn with a certainty that I didn't yet feel. Did Dran know? Or was he just trying to keep our hopes up? Even for the Ellendrí, abdominal wounds were dangerous and took skill and delicate surgery to repair. I'd heard that exceptionally talented Healers could mend such wounds without surgery, but I'd never tried this, and wasn't going to risk Dran's life with experimental techniques. Fear and worry still ate at my heart.

Time seemed to jump forward … I was climbing the *Ënne's* ramp. Farrwÿn had gone inside ahead of me. I could hear quiet clicks and thuds as he rearranged the rear section of the ship to become an operating room. Our minds were intertwined, and he knew what I needed without having to be asked. Carefully, I navigated my way through the ship, gently laying Dran down on the white sheeted surface that Farrwÿn had arranged. I sagged against the wall, my arms aching from the muscular tension of holding Dran without causing him more pain.

I had expended a great deal of psychic energy in my fight with Sevellin. Now I hoped I had enough left to save Dran's life. Once, long ago, I would never have considered using a Star to heal someone. Today, I would gladly use every advantage I had, and I knew that I would need my Star more than ever.

Farrwÿn—Date: 8939.201

Davandrïa

I was pacing back and forth outside the *Ënne*. Everyone had drawn back from the ship, leaving me in peace in my little space of personal anguish. My *turas* was a jumble of strands of alternate realities, out of control. Worry and frustration drove me relentlessly in my circuit, burning off what little energy remained to me. Had I done enough? Was this the beginning of the end that had been haunting me?

Darí and Dran had been successful, but at what cost? Dran was badly injured and Darí was exhausted from the battle.

I had done what I could. I am no Healer, no Medic, but I helped Darí as much as I was able. The pain and stench, our three minds entangled together as Darí worked frantically to clean and prepare Dran's wound for healing … I will remember those moments for as long as there is life in my body. I'd fetched surgical instruments, assisted in setting up the intravenous system that had provided Dran with a solution of artificial blood, had been an extra hand where it was needed.

Finally, Darí had been satisfied with his work and ready to move on to the next stage. I'd helped him clean up the surgery area, knowing that the most critical phase was yet to come. Darí must use his psychic healing abilities to stitch together the pieces, to make whole the parts that had been damaged by a viciously wielded knife. And Darí was tired … it had been a long and difficult day for him, both emotionally and physically. At the end, I'd done the only thing that I could. Laying my hands on Darí's shoulders, I'd given him all the vital psychic energy I could spare. Then I'd left the *Ënne*. My presence there would have only been a distraction to Darí.

Outside the ship, things had changed. Morning had passed, and the afternoon had been well along on its way. The sky had darkened, a brooding shade of grey, with occasional snowflakes whipping past me in a breeze that had been working its way towards becoming a wind. Most of the protesters had been organized and sent off. What tasks they had been about, I didn't know or care. However, at least one group had been sent into the governmental building to apprehend and detain Sevellin's guards. Surrounded by armed civilians, a group of black clad Davandrïans had stood in the plaza, manacled and fettered, a pall of defeat lying heavily over them.

Of even greater import, to me at least, had been the realization that the *Ënne* shared the square with another Ellendrïan vessel, one that I'd readily identified. Rallandrí and Kerredrÿn had arrived. Even as I'd made that observation, I'd seen Kerredrÿn standing outside their ship, talking to a small group of Davandrïans. Although I'd not met Trevern in person, I'd seen images of him in Darí and Dran's thoughts, and had been able to recognize him as one of the foremost Davandrïans in that group. Change was underway.

And now I paced. Kerredrÿn and Rallandrí had clearly seen the value in leaving me to work out my angst.

Obviously, they somehow knew what was going on, that the lives of my *avángri* were hanging in the balance. Afternoon faded into evening. The wind came up for a bit, then dropped as darkness fell, and the snow began in earnest. I felt none of it, only objectively noting the shift in weather in some remote corner of my brain. At last, my *turas* unraveled its knots and quieted. Whatever had happened, had happened. The balance had tipped.

A faint whine startled me. I jumped, twisting around to track the sound. The Ënne's ramp was lowering. As I looked up, I saw Darí leaning tiredly against the entrance frame.

"Farrwÿn, get in here before you freeze," he commanded in a hoarse voice. I met his eyes, and he gave me a small, exhausted smile. Dran would recover.

Chapter 27: Heart, Mind, Body, Soul

Eldarí—Date: 8939.216

Lorril

Staring out over the shimmering turquoise water, I finally put my tablet down on the table where I'd been working. I hadn't added anything more to our report for quite some time now, and I didn't think I was going to. Happily, the cold snows of winter had been replaced by the balmy breezes of a never-ending tropical summer. I let my hands come to rest on the rough wood table, my tablet between them. The details of our assignment, or at least as many of them as we wished to remember, were recorded. Dran had been hard at work dictating minor points and additions last night. Now I had finished contributing my information and final conclusions about the past year of our lives.

Fifteen days on Lorril had given us time to heal, both mentally and physically. I was still fussing over Dran a little, but his wound was completely healed. I'd watched him working out this morning in the early pink and orange glow of dawn. Only the slightest trace of stiffness gave sign to the massive amount of damage he'd suffered to muscle tissue and internal organs. We were both still shaken by how quickly we'd been overwhelmed by the situation on Davandrïa, how close we'd come to being more Guardian statistics, just like Killarÿn, Turien, and Danaldrí.

What had we learned? What had we accomplished? My mind drifted, still trying to piece the puzzle together.

The three Dasení who'd suicided when caught by the Border Patrol had been positively identified as Ellendrí, but their names and families remain unknown. If they'd been born on Ellendrïa, the information that should have been in the records was missing or destroyed. It was possible that they'd been born off-world, but, at least for the moment, we had no way of tracing them.

Sevellin was silenced, although an autopsy clearly showed what we'd suspected. He was a genetically-modified Ellendrí, reliant on hormone therapy to maintain both the appearance and function of a Sfoení. His psi channels had been completely burned out, and the resulting destruction of nervous tissue throughout his body and brain had caused his sudden death. We would never know for sure if the mind I sensed was Drÿfoch's or some other agent of destruction at work. However, Farrwÿn was certain that Sevellin was a player in Drÿfoch's game.

What had Sevellin and the other Ellendrí conspirators been trying to do on Davandrïa? Certainly, they'd worked at destabilizing the government, but to what effect? Trevern suspected that resources had been hoarded by Drÿfoch and his followers. Had those supplies remained on-planet or had they been shipped elsewhere, in support of some other scheme? We didn't know, and if any of the missing goods resurfaced on Davandrïa, there would likely be rapid redistribution amongst the needy and not much heed to record keeping. If enough planetary governments were toppled, the chaos could spread to the

Ll'Ellendrÿn as a whole, disrupting supply chains and reducing support to organizations such as the Border Patrol. What value did Drÿfoch see in the disintegration of the Ll'Ellendrÿn? Was it chaos for the sake of revenge or did he have some other plan? More questions without answers.

On the positive side, Trevern was quickly getting the Davandrïan government reorganized and functioning again. With any amount of luck, they would be able to stave off what might have been a very grim winter for many Davandrïans. My heart and my hopes were with them. Better yet, Rallandrí had contacted some of the First Arc worlds. I knew there would be some shipments of supplies, especially food and medicine, coming into Gavaldrïn not long after mid-winter.

On a personal level, I still hadn't resolved my feelings over the outcome of the fight with Sevellin and his final demise. Had I broken my Healer's Oath when I'd used my Healer's touch to evade Sevellin's shields? Was stopping Sevellin in that way "*using my knowledge of healing contrary to the best interests of humanity*"? I had been desperate, but more than that, Sevellin's brutal attack on Dran had fired up both my rage and my fear. If that unknown mind hadn't snuffed out Sevellin's life, would I have killed him myself? I wasn't sure. I'd like to be able to say that I would only have disabled him, not killed unless there was no other option. But to save Dran's life … I would do what I had to do. I closed my eyes, trying to calm my emotional turmoil. I didn't like the black *föalen* that lurked in the depths of my psych. It gave me strength, but it was dangerous. I must carefully balance its power against my desires to carry out justice and prevent harm. Could I find an equilibrium between my dark and light sides?

The warm sun on my face brought out the sweet, spicy scent of my sweat. That was another problem I would have to deal with. I opened my eyes, staring out at the sea and the white sand beach that spread out below the small cabana. Dense strips of tropical vegetation bracketed the sides of the little cabin, providing privacy from the neighboring buildings. I knew that Farrwÿn's residence was just to the north of us, but it was completely invisible to us from here.

Farrwÿn had been with us for a part of every day since we'd arrived on Lorril, initially to help us with many simple tasks, as Dran had been very weak, and I had been completely exhausted. Later, we'd spent much companionable time together, while Dran and I decompressed from the year-long assignment and gradually resumed our roles as Guardians. I ran my hand through the stubble of hair on my head, reminding myself that it had been cropped short so that it would grow back in its original color. Both Dran's eyes and mine were almost grey again, although his were still a shade darker than mine. When the effects of the drug-induced melanin production had finally worn off, our eyes would be an identical light grey in color.

Today, however, Farrwÿn was conspicuously absent. Had my body been emitting that enticing fragrance yesterday? Or had Farrwÿn simply known what was going to happen? I shook my head. It had been over 13 years since Darriel's death, and not quite three years since Dran and I had taken our vows as *sïathcára*. Over all that time, I had not experienced *ërïol* … had not expected to ever experience it again. And now, my body was beginning to glow with its effects. How? Why today? I could only guess that the

combination of stress caused by Dran's near-death, and the fact that we were approaching mid-winter on Davandrïa, must somehow have triggered a mating response in me.

What should I do? Staring out the window, I watched as Dran came into view along the beach. He'd been out walking along the shore, enjoying his newly regained health and strength in the warm sunshine. Turning towards the cabana, he hesitated a moment, then found a grassy spot under the shade of a large tree just at the edge of my view. Sitting down, back against the tree, he gazed out over the ocean.

Pushing off from the table, I stood up, shaking my head in perplexity. We needed to sort it out between us. Likely, Dran would reject my offer to stay with me during my period of *ërïol*. I wasn't sure that he could experience *ërïol* himself, after all his years of self-denial. Nor was I certain that he would want to, even if he could. We would need to arrange for him to stay elsewhere for a few nights, possibly with Farrwÿn.

Stepping out on the porch ringing the cabana, I was enveloped in the moist fragrant breath of the tropical morning. It was a truly glorious day, in spite of all my frustrations. I was alive. Dran was alive. All of our friends had survived this past year of misadventures. What else could I wish for?

With a smile regardless of my misgivings, I skipped down the steps to the grass, then headed towards Dran. As I approached, he heard my footsteps, and turned to face me. His expression, as he focused on me, was rather odd, slightly abashed, maybe even embarrassed. When I was a couple of strides away from him, he held up his hand, not in a beckoning gesture, but clearly indicating that I should stop. Unsure of the situation, I hesitated, waiting for Dran to clarify his intent. What could he be so concerned about?

"I think you should stay back," he shook his head at me as he spoke.

"Why?" I inquired, although I was beginning to guess the problem. "Do you have a contagious disease?" The corner of my mouth was beginning to twitch, and I was afraid my expression was soon going to be one of friendly mirth.

"Disease …" Dran shook his head. "No. Contagious, maybe," he stared at the ground, a red flush beginning to creep along his jawline.

I chuckled gently. "The imperturbable Eldranth is not suffering from one of life's great mysteries, is he?"

Dran skewered me with a hot gaze, "It's not the least bit funny. And you'd better stay away from me unless you want to deal with an inexperienced, fumbling virgin with a bad case of hormones." I cocked a speculative eyebrow at him, and he gave me another piercing glance. "How did you know, anyway? I only just understood what I was experiencing as I walked along the beach. I thought I'd kept my worries to myself, for the moment."

“I seem to have a bad case of hormones myself. Seeing how you were behaving, it was pretty obvious that the problem has indeed been contagious,” I laughed, more in humor than grimness. “I thought you had given up trying to hide things from me,” I added, possibly a little more sharply than I had intended.

“I was going to tell you as soon you came out. I just needed some time to think about this, to figure out what to do,” Dran looked chagrined.

Rapidly, I was regretting being so hard on Dran. It was strange to be in a situation where my older *deirfad* had less experience than I. “I’m sorry, Dran,” I apologized, chastised. “I realize that this problem really isn’t all that funny.” Taking a deep breath, I continued, “However, we still have to deal with it. Either we follow our hormones, or we need to be isolated from each other. The choice is ours.”

Dran looked at me, then looked away, out over the water. “I’m not sure if this is the right time or place for us.”

“If not now, then when and where?” I asked softly. “Is there every going to be a right place and time? Will we spend our lives avoiding this issue?”

“You know what the Elders think …” Dran left the words hanging in the air like a blot on our lives.

“That doesn’t matter anymore,” I refuted. “We don’t have to live on Ellendrïa now that we’re both Guardians … and we don’t have to let the Elders’ perspectives darken our lives. We’ve respected their ruling for many years, but it’s time that we do what is right for us. I know we will make responsible decisions. Whatever choice we make, it will bring no harm to anyone.”

Dran turned back to me with a self-conscious grin, “You’re right, as always.” He laughed shakily. “That still doesn’t mean I know what to do.”

For a while, there was silence between us, heavy and full of unspoken thoughts. I struggled to find something meaningful to say that would ease Dran’s concerns. Just as the stillness became nearly unbearable, and I felt forced to say something, anything, Dran opened up again, “After we’d been working together as Guardians for the first year, and nothing happened …” His voice was halting, hesitant, “I believed nothing ever would. I thought that maybe Darriel was necessary as a catalyst between us, that without her …” Dran trailed off.

“No,” I shook my head, negating what he was implying. “I know it’s been more than 13 years since Darriel went to the beyond, but some wounds are so deep that recovery takes a very long time. For years, I still thought I could feel Darriel in my soul, as though she were still alive. Even now, that happens once in a while. I don’t think we’ll ever stop feeling the loss, but slowly we are regaining what we had when we were young. Three years ago, we were still healing. Maybe now, we have recovered enough that our bodies are ready.”

Looking more closely at Dran, I realized how tense, worried, even frightened he was. I tried to think back

to the first time I went through *ërïol*. Had I been this nervous and afraid? Darriel and I had been together for so long as children that when we finally chose to share our bodies, it had come very naturally and with little strain. But Dran had been fighting against this for years … there would be nothing natural about any of it for him.

I closed the distance between us, sitting down next to Dran. Putting my hand gently on his shoulder, I could feel the tightness in his muscles beneath my fingertips. The sweet, spicy smell of pheromones thickened as we came together, each of us adding our fragrance to the mix. "Why don't we just take this one step at a time?" I suggested.

Dran sighed and nodded. I squeezed his should gently, sending out feelings of reassurance. "Once, when I was uncertain of you, you swore to me that nothing we did would be without my complete willingness and consent. I'm repeating those words back to you today. Please trust me."

Dran huffed again, then turned to look me in the eyes, "I do, Darí. Truly, I do."

I put both of my hands on his shoulders, massaging gently, trying to release Dran's tension. He leaned back against me, hot and sweaty with fever. I could feel fine shivers running through his body. We sat like that for a long time. I knew Dran was trying to relax, to let go and allow his body to respond to the hormones that were flooding his system. However, his tension only increased … I knew we had to break this impasse, otherwise Dran could become seriously ill.

As Dran's fever spiked, I realized that the situation was becoming serious. I could use my Healer's skills to restore his normal hormone balance, bringing him out of *ërïol*, but that would not help us in the long term. We needed to work through this as *anÿncára*.

On the other side of the cabana, away from the ocean, there was an idyllically landscaped freshwater pond, designed both to augment the natural ecosystem around the small community, but also to serve as a place of enjoyment where the warm waters were inviting to swimmers. During the first tenday we had been on Lorril, Dran and I had made frequent use of that pond as he had convalesced from his injuries, where gentle activity encouraged rebuilt muscle tissue to develop strength and tone. Thinking of swimming as a way to cool Dran's feverish body, my mind wandered back to the time, a little more than three years ago, when Dran and I had played together in the pond at our family's home on Ellendrïa. That moment had been the beginning of where we were today. Maybe what we needed now was some playfulness to break through the barrier that was holding us apart …

Scrambling to my feet, I caught Dran's arm, pulling him up after me. His eyes were puzzled, but he was passive and willing, at least for the moment. Like two young children, we walked hand-in-hand, away from the beach and back towards the cabana. Instead of climbing the steps and going inside, we followed a path that curved around the right side of the building, taking us to the parkland that was central to this neighborhood. Past the cabana, feathery-leaved trees and tropical flowering shrubs formed a tunnel of greenery over the trail. Enticing fragrances wafted about us in the slight breeze

coming off the ocean; edible fruit hung sweet and ripe from many of the trees. Compared to Ellendrïa, Lorril was truly a paradise world. Shortly, the mulched path gave way to sand, the trees opened up, and we were on the shores of a small pond. Light filtered through branches to create ever-changing patterns of bright and dark across the still, reflective surface of the water. On the far shore, a patch of immense pink flowers floated gently, surrounded by great oval leaves buoyant enough to support a person's weight. The sun was beginning to make its presence felt—the shadows cast by the trees would be a welcoming coolness.

I stripped my clothes off, already feeling damp and sticky from both the day's increasing warmth and the effects of *ërïol*. Piling them in a heap on the clean white sand, I took several running strides, then plunged into the water. The pond's embrace was cooling, but not cold, currents created by my lazy strokes swirling around me. A moment later, a loud splash and a surge of water pushing against me informed me that I was no longer alone. Diving deeper, I rolled onto my back, looking up towards the bright rippled surface to see Dran silhouetted above me. Twisting into an upright position, I pushed off the sandy bottom of the shallow pond, shooting myself with playful accuracy at Dran's midriff. In a sudden move, I grappled with him, reversing the roles we had played three long years ago. Dran responded by slithering out of my grasp, slippery as some species of fish, and then we were wildly and energetically cavorting, splashing water around like a pair of mythic sea monsters. The years peeled away from our souls, and we were once again two young children deeply joined by an *anÿncára* bond that had formed before I had seen my second summer. The connection between our minds was so profound that I could no longer tell which thoughts were mine, which were Dran's. Our hearts filled with emotions that we shared intimately, our souls twined together like some elaborate knot with no beginning and no end. We had known this closeness before, had accepted it joyfully as something that was a part of who we were—until it had become unacceptable to the Elders.

Time had no meaning—we were lost in our own private world, relearning how we fit together to make a complete whole. The sun had slid past the height of midday when I once again became aware of my surroundings. We lay together on a bed of soft moss, hidden in a tiny glade deep within the tropical garden. Our skin was dry—we might have been sleeping for a little while, dreaming together as we had as children. We had not yet consummated our bond, of that I was sure. Our pleasure together had been entirely the innocence of the young. As I awoke more fully, I could feel the thrumming of the blood in my arteries, the driving force of *ërïol* vibrating through my body. We would not remain innocent much longer.

I closed my eyes, breathing deeply, seeking control. During *ërïol*, as at all other times, the body of one's *anÿncára* is sacred, and must be approached in loving kindness, treated gently with respect and care. Also, although we were both in male phase, and therefore should be incapable of conceiving, it was our responsibility to be doubly conscientious and ensure than no new life would be created from our actions today. As I had been taught long ago, I used my biocontrol to reach inwards, triggering my cremaster muscle to remain contracted. My testes, which were normally retained within the inguinal canal, were

thus prevented from dropping down and becoming exposed to the cooler outside air, which they would otherwise have done naturally during *ërïol*. This would keep them too warm for proper sperm development, rendering me infertile. Even as I went through the actions, I could hear Dran's thoughts echoing mine as he too prepared himself for what was to come.

Responding to the rush of my hormones, I reached out, gently stroking my hand along Dran's torso. He shivered, but not in fear. I could feel his passion and excitement building. Our senses were so completely integrated that not only could I detect his skin silky under my fingertips, but I also experienced his response to my touch, a tingling string of sparks trailing behind my fingers. Awed by the depth of our togetherness, Dran placed his hand tentatively on my shoulder, amazed by the simultaneous dual awareness of our two bodies.

Unconsciously, I assumed the only role that I knew, that of *ailo*, the giver. Darriel had always refused to allow me to be *awa*, the receiver. I had allowed her intense desire to be the one who would bear our children control our relationship. Inexperienced and unresisting, Dran followed my lead. As I felt myself harden, Dran responded by softening—my fire was drawn to his water. I closed the space between us, moving gently and carefully, as if I were approaching a wild animal that I must not harm lest it flee in fear.

The ancient mantra of spiritual union came into my mind, and I softly voiced it aloud: "I love you just as you are. I accept you into my heart. I accept you into my mind. I accept you into my body. I accept you into my soul."

Dran met my gaze, his eyes soft and luminous, replying "My *anÿncára*, my *sïathcára*, my joy in this life, my all and my everything."

Slowly, gently, with a heart full of love, my body joined intimately with his. Together we shared the instant—his innocence and my experience. Our passions soared as we sought to become one in the ultimate union of spirit with spirit, mind with mind, and body with body. As our joy reached its climactic peak, we were briefly flooded with a vivid awareness of our interconnectivity with each other and all things in the web of life, an intense experience such as I'd never had before. Somehow, I knew this was a transformative moment, a strengthening of our bond and the whole of which we were a part.

In a flash, it was over. A brief sadness washed through me, but Dran held me tightly in his arms, and I knew we would never lose our closeness again. A quiet peace filled my soul. I drifted softly to sleep in Dran's embrace.

Ërïol runs its course over a period of two to four days. During that time, the lucky couple will mate many times in response to evolution's attempt to keep our species from extinction. What peace I had found in sleep did not last long. I awoke to Dran's gentle touch, and I knew that his hormones were peaking again. However, this was not to be a repeat of our previous coupling. Instead, he gave me the gift that Darriel could not—he played *ailo* to my *awa*, and after so many years, I knew what it was like to be a

virgin again.

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Again I was awakened, this time by pangs of hunger. I stirred in our mossy nook, raising myself on my elbow to look at the sky. Streaks of pink and lavender embellished the western horizon—the sun was a reddish ball slipping into the ocean.

Absently, my right hand fingered the *anÿnbränne* on my left wrist, tracing the engraved designs. Feeling the bird pattern entwined with the two *föalen*, my heart clenched as I thought about Darriel. For the briefest of moments, I almost felt as though she was still alive, my mind reaching out and touching hers. Then the sensation was gone.

“You felt her too,” Dran’s quiet voice caught my attention, and I turned my eyes away from the sky to look at him.

“Yes,” I replied, surprised at the tremor in my voice. “Do you really think that she has been reborn somewhere?”

Dran cocked his head to one side, thoughtful. Finally, he responded, “In spite of all that has happened, I trust Farrwÿn and his *turas*. Somewhere in the Third Arc is the person Darriel has become; probably not the Darriel we remember, but a Darriel who has had different experiences, who has developed a different way of living—someone who will complement what we have become.”

“And in the meanwhile?” I wondered.

Dran gave me a smile that held both joy and sadness, “We go where our destiny takes us.”

Appendices

I. People

Alexsis - a Davandrïan; the owner of a house in Kyadairin that was used temporarily as a medical clinic

Aleysïa - an Ellendrí; Farrwÿn's *athairan* (mother); maternal House is Aurora

Allandrïon - a Terran/Ellendrí/Ellendorí hybrid; Guardian-Healer; *sïathcára* (shield mate) to Farrwÿn; *darïlad* (child) of Eldranth, Eldarí, and Ceara; affectionately called ***Drí***; paternal House is Föalen

Anaduviel - an Ellendrí; Science-Researcher, belonged to the Science and Technology Guild; focused on Ellendrïan ecology; *anÿncára* (soulmate) to Eldarkÿn; *athairan* (mother) of Eldarí and Eldranth; maternal House was Iverÿn; deceased

Arlend - an Ellendrí; *anÿncára* to Kaldrin; friend of Farrwÿn; actively involved in the colonist movement

Arrwen - an Ellendrí; *darïlad* (child) of Allandrïon and Farrwÿn; *darïlad* (grandchild) of Eldranth, Eldarí, and Ceara

Aurora - matrilineal House; named for a plant similar to a Terran rose

Belar - a Davandrïan; Medical Technician working at a clinic in Gavaldrïn

Ceara - a Terran/Ellendrí/Ellendorí hybrid; Guardian; *anÿncára* (soulmate) to Eldranth and Eldarí; *athairan* (mother) to Allandrïon; maternal House is Scréachóg

Chekchakin - a Davandrïan; past spokesperson for the Davandrïan governing Council; deceased

Cultaní - a technologically advanced alien race that has evolved from a marine cephalopod; are radially symmetrical, have eight limbs, and a thick, cylindrical torso surmounted with a head-like structure; can breathe in both air and water environments; live on a handful of planets just outside the Ll'Ellendrÿn, close to the First and Second Arcs

Danaldrí - an Ellendrí; Guardian; *ïdrÿlad* (cousin) to Turien; sent out to specifically track down, observe, and possibly apprehend Drÿfoch shortly after the Genomic Enhancement Interval; paternal House was Föalen; presumed deceased

Danoldí - an Ellendrí; Healer; *deirfad* (brother) to Jareth; imprisoned by Drÿfoch at the end of the Genomic Enhancement Interval when he opposed his decision to experiment on humans; paternal House was Föalen; presumed deceased

Darriel - an Ellendrí; Historian who taught Ellendrí history at the Academy on Ellendrïa; *anÿncára*

(soulmate) to Eldranth and Eldarí; paternal House was Tarálon; maternal House was Queralïon; deceased

Dasení - original Ellendorïan human stock; “old-ones” or “ancient-blood”; racially heterogeneous; functional hermaphrodites; do not age; heal very rapidly; have highly effective immune systems

Davandrïan - a person from Davandrïa; Sfoení stock

Drÿfoch - an Ellendrí; genetic engineer involved in some of the worst of the atrocities during the Genomic Enhancement Interval, roughly three thousand years ago; exiled from Ellendrïa; currently posing as ***Gryffÿth***, a homesteader from a Third Arc planet returned to Ellendrïa after the death of his family

Dÿntarálon - a highly intelligent equine species resulting from Ellendrïan genetic engineering

Eldarí - an Ellendrí; Guardian-Healer; *darïlad* (child) of Anaduviel and Eldarkÿn; *deirfad* (brother) of Eldranth; *sïathcára* (shield mate) of Eldranth and Ceara; *athairad* of Allandrïon; affectionately called ***Darí***; paternal House is Föalen; maternal House is Iverÿn; posing as Rori, a Medic, when on Davandrïa

Eldarkÿn - an Ellendrí; Guardian-Healer; *anÿncára* (soulmate) to Anaduviel; *athairad* (father) of Eldarí and Eldranth; paternal House was Föalen; deceased

Eldranth - an Ellendrí; multi-discipline Guardian with weapons expertise; Healer trained but not practicing; *darïlad* (child) of Anaduviel and Eldarkÿn; *deirfad* (brother) of Eldarí; *sïathcára* (shield mate) of Eldarí and Ceara; *athairad* of Allandrïon; affectionately called ***Dran***; paternal House is Föalen; maternal House is Iverÿn; posing as Lyell, a Medical Technician, when on Davandrïa

Ellendorí - ancestral human species in the Ll’Ellendrÿn; believed to have evolved naturally from a hominid ancestor on the planet Dorïanya, circling the sun Ellendorïa; developed a technologically advanced culture, engaged in genetic engineering, developed space travel, and ultimately carried out planet bioengineering throughout the Ll’Ellendrÿn; Dasení stock

Ellendrí - a person from Ellendrïa; very homogeneous race in both physical appearance and culture; have experienced a loss of genetic diversity; highly inbred from a small population of Ellendorí and Gwÿrdrí; Dasení stock

Fallaroní - a person from Fallaron; first race of the Sfoení stock

Farrwÿn - an Ellendrí; Artisan and Psi Technician; Guardian trained, but not active; *darïlad* (child) of Aleysïa and Thorven; *sïathcára* (shield mate) of Allandrïon; maternal House is Aurora; paternal House is Seabÿn

Föalen - patrilineal House; named for an animal similar to a Terran wolf

Garvin - a Davandrïan; Medic-In-Training working at a clinic in Gavaldrïn

Gwÿrdrí - a person from Gwÿrdrÿn; race derived from an early wave of Ellendorí colonists; engaged in a catastrophic war that ultimately destroyed their planet; Dasení stock

Iverÿn - matrilineal House; named for a plant similar to a Terran morning-glory

Jareth - an Ellendrí; Healer; *dasbad* (great great grandfather) to Eldranth and Eldarí; *deirfad* (brother) to Danoldí; imprisoned by Drÿfoch at the end of the Genomic Enhancement Interval when he opposed his decision to experiment on humans; paternal House was Föalen; deceased

Kaldrin - an Ellendrí; Artisan; *anÿncára* to Arlend; friend of Farrwÿn; actively involved in the colonist movement

Kerredrÿn - an Ellendrí; Guardian skilled at *ürïrëtálc* (mind influence); *sïathcára* (shield mate) to Rallandrí

Killarÿn - an Ellendrí; Guardian; *sïathcára* (shield mate) of Turien; sent out to specifically track down, observe, and possibly apprehend Drÿfoch shortly after the Genomic Enhancement Interval; paternal House was Seabÿn; presumed deceased

Kÿrrÿl - an Ellendrí; Scientist-Engineer; manager of Ellendrïa's space flight facility; *ïdrÿlad* (cousin) to Eldranth and Eldarí; paternal House is Föalen

Lorrilei - a person from Lorril; long-lived, psychically gifted, dark-skinned people; adapted well to the hot, sunny climate of Lorril; have two separate dimorphic sexes; mixed Sfoení/Dasení stock

Manarel - a Davandrïan; one of the elected political representatives

Queralïon - matrilineal House; named for a plant similar to a Terran oak

Rallandrí - an Ellendrí; Guardian with expertise in anthropology, archeology, sociology, and history; extremely strong telepath; dispatcher for the Guardians; *sïathcára* (shield mate) to Kerredrÿn

Salander - a Thalandrïan; commander of a trading vessel

Scréachóg - matrilineal House; named for an animal similar to a Terran jay

Seabÿn - patrilineal House; named for an animal similar to a Terran hawk

Sevellin - an Ellendrí; spokesperson for the Davandrïan governing Council; working for Drÿfoch

Seychen - a Davandrïan; daughter of Trevern

Sfoení - common human stock found throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn; "young-ones" or "young-blood"; descended and evolved from the Dasení; extremely racially diverse; have separate sexes, shorter life

spans, high fecundity, and an earlier puberty, frequently as early as 12 years of age

Tanish - a Lorrilei; communications officer for Lorril's flight control and later leader of the Border Patrol

Tarálon - patrilineal House; named for an animal similar to a Terran horse

Terran - a person from Terra, sometimes known as an Earthling; Sfoení stock

Thalandrïan - a person from Thalandrïa; typically broad shouldered with sandy-brown skin and curly dark brown hair; specialize in trading and transport; have two separate dimorphic sexes; mixed Sfoení/Dasení stock

Trevern - a Davandrïan; one of the elected political representatives and later leader of the protesters against abuses by the government

Turien - an Ellendrí; Guardian-Healer; *sïathcára* (shield mate) of Killarÿn; sent out to specifically track down, observe, and possibly apprehend Drÿfoch shortly after the Genomic Enhancement Interval; paternal House was Föalen; presumed deceased

II. Places

Corrÿn - solar system in the First Arc; has two habitable, colonized planets, Yithral and Layení

Danaldrÿn - sun at the edge of the Second Arc; has one colonized planet, Davandrïa

Daseníl - Davandrïa's only moon

Davandrïa - a colonized planet circling the sun Danaldrÿn at the edge of the Second Arc; a planet of plains and wide open spaces

Dïarven - the administrative center of Ellendrïa; now the only remaining city

Dochasïa - habitable planet in the Second Arc circling the sun Serenïa; has land masses mostly in the northern hemisphere; tropics are predominantly oceanic, with a few scattered islands, and in the southern hemisphere there are a handful of island archipelagos; northern continents are largely mountainous, but the mountains are older, worn, low-elevation ranges, with long smoothly rolling foothills that gradually gentle out towards the coastal plains; hills and peaks are dotted with ponds, lakes, and tarns; water is plentiful and there are no deserts

Dorïanya - once colonized planet in the First Arc circling the sun Ellendorïa; currently obscured by an interstellar dust cloud; fate of civilization on Dorïanya is unknown

Ellendorïa - sun in the First Arc; has one colonized planet, Dorïanya

Ellendrïa - colonized planet on the edge of the Second Arc; fourth planet circling the sun Hauldrÿn; has two rocky moons, Lyriel and Gaeana; largely uninhabitable due to extensive desertification; no surface water remains in the lowland regions, although there is still enough water vapor in the atmosphere to form clouds; the mountains are the only places that still have lakes and streams

Eorithrin - village in the northwest part of the populated continent on Davandrïa

Erystarí - colonized planet in the Third Arc circling the sun Eryia; tropical with abundant forests and mountains, and a fair bit of tectonic activity; volcanic cones are common landscape features

Fallaron - colonized planet orbiting the sun Vesusia in the First Arc; colonized approximately six million years ago; bioengineering of the planet was not yet fully completed when the colonists arrived, and the young atmosphere was thin and the ozone layer poorly developed; colonists were exposed to higher than expected levels of UV, gamma, and X-ray radiation; excessive exposure to these types of radiation created mutations in DNA, both in somatic and germinal cells

First Arc - the region of the Ll'Ellendrÿn containing the greatest number of inhabited planets; races in this region originated from the first and second waves of Ellendorí colonization; a number of these races

have some form of space travel, and there are well established lines of trade and travel; there are no potentially colonizable planets left in this region

Gavaldrïn - the largest city on Davandrïa; located in the southwest part of the populated continent; the planetary capital

Gwÿrdrÿn - colonized planet destroyed in a catastrophic war; solar system unknown, presumed to be in the First Arc

Hauldrÿn - sun on the edge of the Second Arc; reaching the end of its stellar life, and has been gradually expanding outward as it becomes a red giant; has one colonized planet, Ellendrïa

Hélïwÿr - the Orion Spur; one of the spiral arms of the Milky Way Galaxy

Indrïan - uninhabitable fifth planet circling the sun Hauldrÿn on the edge of the Second Arc; small rocky planet that is rich in sulfur deposits

Jälaeth Dannaig Sérïen - the Milky Way Galaxy

Kyadairin - village in the northwest part of the populated continent on Davandrïa

Ll'Ellendrÿn - a region located along the Orion Spur about halfway between the center of the galaxy and its outermost edge; consists of 70 G-type stars orbited by planets in their circumstellar habitable zones that have been bioengineered to create ecosystems capable of supporting humans

LLell2-17 - habitable planet in the Second Arc; an ocean world with very little land mass

LLell2-2 - habitable planet in the Second Arc with no terrestrial vegetation; life exists only in the oceans

LLell2-4 - habitable planet in the Second Arc with loess plains and megafauna

LLell2-7 - habitable planet in the Second Arc; Earth-like but with intelligent feline/simian species

Lorril - colonized planet in the First Arc circling the sun Valaera; water world with a land mass that consists of many little archipelagos scattered throughout a single large shallow ocean; has a warm tropical environment; location is central to the First Arc; base for the Guardians; mission control center for the Border Patrol

Second Arc - the region of the Ll'Ellendrÿn where the people mostly owe their ancestry to the second and third waves of Ellendorí colonization; there are fewer inhabited planets in this section and more available bioengineered planets for future colonization

Sol - sun in the Third Arc; has one colonized planet, Terra

Tarasu - sun in the First Arc; has one colonized planet, Thalandrïa

Tellakin on the Lake - village in the northeast part of the populated continent on Davandrïa

Terra - colonized planet in the Third Arc circling the sun Sol; Earth

Thalandrïa - colonized planet in the First Arc circling the sun Tarasu

Third Arc - the region of the Ll'Ellendrÿn where only a few of the bioengineered planets have been colonized by the third wave; none of them retain space flight capabilities; colonies on these planets have been out of contact with the rest of the races in the Ll'Ellendrÿn for so long that they have suffered partial or total loss of their history, and some have degenerated to a primitive condition

Valaera - sun near the center of the First Arc; has one colonized planet, Lorril

Vesusïa - sun in the First Arc; has one colonized planet, Fallaron

III. Ellendrïan Relationships

Relationship [gender]	**Terran translation [equivalent]**
athaira [non-gender specific], *athairan* [female phase], *athairad* [male phase]	parent (hermaphroditic) [mother, father]
darïl [non-gender specific], *darïlan* [female phase], *darïlad* [male phase]	child (hermaphroditic) [daughter (granddaughter, etc.), son (grandson, etc.)]*
deirfa [non-gender specific], *deirfan* [female phase], *deirfad* [male phase]	sibling (hermaphroditic) [sister, brother]
dasba [non-gender specific], *dasban* [female phase], *dasbad* [male phase]	elder (hermaphroditic) [grandmother (great grandmother, etc.), grandfather (great grandfather, etc.]*
athairan-deirfan [female phase], *athairan-deirfad [male phase]*, *athairad-deirfan [female phase]*, *athairad-deirfad [male phase]*	maternal parent's sibling (hermaphroditic) [maternal uncle, maternal aunt], paternal parent's sibling (hermaphroditic) [paternal uncle, paternal aunt]
ïdrÿl [non-gender specific], *ïdrÿlan* [female phase], *ïdrÿlad* [male phase]	cousin (hermaphroditic) [cousin]
ephau	short term sexual liaison
engö	mated partners [Terran common-law marriage]
anÿncára	soulmate(s)
sïathcára	shield mate(s) - Guardians who are *anÿncára* that have chosen to express their life-long commitment through a shield mate ceremony
avángri	best friend - a relationship that is much deeper and closer than simple friendship, but not as close and intimate as between *anÿncára*; often occurs amongst children who have been raised together or between members of the same family

*In general speech, the degree level of the relationship is often omitted; therefore *dasba* may refer to a person's grandparent (second degree), great grandparent (third degree), or even more removed, and likewise, *darïl* may refer to a person's child (first degree), grandchild (second degree), great grandchild (third degree), or even more removed. This is not to imply that the Ellendrí do not keep accurate lineage records, or that the degree of relatedness is unknown. Rather, in a population where aging does not occur, it is not uncommon for a family to have members who are more than four degrees removed, and the language to reflect this is cumbersome for day-to-day usage.

IV. Notes

[1] The short form for Allandrïon; used affectionately by close friends and family.
[2] *Dÿntarálon* are genetically modified equines with human-equivalent intelligence, a complex social structure, and a well-developed culture.
[3] The short form for Eldarí; used affectionately by close friends and family.
[4] The Terran English translation for *anÿncára* is roughly "soulmate".
[5] The masculine form for "child"; it may refer to a person's child (first degree), grandchild (second degree), great-grandchild (third degree), or even further removed.
[6] The feminine form for "elder"; it may refer to a person's grandmother (second degree), great-grandmother (third degree), or even further removed.
[7] The Terran name for the Hélïwÿr is the Orion Spur, one of the spiral arms in the Milky Way Galaxy.

[8] The Terran name for the Jälaeth Dannaig Sérïen is the Milky Way Galaxy.

[9] The Ellendorí were believed to have evolved on Dorïanya, the planet circling the sun Ellendorïa. Eventually, the Ellendorïan solar system passed into a cloud of interstellar dust and experienced severe snowball glaciations, and the Ellendorí were forced to leave their homeland.

[10] Psychic abilities fall into two main categories:

(1) psi-gamma—paranormal or anomalous cognition, often referred to as extrasensory perception (ESP). This is the ability to gain knowledge through means other than the five physical senses or logical inference. Psi-gamma includes telepathy, clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairalience, clairgustance, clairsentience, and precognition;

(2) psi-kappa—paranormal action or anomalous operation. This is the ability to affect physical objects without physical mediation, and includes phenomena such as mind-matter interaction and survival after bodily death. Psi-kappa includes psychokinesis (aka telekinesis), out-of-body experiences, astral projection, apparitions, near-death experiences, mediumship, and reincarnation.

The human organism can be considered as consisting of two parts located in different subsections of n-dimensional space—the physical brain/body and the extended consciousness. These two are connected by the trans-dimensional causal relations that we call psi-gamma on the afferent (inward conducting) side and psi-kappa on the efferent (outward conducting) side.

The afferent psi-gamma causal process that unites the brain and the consciousness has not only a focus on the brain but, in addition, a penumbra (a shadow region) that allows information to be picked up from other minds (telepathy), other objects (clairvoyance), and future events (precognition). Likewise, the efferent psi-kappa causal process has a penumbra that allows for psychokinesis.

Psi-gamma and psi-kappa causal relations are mediated by the interpenetrating energies of the energy-verse (aka the bulk, the between, or hyperspace), and these energies, which penetrate our bodies, are referred to as psychic, or psi, energies.

[11] The Ellendrí year is written in the form: "years since colonization day on Ellendrïa"."current year day number". For example, the date 8936.113 can be read as the 113th day in the 8936th year since the colonization of Ellendrïa.

[12] The visible, three-dimensional universe is embedded in a higher-dimensional space, called "hyperspace", "n-dimensional space", or the "between". Consciousness can be described as a series of hierarchal mental spaces occupying the "between". The higher the mental space reached, the further into the "between" the consciousness has gone, and the greater the dimensionality of the universal structure. While physical spacetime, at the lowest level of the multiverse, is four-dimensional, the highest mental space is eleven-dimensional. The Ellendrí refer to ten- and eleven-dimensional mental space as the "beyond", a place where the spirit goes after life on this plane of existence ends.

[13] The Ellendrí are hermaphroditic. Thus, each parent in a union is capable of either siring or birthing a child. Where the specific relationship of the genitor to the progeny is unknown, the individual is referred to as *athaira*, which roughly translates into Terran English as "parent". Where the genitor is the child's sire (e.g., during the act of procreation, the individual which was in male phase with functional testes), then the term *athairad* is used, which translates to Terran English as "father"; alternately if the genitor is the child's birthing parent (e.g., during the act of procreation, the individual which was in female phase with functional ovaries and uterus, and who then underwent gestation), then the term *athairan* is used, which translates to Terran English as "mother".

[14] In cases where the individual is clearly in male phase, the Terran English pronouns he/his/him are used. Where the individual is in female phase, the Terran English pronouns she/hers/her are used. In ambiguous, unknown, or androgynous situations, the pronouns ey/eir/em are used.

[15] The non gender-specific term for Ellendrí siblings is *deirfa*. When referring to a hermaphroditic sibling in male phase, this noun would be modified to *deirfad*. For a hermaphroditic sibling in female phase, the modified form would be *deirfan*. Since Terrans are not hermaphroditic, the closest Terran English translation for *deirfad* is brother, and for *deirfan* is sister. Unfortunately, the words brother and sister do not recognize the true nature of the Ellendrí, since an individual can be both *deirfan* and *deirfad* at different times during their life.

[16] Translated into Terran English, *anÿncára* means "soulmate". However, these bonds are deeper, stronger, and more encompassing than the Terran concept of "love" or "marriage"; they are enduring bonds of friendship, companionship, and eternal partnership. Soulmates resonate with each other, and have very similar psychic patterns. Soulmates will seek each other out after rebirth, and may spend several lifetimes together.

[17] The short form for Eldranth; used affectionately by close friends and family.

[18] The Guardians of Peace are a corps of Ellendrí peacekeepers, carefully selected for strong psychic abilities, and trained extensively in mediation, peacekeeping, and a variety of armed and unarmed combat skills. Although highly skilled in survival, and well capable of defending themselves and protecting those seeking their aid, these Ellendrí are oath-bound to a specific creed: to always pursue the path of non-violence whenever and wherever possible, to seek peaceful solutions to disputes, and to limit physical conflict to the least amount possible. Guardians are primarily involved in interstellar issues, and have no authority over planetary governments; however, if requested, Guardians will serve as mediators in planetary disputes. The Guardians are self-regulating, and are not bound politically or legally to any planet in the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Ellendrïa provides the funding and resources for the Guardians, but does not demand any allegiance in return. At the time that this part of our story was taking place, there were very few Guardians remaining in service.

[19] A caprinid is a domesticated ruminant mammal belonging to the same family as Terran sheep and goats.

[20] Guardians who are *anÿncára* may choose to recognize their eternal love as soulmates through a ritual where they exchange wrist guards, called *anÿnbränne*, and vow to protect and shield each other from all harm. This is similar in some regards to a Terran marriage ceremony, but with greater spiritual depth and meaning. *Sïathcára* translates as shield mate in Terran English.

[21] A Guardian's Star is a six-pointed star-shaped pendant which has at its center a large *ferrïl*, and at each point, a *durrïl*.

[22] Certain synthetic crystalline materials have proven to be extremely useful in Ellendrí psi technology. These crystals are a complex amalgam of both organic and inorganic compounds, nearly indestructible, and capable of resonating with the wavelengths of psychic energy. A *ferrïl* is a focusing crystal, often blue colored, which enables a person to focus their psychic energy intensely on a specific task, thus enhancing their control and skill. It is able to transform psychic energy into other, more usable, forms of energy. A *ferrïl* is specifically keyed to the unique psychic wavelength patterns of each individual, and thus it can only be used by one person.

[23] A *durrïl* is an energy capturing crystal, generally yellow colored. It is able to capture energy from some extraneous source, such as sunlight, infrared energy, or the high-frequency energies of the between, and convert it

to psychic energy. A *durrïl* is used in conjunction with a *ferrïl* to greatly enhance the amount of psychic energy available to perform a given task.

[24] *Turas* is the ability to see the future. It can range from simple forewarnings of danger to the ability to trace paths created by specific decisions into the future and determine the probabilities of outcomes related to those decisions.

[25] A relationship that is much deeper and closer than simple friendship, but not as close and intimate as between *anÿncára*; often occurs amongst children who have been raised together or between members of the same family.

[26] 1 day = 44.6 Terran hours = 1.85 Terran days; 1 deciday = 4.46 Terran hours; 1 centiday = 26.76 Terran minutes; 1 milliday = 2.676 Terran minutes.

[27] Cousin, male phase.

[28] Parents, plural of *athaira.*

[29] The original Ellendorïa human stock is referred to as the Dasení, meaning "old-ones" or "ancient-blood". They are racially heterogeneous, but have several characteristics in common: (1) they are functional hermaphrodites; (2) they do not age; (3) they heal very rapidly; and (4) they have highly effective immune systems. It is believed that these characteristics are the result of genetic engineering by the Ellendorí used to repair "damaged" genes and chromosomes in the human genome.

A second, much more common human stock found throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn is the Sfoení, meaning "young-ones" or "young-blood". These are humans descended and evolved from the Dasení. Although they are extremely racially diverse, they typically have separate sexes (dioecious or two-sexed) and often shorter life spans. They have high fecundity and an earlier puberty, frequently as early as twelve years of age.

Dasení and Sfoení have interbred throughout the Ll'Ellendrÿn, producing races that have a mixture of characteristics from the two parent stocks. Relatively few of the peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn retain all the characteristics of the original Dasení.

[30] Generally *anÿncára* relationships occur either as a result of (1) very strong resonances between two individuals previously unknown to each other, resulting in what Terrans refer to as "love at first sight"; (2) two individuals who have been raised together as children, and whose psychic patterns have grown similar due to proximity and sharing; (3) two individuals who have been reborn who were *anÿncára* in their previous life together and have found each other again; or (4) two individuals who began their lives together as *engö*, but whose psychic patterns have gradually become more similar over time due to intimacy.

[31] The Ellendrí government is a form of social pacifist anarchism. Governance of Ellendrïa usually falls to committees of volunteers. The Ellendrí Council of Elders is a group composed of 10 of the eldest Ellendrí on Ellendrïa, selected for their wisdom and breadth of experience. The Elder Council meets regularly to discuss all issues impacting the Ellendrí. Generally through a process of debate and consensus, the Elder Council provides a considered judgment on any issue brought before them. Although often treated as binding, the Elder's "decrees" are not law. It is the function of the committees to put the Elder's pronouncements into force.

[32] Children are generally raised and shared amongst the extended family, and are as familiar with their parents' siblings and their children as they are with their own parents. Often the children of several families will be raised and educated together in order to allow companionship to develop between the children as they grow and mature. Even though unrelated, children brought up together tend to remain very close friends, constant companions and supporters, and even *anÿncára* in later life. Young children are taught in home environments, usually in small groups of four to six individuals of similar age. Parents play a significant role in the education of their children, and are assisted by a variety of learning aids, including material in audio, visual, holographic, and virtual reality formats. Learning programs are individually tailored for each child, although, by the age of 25, Ellendrí adults are expected to have an education level roughly equivalent to a Terran baccalaureate [four year] degree program.

[33] Maternal parent's female phase sibling; the equivalent of a maternal aunt on Terra.

[34] Most Ellendrí "own" very little, largely just their personal clothing and a few private mementos. Land and property are held communally, or stewarded. Food, water, clothing, and other necessities are distributed freely as required. Vehicles and equipment are shared, being passed from one individual or family to another as needs change.

[35] The Genomic Enhancement Interval is a period in Ellendrí history about three thousand years ago during which extreme genetic engineering was carried out on the Ellendrí genome.

[36] The *durrïl* was the most difficult of the psi crystals to produce, and contained elements that were relatively rare and hard to obtain. For those reasons, in addition to their inherent potential for misuse, they were only used by groups of psi workers engaged in circles or by Guardians.

[37] Paternal parent's male phase sibling; equivalent to a paternal uncle on Terra.

[38] Like Guardians, Healers are also oath-bound, and swear the following Healer's Oath:

This I swear:
I will consecrate my life to the service of humanity.
I will give to my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due, and will gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.
I will respect the limitations of my own knowledge, and actively seek out the advice of others where my knowledge is not sufficient.
I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity, and to the best of my ability and judgment.
I will maintain by all the means in my power the honor and respected traditions of the r'Elerwai.
The health of my patient will be my first consideration, and I will treat them with warmth, sympathy, and understanding.
I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that others may know.
I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.
I will not permit prejudices or discriminations of any kind or on any basis to intervene between my duty and my patient.
I will maintain the utmost respect for human life; even under threat, I will not use my knowledge of healing contrary to the best interests of humanity or to the ethics of the r'Elerwai.
I make these vows solemnly, freely and upon my honor.

Note that "*r'Elerwai*" translates to "Healers" in Terran English. An individual may train as both a Guardian and a Healer, and be bound by both oaths. The Healer's Oath takes precedence over the Guardian's Oath.

[39] 1 year = 222 local days = 446 Terran days = 1.13 Terran years; 1 half-year = 111 local days = 223 Terran days = 0.565 Terran years; 1 quarter-year = 55.5 local days = 111.5 Terran days = 0.2825 Terran years; 1 deciyear = 22.2 local days = 44.6 Terran days = 0.113 Terran years; 1 tenday = 10 local days = 20 Terran days.

[40] A *föalen* is a wild canine native to Ellendrïa; similar to a Terran wolf.

[41] Dasení generally have better night vision than Sfoení. Like many vertebrates, Dasení have a layer of tissue in the eye, called the *tapetum lucidum*, which lies immediately behind the retina. Sfoení lack this *tapetum lucidum* layer. This tissue is a retroreflector, reflecting visible light back through the retina, thus increasing the light available to the photoreceptors and contributing to superior night vision. Even weak starlight provides enough illumination for the *tapetum lucidum* layer to reflect the dim light and enhance night vision. The *tapetum lucidum* is iridescent, and the visible effect of its presence in the eye is eyeshine. Dasení generally have a silvery eyeshine, although some individuals may have a blue or amber eyeshine. Some Dasení races (e.g., the Ellendrí) also have acute senses of hearing, smell, and overall vision, probably as a result of genetic engineering.

[42] *Dervids* are small caprine bovids similar to Terran sheep or goats.

[43] *Chakars* are fowl bred for meat and eggs similar to Terran chickens.

[44] A brane is an extended object with any given number of dimensions, of which strings in string theory are

examples with one dimension. Our universe is a three-brane.

[45] 1 millirad = 7.601 km; 1 microrad = 7.601 m.

[46] The Ll'Ellendrÿn was colonized by groups of closely-related peoples during a period of time spanning approximately seven million years as the planets bioengineered by the Ellendorí matured and stabilized, providing new home worlds for Ellendorí colonists. These waves of colonization extended outward along the Hélïwÿr as the first colonists expanded and diversified. Interactions amongst colonies and with the people remaining on the Ellendorí home world generated the complex patterns of colonization and genetic variation seen amongst the related peoples of the Ll'Ellendrÿn. Based on these colonization patterns, the Ll'Ellendrÿn is divided into three sections:

(1) The First Arc is the region containing the most inhabited planets, and it is here that the Ellendorí's home world is located. Within the First Arc are races that originated from the first and second waves of Ellendorí colonization. A number of these races have some form of space travel, and there are well established lines of trade and travel. There are no potentially colonizable planets left in this region;

(2) The Second Arc is a region where the people mostly owe their ancestry to the second and third waves of Ellendorí colonization. There are fewer inhabited planets in this sector and more available bioengineered planets for future colonization. Ellendrïa and its sun Hauldrÿn are located on the boundary between the First and Second Arcs. Officially, the Ellendrí are derived from second wave colonization, but as they are the last remnants of the Ellendorí, and, unlike many second and third wave races, have never lost their space flight capacity, they are considered the oldest space-faring race in the Ll'Ellendrÿn;

(3) In the Third Arc, only a few of the suns orbited by bioengineered planets have been colonized by the third wave. None of them retain space flight capabilities. Colonies on these planets have been out of contact with the rest of the races in the Ll'Ellendrÿn for so long that they have suffered partial or total loss of their history, and some have degenerated to a primitive condition. These colonies have largely been left to re-evolve their technology and stabilize before being brought back into the loose association of planets that form the trading network of the Ll'Ellendrÿn.

[47] All ships have electromagnetic force fields (aka deflector shields) to protect their occupants from space radiation. Run at low energy levels, these fields create an artificial magnetosphere, consisting of a thin layer of plasma, around the ship, which deflects harmful energetic particles. When necessary, these shields can be increased in intensity to a point where the plasma becomes hot enough and dense enough to vaporize small particles or even block matter. Shield frequencies are adjustable, and can be tuned to block high-frequency radiation, such as light and laser beams. Whenever lasers are being deflected, light is also unable to penetrate the shield. Running the shields at high intensity puts a heavy drain on the ship's stored energy, and can only be maintained for short periods of time. Tiny antennae for the ship's sensor arrays extend beyond the plasma shield to allow the sensors to function when the shield is up. These antennae are unprotected, but are easily replaced should they be damaged. When the shields are used at high energy, the ship's clear canopy converts to a wrap-around video display showing both visual information as well as data collected by other sensor types.

[48] Some ships are also equipped with a "light bender", or invisibility shield. Using the ship's gravitational field generator, a gravitational field is set up which bends incoming electromagnetic radiation around the ship, thus creating the effect of invisibility. As with the deflector shields, the tiny antennae for the ship's sensor arrays extend beyond this shield to allow the sensors to function. This type of shielding is not perfect, and leaves a trace signature, which can be observed with the appropriate sensors, but is very effective when an invisible ship is unexpected. It is also possible to use this type of shielding to deflect laser beams, but it is not possible to shoot a laser beam through either the plasma deflector shield or the invisibility shield from the interior. Like the sensory antennae, the barrel of the laser must extend beyond the shield in order to function while the shields are up.

[49] Unlike most mammals, Dasení have autosomal sex chromosomes (X^MX^F) rather than the XY sex-determination system. The "sex locus" of each X chromosome contains a different allele. The X^M chromosome contains the allele

SRM (sex-determining region male), which produces male characteristics, and the X^F chromosome contains the allele SRF (sex-determining region female). During embryonic development, the sex-determining alleles on both the X^M and X^F chromosomes are active, stimulating the development of both the mesonephric ducts (male) and the paramesonephric ducts (female), resulting in an individual with both male and female sexual organs. Both the X^M and X^F chromosomes contain an X inactivation/reactivation center, which can be triggered to cause one or other of the autosomal X chromosomes to condense and become inactive. Unlike Barr body formation in XY sex-determination, inactivation only occurs after puberty, is hormonally triggered, and is reversible. This generally results in sequential hermaphroditism, where an individual is either in "male phase" (condensed X^F chromosome; testosterone dominating; testes active and capable of producing fertile sperm) or "female phase" (condensed X^M chromosome; estrogen dominating; ovary active and capable of producing fertile eggs). However, other sexual phases can also occur, including an "androgynous phase" (neither X chromosome condensed; low levels of both testosterone and estrogen; sexually inactive) and very rarely a "bisexual phase" (neither X chromosome condensed; high levels of both testosterone and estrogen; capable of producing both fertile eggs and sperm).

Those individuals who have a shape-shift gene linked to their X^M chromosome can undergo shape-shifting only when the X^M chromosome is not condensed (e.g., either in male-phase or androgynous phase).

[50] Sexual dimorphism between the male and female phases is minor. The female phase develops a somewhat higher proportion of fat to muscle mass than found in the male phase in preparation for pregnancy. If an individual has been in female phase for an extended period of time, a limited amount of breast development may be observed. Individuals in male phase tend to be slightly stronger than those in female phase. However, individuals in female phase are often more lithe and agile.

Copulation can occur between all phases at any time during the reproductive cycle, but occurs most frequently during ërïol, when hormone levels are highest and fertile gametes can be produced.

Ërïol is similar to the estrus cycle found in most other mammals. Although it can be triggered by strong emotion and even stress, *ërïol* is more typically a seasonal event, often occurring twice a year, once near midsummer, and again near midwinter. Only individuals of opposite phases (e.g., a male phase and female phase pair) at the height of *ërïol* are capable of conception.

In practice, Dasení do not change their sexual phases frequently. As children, Dasení are androgynous; however, after puberty, which occurs between 20 and 25 years of age, most individuals tend towards one phase or another, and often stay in their preferred phase throughout their lives. When phase changes do occur, they are usually in response to the needs of partners wishing to conceive.

In addition to phase changes, Dasení may have specific personal sexual orientations. Some Dasení prefer either the *ailo* ("male"—the partner who gives [energy, sperm] during copulation) or *awa* ("female"—the partner who receives (energy, sperm) during copulation.) role, regardless of their actual phase. Others prefer to switch roles regularly. A few are strictly androgynous and asexual.

Due to the strength advantages of the male phase, a typical adult Dasení population is about half male phase, a quarter female phase, and a quarter androgynous. As Dasení age, they often develop a preference for the androgynous phase.

[51] One of the early Ellendorí colonies was on Fallaron, a habitable planet orbiting the sun Vesusïa in the First Arc, established approximately six million years ago. Unfortunately, the bioengineering of the planet had not yet been fully completed, and the young atmosphere was thin, with a poorly developed ozone layer. As a result, the colonists were exposed to higher than expected levels of UV, gamma, and X-ray radiation. Excessive exposure to these types of radiation created mutations in their DNA, both in somatic and germinal cells. These early colonists were robust, and did not readily succumb to hardship. Although cancer rates were unacceptably high, and birth defects were common, the colonists on Fallaron persisted. Over time, they stabilized the atmosphere, and conditions on the planet improved. However, during the thousands of years that the colony survived, grew, and eventually flourished, many mutations occurred in the population, and natural selection increased the frequency

of those that were advantageous to the difficult environmental conditions on the planet.

Two mutations in particular soon became common amongst the population:

(1) The X^M sex autosome degraded to become a Y chromosome. Sex chromosomes are inherently fragile, and under conditions promoting high rates of mutation, the subsequent degradation of one member of the autosomal pair, leading to a return to XY (or similar) sex-determination is possible. Thus, over time, the Y chromosome became more abundant in the population, eventually leading to a resurgence of the old XY sex-determination pattern that is seen in many mammalian species;

(2) A series of small, cumulative mutations resulted in decreased DNA and cellular repair abilities within the population. Individuals with these mutations accumulated damaged tissues and systems throughout their lives, eventually leading to death through aging, something which had not been seen for many millennia. However, in the harsh environment of Fallaron, where death at a young age by accident or hardship was common, aging was of little concern to the colonists. Short lives became the norm, and were in fact selected for by the difficult conditions, as they allowed for a rapid spread of beneficial mutation when it occurred.

Ultimately, when the Fallaroní had mastered the conditions of their planet, and returned to the space lanes to trade and exchange knowledge with other colonies, they had become a different race from the Ellendorí. That race, which became known as the Sfoení, was young, vibrant, and fertile, and was quick to spread throughout all the colonized worlds of the Ll'Ellendrÿn.

[52] Not only do these "gates" allow travel through space, they also permit travel in time, and potentially even between parallel universes.

[53] During the transit through bulk space, or "between", a spaceship moves along with its bubble through space at relativistic speeds, without suffering the effects associated with time dilatation. Within the warp bubble region, the spacecraft never locally breaks the speed of light. Typically, the spaceship has an initial sub-luminal velocity when it activates the gravitational field and enters hyperspace. This velocity serves as the hyperspace coordinate, with a greater initial velocity corresponding to the ship being sent further off the brane and into the between.

[54] The Ellendrí culture is classless. Ideally, respect is shown equally for all members of the community. Realistically, people who are wiser, more experienced, more skilled, or more ethical and trustworthy are treated with greater respect and deference in unspoken recognition that they have earned this honor.

[55] Telepathy travels through n-dimensional space, and is subject to different laws of physics than light or radio waves.

[56] All Ellendrí ships are equipped with at least a rudimentary computer system, which is used for navigation and control of shields and grav/antigrav systems, as well as a variety of life support systems. A few of the more modern ships, particularly those used by the Guardians, have more advanced computer systems that are capable of remotely flying the ship. Some of these systems are essentially fully intelligent, and have the potential to become AIs.

[57] The Lorrilei are a race derived from a mixture of both Dasení and Sfoení lineages.

[58] The Terran English translation for *Sn'ënne ó ed Föalen* is *Föalen's Destiny*.

[59] Belonging to the genus that includes Terran cattle, aurochs, and yaks.

[60] Belonging to the family that includes Terran horses, donkeys, and zebras.

[61] Belonging to the family that includes Terran cats, leopards, lions, cougars, lynxes, etc.

[62] *Nwÿfödad* (Terran English translation is "all-knowing" or "all-knowledge") is the psychic ability to sense the relationships of animals or plants with humans, each other and the environment. It is believed to be a manifestation of a relatively rare talent that allows the user to sense the connections of the web of life (*den*, the universal mind or longbody) more clearly than most people. These connections create the ability to understand or empathize with elements of the web that are nonhuman. This talent often occurs in people who have experienced

reincarnation.

[63] Belonging to the family that includes Terran deer, elk, and moose.

[64] Belonging to the order that includes humans and Terran monkeys, gibbons, and apes.

[65] *Ënne* translates to *Destiny* in Terran English.

[66] The male form for "elder" (plural *redasbad*); it may refer to a person's grandfather (second degree), great-grandfather (third degree), or even further removed.

[67] Translates as "mountain bell flower"; similar to Terran heather

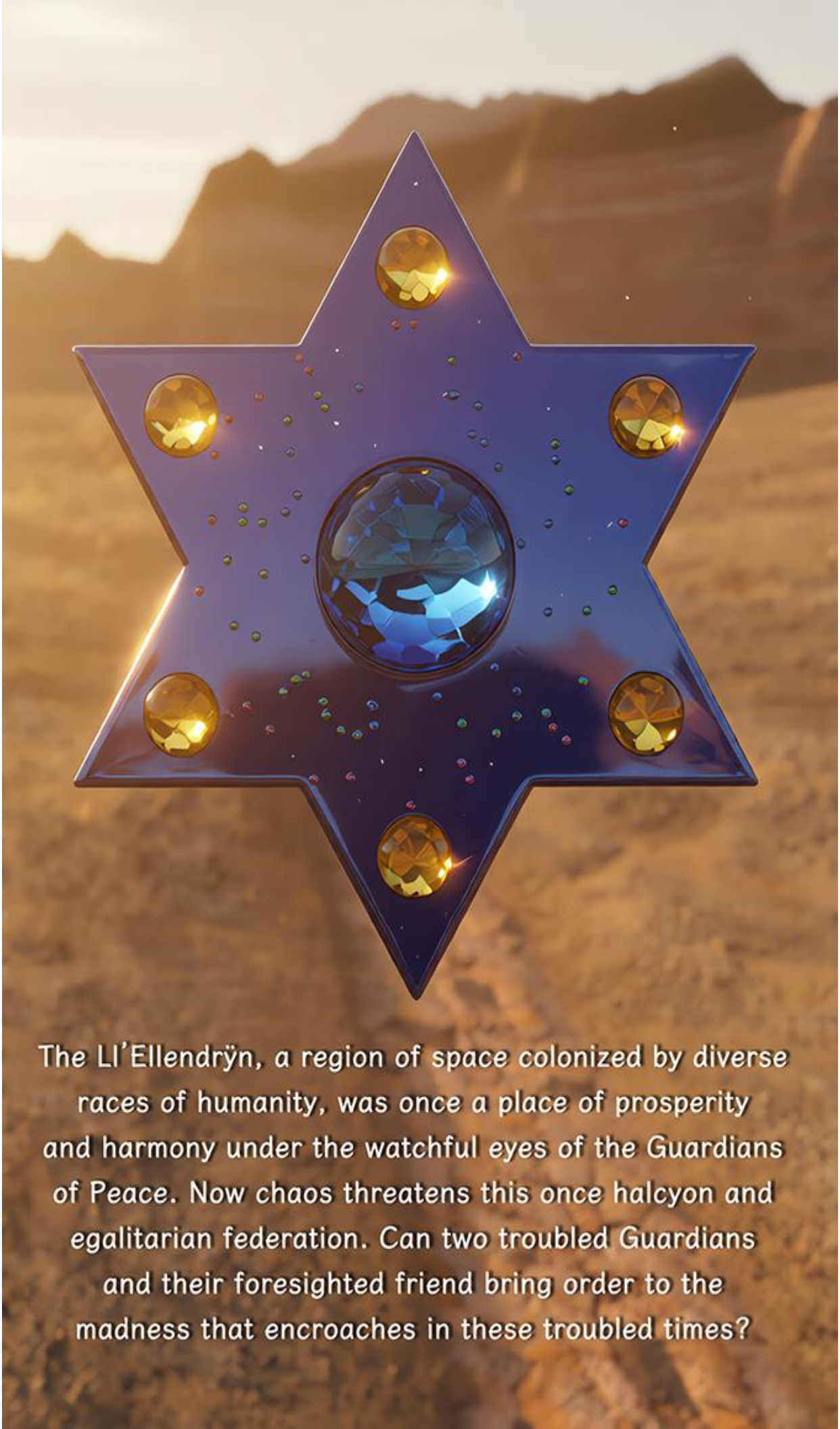
[68] *Ürïrëtálc* (Terran English translation: "mind-influence", mass manipulation)—the ability to subtly use deep influence upon multiple people, allowing the telepath to manipulate their perceptions, better judgment, wills, common sense, and even levels of consciousness. Note that *ürïrëtálc* may refer to control of one person or many people. *Ürïrëtálc* is a form of *ürïaermúngon* (Terran English translation: mind control)—the ability to use telepathy to control the thoughts and actions of others.

About the Author

Eldranth Föalen is the pseudonym used by Barb Faggetter when writing the Ellendrí Chronicle series.

Barb lives with her partner and border collie in a little off-grid cabin tucked away amongst the west coast temperate rainforest. She is a Jane-of-all-Trades, and is, among other things, a farmer's daughter, an oceanographer, an independent scientist, a teacher, a wilderness explorer, a permaculturalist, a druid, and a homesteader. A Tom boy since childhood, she is always looking ahead to the next adventure, even if it is only on paper.

To learn more about Barb and her off-grid life, check out her website. She also has a blog about her science fiction writing and has written a series on world building for the Ll'Ellendrÿn.



The Ll'Ellendrÿn, a region of space colonized by diverse races of humanity, was once a place of prosperity and harmony under the watchful eyes of the Guardians of Peace. Now chaos threatens this once halcyon and egalitarian federation. Can two troubled Guardians and their foresighted friend bring order to the madness that encroaches in these troubled times?