

THE DEVIL OF DAEMONS



STEVEN BISSETT

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Steven Bissett

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CHAPTER 1

Ellia Monroe gasped awake. Lying in the massive, dirty bed that had been hers for the last three weeks, she sat upright and rubbed the fog from her eyes and mind.

“Again,” she muttered pleadingly. “The same dream again. And again. And *again!*”

In it she saw her father.

Almost sixty, with a partial gut and a mostly absent head of snowy hair, Drew Monroe was one of the most successful researchers of psychic activity in the history of the discipline. He had also been missing for nearly two months.

In the dream he was distant, cold – like a statue that had somehow been brought to life. But not true life: it was merely a stiff, unfeeling mockery of it. Uncomprehendingly his formerly lively blue eyes gazed through her. He seemed a mere puppet suspended by invisible strings. She nearly felt compelled to look behind his back to see if a hand had been inserted there.

“Why did you ever come to this place, Father?” she asked, dropping back on her pillow and stretching out her arms to the sides of the bed with a sigh. “Couldn’t you have just stayed on Rimmis?”

A native of that planet, she had followed in her father’s footsteps after the death of her mother and became a professional psychic researcher herself. Of a much more academic stamp than her impulsive, larger-than-life father, Ellia was content to study all that had been written about extrasensory perception from the safety of her library. Making ends meet through teaching at a small college in the little hamlet of Metsk, she’d never had the least idea of leaving the planet.

But then reports had begun to circulate about strange visions and the sudden disappearances of dozens of people on the jungle moon of Daeldis. The government back on Earth had done its best to suppress the rumors, afraid that settlement of the already uninviting world would grind to a halt if prospective colonists felt it was haunted.

Never wealthy, Drew Monroe had spent months attempting to persuade the Rimmis Psychological Society of the need to send someone to investigate the phenomena firsthand.

Someone, incidentally, meant himself. And it was with great vehemence that he pressed his case. Finally he broke their will, and they reluctantly consented. Not in the best of health for several years, Ellia suspected that he was hoping to make one last great discovery before his death, or, failing that, to go out in glorious fashion. It wasn't in him to expire quietly, she reflected with some chagrin, realizing that he would rather pass his final days on a dangerous, gang-ruled moon than near the only family he had left.

The notion of an entire colony controlled by rival gangs made her head spin, especially given that she was just then lying on a bed smack in the middle of its capital city and sole spaceport. The only good thing she could say about it was that the rate of exchange was enormously in her favor. Genuine coinage from Earth and its inner band of colonies was incredibly precious, bearing several times its actual value. The local currency that the banks and lenders of the fringe put out was constantly being debased until it was nearly worthless. Indeed, an increasing number of businesses and private individuals refused to deal in anything other than barter. No matter what the would-be financiers of the fringe tried to pass off on an unsuspecting public, a chicken was still a chicken, a steak a steak, and a handgun a handgun.

Unless, of course, she pulled out the little coin purse she kept tucked inside her calf-high leather boot. Without fail the merchants' eyes would widen into grapefruits, and they would trip over themselves in an attempt to satisfy her every request. However, it was seldom that this happened, for the coins in her small pouch represented the entirety of her savings. The rest had been spent on the nearly two week long flight from Rimmis to Daeldis.

Reflecting on this, she put a hand to her face and sighed.

"How am I ever going to get back?" she asked herself for the thousandth time, it being the question that troubled her the most.

Besides the question of what happened to her father, that is. But she wasn't in much of a mood to be concerned about him just then. The first dreams she'd had were terrifying, representing as they seemed to Drew Monroe in a state of reanimated death. But as week gave way to week, and her savings began to slowly dwindle, she couldn't help feeling anger at his repeated visits. He was so close, and yet so far away. Leaving only a scanty trail behind him, she was forced to part with more money than she wished to just to buy information that didn't lead anywhere at all. Feeling terribly lost and alone, she rolled onto her side and pulled the blankets up to her neck. It was much too hot for them in the sweltering room. But she needed the comfort they provided.

Though not wishing to fall asleep because of her father's apparent ghost, she nevertheless dozed off again. But this time she saw something different: a massive figure garbed in a robe of black reached out an ancient, leathery hand towards her. Seizing her face, it lifted her off the ground as she unleashed a muffled scream and grasped its wrist. Fighting to break free, she felt the palm somehow open and a moist membrane press itself against her face. Instantly it began to draw the energy from her body, until she grew faint and lost the strength to fight back. Cast aside by the figure, she lay on the ground and watched as a succession of individuals suffered the same fate. Over a dozen people were thrown aside like trash by the figure before her awareness faded away, and she was once more inside her dingy room.

Sitting up sharply, she felt her body to make sure she was alright. Though aware that it was a mere dream, she nevertheless couldn't escape the feeling that it was completely real. It *had* to have happened, she thought. Having experienced many such dreams before, their feeling and tone were that of history being lived over again, and not that of a simple unconscious projection. *Someone* had to have experienced it. Then her eyes widened with a dreadful realization.

Scurrying from her bed, she went to the small desk that occupied the south-east corner of her room and picked up a thick book she'd brought with her from Rimmis. Flipping rapidly through the pages to a place she dimly remembered, she sat in the creaky wooden chair in front of the desk and began to read.

"It is often observed that the final few moments of powerful psychics are left behind on the surroundings that they'd inhabited. A fashion of living record, almost like a movie, can be discovered by those sensitive enough to notice. Especially if there's a strong personal tie to link them to the deceased individual in question, because the affinity they share makes the psychic presence they leave behind all the more noticeable."

She slapped the book shut at the last sentence, her stomach tying itself in knots and her heart nearly stopping. "...a strong personal tie to link them to the deceased individual..."

"Was that *Daddy's* death I just experienced?" she asked herself in a horrified whisper, her head beginning to swim. Carefully she went back to the bed and laid down, tears rolling down her eyes as she did so. "Oh, Daddy!" she moaned, pressing her face into the pillow as she began to sob to avoid drawing the attention of the rowdy prospectors who occupied the room next to hers.

The previous dreams ought to have been enough to convince her, she felt. But it wasn't until she felt the life, apparently, being sucked from her own body that the fact of Drew Monroe's death hit home. She knew the odds of it being another individual were fantastically slim, given the rarity of such occurrences between strangers.

"It must have left some life force left in his body," she thought, her academic mind unable to simply wallow in her grief. "Otherwise the vision would have ended right away. He lasted for a little while afterwards."

Shaking her head at the coldness of her analysis, she plunged it back into the pillow and sighed when she heard a knock at the door.

"Are you alright in there?" the hotel proprietor asked, a kindly old man.

"Yes," she lied, her voice thick with emotion. "Thank you."

"Are you sure?" he persisted.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," she assured him, swallowing beforehand to clear her throat. "I just had...a bad dream. That's all."

"Oh, well, alright," he replied, not convinced but unwilling to push the matter further. "Breakfast is on the table downstairs if you want it. Most of the others have eaten already, so I'm afraid it's a little cold."

"Thank you. I'll be right down," she forced herself to say to allay his concerns, eating in public being the last thing she wanted to do just then.

"Okay," he said, his unsteady footsteps creakily receding down the hallway and back to the staircase that led to the first floor.

"Oh, Daddy," she repeated, dropping her head once more onto the pillow and squeezing her eyes shut.

Not only had she failed to get him off Daeldis and back to Rimmis, she hadn't even managed to *find* him. And now he was dead, his soul drained away like vapor from a steaming pot. So consumed was she by this fact that she didn't immediately hit upon perhaps the most striking aspect of the dream.

"Who was that figure?" she thought, a puzzled look crossing her face. "And how did it manage to consume all those people?"

Heading back to the desk and her book, she flipped back and forth for any mention of a robed figure. But none was to be found. Then she remembered the hand and its membrane, and looked for that. She took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair when she came across the following statement:

"Traces have been discovered of an alien race that once inhabited the Milky Way. Their form was roughly similar to our own, though they were much larger and, apparently, possessed potent psychic abilities against which ours cannot be compared without embarrassment. From ancient drawings found in the cave dwellings of several of the races they regularly preyed upon, it is apparent that they drew the victim's life essence through an orifice in the palms of their hands."

Looking up with a gasp, she swallowed hard and then continued.

“These beings were evidently highly intelligent, manufacturing technologies far superior to our own. However, they were chiefly nomadic, and thus there is very little record of their having existed. The fragmentary picture we’ve been able to assemble is based largely on second hand sources, such as the aforementioned cave drawings. Almost no direct evidence exists. Their entire civilization, evidently, departed our portion of the galaxy long ago.”

With a stunned expression Ellia looked up from the book and laid it upon the desk. Staring at the wall for a long moment, she could scarcely believe what she’d both read and seen. The two pieces matched perfectly. Then a doubt flitted through her mind.

“What if I just dreamed that because I’d already read the passage some time ago but had forgotten it?” she mused aloud.

Suddenly a gust of air passed through the room, knocking over a small desk lamp and making her jump up with a yelp. Looking all around the room for a window she might have left open, her heart beat all the harder when she saw they were not only closed but locked tight.

Slowly the sensation of many eyes falling upon every inch of her body came over her, sending a shiver along her spine. Frightened, she slowly crept towards the door before realizing that she was still in her nightclothes. Moving gingerly to the dresser beside her bed, she quickly changed into a shirt and a pair of light pants, and then slipped out the door into the hallway. With a tense sigh she closed her eyes, reorienting herself before inserting her key into the lock and clicking it. It was then that her pale feet caught her attention, and she realized her boots had been left under the bed. Unwilling to return, she just shook her head and quietly went downstairs.

“There you are,” the proprietor said in his grandfatherly way, causing a pair of gruff men and a jaded, sour looking woman to glance up at her. “Made you a plate,” he added, handing over her breakfast.

“Thank you,” she said, forcing a smile and making for the table.

“What’s the matter, honey,” the woman began pointedly, looking at her smooth, graceful feet as she approached. “Had to pawn your shoes?”

The woman had a good twenty years on Ellia, putting her somewhere just shy of fifty. With patches of short, graying hair missing on the sides of her head, she’d evidently lived a much harder life than the sleek, slim, black-haired young woman who’d been forced to take the place opposite her due to a lack of chairs. Where her shoulders were square, strong, and obviously habituated to hard labor, Ellia’s were narrow, elegant, and used to lifting nothing heavier than the book she’d so quickly abandoned in her bedroom.

“I asked you a question,” the older woman persisted with irritation, leaning across the table when Ellia didn’t respond. “What happened to your shoes?”

“I still have them,” she answered quietly, trying not to give further offense. “I just don’t feel like wearing them yet.”

“Ha! Don’t feel like wearing ‘em?” the older man guffawed, though his face bore no mirth, being flat and indifferent. “Jackson don’t run a good enough hotel for that kind of daintiness,” he continued, indicating the feeble proprietor with his fork before hunching over his plate once more. “Your feet will be full of splinters by the time you’re back upstairs.”

“Won’t hurt her any,” the woman replied acidly. “Could use a little roughness on those princess feet of hers.”

Her face reddening with self-consciousness, Ellia looked down and went on with her meal, hoping a lack of eye contact would cause the Daeldisians to lose interest.

“How’d you come to be so fragile, anyhow?” the woman prodded.

“Leave her alone, Lasmina,” the proprietor said, though his tone made it a request.

“I’ll leave her alone when I’m good and ready to,” Lasmina shot back, angrily slamming her fork down. “Now, mind your own business.” Glaring at Ellia with narrowed eyes, she repeated her question in a low, hard voice. “What made you so fragile?”

“I...I don’t know,” she replied, her mind drawing a blank on how to answer such a question. “I guess I never—.”

"Guess nothing!" Lasmina retorted. "You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, is what you were! You can see it in your hands. Look at 'em!" she insisted, reaching across the table and seizing Ellia's right, causing her to drop her fork. "See what I mean?" she asked the two men beside her, stretching out the young woman's fingers and dragging the chipped nails of her other hand across Ellia's soft, uncalloused palm. "She's never had to work a day in her life!"

"That's not true!" she shot back, jerking her hand from Lasmina's grasp. "I've taught at a collegiate level for—."

"Teaching isn't *work*!" roared her persecutor with a dry, contemptuously laugh. "That's just *make-work*, cushy positions for soft people who can't endure a real day's labor. Now, look at that hand," she ordered, dropping her own left onto the table with a thud. "That hand's been broken twice, almost crushed, and had two fingers nearly ripped out. *That's* a hand that's seen real work, not the kind of nonsense you're talking about. I've got scars running up my left side and down my back, girl. I've been battered in more ways than you can imagine. Why I've nearly been stung half a dozen times by the Daeldisian blue spiders. I bet you haven't even *seen* one."

"What, the gangsters?" Ellia asked in a fluster, referring to the notorious criminal organization that ran the city of Raza, west of the capital. Immediately upon asking she realized how dense her question made her sound, but it was too late to take it back.

"Stung by a gangster?!" exclaimed the younger man, slapping his knee.

"Why do you think the gang is *called that*?" Lasmina asked.

"I really couldn't say," she replied, her face somehow reddening further.

"They're called that," she uttered in a lecturing tone, "because the blue spider is just about the meanest, deadliest thing you'll find on Daeldis. One good sting is enough to put you on your back for a week. Two stings'll kill ya. And almost no one ever gets away with just one sting, because the venom goes to working on you so fast that you usually can't get away from 'em. They just keep chasing and stinging you until you're a swollen mound of human mush, covered in bite marks. Bet you didn't know that."

"I'd heard they were bad," Ellia admitted. "But not that bad."

"Oh, they're more than bad," the older man chimed in, still watching his plate as he worked on it. "They're a foot tall, and about three times that in width, if you're measuring their legs from one end to the other. They shoot across the ground like lightning, sinking their teeth into your ankles if they can. If you've got boots on, they'll probably jump up and try to get you in the knee or thigh. Sometimes they drop onto you from the trees, but that isn't too common."

"Now do you get it?" Lasmina prodded, intent on wringing as much embarrassment for Ellia out of the topic as she could.

"Yes, I understand," she replied with a subtle nod, picking up her fork again and returning to her rapidly cooling breakfast.

"What brings a girl like you out to Daeldis, anyhow?" the woman inquired, a hint of genuine curiosity hidden under multiple layers of derision. "You're no natural fit for it, that's for sure."

"I'm here...to perform research," she replied with some hesitation.

"What kind of research?" Lasmina asked scornfully. "How quickly you can get yourself killed?"

"I'm exploring psychic phenomena," Monroe answered.

"There have been reports of people having unusual dreams, and of still others going missing without explanation."

"People go missing all the time," the woman shrugged.

"This is a dangerous place to be. If you don't watch out, you'll be one of them."

Glancing up from her plate at these words that sounded very much like a threat, she was relieved to see nothing but a sort of gruff warning in Lasmina's eyes.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You said folks are having weird dreams," the younger man began, leaning back from his empty plate and drawing a smoke from his shirt pocket that he inserted into a missing tooth in his upper mouth. "What kinds of dreams?"

"What do you care?" Lasmina snapped.

"Maybe I've had a few dreams of my own," he replied with an evasive whimsicality.

"You're not smart enough to dream," she retorted.

"Anyone can dream," Ellia replied, forgetting momentarily that she was speaking to a trio of roughnecks, and not her more cultured students. "Even animals dream," she added in a quieter voice, as Lasmina's eyes bored into her.

"See?" the younger man said to Lasmina, gesturing across the table towards Monroe. "Even animals can dream."

"That ought to be a great relief to you," Lasmina fired back.

"How'd you hear about these dreams?" the older man asked, still looking down and eating at a glacial pace. "Don't seem to know a whole lot else about this place."

"I'm very much involved with the Rimmis Psychological Society. They keep their ears open for any such rumors."

"Then that's where you're from? Rimmis?"

"What difference does it make to you?" Lasmina asked, growing annoyed at the way the men were beginning to take her seriously.

"Yes, that's where I'm from," Ellia confirmed, her voice dipping a little so as not to step on the older woman's toes any more than necessary.

"Just be still now," Lasmina told her in a growl, standing up and gazing at her for a moment before turning towards the younger man and nodding towards the door. "We're finished."

"I'm not," the older man replied, retaining his seat.

"I said we're *finished*," she snapped, turning on him.

"So you said," he uttered, unperturbed. "I'm not deaf."

"Fine," she said with annoyance, shoving her chair against the table and glaring at him. "Sit here and talk the day away with this soft-headed, soft-footed, soft..." she struggled for further words.

"Palmed?" he offered, looking up at her with a hint of a grin on his lips.

"But don't bother coming to the mine afterwards," she said nastily, leaning over and getting into his face. "Because you don't have a job there anymore."

"Just as well," he replied slowly, as she stormed for the door. "Wouldn't want to get between you and the blue spiders when they dive for those fat thighs of yours."

With a murderous look in her eyes she spun on her heels,

about to charge the table and stab him with his own fork. But the younger man intervened, pushing her out the door and into the street.

“Come on, Ma,” he said with a laugh, almost indulgently. “Save that rage for the mine.”

Fearful that she’d storm right back in, Monroe watched the door. After a minute or two passed she began to relax.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the man. “I didn’t mean to cost you your job.”

“You didn’t,” he replied, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth as he ate. “I was ready to quit, anyhow. The pay’s rotten, and you have to listen to *her* constantly,” he continued, stabbing a finger towards the door. “Besides,” he added in a lower tone, “you’re not the first one that psychological bunch has sent out here. There was a man a couple of months ago.”

Instantly Ellia’s back stiffened.

“How do you know that?” she asked in a near whisper.

“Because I ran into him,” he replied, looking up and putting his fork aside at last, though a few morsels remained on his plate. “He’s your daddy, isn’t he? You’ve got the same eyes. Mild green, with a little something else mixed in. They almost lean yellow.”

“When did you see him last?” she asked earnestly, leaning across the table.

“Been a while,” he replied. “I wouldn’t place any bets on his still being alive. Said he was looking for someone to take him past Todrid, which is north of here. Tried to hire me to guide him, but I said no.”

“Why?” she inquired, her hopes of finding a lead to her father rapidly sinking.

“Because that part of Daeldis is too dangerous,” he answered. “Probably most newcomers don’t know why. And even if they were told, they wouldn’t believe it. You’ve got to live here for a while before you begin to respect how things work.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s rumors of a group that operates out that way,” he explained. “Nothing too solid, but the stories keep adding up until you can’t ignore them anymore.”

“Like a gang?” she asked. “Like the Blue Spiders?”

“No, not a gang,” he shook his head. “A *cult*. Again, nobody knows too much about it. But when folks head out that way, they don’t come back. It’s deadly ground for some reason or other. I don’t know, maybe the animals out that way are just a lot more aggressive. I’ve never stuck my neck that far out, so I can’t say firsthand. This is just what I heard. But there’s a thousand rumors about that place, so you can take your pick which one you want to believe.”

“And my father wanted you to take him up there?” she asked. “What did he do when you said no?”

“Well, he tried to double and then triple what he’d initially offered to pay me, but I told him to keep it. Nothing was gonna drag me up there. Then he asked if anyone else would know the way, and I suggested a man I knew. He claims to have been up in that part of the jungle loads of times.”

“I thought you said nobody ever comes back,” she replied.

“Well, nobody that I can be sure of,” he shrugged. “The fact is honesty isn’t exactly a common virtue on Daeldis. It’s no stretch of the imagination to think that Ortmann’s been filling out his legend by bragging about heading up there. Most guides have. Except...” his voice trailed briefly.

“Except what?” she pounced, eager for any small glimmer of light.

“Except something about him makes you think maybe he *has* made it there and back again,” the man explained. “He’s tough enough to pull it off if anyone can. And smart enough, too. It’s just the odds are so far against it.”

“You said his name is Ortmann?”

“Yeah, Markus Ortmann.”

“Would you take me to him?” she asked.

“Why in the world would a nice girl like you want to meet up with a rascal like that? He’s not exactly the kind of company you’re likely to have kept back on Rimmis.”

“Because if he’s the last man to have seen my father alive, I’ve got to at least talk to him,” she answered, standing up and pushing in her chair. “After three weeks he’s the only lead I’ve got.”

"Talking to him isn't gonna bring your daddy back," he replied. "He's long past anything you can do for him, if Ortmann really took him where he said he would.."

"I've got to find out what happened," she said with quiet intensity. "Something is affecting the people of this world, and I owe it to him to carry on his work and bring it to a successful end."

"You'll bring it to an end, alright," he replied, standing up himself. "Not the one you're thinking of, though."

"Please, take me to him."

"Oh, I will," he assured her, taking a handful of nearly worthless coins from his pocket and setting them beside his plate. "I reckon you're old enough to make up your own mind. But I think it's a shame for a pretty girl like you to go throwing her life away like this."

She began to follow him towards the door when she remembered her bare feet.

"Oh, will you wait a moment?" she asked, causing him to stop and turn around. "I need to get my boots."

"I'm not in any hurry," he shrugged, pulling a smoke from his pocket and slipping it between his lips. "Not like I've got anywhere to be today."

Quickly she darted up the stairs and creaked her way past the still-sleeping prospectors to her room. Her chest tightened as she slipped the key into her lock and slowly turned it. Cringing when it loudly clicked open, she pushed the door open and found the room exactly as she'd left it. Staying only long enough to get her boots, she retraced her steps, leaned against the doorway as she pulled them on, and then quietly relocked the door and went back downstairs.

"Those aren't very practical for a place like this," he observed. "Leather is the last thing you want in the jungle. Too hot. And they're much too stylish."

"Does that matter?" she asked, embarrassed by her choice of footwear and trying to shift the topic away from her lack of practicality.

"It does when every other person in town is a thief," the man replied self-evidently. "It's a wonder nobody's smacked you over

the head and peeled 'em off your feet already. You're askin' for it."

"I'll see about getting something else," she said in a smaller voice, following him out the door.

"At least they've got flat bottoms," he observed, trying to give her a little credit. "Anything with heels would be worse than useless."

Guiding her through the winding, narrow, dirty streets of Boulimar, more than once the man had to pull her out of the way of some passing vehicle or stampeding gaggle of animals. The people of Daeldis' capital city had very little regard for sanitation, the poorer set often living with their livestock. Daily a portion of them were walked through the streets to be sold, butchered, or bartered for something else. Every walkable inch of ground was covered in filth that no one bothered to clean up. With the humidity of the jungle all around them, and the heat of the sun beating down from above, the stench was enough to empty the stomach of almost any visitor that wasn't inured to it. Having spent three weeks there already, Ellia managed to keep her breakfast down with the help of a handkerchief she held to her nose.

"This way," the man said, taking a turn down an alley filled with refuse. "Sorry about your boots," he added, glancing over his shoulder as she trampled through a succession of animal bones that were covered in flies. "But we'll never get through mainstreet at this time of day. Too much livestock."

"I understand," she replied, just as she slipped on a bone and fell against the back of a shop. An angry woman on the other side of the wall bellowed something unintelligible as Ellia regained her footing. "Sorry!" she called apologetically, as the man turned around and took her elbow in his hand. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"I don't mean any offense, you understand," he began, lifting her arm a little to help her over a large carcass. "But couldn't those psychological folks have sent someone a bit more used to roughing it? You're out of your element on Daeldis."

"They didn't send me," she admitted.

"I thought you said they did?"

"No, I said I was *involved* with them. They were adamantly opposed to anyone else coming to Daeldis after my father

disappeared. But someone had to come out and see what had happened to him.”

“I suppose so,” he replied, releasing her arm when they reached the end of the alley and once again had the mushy, half-dried mud road under their feet. “Hold on a second,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder to keep her out of the street.

“What is it?” she asked, following his eyes as he gazed off to the left.

“Do you see that woman? The short one with the faded red shirt?”

Carefully she scanned the street, but couldn’t locate her.

“Up there,” he added after a moment. “The staircase that runs along the outside of that old inn. Red shirt, brown pants, beat up hat, nasty expression.”

“Oh, yes,” she nodded, finding her at last and searching her thin, weathered body for a moment. “Is she a friend of yours?”

“Hardly,” he chuckled dryly, stepping into the street and moving slowly between the animals that were beginning to clog it. “She’s a thief. She specializes in women. Likes to sneak up behind ‘em and slide a knife into their backs. Then she takes whatever clothes or shoes they have and keeps ‘em for herself. Lives off their coin purses if they’ve got any. Also hires out as a snoop and burglar, but she’s not very good at it. Mostly works alone because of that. Just wanted you to keep an eye out,” he concluded. “Not sure if you noticed, but she could use a new pair of boots.”

“What’s her name?” she asked, as a building came between them and the thief momentarily. By the time it had passed the woman had vanished. With a hard gulp Monroe hoped that she hadn’t been noticed.

“Take your pick,” he replied casually, calmly noting her disappearance. “She’s used any of a dozen by this time. Mostly folks call her Scarlet because of that shirt she’s got. When it gets too bleached she’ll find something else red to wear. Reckon it’s her favorite color.”

“A killer with a favorite color?” she inquired incredulously, nervously scanning the crowd behind her for a beaten up hat mounted on a thin, wiry body. “Seems so trivial.”

“Well, she’s got a couple screws loose,” the man added. “That’s probably why she’s just a petty thief. Honestly, her skills with a knife are pretty decent. Always gets a good, clean kill on the first strike. But she’s got no sense when it comes to picking her targets. She sees something she likes and just goes after it. Nobody knows why she goes after women exclusively, she just does.”

“Maybe she’s jealous,” Monroe offered, hardly reassured by what she was hearing. “Killing women who are better off than she is and taking their clothes as a prize.”

The man stopped dead in his tracks and looked at her.

“Now that’s something I hadn’t thought of before,” he said in a tone of realization, nodding his head as he gazed at her and reflected for a moment. “Yeah, that makes sense. I don’t think she’s ever gone after anyone who was really in rags. Just picks on the upper crust. Well, as much of an upper crust as Daeldis has got, anyhow.”

“Get it moving!” a man said from behind them, pulling a cart through the street with a couple of donkeys. “Get off the road if you want to talk all day!”

“Sorry!” Ellia said, as her escort put a hand on her back and guided her into another alley.

“We’re too late to use most of the roads now,” he said. “Should have hit the streets an hour ago.”

“I thought we were doing alright,” Monroe remarked.

“You don’t understand,” he said, again taking her elbow to help her over some refuse. “This is when the thieves are most active. The crowd gives them anonymity. One second I could be talking to you, and the next you could have a dagger in your spine. In the half moment it would take for your body to hit the ground, your pockets would have been searched, and the killer would have vanished into the crowd. It’s not worth the risk. At least in the back paths we’ve got line of sight.”

Ellia’s head began to swim, but she couldn’t tell if it was due to the stench and heat of the alley or from the fact that she’d waded through the crowded streets almost daily since arriving in Boulimar. Glad for her knowledgeable guide, she only then realized that she didn’t know his name.

“Cal Hamilton,” he replied when she asked. “You?”

“Ellia Monroe.”

“Good to know you,” he said with a perfunctory nod.

Slowly they worked their way through the alleys and byways of the city. By the time Hamilton paused before a rickety wooden door on the back of a shop, both of them were soaked in sweat.

“Yeah?” a man shouted from inside when Hamilton knocked. “What do you want?”

“It’s Cal, Markus,” he replied, leaning a hand beside the door. “Brought you a customer.”

For half a minute they could hear objects being tossed around in a hurried attempt to make the space presentable. Then the door opened, and a burly man over six feet tall stepped out to see them. With short brown hair, a strong, angular face, and broad shoulders, he looked ready for any trouble that might come his way. Though weatherbeaten like the other residents of Daeldis, he appeared to be in his early thirties.

“How’re you doing, Cal?” he asked, shaking hands before turning to Monroe and looking her over. “Markus Ortmann,” he said.

“Ellia Monroe,” she replied, extending a hand which he shook rather roughly. “I’d like to talk to you.”

“Well, that’s what I’m here for,” he said, stepping aside and holding the door open for them to enter. “Just take a seat anywhere.”

“Thank you,” she replied, her eyes adjusting to the dirty, sparsely furnished room. Small and narrow, it had evidently been tacked onto the rear of the shop as an afterthought. An old couch stood along the back wall with a chair facing it. Gathering that it was the portion of the room dedicated to consultations, she took a seat on the couch and waited for the men to join her.

“So, what can I help you with?” Ortmann asked, taking the chair and turning it around to rest his arms on the backrest.

“A drink would be nice,” Hamilton replied, dropping onto the couch a couple feet from Ellia.

“Oh, sure,” Ortmann said, standing up again and bringing a pitcher and a couple of glasses.

"Haven't you got anything stronger than this?" Hamilton grumbled, holding up the slightly murky glass of water with a frown.

"Only for paying customers, Cal," Ortmann grinned, before turning to Ellia and looking her over a second time. "Naturally, if you'd like a drink..." his voice trailed.

"No, this will do very well, thank you," she replied quickly, holding the glass before her lips for a moment before taking a hesitant sip. Swallowing reluctantly, she found it earthy, but otherwise inoffensive. "Mister Ortmann—."

"Just call me Markus," he said with a wave of his hand, his arms once more upon the backrest. "We're pretty informal on Daeldis," he added, gathering at once from both her accent and appearance tha she wasn't a local.

"Of course," she agreed, though much preferring the barrier that formality provided. "I'm interested in a former client of yours."

"I don't rat on former clients," he replied defensively, tilting his head a little to try and discover what her game was.

"No, you don't understand," she said, shaking her head. "He was my father. Do you remember a man named Drew Monroe?"

"I *thought* I saw a resemblance between the two of you," Ortmann said. "When you first said your name was Monroe I thought it was just a coincidence."

"Getting slow in your old age, Markus?" Hamilton asked. "I noticed that right away. It's the eyes."

"Well, there was a lot to take in," he replied, his eyes tracing her fine neck and elegant shoulders, such a contrast to the women he'd known all his life. "But I'm afraid there's not a lot to tell about your father. I took him where he wanted to go and left him on his own, just as he requested. Said that my presence might draw unwanted attention, whatever that means. I told him that, green to these parts as he was, it was just about murder to leave him alone up there. But he wouldn't have it any other way."

"And nobody's seen anything of him after that?"

"Not that I've heard," Ortmann shrugged. "You've got to understand that I left him in probably the most dangerous part of this entire planet."

"What makes it so dangerous?" she asked.

"Nobody's stuck around long enough to find out. All we know is that when folks head up there, they don't come back."

"But you've been there nearly a dozen times," she pointed out. "You must have some idea what's going on."

"Look, I just know how to get in and out again," he said. "I've never seen any of these so-called cultists that everyone talks about. Sure, there's rumors and gossip and whatnot, but what good are they? Just chit chat to make the time pass a little quicker. I *do* know that I've never seen a single soul again that I've taken up there, even when we've arranged meetings for a return trip. They just up and disappear. Maybe the wild dogs eat 'em. Or maybe there's smugglers and pirates operating out of a secret base, and they're stirring up all this superstition to keep folks out and justify all the missing people. I don't know, because I really don't care. I *could* stick my neck in there to try and find all the answers. But I'd probably pull it back and find my head missing."

"Doesn't it strike you as odd that you're allowed to repeatedly bring visitors there without being attacked?"

"Sister, I'm not *allowed* to do anything," he replied with some heat. "I get in and out because I'm just about the best pathfinder there is on Daeldis. I could take you on any of a hundred trails into that spot; trails that nobody's ever seen and never will. Shoot, I could do it blindfolded at this point."

"Excuse me, I didn't mean to cause offense," she apologized.

"Don't worry about Ortmann," Hamilton said. "He's testy, but he cools down fast."

"Most of the time," he replied, glancing at Hamilton before returning his gaze to Monroe.

"Please tell me, did my father say anything to you about what he was doing? Did he give any idea at all of what he'd discovered?"

"Not much," Ortmann shook his head. "He kept things pretty close to his chest. I guess he realized this isn't exactly the kind of world you flap your gums on, and that the less he said, the better. Although," he added after a moment's pause. "There was something kind of funny one night. We'd made camp south of Todrid. Not being

used to hiking in the jungle, he was out before he'd even touched his supper. So I put it back in his pack and set to work on mine when I heard a stick snap behind me. Well, naturally I shot up like a spring and spun around, gun already in hand when I saw your dad just standing there. His head was hanging off his neck like he was dead, his arms were stretched out to me, and his jaw was just dangling. I tried to move around him, but he kept track of me, even with his eyes closed. I guess he was listening to where I was."

"And then what happened?" Ellia asked eagerly.

"Well, nothing much. He just sort of stood there and kept following where I moved. But he didn't come any closer. Finally I started saying his name, a little louder each time until I was shouting it. That's when he shook and came to. Just about lost his balance, but managed to stay on his feet. I asked what was going on, but he just started mumbling to himself and went to his pack to dig out a notebook. Spent the next hour writing stuff down before he finally dozed off. I asked him again in the morning, but he wouldn't say a thing about it."

"That's strange," Ellia mused aloud. "It wasn't like Daddy to keep things a secret."

"You can say that again," Ortmann agreed. "He'd talk about everything else except what he was doing on Daeldis. Honestly I had to get rough with him a few times to shut him up. Otherwise his big mouth would have drawn every critter in the jungle towards us. Of course, I don't mean any offense by saying that," he added after a moment.

"And you never saw the notebook?" she asked.

"No, after that night he kept it tucked into his pocket the whole time. It was just a small thing, about the size of your hand."

"I wish you had," she said sincerely, leaning back on the couch. "I'd give anything to see what was in it. It could answer so many questions."

"Well, I don't make it a habit to pry into what my clients are doing," Ortmann replied. "My job ends with getting them where they want to go."

"How much would you charge to take me to where you left my father?"

“What?” he asked with a surprised laugh. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m very serious,” she assured him.

“Look, sister, this is no place for a girl like you,” he began. “I doubt you’ve seen three consecutive days of sun exposure in your life. And out here on Daeldis, we’re close enough to the sun to fry eggs in the street. Then you’ve got the local wildlife to consider, which is hard enough even for us natives to deal with. Not a day goes by without someone dying from a snake or blue spider bite. Add on top of that the gangs who use the jungle as their own private highways to move contraband in and out of Boulimar and its suburbs. You’ve heard of shooting first and asking questions later? These guys shoot first and skip the questions altogether. They’ll just strip you of valuables and stuff your corpse under a tree someplace. Then you’ve got the petty thieves working on their own. They’ll cut your throat without a second thought if they take a fancy to so much as a trinket. Like, for instance, that bracelet on your left wrist,” he said, nodding towards it. “I don’t know what you *thought* you were getting into by coming to Daeldis, but you’ve underestimated this miserable little moon dramatically. There’s more ways to die than there are to live. And then, even if you *did* somehow manage to survive the trip, you’d get finished off by whatever killed your dad.”

“I’ve got to go to where he died,” she replied earnestly. “I have to see it.”

“Why?” he countered. “To settle some morbid sense of curiosity? To get closure? Face it, Miss Monroe: your dad is dead and gone. Nothing’s gonna bring him back. You won’t even find a body.”

“Call me Ellia,” she replied. “We’re informal out here, remember?”

“Oh, very cute,” he frowned. “But that little bit of attitude isn’t gonna help you lift your feet when you’re walking through the stifling heat and humidity of the jungle with a pack on your back. You’ll be dying of thirst, but most of the pools are infested with parasites and bacteria, so we’ll have to be conservative and just sip on our bottles between watering holes. You’ll sweat out more water than you’ve ever imagined was possible. The mosquitoes will devour

you by night, keeping you from getting any sleep at all. And by day we'll have to put mile after mile behind us. No, *Ellia*, you won't stand a chance."

"But I'll have you to guide me," she said. "And you *are* the best pathfinder on Daeldis, aren't you?"

"I've been in this game a tad too long for reverse psychology to work on my vanity," Ortmann shook his head, finding her tactics infantile. "The answer is no. I'm not gonna drag you through the jungle so you can get yourself killed."

"Is that your final answer?" she asked.

"I think I've made that pretty clear."

"Fine, then I'll go on my own," she said, putting her drink aside and standing up.

"You can't do that," Hamilton asserted, standing up as well. "He's not kidding about the dangers, *Ellia*. If anything he's understated them in a few places. Remember what Lasmina said about the blue spiders? Every syllable of that was true. They're territorial as all get out, and you've got to know where they live in order to pass by safely. Why, you'd walk right into their turf and get jumped in two seconds. They'd see those boots of yours and jump for your knees or thighs. You'd try to run, but your legs would turn to dough and collapse under you. The last thing you would feel is bite after bite as they sink their fangs into the back of your neck and spine. They've got a way of sensing where to strike to do the most damage, and they always finish off their victims that way."

"You're just trying to scare me," she replied.

"You bet your sweet life he is," Ortmann said, still sitting. "You can't imagine how dangerous it is outside the city. Shoot, it's bad enough *inside* the city. You ought to have seen enough by now to realize this isn't any ordinary colony. Something about Daeldis keeps folks agitated and nasty. It's like it was born to make criminals out of 'em. It's something in the air."

"Nevertheless I've got to go," she said, stepping around his chair and making for the door.

"Why?" Ortmann all but demanded, standing up and reaching the door first to block her way. "Why is it so important that you find him?"

"Please move out of my way," she requested with pointed politeness.

"Not until you answer my question," he replied. "What's the use of throwing your life away like this? You'll never even *find* the place I took him. Half the natives of Daeldis couldn't get you there if they spent the next month. Oh, they all *think* they know where it is, because of the rumors and all. But it's nothing but hearsay. They've never actually been there."

"I'll find it," she said with certainty.

"Why? Because you *want* to?"

"No, for the same reason that I know someone is about to knock on your door," she replied. "I'm a psychic."

"You're a *what*?" he asked.

"I'm a psychic," she repeated. "So was my father. He came to Daeldis to examine the rumors of peculiar dreams and unusual disappearances among the populace. We're very well respected on Rimmis."

"Yeah, well, out here we require a little bit more *evidence* before we believe something like that," Ortmann shot back, crossing his arms and leaning his back against the door to emphasize his point. "They might go for nonsense like that in the inner colonies, with their soft lives and wide margins. But when you've got everything on the line, there's got to be proof that—."

His words were interrupted by a loud knocking against the door. Nearly jumping out of his shirt, he shot forwards and twisted around to look at it.

"You in there, Ortmann?" a gruff, angry male voice called. "Come on out. It's payday." The sounds of several other people snickering at this could be heard.

"What's Mulrooney doing here today?" Ortmann asked himself, checking the ammo in his automatic pistol and slipping it into the back of his waistband. "He's not due until the twenty-third."

"Today *is* the twenty-third," Hamilton replied.

"No," Ortmann insisted. "It's the nineteenth. Just look at the—," he stopped, his eyes falling on the calendar. "It's the twenty-third," he said in an abject voice.

“What does Mulrooney want?” Monroe asked, as Ortmann put his arms on her upper arms and moved her a few feet further inside.

“Preferably my head on the end of a stick,” he said. “Though he’ll settle for money. You might say we’ve had a little misunderstanding.”

“Ortmann, either you open this door, or me and the boys are gonna break it down. I know you’re in there. I can hear you talking.”

“Someday I’ll learn to keep my voice down,” Ortmann muttered.

“I’m gonna give you till the count of ten. Either you open up by then, or we’re gonna drag you out and take what you owe me out of your hide. And don’t get any ideas of blasting your way out of here, either,” he added, anticipating Ortmann’s thoughts exactly. “I’ve got a dozen men with me, and they’re all anxious to meet you.”

“And here I am with only *eight* bullets in my gun,” the trapped adventurer said to himself.

“One!”

“What are you gonna do, Markus?” Hamilton asked.

“Two! Three!”

“Markus?”

“Four!”

“I’m *thinking!*” he shouted through the door.

“Well think *faster!* Five!”

“You’d better get down on the floor, sister,” he said to Monroe.

“Six!”

He drew his pistol and cocked it.

“Seven!”

“Don’t suppose you’ll help?” he asked Hamilton, who just shook his head in the negative.

“Eight!”

“Wait!” Ellia said, putting her hands on Ortmann’s gun arm as he raised it to shoot through the flimsy door. “I’ll pay your debt if you take me where I want to go.”

“Nine!”

"Hold on a minute, Mulrooney," Hamilton called, his voice known to the renegade. "I'm just a bystander. I don't wanna get shot."

"Well, then stay out of the way!"

"You start throwing lead around and I'm liable to catch some of it! Now, give me a chance to get out of here first. I've never caused you any trouble."

"First man that opens that door without my say so is gonna catch a belly full of lead. Now hit the deck if you're so worried about getting shot. Because we're gonna open up in a second. This is your last chance, Ortmann. When I say ten," he uttered, the sound of his and a dozen other pistols being cocked simultaneously passing unmistakably through the door, "we're gonna tear this little shack of yours to pieces."

Ortmann knew that Hamilton's little negotiation was only meant to buy him enough time to think. Like lightning the various factors flashed through his mind. His back may have been against the wall, but he knew it was little short of murder to take Monroe on a journey she wasn't in the least prepared for, just to leave her in the one place no one, besides himself, ever returned from. He would be trading her life for his. And no matter how fervently she wished to make such a trade for the sake of her father, he couldn't ignore that fact. But if he *didn't* take her, she promised to go on her own in any event. In which case she wouldn't make it more than a couple of miles outside Boulimar before someone mugged her, or some wild animal tore her to pieces. At least if he guided her, she might have second thoughts and consent to turning around and coming back when she realized how hard it was. He knew there wasn't the slightest chance of that, and that he was merely pulling a little sleight of hand with his conscience. But there were a dozen armed men outside his door.

"Hold it, Mulrooney!" he called out. "I've got your money!"

"I very much doubt that!" he replied with a laugh. "But why don't you let me inside just to see?"

"How much do you owe?" Monroe asked him, pulling the little purse from her boot and showing him the shiny coins that had made so many other Daeldisian eyes bulge. His were no exception.

"A lot," he replied, before glancing at Hamilton and whispering in her ear.

"What?" she asked incredulously. "That'll take almost all I've got!"

"You got a lady in there keeping you company, Ortmann?" Mulrooney asked with a laugh.

"That's my price," he said to her. "Either that, or find yourself another guide, 'cause I'm gonna be dead in about two minutes if I don't pay up."

Drawing nearly all that remained of her savings, she dropped the coins in his hand and watched him make for the door.

"I'm gonna open up, Mulrooney," he said, tucking the pistol into the back of his waistband. "I've got your money. Don't shoot."

"Oh, I won't shoot," he replied. "Not until I've seen how little you've managed to scrape together."

Slowly opening the door, Ortmann looked into the sunlight and squinted at the dozen men who'd come to collect. They were all rough, desperate looking fellows, each of them more than willing to kill him for the price of a beer at whichever saloon happened to be closest. Mulrooney was a heavysset man around fifty. His mouth was small, tight, and severe, though his eyes paradoxically bore a lightness that implied deep inner mirth. Ortmann had long before decided that Mulrooney's thuggish personality drew pleasure out of being cruel, and thus brought consistency to the otherwise puzzling picture his face presented.

"Let's see it," he said, putting his gun away and stepping forward as Ortmann filled the doorway to block him.

"Of course," he replied offhandedly, holding the coins forth so that they glimmered in the sunlight, causing the men to gasp and stare. "Count 'em," he instructed the older man, turning his hand over and dropping the coins into his hands. "Every last piece is there."

"How did you ever get ahold of money like this?" he asked, too stunned to count at first.

"What's it matter how I got it?" he asked casually.

"Well, you must have murdered a half dozen people to get this much together," Mulrooney replied, before he finally came back

to himself and began to count it. To his chagrin, he found every last piece was there. The debt was paid in full.

"Are we finished here?" Ortmann asked, crossing his arms. "Because I've got things to do."

"Don't push it, Ortmann," Mulrooney snapped, scowling at him while stuffing the coins into his pocket. "One of these days you're not gonna be quite slick enough to get your head out of the noose. And let me tell you," he finished, leaning a little closer and dropping his voice. "I'm gonna be there on that day to make sure the rope doesn't break."

"Please do," Ortmann said with a smile. "I always like big parties."

With a vicious gleam in his eye the thug turned around. He stopped when he saw his gang.

"Well, put those guns away!" he barked at his men, who still held them out. "Can't you see we're finished here?"

Grumbling to himself as he passed through their midst, they eyed Ortmann for a few seconds to try and figure out how he'd come up with the money in time. Then they likewise turned and walked away.

"That's one man you shouldn't antagonize," Hamilton opined, once Ortmann had closed the door and let out a ragged sigh of relief. "Don't kick him more than you have to."

"Oh, he won't bother me anymore," he replied, dropping onto the couch and stretching his arms over his head while the other two watched him. "I don't intend to have any further dealings with him."

"Yeah, and I bet you didn't have any plans to get into debt with him, either. But it happened all the same."

Frowning at the accuracy of this statement, Ortmann turned to Monroe.

"Well, Ellia, when do you want to leave?"

"You mean you're going to take me?" she asked.

"That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Of course. But I thought you might have just been saying that to get the debt paid. Especially after all your vehemence about the dangers."

“Well, the way I figure it,” he said, standing up and crossing the small room for a half-empty bottle of whiskey, “you’re going to go one way or another. I still think you’re gonna die at the end of the trail, but the least I can do is get you there. That’s what you’ve paid for, so I’d be a pretty low character if I didn’t follow through, right?”

Her eyes went to Hamilton, and then back to Ortmann.

“What’s he been telling you about me, anyhow?” he laughed, though a little note of anger flashed through his eyes. Taking a swig from the bottle, he put it aside. “There’s plenty of rumors about me on Daeldis. But nobody can say I never followed through.”

“I reckon Mulrooney could,” Hamilton observed.

“That was different!” Ortmann said quickly. “I hunted down the fella that promised to marry his daughter, didn’t I? Chased him up and down the jungle west of Raza for almost a month. What was I supposed to do, force him to change his mind on the way back to Boulimar? Besides, Tiernan was drunk when he proposed to her, anyhow. Nobody in his right mind would marry that ugly toad.”

“But you didn’t have to help him escape,” Hamilton pointed out.

“Mulrooney had the poor guy locked in a cage!” Ortmann shot back. “He was starving him to death. What would you have done?”

“Gotten as far away from Mulrooney as possible and done my best to keep it that way,” Hamilton replied with utter certainty. “You don’t mix in these things without getting burned, Markus. Besides, he never had a chance of escaping. He was too emaciated by all that time he spent dodging you in the jungle. They nabbed him two days after you let him out.”

“So Mulrooney charged you a fee for letting him out?” Monroe inquired, trying to wrap her head around the strange workings of Daeldis’ criminal class.

“No,” Ortmann replied with a sigh. “That was the bill for blowing down part of the back wall of his house with a grenade, injuring two of his guards, smashing the lock on the cage, and helping Tiernan steal one of his horses.”

"You're lucky he only wanted you to replace the damages," Hamilton said. "Plus interest."

"Yeah, he's always had a soft place in his heart for me," Ortmann replied.

"Not anymore," the older man added.

"Obviously."

"What kind of beast would starve a man to death for breaking a marriage promise?" Monroe asked with keen aversion.

"Welcome to Daeldis," Ortmann laughed dryly. "Things are done a little differently out here."

"I'm learning that," she replied.

"Not quick enough," Hamilton observed, making for the door. "It's about time I moved on and looked for another job. Want me to walk you back to the hotel?"

"What, Lasmina let you go?" Ortmann asked.

"Let's say we both got tired of each other," Hamilton answered. "Ellia?"

"That depends on Markus," she replied, looking at him. "When do we leave?"

"First thing tomorrow. It'll be cooler then, and it'll give you a chance to get your kit together and put in order any obligations you have. Hang on a second, I'll give you a list of things to buy before tomorrow."

"Do you mind?" she asked Hamilton, as he frowned and leaned against the wall near the door.

"Just make it quick."

"I'm always quick, Cal," Ortmann replied, taking an old sheet of dirty paper and scribbling some brief notes on the back.

"You shouldn't have...any trouble finding...this stuff," he said, pausing periodically as he focused on what he wrote. "All the shops are more or less...in the center of town. There," he finished, handing the paper to her.

Casting her eyes over it, she noticed that the last sentence was underlined three times. It read "*sell those boots!*"

"They're not any good in the jungle," he explained, intuitively reading the look on her face. "Besides, they ought to bring

a decent price, and you'll need that extra money to buy everything else on the list."

"Alright," she said reluctantly, making for the door as Hamilton opened it for her. "Shall I meet you here?" she asked, pausing momentarily to look back.

"No. It's better if I come to you. You might get lost in the streets."

"We're at Jackson's place," Hamilton told him.

"Be ready to leave before sunup," Ortmann added. "Say five o'clock. We want to get an early start."

"Okay," she agreed, stepping out the door and into the street.

"Now I'm sorry I ever brought you to him," Hamilton murmured, as they began to retrace their steps. "I should have known you'd have no more sense than your old man. Now you'll both be on my conscience, though indirectly."

"You really don't think I'll come back?" she asked, her resolve softening a little now that the pressure of meeting with Ortmann was over and their plans were set.

"I don't think you have a prayer in the world," Hamilton said with finality. "But like I said before, I reckon you can make up your own mind. I'm not one to coddle anybody."

"That's true," she agreed. "Though you must admit that deep down you're really very nice. Did you ever notice that?"

"Not particularly," he answered, as he took her elbow yet again.

Smiling at his courtesy, she decided not to draw attention to it as it seemed to bother him.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Would you come shopping with me today? The merchants know I'm not from around here, so they'll do their best to cheat me. Especially when it comes to selling my boots. I'll be lucky to get a quarter of what they're worth."

"I can't say I'm especially up to date on what women's fashions are running these days."

“But you must have some sense of what things go for. And even just having a local with me will make them think twice about robbing me too much. Besides, I’ll pay you for your time. It’s the least I can do after I cost you your job earlier.”

“Like I said, that wasn’t your fault,” he replied, stepping into a crowded street and slowly pushing his way past the animals and their minders. “It was time to be moving on, anyhow.” He paused when they reached the other side of the muddy road, another alley noxiously yawning in their faces. “But I reckon somebody ought to stay with you, at least until you unload those things,” he said, pointing at her boots. “We don’t want Scarlet to get them, now do we?”

CHAPTER 2

The next morning Monroe was seated at the breakfast table, hurriedly finishing a meal that Jackson had whipped up. Her boots were gone, replaced by durable shoes that Hamilton had especially picked out; her clothing was loose, beige, and breathable; and a modest pack filled with everything on Ortmann's list leaned against one of the table's legs beside her feet.

"I wish you wouldn't go," Jackson said, bringing a cup of coffee to the table and sitting down across from her. "The jungle's no place for someone who ain't used to it."

"I know," she said quietly. "But I have to go."

"But why do you have to go with *Ortmann*?" he inquired. "He's the last fella I'd want a nice girl like you to go traipsing around with. He'll wrap you around his little finger and take bites out of you."

"He seems like a reliable man," she replied. "Besides, he owes me. I paid off a debt of his."

"You mean you've paid him *in advance*?" Jackson asked with dismay. "Why would you do a thing like that? Folks around here can't be trusted any farther than you can throw 'em. It'll be a miracle if he shows up at all this morning. He'll probably just disappear for a while and wait for you to go back home, then brag to all his friends about how he ripped you off. He's not gonna risk his neck taking you where you want to go when the whole reward for doing it has already been dumped in his lap!"

"I trust him."

"Oh, dear girl," Jackson said, shaking his head. "How can you say something like that? You barely even know him?"

"Let's say I'm very good at reading people," she replied cryptically, a little gleam coming into her pretty green eyes.

"Okay, we'll say that," Jackson agreed. "But when that no good piece of—"

"Gooooood morning," Ortmann said in a breezily pleasant tone, walking in the front door and approaching the table. Wearing only a shirt, shorts, a pair of boots and a large hat, his powerful legs and arms instantly drew Ellia's appreciative attention. "Got any breakfast for me, Jackson?"

"There's never anything for you here, Ortmann," he shot back, his kindly old face twisted into a scowl.

"Ah, just as well. I ate before I came," the younger man said good-naturedly, leaning against the table and looking down at Monroe. "About ready to leave?"

"Yes," she nodded earnestly, gulping down a couple final bites and standing up.

"Well, I see you've gotten a bit of a makeover," he observed, approvingly looking at her from bottom to top. Taking a wide-brimmed hat from the seat beside her, she placed it on her head and looked out from under it at him. "The icing on the cake. I'm glad to see you've taken my advice to heart."

"Yes, sir. I mean business," she replied seriously, before bending over and grabbing her pack. Sliding the arm straps over her shoulders, she wrapped her fingers around them and looked at him expectantly.

"Let's go," he said with a grin, feeling that he might enjoy the trip a little after all.

"You bring her back in one piece, Markus Ortman," Jackson warned him from the table.

Pausing on his way to the door, he turned around and looked over Ellia's head at the proprietor.

"I'll hold up my end of the bargain, old man," he replied. "I never do anything less."

Stepping into the cool humidity of early morning, the pair wordlessly made their way down a succession of mostly hardened mud streets. Though his pack was larger than hers, Monroe noticed that Ortmann bore it with perfect ease. Walking with an energy that

bordered on adolescent spunkiness, the pathfinder moved as though he hadn't a care in the world.

But in an instant that all changed. Laying a powerful hand on her shoulder, he pulled her to a stop and pressed the other hand's index finger to her lips. Reaching into the back of his waistband, he pulled his pistol from under the pack and held it aloft. Making a point of cocking it as loudly as possible, he invisibly grinned in the darkness as a pair of feet scampered away.

"We're alright now," he whispered in her ear, enjoying the opportunity to lean in close and smell her hair despite the stench of the streets.

"Who was that?" she asked, only barely able to make out Ortmann's outline beside her in the dim light cast by an occasional window.

"Any one of a hundred thieves who's prowling Boulimar's streets as we speak," he told her, resuming his jaunty walk as he uncocked his pistol and stuffed it into the front of his belt. "They're easy enough to deal with. It's just like working with animals, actually. You just have to show them who's boss, and they hurry to get out of your way."

"Now I see why you wanted to come and get me," she uttered nervously, her eyes fruitlessly scanning the darkness for human shapes other than his. "I never would have made it to your place, would I?"

"Nope," he replied without hesitation, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder and turning her down another street. He allowed it to linger a few moments before withdrawing it. "They keep talking about sending a police force out here. Earth, I mean. But they never get around to it. Maybe once the daily body count gets high enough they'll actually act. But as you've no doubt put together already, we're hardly a high priority. They'd rather spend money developing the inner colonies than start sending it all the way out here. Shoot, most of us are half-criminals, anyhow, so I can't say that I really blame them. Still, it would be nice to be able to step out your front door without taking your life in your hands in the process."

"It must be pretty bleak, growing up in a place like this."

"I reckon so. Never really thought about it that much, to be honest."

"But you're an intelligent man," she uttered. "It must have crossed your mind at some point or other."

"Why?" he asked. "It's not like thinking about it will change anything. All we can do is play the cards we've been dealt."

"Well, maybe if people thought about it more, they'd be motivated to do something about it. They'd see that their lives could be better, and they'd strive to make them so."

"You're precious," he said with an indulgent laugh, patting her on the back and turning her down another street. "Folks around here don't dare hope, because it would shatter what little strength they've got left to hold on with. Hope just means disappointment on Daeldis, no matter who you are. Better to keep your eyes just on what's ahead of you, that way your expectations are always realistic."

"But what about the children?" she asked. "Don't their parents want something better for them?"

"They never had it better than their parents," he shrugged invisibly. "Why should it be any different for the next generation?"

"But with that kind of attitude—."

Her words were stopped by him once again putting a hand to her shoulder and stopping her. The roughness with which he did so told her at once to keep silent, and she waited for him to repeat his prior performance for the sake of an unseen thief. To her shock he cocked the pistol and then discharged a shot down the street ahead of them, an enormous flame exploding out of the barrel and illuminating them for a fraction of a second. Unable to help jumping at the noise, her ears faintly rang as he pulled her forward again.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"Oh, a few of them were waiting for us," he said in a voice that was nearly bored despite the adrenaline that was coursing through his veins. "Right here," he said, pausing just as they passed a pair of buildings that formed a narrow place in the street. "This is the sort of spot you've got to watch out for. They don't tend to charge you out in the open, so you're pretty safe if you've got a little space

around you. It's when you get near cover that you need to be careful."

"How many of them were there?"

"Three. You didn't see them take off after I sent them that little greeting?"

"No," she shook her head. "All I can see is this giant yellow streak in my vision from when the gun went off."

"Oh, that'll wear off soon enough."

"Tell me, did you have to shoot at anyone on the way to the hotel?"

"No. The thieves can more or less tell who I am from my walk. They know better than to get in my way."

"But why are they trying now?" she whispered.

"They probably think I'm distracted because you keep talking," he replied, a pleasant smile audible on his lips. "That, or they're too stupid to separate my footsteps from yours, so they don't know it's me."

"I'm guessing that shot set more than a few of them straight."

"It should have. My pistol's custom made. Only one that sounds quite like it."

For half an hour they moved without incident along the streets, Ortmann's shot having cleared the way as Monroe had expected.

"You know, I was only teasing when I said you were talking so much," he said. "You don't have to be quiet."

"I'd rather just keep my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut for the time being," she replied, still anxiously searching the darkness. "How long until sunup?"

"Around another hour," he said, glancing up at the sky. "Maybe an hour and a half. Looks like we've got rain clouds moving in. That'll set it back a while."

"Oh, I hate it when it rains in Boulimar," she complained. "It all becomes one giant, stinking bog."

"You're right about that," he agreed. "But we ought to be out of town by the time the rain starts really falling."

"Will the robbers follow us into the jungle?" she inquired, not certain she really wanted to know the answer.

"There's always a few of them working the bush," he answered. "But most of them will stay inside the city. That's where most of the targets are. Only the loonies and the really, really lousy thieves try anything outside the city because the competition is weak enough for them to get by. You don't really have to worry about them, because you'll notice them from a mile away."

"*You* will," Ellia replied. "I'd probably trip right over them."

"Does that mean you're beginning to rethink this trip?" he asked, a hint of hope in his voice at the thought.

"No. I'm just coming to realize how out of my depth I really am. This morning's been an education, that's for sure. I never even saw any of those people who were waiting for us."

"Yeah, nothing beats a local's knowledge," he said casually, as though any other Daeldisian could have taken his place. "You get tuned in to all kinds of things that a visitor doesn't have time to get used to, much less notice."

"Absolutely."

During another long, wordless interval, they reached the outskirts of the city. Passing through street after street of pathetic, rundown shacks, Ellia found herself instinctively drawing a little closer to him as human shapes appeared between the buildings in the predawn light.

"Who are they?" she inquired at last, watching the silhouettes as they stared at her like statues.

"Who's who?" he asked, following her eyes. "I don't see anybody."

"Those people, standing between the houses," she replied, pointing at them.

Coming to a stop, he looked down her arm and shook his head.

"There's nobody there, Ellia," he told her, walking again. "You must be imagining it."

"Yes," she whispered, still seeing the figures as they hauntingly gazed upon her. "That must be it."

“Well, don’t worry about it. You’ve been through enough to make anyone jumpy.”

Shortly after leaving town the road deteriorated into a miserable little dirt path that ran straight north. With deep ruts carved in it by vehicles and animal-drawn carts, it was an accident waiting to happen.

“Here, let’s get off to the side,” Ortmann said. “You’ll break your neck walking on that thing.”

“Doesn’t anyone take care of anything around here?” she asked, moving off the road with him, her legs brushing against the bushes that flanked it.

“I should have thought the state of Boulimar would have answered that question already,” he said with a grin. “There’s not much of what you’d call civic spirit on Daeldis. Just keep that in mind. When we pass through Todrid, you’ll see what I mean.”

“What, it gets worse?”

“Oh, yeah. A lot worse. Whole sections of the town are burned out. Nobody’s bothered to rebuild. They just throw up a new shack to replace the one that was lost, leaving the shell until it’s battered to bits by the storms.”

“Then the storms get bad, too?”

With a surprised smile he came to a stop and looked at her.

“You sure didn’t do your research before coming out here,” he said, suppressing a mild laugh. “Didn’t you at least read a guide book or something?”

“I’ve mostly been interested in the psychological phenomena that’s been reported,” she explained as they moved again. “I guess you could say I don’t have much of a head for practical details.”

“I guess you could,” he replied good-naturedly.

“Tell me, when do we run across the blue spider’s territory?” she asked somewhat anxiously.

“Oh, that comes and goes in patches. In fact, there’s a colony of ‘em just a couple hundred feet off to the east,” he said, pointing to the right. With an uneasy look on her face she shifted to his other side, walking just beside the road. “Well, they’re not *that* close.”

"A few hundred feet is pretty close in my book," she replied, gripping the straps of her pack a little tighter, looking around him for lightning fast arachnids.

"Like I said, they're territorial. They mark their space with these little scent glands they've got, and they stick to their own turf. Cross into it and you'd better have a flamethrower. But if you're even a few dozen feet away from them, they don't care. The main thing is knowing where they are, and leaving 'em alone."

"But what about that woman, uh, Lasmina," she inquired, searching momentarily for her name. "She's a native like you, and she said she's nearly been bitten twice. Wouldn't she know where their territory is, too?"

"Heh, I know Lasmina," Ortmann chuckled unflatteringly. "She's got a loud mouth and a brain about half its size. Sure, she's nearly been bitten twice. More than that, I'd guess, given that she used to make a habit of wandering the jungle drunk. She was a wild one when she was younger. You can see the damage she's done herself just by looking at her."

"But who would wander a place like this *drunk*?" Monroe asked, astounded at the idea. "It's suicide."

"Well, it's kind of a game folks sometimes play around here when they're desperate and out of hope. You've heard of Russian roulette, of course?"

"Yes."

"It's like that, except the wildlife in the jungle takes the place of the gun. They get someone good and boozed, and then they turn 'em loose into the wilds. If they manage to come back alive, they get a reward."

"That's horrible," she opined. "Why would anyone ever sign up for anything so stupid?"

"Oh, they know how dangerous it is," Ortmann assured her. "They go into it with their eyes open. Like I said, it's when they're desperate – at the end of their rope. Like I was when you suddenly dropped by with that little coin purse of yours. If you're gonna die anyhow, you might as well take a chance and see if you can survive a drunken night in the jungle. Like I said, you get a reward if you

succeed. Usually it clears your debts or otherwise gets someone off your back. It's never for money or any other kind of valuables."

"So they don't do it for fun?"

"Absolutely not!" he laughed. "We might be pretty broken down out here, but we're human like anybody else. What do you think we are, some kind of suicide cult?"

"I'm sorry. I guess I didn't think."

"You don't have to apologize," he replied. "But you might consider getting out and about a little more, learning how folks actually live."

"Of course," she agreed. "So, you said Lasmina's done it more than once?"

"Yeah. At least that's what they say. She's got a good twenty years on me, and most of her wildness was during her youth, so I don't have any firsthand knowledge, mind you. But the stories pretty much line up that she went out a total of six times."

"Six times!" Ellia exclaimed. "How could she have possibly survived that?"

"A lot of other folks have wondered that, too," he shrugged. "Some say she's got a gift for it, like a little extra helping of luck was poured into her when she was born. A lot of Daeldisians are superstitious, so that answer will do for most of them. Personally, I think she had someone helping her. Probably had a brother or something hidden in the bush waiting for her to get out of sight, then took her somewhere to sleep off the booze. All she'd have to do is pop up the next morning suitably bruised and bloodied from a night in the jungle."

"Even so, it must have been dangerous."

"Oh, very. You see, they don't just booze you up: they take a couple of strong men they can trust and have 'em blindfold you, put you on a stretcher, and carry you into the jungle. They twist and turn every which way so you can't possibly find your way back, and then they dump you. The men are always armed, and they check their backtrail over and over to ensure you're not following them back to town. Needless to say, the game is automatically over if they catch you cheating," he finished, making a finger gun and clicking his tongue as he discharged a phantom round.

“So how could someone help Lasmina survive?”

“Well, they’d stay out of sight of the two men, following from so far back that they’d run the constant risk of losing contact. The escorts are prepared for this, too, and frequently stop along the way to listen and ambush any followers.”

“I’m guessing this counts as cheating, too?” she inquired, making her own finger gun and pumping her thumb a few times.

“Oh, yeah. Except they shoot both you and any helpers they find. You can imagine why the game is played honestly most of the time. Not a lot of people on Daeldis are gonna put their neck on the line for someone else, even if they’re related.”

“Especially with the jungle so dangerous already,” she inserted. “Evading the escorts is only the first step in a very long night.”

“You said it,” he nodded, glad to see she was catching on. “That’s why it’s never played for money – usually just the cancellation of a debt. That way nobody else can profit from it, and there’s no motive for outside cheaters to step in. Otherwise you’d have groups of young desperadoes trying to rig the game and milk it for cash.”

“So why did Lasmina have to play it so many times? She got into debt over and over?”

“Pretty much. They say four of her jaunts were for debt, one was for love, and the other’s a secret that nobody’s ever found out.”

“She didn’t seem capable of love, back in the hotel,” Monroe remarked.

“I reckon everyone is, provided they come across the right person,” he replied. “We’ve all got buttons that *someone* out there can press. Even someone as nasty as Lasmina.” He glanced at her and smiled. “I gather you didn’t get along.”

“She tore into me right from the start,” she uttered in an almost pleading tone of confusion. “Just one insult after another. It was like she was allergic to me.”

“Doesn’t take a lot of imagination to figure out why,” he said with a grin.

“What do you mean?” she inquired genuinely.

“Are you serious?” he asked, glancing at her again.

"Of course. What did I do to her?"

"You didn't *do* anything," he told her. "It's who you are. You may not have noticed this, but you're a very pretty girl."

"I've never thought of myself as pretty," she replied. "I'm too thin and boney for that. I don't have a curve to my name."

"Well, you're a lot prettier than any girl you'll find around here," he assured her. "How old are you, anyhow?"

"Twenty-five."

"See, most of the females on Daeldis are old women by thirty. It's the poverty and the sun and the constant worrying. It ages 'em like nothing else. Anyone can see from looking at you that you've had an easy, comfortable life. Your skin is soft and supple; your back isn't starting to stoop because you've been working since your fifth year; your shoulders haven't got an *ounce* of muscle in 'em; and your fingers are long, smooth, and delicate. You've never had to manually work for a thing in your life. It's kept you young, and it makes someone like Lasmina insane with jealousy to see it, because it makes her wonder how good she'd still look if fate had taken a different turn, and she'd been born somewhere else."

"You mean she *envied* me?"

"From the first moment she laid eyes on you."

"So that's why she picked on what she called my 'princess feet,'" she mused aloud.

"Exactly. You've been living like royalty compared to her, and it makes all the work and strife and struggle in her life feel like it's of no consequence at all. Decades of hard labor, to say nothing of those drunken trips to the jungle whenever her debts piled up too high, and all she's got to show for it is a little hole in the ground that she pretends to call a mine."

"I had no idea," Ellia replied with quiet wonder. "I never meant to make her feel that way."

"You can't take responsibility for folks' feelings, Ellia," Ortmann said. Suddenly he snapped out a hand and pulled her to a stop just short of a bush. "Don't walk through that."

"Why?" she inquired, looking at it and finding nothing offensive about it.

"Can't you hear it?" he asked, keeping his hand on her shoulder to ensure she didn't move. "Just a hint of a rattle?"

Instantly she jumped back.

"A *rattlesnake*?" she asked, her eyes wide as she moved slowly back.

"No," he shook his head, gently pulling her towards the road so as to cross it. "It's got a rattle, alright. But the venom's much milder. You'd swell up from the bite, but it wouldn't be much more than a nuisance."

"It's hard to believe that anything on this planet isn't lethal," she said, sticking close to the road and keeping Ortmann between herself and the bushes. "Especially after all that talk about the blue spiders."

"Yeah, they're right around the top of our food chain," he told her, walking along, his legs brushing past the foliage beside him without causing the least concern, a fact that made her wonder if he was invincible or simply crazy. "You've got a couple other things that float near the top along with 'em. But mostly the threat level drops from there. Honestly, you've got more to fear from the people of Daeldis than the wildlife, as long as you practice a little commonsense. Take, for instance, those two men who've been following us since we left Boulimar."

With a gasp she began to turn around to look. But he shot an arm across her shoulders and pulled her close, disguising his movement by pretending to embrace her.

"Don't *look!*" he said with repressed intensity. "They're not that good of trackers, so they've more or less kept us in sight the whole time. I don't want 'em to get wise and change up their tactics. It's easier to lead them along if they're directly behind us."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, half pulled off her feet by the force with which he was crushing her shoulder against his side. "How did you know?"

"Same way I knew about that snake," he replied. "You live in the jungle long enough, and you get attuned to it." Releasing her with an affectionate pat, he glanced warningly into her eyes and then lowered his head and watched his feet.

Both embarrassed and confused, Monroe felt more than ever how totally out of her depth she was. The jungle seemed alive with threats of which she hadn't the least cognizance. Not for nothing had both Ortmann and Hamilton warned her so vehemently.

"What are we going to do?" she asked after an interval, her eyes rigidly forwards, her body stiff from the awareness of being watched.

"Oh, I know a good place to take care of 'em," he said easily, the previous tension gone and forgotten. "There's a bend in the road that'll take us out of their sight for about half a minute. We'll duck into the bushes and off 'em when they stick their heads around the corner."

"What, you'd just *kill* them?" she asked as quietly as her shock would allow. "You can't just gun them down!"

"They'd do the same for us," he assured her. "I'm all but certain that these are the Clemons boys. Rumor has it they've already killed a dozen people; stripped 'em of their worldly possessions and left the corpses for the animals to clean up. But the wildlife never seems to get to 'em quite fast enough, so the bodies keep getting found. They always off their prey with a couple of throwing knives that they each carry. It's an unintentional calling card, since the blades are unique, and easy enough to identify from the victims' wounds. They actually used to perform with a little half-baked circus that worked its way between Boulimar and the other towns. Folks would pony up—."

"I don't care about any *circuses*!" Ellia said in a strained whisper, the idea of being knifed in the back nearly sending her into a panic. "I want to know how soon you're going to shoot them!"

"I thought you didn't want me to shoot them," he replied with a quiet chuckle at her change of priorities.

"That was before I knew they were killers."

"Well, like I said, I'm not absolutely *certain* it's the Clemons boys," Ortmann stipulated. "It could be someone else."

"I don't want you shooting just anyone," she said.

"No, that doesn't seem right somehow," he agreed, stifling a laugh.

"How can we make sure?" she inquired, glancing up at him and then back to the trail ahead.

"Well, I don't want to risk hesitating to identify them when they round that corner up ahead," he reasoned aloud. "It would be better to do it now."

"But you said they'd know if we turned and looked."

"Yeah, we'd have to disguise it somehow."

"But how?"

"Well, this is as good a way as any," he shrugged, taking her hand and twisting her towards him. In an instant his powerful arms shot around her middle and lifted her up, his mouth going to hers. With a muffled shriek she began to writhe, but a strong hand took the back of her head and kept her pressed tight against him. Knocking her hat off when he seized her, he twisted her back and forth as they embraced, shifting just far enough to look down the backtrail. Satisfied, he released her.

Too shocked for words, Monroe could only stare at him and stammer in surprise and anger.

"Here, you dropped your hat," he grinned, sweeping an arm down in one smooth motion to pick it up before turning her back towards the trail. "Put it on and don't look back," he quietly ordered.

"I bet there's nobody back there at all," she fumed, jamming it onto her head. "You're just taking advantage of me now that we're alone. I should have known the stories about you were true!"

"You can't tell me you didn't enjoy that," he smiled.

"Not at all! Not even a little bit! Oh, I don't know why I'm still *whispering*! This is all just a sham. I bet the snake wasn't real, either."

"If you don't believe there's a couple of men behind us, just stop and turn around."

Despite wishing above all else to prove him wrong, she found her legs still in motion by the time he spoke again.

"Well, you've got sense, anyhow," he observed. "Even if you're uptight."

"I am *not* uptight," she insisted, her voice still low. "No girl likes being dragged off her feet and manhandled."

"Shouldn't that be *womanhandled*?" he asked mirthfully.

“What was I thinking, coming out here with you?” she asked.

“Search me. I was the one who tried to talk you out of it, remember?” Then his tone grew serious. “The bend in the road is coming up. The second we’re out of sight we’re gonna have to run a little. Stick close to me and don’t trip. And *don’t* make any noise, either. They’re not gonna walk right into open view if they get the slightest notion we’re onto them.”

Wordlessly they rounded the corner. Seizing her hand, he pulled her into a quiet run and led her to a thick growth of bushes. Ducking into them, he drew his pistol and looked down their backtrail. Finding the bushes had grown on uneven ground, she crouched inside them with difficulty and began to shift her feet.

“Don’t move an *inch!*” he whispered sternly, freezing her in place. “This’ll all be over in twenty seconds if you don’t mess it up.”

Watching the meager road with him, her nerves were as tight as bowstrings. Half a minute passed without any sign of the Clemons brothers. Then a full minute. Then two minutes.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed, standing up in the bushes and looking down at him. You made the whole thing up! You just wanted an excuse to kiss me!”

No sooner had she said this than he grabbed her hand and jerked her downward, just as a knife flew out of the bushes on the opposite side of the road and sliced the top of her arm. Holding her to the ground beside him, he raised the pistol and discharged three rounds. With a scream one of the Clemons tumbled out of the bush and lay face down in the road. Another knife sailed towards them, aimed at Ortmann’s muzzle flash. Barely ducking it, he fired three more shots which quickly produced the other brother. Slowly he stood up, stepped out of the bush, and approached the bodies with his gun leveled on them.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Ortmann said, stopping a dozen feet short when he noticed his powerful pistol hadn’t caused any exit wounds.

The brothers snapped upwards like practice targets, each with a knife that had been concealed in the palms of their hands.

They'd both raised their arms to throw when Ortmann's final two bullets dropped them into the dirt for good.

"I need to get a bigger magazine for this thing," Ortmann said to himself, ejecting it and beginning to reload it as Monroe climbed out of the bushes and approached. Her eyes were wide as she gazed upon their dead pursuers. "Now do you see why I wanted to shoot first?"

In lieu of replying, she put her hands around his left arm and leaned her head against his shoulder, unable to look away from the corpses.

"I take it you've never seen a man shot and killed before," Ortmann commented, as the last bullet entered the magazine and he slid it back into his pistol. She shook her head. "Well, it won't be the last time if you stick around on Daeldis. There's plenty more where they came from," he added, stabbing a finger at the bodies. "Now, do you want to head back to the bush and make sure the snake is actually there, or are you finally ready to start trusting me?" he asked pointedly.

She nodded, still holding his arm.

"Say it," he ordered, aware that worse things than the Clemons awaited them, and that there wouldn't be time to explain things to her every time she found his methods objectionable.

"I trust you," she said quietly, struggling to find her voice. "I think I'm going to be sick," she added.

"The bushes are back there," he said without concern, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "Take care of business now, if you have to. We've got a lot of miles to cover today."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Bury them?"

"Burying is too good for 'em," he said contemptuously. "The jungle can have 'em. I'm just gonna search their clothes for anything that we can use."

Sensing that she was about to object, he turned and gazed at her with hard eyes that brooked no opposition. Feeling a little pulse of fear pass through her stomach, she nodded and headed for the bushes.

"Wait a minute," he said, stopping her dead. Turning around, she saw him bend over one of the corpses and tear a strip of

cloth out of his shirt. This he tied around the modest wound she'd received from the knife. "You're lucky," he said, making a knot and pulling it tight. "He was aiming for the middle of your back when I pulled you down. Another second and that blade would have plunged right into your spine. And then your journey would have been over real quick, wouldn't it, Princess?"

Surprised at the change in his tone, she could only nod again and make for the bushes. Her stomach was nearly in her throat, but she couldn't actually throw up. Instead she leaned against a narrow tree for a little support and watched Ortmann rifle the Clemons' pockets. She tried to understand why he'd suddenly taken so much offense at her earlier behavior when he'd merely blown it off at the time, but couldn't find a good answer. The best she could cook up was that he was feeling something of a come down after the danger and excitement of being pursued and then shooting it out.

"Are you done yet?" he asked, concluding his search by taking one of the throwing knives and tucking it into his pack.

"Yes," she replied quickly, leaving the bushes and joining him. "I couldn't actually do it."

"Well, maybe we'll get lucky on the way," he said brusquely, once again heading north along the road.

For hours they walked in silence, the sun climbing in the sky and raising the already high temperature of the jungle. The weight of her pack seemed to be growing as every muscle in her untrained body began to complain. Her legs stiffened, her shoulders sagged, and sweat dripped off her chin with every movement. But the hardest part for her sensitive heart to bear was the stony indifference with which Ortmann had suddenly decided to treat her. Walking as though she didn't even exist, more than once she had to jog to keep up with the punishing pace he set. Finally, as her chest heaved and she began to grow dizzy, she put a hand on his arm and tugged.

"Please stop," she pleaded, unable to go any further. "I need to rest."

Turning towards her with annoyance in his eyes, he glanced up and down her soaked body.

"We can take a few minutes," he said, leaning against a tree and crossing his arms.

Sliding the pack off her back, she knelt beside it and searched for the water bottle she'd brought with. Unscrewing the cap, she took two small gulps. Looking up and wincing at his unfriendly glare, she put the bottle away and closed her pack. Standing up a little unsteadily, she walked to where he stood and braved his stare as well as she could.

"Markus, I'm sorry for the way I behaved earlier," she apologized. "I was wrong and stupid. I shouldn't have distrusted you. I knew better than that."

"Why, because of your magic psychic abilities?" he retorted.

"In part, yes," she said.

"They didn't seem to do you a lot of good with the Clemons boys," he observed. "They would have slit your throat without you even knowing it."

"Well, they come and go," she explained briefly, not wanting to get off track. "But I behaved badly and I'm sorry for—."

"Oh, stop apologizing, will you?" he asked, pushing off the tree and walking a few steps away before facing her again. "You think my pride's been hurt? That I'm upset? I'll tell you what the real deal is, sister: I'm a fool. A bonafide, dyed-in-the-wool idiot. That little fight with the Clemons snapped me back to reality. I *never* should have taken this job, and *you* should never have paid off Mulrooney. It's been one stupid decision after another since we met, and things are only going to get worse from here on in. You're right, I *did* use the Clemons as an excuse to kiss you. I've been wanting to do that since I first saw you, and it's been messing with my judgment. It would have been kinder to have taken your money and then broken your legs so you couldn't go traipsing around the jungle looking for your dead father. At least that would have given you time to come to your senses and leave Daeldis with your life. But unfortunately," he concluded, looking her up and down yet again, "I don't think I could bring myself to do that now, even for your own good."

"I won't be any more trouble," she assured him earnestly. "I'll do anything you say."

“You’ll be *plenty* of trouble,” he replied. “You can’t help it. The day’s not half over, and you’re already spent. With a good rest you’ve got an hour, maybe two left in you. Then I’ll have to throw you over my shoulder and *carry* you until nightfall. Add on to it the fact that you can’t see or hear to save your own life, and you’ve got more trouble than anyone in his right mind would ever sign up for. You’re carrying your pack like it’s filled with concrete; you’ve sweated twice the water out of your body that you should have by now; and your princess feet are already covered in blisters. By morning you’re going to be a walking, moaning sore, with barely enough strength to put one leg ahead of the other.”

Disconcerted by the total accuracy of his observations, she could find no words to reply.

“But,” he added, saving her the trouble of conjuring an answer. “I don’t have it in me to immobilize you, and you’ll press ahead whether I’m with you or not. So it looks like I’m stuck with you.”

Having nothing further to say, he walked a short distance up the trail and left her alone.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, shaking her head at how ignorant she’d been to set off on such a journey. Sitting down and resting her back against the tree he’d been leaning on, she wiped the sweat from her face with the stomach of her shirt and then looked at him. With a sigh she thought of all the trouble she’d already caused him, certain that far more was to come.

Despite the heat of the jungle, as time passed she found her body growing loose and relaxed under the sun’s penetrating rays. The addition of a slight breeze blowing up the road from Boulimar eased her just enough to slide her into a partial doze. In it she found the lines blurred between consciousness and unconsciousness. In the latter realm her psychic abilities tended to express themselves more, often picking up on psychic energy through dreams.

She perceived a dark room, some kind of subterranean chamber that was made of stone. Terribly old, it smelled moist and somehow organic, as though many plants grew along its walls. Feeling her way carefully along, she bumped into one of the walls

and indeed found plants and grass pressing their way through the stone blocks that made it up.

Following the blocks to a corner, she shifted to the next wall and was about to follow it when a deep, booming laugh echoed through the chamber. Cringing as she covered her ears, she turned her head towards the voice. Still unable to see in the darkness, she took a couple of steps forwards and then stopped.

"I see you," a male voice said, unmistakably addressed to her. "But you do not see me."

"Who are you?" she asked, finding her voice weak compared to the tremendous power that his bore. "What is this place?"

"This is my temple. A place dedicated to myself alone."

"Where is it? How did I get here?"

"I invited you here," he said masterfully. "I plucked you from beside that little road and carried you to my domain. Long have I sought one such as yourself. And now I have found you."

"Why?" she asked, terrified at the thought. "What good can I possibly be to you?"

"More good than you could ever imagine," he assured her. "There's no limit to the benefit I will derive from you. There are great things ahead of you, Ellia Monroe."

"How do you know my name?" she trembled.

"I know all about you. Every speck of information your father ever possessed about you is now mine to peruse. I drew it from his mind before he died."

"Before you *killed him!*" she shouted, suddenly angered at the memory. "Before you *murdered him!*"

"His death was regrettable," the figure replied. "But it was a necessary sacrifice. It was never my intention to kill him. I merely wished to harvest his knowledge. Your father was a very well-traveled man. But in my enthusiasm at discovering you in his mind, I drained too much from him, and he unfortunately perished."

"I don't believe you. I saw it all in a dream; I saw you drain all those other people."

The figure emitted a low, repressed growl.

“Do *not* argue with me!” he bellowed, causing sharp, burning pain to course through her body. With a scream she fell to the floor, unable to remain on her feet. “I could do things to you that you would never have imagined were possible,” he taunted, lifting one of her feet and swirling her around and around on the stony floor. “But that is not my wish. Your power as a psychic is immense. But you have not yet realized the true extent of your gift. I will teach you how this can be done, and together we can lead this blighted world into a future of hope. For too long you have hidden behind your books, safely shut in by the walls of your library. Now is the time for you to step forth and find yourself.”

“I don’t trust you,” she whimpered, all her strength gone from the attack she’d suffered. “You’ll kill me, just like my father.”

“You need not fear me,” he told her, causing the space to illuminate. In the center sat the figure on a throne of stone. Clothed in a black robe, his hood drooped far down and obscured his face. Only his hands could be seen, which were ancient and massive, the fingers twice the length of the palms “Your father did not. I showed him the way of hope for Daeldis, and he willingly joined me on that journey. It was merely his age that held him back, causing the extraction process to—.”

“Extraction!” she blurted out. No sooner had the word left her lips than she was hoisted off the floor and pressed against the twenty foot high ceiling.

“Do not imagine that I *welcome* your outbursts,” the figure roared. “I merely tolerate them. But my tolerance is nearly at an end. You will soon see, as your father did, that I offer peace, prosperity, and safety for all the people of this world. I have waited much too long to enrich their lives to bandy words with a self-important librarian. We shall speak again, when you’re in a less temperamental frame of mind.”

Suddenly releasing her, she screamed as she fell helplessly to the floor. Closing her eyes just as she was about to strike it, she passed harmlessly through it and found herself once more beside the road to Todrid.

“What’s wrong?” Ortmann asked, approaching from the north. “I heard you scream.”

Without a word she shot to her feet and embraced him, still trembling from her apparent near-death experience.

"What's the matter?" he asked, awkwardly patting her back as she clung to him.

"I talked to it," she replied, shivering like a leaf. "I saw the creature that killed Daddy. I-I spoke with it. I spoke with it."

"Yeah, I got that part," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and moving her back to look into her anxious eyes. "What did it say? What happened?"

"It tried to seduce me," she uttered in a whisper. "It tried to make me think that Daddy went along with its schemes. It wanted me to believe that it would help the people of Daeldis, if only I would join forces with it."

"Why did it want you?" Ortmann asked, finding the notion ridiculous.

"It said I'm a powerful psychic, and that it could train me to utilize my full potential. But it was angry, abusive. It sent this terrible pain throughout my body and tossed me around like a doll." She shook her head, her eyes earnestly fixed on his. "It's not good. It's bad. *Very bad.*"

"What did it look like?"

"I don't know. It wore a robe. All I could see were its hands. But it was huge. At least ten feet tall. Probably more."

Ortmann's face lost its skepticism and he lowered his head as he returned her gaze.

"Are you sure?"

"That's not the sort of thing you forget!" she replied. "It was probably even a little taller than that. Say twelve feet."

"What did its hands look like?" he inquired pointedly. "Brown and leathery, like an old saddle?"

"Yes!" she said with urgent realization. "But terribly old. The fingers were long and boney."

Wordlessly, Ortmann drew his head back and nodded to himself.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I saw a drawing once," he answered. "A cave drawing. Up near Todrid. There was a figure like that, only he wasn't wearing a

robe. He wore some kind of space suit. I can't remember the whole drawing now. But it showed a bunch of little people bowing down to him. If they were anything like our height, the figure would be around twelve feet tall."

"You think they're the same person?" she asked. "Or rather *thing*?"

"Same species, anyway," he replied. "Those drawings have got to be as old as the hills. I doubt there's any way that a creature could last that long, no matter how advanced the technology."

"Could it be a kind of stasis?" she inquired. "Suspended animation?"

"It's possible, I suppose. Did you see anything like that in the dream?"

"No," she shook her head, narrowing her eyes as she thought back. "Just a chamber made of stone. Honestly the whole space felt primitive and unkept. Like some old temple or... something."

"What?"

"You said the little people were bowing down to the figure?"

"Yeah."

"Like a god..." she nodded to herself, her voice trailing in thought. "We have records of a race of highly advanced aliens that used to live in this galaxy before us. They were like parasites, preying on weaker races and draining their life force through an opening in their hands," she explained, holding up her right palm and tracing it with her left index finger. "Most of our knowledge of them comes from cave drawings like the one you saw. But I don't remember reading anything about them being worshiped. I think all the drawings I've ever heard of depicted them as persecutors and monsters. Devils, if you will."

"So that's why your old man was in such a hurry to get up there," Ortmann uttered. "He must have felt this thing talking to him, too, and went out to see it."

"Are you implying my father wanted to *serve* it?" she asked, the figure's words to that effect still painfully fresh in her mind.

"No," he laughed, the notion absurd to him. "But if it can reach into your dreams, it must be very powerful. And your dad

struck me as the kind of guy who couldn't let something like that pass him by. He'd have to stick his head into the beehive and get himself stung."

"He wasn't *stung*!" she protested. "He was killed! Murdered! I saw that thing suck his soul out of his body in a dream back in Boulimar. For the life of me, I can't imagine how you're being so cold about all this. Don't you have any feelings at all? Or do you dispense with all life as easily as you did those of the Clemons brothers?"

With a disappointed scowl on his face he reached out and gripped the torn bit of shirt that protected the slice in her arm. Instantly she yelped and jumped back.

"What did you do *that* for?" she demanded, covering it with her hand and gently rubbing it. "Have you degenerated into simply abusing me now?"

"I was just reminding you of what Bo Clemons nearly did to your *spine*," he asserted, crossing his arms and leaning back on his right foot. "If I hadn't jerked you out of the way and then put 'em both out of their misery, you'd be a pincushion by now. Don't forget that, Princess."

Realizing that she was acting absurdly, she held up a hand and took a deep breath.

"You're right," she admitted. "You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. I'm just so upset from what that creature said. I just can't believe that Daddy would have gone along with it. But yet..." her voice trailed, even as she grimaced at the notion.

"What? You think it might be true?"

"Honestly?" she asked, glancing around as though someone might hear her. "I think it's just possible. He'd been getting a little...unstable these last few years. Sometimes he'd say things that I never would have imagined him saying when I was younger. He was always so strong and rooted – had so much integrity. But I noticed his wheels coming off the ground, like he was losing sight of what made him who he was. I think he was searching for something to identify himself with. I think–," she paused mid sentence.

"You think what?"

"I think he felt the end of his life coming into reach, and he wanted something to plug into that would live after him. And if that

figure really *is* as old as we suspect..." her voice trailed again.

"Your father might just have found himself a god to worship," Ortmann finished for her, recognizing that the idea was too painful for her to verbalize herself. "Something that would live after him."

Mutely she nodded, looking down at the ground guiltily.

"Well, that could be," he allowed, uncrossing his arms as he felt his attitude towards the girl soften. "But I don't think there's any reason to assume that yet."

"No," she agreed. "You're right, of course. I don't know why I'm letting my mind run away with me like this. It's like that robed figure has gotten inside my head and is leading me down every dark bypath it can find." She paused and looked up at him with consternation in her eyes. "Do you think that's possible?"

"Why ask me?" he shrugged. "I'm no psychic."

"But you were with Daddy," she replied. "You might have seen something."

"Like I said before, he talked about anything and everything *except* what you might call his inner experiences. Assuming he had more of them than just that one sleepwalking episode I told you about, of course. Although, I did notice him getting happier, more buoyant, as we got closer to our destination. Kind of like he was going home."

A nauseous grimace crossed Monroe's pretty face, and she looked down in dismay.

"Hey, that doesn't mean that he sold out to this figure," he assured her, taking her shoulders in his hands again. "It just means he was getting close to what he wanted, whatever it was. You said he came here to help the people of Daeldis. Well, maybe he thought this being was behind a lot of our problems, and he planned to finish him off. There's no way of knowing now, of course. But there's no sense in assuming the worst. That's just surrendering to dread."

"I know," she nodded, lacking the will to raise her head. "It's just so tempting. Daddy wasn't very stable, like I told you. He left Rimmis without putting any of his affairs in order, leaving no provision at all if anything happened to him. He just didn't care anymore. For those last few weeks before his trip it was like I didn't

even exist. We used to be so close, but we'd become strangers towards the end."

"People get pretty self-centered when they think their number is about to be called up," Ortmann told her. "It's natural, even if it hurts."

"Are you like that?" she asked, looking up again and searching his eyes for strength.

"Heh, I've seen death so many times I wouldn't know what to do with it anymore besides laugh," he said lightly. Then his face grew serious. "Hey, don't go putting your faith in me," he warned her with quiet firmness, aware that her fears about her father were turning her world upside down, and that she was searching for a new lodestar. "I'm not the type."

"And just what is the type?" she asked in a hollow voice, her shoulders starting to sag.

"I don't know. Your father, I guess. Just remember the good times and live off that. Everyone goes downhill in the end, either mentally or physically. You can't hold that against him."

Sadly she nodded, looking down again. It was then that he realized she'd never been disappointed in such a manner before. Living a sheltered life, she'd missed most of the hard knocks that shatter one's illusions about faith, honor, and integrity. She still saw life in black and white absolutes, instead of as existing on a curve where strength and weakness managed to meet in the same person. Though twenty-five, she still was very much a child in her outlook. That was why she'd tried to latch onto him, he reflected: being strong, brave, and direct in his manner and way of living, he was the perfect figure to carry forward her unconscious notions of the perfect man. His lack of culture was something of a hindrance to this, given her background. But she was willing to overlook that if he allowed her to keep her illusions otherwise intact.

And that, he concluded, was why she'd been so upset at the kiss he'd stolen: she had already begun to attach to him, and his behavior had thrown up a temporary roadblock. That signaled to him that her doubts about her father preceded the dream, even if she was more or less unaware of that fact.

“Well, we’d better get a move on,” he said after a short interval of silence, unsure what else to do. It was easy enough to throw lead at thieves and killers. *That* was something with which he’d had plenty of experience. But he was utterly ignorant about how to patch up a girl’s broken heart.

CHAPTER 3

With Ortmann carrying her pack, Ellia managed to keep moving until nightfall.

"We'll camp a couple hundred feet off the road," he said, leading her into the trees and bushes. "Sometimes robbers travel between Boulimar and Todrid looking for traders they can kill and loot."

"Okay," she agreed morosely, as though she hadn't really heard him.

Absorbed in thought during the entire second half of their journey that day, she'd been too blue to respond to anything he said with more than a single word. The helpless spiral with which her image of Drew Monroe disintegrated surprised him, given that nothing was really known about his behavior towards the end. But nothing he said seemed to make a difference to her. She was convinced he'd sold out somehow, trading his character for a shot at a kind of immortality.

Familiar with most of the turf between Daeldis' two largest cities, Ortmann continued to walk until he found a fat old tree that was absolutely covered in leafy branches. Ducking beneath them, he gestured for Monroe to catch up and join him in the waning light of dusk.

"This is it," he announced.

"What do you mean?" she asked, glancing around in the gloom and seeing nothing special.

"Not *here*," he told her, waving his finger in a circular motion. "Up *there*," he said, pointing up the tree. "There's a

treehouse hidden way up in the branches. Nobody knows about it except me and the man who built it. And he isn't gonna talk."

"Why's that?" she asked, as he looped her pack over his right shoulder and prepared to climb.

"Because I killed him," he replied.

"Oh," she nodded, too emotionally drained to worry about the circumstances.

"You any good at climbing?"

"I climbed the ladders in the college library," she said blandly. "Does that count?"

"Well, watch how I do it and stay close," he instructed.

"There's enough branches that you shouldn't have a problem finding things to hang onto. Just take it slow and hold on tight."

"Okay."

Wrapping his hands around a thick branch, he hoisted himself up and stood atop it. Bracing himself with another, thinner branch, he looked down.

"Your turn."

Feebly she wrapped her arms around the branch and tried to pull herself up. But a lifetime spent indoors had done little to develop her muscles, and she couldn't manage.

"Here," he said, squatting on the branch and reaching his hand down. "Grab ahold and I'll pull you up."

Grasping his hand, she marveled at the ease with which he drew her upward. Getting her shoes on the same branch he stood on, she let him go and steadied herself between two limbs.

"We'll just keep this going until we reach the top," he said.

"How far do we have to go?" she asked, looking down with dismay.

"Old Beaky didn't build this thing within easy reach," Ortman replied. "Didn't want anyone finding it by accident."

"Beaky?"

"Yeah, Beaky Farage. Craziest old coot you'd ever want to meet," he said, hoisting himself up to the next branch and reaching his hand down again. "He used to say," he continued, his voice straining as he took on her weight, "that there were only two times

you could trust someone: when they were born, and just as they were about to die.”

“Why?” she inquired, aware that he was distracting her from the ever increasing height.

“Well, as he saw it,” he explained, seizing the next limb and ascending. “When you’re born, you haven’t the least idea what you have to gain or lose in life, so you haven’t got any reason to cheat anybody.” He drew her up again. “And when you’re about to die, you’ve got nothing to lose, so you won’t have any reason to lie. As for all that time in between,” he paused briefly, merely stepping onto the next branch and offering his hand to steady her. “You’ve just got to take your chances.”

“Now, personally,” he continued, again stepping to the next branch as their number increased. “I’d say that’s a little bit too harsh. Most people are looking out for themselves, sure. But they’ve got their reputation to think of, if nothing else. That’ll at least make ‘em more honest than they otherwise would have been.” Wordlessly he helped her up the next two branches, both being thinner and thus more treacherous. “And that says nothing of conscience,” he added. “Not everyone listens to theirs. But I reckon it tilts things in a little more favorable direction than Beaky would have you believe.”

“Why did you end up killing him?” she asked, hugging the tree’s trunk and closing her eyes with dread.

“Oh, he made me do that,” he assured her, again reaching upward and dragging himself higher. “Like I said, he was crazy. You could see him slipping a little more with each passing year.” He took her hand and pulled. “Too bad,” he strained, depositing her shivering form on the limb. “Probably never meet a better hunter than Beaky Farage. But when he came at me with that rifle of his, cranking off shots like I was his mortal enemy, I only had time to shoot to kill. He lasted long enough for his senses to return, and he told me he was sorry. Then he passed, and I buried him.”

“Are we almost there?” she asked desperately, scarcely able to force her eyes open, and utterly incapable of looking down.

“Oh, yeah,” he said easily, though he was breathing heavily from the exertion. “Just look up. One more branch and we’re golden.”

"I'll take your word for it," she replied, continuing to shake.

"What, are you cold?" he asked, putting a hand on her trembling side.

"No," she shook her head slightly, not wishing to upset her balance. "Just get us up there. Please."

"Sure," he said, removing his hand and reaching for the last branch. Once atop it he reached down for her. "Alright, give me your hand. Ellia?"

But she didn't move.

"Ellia, this is no time to be scared. We're right at the top. Just a little further and you can rest for the night."

"I-I'd rather go back down," she said through clattering teeth. "I can't go any further. I want to go back down."

"Well, we're not going back down," he replied with certainty. "Up here nothing can get us but a few bugs. Down there—."

"I can't."

"Look, you trust me, don't you?" he asked, trying a different tack as he squatted on the limb. "Ellia?" he asked more forcefully.

"Yes," she admitted, resting her forehead against the tree and taking a shallow breath.

"I haven't let anything hurt you yet," he continued, hoping she was too scared to remember the cut Bo Clemons' knife had given her. "And I'm not about to start. Now, just give me your hand and I'll pull you up."

"But what if I slip?"

"You won't slip," he promised her, patting his hand against the branch and reaching out again. "Give it to me."

Swallowing hard, she lifted her left hand away from the tree and extended it straight over her head.

"Over here, Princess," he said with a grin. "A little more. Alright. Hang on tight."

"Oh! Oh!" she whimpered, as her feet came off the branch and she dangled in the air. "Don't drop me! Don't drop me!"

"I...won't..." he strained, standing up and pulling her as high as he could. "Get your feet on the branch!" he ordered, as her legs bumped against it. "Ellia, open your eyes!"

This she couldn't bring herself to do. But she managed to feel her way up and got the load off his arm. Frantically searching for a handhold for her right, she felt a board. Surprised, she opened her eyes and saw the ramshackle treehouse.

"I told you it was just one more branch," he said with a smile from behind her. "Now, we'll have to work around to the other side. Beaky only made one entrance to this thing, and—."

"I can't move another inch," she said fervently, shaking her head. "I don't have it in me."

"Yes, you do," he said sincerely, leaning near her ear and speaking quietly. "You're a brave girl, and you've got what it takes. Now, just like before."

Taking one branch at a time, he helped her work around to the front of the treehouse. Pulling open a narrow door, he got her inside, handed her the packs, and then followed.

"Not much room," he said. "But it's better than spending the night on the ground. As long as we're quiet, nobody'll ever know we're here."

"How are we going to get down?" she asked, frightened at the thought.

"Same way we came up," he replied simply. "But don't worry: it's easier going down."

Taking out a small lamp, he unpacked a simple meal of water, dried meat, and bread.

"I'm not hungry," she said, wrapping her arms around her knees and drawing them against her chest.

"You'd better be," he uttered, laying on his side and propping himself on his arm. "You've burned off a lot of fuel today, and you've got to put some of it back. By morning you'll wish you had." He laid a strip of dried meat on a piece of bread and held it out to her. "Come on: get something in your stomach."

Reluctantly she reached out and took it. Taking a small bite, she chewed it slowly and swallowed. Looking around the treehouse, she found it poorly ventilated but solidly built. A few mosquitoes had followed them in when they opened the door. But most of them seemed to be locked outside.

“Beaky knew how to build,” Ortmann observed, sensing her train of thought as she looked around.

“Did he make any other treehouses?” she asked, trying to take her mind off of the climb down that awaited them in the morning.

“A few,” he replied casually, making an open-faced sandwich for himself and eating it with far greater appetite. Noticing how she nervously clamped and unclamped her free hand on her leg, he added, “You don’t have to worry about getting down. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I know.”

Quietly they finished their meal, and then Ortmann laid out the packs as pillows.

“We’d better get some sleep,” he said, stretching out on his back and yawning. “We’ve made decent progress today. But I want to cover more ground tomorrow.”

Without responding Ellia stared at the door, her eyes dull and far away as she thought. With her chin upon her knees, and her arms once more wrapped around her legs, she looked like a little ball.

“Ellia, what’s on your mind?”

“You know what I’m thinking about,” she replied in a melancholy voice.

“Sure. But you might feel better if you say something about it.”

“I just thought I knew my father better than that,” she said with a sigh. “I wish he’d never come here. He wasn’t in any kind of a state to resist the figure’s words. He offered himself up on a platter.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh, I do,” she insisted. “I couldn’t understand it at the time, but the figure was right: Daddy went right along with it. I saw the moment he gave his life away in a dream back in Boulimar. I was so filled with emotions at the time that I couldn’t parse what *he* was feeling at the time. But it was filtering its way through my unconscious mind all the while.”

“And?” he inquired.

Reluctantly she raised her head and looked at him.

"I felt *satisfaction*," she whispered. "He was happy with what had happened. When I experienced it in the dream I panicked and fought back, and that kept me from noticing that he *didn't*. He surrendered his life to that monster. He willingly gave his vital force away."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said dismally. "Absolutely. Sometimes it takes me a while to catch on to everything that a dream contains. But it all soaks in eventually."

"I'm sorry, Ellia."

"I don't know what I'm going to do without him," she said, tears beginning to roll down her cheeks. "It was always Daddy and me, ever since mother died. Her passing nearly broke both of us, so it forced us to draw together and find strength in each other. Sometimes we just sat together and cried and cried that she was gone. Those were some of the saddest days of my life, but I cherish them. I wouldn't trade them for anything."

"I understand," he said a little flatly, the offering of comfort being outside his skillset.

"And to find that he left me all alone just to find phony immortality in a false god!" she exclaimed, her chest convulsing as she began to sob. "It's too much!" Resting her arms atop her knees, she buried her face in them. "Too much," she repeated in a muffled voice.

"Ellia, I'm sorry," Ortmann said sincerely. "Truly sorry. I wish you didn't have to go through all this."

Raising her head from her arms, she twisted onto her hands and knees and crawled towards him. Putting her arms around his middle, she buried her face in his strong chest and continued to cry. His eyes opened wide at this, perfectly aware of both her utter vulnerability and his absolute unwillingness to take advantage of it.

"Ellia," he protested reluctantly, putting his hands on her shoulders and trying to gently lift her off. "This isn't the right way to go about this."

"Oh, be quiet," she sobbed, looking up into his face with red, tear-soaked eyes. "Just put your arms around me and make me

feel safe. Just for a little while.” Lowering her face again, she turned it to the side and let out a ragged sigh.

Unable to do anything else, he put his hands to her back and began tepidly rubbing her. It had been one thing to steal a kiss from her when she was upright and alert. But it was quite another thing to squeeze her against himself when her world was crumbling and she was looking for a safe harbor to rest in. She’d been dependent on her father to a degree he hadn’t understood until just then. Being so boisterous and lively, he inhabited the complete opposite world from the one she did. His life was filled with people, action, and new experiences. She preferred to hold back, filtering experience through books and established institutions. He had been her crutch, the strong, impulsive being who could beat down everything that threatened her from without. And in her own, academic way, she complemented him with the reflection and studiousness that his outgoing personality obviously lacked.

Again Ortmann’s eyes widened as he thought on the peculiar suitability he possessed to take that role over for her. With infinite uneasiness he raised his hands to her shoulders once more.

“Ellia,” he began, only to have his words met with a growl that surprised him.

“Keep holding me, or I’ll bite you,” she warned him, her tone utterly sincere.

Flaring his eyebrows at this rather unexpected notion, he lowered his hands again and continued to rub her. With a sigh he decided that he could stand the arrangement if she could, and began to take a little pleasure in the sensation of her narrow form being partially draped over him. As time passed and her tears ceased, he noticed her breathing even out. When he was certain she was finally asleep, he reached over, clicked off his little lamp, and gently knit together his fingers over her slim waist.

The night passed slowly for him. Unused to having a bedfellow, he awoke every time she shifted in her sleep. Once or twice she moaned, but not unpleasantly. She seemed to be resting comfortably, her dreams apparently uninterrupted by the mysterious figure that had so tormented her earlier in the day.

As night gradually turned to morning, and the rays of the sun found their way through the odd crack in Beaky's workmanship, the heat of two people in such a confined place finally brought them both to consciousness.

"Mmm," she said, only half awake.

"Good morning," he said with a smile, inwardly laughing at himself for the miserable day he'd set himself up for. It was hard enough journeying through the jungle with someone utterly unused to even moderate exertion. It was quite another thing to do it on a half-baked night sleep. However pleasing it had been to act as her pillow, he wordlessly promised himself to find her other accommodations at their next rest stop. "Hope you slept well," he added.

"Mmm."

"We're gonna have to get moving pretty soon. The temperature is already rising, and I want to get a couple hours of travel under our feet before it really starts to scorch us."

"Mmm."

"Is that all you can say?" he laughed.

"I'm not a morning person," she explained groggily, her face turned away from his. "I'm not used to this."

"You got up early enough yesterday."

"I know. It killed me to do it. Today I just want to sleep in."

"Afraid that's not an option, Princess," he chuckled. "Now, come on: hop up."

"Five more minutes," she sighed.

With a sigh of his own he rolled his eyes.

"Fine. Five more minutes," he acquiesced. Having spent the entire night on his back, he wished above all else to *move*. "Can I ask you something?"

"Mmm."

"Isn't this a bit...intimate, for your sensibilities?"

"What sensibilities?"

"The ones you threw in my face yesterday when I womanhandled you."

"Oh, those."

"Yes, those."

A brief interval passed in silence.

"Hello?"

"Hmm?" she asked, starting a little at his voice. "Did you say something?"

"Nothing."

Feeling generous, he decided to give her ten minutes before rousing her.

"Alright, time to get up," he announced, sitting up slowly and causing her to slide off his chest and onto the floor beside him. "Rise and shine."

"Oh, I hurt," she moaned, putting a hand to her eyes as though to blot out the pain.

"Welcome to the first real day of your journey," he said, stretching his arms and back to work the kinks out. "Yesterday you were all ignorance and enthusiasm. Today you know what you're in for."

"Do I ever," she groaned, twisting back and forth to work a knot out of her spine. "You're not a very comfortable pillow," she said, opening her eyes with a hint of a smile. "I think I have a crick in my neck."

"Wasn't my idea, if you'll recall."

"Yes, I know," she nodded, putting a hand between her skull and the wooden floor, watching him for a moment. "Thank you, Markus. You were a perfect gentleman."

"There's a *few* of us, here and there," he replied somewhat pointedly, flaring his eyebrows at the shock and wonder of such a notion.

Wordlessly he laid out their spartan breakfast, making a little open-faced sandwich and placing it beside her.

"Eat that up," he ordered. "You're gonna need strength for the journey ahead."

"I think I'd rather just die," she uttered, lying flat on her back and stretching her arms and legs out. "Every muscle hurts. I think even my *bones* hurt, if that's possible. I just want to soak in a nice hot bath for the next six or eight days."

"It'll pass with time," he replied factually, taking a bite of his breakfast. "Nothing better for sore muscles than to get 'em moving."

You'll forget most of your aches after the first hour or so."

Twisting painfully towards him, she rested on her elbow and lifted the little sandwich.

"Isn't this kind of small?" she asked, surprised at the portion.

"You don't need a big breakfast," he explained. "With the heat and the exertion, your stomach won't want to hold much. You'd probably just throw up anything larger, especially when you get a look down the side of this tree in the daylight."

"Don't remind me," she replied, scrunching up her face at the thought.

"That's why we're gonna get to it right after this," he said, downing the rest of his meal. Reaching for the packs, he put the little light away. "Before you've got a chance to let fear get the better of you."

"I think it's already done that," she uttered, finding her appetite even for slight fare evaporating in an instant. She was about to set the sandwich down when he stopped her.

"Eat that," he instructed, stabbing a finger at it. "And do it quick. We're heading down this tree in two minutes."

"You don't give a girl a break, do you?" she asked, drawing it back to her mouth and biting off a corner.

"You'll thank me later," he assured her, moving in a hunch towards the door and pushing it open. Blinded by the incoming rays, Ellia raised a hand to her eyes. "Think rain is coming," he commented, sniffing the air a few times before turning back to her. With a disappointed shake of his head he saw most of her sandwich intact. "Do I have to shove that thing down your throat?"

"Would you?" she asked, looking upwards with a little flutter of her eyes, her nervousness about their impending descent making her remarkably expressive.

"Ooh, flirtatious," he said in a sarcastic monotone. "And it isn't even noon."

Working the packs' handles over his shoulders, he leaned out of the treehouse and put his feet on a decently wide branch.

"Come on," he said, reaching inside and gesturing for her to follow. "Now or never."

"Can I choose never?" she asked with a nervous laugh.

"No," he replied flatly. "Out."

Stuffing the rest of her breakfast into her mouth, she rose into a hunch and joined him at the door. Taking his hand, they began to work their way around to the other side of the treehouse.

"Oh, I'd forgotten how bad this was," she squeaked, her eyes fixed straight ahead as she felt for each branch.

"You've got to look down," he told her. "You can't just grope your way along."

"I think I'll pass out if I look down," she said in a strained voice.

"Then I'll catch you," he replied. "Now, do it."

Forcing her head downward, her eyes bulged at the distance between herself and the ground. One slip, and it would be a long, long way down, her path interrupted by numerous branches that would tear at her skin and break her bones.

"Keep moving," he ordered. "It'll get better with each step down."

"Don't say *down*," she pleaded, following him to the next branch, gripping his hand and a thin limb just above her head.

"That's it," he coached her, stepping easily from branch to branch. "Just follow me."

Soon they reached the other side of the treehouse.

"Alright, this is where we start climbing down."

"Oh," she whimpered, her nerves tight as piano wire.

"You'll be fine," he assured her. "We'll do like we did yesterday, just in reverse. I'll just lower you down—."

"No, no, no," she insisted, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "I can't do it. I can't dangle in the air with all that space between me and the ground. I'll die of fright."

"One way or another, Princess, you're going *down*," he asserted. The sudden absence of kindness in his voice opened her eyes, and she saw in his the utter determination to carry out his threat. "You can make this easy, or you can make it real hard. But we're not spending another minute in this tree that we don't have to."

"Yes, sir," she found herself saying, nodding slightly.

"Now," he began, moving in close behind her and pressing her against the trunk to get a firm handle on a nearby limb, "you're gonna take my hand in both of yours. And when I tell you to, you're gonna ease yourself off the branch and into the air. Then I'll lower you down."

"Okay."

Grasping his large hand with her small ones, she swallowed hard and awaited his instructions.

"Alright, turn your butt out towards the next branch, and start bending your knees to lower yourself," he told her. "Make it slow, gradually taking weight off your feet so you hang from my hand."

Inwardly dashing off a little prayer, Ellia did as she was told. Bending her knees until most of her weight was dangling from him, she kept drawing upward on her legs until her feet came off the branch.

"That's it!" he said in a strained voice. "Good girl. Now, slowly stretch your legs out and look down. You need to find the branch beneath you."

Carefully extending her thin legs, she was horrified to find that she was hanging in open air, the branch she needed being a couple of feet away.

"I'm gonna have to swing you, Ellia," he told her.

"Swing me?!" she exclaimed, as he began to do so.

"Get your feet on the branch when you're over it," he ordered, ignoring her comment. "I won't let go until you're...securely on it."

Tepidly she reached out for it, nearly frozen stiff from fear as the jungle rocked to and fro beneath her.

"Ellia! Get your feet on the branch!" he barked. "I can't hold you forever, you know!"

Finding suitable stimulus in this bit of information, she managed to get her feet on the branch, though she was tilting much too far towards her previous limb for him to let go without dropping her.

"What do I do now?" she asked in a pleading voice.

“Let go with your left hand and grab a branch!” he said.
“What do you think?”

Looking around for one she could hold onto, she peeled away her left and got it around the limb.

“Alright, I’m gonna let you go now.”

“Oh!”

“Just hold on tight to the branch. I’m gonna let you go easy. Ready? Alright, here we go.”

As his fingers began to loosen she felt a nervous shiver go through her body. Gripping the limb with all her strength, she felt certain she’d drop to her death. When she didn’t, looked down and let out a little laugh.

“Not so bad,” she said, as he clambered down to her with the agility of a squirrel.

“Tell that to my hand,” he joked, shaking it for effect. “It’s a wonder there’s any blood left in it. Ready to do the next one?”

“Uh huh.”

And so they continued, conquering one branch at a time. By the time they were halfway down, Monroe felt she was getting the hang of it and said as much.

“Fear’s a great teacher,” Ortmann replied, bracing himself to lower her again. “You learn ten times faster when your neck is on the line.”

Their speed increased as they neared the bottom, both of them falling into a rhythm that kept them in almost constant motion. When her feet finally landed in the moist soil of the jungle floor, Ellia let out a little yip and hugged him.

“We made it!” she exclaimed happily, her face beaming. “I never thought I could do it.”

“Just needed a little push,” he smiled, nodding in the direction of the road. “Let’s get a move on. It’s only getting warmer.”

“Okay,” she agreed, falling in behind and following him through the bushes. “Are you tired after all that? I mean, having to haul me down the tree and all?”

“It was a good workout,” he answered, pushing a wide, frilly leaf aside that instantly snapped back into her face. “Sorry.”

“Oh, I can take anything after that,” she said enthusiastically. “I never knew danger could be so much fun!”

“Yeah, it gets your body’s chemicals raging, that’s for sure,” he replied with moderate interest.

“After all you’ve seen, I guess I sound pretty silly to be going on like this,” she said.

“Not at all. That was a big step for you. Next we’ll have you riding a bike without anyone holding the seat.”

“Oh!” she laughed, lightly smacking him on the back.

“Thank you so much for helping me,” she added after a brief interval.

“That’s what you’re paying me for.”

“I know,” she nodded to herself. “But thanks all the same.”

Finding the road, Ortmann looked up and down it for other travelers. Pulling out his water bottle, he took a swig, offered her one, and then put it back. Turning off towards the north, he began to walk.

“Do you want me to carry that?” she asked, pointing at her pack.

“No. You’d better just focus on keeping your own body in motion.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to carry my pack for me back in Boulimar?” she teased, nudging him a little.

“Well, we all have lapses in judgment,” he said evenly.

She glanced up at him as the smile melted from her face, but he said nothing more. Curious as to what she’d done to upset him, she dropped back a hair to slip out of his peripheral vision and looked at him, trying to stimulate her mind. As she’d told him the day before, her psychic faculty came and went. Never truly able to direct it, she’d long practiced giving it a little helping hand by focusing on a single subject and blotting everything else from her mind. This she now attempted to do, though the roughness of the ground beside the road constantly drew her attention away from her task. For over an hour she determinedly strove to glean a little bit of insight from the complicated man beside her. But as the first hour rolled into the second, and then the third, she gradually lost hope. With the termination of the fourth hour, she gave up.

"Can I have a drink?" she asked at last, her mind wearied by the exercise she'd put it through, to say nothing of the heat of the jungle.

"Sure," he said, unfastening the top of her pack without stopping and pulling out her water bottle. Handing it to her, he avoided eye contact by looking straight ahead.

Confused by this, she took a pair of swallows and then handed the bottle back. Mechanically he replaced it.

"Markus, have I done something wrong?"

"Is that what you've been so quiet about all this time?" he asked.

"Well, yeah. I feel like you're angry with me."

"No, I'm not angry with you."

"Well...what is it, then?"

With a reluctant sigh he stopped and turned to her.

"I said last night that this wasn't the way to go about healing yourself," he began, not wishing to talk about it but having no choice. "Throwing yourself into the arms of a man you barely know because your dad is gone will lead to nothing but heartache. Now, I know you're hurting, but you need time to let your mind level out again. You have no idea how vulnerable you are. I should have stopped you last night, but you were about to burst, and I couldn't think of anything else to do. So I let you be."

"Besides, I would have bitten you if you hadn't."

"Oh, don't joke," he frowned. "This is serious."

"What makes you think I'm not?" she asked, taking a step closer and putting her hands on her hips. "You want to know why I'm standing on my own two feet right now? Why I'm not a puddle of jelly?"

"I imagine you're going to tell me."

"Because I've got *you* with me," she said, causing him to roll his eyes and glance away for a moment. "Don't believe it if you don't want to. But last night I thought I'd die from grief over my father. I felt betrayed and abandoned and alone. Then I awoke this morning to find myself hurting, like you said, but quite sane. Something passed between us last night that I can't explain. I feel a bond. I feel *trust*."

"That'll pass," he asserted, turning northward again and resuming movement. "Like indigestion."

"Do you *want* it to?" she asked, trotting up ahead of him and turning around to face him while walking backwards awkwardly through the bushes. "Is there something wrong with me?"

"Ellia, can you even hear yourself?" he asked, halting to stop her ridiculous looking movements. "This is the *third day* we've known each other. That's a little fast to be jumping into my arms."

"Why?"

"You're smarter than this, Ellia. You're all plugged into that psychological society back on Rimmis. Didn't they ever say anything about the effects trauma has on people? How it warps their judgment? I mean, look at yourself: you were coming apart at the seams last night, and today you're flirting and making jokes. You're riding a succession of highs and lows. Right now you're on top. But when the emotional waves start going out again, you're gonna collapse."

"I'll have you to catch me," she said.

"Why do you *want* that?" he asked, genuinely incredulous. "You see what kind of man I am; you know what I do. I killed those two men yesterday without so much as blinking. I'll do the same thing today if that *moron up ahead of us doesn't get out of sight!*" he said, his last words being shouted. With a gasp Ellia looked over her shoulder just in time to see a stooped little figure disappear behind a boulder beside the road. "Ellia, I think you're smart, and I think you're sweet," he finished, as she turned back to him again. "But you'd better look elsewhere for emotional support. I'm a wrecking ball, not a therapist."

"What's bothering you?" she asked, stepping closer again. "I mean really?"

"I don't believe in using people," he said at once. "That's all anything between us would amount to: you using me to find your equilibrium; and me using you for a little companionship. Once this little jaunt of ours is over, provided we survive, we're gonna go our separate ways. And I have no interest in *lessening* our chance of survival by clouding things up with emotions. There's enough stacked against us as is."

"What makes you think I'd leave?" she asked, dropping her voice and looking up into his eyes.

"You're not staying on Daeldis," he shook his head. "You'd be insane to."

"Or in love."

"Oh," he groaned, pushing past her and walking again. "I'm finished with this conversation."

"Well I'm not," she insisted, hurrying up beside him.

"Good, enjoy it. Just leave me out of it."

"I don't intend to."

"Look, Princess," he said, turning and towering over her. "I've put up with a great deal from you. But don't ever forget that I could leave you out here without leaving so much as a footprint for you to follow. You wouldn't last even twenty-four hours on your own. So don't press me."

"You wouldn't do that," she replied. "You *couldn't*. It's not in you. Not after last night."

"Nothing *happened* last night. You were grieving, and against my better judgment I let you cry it out. Just leave it there."

As soon as he said this, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, hoping that a more direct approach would yield better results. But he angrily shoved her away, causing her to lose her balance and drop to her rear. With a stunned expression on her face she looked upward. Seizing a fistful of her shirt, he dragged her up and pulled her face close to his.

"*Don't do that again*," he growled.

"You're serious," she uttered in shock, her eyes dancing around his furious face.

"Are you just catching on to that now?" he asked, letting go of her shirt and dropping her pack on the ground. "Time to carry your own weight, Princess," he added, turning away and resuming his walk to Todrid.

Too surprised to move for a few moments, she soon came back to reality and snatched her pack off the ground. Slinging it over her shoulders, she scurried off after him. Keeping about a dozen feet back, she wondered how she could have been so wrong about his feelings. But she had little time to ruminate. Seeing the little figure

pop his head around the boulder a second time, Ortmann unhesitatingly drew his pistol and sent two shots roaring over the stranger's head. Like a flash he bolted into the jungle, even Ellia's untrained ears following his hasty departure with ease.

Ejecting the magazine from his weapon, Ortmann quickly slid two more shells into it and clicked it back into place. Tucking it into his waistband, he glanced over his shoulder at her with a scowl on his face before facing the path ahead.

Noon came and went without them stopping for either rest or water. Despite the seething glow of the sun above her, she felt the world slipping into darkness. A deep depression began to reach up from the back of her mind, engulfing her in misery. Losing her father to the figure shattered her world, leaving it in thousands of tiny shards that she feared could never be put together again. But after spending the night on Ortmann's chest she found, as she had told him, that something had changed within her. She suspected that a psychic transference of feelings had taken place, and that many months, perhaps many *years*, of familiarity had been gleaned from a single night of rest.

To have it thrown back on her was almost more than she could bear.

Struggling under the weight of the pack, her tired legs began to wobble with each step as she strove to keep up with the implacable pathfinder. Not once did he offer to help; not once did he slow his inexorable gait. He was being driven, she felt, spurred by an inner drive that she didn't understand.

Taking her eyes off the path a little too long to watch him, her uncertain feet stumbled over an exposed root and sent her tumbling forwards. Trembling with fatigue, she laid still for a few moments to gather the strength to stand. Suddenly she felt a powerful hand grip her pack and haul her upright. Not daring to look at him, she waited for him to move ahead again and then followed slowly behind. Her muscles burning, her chest heaving, she began to lose ground on him. Shutting her eyes and forcing herself to speed up, she managed to close the distance before dropping back a second time. The gap between them grew as her limbs seized up from exhaustion.

“I’m sorry,” she all but whispered, dropping to her knees and gasping. “I can’t go on,” she wheezed, shutting her eyes again and panting as the sweat poured from her body onto the ground around her.

She could hear Ortmann draw closer, and she feared to open her eyes and look at him. She felt certain he was angry – probably furious. Roughly he worked the pack off her shoulders before taking her arm and dragging her back to her feet. Opening her burning, sweat-soaked eyes to look at him, she found a cold, hard expression on his face. With one hand holding her pack, and the other firmly locked around her arm, he led her north.

After a brief plea for water he stopped and gave her some, not bothering to take any for himself despite the intense heat. The moment the bottle was back in her pack motion resumed and continued until well past nightfall.

“Please,” she pleaded, Ortmann practically dragging her at this point. “I need to stop. I can’t go on.”

Wordlessly his hand remained clamped around her upper arm, bearing much of her weight.

“Please, Markus,” she begged. “I need to rest.”

Without warning he turned off into the brush, pulling her through what was to her an invisible network of branches and leaves that scratched at her face and arms. Utterly spent, she hadn’t the least idea how long they walked. On the verge of collapse, he stopped and let her go.

“Inside,” he said flatly.

“Inside where?” she asked, looking around and finding only darkness.

Roughly seizing her wrist, he moved a few feet to her right and pulled her down to the ground. She heard what sounded like a door creaking on rusty hinges. Then he led her along on her hands and knees into a covered space that blocked out most of the sounds of the jungle. As his hand came free of her wrist, she heard the hinges creak again. Feeling rough, dry dirt in her hands, she waited. He was rustling in the dark, probably taking the packs off, she reflected. Then she heard the click of his little portable lamp, and the space was bathed in light.

“What is this place?” she asked, unintentionally verbalizing an internal question. Glancing at him anxiously, she found his stony gaze fixed on the packs as he unloaded the food and water.

“It’s an old mine entrance,” he explained. “Underneath a hill.”

The space was short, only four or so feet high. A couple of wooden pillars placed in the middle of the small room kept it from collapsing by supporting a rotten looking ceiling made of roughly cut boards. Looking towards the back, Monroe saw a tunnel that led deeper underground. Curiously she eyed it.

“Don’t go down there,” he said flatly.

“Why?”

“It’s filled with snakes.”

With a gasp she recoiled.

“They don’t come up here,” he elaborated.

“Oh,” she said, scarcely reassured. “Why not?”

“I haven’t asked them,” he replied indifferently, the serpents’ presence not bothering him in the least. He tore two large pieces from one of the loaves he carried, heaped dried meat upon them, and handed her one along with her bottle of water. Quietly muttering her thanks, he grunted in acknowledgement.

Furtively Monroe glanced at him while she ate. Pretending not to notice, he stared at the snake tunnel and chewed without interest. Long days on the road, followed by spartan meals, were a way of life for him and felt completely normal. What for her was an adventure was to him merely another workday to mark on the calendar.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked, her courage buoyed by her first food since breakfast.

Wordlessly he continued to stare.

“Markus?”

Turning his head slowly he frowned at her. Blushing at his hard gaze, she swallowed hard.

“Why are you so angry with me?”

“Just leave it alone,” he replied, turning back to the snake tunnel.

"No," she said with as much firmness as she could gather. "I really want to know."

"If I have to explain it to you, there's no way you'd understand. Either you get it, or you don't. And you don't. You're too immature."

"Then help me understand," she uttered.

"School is *not* in session, Ellia," he said pointedly.

"I'm not leaving here until I get an explanation," she responded.

Again turning slowly towards her, the iron in his eyes made her heart tighten.

"You're arguing like a child. Each word simply proves my point."

"Was it because I said I love you?" she inquired.

"Oh," he said with disgust, twisting his head away before looking back. "Stop saying that. You don't even know what the word means."

"A girl knows when she's in love, Markus," she insisted.

"I'm a fool for saying all I'm about to say," he began in a tone of self-scorn. "But I have the incorrigible belief that anyone can learn, so I'll give it a shot. A girl can't tell love from infatuation until she's experienced *both*, lost them both, and then gotten one of them back again. All you know is that you're intensely attracted to me. There's a simple explanation for that: you're dodging the grief you feel for your father by latching onto me. People do it all the time. And it doesn't have to be grief, either. Any intense negative emotion will provide the fuel. I suppose even locked away in your library, you're aware that the trials of prolonged warfare drive people together. It's common knowledge that relationships, even ill-advised ones, explode in number whenever a war is on. It's simply one of the ways people dodge what's troubling them. That's all this is, Ellia: a therapeutic relationship. Even in the fantasy world you live in, you must admit the fact that you didn't jump into my arms until *after* you started breaking down over your father. I'm just a conveniently available shoulder to cry on until you process your grief." His eyes seemed to bore into her as he delivered his final point: "And I have no intention of being a therapy doll for you to squeeze and cry your

heart out to. I was a fool to let you do that last night. I'm not going to make that mistake a second time."

"You've been hurt," she observed, the insight slowly filtering into her mind.

"So's everyone," he replied, looking away again.

"No, I mean there was another girl," she uttered. "Her hair was dark like mine – like a raven's."

Instantly his head snapped to her, outrage bursting from every pore.

"How do you know that?" he demanded, his body tense as though ready to pounce and beat the information out of her. "Tell me!" he barked when she hesitated.

"I—I just know it," she shook her head helplessly, her heart beating in her ears. "I can't explain it."

Angrily he moved to Ellia. Seizing her wrists, he pushed her onto her back and ground her into the dirt.

"You'll tell me..." his voice trailed, his head turning from side to side in warning.

"I—I," she began to say, before her mild green eyes glazed over, and she slipped into another world. "Emory. Emory Rosin. She needed you; but you needed her more. It almost killed you to lose her. She found...another...man. Left Daeldis. Never came...back. Sh-Sharkey was his name. Viktor Sharkey. A merchant. Emory was very beautiful. Swept him off his feet." Her cloudy eyes narrowed a little. "Sharkey was...a...friend. Childhood friend."

His rage evaporating at her genuine insight, he released the crushing grip he had on her wrists and pressed his palms to the ground on either side of her. Gazing down at her, he saw the haze begin to leave her eyes the moment skin contact was broken. Looking up at him tenderly, she gently raised a hand to his cheek and brushed it.

"You poor man," she uttered sincerely, her eyes wide with sympathy. "Your heart's been broken so terribly."

"Not broken," he replied, drawing back and looking away. "Shattered. Obliterated. Torn into tiny little fragments that have never gone back together again."

"How long has it been?" she asked softly.

“Eight years. Nine, a month after the next.”

“I’m so sorry, Markus,” she said, rising to her elbow and putting a hand on his knee. “I was such a fool to act the way I did this morning. My only excuse is that I didn’t know.”

“But you know now,” he replied, his eyes finding hers and searching them curiously. “Where did all that suddenly come from?”

“I don’t know. My insight is very unpredictable.”

“Like noticing Mulrooney but not the Clemons boys?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “Daddy had a real gift for insight. But Mother didn’t, and I think it must have gotten a little watered down when it passed to me. I’ve never been able to rely on it the way he could.”

“Well, I’m convinced,” he replied quietly. “Only a handful of people knew about me and Emory. And they’re all either gone or dead. There’s no other way you could have found out.” Visibly withdrawing into himself, he looked off into the snake tunnel and exhaled.

“Do you still think about her?” Ellia inquired.

“I doubt a day passes without me thinking of her,” he said somberly. “That’s not the sort of thing you forget. You can move around it, try to leave it behind. But it’s always a part of you. There’s no helping it.”

“But...she treated you so badly,” she observed, rubbing his knee.

“That doesn’t make a difference,” he replied, looking at her and patting his chest a couple times. “Not in here. The heart doesn’t take stock of that sort of thing. Mine doesn’t, anyway. I’ve told myself a thousand times to let her go, but I can’t. It doesn’t hurt me that much anymore. But every once in a while something will come to mind that brings her palpably back.”

“Like when I started describing her?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause you any more pain.”

“I suppose it had to be that way,” he replied. “Nothing else would have proven your abilities.” He paused and looked at her for a moment. “Does that sort of thing flow both ways?”

"What do you mean?" she asked, shifting a little where she lay.

"Well, is the insight a one-way street? Or did the contact we shared allow something to flow my way, too? I mean, I'm guessing you picked all that up last night, more or less, and that our touching just now only stimulated it into the open."

"Usually it's all one way. Although, in extraordinary cases, the non-psychic partner will get something in return. Mostly just fragments, though. Why?"

"Because I feel something different," he replied with a touch of hesitation, working out what was going through his heart in real time. He glanced at her and then looked back at the tunnel as though ashamed of his next words. "I feel like I can trust you."

"Is that a bad thing?" she asked, laughing a little despite the pain she felt at his obvious aversion to the idea.

"It can be, yeah," he nodded, still looking away. "If it lays you open to an attack."

"I wouldn't attack you," she assured him. "Not for anything."

"I'm sure your father would have said the same thing," he countered. "Before he threw his life away for that...thing." He regretted his words the moment he saw their effect written on her face. But the observation was simply too obvious, too poignant, to leave alone. "We all have limits, Ellia," he continued. "And you've never really met yours, locked away in your academic cocoon. You've been protected all your life from the harsh reality of pain and suffering and death. Nobody really knows how far they'll go until they've had to deal with those realities on a daily basis; until they've had a chance to grind you down and show what truly lies underneath. That's when you know what you're made of. Until then, it's all promises made out of air: they might come true, and they might not. But they're not worth anything."

She inched closer, cupping her hand a little more tightly on his knee.

"But if you *did* get something back from your contact with me, it must have told you that what I'm feeling is genuine," she insisted. "It must have shown you that I'm speaking the truth."

"That's the feeling I've got, yes," he agreed, nodding again. "But all that tells me is that you're on the level, right? It tells me you believe in what you're saying. It doesn't mean there's any staying power to what's going through your heart. It could just be a passing fancy."

She released his knee and reached up to his face, turning it towards herself.

"Does this look like a passing fancy?" she asked, her light green eyes magical in the semi-dark of the mine's entrance. "Does this look insincere?"

"No," he admitted. "It does not."

"Then kiss me," she said softly, slightly parting her lips.

"I'm not going down that road again," he shook his head, gently brushing her arm aside. "I've learned my lesson."

"We've kissed twice already, Markus. What's a third time?"

"I stole that first kiss, if you'll remember," he pointed out.

"That wasn't any lover's kiss. It was a boy stealing a couple seconds of comfort from a girl he'd taken a fancy to. And that second time had nothing to do with love, not on my end. Now, you want to open the floodgates of passion, and I don't. Can't you just respect that?"

"Not when I feel that you want it, too," she replied.

"You might be insightful, Ellia, but you're no mind reader," he said with slowly growing irritation. "Listen to my words, and stop filling out what you *think* I want with your fantasies."

"She can't hurt you anymore," she asserted, as he began to turn away from her. "She's gone for good. She might as well be dead."

With a frown he turned back to her and looked pointedly into her eyes.

"She'll never be dead to me. I don't care how long she's been gone, or how far she goes. She'll always be in my heart."

"But not as a lover," Monroe responded as he turned away again, reaching for his arm to stop him. "She's just a tormentor now, a vision of what could have been."

"Leave it alone, Ellia," he said brusquely, pulling his arm out of her tender grasp and heading for the packs. "You've dug deep enough."

"No," she uttered sincerely, crawling to him and sitting up beside the packs. "Not nearly deep enough, if you're still hurting this badly. You think you've gotten past her. But she's a thorn in your heart. You're still bleeding from the wound she left behind. This calls for a woman's touch."

"What, a little hair of the dog that bit me?" he asked with a dry laugh. "If you'll recall, it was a woman that got me into this fix in the first place."

"Not a woman: the *wrong* woman. She abused your love, Markus," she said, causing him to jerk his head away at the memory. "See? Your reactions just serve to prove my point."

"And what *is* your point?" he snapped, looking back at her. "That I need you? That you've got to play doctor for my poor little beat up heart? That I can't get along without you?"

"You're in so much pain," she sympathized, reaching her hand towards his cheek. But he batted it away. "You can't scorn yourself, Markus," she added, withdrawing her hand. "You weren't weak or wrong to fall in love."

"I was a *fool*, Ellia," he asserted darkly. "A man ought to have enough sense to know when he's putting his foot into a snakepit. And now I can't get away from it. She's got a lock on my heart."

"Every lock has a key," she replied meaningfully, tilting her head a little as she looked into his eyes.

"Oh, don't give me that pap," he said with a disgusted look and a wave of his hand. "Just leave me alone."

"I would, if I thought it would do any good. But it isn't love to let someone you care about go on hurting when you can help him."

"Ellia, I'm telling you to drop it," he said warningly. "Whatever your intentions, I don't appreciate your interference. We've got a long enough journey ahead of us without you clouding it up with any more feelings. Just leave things where they are."

"No," she replied resolutely.

"No?" he asked with irritated sarcasm. "Just what are you going to do? Talk me to death? Bludgeon me into spilling my guts by flapping your gums?"

"No, I thought I'd just do this," she replied, reaching out and touching the bare skin of his arm. Instantly a vision of Emory appeared before his eyes, causing him to jump backwards and smack his head against the low ceiling. Cursing under his breath, he put a hand to a small trickle of blood that began to flow from the top of his skull and looked at her.

"What's the idea?" he demanded, lowering his hand momentarily to look at the blood. "You want me to tear myself apart?"

"I'm sorry," she said at once, about to reach out again when he drew back. "I want to help you overcome your grief."

"By making me too numb to feel it?" he retorted, shaking his head a little to chase off a wave of dizziness he felt coming over him. "Another stunt like that and I'll give you a going over you won't forget."

"If that's what it takes," she replied bravely, though a little nervous charge went through her stomach as she said it.

Ortmann could only scoff.

"You don't believe me?" she asked, a little offended despite her nerves.

"Oh, I believe you," he assured her. "That's the problem. You're so caught up in dreamy visions of love that you can't even hear the call of self-preservation ringing in your ears. The only thing on your mind is sweet, pure, sacrificial love. Well, let me tell you something: it doesn't work out like in the fairytales that you obviously grew up on. Sacrificial love means ending up face down in the dirt for someone who doesn't give a snap of their fingers for you, see? It's just a fantasy."

"Life should have an element of fantasy about it."

"Oh, you're precious," he said sarcastically. "No length is too great for you, is it? You'll jump off any ledge that presents itself, so long as one of your dreamy notions is floating out in the air, just a little out of reach! It's no wonder you came to Daeldis so unprepared: you had to look for Daddy, no matter if it cost you your neck in the process."

"That's right," she nodded.

Again he could only scoff.

"That's what love is, Markus: it tells you what you *have* to do, not what's smart or in your own best interest. It runs along a different set of rails from either reason or instincts like self-preservation. It pulls us into something grander, something nobler. It makes us greater than the animals, puts us on a plane altogether above them. It teaches us to extend our reach so that we grow."

"Until it shatters your life and leaves you in the gutter," he replied gravely. "Until it takes away your very soul and leaves you just a *husk*. Where's your precious ideal then, Ellia?"

"Love doesn't mandate a happy ending," she answered quietly. "That's just in the fairytales."

"I'm glad you see that, at least," he said with modest satisfaction. "It shows you've got some sense, however little it may be."

"You say the nicest things," she replied with a sweet smile.

"Oh, don't get cute now," he uttered.

"What would you rather I do?"

"I'd rather you keep your mouth shut, lay down, and go to sleep. For a girl who was dead on her feet, you've got an awful lot of energy to spend solving other people's problems. Tomorrow you're gonna regret staying up half the night trying to get inside my head."

"Not your head," she objected. "Your heart."

"Don't say that," he grimaced.

"That's why I have to say it," she replied, pointing at the face he made. "It's still raw, even after all these years."

"Okay, somehow I'm not getting through to you, so I'm going to lay this on the line: either you stop talking *right now*, and go to sleep, or you're gonna spend the night outside with nothing but your good intentions to keep you company. Which'll it be?"

"You wouldn't do that," she said with certainty.

"You want to bet?"

"I do."

"Alright," he said, grabbing a handful of her upper arm and dragging her towards the entrance. Confident he was bluffing, she didn't even think of resisting until she was actually halfway out the door. "Goodnight!" he said, slamming it in her face as she looked back in shock.

“Markus?” she asked in a low, pleading voice, her lips near the door. When he didn’t respond she drew back and listened to the night. Alive with myriad sounds she’d failed to notice before, every branch seemed to rustle, peep, squeak, or chitter with activity. Unable to see a thing in the blackness, she suddenly felt very much alone. Finding a little handle on the door, she pulled on it but without effect. Ortmann, she realized, must have latched it somehow from the inside. “Markus, please,” she whispered, both afraid of the night and hurt that he’d actually thrown her out. She couldn’t imagine how the expression of feelings as pure as those she felt could have gotten her into such trouble. Before she could think further along this line, a stick snapped a short distance away. “Markus?” she asked quietly, her tone mortally serious. “Please, let me back in. I think something else is out here.”

Still he failed to respond. Swallowing hard, she strained to see in the darkness but only managed to cause her imagination to find things that weren’t there. Suddenly a face seemed to loom up before her, making her gasp and jerk back, banging her head against the door. It was only when she realized it was too dark to see anything at all that the apparition faded. No sooner had this happened than a small spider dropped from the tree above her, hit her shoulder, and ran off her arm. Barely stifling a shriek, she began tapping rapidly on the door.

“Please, please let me in, Markus,” she begged, imagining that the spider had been of the blue variety, wholly forgetting their enormous size in her panic. Her tapping continued for half a minute before a latch finally clicked, the door swung open, and the little lamp’s glow shone forth. Wordlessly she shot into the small enclosure and looked back, anxiously making sure no spiders followed her inside. Hastily she checked her clothes for more.

“Goodnight,” Ortmann said unsympathetically, relatching the door and moving back towards the packs.

“How could you throw me out there?” she asked, her heart aching at what she felt was his betrayal. “There’s spiders and snakes and all sorts of things out there.”

“So?”

“What if one of them had bitten me?”

“Oh, they wouldn’t do that,” he said acidly. “They wouldn’t risk getting that close. You might start digesting their personal problems at that range.”

With the stout shell of her love temporarily fractured by her experience, his words hit home like a brick to her stomach.

“Oh, Markus,” she uttered, her eyes filling with tears as she turned her back to him. Laying down on her side, she drew her knees into her chest and folded up like a little bean. Too tired to control herself, she began to sob.

“Now you know what love is, kid,” she heard through her tears. “It’s pain, plain and simple. You felt it when your papa gave himself to that thing. And you’re feeling it now.”

“What is this?” she demanded, rolling over to look at him, her eyes red and angry. “Why are you doing this to me? Are you trying to make me feel what Emory put you through? Are you trying to share the suffering?”

“I’m trying to save us both a lot of trouble,” he replied flatly. “I’m trying to keep you out of my hair. And I’m trying to snap off your feelings before you get too attached. You’re already stuck to me like glue, or you wouldn’t be feeling this way. If you had any sense you’d recognize that and appreciate it.”

“Appreciate it? Appreciate being thrown out into the dark with all those animals around?” she asked incredulously. “I could have been attacked!”

“You were fine,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Just scared you a little, is all.”

Infuriated at his casual air of indifference, she crawled up to him and raised a palm to smack him. Seizing her wrist with ease, he clamped down until she yelped.

“Maybe the men back on Rimmis let you slap them when you were angry. But you’ll find things are played a little differently out here. We’re not civilized enough to let ourselves get smacked around. Here we give as good as we get, and a great deal more. Just remember that,” he warned her, releasing his hold.

Rubbing her wrist with her other hand, she drew back and eyed him with wonder.

“Just what *are* you?” she asked.

“I’m the only man who can get you where you’re going in one piece,” he replied. “And I’m gonna do it, if I have to tie you up and throw you over my shoulder. And don’t you forget it.”

CHAPTER 4

The passage of two more days saw the mismatched pair moving into the outskirts of Todrid just after nightfall. Though physically and emotionally battered, Ellia found her awareness of psychic phenomena expanding with time. Only able to see a foot or two ahead with the aid of a blanket of stars above, she nevertheless felt many eyes watching them from the ruins of countless structures as they walked along the road. Every hair on her body stood at attention as they moved within the confines of the city.

"We're being watched," she confided, her voice low and hollow.

"I know that," he replied, his right hand resting on the handle of his automatic, tucked as ever inside the back of his waistband. "Just be quiet."

She felt him take hold of her shoulder and guide her into a sidestreet. For some reason the main road wasn't on the agenda.

Working their way east for several minutes, he turned her north again. The air was foul, reeking of human waste and dead animals. Suddenly her shoe stepped on something soft and puffy that deflated with contact. Jerking her foot up with horror, she realized it was the swollen corpse of some small creature. Probably a dog. Scraping her shoe against the ground as she walked, she hoped the rest would come off before they stopped for the night.

As they moved deeper into the city his hand stayed on her shoulder, ready to pull her to a stop or guide her into some other path. His touch was hard, pragmatic, completely lacking in warmth. She yearned to feel something from him, some little hint of affection. But he handled her like she was a piece of two-legged livestock.

Every minute that his indifferent hand rested on her shoulder made her already aching heart burn all the more. Despite the harsh words and rough treatment she'd received at the mine, to say nothing of that experienced during the intervening days, she found her feelings binding themselves all the more tightly around him. To sense his utter lack of interest in her tore at her insides.

Again they turned, this time to the west. The street was narrow, no bigger than a large alley. On either side were houses with crooked little doors. Out of their crude shutters escaped the undulating, uneven light of cooking fires. Poorly made chimneys vented most of the resultant smoke upward, though some of it invariably made its way into the rest of the house and stifled the residents. The smoke filled the air around them. With effort Monroe managed not to cough.

At the end of the street they turned north once more, and she felt they were back on the main road. The ruts carved into it were unmistakable, even to her inexperienced feet.

She gasped at the sound of two men suddenly laughing loudly some distance ahead. Obviously drunk, they clattered against some rubbish piled against one of the houses before falling silent. Unsure if they'd moved on or simply gone quiet, she wished above all things to stop and listen. But Ortmann's hand pushed onward as she began to slow, keeping her in motion.

Unbeknownst to her, the powerful pistol he carried was no longer in his waistband. It floated just beside his right thigh, ready to spring into action and roar death into the face of anyone who stood in their way. Perfectly aware of the pair of drunks, he eyed them in the darkness as they moved past. Lost in a hazy world all their own, they lay next to each other on the ground, whispering about where they might find another bottle.

Onward they walked, until Monroe lost what little sense of time she possessed. Had they entered the city an hour before? Or had it merely been fifteen or twenty minutes? She hadn't the least idea. All she knew was that she wanted to get off the street and under cover right away. Todrid felt like some kind of putrefying corpse of a city. The psychic presence it bore was nasty, low, and hopeless. It seemed ready to tumble of its own accord into the grave.

Every step made her yearn for the muddy streets and stinking alleys of Boulimar.

"In here," Ortmann ordered quietly, turning her roughly towards a rundown building with a small light glowing inside. Opening the rickety door, Ellia cringed as the rusty hinges loudly creaked. Pushed inside, she moved a few steps across an old, groaning wooden floor and stopped. A single bulb flickered above her head, casting just enough light to keep her from tripping on the rubbish that was scattered throughout the room.

"Benedict!" Ortmann uttered in a sharp whisper. "Where are you?"

"Right where I need to be," a man replied from a dark, yawning doorway at the end of the room. Stepping forth, he revealed himself to be an old man with a double-barreled shotgun. "If I wanted to blow your head off, that is." His eyes dashed up and down Monroe for a moment. "You know the rule about guests, Markus."

"So make an exception," he replied, tucking his pistol into the back of his pants. "I don't have time for manners."

"You never did," Benedict said sourly, lowering his weapon. "Well, come on, then," he said, gruffly waving them onwards. "Let's get you downstairs."

Uncertainly she glanced at Ortmann, but his stony face revealed nothing. Following the old man into the dark room from which he'd emerged, she put a hand on the wall and tried not to trip over anything.

"Not that way," Benedict reprimanded her, his voice off to her left and several feet ahead. "Over here! Can't you see?"

Without responding she reached out a hand and tried to feel her way towards him. She heard him mutter something to himself and cross the short distance to her. Suddenly a dry old hand took hers and pulled her forwards.

"Watch your step," he cautioned her flatly, leading her down a flight of stairs in the darkness. "That's it," he announced at the bottom, releasing her hand. She heard him shuffle across the basement's hard floor, his battered old shoes scraping along with each step. Then a light clicked on, making her blink and squint. To

her surprise Ortmann was already beside her, having descended the steps noiselessly.

Glancing around, she saw a dusty old room with shelves placed against each wall. Filled with old boxes, disassembled pieces of machinery, and every other sort of odd and end she could imagine, there appeared to be nothing of value at all. Everything was rusted, worn out, and ready for the scrap heap. In the middle of the room was the staircase, a walled-in affair with a heavy wooden door attached by a pair of ten inch hinges.

"Close that up, Markus," Benedict said, nodding towards the door as he made for the north end of the room. "And lock it."

Ortmann did so, and then leaned against it and watched the old man as he pulled junk off one of the shelves preparatory to moving it.

"You're lucky I let you come through here at all," he grumbled.

"I'll make it worth your while, old man."

"Yeah, see that you do."

Halfway through unloading the shelf, Benedict stopped.

"I suppose you *do* want to use the north tunnel?" he asked.

Wordlessly Ortmann nodded, crossing his arms.

Grumbling further to himself, the old man turned back to his work.

"Tunnel?" Ellia asked, moving closer to her escort.

"That's right," Benedict replied, hearing her despite the noise he was making. "Best way to get around Todrid unseen." He paused and looked at the younger man pointedly. "As long as they don't get found out."

"She won't talk."

"She'd better not," he uttered, his eyes finding hers and driving his threat home.

"Why are there tunnels down here?" she asked, joining Ortmann by the door and dropping her voice further.

"Smuggling tunnels," he explained tersely.

"To hide from the police?"

"What police?" he asked, looking at her with a flat expression. "One of the weaker gangs uses 'em to hide from the

stronger ones.”

“You mean we’re going to run into gangsters?” she asked anxiously.

“They won’t lay a hand on you,” he replied without interest. “Besides, I need to talk to their leader.”

“But why?”

“Because I want to know what’s going on north-east of town. We’re not gonna strike off into the most dangerous part of Daeldis blind.”

“You know, this would go a lot faster if you’d help me,” Benedict pointed out, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and scowling at the two visitors.

“You’re doing alright,” Ortmann replied, not budging an inch.

Shaking his gray head, the old man resumed.

Monroe was about to walk over and help when Ortmann’s hand took her arm and held her back.

“Don’t stick your nose into something you don’t understand,” he told her quietly, as Benedict clanked, clunked, and muttered to himself. “Just keep your mouth shut until I say you can open it,” he added, folding his arms again and watching the old man work.

Though taken aback at being muzzled in this way, she nevertheless resolved to do as he’d said. He was an expert in his own domain, and she knew better than to break with his instructions.

Finally Benedict finished. Pulling the shelf away from the wall, he revealed a square hatch. Opening it as Ortmann and Monroe approached, he wrestled it out of its place and laid it on the ground with a grunt.

“Anything else I can do for you?” the old man asked sarcastically, as Ortmann rested a hand on the wall and ducked his head to look inside. “Perhaps a four course meal, complete with belly dancers?”

“Close up when we’re through,” Ortmann replied, ignoring his comment and looking at Monroe. “Inside.”

Nodding nervously as she eyed him, she approached the opening and looked into the yawning hole. It was only three feet in diameter, with water audibly dripping at different points along the

line. With no lights inside, she hadn't the least idea how long it was, or how many twists or turns it took. Never a fan of confined spaces, she looked up at Ortmann's granite face momentarily, hoping for another way. When he tipped his head towards the tunnel, she nodded again, dropped to her hands and knees, and climbed inside. Pausing after a half dozen feet, she waited for her escort to follow and click on his lamp. Attaching it by a little clip to his pants, it swung back and forth wildly as they crawled.

"Where'd this come from?" she asked, surprised that the tunnel was made of solid pipe instead of being some dirt-and-wood affair.

"Scavenged it from somewhere or other," Ortmann replied, his tone pointedly reminding her to keep quiet.

Quickly she found herself wishing it *had* been made of dirt, since the unforgiving metal ground away at her knees with every move she made. Her only consolation was that the pack that had burdened her since the start of their journey was no longer on her back. Earlier that day, Ortmann had reshuffled their remaining supplies into his own pack, sparing her that extra load.

The sound of dripping water increased as they reached a fork in the pipe. Looking between her two options, she was about to go left when he spoke.

"Right," he ordered.

Crawling in that direction, she began to grimace each time she put a knee to the pipe. She was about to ask for a breather when a face appeared before her, making her gasp and draw back.

"Hello, Meeker," Ortmann said in a bored tone, putting a hand on Monroe's rear to push her back into motion.

"Hello yourself, stranger," Meeker replied, revealing herself to be a woman despite Monroe's initial impression. With her broad, rough-hewn face and square body, she looked like a subterranean mechanic. All that were missing were overalls, a grease smudge on her face, and a dirty rag sticking out of her pocket. Messy red hair and freckled cheeks framed a brilliant, active pair of blue eyes that danced across her environment. Around twenty-two, she had an almost boyish openness to her manner. Slipping past Monroe, she

fell in beside Ortmann. "Haven't seen you in a while, Markus. Where have you been?"

"Around."

"Hanging out with this little thing?" she asked, a note of jealousy in her voice.

"This is a client," he said blandly, his lack of interest unintentionally hurting Ellia.

"She's not from around here, is she? No, you can tell that right away," Meeker uttered in a seamless streaming of her consciousness. "Nope, she isn't any of our local brew, that's for sure."

"She's not from Daeldis," Ortmann confirmed. "Take a left up here," he added to Monroe.

"No, take a right," Meeker said. "You ought to remember that, Markus. You've been down here enough times."

"We're not heading to Rutger's place. We're gonna see Thomas."

Meeker stopped in her tracks, simultaneously reaching out for Monroe's ankle and pulling her to a halt.

"You know that isn't a good idea, Markus," Meeker said forebodingly, as Ellia turned around in the confined space and looked at her. "That last time you took—."

"I'll make it up to him," Ortmann cut her off, pointing for Monroe to resume movement.

"No," Meeker chuckled meaningfully, shaking her head. "No, you won't. You know how Daddy gets. He doesn't like to be made a fool of, especially in front of the rest of the gang."

"I will *let* him win, if that's what it takes," he said emphatically. "Just so long as I can get this job over with."

"What, this girl isn't to your liking?" she asked, a combination of sass and relief crossing her dirty lips in a grin that was scarcely visible in the inadequate light. "I should have thought she'd be just your type."

"I don't have a type," Ortmann replied, matching eyes with Monroe and nodding her forwards. "Move."

"Well, I've warned you, is all I can say," Meeker said lightly, glad to find the competition non-existent. "But Daddy's gonna throw

a fit when he sees you.”

“Let him.”

At the end of the tunnel Ellia found another hatch. Stopping before it, she glanced at her companions.

“Hit it a couple of times,” Meeker instructed her. “Real hard, or they won’t hear you.”

Monroe smacked it several times with her palm, but produced hardly a sound.

“Oh, harder than that, girl,” Meeker said, crawling up beside her. “Like this,” she added, nimbly shifting to her back and kicking it thrice. For several seconds they waited. Then the sound of metal sliding on metal reverberated through the hatch, and it popped off. “See?” Meeker smiled triumphantly, climbing through the opening into a poorly lit room with narrow walls and a low ceiling.

“Didn’t expect to see you so soon, Meeks,” the man who watched the hatch said, a fellow more or less of her age. Approvingly he gazed at Ellia as she joined them. Then his face dropped when he saw Ortmann. “Oh, boy.”

“I told him,” Meeker shrugged, as Ortmann stood up. “But you know Markus.”

“Yeah, I know Markus,” the man replied, shaking hands with him. “How’s it going?”

“Still breathing.”

“Not for much longer, if you run into the old man.”

“You let me worry about that.”

“Oh, I intend to,” he said, lifting the hatch and putting it back in place. The covering featured metal loops at the three and nine o’clock positions that corresponded with a pair that were anchored into the wall. Lining them up, he slid a thick metal bar through them to lock it. “Nothing would get me to step between the two of you, not with the mood he’s gonna be in.”

“Uh huh,” Ortmann nodded, turning away and pushing Ellia just ahead of him.

“I have *got* to see this,” Meeker enthused, rubbing her hands together and following them.

Monroe was all eyes as they passed from one room to the next. Everywhere the ceilings were low, the walls were cool, and the

moisture was high. She concluded they were inside some kind of bunker, likely one much farther underground than the basement they'd entered the tunnel from.

"Where is everyone?" Ortmann asked Meeker as they passed down a long corridor towards a lone door.

"Oh, here and there," she replied with chipper evasiveness. "You're not exactly part of the inner circle anymore, Markus," she added, skipping past them and stopping by the door. "Not that I don't wish you were," she finished with a flirtatious smile, knocking thrice sharply.

"What?" demanded a male voice from within.

"Primed and ready to see you," she grinned, stepping off to the side and crossing her arms. "I don't envy you, honey," she said to Ellia, who still walked before her escort.

With a frown at Meeker, Ortmann opened the door and ushered his charge inside.

"What are *you* doing here?" a grizzled man of sixty demanded. Scarred, portly, with mean little eyes and a gray, scraggly beard that tumbled down his chin and into his shirt, Melvin Thomas was hard on the eyes. The discerning observer could see a faint resemblance between himself and Meeker, particularly in terms of their mutually stocky bone structure. But the playful sprightliness that did so much to lighten her bearing was totally absent in her father, who moved like a sack of concrete on legs. "Well?" he asked, leaning against the front of a weatherbeaten wooden desk, his joints clearly bothering him. "What do you want?"

"Hello, Thomas," Ortmann said.

"I don't have time for your pleasantries, Ortmann," he retorted, his small eyes scanning Ellia momentarily, digesting her in full, and moving on without interest. "What's your trick this time?"

"No trick. I just want information."

"And you had to come all the way down here to get it? Why don't you hit up one of your regular informants and leave me alone!"

"Only the Vipers head out to the north-east of the city," he replied, as Thomas shambled past them both for a dirty bottle of booze. It stood on a shelf against the far wall of the modest room,

and though the distance wasn't far, it took a great deal of effort for him to retrieve it and return to his desk.

"And who's she?" Thomas asked, filling a small, dusty glass halfway and downing the drink in a single swallow. "Friend of yours?"

"Client. Ellia Monroe. She wants to see the old temple."

"You're insane," Thomas said, stabbing a finger at Monroe. "I suppose you know what's out there? Nobody ever comes back from that part of Daeldis. Not a single blessed soul."

"I have to see it," she replied, her voice small and uncertain.

From outside the room they could hear Meeker laugh, her ear being pressed against the door. Angrily Thomas threw his glass against it, the explosion making her shriek. Then the gang leader's red, watery eyes moved slowly from the door to Monroe.

"Why?" he interrogated.

"My father went out there and never came back," she said with difficulty as his eyes bored into her.

"And what, you want to repeat his feat? Manage to get yourself killed?"

"I...can't explain," she shook her head.

"You want to see what killed him," Thomas said knowingly. "You want to see Tholoambelet."

A shiver suddenly ran through Monroe's body, a fact that was not lost on Ortmann.

"What did you say?" he asked the older man.

"You heard me the first time," Thomas said. "More importantly, *she* did," he added with an ambiguous grin. "It's the kind of name that strikes you the minute you hear it. Gives you a sense of dread. Too bad your old man didn't have the sense to keep away after *he'd* heard it."

"You knew my father?" she asked.

"Like Ortmann said, the Vipers know everything that goes on north-east of town. Or we did, until lately. But something's abroad these days, keeping us away. None of us dares to enter that area now."

"But how did you know its name?" she queried.

"You're hardly the first psychic to walk the surface of Daeldis."

“You mean *you’re* a psychic?”

“Obviously. And like you, I wanted to see Tholoambelet first hand, though for different reasons. There are ancient legends that describe a powerful alien being who once ruled Daeldis. Over the course of many years I realized that Tholoambelet and this being were one and the same, though the cave drawings that tell of him are incredibly old. Curious to know how he’d lived so long, I sought him out.”

“And did you meet him?” she inquired.

“You might say I’ve interacted with him in a second-hand capacity. A sorcerer that he groomed, a tall man with glowing eyes, found me one night as I was exploring the ruins that surround Tholoambelet’s temple. I was lucky to get away with my life, or what’s left of it.” Pausing just as he was about to say more, he grimaced and rubbed his stomach. With a grunt he pushed off the desk and made for the door.

“Are you okay?” Monroe asked.

“I’ll be alright,” he answered gruffly. “Just something I ate.” Pausing beside the door, he looked at Ortmann. “Are you going with her to see Tholoambelet?”

“My job’s over when I get her in sight of the temple.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Thomas observed, laying his hand on the knob and twisting it open. “Well, make yourselves comfortable for the night. I’ll talk to you again tomorrow morning.”

“I want to leave as soon as possible,” Ortmann told him.

“Good for you,” he said pointedly, stopping halfway through the door. “But the fact is, I’m waiting for a couple of Vipers to come back from the temple region. If you want fresh information on what’s going on, you’ll wait until morning.”

“But I thought they weren’t able to get out there anymore?” Ellia asked Ortmann quietly, once Thomas had left them.

“That old bird’s always got an extra card or two up his sleeve,” he said, giving her a little nudge towards the door.

“Where are we going?”

“To get bedded down,” he answered, as Meeker came into view.

"Together, or separately?" she teased as they entered the corridor.

"Separately," Ortmann said flatly. "What rooms are free?"

"As a matter of fact, only one is," she said whimsically, falling in behind them. "Number nine."

"Nine's a broom closet," Ortmann shot back, unsatisfied.

"Then I hope you're good at sleeping standing up, because that's all we've got."

Ortmann stopped dead in his tracks and glared at her.

"Honest, Markus!" she exclaimed, her veneer of nonchalance melting under his gaze. "We're prepping for a big operation, and all the rooms are taken. Every last high-level Viper is here. It's all we have left. Unless," she added playfully, "you want to share *my* room."

"Pass," he said coldly, pushing Monroe forward again and leaving Meeker to scowl at his back.

"Meeker is a strange name for a girl," Ellia commented quietly. "Sounds like a last name to me."

"It is."

"Then why—," she began, just as they turned a corner and nearly walked into a pair of rough looking men in dirty clothes.

"Never thought I'd see you again, Ortmann," the larger of the two said, glaring through thick eyebrows.

"Hello, Fats," he responded, his voice strained as his patience grew dangerously thin. "Out of my way."

"Not until I've had a chance to meet your friend," Fats replied, devouring Monroe with his eyes, his partner doing likewise. "We haven't seen a gal like her around here in a long, long time."

Remembering Ortmann's warning, she kept her mouth tightly shut.

"Well, what's the matter, honey? Can't talk?"

"Not to the likes of you," Ortmann shot back. "Move it."

"A body could take offense at being talked to like that, Ortmann," Fats began. "Yes, sir, he certainly could."

To spare any further risk of giving offense, Ortmann snapped out his pistol and clubbed him over the head. With a groan Fats fell to his knees and then dropped onto his back, his partner

quickly following him from the same cause. Taking Monroe's arm, Ortmann led her over their unconscious bodies and continued walking.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, looking over her shoulder as he pulled her along.

"Seemed like the thing to do at the time," he replied flatly, taking her around a corner and leaving the two men behind.

"Were they very bad?"

"Everyone down here is," he told her, stopping before a narrow door. "This is it."

"What, room nine?" she asked, as he opened it and clicked on a small light. Four feet wide by twelve feet long, it was indeed little more than a broom closet. "We'll never fit."

"It's this, or sleeping in the hall," he told her, heading inside and beginning to shift the room's contents towards the door. Part way through he stopped and looked at her. "Care to help?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, joining him. "Why are we moving all this stuff to the front?"

"So there's an obstacle between us and any visitors we might get during the night," he explained. "We'll sleep with our feet to the door. That'll give us an extra couple of seconds to act if necessary."

"Do you think anyone will try to cause us trouble?" she asked, bending over and twisting a heavy bucket towards the entrance.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"It really isn't though," she objected. "You know them a lot better than I do."

Pausing with a sigh, he looked at her.

"I'd say it's more likely than not. Once word gets around that you're here, we'll probably have a few curious strays that'll want to poke their heads in. That's why I issued a little warning in advance."

"Warning..." her voice trailed as she thought. "Oh," she said with realization, as her mind went back to Fats and his pal. "That's why you clobbered them."

"You're kind of slow for a psychic, Ellia," he said in a mildly chiding tone.

"It's been a long day," she replied with a little smile, making him shake his head.

Another half minute saw the space cleared. Slipping the pack off his shoulders, Ortmann tossed it towards the back, drew his pistol from his waistband, and laid down.

"Come on," he said when she hesitated. "I can take it if you can."

With another little smile she lowered herself to the floor and joined him.

"I didn't think you'd want to be so close together," she explained, laying on her side and tucking an arm under her head.

"Exigencies of the job," he answered. "Now go to sleep. Morning'll be here before you know it."

"Alright," she nodded, closing her eyes for a few seconds before opening them again. "I want to thank you, by the way."

"For what?" he asked, his eyes still shut, the pistol gripped firmly in his hand.

"For what you said to those thugs, about me not talking to the likes of them."

"I was just putting them down."

"You put me up, too."

"Don't read too much into it."

"I'm not," she assured him.

Feeling her light green eyes upon him, he opened up to find her gazing at him appreciatively. With an exasperated sigh he rolled over.

"You're welcome," he said grudgingly, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Now go to sleep."

Less than an hour later the door popped open and a pair of curious eyes looked inside. They examined Ortmann's tense form first, noting the pistol that was ready to spring to action. Then they moved to Monroe, jealously studying her shapely figure.

"Go away, Meeker," Ortmann said without bothering to look.

"Bah! How'd you know it was me?" she asked in a harsh whisper.

"I could hear you giggling your way down the hall. Now get out of here. And spread the word: the next person who opens that door is gonna get a lead surprise."

"Alright, alright. Keep your pants on," she said with annoyance, closing the door and grumbling as she walked away.

"Stupid..." he muttered under his breath, shifting a little where he lay. "Go to sleep, Ellia," he added, noticing her breathing had changed.

"It's hard on this floor."

"You'll get used to it."

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, though Ortmann awoke every time someone neared the door. By morning his mood had worsened considerably.

"Good morning," Thomas said sarcastically, as the duo re-entered his office. "I trust you slept well?"

"What did your informants tell you?" Ortmann asked, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall near the door. Ellia stood beside him, her hands in her pockets as she glanced between them.

"Absolutely nothing. They never arrived."

"Well, couldn't they just be late?" she suggested.

"No," Ortmann said with a cynical smile. "Because they were already overdue, weren't they?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," the gang leader nodded. "They should have been here twenty-four hours ago. Obviously they've fallen victim to Tholoambelet."

"Obviously."

"Or to the other elements that fill that part of Daeldis," he added.

"You mean there's other dangers besides Th—," she hesitated, not wishing to say his name. "Um, besides the figure?"

"Yes, of course. Tholoambelet seems to attract every strange, unnatural thing this planet has to offer. That's why that region is so dangerous." He looked at her for a moment, his eyes brighter and even a touch friendlier than they'd been the night before. "Just what do you hope to accomplish by facing him? You can't bring your father back. You'll just die the same way he did."

"I have to stop him somehow," she said. "The figure can't go on killing good people like he has been."

"I doubt most of the people he's killed have been good," Thomas laughed dryly. "You can't have spent much time here if you think that."

"Nevertheless, I have to try," she replied.

"And just how do you intend to do that?" he asked.

"Tholoambelet is at least twice your height. He's got psychic powers unlike anything we've seen before. Just what's your plan?"

"Well," she said, reaching into her pocket and making them both jump by pulling out a pair of small, high-powered grenades, "I thought I'd blow him to bits."

"Where in the world did you get those things?" Thomas asked, as Ortmann took one from her and examined it. "Those things are contraband – highly illegal."

"I bought them from Hamilton that day he took me out to your place," she explained, looking at her escort. "He thought I might need them." Then she looked at Thomas and smiled. "I shouldn't have thought a gang leader would be so surprised to see contraband."

"I'm not. It's just that I never expected *you* to have any," he explained, painfully shuffling to where she stood and studying the second grenade. "Well, if you can get close enough, these'll do the trick. But I don't think you'll ever get the chance to use 'em. You're not the first one to try and finish him off. Plenty of others have lost loved ones and tried to take a piece out of his hide. All they ever ended up doing was donating their life force to him."

"I'll be careful," she replied, as he handed the grenade back and returned to the desk to lean.

"You'll have to be a lot more than that," he told her. "A lot more, 'cause he's gonna know you're coming. More than that, blue spiders have been seen moving into the area in greater numbers than ever before. And something worse: two-headed snakes with legs. We call 'em sylgens."

"Snakes with legs?" she queried.

"Uh huh," the gang leader nodded, lifting a small covered box off his desk and dropping it on the floor between them. "Take a

look.”

Dubiously Ellia eyed him.

“Don’t worry: it’s dead.”

With an annoyed sigh Ortmann squatted down and lifted the lid. Monroe gasped and put a hand to her throat when she saw the severed neck of the sylgen. A pair of massive heads, each the size of a large man’s fist, lay joined together in the shape of a ‘Y.’ A thick, forked tongue spilled out of each mouth. The eyes, though lifeless, were nevertheless vile and malignant. But what caught Monroe’s attention and held it were the bizarre teeth that each head possessed. Though fanged like other snakes she’d seen, they also had a sharp set of teeth that were clearly designed to chew.

“What strange teeth,” Ellia commented, reluctantly squatting down to get a better look, instinctively keeping a little back.

“These things don’t poison and then swallow their prey,” Thomas informed her, shifting where he leaned with a grunt. “They take bites out of whatever’s in reach and then bolt off. They scavenge their food from the living.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they’ll swallow whole anything small enough to fit in their mouths. And for anything bigger, they’ll just take a bite out of it and make for the jungle. They’ll take bites out of calves, thighs – anything with enough meat to justify the risk. Two bites, if they can get each head onto you quickly enough. And believe me, most of the time they are. Three of my people encountered a bunch of ‘em, and only one came back fully intact.” He looked at Ellia warningly. “Mind you, they didn’t get anywhere near the temple. They barely even penetrated the region before getting attacked.”

“I understand,” she said, taking his point and looking back at the sylgen. “You said these things have legs?”

“Yes. They’re not very large. But they help ‘em shoot along the ground like little bolts of lightning. I doubt even your bodyguard here could blast more than one or two of ‘em before they’d gotten some teeth into his hide.”

“We’ll see about that,” Ortmann replied.

“Are they venomous?”

“Nope,” Thomas shook his head. “No venom glands.”

“Well, that’s something, anyway,” Ellia said, hesitantly reaching out and lifting the severed ‘Y.’ “It’s awfully heavy,” she added, moving it up and down a little to feel its heft.

“Those things are mostly muscle. You can see why you don’t want one clamping its teeth onto you.”

“I most certainly can,” she said emphatically, laying it back down in the box and standing up.

Thomas opened his mouth to speak. But before he could do so, the door burst open and Meeker stepped in.

“Daddy, I—,” she began, her eyes instantly shooting to the visitors and the open box before them. “Oh, so you’ve seen our little pet.”

“We’ve met,” Ortmann confirmed, annoyed to see her.

“Oh, well, good. Those things are crawling all over the area north-east of here. I just finished talking with one of the men who brought that thing back.” She paused and looked at her father, her animated face instantly falling. “Not good. Doctor says his leg needs to come off.”

“His *leg*?” Ellia asked. “How horrible.”

“Well, that’s life on Daeldis, honey,” she shot back cockily. “One minute you’re skipping along, free as a—.”

“Do you have a message for me, Meeker?” Thomas cut her off, frowning.

“The doc said we’re low on anesthetic, and he wanted to get your permission before—.”

“He has it,” Thomas said with a wave of his hand. “Go.”

“Enjoy our little friend,” she said to Ortmann, wrinkling her nose in a silly little smile before turning for the door.

“Wait a moment,” Ellia said, stepping around the box. “I’d like to see what kind of damage they can do.” She looked at Thomas. “If that’s alright,” she added.

“Having second thoughts?”

“I’d just like to know what I’m up against,” she replied gamely, though a little wobble in her voice betrayed fear for what lay ahead.

“Take her with you, Meeker,” he said, waving his hand a second time. “Keep her out of trouble.”

"Oh, I will," she laughed. "Come on, honey."

With a doubtful look at the two men, Monroe followed her out.

Putting the lid back on the box, Ortmann reached for the door but was stopped by Thomas' next words.

"She'll be alright. Meeker will keep an eye on her. Besides, I want to talk to you alone."

"Meeker can't keep herself out of trouble, much less anyone else," Ortmann rejoined.

"She'll be alright. Just a few minutes."

With an exasperated sigh Ortmann withdrew his hand from the knob and looked at him.

"Well? What is it?"

"You can't let that girl go out there on her own. She'll be dead five minutes after she's out of your sight."

"That's her choice. I'm just being paid to get her there."

"It's nothing short of murder, Markus. You know that."

"She's a grown woman. She can make her own choices."

"Oh, don't give me that garbage," Thomas said with a disgusted scowl, shifting where he leaned again to try and ease his joints. "Below the neck, she's every inch a woman, as any man with one eye and half a brain can see. But above it," he shook his head, his eyes fixed on Ortmann's. "She's green, Markus. She doesn't have the least idea what she's in for. I only dealt with Tholoambelet's little helper, and you can see what he did to me. I don't care if she goes in there with a backpack full of grenades: she doesn't have the strength to bear up. She'll never have a chance to use 'em."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Tholoambelet's never shown any interest in you," he argued, growing eager. "That's good. There's a handful of people who just seem to stay off his radar. It's like he can't even access them. Oh, I suppose everyone is vulnerable, given enough time and effort. But we psychics are easy pickings for him, because our channels are already open." He paused and his face hardened. "But with a skull as thick as yours, I reckon you've got a chance."

"And why would I do that?" Ortmann replied. "She's broke."

"Don't play the heartless mercenary with me, boy," Thomas chided him. "It doesn't take a psychic to see you're in love with that little gal."

Ortmann, who had been idly glancing at the sylgen's box, instantly snapped his head to the older man.

"Or perhaps it does," he added. "Maybe I'm too used to seeing what can't be seen any other way. Probably the only charitable explanation for why you're being such a fool about what's right under your nose. Given that she's in love with you, too."

"You're getting senile," Ortmann shot back, stabbing a finger at him and turning for the door.

"Then why'd you level Fats?" he retorted, stopping him a second time as his hand lay on the knob. "And Squeaky? You can't tell me that was all in the line of duty. Doctor had to stitch those two morons up after the gashes you left on both of 'em. I've known you for a long time, Markus: only one thing would get you riled like that. It recalls younger days. It recalls—."

"Don't you *dare* say that name!" Ortmann ordered, his face instantly flushed as he fixed him with dangerous eyes.

"But this one's different, Markus," Thomas continued, unperturbed. "This one loves you back. She's got a real heart of gold, this girl. Any man should be glad to have her."

"Then let any man have her," he said angrily, taking a step towards him. "I don't want her."

"You can't let the past rule you, Markus," Thomas told him.

"Why do you care?" he demanded. "What business is it of yours? If you're so worried about this girl, why don't you accompany her yourself?"

"I would, if I was half as old as I am now!" Thomas laughed. "I'd leave you in the dust and carry her off. But it so happens that I'm out of the running, so she's stuck with you. Too bad for her, but that's life."

"You're getting soft in your old age," Ortmann scorned.

"If you think that's true, just push me a little further," he retorted, the mirth evaporating from his face. "But the fact is there's something special about this girl, Markus. Something very special. She *needs* to go on living. And there's no way in the world she'll

manage that on her own. She's got to have someone who can look after her; someone who's used to Daeldis and all the tricks it's gonna throw at her. To say nothing of Tholoambelet. Without you, she doesn't stand a chance."

"It's just a job," Ortmann replied, though his conviction had audibly slackened.

"If *she's* just a job," Thomas said, pushing off the desk and approaching him. "Then you're the most heartless man I've ever had the shame of knowing. I'm sorry that poor girl ever fell in with you."

Scowling in reply, Ortmann opened the door and left.

Walking the corridors with Thomas' last words burning his conscience, he was headed towards the bunker's modest infirmary when Meeker breathlessly tore around an upcoming corner and crashed into him.

"Why don't you watch where you're—," he nearly shouted.

"They've got her! Fats and Squeaky! They jumped us coming out of the infirmary! Took her inside with a knife to her throat! There wasn't anything I could do!" she pleaded.

"What do they want?" he asked darkly as he resumed walking, though he already knew.

"You. They told me to come and get you. And nobody else, either," she added, dropping her voice. "Anyone else pops through that door, and she's had it. They've got the doctor standing watch now."

Walking beside and a little behind him, Meeker's heart trembled to see the fatal determination in his eyes, the inexorable will that animated each step. She knew that within a quarter of an hour, blood would be spilled. She hoped it wouldn't be his.

Approaching the infirmary with his gun in his hand, the doctor hastened forward to stop him.

"No weapons," he said, holding up his hand. "Or they'll kill the girl."

Without hesitation he dropped the pistol on the floor as he moved for the door. Opening it, his eyes immediately fell on Fats and Squeaky at the far end. A couple of badly wounded men lay on tables in the middle of the room, one evidently ready for an operation.

“See you got our message,” Fats taunted, his pudgy left hand wrapped around Monroe’s cheek and ear, her head twisted off to one side as he held a short knife to her neck. Awkwardly bent backwards over his enormously protruding gut, she was gasping for air in small gulps and trying desperately not to move against the blade as Fats breathed. “Lock that door, Ortmann. And snap off the key.”

“We don’t want any visitors while we’re having our fun,” Squeaky chimed in, pulling a much larger knife of his own and shaving a few of the fine hairs off Ellia’s left arm. “You’ve had this coming for a long time, Ortmann.”

Locking the door, Ortmann raised the heel of his hand to the thin key and bashed it several times. Suddenly it snapped off, the back of it clattering to the floor.

“Now we’re all alone,” Squeaky grinned through his filthy beard. “That door’s two inches of *oak!*”

Wordlessly, Ortmann approached them.

“What? No words of warning? No threats?” laughed Fats.

His narrowed eyes went from the two men to Monroe.

“You alright?”

Unable to force so much as a syllable out of her throat, she gave him the subtlest nod in the affirmative.

“Let her go,” he ordered.

“Sure, she can’t go anywhere now,” Fats smiled, releasing his hold on her head. “I want her to have a good view of us cutting you to pieces.”

Stepping away from the thug, she knew better than to get between the combatants. Moving off to one side, she slipped behind a table and anxiously watched.

Suddenly Squeaky lunged, swiping at Ortmann’s ribs with his knife. Stepping back easily, he dodged the attack and kicked him in the stomach, forcing all the air out of his lungs. With a groan he fell to the floor, nearly impaling himself on his own knife.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” he taunted, as Squeaky struggled to his feet.

Roaring defiance, the thug lunged again, desperately swiping the air ahead of him to block another kick.

Retreating across the infirmary, Ortmann seized a small glass bottle of anesthetic and threw it hard against Squeaky's head. Shattering on impact, he screamed and fell onto his back. Just as he hit the ground, Fats' little knife sailed through the air and caught Ortmann in the left shoulder. Grimacing as he seized its handle, he jerked it out in time to fight off its owner, who'd taken his fallen comrade's blade. Forcing him backwards towards the door, Fats proved a much more skillful hand with a knife than Squeaky. Twice he drew blood, both times from Ortmann's ribs.

Managing to maneuver around his assailant, Ortmann retreated back into the room.

"I'm gonna filet you, Ortmann," Fats said with a wicked smile, twisting the knife before him. "I'm gonna chop little pieces off you."

Flipping the small knife in his hand to throw it, he raised the blade over his head and aimed. When Fats lifted his arms to protect himself, Ortmann slammed a boot into his stomach, driving him towards the door. But as the enormous man fell backwards, he managed to drag his blade across Ortmann's shin, slicing down to the bone. Barely stifling a shout, Ortmann shuffled back.

"How do you like it, Ortmann?" Fats asked, managing to catch enough of his breath to speak. "Now you're in *my* domain."

Carefully he worked Ortmann into a corner, blocking him each time he tried to slip out.

"And when I'm finished with you," Fats began, before glancing at Monroe, "I'm gonna make short work out of *her*!"

Raising the knife once again as though to throw it, he managed to fake Fats into covering himself long enough to squeeze out. But not without taking another slash, this time to the back of his left hand.

"Little pieces," Fats said in a singsong. "I'm gonna cut little pieces off you."

Allowing himself to be worked towards the door, Ortmann raised the knife to throw it. Used to the trick already, Fats didn't bother to cover himself as he moved in. It was at that moment that Ortmann threw the blade as hard as he could, catching him squarely in the heart. With a stunned look of realization on his face, he looked

down at the expanding pool of blood as it spread across his dirty gray shirt. Stumbling forwards, he tried to cut Ortmann one last time. But his legs gave out and he collapsed to the floor.

Moving with difficulty, Ortmann walked to the closest wall and leaned against it, gasping as he drew air and aggravated the wounds to his ribs. Swallowing hard, he rested the back of his head against the wall, closed his eyes, and exhaled.

Then he felt something warm and soft against him. Looking down, he saw Ellia putting her arms around him to support him. Helping him away from the wall, she guided him to one of the tables and helped him sit. Stepping between his knees, she embraced him with a sigh and began kissing his neck.

"Thank you," she whispered sincerely. "Thank you. Thank you."

Putting his hands on her shoulders, he pushed her a little way back and held her for a moment.

"You alright?" he asked, his weary eyes double-checking her neck for any sign of injury.

"I'm fine," she assured him, drawing him back into her embrace. "But we need to get that door open," she said with quiet urgency. "The doctor needs to see those wounds of yours."

"In a minute," he said, pulling her back when she began to move away. Doubtfully he raised his eyes to hers. "I guess you know what this means," he uttered.

"No," she shook her head, though in fact she did. "Why don't you tell me?"

Briefly he glanced at the dead body of Fats. Then his eyes slowly moved to the savagely wounded, profusely bleeding Squeaky. Finally they met hers again.

"Looks like you're stuck with me."

CHAPTER 5

For several days Ortmann rested, carefully tended by the solicitous Ellia. From time to time Thomas would drop in. But he seemed distracted, his mind occupied by something much larger than his convalescing guest. Meeker proved by far his most frequent visitor, and consequently the least welcome.

"Lock it," Ortmann ordered Monroe one day, pointing at the door to the small room he'd been assigned while he recovered. "If I see her one more time I'll tear her head off."

Scurrying from his bedside, she latched it just as a buoyantly whistling individual reached the other side and tried the knob.

"Hey! Let me in!" Meeker protested, rattling the door a few times.

"Go away!" Ortmann all but shouted, causing Monroe to flinch as his voice echoed off the walls.

"I just want to see how you're doing!"

"You saw me an hour ago!" he bellowed. "Now get lost!"

Audibly grumbling, Meeker's footsteps retreated.

"She's stuck on you," Ellia smiled, kneeling beside his bed and looking at him.

"Isn't everyone," he said sourly, rolling his eyes. "I'm sorry," he added, when he saw her face fall. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"It's okay," she nodded, shifting to her rear and resting her arms on the side of his mattress. "I know you're frustrated, being stuck here and all."

"And how," he agreed. "Another day of this and I'll go out of my mind."

"The doctor came in this morning while you were sleeping. He said you'd be ready to go tomorrow."

"Good enough for me," he said, sitting up quickly and grimacing from the pain that shot through his ribs.

"What are you doing?" she asked with alarm, as he shifted down the bed and swung his feet to the floor behind her. "He said *tomorrow*."

"That means today," he answered. "Doctors are paranoid. He was just playing it safe."

"So should you," she asserted, quickly standing up as he got to his feet and took a few painful steps. "You don't want to open something up."

"This isn't the first time I've been torn up, Ellia. I know my limits."

Dubiously following him to the door, she watched him unlock it and step into the corridor.

"Ah, nothing like a little fresh air," he joked, patting his chest and inhaling the stale, moist air outside the room. Glancing at her with a gleam in his eyes that recalled their first meeting, he took a few steps and then halted with a painful gasp.

"See? You've hurt yourself," she said, hastening to his side and putting her hands on his arm.

"Just working out the kinks," he replied, shaking her off and resuming movement.

Unable to stop him, she moved up beside him and watched anxiously from the corner of her eye.

"I'm not gonna fall apart, Ellia," he said with a trace of annoyance in his voice. "I told you, I've been through this before."

"I know," she replied. "But that doesn't mean I can't worry," she added with an apologetic little smile.

Glancing at her, he couldn't help chuckling at her sweetness.

For half an hour they rambled the halls while Ortmann got his legs used to walking again. Monroe noticed a mixture of respect and aversion in the eyes of those they passed. The slaying of Fats,

and the near-fatal wounding of Squeaky, had done the rounds among the Vipers, quickly producing a sharp division of opinion. A bare majority didn't appreciate an outsider killing one of their own, though none of them liked him enough to do anything about it. The rest were glad the portly knife fighter was no longer sharing the same air they breathed.

Falling into light conversation, the duo rounded a corner just in time for Meeker to plow into him for a second time.

"Aah!" he exclaimed, as she collided with almost every wound he had. "Don't you *ever* watch where you're going?"

"You've got to come in a hurry," she said, thoughtlessly taking his bandaged hand in both of hers and squeezing it hard. "Daddy's in trouble. He's sick or something."

"Let go!" he replied, painfully pulling his damaged mitt from her grasp. "Haven't you got any sense at all?"

"Hurry," she pleaded, taking his other hand and pulling him along.

"He's sick?" Monroe asked, surprised given that she'd seen him just a couple hours before. "With what?"

"I don't know," Meeker replied, shaking her head as she continued to drag Ortmann. "It came on real suddenly. Like something just struck him."

"People don't just get sick like that, Meeks," Ortmann opined, his tone softening a little when he saw just how distraught she really was. "Probably just something he ate."

"Is the doctor with him?" Ellia inquired, as they rounded the last corner and the door to Thomas' office was in sight.

"Yes, but he doesn't know what's wrong, either," she said, tugging one last time on her slow-walking friend before breaking away and scurrying to the office on her own. "Hurry!" she pleaded over her shoulder from the doorway, before disappearing inside.

With a puzzled, worried expression, Monroe looked at Ortmann, who could only shrug and amble a little faster. Reaching for the door's knob, it suddenly moved away from his hand as Meeker jerked it open.

"Come on!" she insisted, holding it wide for them.

Stepping inside, the pair saw Thomas stretched out upon a thin mattress on the floor. His eyes were closed, but he was muttering something with an odd, machine-like rapidity. The doctor, who'd taken a knee beside him, stood up when he saw them.

"What's wrong?" Ortmann asked, taken aback to see the formerly stalwart gang leader babbling as though on autopilot. "What's he saying?"

"I haven't the least idea," the doctor answered in a confidential tone, crossing his arms. "It's nothing I've ever heard before. Like a foreign language, but it's...weird, clipped. Doesn't sound human, honestly."

"*Alien?*" Monroe queried.

"Your guess is as good as mine," he replied, glancing over his shoulder at his patient momentarily before continuing. "He was into all kinds of strange things. Alien drawings and whatnot. My guess is he's suffered some kind of mental breakdown, and it's all roaring back. Spilling out of the old memory pipes, if you will."

"You mean he's dying?" Ortmann asked, his voice low for Meeker's sake, who knelt beside her father, gently brushing his brow with her square, coarse hand.

"What do you think?" he replied tartly.

Tilting his head to the side, Ortmann frowned his irritation with the question.

"Sorry," the doctor apologized half-heartedly, looking at Thomas again. "It's just that it's hard to stand by and do nothing with him in a state like this. Medically there's nothing very wrong with him. He's far from being in the best of shape, given how he's lived all these years. But I can't detect anything that should have him flat on his back, blathering like this."

"Well, can't you at least put him somewhere more comfortable than his office?" Ortmann asked.

"Where would you suggest? You've seen this base, Ortmann. We're not running a topflight operation here. At least his office is off the beaten track. Won't have to listen to a lot of foot traffic. Besides, it helps us keep the curious onlookers at bay. Nobody outside this room knows how bad off he is, yet. And I intend to keep it that way," he said, a note of warning in his voice. "As soon

as this is generally known, there'll be a power struggle within the Vipers, and it isn't gonna be pretty."

"Yeah, we get the drill," Ortmann nodded.

"Is it alright if I look at him?" Ellia asked, her intuition stirring.

"Not like you can do him any harm," he shrugged, making for the door. "I'll be back in a little while. I need to see to another patient."

Once he was gone, Ortmann and Monroe knelt beside the ailing man and looked him over. Meeker, in her distress, didn't seem to notice them. Gently Ellia took her hand and drew it away from Thomas' brow.

"Just a moment, please," Monroe said kindly. Placing both of her small hands upon his head, she closed her eyes and concentrated. Ortmann watched her face carefully, noting the little twitches and flicks of her muscles.

"What is she doing?" Meeker inquired in a whisper.

Holding up a hand for her to keep silent, Ortmann leaned in a little closer to Thomas. No longer babbling, his words were coming out easily. He was speaking casually, pausing from time to time as though in conversation. Occasionally his tone implied a question. But for the most part he dominated the apparently one-sided dialogue. As the minutes passed Ortmann's injuries began to complain about his posture. But he held steady and still to avoid disturbing Ellia.

At last, after almost twenty minutes, Monroe removed her hands and leaned back. Losing her balance, she swooned into Ortmann, whose arms shot out to steady her.

"What's going on?" Meeker asked, as Thomas ceased speaking and seemed to relax. "What were you doing to him?"

"Communicating," she said in a light voice, putting a hand to her dizzy head and pausing to breathe and reorient herself. "He wasn't just blathering, that I can tell you."

"What did you learn?" Ortmann inquired.

"The doctor's right," she said regretfully, her eyes finding Meeker's. "There's nothing we can do for him now. But he does have some interesting things to share. With the breakdown of his mind—,"

she paused part way, glancing at Meeker. "I'm sorry to put it so crudely," she apologized.

"Put it any way you have to," she said with a defeated wave, sadly looking down at her father.

"Well, with the *breakdown* of his mind," she said, cringing a little as she uttered the most painful part of that sentence, "his memories are spilling out. I saw a lot of interesting fragments from different cave drawings he'd studied over the course of his life. There were a number of...*other* scenes, too," she uttered, wincing at some of his criminal activities. "But for the most part he was concerned with passing along some of what he'd seen. He was desperate to share all he could with someone. Honestly I'm honored that he chose me."

"He'd taken a shine to you," Ortmann observed.

"Yes, I noticed that, too," she agreed. "I'm not sure why, though. Perhaps he felt a certain affinity for me as a psychic."

Regretfully Meeker brushed the hair from her father's brow and then looked up.

"Is there anything you can do for him? Maybe help him along somehow?"

"You mean...help him pass?" Monroe asked hesitantly.

"No, no," she shook her head. "No, not that. I don't know what I mean. It's just, you seem to understand what he's going through. Can you make it easier for him? Less painful?"

"He's not in pain now," Monroe replied. "He's been distressed, worried that he would die before he had a chance to share what he's given me. That's why he's resting now: he's gotten it off his chest."

"I wonder why he didn't say anything about this before," Ortmann commented. "We've been here for days. He could have taught you at least some of it by now."

"No, I don't think so," Monroe responded. "The cave drawings in particular are highly evocative. You don't just see them: you feel them as well." She looked down at him and sighed. "It's too bad. I wish we could spend more time together, going over all he's learned."

“Well, if you’ve done all you can for him,” Meeker began, cradling her father’s head in her arms and looking at them.

“Of course,” Monroe nodded, taking her meaning and rising alongside Ortmann. “Just let us know if you need anything.”

Two days later, Ortmann was sitting on the mattress in his room when Ellia pushed the door open and shuffled to him. Dropping onto the bed, she laid back and groaned.

“I can’t get anything out of him,” she complained. “Not a single thing. Ever since that first day it’s like his psyche has corked itself up for good, and there’s nothing I can do about it.” Covering her eyes with her palms, she rubbed her face and sighed. “I wish Daddy was here,” she uttered quietly, lowering her hands and looking up at Ortmann. “He’d know what to do.”

“Thomas passed along what he felt he had to,” Ortmann replied. “That’s why he’s not talking anymore.”

“I know. And I’ve been trying to scribble down the images I saw in a little notebook I’ve got. But it’s hard to feel I’m not distorting the pictures with my imagination. It’s hard to copy out dozens of cave drawings when you’ve only seen them once.”

Before he could reply, the door opened again, and Meeker stepped inside. She eyed them from behind a stunned, emotionless face that told at once why she’d come.

“He’s gone,” she said in an odd tone, as though she didn’t believe her own words. “He just passed. D-doctor still can’t say why. Just said it was his time and sent me away.” Looking uncertainly between them, she was about to leave when Ortmann arose and took her in his arms.

“I’m sorry, Meeks,” he said as warmly as he could, massaging her back with his powerful hands. Melting into his embrace, tears began to dribble down her cheeks as the weight of her loss sank in.

“Oh, Daddy!” she sobbed loudly, her chest beginning to shake as she gripped Ortmann tight. “Why now? Why so suddenly?”

Having no answer to these questions, Ortmann squeezed back tighter and rocked her gently side-to-side.

“It’s alright,” he whispered.

It was with difficulty that Monroe fought off tears of her own. Losing her own father so shortly before made Meeker's experience terribly personal for her. But she didn't want to add to her grief by sharing her own. Pushing it aside as well as she could, she arose from the bed and put a hand on Meeker's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she sympathized. "We'll help you any way we can."

"Nothing can help me now," Meeker all but wailed, before pulling her head away from Ortmann's chest and glaring at Ellia. "Wasn't it enough to take Markus from me? You had to take my father, too?"

"I took your father?" Monroe asked, shocked by the accusation.

"Of course! None of this happened until you got here. And then, when you did all that weird stuff to him in his office, he stopped talking and never stirred again! I never even got to say goodbye!"

Sobbing all the more violently at this last thought, she pushed away from Ortmann and bolted out the door.

"I...I can't even..." Monroe's voice trailed, as she tried to make sense of what Meeker had just said.

"Don't pay any mind to that," Ortmann replied knowingly. "She doesn't know what she's saying."

"But what if I *did* hurt him somehow?" she asked.

"That's nonsense."

"I'm not so sure," she said musingly. "You saw how animated he was before I started communing with him. I might have done just as much harm as I did good."

Taking her shoulders in his hands, he turned her towards him and looked piercingly into her eyes.

"You can't blame yourself for something like that," he insisted. "The doctor already said that he was on his way out. You just gave him a chance to unload his thoughts before he died. There's no way that you caused his death."

"You're right, of course," she shook her head, trying to dislodge the sense of guilt that had begun to fill her. "I'm sorry, that was stupid. It was just hard to see Meeker come apart like that and not take it to heart."

"I know."

Reaching up and putting her hands on his, she smiled.

"At least I have you to keep my feet on the ground. But what about her?"

"She'll have to make out as well as she can," he replied, releasing her shoulders and frowning at the door. "She's pretty tough. She'll bounce back."

"Sure...but when?"

"That's up to her," he shrugged. "She'll wallow in it, or deny it, or do any of the thousand things people do to process their grief. Eventually she'll land on her feet. But by then we'll be gone."

"When do we leave?" she inquired quietly.

"*Soon*," he answered emphatically. "Real soon. Once word spreads that Thomas is six feet under, there'll be a fight inside the gang to decide who's gonna run it. And they're not gonna be happy to have a couple of outsiders hanging around the bunker while they're settling their domestic problems. Who knows, they might even try to lay the blame for his death at our feet."

"Why would they do that?" she asked, alarmed at the notion considering that all exits were tightly controlled, hemming them in. "No one could make the case—."

"They don't need a case, just a plausibility. Meeker gave us one herself just a little while ago: timing. We show up just in time for him to kick the bucket. Add to it the fact that everybody knows Thomas and I didn't get along, and you start getting a real nice set up. Planted in the right places, a notion like that could become a certainty overnight. They're gonna need some way to explain his death to themselves, and it'll be easier to point their fingers at us since we're not part of the club. Besides, it'll give them something to rally around, a banner for the ringleaders to wave."

"But the doctor won't corroborate their story," she objected.

"Look, Ellia, this isn't some first rate courtroom we're talking about: it's the dirty halls and dark corners of a base that belongs to a gang of criminals. They aren't burdened by a need for evidence or witnesses. They'll just shoot first and figure out who was guilty and who was innocent later, when their blood's cooled."

"I understand," she nodded. "How soon are we going?"

"Not for an hour or two," he answered, dropping his voice a little. "I'll talk with the doctor and see if he's willing to sit on the news for a little while. Then I've got to see to Meeker, and do what I can for her. This isn't a place for her anymore, not with Thomas gone."

"Where could she go?" Monroe asked. "Has she ever known anything else?"

"No, but she's pretty sharp. I'm sure she could get along alright, provided she makes a clean break with the Vipers. Her father always shielded her from the...rougher aspects of the gang. But she's gonna get it right in the face if she sticks around here, especially given she's the obvious choice to take over."

"Could she?"

"No. She doesn't have the killer instinct that you need for something like this. Thomas could kill a man and then sit down and eat his breakfast without a second thought. But Meeker doesn't have that kind of ruthlessness in her. Her heart's too soft. The moment she flinched, they'd eat her alive."

"Thomas could do that? I had no idea. He seemed so kind, in his rough way."

"That was just a veneer, believe me," Ortmann said knowingly. "He literally killed his way to the top of the Vipers. There was more blood on his hands than you've got in your whole body."

"That's a chilling thought," she said with a visible shudder.

"You can see why we weren't the best of friends," he replied, glancing around the room and thinking for a moment. Then he headed for the door. "I'll be back in a while," he told her. "Lock this when I'm gone, and don't let anyone in except me."

"Alright," she agreed as he closed it.

Heading for Thomas' office, Ortmann managed to wrangle a few hours' silence from the irritable physician. Then he looked for Meeker. Checking nearly the entire bunker, he finally found her behind a pile of supplies in one of the storage rooms.

"Go away," she said sadly, sitting on the floor, her back against the wall and her arms crossed upon her knees. Tired from half an hour of crying, she glared at him with red, watery eyes. "Didn't you hear me?" she added, when he closed the door, clicked on a small light, and sat down beside her. "I don't want to talk to you."

I don't even want to see you, not after that witch has gotten her hooks into you."

"Stop talking like an idiot," he chided her in the quasi-parental tone of an older brother. "Nobody could have done anything for your old man. You heard the doctor: it was his time."

"Yeah, right," she retorted, dropping her head to her arms for a moment before looking at him beside her. "You're just saying that because you're head-over-heels for that little weirdo, that mystic."

"Your dad was a mystic," he pointed out. "He was up to his neck in this stuff. Ellia's barely dipped her toes in it."

"Oh, shut up," she shot back, dropping her head again and rocking it back and forth. "I just can't believe he's gone."

"It happens to everyone, sooner or later."

"Very original."

"Look, Meeks, your father was the head of the Vipers. It's a miracle he lasted this long. It really is. What did you think would happen? Did you imagine he'd live forever? That he'd outlive you? Whatever killed him simply did the job any of a dozen Vipers would have gladly done if they could have pulled it off. He had no lack of enemies. It was simply a matter of time."

"Is that supposed to make me feel *better*?" she asked pointedly. "'Oh, don't worry, Meeks: your dad had a target on his back from day one!'"

"He *did* have a target on his back, ever since he gunned down Myron and Pinkie."

"That's just a story," she sniffed. "He didn't have to kill anyone to take over. They saw his talent and asked him--."

"That's a lie, and you know it," he cut her off, annoyed by her self-delusion. "You've seen enough to know the truth: your father, whatever his virtues, was a murderer and a schemer. He'd stepped on more toes than anyone this side of Boulimar. It was only a matter of time."

"What do you know," she replied sullenly.

"A great deal, Meeks," he said ominously. "I've never mentioned this to anyone. But a few months ago I was approached by a man who wanted me to knock your old man off." Instantly her

head shot upward, her eyes locking with his. "That's right: the sharks have been circling for a while. He'd been slipping for the better part of a year, and they knew the time was getting close to take a stab at him."

"He wasn't slipping," she insisted.

"Why do you think it burned him so bad the last time I beat him at cards?"

"Because you were cheating!"

"We *both* were. But he used to be better at it than me. That's what really set him off: I beat him at his own game."

"I don't believe you."

"Meeks, I don't have a reason to lie to you. Don't you realize that?"

"I realize that I've lost the two men I cared most about," she replied morosely, turning her head to the side and laying it on her arms, looking away from him. "And in both cases, it's because of the same woman. That silly little sniveling off-worlder."

"Ellia had nothing to do with your father's death," he uttered in a tone of warning.

"But she *did* take you away from me, didn't she?" Meeker countered, twisting her head towards him, continuing to rest it. "You can't deny that, can you?"

"I was never yours, Meeks," he said quietly, not wishing to hurt her further. "We've had our fun. But there was never a way forward for either of us."

"Why?" she demanded, raising her head, her cheeks flushing with anger. "Because I'm not a dainty little thing like that twit? Because I don't have her fancy education or her cute little manners? Just what's so wrong with me? Why have you always pushed me away?"

"Meeks, you're in shock," he cautioned her. "This isn't the time to go pulling apart every bad thing that's ever happened to you. Just give yourself a chance to breathe."

"Why not? What better time could there be than now? My world's coming apart at the seams, Markus: why not add to the chaos?"

Visibly melting down as she asked this, she dropped her face to her arms yet again and began to sob. With a sigh Ortmann stretched his legs out before him and drew her against his chest. Stroking her head through her long, unruly mane of dirty red hair, he rested the back of his skull against the wall and settled in for a long wait.

"What am I going to do?" she asked despondently, once her tears had ceased to flow and her breathing had evened out. "I can't stay here. They'll want to sweep me under the rug as fast as they can once they know Da—," she paused, fighting to maintain her composure. "Once they know Daddy is gone."

"I'm glad you see that."

"I'm not stupid, Markus," she sniffed. "I can see what's coming down the pike as well as anybody."

"Sure."

"I guess I'll have to strike off on my own. Get a job in Boulimar or something."

"Doing what?" he asked.

"Like you care."

"I do care, Meeks. I wouldn't be here if I didn't. I could have lit out before this."

"Well, it's not like you're gonna put me before that little... friend of yours," she replied, managing to censor herself. "Whatever happens, she's gonna come first. You two'll be heading off for that temple just as soon as you can to try and avenge her daddy. And then I'll have lost you again."

"Nobody's gonna lose anybody."

"Oh, come on, Markus: you'd be safer diving headfirst into a pit of sylgens. People don't come back from the temple. You know that better than anybody. Shoot, they hardly ever come back from being in its *vicinity*."

"Somebody's got to take a shot at that old buzzard."

"But why you?" she asked earnestly, twisting around to face him. "Why does it have to be you?"

"Why not me? I've been in and out of that area more than anyone else. Who'd have a better chance?"

"There's *no* chance, Markus. Don't you see that?" She shook her head. "That little—."

"Her name's Ellia, Meeker," he cut in. "Just call her that."

"Fine. *Ellia*'s got your head twisted on backwards, and you're willing to try anything to please her."

"What would you prefer? That I let her go in alone and get killed?"

She broke eye contact and didn't respond.

"*Meeks*," he said chidingly.

"No," she sighed. "Though that would save a lot of trouble."

"You're not that cold. You don't mean that."

"Yeah, well, sometimes I wish I was," she said glumly.

Standing up slowly, Ortmann took her arm and pulled her to her feet. Still avoiding his eyes, she kept her head down as he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Nobody else knows about your father yet. I've seen to that. Get out of the base before any trouble starts. There's no telling what'll happen once the news spreads."

"What, leave even before he's buried?" she asked with surprise, looking up. "Just abandon him in his office like a cold piece of meat?"

"There's nothing you can do for him now," he replied, working her shoulder a little. "The doctor will get him buried."

"No, Markus," she shook her head, stepping back out of his grasp. "I'm not gonna do that. He's got to be buried by his family."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged. "Just get it over with in a hurry, and don't stick around longer than you have to."

"I don't intend to."

"Good, that's something at least," he concluded, glancing at the door and then back at her. "Take care of yourself, Meeks. I'll see you around."

"Yes," she muttered to herself as he left. "I think you will."

CHAPTER 6

Less than an hour later, Ortmann and Monroe were on their way. Quietly helping himself to the Vipers' stores, he refilled both his pack and Ellia's, ensuring they wouldn't go without during the journey that lay ahead. Emerging from another tunnel off in the west end of town, the pair began to work their way towards the north-east.

"Did you talk to Meeker?" Ellia asked, as the sun set behind them and cast long shadows on the muddy street they walked. Here and there a passerby glared at them while moving past, trying to guess what was in their packs in order to gauge if attacking them was worth the risk. Invariably their eyes were met by Ortmann's, whose knowingly penetrating stare sent each of them scurrying on their way. "Is she alright?" she added, quite oblivious to the little game being played out around her.

"She's fine," he replied. "Torn up, but she'll pull through. Wants to see her old man buried, then she'll be on her way. With any luck she'll leave the Vipers behind for good."

"You don't sound very convinced of that," she prodded gently.

"It's all she's ever known," he explained. "And folks tend to stick with what's familiar to them. It'll get awfully lonesome for her before long, and she's gonna get nostalgic for the safety of having the gang wrapped around her."

"But they'll kill her," she objected.

"Could be. But by then their power struggles ought to be settled, and the new leadership might not have a problem with her hanging around. Then again..." his voice trailed.

"They might see her as a threat and get her out of the way."

“Yeah.”

“Maybe we should have stayed,” Ellia mused aloud. “At least made sure she got away alright.”

“If the gang turned against her, there wouldn’t have been a thing either of us could have done about it. A man, a gun, and two girls against a bunker full of scum isn’t good odds.”

“I’m sure you would have found a way,” she replied trustingly.

“I’m not some god of war, Ellia,” he said, though he appreciated her faith.

“I know,” she responded quietly.

The conversation died as they strode into a narrow side street, their movements carefully watched by thieves waiting between what the residents of Todrid charitably referred to as houses. Mere shacks that a stout wind could, and often did, blow down, they did little more than keep the stars from gleaming down on their occupants as they slept.

“Watch it,” Ortmann warned her confidentially when they were part way along another road, putting his hands on her shoulders and moving her from his right to his left side.

“What is it?” she asked, looking around in the diminishing light but finding nothing amiss among the houses that hemmed in the street. “Do you see something?”

“Just stay close,” he uttered, slipping his pistol from his waistband and cocking it. The click reverberated loudly down the apparently deserted path, causing unseen figures to stir as they strove to hide themselves from its potent fury. “And don’t stop moving,” he added.

Nervously she did just that. Rolling her feet to make as little noise as possible, she strained her ears for danger and dashed her eyes every which way. Before she knew it they were moving onto yet another road, and Ortmann put a hand on her shoulder.

“We’re alright now,” he said, lowering the hammer on his pistol and sliding it back into his pants. “You can relax.”

“What was that?” she asked urgently, her voice tight. “What was wrong?”

“Like an idiot I walked us into one of the most dangerous streets in Todrid,” he replied sourly, scowling at himself. “Usually I come at it from the east. With the sun going down, I didn’t recognize it coming from the west until we were committed. Turning back would’ve signaled fear, so I had to play the cards as they’d fallen. Sorry, Ellia.”

“Oh, I’ll play any hand you lay out,” she said quickly. “I just wanted to make sure we were dealing with *corporeal* threats.”

He glanced at her and smiled.

“What, you thought they were ghosts?”

“Well, stranger things have been reported around here lately,” she chuckled self-consciously. “Life-sucking aliens and snakes with legs that eat you like bologna.”

“True enough.”

Moving briskly, the pair reached Todrid’s north-eastern section as the last rays of light dissipated in the sky. The glow above made it hard to see what lay around them, and Ortmann once again drew his weapon and kept it close by his side. With his other hand he took Monroe’s upper arm.

“Be ready,” he whispered, leaning over and speaking into her ear.

“For what?” she inquired, blindly searching her environment.

In lieu of a verbal answer his pistol exploded in front of her with a roar that made her shriek in surprise. From the enormous muzzle flash she saw a trio of darkly clothed figures coming at them with long knives in their hands. He fired twice more, the deafening noise making her ears ring. Unable to see much more than the three bright dots that had been burned into her vision, she felt him squeeze her arm tight and pull her forwards, all but dragging her over one of the bodies that lay in the street.

“Pick up your feet!” he ordered, his voice a little muffled by the dullness of her ears.

Heedlessly hurrying where he led, she was suddenly whipped around a corner and pressed against an adobe wall that was still hot from the sun’s rays. Dimly she could see him steady his pistol in both hands, resting his elbow against the wall before firing

thrice. Jumping at the first report, she covered her ears for the last two and managed to spare her hearing further abuse.

"That taught 'em," he uttered with grim satisfaction, ejecting his magazine and quickly topping it up. "Filthy animals," he added contemptuously, slapping it back into the handle and watching carefully for a few seconds.

"Who were they?" she asked.

"Slavers," he answered scornfully.

"How could you tell in the dark?" she asked in amazement.

"By their knives," he replied. "You saw how long and thin they were? Only the slavers use those. They're perfect for cutting throats. It's their calling card, a warning to anyone who tries to cross 'em. They wanted to knife me and carry you off."

"What, and make me a slave?" she asked incredulously, having heard stories of such things but never having seen them point blank.

"No, they'd have sold you off. You're too pretty to keep on Daeldis. They'd find a buyer, some merchant or other, and you'd be on your way in less than a week." Taking her arm again, he pulled her back into the street. "Come on. Let's keep moving."

Without further incident they passed out of the city. Word of the slavers' fate quickly passed through the ranks of Todrid's vermin class, and with one consent they resolved to give Ortmann and his companion a wide berth.

"I never thought fresh air would smell so good," she enthused, filling her lungs with the jungle air now that they were outside the stinking settlement's confines. "Markus?" she asked quietly when he didn't reply.

"There's someone behind us," he whispered, his hand still on her arm, guiding her along. "Been there since a little after I quit shooting."

"More slavers?" she inquired, shuddering at the thought of their cruel knives.

"No," was all he said, before pulling her into a trot.

Wandering off the trail time and again, she crashed against thick leaves and sprawling growths of tube-like plants that snapped as she moved through them. Deploring the noise she was making,

she was surprised that Ortmann didn't seem to care so long as they continued to move quickly. Suddenly he let go.

"Keep moving!" he ordered in a harsh whisper, his mouth beside her ear. Then he dashed to the right of the path and froze.

Unable to see more than the faintest outlines, she moved with hesitant urgency through the foliage, hoping there weren't any blue spiders or sylgens underfoot. When she was about a hundred feet off, she heard a woman scream behind her. Pausing and looking back, she could hear someone wrestling with Ortmann in the bushes.

"Markus?" she asked uncertainly, afraid to speak but unsure what else to do. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he called out in an annoyed voice. "Come on back."

Picking her way through the path she'd carved in the bushes, she stopped when she heard someone panting heavily on the ground.

"You didn't have to clothesline me, Markus!" Meeker said with a groan. "I'm gonna feel that tomorrow."

"Meeker?" Monroe asked incredulously, moving slowly to her outline and squatting down. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think I'm doing here? I'm joining up."

"Applications are closed," Ortmann replied, taking her arm and roughly dragging her to her feet. "Now scram."

"Oh, very funny," she retorted, sounding more annoyed than she actually was. "But I'm afraid you're *stuck* with me, big man," she said, poking him in the chest with her index finger. "The Vipers have run me out."

"What, already?" Ellia inquired.

"Well, more or less," Meeker clarified. "You see, I heard it all, their whole plan. That's when I knew I had to get lost, or they'd have me buried by dawn."

"What are you talking about?" Ortmann asked.

"You were right!" she said with a sigh, moving to a tree and leaning against it. "You were right about the whole thing. The power struggles and the backstabbing and all of it. I overheard the doctor talking to Pudgy Malone."

“What, Fats’ cousin?” Ortmann clarified. “He’s been persona non grata for years.”

“For Daddy,” she corrected. “Not for the Vipers generally. And certainly not for Doc Wilson.”

“So he *does* have a name,” Ellia chuckled, causing them to glance at her for interrupting. “Sorry.”

“Well, anyway, Wilson was behind the whole thing. Remember when I said that there were a lot of high level Vipers in the bunker for an upcoming operation? Well, he’s the one who talked Daddy into bringing them there in the first place. He wanted them all under one roof so that when he orchestrated a change in management, he could pressure them to support him.”

“You mean *Wilson’s* taking over?” Ortmann replied with genuine surprise.

“He’s gonna try,” she answered him. “That’s why Daddy fell sick so suddenly: he poisoned him. Put something into his food. Had a funny name that I can’t remember now. Chlozor—, Chlozoro—. I don’t know,” she shook her head. “Anyway, it’s slow acting, and causes the brain to go to pieces. That’s why he was talking all that gibberish.”

“He had a message that he was trying to pass on,” Ellia chimed in, still a little chastened from before. “The poison might have opened the floodgates. But the water that flowed through was real.”

“Sure,” Meeker said indifferently. “Anyhow, he put Fats and Squeaky onto manhandling your friend here, hoping to spur a fight,” she continued, speaking directly to Ortmann.

“You know her name, Meeks,” he chided. “Besides, we’ve established that it’s *womanhandling* when done to a woman.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Inside joke,” he responded.

“Ooh,” she said with a sarcastic little wave of her hands. “So, when I heard all that, I knew the only thing to do was beat it. Honestly I think the word had already gone out to lock me in. But one of the guys who watches the tunnels has always been kind of sweet on me, so he let me through.”

“Lucky you,” Ortmann replied.

“Yeah,” she said quietly.

“But why did the doctor let us go?” Monroe asked. “He could have tried to poison us or have his thugs attack us or something.”

“Yeah, Pudgy was mad about that, actually. Wanted revenge for what happened to his cousin. But Wilson said after the way Markus had taken care of Fats and Squeaky, it just wasn’t worth the risk to court any more trouble. That’s why he agreed to keep Daddy’s death a secret from the rest of the Vipers until you’d gone: he didn’t want any complications.”

“And you learned all this by eavesdropping?” Ortmann asked.

“Well, I’ve always been kind of nosy,” she admitted. “But what really set my curiosity off was when I saw Pudgy. I knew he had no reason to be there right after Daddy had died, so he had to know something that I didn’t. I stuck to him like a fly, and sure enough, he started talking to Wilson in Daddy’s office and I learned the whole thing.”

“I trust you know what this means,” Ortmann said meaningfully.

“Yeah, that I need a new home,” she said a little too emphatically.

“*Meeks.*”

“Fine,” she said with a dramatic sigh, looking at Ellia again. “I’m sorry I accused you. You didn’t do anything to Daddy. It was all Wilson’s fault.”

“Thank you, Meeker,” Monroe said kindly, taking her hand and rubbing it sympathetically with her thumb. “I know how hard—.”

“Hey, don’t get all soft and gooey on me,” she objected, pulling her hand away and shuddering. “Save it for this big lug. He likes that stuff, apparently.”

“So, what are you going to do now?” Monroe asked, shifting the conversation to feel like a bit less of a mother hen.

“I’m coming with you guys, obviously.”

“This is a trip for two, Meeks,” Ortmann replied. “We’re packed for two, and we’ve only got use for two. We don’t need a third wheel weighing us down.”

"Markus Ortmann, you know I've never weighed you down in my life!" she exclaimed. "I know this jungle better than anyone. Better than *you*."

"Nobody knows this jungle better than me," he replied factually.

"Well, I could give you a run for your money, anyhow," she grumbled. "Look, Markus: I had to get out of the bunker before they nailed me. I didn't have time to bring any supplies, or make contact with anyone on the outside."

"Yeah, 'cause you came chasing right after us," he replied. "How'd you get past the street thugs, anyhow?"

"Because I can sneak like a cat," she said proudly. "That's how. Not everyone needs to go blasting their gun off every five minutes like it's a shooting gallery."

"Daeldis is better off with a few less slavers stinking it up," he responded sourly.

"You...mean..." she said with realization, her head turning slowly back towards Todrid. "I was dodging—."

"Slavers. Yeah. Who'd you think they were?"

"Thieves? Killers?" she replied. "Anything but *them*. Holy cow," she uttered, shaking her head. And then, with a nervous giggle, "And all I had on me was a knife!"

"Don't worry: you're not pretty enough for them to send you off-world. You'd probably have ended up tied to a millwheel with the rest of the donkeys, grinding out flour somewhere in Boulimar."

"Markus!" the two girls exclaimed simultaneously.

"What a terrible thing to say!" Ellia declared.

"Yeah, you listen to her!" Meeker seconded.

"What, she's suddenly on your radar again?" he countered.

Reluctantly Meeker looked Ellia up and down.

"Well, for the time being," she said in a small voice, embarrassed by her own flip flop. "And anyhow, she's right. With *my* figure, whichever slaver caught me would probably keep me all for himself!"

"That's a nice thought," Ortmann replied, turning away from her and taking Monroe's arm. "Let's go."

“Hey, you’re not just gonna leave me here, are you?” Meeker asked anxiously, trotting after the pair as they tramped farther into the jungle.

“That’s right,” Ortmann replied, though Monroe could hear a faint smile on his lips that Meeker’s fear caused her to miss.

“But—, but—,” she stuttered, following, pausing, and then following again. “But I could be a big help to you! I know this jungle! Please, don’t just leave me out here.”

“You’re a big girl. You’ll make out alright,” he said, continuing his ruse with difficulty, barely stifling a laugh.

“Oh, why are you so mean to me, Markus?” she asked, growing frustrated and smacking him on the shoulder. “I’m always nice to you! But you keep pushing me away!”

With a loud, long sigh, he stopped and turned around.

“You want to come with us?” he asked slowly.

“Yes! Yes! Absolutely,” she nearly jumped while saying.

“Alright. But we’re gonna play it my way, see?”

“You’re the boss!” she said fervently. “Wouldn’t have it any other way. Nobody knows this jungle like you do.”

“Except you, apparently,” he observed.

“Yes, but that was such a long time ago. Why can’t we let bygones be bygones?”

“You said it a minute ago,” Ellia commented.

“Hey, whose side are you on, anyway?”

Wordlessly she pointed at Ortmann, who smiled at Meeker like a satisfied cat on a windowsill. Turning around again, he led the way into the jungle.

“Well, anyway, you won’t regret this,” Meeker continued. “I’ve got a strong body, haven’t I? Much better suited to a long trip than Ellia. Look, I’ll even carry her pack,” she said, reaching for it.

“I’ve got it, Meeker,” Monroe replied, putting her hands on the straps and tugging it out of her grasp.

“No, let her carry it,” Ortmann said. “If she isn’t gonna be a donkey for a slaver, she might as well be one for us.”

“Oh, Markus,” Meeker said disapprovingly, taking the reluctantly surrendered pack and working its straps over her shoulders. “Why are you always picking on me? I’m a better walking

companion for a journey like this than she is. I'll bear up under anything, you know that."

"There's one place where she's got you beat all to death, Meeks."

"What's that?" she challenged him. "Come on: I'd like to hear it. Just how can this little princess be any better than me? Name *one* thing."

He paused significantly and looked at her.

"She knows how to keep her mouth *shut*," he replied, causing her to shrink back.

"Well, yeah, I guess..." she mumbled, lowering her head and falling in again as they resumed movement. "But it's not like there's anything to hear us out here, anyhow. Nothing comes this close to Todrid except wild dogs and the odd family of boars. And they don't typically attack unless they're *real* hungry."

"Wild dogs?" Monroe repeated dubiously.

"Oh, sure, honey. Didn't you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"They like to stalk their prey in packs. Most of 'em are descended from old hunting dogs that ran off, so they've got a lot of the old instincts still intact. The smaller ones tend to drive the target towards the bigger, slower ones. They hem you in on three sides, and then—."

"Knock it off, Meeker," Ortmann said, aware that she was just trying to make Monroe nervous to show her own prowess.

"Anything that gets in our way won't be there for long. So clam up and walk."

"Alright," she grumbled.

"But...what about the sylgens?" Monroe inquired. "And the blue spiders?"

"Oh, the blue spiders aren't—," Meeker began.

"We'll have to cross their turf before we reach the temple," Ortmann cut her off. "But not tonight. You don't have to worry about them."

"And the sylgens?"

"They're farther north."

“Provided they haven’t migrated...” Meeker’s voice trailed insinuatingly.

“What?” Monroe asked with alarm, pausing and looking between them both. “Migrated?”

“They’ve stuck to the same territory for years,” Ortmann said pointedly to Meeker, causing her to look away. And then, to Ellia he added, “We’re not anywhere near their hunting grounds. You don’t have a thing to worry about. Now, keep moving.”

“Alright,” she replied, walking again but moving closer to him.

Sticking to the narrow trail, they traveled in silence. Each step, Monroe reflected, brought her closer to the bizarre creature that had extinguished her father’s life and threatened countless more on the beleaguered world. The thought spurred her stomach to anxiously churn, though she did her best to push it aside and keep her mind on the jungle and the threats that could be lurking just out of earshot.

Several hours later they paused briefly for food and drink. Conversation was minimal and to the point. Even Meeker had lost her appetite for talk, the fatigues of the journey weighing on her a little more than she cared to admit.

Scarcely rested, they resumed when Ortmann mutely got to his feet and began to walk again. Stifling a groan, Meeker stood up, straightened the pack, and fell in behind him. Monroe followed up the rear, wishing to get their eyes off her so she could think.

Though she’d shown the grenades to Thomas and Ortmann with great confidence, the truth was she had very little faith in her own plan. The creature seemed so powerful and otherworldly that she feared he must somehow stop her dead in her tracks long before she even had the chance to pull the pins and throw them. Thinking back on the vision of her father, she wondered if Tholoambelet could command the will of those he chose to. It was an appealing notion despite the threat it presented to her, for it gave Drew Monroe an excuse for his behavior. But when she recalled the satisfaction with which he gave away his life, she knew it had been his own free choice. Could the figure command the will, there would have

nevertheless been signs of resistance, particularly in the unconscious. And there were none in the vision she'd had.

Suddenly a branch snapped off to her left, making her gasp and look. At the same moment Ortmann had held up his hand to stop, a command Meeker complied with at once. Not seeing this, Monroe collided with her, knocking the squat Daeldisian to the ground.

"Watch where you're—," she blurted out automatically, before catching herself at the sound of another stick snapping. Looking into the brush, she got back to her feet and pulled out the small knife that was her only protection. "Move behind me," she whispered to Ellia, who quickly obeyed.

Calmly Ortmann drew his pistol as the sounds of snapping sticks and rustling leaves multiplied. Even without them barking, he knew that it was a pack of six, perhaps eight, dogs. Though obviously on the hunt and doubtless hungry, they chose to keep their distance at first and feel out the invaders of their domain. Twice one of them came near, sniffing the wind and growling a little before retreating to the safety of the group.

All at once the pack decided to act. Barking and howling with one will, their combined noise made both of the girls jump, though Meeker had more than enough experience to know better. Had she maintained her composure, she would have felt Monroe reflexively seize the pack on her back with both hands, all but frozen with fear.

Slowly Ortmann raised his pistol, aiming for what sounded like the center of the group. Like a cannon his weapon exploded, lighting up the night and silencing the dogs. Well aware that humans meant death when accompanied by loud noises and bright flashes, they twisted around and bolted in the opposite direction, tearing their way through the bushes. One of them, heedless in its panic, crashed headlong into a tree and nearly knocked itself out. Stumbling to its feet, it whimpered and followed in the others' wake.

"Did you hit one of them?" Monroe asked, coming back to herself and letting go of the pack.

"No, just scared 'em off," he replied, slipping another round into the magazine and tucking the pistol away. "Come on."

"Why'd you walk into me?" Meeker asked pointedly, now that the excitement was over. "Didn't you see Markus' sign?"

"I'm sorry. I—."

"You're the last person who's got any right to complain about getting walked into, Meeker," Ortmann cut in. "Now keep quiet and let's move. We've got a long way to go before we can stop for the night."

"How long?" Monroe asked.

"Getting worn out?" the girl in front of her asked.

"Keep that tongue of yours still, donkey, or you'll be carrying this pack, too. And it's a lot heavier."

Invisibly rolling her eyes in the darkness, she fell silent.

"At least a few hours yet, Ellia," he answered her. "It depends on how fast we can cover ground, and if there are any more interruptions. Try to keep moving quickly, both of you. Every hour on the trail is one we're all gonna miss sleeping tonight, 'cause we're moving out shortly after dawn."

"We'll be dead on our feet halfway through tomorrow," Meeker objected. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

Briefly he glared over his shoulder at her.

"Okay, okay," she replied, holding up her hands. "You're the boss."

Moving again, Monroe was pleased to find the churning in her stomach had ceased. Ortmann's show of force had reminded her that she wasn't alone in her crusade against Tholoambelet. If any one man could help her overcome such a powerful foe, she felt he could. And even if he couldn't, she reflected a little more darkly, she found the idea of death a little less scary with him beside her, though she didn't know why.

As the night wore on, clouds of mosquitoes devoured all the exposed flesh they could find, making the walkers miserable. The salt from their sweat ignited the already itching bites they'd received, making the urge to scratch all but irresistible.

"Wait a second," Meeker said, noticing a plant in the darkness and stepping off the path to the right. "I've found something."

"What?" Ortmann asked, his patience thin.

"It's a flower I found a while ago," Meeker explained, plucking it from the ground and returning to her companions. "I don't think it has a name, so I call it bloodflower."

"Is that all?" he asked pointedly.

"No, silly. I call it bloodflower because it drives away these little bloodsuckers and helps you keep more of your juices inside your body," she explained, swiping at the mosquitoes that were gathering before her face. "Just rub it on your skin and clothes, and the fragrance drives them off. It only lasts a few hours. But it should get us to our night camp. Provided we ever stop, that is."

Frowning at her, Ortmann went to where she'd plucked the flower and returned with two more. Handing one to Ellia, they followed Meeker's example and rubbed it against themselves.

"See? They're taking off."

"Yes, I think you're right," Monroe said hopefully, tilting her head and listening carefully to ensure they were really leaving them alone.

"Good one, Meeks," Ortmann said, throwing aside his mangled flower and walking again.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" she asked playfully.

"Don't push it," he said without looking back.

With the passage of another hour, Meeker spoke up again.

"Ooh, I know where we are!" she said happily.

"You ought to, being an expert on the jungle and all."

"Very funny, big man. But do *you* know where we are?"

"Of course."

She fell silent for a few moments, waiting to see if he would depart from the path. When he didn't, a smile crossed her lips.

"I know something you don't," she teased in a singsong.

"Good."

"Aw, come on: don't you want to know what it is?"

Wordlessly he pushed a leafy branch out of his way, allowing it to snap back into her face.

"You're just lucky I like you, Markus Ortmann. Otherwise I'd let you walk the night away without saying so much as a word!"

"Is that a promise?"

“Oh!” she exclaimed, smacking his shoulder again. “It just so happens that we’re about to bypass the best night camp any of us could hope for on such short notice! Does that get your attention?”

Unsurprisingly it did, causing him to stop and turn around.

“Where?”

“Over there, off to the right,” she replied, pointing into a dense growth of trees as Ellia caught up. “It’s an old cave. You can’t hardly see it, even in the daylight, so nobody’s been there for ages.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I have eyes, Markus. There was a thick coating of dust that hadn’t been disturbed for a long time when I first found it. Now, do you want to check it out, or stand here and talk about it all night?”

“Go ahead,” he responded, nodding her forwards.

“With pleasure,” she said primly, making a little bow and hopping off the path into the trees. “It really isn’t very far,” she called over her shoulder, fighting her way through a remarkably thick wall of branches. “Just takes...a little work...to get there,” she struggled to say, blindly pushing the limbs away, her eyes closed as they scratched against her face. “It’s almost like the jungle is trying to keep us out,” she added with a laugh, quickly growing nervous as the area turned out to be not quite what she remembered. Pressing on determinedly for a hundred feet or so, she paused.

“Meeker?” Ortmann inquired in an accusatory tone. By far possessing the best night vision of the trio, he could easily see that there wasn’t anything resembling a cave in their vicinity.

“So I made a little mistake!” she replied defensively. “It could happen to anyone!” Loudly she sighed. “It must be farther on. I think we just got off the path too soon.”

“Well, couldn’t we just move parallel to the path for a little while?” Monroe offered. “Maybe we’ll run into it.”

“If it’s even out here,” Ortmann said.

“What, you don’t believe me?” Meeker asked indignantly. “Look, I know where we are...more or less. There’s a big rock on the left side of the path coming up. It wasn’t more than a couple hundred feet short of that that I saw the cave. It *has* to be right around here.”

"A couple hundred feet short of the big rock?" Ortmann confirmed.

"Yeah."

"You mean the rock that's still a half mile ahead of us?" he asked pointedly.

"But it," she blurted out, before slowing down and dropping her voice. "Can't be...that far."

"It can," he replied with annoyance, leading the way back to the main path.

Thoroughly chastened, Meeker kept her mouth clamped shut until Ortmann addressed her some time later.

"Meeks?" he asked.

"Yes?" she responded quietly.

"We're a little way short of the rock," he announced. "Go find your cave."

Nodding guiltily, she moved off to the right and tried again, the other two following her at a slight distance.

"She's trying her hardest to help," Monroe whispered, hoping to soften his attitude.

"That's the problem with her," he replied, his voice low enough that Meeker couldn't hear. "She does everything passionately, including her mistakes. She'd would've had us crawling through the jungle for hours looking for that cave if I didn't know the area better."

"Well, then it's a good thing that you do," she said prettily, causing him to smile despite his frosty demeanor. He knew what she was trying to do, and while he didn't typically tolerate interference from others, it didn't bother him when Ellia chose to intervene in her gentle way. Holding a branch out of her way, he gave her a little peck on the cheek as she passed, making her giggle.

"Hey!" Meeker called from ahead. "I think I've found it!"

"She *thinks* she's found it," he repeated to Ellia, picking up the pace and joining her moments later before a low hill. "*This* is your cave?" he asked, scanning the hill briefly.

"No, silly," she replied. "Down *there* is the cave," she added, pointing to a dark spot just ahead of her feet. "It's a tight fit. But if you ditch the pack and hand it through to me, we should all be able to

squeeze inside.” Without a moment’s hesitation she dropped Monroe’s pack, got on her hands and knees, and stuck her head inside. “Give me some kind of light, will you?” she asked, her voice muffled by the hill, her hand waving wildly. “I can’t see a thing!”

“There’s a surprise,” Ortmann commented, dropping the pack and digging through it for his little lamp. Putting it into her still waving hand, she pulled it in, clicked it on, and slithered out of sight.

“Come on!” they heard her call from inside, her voice barely audible. “There’s room enough for all of us, and to spare!”

“That looks awfully...claustrophobic,” Monroe observed dubiously.

“No! It’s much bigger once you’re past the entrance!”

“Go ahead,” Ortmann told her. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“Oh, I hope this old hill doesn’t fall down on us,” she murmured anxiously, dropping down and slowly crawling inside. “Meeker? What happened to the light?” she asked when it suddenly went out. “Meeker?” she asked again, shifting where she lay, about to crawl back out when she felt Ortmann kick her foot.

“Go ahead,” he repeated. “She’s just messing around.”

Slowly her feet disappeared into the cave’s tiny mouth. Moments later Monroe shrieked, causing Ortmann to roll his eyes.

“Oh! Meeker, don’t do that!” he heard Monroe protest, followed by the sound of a smack.

“Hey! I was just kidding!” Meeker objected.

Putting Ellia’s pack into the opening, Ortmann shoved it along and joined them. As Meeker had said, the entrance was much the smallest part of the cave. Once inside it sloped gently downwards for a couple dozen feet, terminating in a large, cavernous space. The hill, evidently, did little more than house the entrance. The rest was underground.

“Isn’t this great?” Meeker enthused, raising her arms to the dirt walls. “It’s perfect! You couldn’t ask for a better hideaway.”

“What are those?” Monroe asked, pointing to some sheets of stone that were laid against the back wall. Moving slowly towards them, she could just make out faint drawings in the weak light of Ortmann’s lamp.

“Oh, those?” Meeker asked without interest. “Just some doodles the previous residents left behind. They were scattered all around the cave, so I piled ‘em in the back when I first came here to get them out of the way. Now we have all the space we’ll need!”

Taking the lamp from the scrappy Daeldisian, Monroe knelt before the sheets and examined them. None of them larger than eight-by-eight inches, they were thick, heavy, and featured crude drawings with little figures.

“What is it?” Ortmann asked, noticing her intense interest. “Something important?”

“I...don’t know,” she replied distractedly, taking one up in her delicate fingers and moving it. “I’ll have to...sort them out. Try to make some sense of them. I *think* they’re in some kind of sequence.”

“Like a story?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, story or no story, I’m *starving*,” Meeker interjected, her hands on her hips. “Can we eat something now?”

“Oh, of course,” Monroe said, briefly breaking the trance the drawings had drawn her into. “I’ll just be at this for a little while. Please start without me.”

“You need to eat and rest, Ellia,” Ortmann replied. “We’ve got an early start ahead of us.”

“I know,” she uttered quietly. “But there’s something special about these tablets. I can feel it.”

“Well, you do what you think is best,” Meeker said indifferently, popping off her boots and settling on the floor, her legs wrapped around Ortmann’s pack. “I’m just gonna dig in,” she added, opening the main flap and rummaging around with her dirty hands.

Seeing that Monroe was already absorbed by the tablets once again, Ortmann decided to leave her to them for the time being. Standing behind Meeker, he reached down over her head and drew a can of beans out of his pack. Cutting the top open with a knife, he grabbed a camp spoon with tines out of one of his pack’s side pockets and moved to the opposite side of the cave from his fellow Daeldisian. Sitting down, he rested his back against the wall, finding it, along with the floor, surprisingly cool.

For a long moment he looked at Monroe, curious what it was about the tablets that had so arrested her interest. Glancing at his spoon long enough to fill it with beans, he scraped them off with his teeth and chewed slowly as he gazed at her.

"Ellia?" he asked in a low voice, trying not to startle her. "Ellia?" he repeated a little louder.

"Oh, leave her alone," Meeker said, moving between them and sitting down right beside him, her body pressed against his. "Can't you see she's busy?" she asked, taking a bite out of a piece of bread.

"Anyone can see that," he replied shortly. "But it's more than that. She's *fascinated* by a bunch of stone plates when she ought to be dead tired and starving."

"Well, she's a strange girl," Meeker opined with a shrug. "You can't ever account for folks like that. They just go off and do what they want whether it makes any sense or not."

"Don't get on her case again."

"I'm not!" she protested. "Boy, you're so sensitive these days. Why don't you just roast me for dinner and get me out of your hair? At least then you'd have a hot meal. In more ways than one," she winked and nudged him.

"Aren't you a little chipper for someone who just lost her father?" he shot back, trying to cool her flirtations.

"I suppose I am," she admitted, the smile fading from her lips. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be flippant. Well, I *do*. It's just...I don't know what to do about it. I felt so cold when Daddy died. Like my world had ended. When you reminded me how he got to be in charge in the first place, I didn't want to hear it, though I knew you were right. And then to hear that Doc Wilson did the same thing to him that he'd done to those others, well, I guess it just seemed natural somehow. He'd lived in a violent way, and he went out that way. I suppose that sounds pretty stupid. I ought to be crumbling to bits with tears right now, but I just don't feel that way. He died the way he lived, and it was all sort of poetic in working out that way." She paused and looked at him. "Does that make any sense?"

"Quite a lot," he replied, impressed to see her show a little depth of thought.

“Good, ‘cause I don’t think it makes any sense to me,” she chuckled. “That was just the only way I could put it. But if it makes sense to you, I guess it’s got to have something to it. You never did miss a trick.”

“Easy, girl,” he told her.

“What?” she asked innocently.

“I’m committed,” he replied, nodding towards Ellia. “Or have you forgotten already?”

“Who could forget Little Miss Mystic?” she said, rolling her eyes. “I know! I know! I know!” she added quickly, raising her hands. “Please judge, have mercy! Don’t throw the book at me!”

“On what grounds?” he asked, amused despite himself.

“On the grounds that I shouldn’t be punished for my passion,” she said with a playful grin, though her eyes told a far more sincere, vulnerable story.

“Don’t go there, Meeks.”

“Why not?” she asked in an earnest whisper, twisting towards him and sitting on her legs. “How much do you know about Ellia? I mean really? You’ve known her for a few weeks. Whoop-dee-doo! Sure, you’re both head-over-heels in love right now. But these things pass off like indigestion in no time. We’ve both seen it.”

“What’s your point?” he asked, unconvinced.

“My point is that she’s got to go back to her own planet sometime. You can’t expect her to stick around this dump when she’s all done with the guy that killed her daddy. Who would? She can’t live on love, you know. Sooner or later she’ll get tired of Daeldis and go back to Rimmis. And you know you can’t follow her there, because they don’t allow folks like us, without a high-tech trade to our name, to immigrate. So you’re stuck here.”

“She’ll stay here,” he replied. “Or we’ll move to some other planet. But we’ll be together, either way.”

“Did she tell you that?” Meeker prodded. “Did she actually say it?”

“She didn’t have to. Sometimes you just know about these things.”

“Like you knew about—,” she all but blurted out, stopping herself short. “I’m sorry, Markus,” she said quickly, shaking her head.

"That was stupid."

"Yes, it was," he replied.

"I just don't want you to get hurt again," she said quietly, reaching out and giving his hand a little squeeze. "I know what it did to you last time. It would break my heart if it happened again."

"You don't have to worry about me."

"But that's what you do when you care about someone." she replied slowly. "You worry about 'em. You want what's best for 'em."

"And that's you?" he asked.

"You could do a lot worse," she answered with a little grin. "Besides, I'm a couple years younger than Ellia. You'll have me around longer."

"You don't pick a girl like you pick a horse, Meeks. It either strikes you or it doesn't, like lightning."

"Well, maybe that's your problem: you're just not thinking practically enough. You're all caught up in visions of love when you should be thinking just how you'd live with that girl on a day-to-day basis. I mean, what are you gonna do together? What are your shared interests outside of walking and getting into trouble? Ever since you met there's been a mission for you two to collaborate on. That's drawn you together. But what are you gonna do when it's over?"

"We'll figure it out."

"You don't have *any* answers, do you?"

"None that'll satisfy you, apparently."

"That's right, 'cause I've got my feet on the ground and you don't. You're spinning up there with the clouds."

"Clouds don't spin."

"Oh, don't get technical with me. You know what I mean." She glanced over her shoulder at Monroe, ensuring she was still absorbed in her task. "Anyway, I just want you to think about that. A Meeker in the hand is worth more than two Ellias in the bush."

"One Ellia is enough for me," he responded, as she shifted again and rested her back against the wall, stretching her legs out before her.

"A romantic to the end," she shook her head. "Well, I'll be here all the same, in case you change your mind."

"Good to know."

A quiet handful of minutes passed by, during which Meeker shifted again, moving closer.

"Knock it off."

"I'm not making a pass at you, I'm just cold," she replied, rubbing her arms. "Don't you feel that?"

Sitting perfectly still, he hadn't. But with a little movement, he realized the surface of his skin had indeed chilled down.

"Yeah," he said curiously, glancing around the space for the source of the cold, for he could readily tell it wasn't merely the coolness of the ground and wall. "Where's it coming from?"

"Search me," she replied, drawing her legs against her chest and pressing herself against him, her head leaning against his shoulder. "Too bad we don't have any blankets. I wish—."

She released a muffled yelp as he clamped his hand over her mouth. Sitting up and glaring at him, she calmed down when their eyes met and she found in them a note of warning. He pressed a finger to his lips and nodded towards Monroe. Twisting her head as Ortmann let go, Meeker gasped at the sight of a faintly visible figure talking to the Rimmian. Wearing only a pair of leather breeches and an ornate necklace of animal teeth, he looked human, though with different proportions. His cheekbones were much wider, his neck long and almost delicate. His entire form was light and birdlike, and his skin looked thin and sensitive. Earnestly he spoke to Ellia, though in low tones that didn't reach the two observers.

"Who's *that*?" Meeker asked quietly, looking at Ortmann and nodding emphatically to her right.

"How would I know?" he asked in a whisper, his tone distracted as he studied the apparition.

"Well, you've been hanging out with Little Miss—," she began, before his hand went to her mouth again.

"Just keep quiet, for once in your life," he said without looking at her. "This is something big."

Huffily she drew her head back, and he let go. At just that moment Monroe gestured towards her companions, causing the

figure to turn and look at them. Meeker all but jumped out of her skin when she saw his eye sockets were hollow. The bone, or what would have been bone in a living person, was transparent, allowing her to see right through him. Reflexively she seized Ortmann's leg with her hand.

"We're being haunted!" she gasped urgently. "He's a ghost!"

"That's clear enough," he replied, watching as the figure turned back to Ellia and continued their dialogue. "But he doesn't look like he means to cause us any trouble. He's just here to talk."

"How do you know that?" she asked desperately, squeezing his leg still tighter. "Maybe he wants to take our souls, or something!"

"I think he would have done that already, if that was his plan."

"Shouldn't we go check on Ellia?" Meeker asked. "Maybe she's in a trance, and he's sucking out her spirit!"

Intuiting Meeker's concern with her gift, Monroe glanced in their direction just after she'd spoken and gave Ortmann a small, serene smile.

"She's alright," he concluded.

"But what if that guy just *wants* us to think that?"

"Then go over and talk to him."

In shock her head jerked towards him.

"What? Me? No way! She's *your* girlfriend, after all!"

With a grin Ortmann laid his head against the wall and continued to watch, gazing over her head.

"You're awfully cool about all this," Meeker observed pointedly. "Aren't you worried about her? Maybe he's trying to seduce her! He's just her type: all mysticism and no substance!"

"This is her bag, Meeks," he answered. "Not mine. Besides, what do you want me to do? Shoot him?"

"Well...maybe!" she responded, unsure what else to say. "Anything's better than just sitting around *watching!*"

"If you're so worried, get on my other side."

"Why?"

"So that when he comes for our souls, he'll get yours last."

"Oh, sure, tease me," she replied dramatically. "Just for that, I *am* gonna let him get you first," she added, carefully getting to her

feet and gingerly stepping over his legs. Settling down on his left side, she continued to watch. "What do you think they're saying?" she whispered in his ear, all her sass suddenly gone.

"They're probably comparing soul recipes."

"Can't you be serious about *any* of this?"

"Why?" he asked, shifting a little and crossing his arms.

"We won't know anything until they're done talking, anyhow."

"Then let's interrupt," she replied. "Find out what's going on."

"We haven't been invited," he observed. "Or haven't you noticed? This is a party for two."

"Well, then let's be party crashers," she said, scrunching a little closer, her body language at variance with her words. "Just so long as we're not doing nothing."

"Sometimes that's the best thing to do." Feeling her hands work their way around his arm, he looked at her with a puzzled expression. "You're really coming unglued, aren't you?"

"Shh!" she insisted. "Maybe that's what he wants. Maybe he softens you up first so your soul is easier to take."

"Do you have any idea how silly you sound?"

"Oh! He's looking this way again!" she squealed, hiding her face behind his shoulder and wishing she could vanish. "Those eyes! Those horrible eyes!"

"He hasn't got any eyes," Ortmann commented dryly.

"That's the point!" she replied, whimpering. "Oh, I wish we'd never come here!"

With this last statement Ortmann could hear a shift in her tone. Where she'd been scared before, she was now petrified, losing control of herself. With some reluctance he put a protective arm around her shoulders.

"It's alright, Meeks," he assured her, as she tucked herself up against him and continued to watch. "It's alright."

Following her eyes back to Monroe and the figure, he noted a kind of intimacy between them that hadn't been there shortly before. Apparently they'd hit it off, and were rapidly becoming friends. Animatedly he spoke to her, his arms soon waving about to emphasize some point or other. With unblinking focus Ellia listened

to what he had to say, only rarely speaking now that he was in high gear. Several times he made reference to the stones on the floor behind him, which faintly glowed an eerie yellow. It was then that Ortmann noticed the slight hint of yellow that outlined the figure's body, and he realized the two were linked together somehow. Lacking familiarity with the nature of hauntings, he was reluctant to hazard a guess. Though privately he toyed with the notion that the figure was some kind of projection from the tablets.

Finally, nearly an hour after Meeker had packed herself up against his left side, the mysterious man evaporated and Monroe joined them.

"Who was that?" Meeker asked in an insistent whisper, doubtfully glancing around lest the figure reappear beside her and take her soul.

"His name is Frell," Ellia replied, settling on the floor before them and crossing her legs.

"/s?" she clarified. "Don't you mean *was*?"

"One could say it either way and still be right," Monroe answered in a tired voice. Though fascinated by the discussion and stimulated to no end by what she'd learned, the journey that had preceded it left her spent, eager only for a meal and sleep. "I can't even begin to tell you all the things he shared with me," she shook her head, scarcely believing it wasn't a dream. "It's a revelation, a true breakthrough."

"What did he say?" Ortmann prompted her, after she'd paused and withdrawn into thought for a few moments.

"Oh, well, an awful lot. Honestly I'm having a hard time keeping it all straight."

"Let's start with who he was," he replied. "You can build out from there."

"Sure, okay," she nodded, trying to organize her jumbled thoughts. "Um, he was the son of a chieftain of sorts among the people that Tholoambelet used to raise like cattle. I say of sorts, because they didn't really have any rulers. More like heads of groups that Tholoambelet established to make managing them easier. I guess overseer would be a better word, but the role lacked the clinical sterility that we tend to give it. He was more of an appointed

father figure, someone people went to with their ills. Maybe more like a priest of sorts? A midway point between them and, if you'll pardon the expression, their god?"

"We get the idea," Ortmann assured her, as she was about to refine the point still further. "Go ahead."

"Well, anyway, Frell was his son, and that gave him a certain amount of standing. Not that they had a particularly advanced social structure: Tholoambelet saw to that. He didn't want them raising up anything like a civilized hierarchy, because that would threaten his sway over them. He wanted them vulnerable and easy to control. And a flat social structure with as few leaders as possible enabled that."

"But what happened to them?" Meeker inquired quietly, her voice small. "Why'd their history just stop all of a sudden?"

"Because like a massive wave, they all crashed against him at once," she explained. "A small rebellion of those nearest to Tholoambelet's temple sparked a revolution that quickly spread throughout their ranks. Every able-bodied member of their society assaulted his temple and stormed his throne room. Like flies they dropped before his psychic powers, no match for the gifts he brought to bear on them. When only the weak and feeble were left, he drained their life essence to recover from his exertions, marking the end of Frell's people. And then he dropped into a profound state of dormancy that lasted for ages."

"What, he fell asleep?" Meeker asked.

"No, he entered stasis, sustained by the technology his people had brought along when they visited Daeldis. You see, his temple is partially made from the battered remains of the ship he came in. Near the throne room is a kind of medical chamber or pod that extends his life and lessens his need for life force. Without it, he would have been forced to drain all life on this world eons ago, after which he would have starved."

"Couldn't he have just left?" Meeker queried. "Why stay here after all that hubbub? There must have been juicier worlds to suck dry."

"Apparently his ship was damaged when he landed here, and only certain parts still worked. Like the stasis chamber. Much of

the rest of it was crippled and subsequently removed. Through the forced labor of his slaves, he rebuilt whole sections of it in wood and stone, which is what most people mean when they speak today about the temple. They'd be surprised to see how advanced some of the inner rooms are. And how alien."

"You're talking as though you've seen them already," Ortmann observed, noting a far away look in her eyes.

"I have," she replied. "In a sense. Frell made me see what he'd seen through his wonderfully descriptive language. It's truly extraordinary what he was able to tell me, like a kind of audio-visual poetry. His words seemed to create images inside my mind, painting a picture with my imagination."

"Told you he was pushing her buttons," Meeker whispered in his ear none-too-quietly.

"Pushing my buttons?" Monroe asked with a puzzled look. "No, we were just talking. He knows what we're trying to accomplish here, and he wants to help any way he can."

"And how do you know you can trust him?" she countered. "And while you're answering that, maybe you can explain how he can appear at all. I mean, he was sucked dry like an orange, right?"

"That's one of the peculiarities of Daeldis: it retains a faint trace of those who have passed their lives here. That's why Tholoambelet chose this world in the first place: it perpetuates the energies of its past residents, providing him with a very weak field of life force to draw from. It allows his technology to function and keeps him alive."

"Then his ship runs on life force, too?" Ortmann clarified.

"Strange as it sounds, yes," she confirmed.

"Who would ever make such horrible technology?" Meeker shivered. "It's like they're a bunch of vampires or something. Besides, isn't that pretty stupid? Couldn't they fuel their craft a lot easier with something a little less...gross?"

"Oh, it gets a lot more gross than that," Monroe replied. "Believe me."

"I don't want to know," Meeker insisted, looking away and holding up her hand. "No, thank you."

"Go ahead," Ortmann nodded.

“What?” Meeker asked, jerking her head his way with betrayal in her eyes. “Don’t you care how I feel about this? Even a little bit?”

“You can plug your ears if you want,” he uttered simply. “But we’re not gonna charge his temple and get mowed down like Frell’s folks did. We’re gonna get the complete picture so we know what we’re up against.”

“Oh, fine,” Meeker frowned, crossing her arms as Ortmann removed his from her shoulders. “Hey, it’s still chilly in here, you know,” she objected.

“You’re a big girl.”

“I’m five-feet-two, Markus Ortmann,” she responded, taking his arm in her hands and draping it around herself once more. “I need all the help I can get.”

Unable to help grinning at her plucky dependency, Ortmann nodded for Monroe to continue.

“Well, like I said, it gets a lot more gross than that,” she resumed. “Tholoambelet belongs to a race called the Behrollen. Like parasites they travel the universe in search of victims. Without hesitation or mercy they descend upon a given world, draining the life from its inhabitants before simply moving on. Truly a countless number of worlds have fallen to their hunger. But when they came to Daeldis, they knew they had something different on their hands. A world that could sustain in perpetuity, even if only dimly, the life essence of its residents was an extraordinary find. Electing to stay behind when the rest of the Behrollen moved on, Tholoambelet bred a handful of Frell’s ancestors that had been spared for that purpose. Depending on his technology to sustain him until they grew numerous enough for him to feed on them regularly, he experimented with what Frell called ‘The Glow.’”

“‘The Glow?’” Meeker queried.

“Yes, it’s an energy field that permeates the planet. It’s made from the combined essences of all Daeldisians, from its earliest days up to the present. A vast, ghostly colony surrounds us at all times, though of course they’re only fragments – little pieces of the original beings they were drawn from.”

"You mean the entire *planet* is haunted?" Meeker nearly squealed, looking around again and huddling closer to Ortmann.

"She's a little anxious about ghosts," Ortmann explained to Monroe. "Always has been."

"Well, why shouldn't I be?" she replied defensively. "They're scary! They walk through walls and listen to your thoughts and try to take your soul!"

"That's silly, Meeker," Monroe said gently, trying to coach her in the right direction. "You know it is."

"How can you say that?" she shot back. "You just got finished talking with someone who wants to overthrow Tholoambelet. Okay, great. But *you're* the silly one if you think he's the only one who takes an interest in the affairs of the living. Why would he be? Why wouldn't there be others who want to hurt us? There must have been rotten apples among Frell's people. Shoot, how do we even know that *Frell* isn't one of 'em?"

"I would have sensed it if he was," Ellia assured her. "I could feel his essence quite clearly. He was pure, surprisingly so. He doesn't want to hurt us."

"Yeah, well, maybe he was just letting you see a part of himself. We living folks hide and cheat and manipulate each other all day long. Why should it be any different for the dead?"

"You're panicking, Meeker," Monroe said in a motherly tone. "You're seeing threats where there aren't any. You need to relax."

"That's easy for you to say!" she exclaimed. "You *like* all this nonsense! Dead people floating around; aliens that suck your brain out; magic planets. All I know is my head is spinning!"

"You're just worked up," Monroe replied, as though counseling one of her students. "Nothing's changed, really. Just our perception of the world around us. Now we *know* more. But Daeldis is the same old place it's always been. You don't need to be alarmed."

"Well, I *am* alarmed," she insisted, crossing her arms again. Then her face went blank with realization. "Wait, does that mean *I'm* already a part of this circus? The planet's already taken a scoop of my soul out for itself?"

Grimacing as she tried to find a diplomatic way to confirm the girl's fears, Monroe glanced at Ortmann.

"We've all been sampled at this point, Meeks," he said.

"I...I don't believe this," she said with a shudder, standing up and pacing anxiously. "I don't *feel* any different," she uttered, patting her stomach, chest, and finally her head to check them. "I *seem* the same. I *feel* the same."

"It's not like you'd notice any difference now," Ortmann replied evenly. "You're used to it, however it works."

"Then it's sucking on me right now? Draining my life force?" she whimpered.

"It's okay, Meeker," Monroe said, rising from where she sat and putting her hands on the fretting Daeldisian's shoulders. "You're okay. It doesn't suck the life out of you like Tholoambelet does."

"That's *just* what it does!" she replied. "Just slower! Quieter! Like a dripping faucet! Oh, this is horrible!"

"Why?" Ortmann asked, likewise standing. "Humans have lived here for centuries, Meeks."

"Yeah, and they've all died by fifty!"

"Your old man made it to sixty," he pointed out.

"He was just a lucky exception! Don't you get it, Markus? This planet doesn't just take a snapshot like some camera! It's actively draining our lives. That must be why everything is so rundown all the time: nobody really has the strength to keep up *anything*. It's milking us like a bunch of cows and we're worn down by it!"

Ortmann looked at Monroe.

"What do you think?"

"Well, that's certainly possible," she admitted. "Frell said that the planet doesn't drain very much. But it could be a great deal harder on us, given our weaker natures. Evidently his people were quite robust, and they may have been able to weather it without the same side effects."

"What are we, the weak cousins or something?" Meeker asked, not really expecting an answer as her mind was too caught up in the fear that her life was dripping away with each passing second.

"It seems that way," Monroe replied. "Clearly we're related to Frell's people, though how I don't know."

"It's odd that we'd be the *weak* cousins, given that he looked so fragile," Ortmann observed, leaning against the dirt wall.

"Who cares what he looked like!" Meeker exclaimed. "We're all getting older by the second. Doesn't that bother anybody?"

"What would you like to do about it?" Ortmann asked. "It's not like we can leave Daeldis."

"Why not? What's holding us here? I'm sure we could scratch together some money and book passage for three on some dingy old freighter! Y-you could sell off that place of yours, Markus, and we could even work for a little while if we had to. Just long enough to get off this horrible rock!"

"We've got a mission here, Meeks," he said with finality. "We're not taking off so long as Tholoambelet is knocking around."

"Why? Why does it matter to us what he does? He's been preying on folks for hundreds of years. So what? So has the jungle. I guarantee you more people have been killed by snakes and sylgens and blue spiders than have died from Tholoambelet."

"But that won't always be the case, Meeker," Monroe uttered. "Frell told me that he's getting stronger. Eventually he may be able to reassert his rulership over Daeldis. If that happens, everyone alive today will be fed upon as Frell's people were. They'll be a second herd for him to consume."

"That's why we have to act now," Ortmann seconded. "While he's weak enough to be taken down."

"Oh!" groaned Meeker angrily, stamping her foot. Torn between survival and her conscience, she was finding it impossible to reconcile the two. "So that's it, then? We go off and fight the big bad monster while Daeldis keeps happily snacking on us?" She looked at Ortmann. "You're okay with Little Miss Mystic here pouring her life force out?"

"Don't see any way around it, Meeks. Tholoambelet's got to go, and we're the only ones who'll take him out. Besides, it's not gonna take that long to finish with him and then get off world. He'll probably even have some kind of treasure or tech in his temple that we can sell to buy passage."

Meeker perked up at this notion.

"You think so?"

"Sure. Human dictators wrap themselves in gold and jewels and whatnot. Stands to reason Tholoambelet would, too, just to remind the slaves how far above them he is. It's good for maintaining the power dynamic."

Slowly Meeker nodded as the gears in her head cranked round.

"Yes, I think you're right," she agreed. "That would get us off world faster than just bolting for Boulimar right now would. And besides," she added, trying to stifle the smile that was forcing itself onto her lips. "We might just make a little something extra from selling off his treasures."

"We might just," Ortmann smiled in return, inwardly rolling his eyes at her materialism in such a situation, but unwilling to say anything that might blunt her change of heart. "We'll probably come out of this rich."

"Oh, I don't care about being rich," she said unconvincingly. "I just want to make sure we have enough to live once we get off Daeldis, you know? Some kind of stake until we get established."

"Sure."

"I don't want to dampen the mood any," Monroe said. "But I should have added that we'll need to stay here a little while. Frell has some important techniques from his people to teach me; methods of guiding the mind that will help me stand before Tholoambelet."

"But if all his people throwing themselves at him couldn't manage—," Meeker uttered, stopping short.

"I know," Monroe assured her. "But Tholoambelet is weak from ages of starvation rations. Besides, I just have to last long enough to get those grenades out of my pocket and throw them at him."

"There's no chance of that," Ortmann interjected. "I'm not about to let you go in there."

"I'm afraid we don't have any choice," she responded. "Frell told me all about it: the only way in is through a door that only Tholoambelet can control. He wants me in there, so of course he'll

let me in. He might let you pass as well, given that we're together. But there's no way he'd admit you by yourself."

"But why would he do that?" Meeker objected. "You've got those grenades."

"That's part of the reason why we've got to stay in this cave with Frell for a few days: he's going to help me strengthen my resistance to Tholoambelet's mind."

"But...couldn't he just take a peek into *our* brains and figure out what you're doing?"

"He's too weak to penetrate a non-psychic mind," she answered, shaking her head. "He can't intrude on your thoughts. Not yet, anyway."

"Well, that's something," Meeker nodded.

"So you just want us to escort you there," Ortmann began. "Then we're supposed to sit on our hands while you blow this guy up?"

"That seems to be the only way," Monroe replied sympathetically, aware of how trying a notion it was for him to accept. "Naturally if there were other psychics that he also wanted to invite in, we could see about joining forces with them. But there'd always be the risk that one of them would feel loyal to Tholoambelet and betray us. And that's just not a chance we could take."

"Who on Daeldis would feel loyal to that monster?" Meeker asked incredulously.

"Some people have gone over to him willingly," Ortmann answered, as Monroe shifted uncomfortably on her feet. "They believed he was a kind of god and threw themselves behind what they thought was his cause."

"How could anyone be that stupid?"

"People will do all sorts of things," he replied, glancing at Ellia. "When they're desperate."

"Well, then it's a good thing we're all grounded, level-headed folks," Meeker said, her eyes narrowing a little as she noticed the look that Ortmann and Monroe quietly shared. "So, how long will we have to stay here?"

"Probably just a few days," Monroe answered, looking from Ortmann to the squat Daeldisian. "Frell didn't think it would take very

long. He has a method of entering my mind that will let him train me much faster than a normal trainer—.”

“Whoa!” Meeker objected. “Hold on. Time out. He’s gonna enter your *what?*”

“I know that sounds risky,” Monroe began.

“Uh, *yeah*, and crazy to boot! Look, I know you’re a trusting person, and that probably even makes sense where you come from, given everyone is at least decently nice. It helps you get along with them. But out here, you learn to distrust from an early age, and with good reason. Folks’ll cut your throat if given half a chance. How do you know that Frell’s not just worming his way inside your skull to do some kind of harm? Shoot, is it even Frell, really? He’s just a kind of projection, from his telling; something Daeldis has held over from the past. What if he’s just a key whose purpose is to unlock your mind? Then maybe he can suck you drier than a cork. Ah! I know, I know,” she held up her hand, forestalling a response from the Rimmian.

“You didn’t feel anything bad in his aura or whatever.”

“That’s correct,” Ellia agreed somewhat self-consciously. “I didn’t.”

“Has it occurred to you that this nasty little rock has been at this a lot longer than you have? Shoot, what if it’s the one playing a game on Tholoambelet, using him to breed another herd so *it* can suck them dry?”

“I...don’t think...” Monroe responded hesitantly, unable to help finding some sense in what she was saying. “But then why would he offer to help me?”

“*Hello?!* He hasn’t actually taught you anything yet. Just held out a promise. Nothing is cheaper than words, especially words spoken by a *ghost*.”

“Just settle down, Meeks.”

“Sure, and let Ellia get her brains sucked out through a straw,” she retorted with a roll of her eyes. “Well, fine: you do what you want to do. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Frowning as she looked between them, she turned on her heels and made for the small entrance. “I need some air,” she said over her shoulder, crawling through the opening and disappearing into the night.

“What got her so upset?” Monroe asked, drawing close to Ortmann and likewise watching the dark hole. “Up one minute and down the next. Every half-minute, really. I didn’t think she was so mercurial.”

“She just lost her father,” Ortmann answered. “It’s got her all torn up inside, but she doesn’t know it.”

“Oh, duh,” Ellia said, lightly smacking her forehead with the heel of her hand. “That was stupid of me. Of course she’s out of sorts. Anyone would be.” She paused for a moment and gazed at the opening as she thought. “Actually, she’s holding up surprisingly well.”

“Meeks is pretty sturdy,” he replied, turning from the opening and fishing a can of beans out of his pack. Pulling out his knife, he began to work at the lid.

“She’s pretty cuddly, too,” Monroe added, joining him by the pack. “No sense of personal space with that girl.”

“Does that bother you?” he asked without looking up from his task.

“Well, nobody likes to see their man in the arms of another woman,” she replied, grimacing at her dramatic choice of words once they were out of her mouth.

He paused to glance at her for a moment.

“I told you we’ve got a history,” he replied factually, looking back at the can, the lid almost off. “We were pretty serious for about a year.”

“What happened?” she asked quietly.

“I realized I was using her to smooth over the pain I felt over...her. That’s when I ended it. She has too good a heart to be used like that.” Successfully removing the lid, he chucked it into a corner of the cave and handed the can to her. “There’s spoons in the pack,” he said, heading for the entrance.

“Where are you going?” she asked, as he climbed into the opening.

“To bring Meeker back. She’s too proud to come in on her own. She’s got to be asked.”

Crawling into the dark night, he was struck by how much warmer the air was outside the cave. Though naturally cooler given it was underground, it was still much colder than it had been before

Frell arrived. Whatever aura or atmosphere he'd brought in his wake lingered long after his departure. Assuming he really *had* left, Ortmann reflected as he stood up.

"Couldn't stand it in there either, eh?" Meeker asked, leaning against the hill, her arms crossed. "Sometimes she's just too pure for this life, you know?"

"That's why we've got to look after her," he replied, joining her and likewise crossing his arms. "She doesn't have a chance on her own. Too naive."

"You can say that again," Meeker said grumpily. "I mean, what does she really know about all this psychic stuff, anyhow? She's a library philosopher! A desk warmer! Doesn't she think that these characters are totally out of her league? Assuming they even *are* characters, and not just puppets of Daeldis."

"You got a better idea?" he countered. "Let's say we ignore Frell, and it turns out he was on the up and up about his teachings. She'd be walking into Tholoambelet's throne room dangerously exposed."

"So you're saying you *buy* all this?"

"I'm saying inaction is just as much a choice as action, Meeks. All you can do is make the best decision you know how to make and roll with it. Sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose. But that's all you can do."

"I suppose so," she reluctantly agreed. "I just wish she wasn't so wide-eyed about this whole thing. You'd think she'd found her long lost mentor or something. She just can't wait to sit at his feet and drink in everything he's got to say. There's no filter at all, no skepticism. Just blanket acceptance."

"Well, that's why you're here," he said with half a grin, nudging her with his side. "You've got skepticism to spare."

"Yeah," she said glumly.

"What is it, Meeks?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm missing Daddy," she replied with a little sniff. "It comes and goes."

"I thought so."

Drawing a big breath, she exhaled some of her emotion.

"I guess we'd better get back inside. Don't want her boyfriend to return while we're gone and suck her brains out. Not that I know what we'd do about it. It's not like you can shoot spirits, or whatever he is."

Crawling back inside first, Meeker shuddered from the chill as Ortmann got to his feet and brushed some of the dirt off his clothes.

"I hadn't realized just how *cold* it is in here," she said. Noting the way Ellia's eyes watched them both, a mischievous grin crossed her lips. In an instant she spun around and kissed Ortmann on the cheek. "Thank you so much," she uttered sweetly. "I feel much better now."

"Everything okay?" Monroe asked dubiously.

"Oh, it is now," Meeker assured her as Ortmann was about to speak, turning back to Ellia. "Everything's fine." Suddenly she felt a large, square hand smack her on the rear hard enough to make her yelp. "Hey! Who do you think you're smacking around?" she demanded, spinning back again to face him.

"You, if you don't cut that out," he replied seriously, staring down into her eyes until she blinked and looked away. Taking her wrist in his powerful grasp, he pulled her to where Ellia stood by the packs. Grabbing her wrist as well, though not so firmly, he looked between them. "We're gonna be stuck in here together for the next few days. So you'd both better get used to being one big, happy family." Feeling the chill on his own skin, he glanced around the cave before continuing. "We don't have any blankets, so we'll have to lay next to each other to pool heat."

"Couldn't we just sleep outside?" Monroe asked, not wishing to share him with his former girlfriend.

"Sure, if you want to be devoured by the mosquitoes, dogs, snakes—," Meeker began to rattle off.

"No, Ellia," Ortmann cut in. "It's best this way. We'll be out of sight of anything that decides to take a walk through the jungle, be it man or beast. And we'll be on hand if Frell comes back unexpectedly."

"Yes, we wouldn't want to miss *that*," Meeker said.

"I guess you're right," Monroe uttered reluctantly to Ortmann.

"Alright," Ortmann said, releasing his grip but still eyeing them with disappointment. "I *hope* we understand each other, and that there'll be no more of this nonsense."

"I'm sorry, Markus," Ellia said quietly, her eyes downcast.

"You won't get any trouble from *me*," Meeker said with insinuating flippancy.

"Good," he replied, turning to her. "Because I'm about out of patience with you," he added, his words striking the faint smile from her face and causing her likewise to look down. "Let's get some sleep."

CHAPTER 7

The next morning Ortmann awoke with a pair of girls pressed against him, their heads on either side of his chest, their arms unconsciously intertwined across his stomach. The night before they had maintained a rather chastened distance, smarting from his words. But as the hours passed and the cold of the room and floor passed into their bodies, they drew closer and closer, sleep removing all inhibitions as they unconsciously searched for warmth.

He'd fallen asleep with his fingers interlaced behind his head, a modest cushion between his skull and the large pack that served inadequately as his pillow. Spending the entire night in this position, his arms were stiff as boards. They complained painfully when he moved them over his head and shook them to get the blood flowing again.

Feeling a chill in his bones, he looked down at the girls once more and put a hand to each of them, making sure they hadn't gotten too cold. Satisfied that they were alright, though chillier than he was, he draped an arm over each of them. Ellia moaned softly and shifted a little, while Meeker immediately took his arm in both of her unconscious hands and pulled it tightly over her shoulder and along her side. Letting out a long, high pitched sigh, she smiled in her sleep, smacked her lips a few times, and began to gently snore.

Glancing around the cave to ensure Frell hadn't joined them for an early breakfast, he decided to give them another hour to catch up on their sleep. Carefully taking a deep breath so as not to disturb them, he closed his eyes and soon found himself drifting away.

"Hello, Markus Ortmann," a male voice said from behind him.

Opening his eyes with a start, Ortmann found himself in a dark, foggy place. Twelve paces ahead of him a silhouette was visible. His neck was long and his body was lean. Instantly he recognized Frell.

"What is this?" Ortmann asked, reflexively slipping his hand behind his back for the pistol. Finding it gone, his mouth tightened into a scowl. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"To speak with you," Frell replied, walking slowly forward on a floor of indefinable blackness. "We have much to discuss."

"About what?"

"Ellia Monroe."

"What about her?"

"You must keep her safe," he replied. "I can train her in the ways of my people. But our techniques won't see her through the jungle and into Tholoambelet's temple. Only you can do that."

"I intend to."

"You don't understand," he continued. "The jungle is more dangerous than it has ever been before. The animals are running wild, inflamed by the strife that they sense Tholoambelet is preparing to bring to Daeldis. Soon they will spill over into the cities your people have established. The suffering will be great."

"From what I'm piecing together, you're a large part of our suffering," Ortmann retorted. "You've been sucking us dry for ages."

"I have?" Frell asked.

"We're not quite as stupid as you seem to think," he answered. "Frell may be speaking, but Daeldis is the one doing the talking. So why don't you just cut out this puppet routine and give it to me straight?"

"Because Frell's faculties are a necessary intermediary for us to converse," the being replied, dropping its pretense. "Before he was consumed by Tholoambelet, we took a more complete sampling of Frell than anyone else among his people. He had a gift that permitted him to communicate across languages by employing psychic cues that stimulated the listener's own ability to produce mental images. Through a chain of such images, your native imagination is able to produce a kind of narrative that takes the place

of traditional language. It is at once understood, even by those who have never heard it before.”

“Is that how you’re speaking to me?”

“Partially. Under normal circumstances, it would not be possible for us to address you in any form given your lack of psychic faculties. But the times are grave, and we must expend the necessary energy to converse with one of your sort.”

“What do you mean *we*?” he asked.

“We are not, as you believe, Daeldis speaking to you. This world permits us to exist; it is the soil from which we grow; but it does not possess any intelligence of its own. We are what Frell’s people called The Glow. We are the combined fragments of countless lives mixed together into one harmonious whole. As a collective we live, and grow, and adapt to the challenges put before us.”

“Challenges like how to drain the human population?” he shot back.

“All life forms prey upon others for sustenance. Why should it be any different for The Glow? We take only what we need to support our existence, which has been terribly threatened by Tholoambelet and his ambitions.”

“What ambitions?”

“To join The Glow.”

“Why would he want to become just a fragment?” he asked skeptically.

“He doesn’t. He’s attempting to engineer a way to pass his entire personality over into us. Using our combined energy to fuel his powerful mind, he hopes to dominate the fragmentary shards that make up our collective, directing us to do his bidding and becoming the god of this world.”

“Could he?” Ortmann asked.

“It is very likely. He came close once before. But then Frell’s people rebelled, and his stock of psychics was destroyed and his plan was delayed.”

“It was you,” Ortmann said with instant realization. “You’re the reason Frell’s people suddenly threw themselves at him. You put them onto it.”

"Yes, that is true," The Glow replied serenely. "He had come much too close to penetrating the barrier between The Glow and his own psyche. Through the aid of many psychics, he was attempting to create an opening that, had it grown large enough, would have permitted him to pass into our collective. That could not be accepted, and we were forced to act."

"By killing Frell's people."

"Tholoambelet killed them."

"Only because you were driving them on like stampeding cattle," he said pointedly. "You were right behind them, cracking the whip."

"It was a necessary act. Tholoambelet could not be allowed to dominate our collective."

"Yeah, it would have spoiled your little party, wouldn't it?"

"The choice we made hurt us terribly," The Glow responded. "With Frell's people destroyed, we had no source to draw from to sustain ourselves. And with Tholoambelet draining our energy to sustain himself and his technology, we came dangerously close to dissipating altogether. Many fragments disintegrated as we were forced to decide which would survive and which would perish. Hoping that another people would reach Daeldis someday and furnish us with the tools to destroy Tholoambelet, we preserved Frell above all other fragments, carefully sustaining his imprint so that we could communicate when the time was right."

"And why did you wait until now?" he asked. "Why spring this on Ellia? There must have been other psychics you could have used."

"We have waited for the same reason Tholoambelet had been dormant until now: heretofore we have been much too weak to act. Even the energy it takes to speak with you now could not be spared until this time. We had to wait for the human population to grow sufficiently large to find the strength to take up the battle against the interloper and destroy him."

"Needed new batteries," he summarized scornfully.

"You have great anger towards us," The Glow observed. "But we bear none towards you. We wish only to cooperate with you, Ellia Monroe, and your companion Meeker. Together we can defeat

Tholoambelet, because he doesn't perceive any danger in such a naive and innocent young woman. He has sensed her power and wishes to add it to his own. But he feels sure he can twist her to his will, as he did her father."

"Ellia won't turn," Ortmann shook his head. "Her old man was desperate – washed up and over the hill. He was looking for a savior to escape his old age. Ellia doesn't have that problem."

"Tholoambelet is seductive and cunning," The Glow responded. "That is why such care must be taken with her training: she must be given the tools to keep him at bay long enough for the weapons she carries to be employed against him. Otherwise he will dominate her mind with beautiful notions that she will be unable to resist. Deceived by utopian visions of eternal life, she will then surrender herself to him, placing her power in his hands and hastening the day when he will be able to join with us. Should that occur, this world will become a fortress of evil."

"How in the world could he promise eternal life?"

"By using his powerful mind to give her a greater awareness of The Glow; of the peaceful, strifeless existence that we lead, and then leading her to believe she could join us alongside him if she surrenders herself."

"Is that what her father did?"

"Yes."

"Can he make good on that promise?"

"Possibly. There has never been a case of it occurring. But with Tholoambelet's great abilities, he may indeed find a way. The difficulty is in bringing such a small mind into our presence. Tholoambelet has nothing to fear from us, because his psyche is much too powerful to be effaced by our collective pressure. The contrary, as I have already stated, is the case. But for a human intelligence to pass into our domain would likely end in disaster. Like a small piece of fruit trodden underfoot, she would almost certainly be crushed. Unless, perhaps, her newfound lord should expend his own energies to sustain her."

"Not very likely."

"Indeed not. He would certainly dispense with her life the instant she ceased to be useful to him."

Ortmann eyed the strange figure for a moment.

"Why'd you bring me here?" he asked. "What's really on your mind?"

"We have already said what our purpose was: to speak of the necessity of protecting Ellia Monroe, and to warn you of the dangers that lie ahead."

"Yeah, and if you know me half as well as you seem to, you'd know I'd never let anything hurt her. You've got some other purpose for talking to me. I'd say you're feeling me out."

"To what end?"

"Probably to see if I'm gonna get in your way," he replied. "To make sure I'm not gonna mess with your plans. You've got Ellia eating out of your hand, and you like it that way. You already know about Meeker's skepticism, and you're curious if I share it. You want to know if I'm gonna come between you and your weapon."

Frell's eyeless face smiled.

"You're very wise, Markus Ortmann. That was indeed our true purpose, although we *did* also wish to press upon you the necessity of staying alert. In a short time the jungle has changed, and we couldn't let you discover that the hard way. Too much hangs in the balance."

"Sure, and you could have just passed that along through Ellia," he observed, crossing his arms. "You didn't have to expend the extra energy it takes to talk to me."

Again he smiled.

"You will keep her safe," The Glow opined, as Frell's body began to dissolve into mist. "You are much too suspicious to allow anything to happen to her. We are grateful to you for that."

Before he could respond the strange interview ended, and he found himself once again flat on his back, a girl on either side of him. Jolting upright, he looked around but saw no visitors.

"Is it morning already?" Meeker asked groggily, his movement awakening her. Raising her head and looking towards the opening of the cave, she saw it was dark. "Can't be," she decided, lowering her head again. "Sun isn't up yet."

A faint rumble of thunder managed to find its way in through the entrance, the dirt ceiling being far too thick to transmit any noise

at all. Meeker answered it with a groan.

Getting to his feet, Ortmann crawled part of the way out the opening and heard rain falling steadily outside. Poking his head out long enough to find the sun behind a dense bank of clouds, he concluded it was around ten. He relayed as much upon his return.

"Oh, I think I could sleep another day," Monroe said, stretching her thin arms over her head and yawning. "I can't believe it's still cold in here," she added, hugging herself and rubbing her sides for warmth. "Whatever that effect is from Frell, I thought it would be gone by morning."

"Maybe he isn't really gone," Meeker offered, peeking around dubiously. "Maybe he just wants us to *think* he's gone. Oh, I know you think he's the greatest thing since...I don't know, books, or something. But I've still got my doubts."

"Keep 'em," Ortmann told her. "I don't think he's playing a completely straight game with us, either."

This comment drew his fellow Daeldisian's pleased attention.

"You don't? Really? Oh, good," she uttered, standing up. "I thought I was the only one here who knew something else was going on. What changed your mind?"

"Nothing changed my mind," he responded, taking a knee before his pack and rifling it for breakfast. "I've never been a fan of his. I just wasn't gonna go off half-cocked like you."

"Aw, come on. Something must have changed," she insisted.

"Let's say I had a chance to sleep on it," he answered, his tone final.

"Okay, have your secrets," she shrugged indifferently, though she was dying to know. Feeling isolated the night before, she was glad to feel she had an ally. Especially since she fancied it gave her an advantage over Monroe in what she considered to be the battle for his affections. "So, what are we gonna do today, Boss?" she asked pluckily, moving a little closer than necessary to dig through his pack for something to eat. When he raised a quizzical eyebrow at her choice of nickname, she explained: "Well, that's what you are, right? I said you'd be the boss when we started out on this

little vacation of ours.” Taking a can of meat out of the pack, she began to work the lid open with her small knife.

“Sure,” he said without conviction, aware that she was just trying to butter him up with a little tactically applied respect. Glancing over his shoulder at the sound of rustling behind him, he saw Monroe crawling out the entrance to take a look at the storm. “While you’re at it, get something open for Ellia, too,” he instructed Meeker, working hard to stifle a grin.

“What for?” she asked, looking up from her labors. “She can get her own—,” she stopped, noticing the look in his eye. Grinding her teeth at having her bluff called, she forced a smile and nodded. “Of course. Like I said, *you’re* the boss.”

The morning passed off awkwardly, neither girl speaking to the other any more than necessary despite Ortmann’s warning of the night before. Both made furtive attempts to speak to Ortmann as though the other wasn’t present. But scarcely a half dozen sentences would be exchanged before the excluded girl would chime in to make sure she didn’t end up sidelined. Eventually they gave up on talking altogether, sitting in a loose trio against one of the walls, waiting for their visitor to return. Meeker was the first to notice the temperature begin to drop. When a shiver ran through her body, she spoke up at last.

“I think our little friend from last night is about to—.”

“Frell!” Ellia exclaimed, jumping to her feet and bolting to the apparently empty rear of the cave. Dropping to her knees and quickly folding her legs under herself, she began to talk in an animated whisper to the air before her.

“Has she lost her marbles?” Meeker asked, eyeing the spectacle.

“Our friend Frell hasn’t decided to show himself this time,” Ortmann explained.

“Oh? He can do that?” she asked with aversion, glancing around the space. “Makes you wonder if he’s got any friends. Maybe he brought the whole goofy family along.”

“I doubt it.”

“And why not?”

“Because they’ve got better things to do than stand around and spy on us while we sit here talking.”

“But what if that’s why the cave was cold the whole night through? Maybe they kept a guard on us.” Her face flushed with realization. “Maybe they’re holding us as prisoners in here until they can finish Ellia’s indoctrination!”

“Calm down.”

“You don’t know that *isn’t* the case,” she replied. “Have you *tried* leaving?”

“How do you think I knew where the sun was? It’s not like I can see through dirt.”

“Oh,” she responded, a bit deflated. “Well, fine, so they’re not locking us in here. But they could *still* be spying on us, making sure we don’t say anything they don’t like. Maybe they’re just waiting for Ellia to finish her training before bumping us off.”

“No, they want me very much alive to make sure she makes it to the temple,” he answered, absentmindedly digging at the dirt beside himself with his fingernail. Then a grin crossed his lips, and he looked at her. “Of course, that’s no guarantee for you, is it?”

“That’s a cruel thing to say, Markus Ortmann,” she said with a frown, crossing her arms with a huff. “And after I donated all that body heat last night, too,” she added with a wink, her irrepressible good humor shining through.

“I think you two got more out of that than I did,” he replied. “You were both chilly by dawn. Without me you’d probably have frozen solid.”

“Oh, please!” she uttered, dismissing his statement with a wave of her hand. Immediately her body betrayed her, however, as she began to shiver. “Couldn’t we start a campfire or something?” she asked in a protesting tone, rubbing her arms.

“Sure, if you want to choke on the smoke,” he answered, pointing at the ceiling. “Does that look like a chimney to you?”

“Stop picking on me; I’m too cold to think straight,” she replied, alternating between patting and rubbing her arms. “I’m gonna head outside and warm my blood up again,” she said, standing up and stepping over him.

“No, you’re not.”

Pausing, she turned around and put her hands on her hips.

"Aren't you taking this 'boss' thing a bit far?" she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Think about it, Meeks: you're gonna go outside, get soaked to the bone, and then come back inside where it's already cold enough to make your teeth clatter. Does that sound smart to you?"

"Well, I guess not," she had to admit, returning to where he sat leaning against the wall and dropping to the floor. Drawing her legs up against her chest, she looked past him to where Monroe sat meditatively listening to the strange words of the unseen Frell. "I can't believe I'm saying this," she began. "I really can't. But I wish we could see him like yesterday. Even with those horrible eyes of his," she shook her head, trying to jostle the image out of her imagination. "At least I could pretend he was sort of human. This just screams straight up haunting. I wish I never found this place."

"Be glad you did," Ortmann replied. "Ellia's learning a lot of things she needs to know."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, don't start that again."

"No, come on: how do you know? Maybe Frell *is* just brainwashing her. It's not like either of us can hear what they're saying. And even if we could, he might be able to, I don't know, *tune it* to each listener. Like a multilingual broadcast or something."

"Then why don't you go over there and find out?"

"B-because I don't want to," she replied, stuttering momentarily as the thought filled her with dread. "And besides, she's *your* girlfriend."

"Then we'll let it rest," he said, leaning his head against the dirt wall of the cave and rolling his gaze towards Monroe.

It rubbed him the wrong way that 'Frell' hadn't decided to manifest this time. He reasoned that The Glow was likely just saving energy. But he couldn't escape the feeling that they also felt they'd established a kind of mastery over the situation, and that they could interact with them howsoever they pleased. The notion annoyed him, and quickly gained merit in his eyes as he continued to watch the half of the dialogue that was visible.

That is, until his ruminations were interrupted by Meeker lifting his arm and wrapping it around her shoulders once more. With annoyance he began to pull it away. But she seized his hand with both of hers and held on tight.

"If you're not gonna let me go outside or start a fire, you'll just have to compromise," she said.

"It's not that I won't let you. It's that you *can't do* either of those things without ending up worse than when you started."

"Potato, potahto. Besides, you owe me for all that warmth I donated last night. I deserve a little something back."

After a short interval her continued shaking made him realize that she was actually being conservative with her actions. Feeling her arm, he turned to her with surprise.

"Hey, you *are* getting pretty cold," he observed.

"Nice of you to notice," she answered snappily. "Do you think I've been shaking for the fun of it?" She looked once more towards their unseen visitor. "Much more of this and I'll turn into a snowcone." Watching half of the pair for a few moments, she clicked her tongue irritably and looked at Ortmann. "How is she handling this so well? She's skinnier than I am!"

"Rimmis isn't one big jungle," he answered. "They've got winter part of the time."

"No kidding?" she asked, glancing at Monroe again.

"Yeah, she's better suited to this than either of us."

"But didn't you say she got cold last night?"

"Well, sure. But she wasn't moving. Anybody'll chill down when they're sitting still."

"Like she is now?" Meeker pointed out. "No, I think that weirdo is sustaining her somehow. Probably part of the brainwashing."

"Then why don't you go and sign up for some?" he grinned. "Get the chill out of your bones."

"And hand over my soul on a silver platter? No, thank you!" Shuddering again, she pulled her legs tighter against her chest and began rocking forwards and back.

"Alright, come here, Meeks," Ortmann said, lifting his arm from her shoulders and spreading his legs a little.

"Come where?"

"You know what I mean: cuddle up."

"You mean like we used to?" she asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

"This is strictly for medical reasons."

"Oh, sure," she teased, quickly climbing between his legs and laying back, his arms wrapping around her. "Justify it any way you like."

"If you don't keep that mouth of yours shut—."

"Okay! Okay! We'll have it your way. I just hope Little Miss Mystic is as understanding as I am."

Glancing at her somewhat dubiously, he saw she was much too absorbed to even notice.

"I don't think she'll mind. Not for a while, anyway."

"That bothers you, doesn't it?" Meeker asked, her voice softening. When he didn't respond, she drew his arms a little tighter around herself and closed her eyes. "This is nice."

"Yeah," he said without interest, still watching Monroe.

"You could at least *pretend* to enjoy it, Markus."

"I'm not trying to enjoy it, Meeks: I'm trying to keep you from freezing. If there was another way, we'd be doing that instead."

"Well, you don't have to treat me like I'm bacteria." She attempted to get up, but his powerful arms held her fast. "Let me go, Markus. I'll freeze on my own."

"Don't be silly."

Twisting around in his grasp, she looked up at him with vulnerable eyes.

"Then don't say things that hurt me," she replied quietly, her tone gentle and sensitive.

"You make it hard not to."

"Why? Why is it my fault?"

"Because you keep beating a dead horse, Meeks. You're trying to start up something that died six months ago."

"It never died for me," she insisted. "I've never stopped loving you. Can't you see that?"

"Yes, I can see that. I'd have to be stone dead to miss it. But can't you understand that I don't feel the same way? This can't

be a one-way street. It *shouldn't* be, because then I'll be unhappy and you'll end up the same way. It would break your heart to love a man who doesn't love you back."

"Do you think I care about that?" she asked, twisting around a little more to look at him easier. "Do you think *love* cares about that? I want to be with you, Markus. I *need* to be. You've gotten under my skin and I can't get you out. It's like I'm addicted or something. I just can't explain it. But I think about you every day, every hour. You've never been out of my thoughts."

"Then I've wronged you badly," he responded. "I never should have gotten involved with you in the first place. I knew better."

"Nobody can know better when they're hurting like you were," she told him sympathetically. "You would have been more than human to push away someone who wanted to wrap herself around your little finger when you were so desperate and alone. You can't blame yourself for that. Oh, I know you will," she added quickly, seeing he was about to speak. "It's just that you shouldn't."

"I'll blame myself whenever I'm guilty," he said heavily, leaning his head against the wall and looking across the cave.

"Why? Does that make the situation any better?"

"It's justice."

"Who has time for justice on Daeldis? We're all just trying to survive, Markus. *You* were just trying to survive. I don't blame you at all for what you did. I'm glad it happened. I'm *glad* that I was able to help you, or I never would have gotten to know you like I have. It's been a real gift."

"Believe me, it's one that you'll regret."

"Why? Becau—," she paused, glancing over her shoulder at Monroe before looking back and dropping her voice. "Because of *Emory*?"

One look into his eyes was all it took to answer her question.

"That's different!" she insisted in an urgent whisper. "She was a despicable little witch! You've never been anything but good to me. Bad tempered, sometimes," she reflected with a playful roll of her eyes. "But never anything but good, all told. The fact you needed little old Meeks flatters me no end. I just wish you still did."

“There’s a difference between needing someone and loving them.”

“What do I care? Here we are on a planet that’s sucking us dry, living in slums, and dodging death on a weekly basis, and *you’re* worried about ideal relationships! Thirty-one years on this rock sure hasn’t taught you a whole lot, Markus Ortmann. No, sir.”

“What would you have it teach me? To exploit every opportunity that comes my way no matter how dishonorable it is? To throw away my integrity?”

“I’d have it teach you to be a little more *flexible*, Markus,” she explained. “I’d have it moderate those granite principles of yours so that you can come down from your mountain and live with the rest of us mortals. I’d have it show you how to *breathe*, *relax*, and *enjoy* what life is offering you *right now*. I mean, think of it this way: if Ellia had never come along, you wouldn’t have ever thought of leaving Daeldis. With it draining on you, your life would already be half over. And what has that integrity done for you? Has it made you happy or miserable? Have those cast iron principles made your life better?”

“They’ve made me a better person. You don’t see me grubbing for every dishonest buck that comes my way. I’ve managed to keep my head high.”

“So no, then,” she summarized.

“Happiness isn’t everything. A clear conscience is. The satisfaction of knowing you’ve kept yourself pure from all the low tricks and machinations of the rest of humanity. That’s more important than feeling good.”

“Look, I’m not talking about becoming a bad person, Markus. I’m not trying to talk you into a life of crime. I just mean you’re such an idealist. Everything has to be just so, or you won’t accept it. That’s why you pushed me away six months ago. That’s why you’re pushing me away now.”

“You seem to be forgetting her,” he replied, nodding towards Monroe.

“That’s pretty easy to do when she’s absent in every way except physically,” she said dryly, looking at the Rimmian briefly as she conversed with her invisible teacher. “She’s an egg-head,

Markus. She doesn't understand us or our way of life, and she never will."

"Daeldisian culture isn't exactly something to emulate."

"Yeah, but folks ought to at least have something in common if they're gonna start a relationship. And, believe me, you've got *nothing* in common with that girl."

"That's part of what I like about her: she's different from anyone you'd ever find on Daeldis. She's like some flower that grew up in a greenhouse, protected from bad weather and bugs and whatnot. She's twenty-five years old and has never so much as stubbed her toe. I like that."

"Why? What's so fascinating about that?"

"Because she's a vision of what *can be*, if enough things break your way early on. Safe planet to grow up on; devoted father; probably a lot of friends who loved and protected her. With the exception of losing her mother a long time ago, she's had the chance to live and grow under ideal conditions. It's made her warm and trusting and naive, and I like that. She doesn't look you in the eye and wonder what your game is; her mind isn't warped by suspicions like ours are. She's an island of peace and gentleness."

"And you're not, Markus," she observed. "Don't you think that'll scrape on her nerves? Shoot, look at the way you knock me around!"

"You grew up on Daeldis," he replied simply. "You need rough handling or it doesn't sink into that skull of yours."

"Well, I've said my piece," she sighed, giving up for the time being and facing forwards again. "She's got you under her spell, and I can't—," she stopped suddenly, jerking her head around to look at him. "That's it! She's brainwashed *you*!"

Putting his hands on the sides of her head, he turned her forwards again in lieu of replying.

"Oh, sure: brush me off. That's exactly what a brainwashed person would do," she huffed.

"Yeah, or someone who's heard enough nonsense for one day," he countered. "Now be quiet and warm up."

"Not like I can help that," she replied tartly. "With you death-gripping me and all."

Ortmann eased his hold.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Lightening up."

"Who told you to do that?"

"You did."

"No, I didn't. I *complained* about your grip. I never said anything about lightening up. Now, squeeze me like you mean it, or I'm gonna hop up and freeze."

Calling her bluff again, he released his hold altogether.

"Now what are you doing?"

"Consigning you to an icy death."

"Oh, Markus!" she groaned, though inwardly smiling. Taking his large hands in her little ones, she drew his arms around her again and leaned back with an exaggeratedly relaxed sigh. "There. Now let's just be quiet and not spoil the moment."

More than willing to keep silent if it meant she would, Ortmann did as she said and didn't utter another word. Once more he looked at Monroe, and once more he was disappointed to see how absorbed she was. It was to be expected, he told himself. After all, it wasn't every day that one got, seemingly, to speak with a dead person. Especially when he was teaching her things about her own speciality. It couldn't help but arrest her interest.

After an hour or so, Meeker was warm and contentedly reclining in his embrace. Sensing that Monroe was wrapping up with Frell, he told her to get up.

"Why?" she asked drowsily. "I'm comfy."

Instead of telling her again, he simply dumped her off to one side and stood up.

"What a way to end such a nice moment," she said grumpily, scratching her head and looking up at him. "I told you once that I'm not bacteria."

"Ellia's getting ready to come over," he said quietly. "It'll be easier this way."

"What, you think she'd have a problem with a couple of old friends staying warm?" she asked with a grin, likewise standing up.

"I think she's bound to be tired after her discussion, and that it would be better to preface something as apt to be misunderstood

as us sitting together. She's a sensible girl, so she'll see the necessity of it easily enough. I'll just tell her that you can't handle the cold like she can—."

"Hey, you don't have to be insulting," Meeker objected, averse to the idea that Monroe could physically endure anything better than she could. "Besides, I was just as much keeping you warm, you know. Neither of us are suited to this kind of thing."

"Suited to what?" Monroe asked, still sitting in the back of the cave. Her interview over, she'd sat and listened for a few moments.

"Oh, the cold," Meeker replied rather sweetly, moving to Ortmann's side and putting a hand on his arm. "We're not quite so used to it as you are. Markus told me it snows on Rimmis and everything."

"Yes, it snows," she replied conservatively, glancing between them. "I spent most of the winters there indoors. But I guess I probably got a little toughened up by it."

"Of course. So, you can understand why we—."

"How was the session?" Ortmann cut her off. "Productive?"

"Oh, yes," she nodded, aware she was being kept in the dark about something but willing to let it drop for the moment. "Very little history today, except where it was necessary to understand a given technique. It's strange: you'd think that I'd be spending long hours intensely meditating. But that's completely wrong. Instead we speak to each other almost constantly, as he leads me along a kind of psychic path that's intuitively training my abilities. It's like..." her voice trailed as she searched for words. "It's like a kind of mold or form that I'm being led into. By following where Frell guides me through his remarkable language, I'm honing my faculties. At the same time I'm expanding my awareness of life itself. It's truly remarkable, like a floating perspective that continually leads somewhere new. I'm so used to being locked into my own way of seeing things that I never imagined there were so many different ways of looking at life. It's remarkable."

"Tell me about it," Meeker responded blandly, having lost interest part way through Monroe's first sentence.

"When is he coming back?" Ortmann asked.

“Later today. He thinks it’s best to break up our sessions so I don’t get overwhelmed by all the new information. I can tell you, I already feel pretty tired just from this one.” Standing up, she approached the pair and weakly smiled. “So, what have you two been doing all this time? I feel like my mind just left the cave behind as soon as Frell started speaking. It’s a little weird, like stepping out of a dream back into the real world where time has been moving all the while.”

“Oh, not much,” Meeker began offhandedly. “Reminiscenced about the old days; laid around; nearly froze to death.”

“It *is* pretty cold in here, isn’t it?” Monroe agreed, rubbing her own arms. “It’s funny: I never noticed it when he was talking to me. If anything, I felt kind of warm.”

“Warm?” Meeker asked rather pointedly. “How could you possibly feel warm? My teeth were chattering and everything.”

“I don’t know,” Ellia replied with a puzzled look. “Maybe I was just too distracted to notice.”

Moving closer to her, Ortmann slipped his fingers a couple of inches up the back of her shirt and shook his head.

“Nope, you’re warmer than we are. You’re just starting to chill down now.”

“But...why?” she asked with confusion. “It’s not like I was in another room.”

“Well, there’s supposed to be monks who can change their body temperatures, right?” Meeker suggested, eager to find a physical answer to the question. “Maybe that’s what happened. Like your metabolism got cranked way up and kept you warm.”

“That could be,” she nodded contemplatively as she thought. “I do feel pretty hungry.”

“Then you’d best get something in your stomach before he comes back,” Ortmann said. “He’ll just run you down even further next time.”

“Alright,” she agreed, making for her pack.

The Glow returned in the unseen person of Frell several hours after Monroe had eaten, giving her a chance to rest. Returning to the back of the cave when she felt the temperature rapidly dropping, she fell once more into her quasi-trance the moment his

strange language could be heard. The moment this took place, Meeker made for Ortmann and snuggled up without bothering to ask permission.

"I feel like this is gonna be a long session," she uttered as she settled in. "Might as well get comfortable now." Looking into the back of the cave, she shook her head and muttered something he couldn't hear. Then, tilting her head with realization, she scanned the cave from back to front a few times. "You know, this place is just made of dirt."

"Yeah," Ortmann replied.

"Well, shouldn't the walls and ceiling have caved in by now? There's nothing holding them up. At the very least the walls should be slanted, right? I mean, it's not like dirt has any integrity. It ought to just fall inwards."

"You're only just noticing that now?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow that she couldn't see.

"I've been too busy not freezing to death!" she protested, twisting around to look at him for a moment before facing forwards and snuggling up again. "Besides, you can't tell me you noticed it when we first arrived, either."

"Of course I did."

"No! Really?" she asked emphatically.

"Sure. The first thing anyone thinks about when climbing into a tunnel is whether or not it'll hold up. The second I saw this cave I knew something strange was going on. But it's held this long, and it's not like we had anywhere else to go."

"But what could be holding it up?" she inquired, glancing around. "I mean, I guess you could support the ceiling with a kind of lattice, right? But how would you get the dirt to stick to the underside?"

"You wouldn't," he answered in a confidential tone. "There's something else going on here."

He felt her body tense up.

"Something bad?"

"That depends on how much you trust 'Frell,'" he uttered.

"That's the second time you've said '*Frell*' like that," she observed. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Ortmann took a moment to think. Glancing at Ellia, he contemplated the repercussions if she learned that Frell was really just the face of The Glow. Naturally she already knew that he was a fragment, not a complete being but more of a snapshot. But Ortmann was certain that that piece of data had quickly been lost, and that her fertile imagination had filled him out as a person. Seeing him as a complete, essentially *human*, being, likely facilitated her training. And he wasn't eager to get in the way of that.

"Come on," she prodded. "Don't leave me hanging like this."

"Let's just say I think there's more to him than meets the eye," he uttered, reluctantly deciding to evade the issue.

"Well, *duh*," she retorted. "Look at him! There's nothing to see!"

"You know what I meant."

"Yeah, I know," she admitted. "I also know you're hiding something from me. What's the matter: you think I'd spill it to Ellia?"

"That's exactly what I think."

"Why would I do that?" she objected.

"Because you're a chatterbox?" he suggested. "Because you're on the hunt for anything that'll throw her off her game? Because—."

"Alright, two was enough," she stopped him, shaking her head. "I get the point: poor old Meeks can't be trusted with a secret." Dramatically she sighed.

"*Poor old Meeks* is twenty-two years old," he pointed out.

"Hey, I'm going on twenty-three, you know."

"When?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Well, eight months from now," she said quietly. "But the way Daeldis drains life force, it's practically half that time. Shoot, we should probably start measuring our lives in dog years or something. At the very least we should double our years to get our *actual age*. That would make me forty-four!" She twisted again to look at him and grinned. "I guess that means I'm too old for you to boss around anymore."

"No, because by that system I'm sixty-two," he said. "I'm right around old enough to be your father."

“So much for that idea,” she wilted, turning forwards and sighing once more. “Guess there’s just no winning this. The cards have been stacked against dear little Meeks and there’s nothing I can do about it except dry up and blow away like a leaf on the wind.”

“Stop playing for sympathy.”

“Why? Is it working?”

“No.”

“Oh, then I’ll stop,” she uttered. You know—,” she began again, before suddenly being thrown off to one side, Ortmann bolting upright in an instant. “Hey! What’s the big—,” she blurted out, rolling over to look at him. But he’d already darted across the cave to the rear, where Ellia lay convulsing helplessly on her back, foam coming out of her mouth. Seizing her in his arms, he bolted for the entrance and laid her down, crawling past to drag her out. By this time Meeker was on her feet and at the opening also, pushing Monroe out of the cave.

“Hold on, Ellia,” Ortmann said, violently dragging her outside. Sitting on the ground, he cradled her head and shoulders. “Come on, girl,” he said, as the seizure quickly passed and she lay motionless in his arms.

“Is she alright?” Meeker asked, joining him in the rain.

“How should I know?” he snapped, frowning at her before lowering his gaze to Monroe again. “There’s nothing we can do now but wait.” He looked towards the entrance and scowled. “The Glow did this,” he growled.

“The *Glow*?” she inquired.

“Yeah. There is no ‘Frell.’ Not anymore. He’s just a tool, a mouthpiece of the collective.”

“I don’t understand. What collective?”

“Remember when Ellia said we’re surrounded by a colony of ghosts?”

“Uh huh,” she nodded, not very happy to be reminded of the fact.

“Well, that’s half right,” he continued, gently brushing the moisture from Monroe’s cheek, rain dribbling off his hair and onto her neck. “They’re ghosts, or fragments, or whatever you want to call

'em. But they're not individuals. They're a big bag of mush all crushed together. A collective. Some kind of headless gaggle of--."

His words were stopped by a moan from Monroe. Half-consciously her eyes fluttered open, blinking from the drops of rain that landed around them. Unfocused, they gazed into the sky for a moment before moving to Ortmann.

"Markus?" she asked confusedly, trying to understand where she was.

"It's alright," he assured her. "You're safe now."

"What...what happened?" she asked.

"Frell must have gone too far," he replied. "Overloaded your brain somehow. That's why I got you out of there. Tell me, has anything like this ever happened to you before? A psychic overload?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered weakly, trying to wrack her memory. "Wait," she continued, narrowing her eyes as she thought back. "On Rimmis I nearly had an episode once. It was with a man Daddy brought to dinner. A very powerful psychic. He was showing us both something when I started to feel this charge build up inside my head. Luckily Daddy noticed in time and made him stop."

"What was he showing you?" Meeker asked. "Anything like what Frell's doing?"

"Honestly I can't remember now," she shook her head, grimacing when a pang of pain shot through her skull. "I haven't thought about it in a long time."

"That's alright," Ortmann told her, before looking at Meeker. "We'd better get her back inside. Tell Frell to knock off whatever he was doing."

"What? Me?" she asked in surprise, the idea filling her with fear.

"Yes, *you*," he replied pointedly. "I'm not leaving Ellia alone out here, so get your butt back inside and tell him."

"Oh!" she grumbled anxiously, sticking her head inside and then pulling it out again briefly. "The things I do for you," she added, disappearing into the hole before he could respond. Two minutes

later she returned. "I told him what you said. But he won't answer me."

"He's saving strength," Monroe explained, attempting to sit up but falling back into Ortmann's arms. "I'm sure he heard you."

"He could at least let me know," Meeker complained.

"Come on," Ortmann told her, shifting his hold on Monroe. "Crawl back in there and help me get her inside."

Working her into the cave as gently as they could, they stretched her out just past the entrance, her small pack serving as a pillow. No sooner had they placed her than they heard a strange, warbling whisper in the air. Meeker nearly jumped out of her clothes the instant she heard it.

"What in the world is that?" she asked Ortmann, her eyes dancing all around.

"What do you think?" he answered with a scowl, pointing at Monroe, who was once again in a trance. "Our little friend is back. This must be what it sounds like when you're close enough to really hear it. We've always been further away than this."

"Oh, it sounds horrible!" she almost whimpered, covering her ears and moving deeper into the cave. Carefully drawing her hands away, she cringed a little and listened. "Oh, good," she said, straightening up. "It doesn't sound weird over here. I mean, it still sounds *weird*. But not like—."

"A dozen voices talking at once?" he suggested with a knowing frown.

"Yes, exactly," she agreed quietly, glancing at Monroe and then back to him. "A collective, you said?"

"Yeah, a collective. A bag of psychic mush sticking its fingers into our lives and playing god. Now Tholoambelet wants to muscle in on their action and take it for himself, and they don't like that. So they're putting her through all this," he concluded, pointing at Monroe once more.

Sensing the concern that was hidden behind his visible anger, Meeker reluctantly went to him and took his hand.

"She'll be alright," she assured him. "The Glow doesn't want to hurt her. Shoot, that would undermine their whole plan, wouldn't it?"

“They screwed up once, didn’t they? They can do it again.”

“I’m sure they’ll be more careful this time,” she responded, before putting her other hand on his arm and pulling him away.

“Come on: let’s get away from all this jabbering. It’s making me crazy.”

Allowing himself to be drawn into the cave by her firmly insistent little hands, he continued to watch Monroe.

“What are they *doing*?” he demanded in a low voice, grinding his teeth. “They ought to just apologize and give her a chance to rest. Or, better yet, just get lost and leave us alone for good.”

“Maybe they’re helping her,” Meeker offered.

“They’ve done plenty already,” he uttered contemptuously. “They’re just lucky they’re incorporeal.”

“You can say that again,” she agreed with quiet emphasis. One demonstration of the infamous Ortmann fury was usually enough to convince anyone not to risk provoking it a second time. And Meeker had seen it on several occasions. “At least they’re keeping her warm,” she pointed out, as the chill of the cave sank into her wet body and caused her to shiver. “Which is a lot more than can be said for us.”

Wordlessly, Ortmann drew her in front of him and hugged her from behind, his arms wrapped around her neck, his hands on her shoulders as he continued to gaze upon Monroe’s prostrate form. Resting his chin atop her head, he drew a frustrated breath and exhaled it with annoyance.

“I’m starting to agree with you, Meeks,” he uttered gravely. “I wish you’d never found this place.”

CHAPTER 8

Throughout the day and into the night, The Glow continued to commune with Monroe, keeping her warm while freezing her companions. Doing their best to huddle together in the back of the cave, they were both growing seriously cold.

"I don't think...I can last...a whole lot...longer," Meeker confessed through chattering teeth. "I've got to head outside and...warm up."

"It'll just soak you again," he told her, their clothes still damp. "It's better to wait this out in here."

"Markus...I'm gonna freeze!" she insisted, turning around in his embrace, her cheeks pale, her teeth bouncing off each other like they were made of springs. "Rain or not, I've got to warm up. I can't...stand this anymore."

Rolling off to the side, she awkwardly stood up, crossed her arms over her chest, and walked in a hunch towards the entrance. Pausing as she got within audible range of the warbling whisper, she looked back at him with a dubious look on her face. Pressing her fingers to her ears, she hurried past Monroe and climbed into the opening. Seconds later she was back.

"It's stopped! The rain's stopped!" she said joyfully, twisting around in the opening to look at him. "Oh, it's so warm I could just lay down and die! It's wonderful!"

"Go ahead," he uttered, nodding towards the entrance.

"Aren't you coming? You're cold, too."

"Someone has to wait with Ellia. I'll warm up a little once you're back."

“Well, alright,” she said hesitantly. “I’ll make it quick,” she added, before scurrying out the hole.

“At least something is breaking our way,” he muttered, continuing to shake as his eyes fell on Monroe. The consistent, almost droning sound of The Glow speaking called to mind religious chants that he’d heard many years before as a boy. It made him wonder if, as Meeker suggested, they were doing something to help Ellia. But he dismissed that notion in an instant, his native cynicism manifesting itself. He was certain that they must be doing something that would forward their own ends with no concern for her wellbeing. Like Frell she was a mere instrument to them, he felt, one that might have already been fractured in some way by their overzealous training methods.

Then a horrible thought shot through his mind, making his body tense despite its shivering: what if they’d already damaged her and, like Frell, they were merely extracting her imprint for future use? Jumping to his feet as the thought sent him into a near panic, he strode quickly to her side and knelt, the strange voices filling the air.

“Ellia? Ellia, are you alright?” he asked in an earnest whisper, his lips beside her ear. “Ellia, can you hear me?”

But the trance remained unbroken, her cloudy eyes dully contemplating the ceiling.

“Alright, that’s it,” he said, slipping his arms under her back and legs. Just as he was about to lift, a voice stopped him.

“If you remove her now, you will risk irreparable harm,” The Glow uttered through a multitude of voices. “We are doing all that can be done for Ellia Monroe. You must trust us.”

“It’s trusting you that got us into this in the first place!” he exploded, sliding his arms out from under Monroe and tearing at the air with his fingernails. “You’re the ones who made this happen!”

“All is proceeding as one could wish,” the voices responded. “The process is nearly complete. You must have patience.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he shot back, sliding his arms under her once more and standing up. “We’re getting out of here.”

“She cannot be removed from this place without losing all that she has striven for,” The Glow warned him as he laid her in the

opening and was about to crawl past to drag her out. "You will not be permitted to leave."

"Try and stop me."

"As you wish," The Glow responded, just as a sheet of rock descended from the top of the tunnel and closed it off. "You forget, Markus Ortmann, that you are a guest in this, our domain."

"Markus? Markus?" he could hear Meeker call from the other side, her small hands beating ineffectually on the stone barrier.

"Markus, are you alright? What's going on?"

"Your friend will be permitted to enter when you have placed Ellia Monroe upon the floor once more," The Glow stipulated. "And not before."

Though ready to explode from rage, there was nothing he could do to the formless cloud of voices that surrounded him. Throughout their brief exchange the chanting had continued, keeping Ellia in her daze. It haunted him to look down into her mild green eyes and find them comprehending nothing. She was a perfect victim of whatever either party chose to do. Powerless, he was forced to comply. Taking her up in his arms again, he placed her gently on the ground and gazed upon her.

"You have cost us greatly by your arrogance and stupidity," the voices rebuked him sharply, slowly drawing the stone sheet upward into the tunnel's ceiling. "This shall not be forgotten, Markus Ortmann."

"The same goes for you," he growled, twisting his head as he looked upward at the voice.

"There is nothing you can do to us," The Glow responded in a superior tone, as Meeker fearfully clambered inside and stood next to him, cringing at the heat of the exchange.

"We'll see," he uttered, privately entertaining the notion of helping Tholoambelet in his ambitions should The Glow hurt Monroe. "We'll see," he repeated.

"We have seen all things, and know that no such action is possible by a creature such as yourself," they replied. "Now leave us to our work. We have expended far too much attention on you already."

"Come on, Markus," Meeker whispered, taking his arm in her hands and once more drawing him into the cave. "Let's leave them to their work."

"Yes, listen to her," The Glow agreed acerbically. "And spare us your interference."

"What were you *thinking*?" she asked with quiet urgency, standing at the back of the cave. "You can't just take on a bunch of ghosts like they're a gaggle of rowdies in a bar! What if they tried to drain your life force or something?"

In lieu of answering, Ortmann looked at her. His eyes bore the unmistakable signs of the burning, irrational fury that usually preceded one of his devastatingly violent acts. Beyond reason in such moments, the only safe course was to stay out of his way.

"Oh, I know that look," she couldn't help mumbling, too shaken to keep her mouth shut. "But think of Ellia," she added quickly, trying to ground him before he lost control. "She needs you cool and detached, not losing your head and looking for a fight. For her sake you've got to calm down." Inwardly, she added, "And for my sake, too."

"I'm not gonna explode," he told her in a dangerously calm voice. "That wouldn't do any good."

"I'm...glad you see that," she uttered, though his tone made her stomach churn. "The best thing is for us just to calm down and keep an eye on Ellia."

"You're right, of course," he replied, still thinking of Tholoambelet. "That's the best thing to do."

Despite his anger he was still cold and shivering. Certain that he would now leave the cave under no circumstances, she hugged him from the side, wrapping her arms around his middle. Privately she also hoped it would mollify him a little.

"Here's some of what I got outside," she said by way of justification, hoping he wouldn't angrily push her away. Noticing the distracted way his arm draped down her back and terminated in a fist, she hugged a little tighter. "Can't let you get too cold, right?" she asked with a weak chuckle, looking up at him.

But he didn't hear her. With his eyes boring into the space that he fancied The Glow occupied above Monroe, he contemplated

the best way to betray them should it ever come to that. He harbored no desire to see Tholoambelet become master of Daeldis. But he knew above all else that he would not rest until he'd destroyed *anyone* who hurt Ellia. Even if they were beyond the grave.

"Markus?" Meeker asked reluctantly, like a small child tugging on her angry father's pant cuff. "Are you...okay?"

"Oh, yes," he nodded with grim satisfaction, his hearing finally returning to him.

"Oh, well, good," she likewise nodded, hoping to put the episode behind them, though she knew it would linger. "Here, put your arms around me," she said, moving in front of him and turning her back on The Glow. "You've got to warm up."

"I'm fine," he responded quietly, as she pressed her head against his chest.

"You're shaking like a leaf, Markus," she replied as firmly as she felt she could. "Much more of this and you might get sick or something. Now, cuddle up with me for a little while. Then I'll head back out and warm up again. Okay?" She waited several seconds for a reply. "Sound good?" she persisted.

"Alright," he assented, letting her go briefly and taking his familiar position on the floor. Climbing into his lap, she wrapped his arms around her again and leaned back.

"There, that's better, isn't it?" she asked hopefully, trying to draw his unshakeable attention from their unseen visitor. But like searchlights in a fog, she could practically see his gaze reach across the room and rest murderously on the space occupied by The Glow's many voices. "Oh, I can't tell you how *good* it felt to get out into the warm air," she enthused. "Wonderful, just wonderful. I never thought the wet, oppressive heat of the jungle could be so nice."

"Mmm," he assented, more or less.

Falling silent, the pair watched Monroe's chest slowly rise and fall. Twice it seemed to stop, nearly causing Ortmann to throw Meeker off his lap. But each time it resumed movement, and he settled down.

Meeker remained with him until long after she'd grown cold again, unwilling to leave lest he get into another fight with The Glow.

She did her best to stifle her shivering, but eventually he despatched her to the jungle once more.

"I'll be quick," she uttered, getting to her feet and looking at him. "It's these clothes: they're still damp."

"Take your time," he said with an indifferent wave, his eyes on Monroe. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yeah, that's what I'm worried about," she mumbled, hurrying across the cave and climbing into the tunnel.

Standing up, Ortmann moved slowly to Monroe and sat down at her side. Ignoring the myriad voices above his head, he gently brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. He considered openly threatening The Glow with Tholoambelet, but instantly shot the idea down as being suicidal. Controlling the cave, and who knew what else, they could easily remove him from the picture. It wasn't until he was actually *in* Tholoambelet's domain that he could risk crossing them. Again, he stipulated, though with less conviction, if it came to that.

Trailing his fingertips down the soft skin of her inner arm, he worked down to her hand and squeezed it. The lack of a response troubled him, though he'd expected it. It was like she was dead, though her body continued to function normally. Assuming one could consider wide-eyed incomprehension as being *normal*, he reflected sourly.

"You are interfering with us again, Markus Ortmann," the voices said critically.

"I'm not doing anything," he replied calmly, trailing his fingertips back up her arm and then slowly down again.

"You are engaging her physical senses," The Glow explained with annoyance. "You are drawing her faculties away from us."

"Pity."

"There is only so much energy that can be expended on Ellia Monroe," The Glow shot back. "Anything that reduces the effectiveness of our interaction with her necessarily lengthens the time that must be spent. And time is a precious commodity."

"Surprising, considering you're ghosts," he replied, continuing to touch her arm.

"If you persist in interrupting us, we will be forced to deal with you," they threatened.

Pausing just beneath her elbow, he drew his hand away and slowly looked up.

"You don't say?" he asked evenly. The murderous look in his eye had returned, though only Meeker had the experience to recognize it. "Then I suppose I'd better leave her alone."

Standing up, he gazed at her for a long moment and then turned towards the back of the cave and slowly moved off.

"And do not trouble us again," the voices called after him. "There is too little time and energy for this as it is."

A short time later Meeker returned. Seeing the look on his face, she instantly regretted leaving him alone with The Glow.

"So, how's she been?" she inquired to feel him out. Squatting down beside him, she sat on her legs. "Any change?"

"No change."

"Well, maybe we'll see something by tomorrow morning." Reaching out hesitantly, she took his wrist and felt it. "You're pretty cold. Let's get together."

And so they did, beginning a cycle that felt more and more like a ridiculous circus to Ortmann as the night wore on. On one end of the room his love lay comatose, the victim of a bizarre intelligence that was twisting her to its own ends. And on the other side he sat with his ex-girlfriend cuddled up in his arms, pausing periodically so she could take a trip to the warm jungle outside the cave and bodily bringing its heat back to him. It was, he felt, the silliest situation he'd ever allowed himself to be drawn into. But, as Meeker had already deduced, there was no way he would leave the cave without Monroe either on her feet or in his arms. That meant either snuggling or freezing.

"Is it getting *colder* in here?" she asked him in a tired voice as they neared dawn.

"Uh huh," he replied quietly, nodding his head against the top of her skull. "I think they're trying to freeze us out. Or rather freeze me out."

"You mean..." her voice trailed.

"I mean they'd *love* to get me on the other side of that sheet of rock," he whispered in her ear. "Then they'd have Ellia all to themselves."

"But if they want you out of the way, why don't they just suck out your soul or something?" she objected, hoping that he was wrong.

"Don't you think that *might* have a slight effect on Ellia?" he countered. "You think she'd work with 'em if they killed me?"

"I guess not," she admitted. "But what good would it do to separate you two? It's not like you're stopping them from doing all this jabbering."

"Maybe I'm stopping them from doing something *e/se*," he suggested. "Maybe this is just the best they can do under the circumstances."

"Oh!" she groaned quietly, shifting where she sat. "I wish all this wasn't going on. I hate this kind of tension."

"I know," he said, giving her a little squeeze. "But it can't last a lot longer. Sooner or later she'll have to eat or drink, and then she'll be free of their spell. If they work her nonstop they'll grind her into the ground."

"And then what?" she asked in a whisper, partially twisting her head to speak to him, yet keeping her eyes on Monroe. "Bolt with her or something? It's not like we've got control of that little door of theirs."

"They won't hurt Ellia," he replied. "We know that. So we'll slip her under the door before they have a chance to close it, then climb out on top of her. She can follow us out and we'll leave this place behind."

"Including the packs?" she asked with aversion, not eager to rough it through the jungle with just the clothes on their backs and the ever-present gun tucked into the back of his pants. "How are we gonna get to the temple if—"

"Forget the temple," he whispered. "We're getting off this rock if I have to steal a ship and fly it myself. Ellia's not going through any more torture for The Glow."

"But it's not just for them, Markus," she insisted. "It's never been about them. It's been about taking down Tholoambelet so he

can't threaten us or anyone else on Daeldis ever again."

"Why? So The Glow can keep chewing on us?" he retorted, the anger that seethed beneath the surface briefly flaring and hardening his voice. "So we can trade one parasite for another?"

"Markus, you're forgetting the treasure in his temple," she replied. "We can use that to get off Daeldis for sure, instead of hoping for some lucky break. Shoot, you know how locked down the spaceport in Boulimar is. You'd probably have to kill a couple of guards just to get access to a ship. And then you'd have to take off and fly it who knows how far, because they'll blast your face all across the news services, and every bounty hunter in the region will come hunting for us. You've never flown a thing in your life. Do you really want to put Ellia in that kind of situation? To say nothing of me? Do you really want to put your skills against expert fliers?"

"You're right. It'd be better to take a pilot hostage and have him fly us."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," she uttered incredulously, twisting around to face him. "Do you know what you're saying? This isn't just illegal and immoral: it's downright stupid. I know you're all bent out of shape over what they're doing to her. Believe me, and I truly, truly mean this, I hate it, too. Even with her in my way, I *hate* seeing that poor girl flat on her back, her eyes wide as dinner plates. But there's nothing I can do about it. And there's nothing *you* can do about it, either."

"I can get her out of their hands," he replied. "For some reason they're locked down to this cave. Maybe they've got other places they can control, too. But they've never come on this strong before, so we should be home free once she's outside the tunnel."

"Has it occurred to you that she might not agree with this?" Meeker pointed out. "Last we knew, she was all gungho to take down Tholoambelet. And you heard her just *oozing* enthusiasm about the new perspectives Frell was giving her." Jerking her thumb over her shoulder, she added, "She's probably having the time of her life right now. She's not gonna understand what you're doing." Warming to her topic, she continued. "That's what I was telling you before, remember? That you two are different? She's not gonna understand the possessiveness we Daeldisians feel over those we love. Ellia's

not built to understand that we pull out all the stops when someone we love is threatened. She's too 'civilized' for that. She's got too many rules."

"She'll understand in time."

"What are you gonna do? Throw her over your shoulder and drag her off by force?"

"If I have to."

"And don't you think that might spoil things between you just a *tiny bit*?"

"Like you said, we pull out all the stops around here."

"Oh, don't turn my words around on me," she objected, waving her hand to dismiss his reply. "You *can't* run a relationship like that. You can't coerce a girl away from something she so passionately believes in. She'll end up hating you."

"You wouldn't."

"Well, I'm special," she said with a vain little flutter of her eyelids. "But *she* isn't. She hasn't grown up with the kind of grinding poverty that makes the people in your life the most important thing there is, because they're truly all you've got. She's all caught up in principles and high ideals. She wants to make this world a better place for people she doesn't know and who don't give a snap of their fingers whether she lives or dies. That's the kind of person she is. You could leave it all tomorrow and never once look back. So could I. But *she* can't."

Though obviously an interested party, he felt her words nevertheless contained a great deal of sense. Leaning his head back against the wall, he contemplated Monroe for a few moments before replying.

"Then what would you have me do?"

"Oh, that's a cruel question, Markus," she squirmed, shaking her head a little.

"Why?"

"Because you're asking me how to keep *my* rival in *your* life," she explained, looking him in the eyes. "Don't you think that hurts me just a little?"

"Then why've you been trying your hardest to clue me in to her point of view?"

“Because I’ve got an overactive conscience, that’s why,” she grumbled. “Besides, I can’t watch you go through another Emory. It would break my heart.”

“You’ve been against Ellia and me from the start,” he pointed out. “Why the change?”

“Nothing’s changed,” she answered. “I still think you two haven’t got anything in common. But there’s a big difference between you realizing that and breaking it off, and making her hate you by violating her sense of right and wrong and shattering your heart into a million pieces. If you drove her away, I think that would just about kill you. And I couldn’t stand that. I don’t even like talking about it,” she grimaced a little.

Reaching up her back with his right hand, he squeezed her neck affectionately.

“You’ve got a sweet heart, Meeker.”

“Don’t I know it,” she mumbled, looking off to the side for a couple of seconds before facing him again. “You really want to keep her?” she asked with a sigh. “You’re gonna have to play it her way. She’s committed to this mission from beginning to end, and you’re gonna have to stand by and watch her smack her face on every obstacle that comes along. It’ll kill you and twist your guts in knots and make you hate life. But you’ll have to just be brave and take it, because there’s no way she’ll ever give up on taking down Tholoambelet. He killed her Daddy, Markus, and that’s not something you can just forget. Besides, he’s evil, and she’s an idealist. She’ll gladly throw her silly little life away trying to stop him, and there’s nothing you can do about it. But when it’s all over she’ll have it out of her system and settle down, and she won’t give you any more trouble. You won’t have to worry about her rambling off and getting hurt anymore, because she’s not the type. She’s no adventurer.”

Wordlessly he gazed across the cave, reflecting on her words.

“Well, give me some kind of response, at least,” she complained. “I thought I sounded pretty smart.”

“You did,” he assured her, still looking past her, his eyes on Ellia. Then they moved to Meeker. “You’re pretty wise when you’re in the right mood.”

"Nice of you to notice," she replied, rolling her eyes upward and shrugging her shoulders in a cute little gesture. "I'm not quite as dull as you tend to think."

"You're the farthest thing from dull," he told her. "*Excitable* is more the word. Carried off your feet—."

"Don't ruin the moment," she said, holding up a hand to stop him. "Just let me bask in this little scrap of praise amidst all the abuse you give me."

"I don't abuse you."

"Well, you're not very nice to me. You're always pushing me away."

"That's because you make yourself a nuisance."

"Shh," she said, putting a finger to his lips. "You're doing it again."

Unable to help himself despite the circumstances, he broke into a smile.

"There, it's been too long since I've seen one of those," she said with gentle sweetness, brushing his cheek with her fingers a little before lowering her hand and looking back to Monroe. "This is gonna be hard on you, Markus. So hard. You're gonna want to throw yourself in front of everything that comes her way. You already do. But you can't. Some things she's just got to deal with on her own. And this is one of 'em."

Putting a hand to her chin, he turned her head back toward himself.

"How'd you get so smart about love?" he asked. "You hate to read, so it can't be that."

"I'm just telling you what I feel," she replied softly, her eyes wide and tender.

Nodding his understanding, he rubbed his thumb on her square chin and let go.

"That's why you deserve someone who'll love you the way you love him."

"I'd be happy either way," she assured him, locking eyes for a moment before looking away. "Either way," she repeated, gazing at Monroe. "Hey, did you see that?" she asked urgently, twisting around again. "Her arm just twitched!"

Before he could speak they both heard a loud moan escape Monroe's lips. Bolting upright, they shot across the small space and knelt beside her. Though visibly confused, the haze had left her eyes. The trance had been broken.

"How are you feeling?" Meeker asked earnestly. "Are you alright?"

"I...I think so," Monroe croaked, her throat dry and tight.

"Meeks," Ortmann said, snapping his fingers and pointing over his shoulder towards the packs.

"On it," she responded, dashing for a bottle of water. Bringing it back, she knelt once more beside Ortmann, who then gently lifted Monroe's head. "Here you go, honey," Meeker said, gently pressing the bottle against her lips and giving her a small drink. "Not too much," she cautioned, pulling it back. "Just a little at a time."

"I think I could...drink a gallon," she answered with a weak smile, her voice a little more lubricated. "Oh," she sighed. "How long have I been out?"

"Hours," Meeker replied, glancing at Ortmann for confirmation. "Since yesterday. We were starting to wonder when you'd be coming back to us."

"I had no idea," Monroe replied, rolling her eyes from Meeker over to Ortmann. "I hope I didn't make you both worry too much."

"Just a little," Meeker answered with a glib shrug. "What were you doing, anyhow? Having a cosmic tea party or something?"

"Oh, it was fascinating," she enthused, attempting to sit up but finding herself utterly exhausted. "That's odd," she uttered, more to herself than to them. She then tried to roll onto her side, but Ortmann put his hands on her and stopped her.

"Just rest," he instructed. "You've been through a lot."

"But...I've been asleep...or something..." she said with mounting confusion, putting a feeble hand to her forehead and closing her eyes. "At least I think I have," she added, opening her eyes again, showing them to be a little clearer. "I know I wasn't here. Not mentally. It was like...an out of body experience. Like I was soaring through the clouds. It was exhilarating."

Looking at Ortmann, Meeker grinned a silent 'I told you so.'

"What do you mean?" he asked, giving Meeker a frown before turning back to Monroe.

"Well, I was taken way up into the sky. Not into space, but close. And I could see all kinds of things happening on Daeldis, like some kind of all-seeing eye. Birds and people and snakes going about their business. There was plenty that I *couldn't* see. Like, I couldn't see inside this cave for some reason. Oh! And I could hear all these voices around me. They sang these beautiful songs that put images in my head just like Frell does when he talks. It was like...ten thousand lifetimes of memories put to music. A living, vocal record of past lives. But it all blends together in a symphony that I can't even describe. I don't even know how I kept it all straight! Countless personal histories, each one belonging to an individual fragment, were all being projected at the same time. And I could understand each one! Not that I really remember them now," she said with disappointment, narrowing her eyes for a moment and thinking back. "But at the time it was incredible. Just incredible."

"Well, did you learn anything we can use against Tholoambelet?" Meeker asked. "This can't have just been one big pleasure trip."

"I learned a great deal," she assured her. "It's all still swirling around inside my head. But I feel calmer, more focused. I think I'm ready to go to the temple."

"You can't even sit up," Ortmann pointed out, certain she was out of her head.

"Oh, I don't mean right this minute," she explained. "I need a ten course meal and about half this cave filled with water to drink. I mean that my training is complete. I've been shown how to deal with Tholoambelet."

"But how could you learn something like that so *fast*?" Meeker objected, glancing at Ortmann and sharing his skepticism. "I thought we'd be at it for days and days."

"So did I," Monroe answered. "But The Glow decided to take a different tack. Sensing that I could be trusted, they've let me into their secrets and shown me their way of life. And their way of countering Tholoambelet. Before, with Frell, they were holding me at

a distance, feeling me out to see if I was really dependable. Satisfied that I was, they forced me into a deep trance. That's when I put you both through that scare and you had to drag me outside. I was actually quite safe. It was just a little physical reaction."

"Little?!" exclaimed Ortmann, before immediately catching himself. "We thought you were coming apart, Ellia."

"Yeah, it scared us stiff," Meeker added.

"I'm sorry," she said gently, looking between them both sympathetically. "I never wanted any part of this to be hard on you two. But when The Glow told me what needed to be done, I signed on and never looked back."

"You mean they gave you a choice?" Ortmann inquired.

"Of course," she replied with some puzzlement. "They've kept me well informed and have consulted my wishes every step of the way. Oh, naturally they've been rather emphatic in presenting their preferred courses of action. But they've never forced me to do anything I didn't want to do."

Dismayed at her willingness to trust the ghostly assembly, Ortmann leaned back, eyed her, but said nothing. It crossed his mind that they probably gave her merely the *appearance* of a choice, resolved to go ahead whether she said yes or no. But preferring to get her willing participation, they'd asked each time. Not willing to throw this cynical notion at her when she was in such a weakened state, he kept it to himself.

"Well, how did you come to learn the truth about Frell?" Meeker queried.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "What truth?"

"That he's just a mouthpiece for their collective," Meeker answered.

"Oh, well, I wouldn't exactly call him that," Monroe quibbled. "He's just a fragment, to be sure. A really, really *detailed* fragment. But that's all their collective is, anyhow. Kind of like how our bodies are made up of all these different cells, yet we're complete beings. That's how their group works. Well, not really," she scowled with thought, trying to sort out the ideas that were circulating in her mind. "I mean, they're all *separate*, like senators in an assembly. But they're also united. It's more like there's no borders between one

mind and the next, and so they cross pollinate and affect each other's ideas constantly. Even their individual perceptions are colored by the whole."

"But Frell isn't a real person," Ortmann insisted. "He's just a self-serving snapshot that The Glow have appropriated to get what they're after. A spokesman – a tool through which to interact with the outside world."

Looking up at him with some concern, Ellia pondered his words for a moment.

"Something went wrong while I was gone," she commented. "I can feel it."

"You might say Markus had a couple of arguments with The Glow," Meeker said.

"You *argued* with them?" she asked, both surprised and impressed.

"Oh, sure. This guy pulls out all the stops when he's got a thing for you," she continued, slapping him on the back. "I ought to know," she added, unable to help stirring the pot.

"I hope you didn't make them angry," Monroe fretted.

"Make *them* angry?" Ortmann asked. "What about us? What about *you*? You're the one who could have had a stroke, given all they were doing to you."

"Oh, I was okay," she assured him. "Really, Markus, I wasn't in any danger."

"Then why were you foaming at the mouth?" he countered, his voice rising. "Why were you convulsing on the ground, utterly helpless? If The Glow is so harmless, then why—."

"Please, Markus," Monroe stopped him, managing to sit up on her elbows and look at him. "*Please* don't offend them. They've offered me their help in destroying Tholoambelet, and I'd be utterly lost without it. I don't want to risk damaging my relationship with them because of words spoken in anger."

"Those *words* have to do with your wellbeing, Ellia," he pointed out. "Don't you see that? You're dangling from the end of their string, and I'm not supposed to care?"

"I just need you to understand what I'm trying to do here," she replied with quiet firmness. "I'm trying to cooperate with these

incredible beings so that my father will be avenged. My training may be complete, Markus. But my need for them isn't over. I'll need them to help sustain me when I'm finally standing before Tholoambelet. Those few crucial seconds between entering his throne room and using the grenades will be a life-or-death moment for me. And I need The Glow unhesitatingly on my side."

"They won't be able to help that," he shot back, standing up. "You're their weapon, their instrument of survival. They're not about to pull back on you now."

"I don't understand why you're being so suspicious of them," she shook her head, growing frustrated. "What's your problem with them?"

"My problem?" he asked, putting a hand to his chest. "If you don't know the answer to that, it won't do any good to tell you."

Without another word he shivered his way out of the frigid cave and into the tunnel.

"What *is* his problem?" she asked Meeker once he'd disappeared.

"Oh, he's in love with you," she replied, sitting on the floor and stretching her legs out before her, leaning back on her hands. "You've never known love, have you?"

"Of course I've known love," she answered defensively.

"No," she shook her head with a grin. "No, you haven't. Not like a Daeldisian loves." She nodded towards the tunnel. "That man would cut his hand off for you if it was necessary. Shoot, he'd *die* for you. He really would. It's twisted him in knots and made him sick to watch you get knocked around by these newfound friends of yours. He wants nothing less than to rip their heads off one by one, spit down their throats, and toss their mangled bodies onto an ever growing pile until he'd finished with 'em. Then he'd set the pile on fire and curse the fact that they ever existed at all."

"But why? They haven't hurt me. Not really."

"Try watching someone you love to death foam and writhe and lose all their senses, and then tell yourself they haven't been hurt," Meeker shot back. "You might trust these guys, Ellia. But Markus isn't the trusting kind. You ought to know that by now."

"I do," she nodded quietly. "But I hoped he would...I don't know, *soften* a little. Realize that not everyone is out to get you."

"What is it with people like *you* always trying to buff the rough edges off people like *him*?" she asked rhetorically. "Don't you realize he's beautiful just the way he is, in all his savagery and crudely expressed love? He hates The Glow because he loves you. He's not someone for subtle distinctions when it comes to his feelings. He's over the moon for you, and that means he'll destroy anyone who lays a finger on you. That's why these guys have him so twisted up inside: *he* can't lay a finger on *them*. Needless to say, they're lucky they're not physical anymore. Otherwise they'd be looking around for some new skulls."

"But who can live like that?" she asked. "It's like being on the warpath all the time."

"Hey, that's life on Daeldis, sister," Meeker shrugged. "You can take it or leave it. Personally, I'd take it. But then, I know a good thing when I see it. And Markus is a *real* good thing. I can't tell you how many times I've wished his strong arms were around me, his powerful fingers squeezing me a little too tight. Oh," she sighed, savoring the thought. "It's like a dream."

Monroe glanced at the tunnel and then back to the Daeldisian.

"You've been worried about offending The Glow," she continued. "But you'd better do something about that guy out there you've just driven off. 'Cause when you burn him, it runs deep, and he's slow to forget."

"I don't know if I'm rested enough," Monroe said doubtfully, testing her strength by rocking back and forth a little.

"Well, all I know is I'd *find* the strength if I were you. Believe me, this is something you want to nip in the bud." Shaking her head again, she laughed at herself. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I ought to let you sabotage this whole thing. Then I could swoop back in and comfort him."

"That wouldn't make him love you," Monroe replied.

"No," she agreed. "But he'd need me. And that would be enough. Now get your butt out that tunnel before I drag you through

it myself. He might be angry on the outside, but in here," she said, tapping on her heart, "He's hurting real bad."

"But why? I just asked him not to offend The Glow."

"Boy, you really are new to relationships, aren't you?" she laughed. "Because you blew off his *love*, sweetheart. Because you took all his concern and tender feelings and pushed them back in his face. Right now he's out there trying to convince himself that it's all his fault and not yours, but he's wrong. It's *your* fault, and you've got to make it right."

"You're right," Monroe said, rolling unsteadily onto her hands and knees and striving to get up. Seeing she was apt to fall over, Meeker quickly stood and put her hands on the Rimmian's waist. "Oh, thank you," she said, turning to the tunnel and climbing into it. As she slowly crawled away, Meeker shook her head in disbelief.

"Meeks, when will you keep that silly mouth of yours shut?" she said with a roll of her eyes, wishing once again that her conscience wasn't so vocal.

Laboring through the tunnel on her elbows, Monroe paused just short of sticking her head out. Aware that she could make matters much worse by further insensitivity to Ortmann's Daeldisian point of view, she tried to run everything Meeker had just told her through her brain one more time. About halfway through, a voice interrupted her.

"You can't just lay there all night," Ortmann said dryly, leaning against the hill right next to the tunnel. "I can hear you breathing."

Only then aware that she'd been panting rather loudly from her brief exertion, she swallowed hard and clambered the rest of the way out. Shakily she got to her feet with the aid of the hill, found Ortmann's dim silhouette in the darkness, and moved to his other side so as not to block the entrance if Meeker suddenly popped through.

"It sure is humid," she began uneasily, testing the waters. "Feels like it's about to start raining again."

"It's not. The plants are just exhaling moisture," he answered flatly, his arms crossed as he gazed into the distance.

“Have you got something on your mind, Ellia?”

“I do,” she admitted, mimicking his posture in an attempt to establish some kind of commonality. The instant she did so, however, his hands went to his pockets.

“Then say it.”

“Markus, I’m sorry,” she began, her voice quavering a little as her stomach tied itself in nervous knots. “I didn’t understand where you were coming from.”

“Is that all?” he asked, as though a little mental box inside his mind was just short of being fatally checked.

“No, no,” she hurriedly added, sensing the danger. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to get my brains together.”

“It seems like a pretty open and shut thing to me,” he replied, still not looking at her.

Aware that she was playing it safe, she thought back on Meeker and decided to emulate her.

“Markus, I love you. I really, really do. I can’t tell you how much you mean to me. When I talked back in there, I was just being stupid. I wasn’t thinking about how you must have watched over me ever since I started interacting with Frell. Thinking back, I could see the exhaustion in your eyes, the hours and hours of vigilance that must have robbed your sleep. It makes me feel silly now, because I don’t really deserve that.”

“You let me be the judge of that,” he responded, his tone hard despite his words.

“Yes, yes, you’re right,” she agreed, hoping she’d begun to make some headway. “It’s just that I don’t really know what I’m doing. I’ve never been involved with a man like you before. I’m flying without my instruments,” she chuckled a little, her face falling when he chose not to reciprocate.

“We’re different people, Ellia,” he uttered in a gravely contemplative tone.

“Sure, that’s what makes us so great together,” she said quickly, aware of the note of finality that his words bore. “You don’t get a meaningful love unless there’s big differences, because then you can fill each other out. It makes it harder to understand one

another. But it makes it all the more worthwhile when you do. Each time it's a triumph, a victory."

"Provided it happens at all," he said quietly.

"But there's going to be rocks in any relationship, Markus," she insisted, slowly uncrossing her arms now that a little time had passed, hoping that he would notice her mimicry on a merely subconscious level as she slipped her hands into her pockets. Perfectly in tune with his surroundings, he immediately crossed his arms again, making her grimace for having played her hand too soon. "Markus, do you love me or not?"

"Why don't you ask the men I've killed for you and see what they think?" he shot back, turning to her at last. Despite her poor night vision, even she could feel the smoldering wrath with which his eyes rested upon her. "Go dig up Fats and ask him. Your ghost friends can help you contact his spirit. Or ask what's left of Squeaky."

Thinking back on the deadly fight in the Viper's humble hospital, she blushed with self-consciousness at what she felt was her ingratitude.

"Or the slavers," he added.

"I know," she assured him earnestly, putting a hand on his arm. But he shook her off.

"You're not gonna push my buttons, Ellia," he told her coldly. "You're not going to schmooze your way out of this. People like you are always getting themselves in trouble and then trying to butter their way out. But it isn't gonna work that way. I've been around the block a couple of times; I can see a bad deal from a mile away. Provided I'm not blinded by my own stupidity."

"You weren't being stupid," she insisted urgently, worried she was losing ground. "Not at all."

"Anyone would be stupid to get involved with you," he uttered remorselessly. "You're all sensitivity and mush on the outside. But you don't understand what makes people *tick*, what really makes their wheels *spin*. You only understand what you see." He turned away again. "And what your 'gift' points out," he added. "Without that, you wouldn't have a clue. And even that hasn't done you much good. You jumped right into The Glow's lap because they held out a hand and promised friendship. But you *ought* to know that

nothing ever comes that easy. It was just a trick so you'd lower your defenses and let them into your mind." With a scowl that was invisible in the darkness, he concluded, "They've had you dialed in since you first set foot on this planet. They've been manipulating you right from the start."

"I...don't think..." her voice trailed hesitatingly, feeling he was moving away from the facts because of his dislike for The Glow.

"That's right," he said pointedly. "You're not. Do you think it's a coincidence that you ran into Hamilton? And that he just-so-happened to get you over to my place in time for Mulrooney and his thugs to come along? The Glow knew you needed me to get this far, and they orchestrated this whole series of 'accidents' to make sure it happened. Without Mulrooney sticking his gun in my face, I never would have brought you to the temple. You know that."

"Yes, I know," she nodded reluctantly. "But...what's so wrong about that? It brought us together."

"We're dangling at the end of their chain, Ellia!" he snapped. "Maybe you Rimmians are used to being manipulated. But here on Daeldis, we don't like being jerked around like puppets. Especially when the puppet master has already been so duplicitous. I didn't tell you this before, but the first night we were here, they felt me out. They just jumped right into my dreams and felt me out. They shifted their stance every time I poked a hole in what they were saying. But one thing was clear: they wanted to make sure I wasn't gonna get in their way. They're simultaneously dependent on me to get you to the temple, and afraid that I might pull you away from the mission they've laid out for you. Doesn't that make you think? Make you wonder what else they might have up their sleeves?"

"It does," she answered slowly, allowing his words to circulate through her mind for a moment before continuing. "We're being managed."

"Yes!" Meeker exclaimed from the tunnel, instantly gasping and covering her mouth.

"Meeks!" Ortmann exclaimed, his carefully controlled temper flaring.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll get lost!" she assured him, clambering back the way she came. "But it's awful *cold* in here all

alone!" she added.

"All alone?" Monroe asked, verbally raising an eyebrow, her tone suddenly firmer, more assertive.

"We had to cuddle up when your ghost friends turned the cave into a freezer," Ortmann replied factually.

"Were you planning to tell me this?" she asked, chuckling a little to mask her jealousy.

From the glow of the stars above she could just make out the silhouette of his head turning towards her.

"When you were feeling sensible enough not to assume something that wasn't there," he replied flatly.

"You must admit that girl's got a thing for you that simply won't go away," she said, surprised to find herself growing warm at the thought. "She's probably been crawling into your shirt every chance she gets."

"You'd better believe it!" Meeker seconded from the tunnel, having found it impossible to keep her nose out of their business.

"Meeks!"

"I'm going! I'm going!" she insisted, though Ortmann could hear that she didn't budge an inch. Scooping up a handful of moist dirt from beside his right boot, he leaned over to the tunnel's mouth and tossed it in. "Yuck!" she complained, as it struck her in the face. "Markus, you caught me right in the eyes!" She spat several times. "And the mouth!"

"Too bad I didn't hit you in the *ears*."

"Okay, fine! Have it your way!" she uttered, audibly retreating into the cave.

Glancing into the opening, the dim light of his small lamp showed the tunnel to be clear.

"Every chance she got?" Monroe repeated. "Sounds like she made herself pretty comfortable while I was busy."

"No more so than The Glow, rambling through your brain like they owned it," he replied with understated sharpness.

"That's completely different. I'm just trying to help them fight against Tholoambelet. Meeker is trying to seduce you."

"If that 'gift' of yours was half of what you crack it up to be, you'd know that isn't possible."

“Well, how do I know what is and isn’t possible?” she asked, her anger growing. “I’ve barely had the chance to get to know you with that little urchin sticking herself between us every chance she gets. She’s been underfoot ever since we left Todrid!”

“She’s been a great help, Ellia,” he responded, growing more calmly serious as her passion rose. “Without her I would have been locked out of the cave by The Glow. That’s another thing you haven’t given me a chance to mention: they’ve got a stone door that they can control. If I’d left to warm up out here, they would have slammed it shut until they’d finished with you. Without Meeker, you’d have been left all alone with them.”

Monroe was confused. Though trustful of The Glow, the idea of being at their mercy made her uncomfortable, as did their evident aversion to Ortmann. Yet knowing that Meeker had been free to act as she’d pleased during her mental absence troubled her more. Ultimately she found the Daeldisian threatening in a way that The Glow weren’t. She was willing, reluctantly, to admit that they were using her for their own ends, though she had difficulty in finding anything particularly insidious in that fact, given that most humans she’d met did the same thing to one another. To her it was rather more natural to see them as part of a continuum whose constituent parts mutualistically fed upon each other. The normal circle of life, with a spiritual layer added on top.

The fact that this layer made her feel alive in a way that she never conceived to be possible also affected her view of the situation. Clued in to a form of existence without constraints; free to soar and dive through the natural world; dissolved into a collective that nevertheless allowed her to retain her essential individuality: it was beyond breathtaking: it was life-changing. They allowed her to reach beyond the confines of her previously narrow existence and grow to touch the sky with one hand and the planet’s surface with the other. It was hard to find fault with beings who seemed to lavish their gifts so freely upon someone that they, in their turn, hadn’t had much of an opportunity to understand before admitting her consciousness to their assembly. She was more inclined to find generosity in this act, and not the selfish desperation that Ortmann perceived.

And then there was Meeker.

Physical, sensuous, and brimming with life, she represented everything that Monroe was not. Uninhibited by the rules that most people conduct their lives by, she was a bolt of lightning that could strike anywhere, at any time. Deep down she knew the problem resided with herself; her lack of familiarity with the Daeldisian way of life; her lack of a history with Ortmann; her lack of any meaningful experience with either relationships or love. Like a boulder Meeker tumbled through these insecurities, smashing each one and gleefully rolling along a path that led straight to Ortmann. Delighted to point this out at every opportunity, Monroe felt she was being taunted by a girl who, ultimately, was sure of her object. And that very certainty made her nervous, suspicious, inclined to find things that weren't there. Admittedly Meeker had a good heart; any honest person couldn't deny that. But Monroe felt certain that her rival was a firm adherent to the old adage about love and war.

"You can't stand there all night ruminating," Ortmann pointed out, bringing her train of thought to an end. "Besides," he added, slapping the back of his neck, "I've had about enough of these mosquitoes."

"I know," she replied, more grounded now that she'd had a chance to think. "Markus, what do you see for us going forward?"

"You tell me."

"I know that I love you," she uttered quietly. "How's that for a starting point?"

"There's love and then there's *love*, Ellia," he responded, taking a big breath and letting it out slowly. Crossing his arms skeptically, he leaned a little further back against the hill as though settling in for a lecture. "When most people say love, they always follow it up with a little unspoken 'if...'. *If* you give me the things I want; *if* you stay out of the way of my passions; *if*.... On and on it goes. Their so-called *love* is conditional. They only let it out of its cage if they're satisfied a bunch of things will break their way first. That's not love; that's *convenience*. It's getting involved with someone because they make you feel less lonely, or more desirable, or because they have money. You see plenty of that last one here on Daeldis. I don't want any part of that." Nodding towards the tunnel,

he continued. "Meeker, despite her *numerous faults*," he said in a louder voice, certain that she'd once again returned, "is capable of the kind of love I'm talking about. She'd throw herself on a grenade to save me, as I would for you. But would *you* do the same for me?"

"Of...course," she said slowly, taken aback by the bluntness of the question.

"I'm not so sure," he replied, pushing off the hill and looking at her. "Best get back into the cave and get some sleep. We leave at dawn."

"Oh!" he heard Meeker gasp from the tunnel, quickly clambering inside to avoid being seen.

"What are you saying?" Monroe asked, putting a hand on his arm to stop him as he turned to climb into the opening.

"I'm saying you'd better figure out where your priorities lie," he answered gravely. "With me or with The Glow. Because it can't be both."

CHAPTER 9

For days they traveled slowly through the jungle, Monroe unable to move quickly due to her exertions with The Glow and her unfamiliarity with jungle conditions. Since setting out from Boulimar she'd lost a great deal of weight, her already lean frame gradually growing gaunt. Finding the pack too heavy to bear for more than a couple hours at a time, Meeker eventually came to carry it exclusively. With all the sprightliness that she could muster in the sweltering heat and oppressive humidity, she walked directly behind Ortmann. Monroe followed up the rear as before, the path being easier to follow for having been trampled twice.

"Next time we go on a vacation, *I'm* picking where we're going," Meeker joked, trying to ease the unspoken heaviness between her two companions. Glancing back at Monroe, she saw the sweat pouring off her bright red cheeks, her mouth hanging open as she raggedly drew breath. Tripping over a vine in her exhaustion, the Rimmian stumbled and almost tumbled into her. "Whoa, easy, honey," Meeker said, twisting in time to catch and steady her.

"Thank you," Monroe uttered. Resentful that the Daeldisian had once again proven more adept than she, her tone was none-too-friendly.

"Anytime," she responded, rolling her eyes at Monroe's touchiness. "How much farther do we have to go, Markus?"

"Why?" he asked flatly, given she already knew they'd march until sundown, which was still several hours away.

"Well, you know, I want to touch up my makeup." He didn't bother to answer. "Are we gonna spend the night in the open again? I mean, I like having a canopy of stars over my head as much as the

next girl. But sharing my bed with two sylgens isn't my idea of a good night's rest."

"I shot 'em before they got anywhere near you," he replied, pushing a modest branch aside and holding it long enough for her to put a hand on it. "You weren't in any danger."

"They were six feet away, Markus," she said.

"They can't bite you from a half dozen feet."

"I'll try to remember that the next time one of 'em snarls at me."

"You won't have to worry about that tonight," he told her. "We're not gonna be in the open."

"*Please* tell me it's not another cave. I never want to see one as long as I live."

"That wasn't a cave we were staying in."

"Oh, don't nitpick my terms," she objected. "I know I called it a cave when I first showed it to you, and it really wasn't. More like a...dugout, or hole, or something."

"It wasn't any of those, either."

"Then what was it?"

"A shrine," he replied, pausing to take a drink before handing the bottle off to the girls. "Somewhere that The Glow could more easily access. You remember how those stones glowed when 'Frell' first showed up?"

"Yeah?" Meeker nodded, giving the bottle to Monroe after she'd taken a swig.

"They must have been artifacts that help The Glow reach out to us. Probably the whole cave is lined with 'em."

"But how could they make anything like that?" Meeker inquired, as they got moving again. "It's not like ghosts can manufacture stuff."

"Someone made 'em for The Glow."

"But who? Frell's people sound too primitive to have done anything like that."

"They predate us, but that doesn't mean they predate everyone who's ever set foot on Daeldis."

"What? *More* aliens?"

"Could be."

With this thought the conversation ended. Despite Ortmann's hardness, and Meeker's pluck, they were much too burdened by fighting their way through the jungle to feel very much like talking. And Monroe was too far gone to open her mouth for any purpose other than breathing.

"Are we *there* yet?" Meeker groaned after another pair of hours had passed. "Much longer and we'll be tripping over sylgens and blue spiders."

"Twenty minutes," he answered factually.

"Good, 'cause I think my feet are about to fall off," she replied. "You don't have to be such a slave driver, Markus Ortmann."

"Better than passing the night in the open. Or would you rather spare your feet and bunk with a couple sylgens?"

"I'd rather spend the night in an off-world resort," she chuckled. "One with room service and massages included in the bill," she added warmly, briefly closing her eyes and contemplating the scene. "One that I didn't have to pay, of course," she quickly pointed out, her eyes opening again. "You can't really enjoy yourself unless it's free, you know. Otherwise you spend the whole time wondering if you really got such a good deal. And then that spoils everything. What do you think, Ellia?" she turned to ask, her good humor spilling over onto her rival. "Ellia?" she asked, the concern in her voice causing Ortmann to stop and likewise turn.

"I'm fine," she gasped, leaning against a tree as sweat dripped from her face. Panting heavily, she lifted tired eyes to her companions and then looked down at her feet. "Just give me...a minute."

"You're gonna need more than a minute, honey," Meeker observed, reaching around for the bottle in her own pack and handing it to the Rimmian. "Just take a couple swallows of that and relax. You're burning up."

Tipping her head to take a drink, she lost her balance and fell onto her back. By the time she hit the ground she was unconscious.

"Ellia!" Meeker exclaimed, dropping to her knees and feeling her face. "She's hot, Markus. She's about set to melt."

Glancing up at the trees around her as Ortmann likewise knelt, she added, "Why's she roasting? It really isn't that bad out here."

Before he could speak, Monroe moaned deliriously.

"You're right," he agreed, holding the back of his hand against her cheek. "This isn't just the jungle."

"What, is she sick?" she asked urgently.

"I'd say so," he replied with a frown.

"But with what? She was just fine a few hours ago, wasn't she?" She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe I wasn't paying attention."

"She's sick alright," he explained. "But not with any bug. This is a mental sickness. A *psychic* sickness."

"What makes you say that?" she inquired, concerned that his hatred of the glow was making him rush to judgment.

"You've got ears, haven't you?" he responded, gesturing towards Monroe. "Stick your head by her mouth."

Puzzled, she leaned over and listened for a few seconds. Suddenly she jerked her head back up.

"She's mumbling gobbledegook!"

"Mhm," he responded with a scowl, looking Monroe's sweat soaked, exhausted body up and down as he thought. "Like she doesn't have enough things to grapple with," he muttered.

"Well, what are we going to do?" his companion asked, her eyes wide.

"Carry her."

"No, I mean about the sickness."

"Get her out of the heat and wait it out," he replied. "And hope that The Glow doesn't fry her brain."

"But we're in the middle of the jungle, Markus. There *is* nowhere to get her out of the heat."

"You'll see. Come on."

"Oh, I feel like I'm not gonna like this," she said forebodingly, standing up to get out of his way.

Moving to Monroe's slender middle, he easily slipped his arms under her reduced form and lifted her up. Working her onto his shoulder, he wrapped his right around her thin legs while keeping the left free to clear the path ahead.

"I hope she's gonna be alright," Meeker fretted, watching the Rimmian's head bounce up and down against the pack with every step Ortmann took. "She's way too fragile for something like this. I wish she hadn't come to Daeldis. Or at least hadn't fallen in with The Glow."

"So would she, if she had any sense," Ortmann commented.

"Yeah," she agreed quietly, following closely behind. "I don't see why they're putting her through all this, anyhow. She's suffered enough for them as it is."

"I doubt they can help it," he replied sourly. "Once they get their fingers into you, they just keep going."

"What, like they dominate you?"

"Like they bend you to their purposes in every possible way, sometimes forgetting how much you can actually take. You can't look at Ellia and say they're respecting her limits."

Glancing up at the girl's unconscious face, still bright red and sweating profusely, she was pained by her suffering and had to look away.

"No, you certainly can't."

"This'd be a lot easier if she wasn't so eager to jump into their laps," he observed with annoyance. "It's hard to protect someone who's so bent on getting herself into trouble."

"Yeah," Meeker responded, before moving around him and trotting a little way ahead. "I'll clear the branches out of the way," she announced, doing just that.

"Thanks, Meeks," he replied, having found it difficult to move them enough with one hand to keep Monroe from getting scratched up. "You're a keeper."

"I'm glad you've noticed," she replied, glancing over her shoulder with a grin and turning forward just in time to catch a bunch of leaves in the face.

"Better watch where you're going," he could help dryly chuckling.

"Well, then you'd better go back to being mean and nasty. I just lose my head when you're actually nice to me."

"Don't start that again."

“Okay,” she dragged out in a singsong, pushing a big branch aside and holding it until he’d passed through with Monroe. Quickly she bolted ahead of him and continued her work. “Markus, are we going downhill?” she asked after an interval.

“Yes.”

“*Why* are we going downhill?” she asked with concern in her voice.

“Because the ground slants here.”

“You *know* what I mean,” she insisted. “Are we heading for another cave?”

“No. We’re heading for an actual cave.”

“Oh! I said I didn’t want to spend any more time in caves!” she protested. “Really, this is too much, Markus.”

“It’ll be cool in there, Meeks,” he responded. “And that’s what Ellia needs.”

As if to second his statement, Monroe muttered something unintelligible in her delirium.

“Oh!” Meeker repeated with frustration. “Just tell me that there aren’t any ghosts in there.”

“I’ve never seen any.”

“You’ve been there before?” she asked hopefully.

“Sure. How do you think I know about it?”

“Well, someone could have told you about it.”

“Not up around here,” he replied. “Not this close to the temple. Most folks have got enough sense to stay away from it. You know that.”

“I guess so,” she admitted.

“Besides, The Glow probably doesn’t want to appear this close to Tholoambelet, anyhow.”

“You think he can hurt them?”

“Why not? He’s got the psychic powers to punch his way into their realm. If they make an opening near him, he can probably exploit it. Shoot, he’s probably been hoping for a break like that for years.”

“Now I don’t know whether to be more or less worried,” she nervously laughed. “We might be trading one problem for another one.”

"You didn't think Tholoambelet would be a picnic, did you? He's gonna be at least as bad as they are."

"Sure. But at least he's, you know, *physical*. He's not a ghost."

"I doubt that'll matter when he's sucking out your brains through his hand."

"Oh, Markus!" she objected, shivering at the thought. "Why do you have to say things like that? I was all set to spend at least *one* evening without having to worry about ghosts or anything else. Now I'll be thinking about Tholoambelet all night."

"Sorry."

"That's it? Just a plain old *sorry*?"

"It's the best you're gonna get," he responded, only partially paying attention as he glanced around. Through the trees he could see the land on either side of them rising as they descended into a broad, deep gully. "Take a right," he instructed her, just as she put her hands to another leafy branch.

"A right *where*?" she inquired, turning to look at him. In answer he pointed. "Oh," she nodded, following his finger and making a path that led them closer to the right wall of the gully. "I hate caves," she mumbled, just loud enough that he could hear her over the branches she was rustling. "I hate, hate, *hate* them."

"I told you, there aren't any ghosts in here."

"Yeah, but a bad taste lingers, you know," she answered. "And that was a real bad taste. I'm just glad we got away with our souls."

"We'll see about that."

Stopping dead, she turned and looked at him.

"Just what do you mean by that?" she asked, her eyes wide, her face tense.

"Go ahead," he pointed over her shoulder.

"Not until you explain what you just said," she insisted. "What did you mean?"

"Not now, Meeks. Let's get under cover first."

"No," she shook her head. "Right now! Right this very second!"

“Fine. It’s just *possible* that they’ll want to keep us around as minions. They’ve already got a thing for Ellia, and she’s got a thing for them. But they know she can’t make it on Daeldis without us. So they might take her hostage and threaten to drain her life force unless we play along.”

“You think they’d do that?” she asked in an anxious whisper, glancing around, suddenly afraid that they might hear.

“I think they’re capable of anything,” he replied, indifferent to whether they heard him or not. “Now keep going.”

Swallowing hard, she nodded her understanding and made a path for another couple dozen feet before stopping. Just ahead, embedded in the gully wall like a door, stood a craggily yawning opening. Dark and deep, she could hear the faint sound of water dripping inside. Gently the cave exhaled moist, cool air.

“So, these are our accommodations for the night?” she inquired uneasily, trying to penetrate the darkness by squinting a little.

“Go on.”

“But I can’t see anything!” she objected, her voice louder than she’d intended. “I mean, besides, you’re the one who’s been here before. You know the layout. I might trip and fall down a hole or something.”

“Then fish the lamp out of my pack and turn it on,” he said, turning so the pack was before her.

Doing as she was told, she clicked the little light on and held it out at arm’s length. Swallowing again, she slowly stepped into the opening, Ortmann right behind her. Nervously her eyes shot in every direction except down. Suddenly his free hand reached out and seized her shoulder, making her shriek and jump back. The echo of her voice reverberated through the cave, causing her to cringe until it died down.

“Why’d you do that?” she demanded in an urgent whisper. “I nearly died!”

“You nearly broke your ankle,” he replied, nodding towards a deep hole in the ground. “You’ve got to watch where you’re going,” he added.

“Then why don’t you go first?” she countered.

“Because I’ve got *this*,” he responded, squeezing Monroe’s legs a little tighter for emphasis.

“Oh, yeah,” she uttered reluctantly.

“Just keep an eye on your feet along with everything else,” he said, pushing her into motion again. “We don’t have far to go.”

“Just when I thought this couldn’t get any better,” she murmured, holding the lamp lower to ensure she didn’t miss any more holes.

Soon stopped by the cave’s rear wall, Ortmann laid Monroe out on the cool stone floor and supported her head with the small pack Meeker carried. Loudly water dripped from a hole in the ceiling at the very fringe of the lamp’s modest glow, running off to the right of the back wall in a small stream. Pulling a small piece of cloth out of his pack, Ortmann allowed the cool water to dribble onto it and then placed it over Monroe’s forehead. Shifting a little in her sleep, she sighed.

Opening the top of her shirt a little to improve ventilation, he slid her shoes off and then sat beside her, watching and thinking.

“You really care about her, don’t you?” Meeker asked once she’d refilled the water bottles, settling on Monroe’s other side and drawing her legs against her chest.

“I should have thought that was obvious by now,” he answered without looking up from his unconscious charge.

“Well, sure. But you’ve been riding her so hard these last few days. I thought maybe you were...cooling on her a little.”

“Thought or hoped?”

“Both,” she admitted, reflecting for a moment. “But why have you been making it so tough on her then? You’ve been so annoyed with her that sometimes it’s made me cringe to see the way you look at her.”

“That’s a long story.”

“Not like we’re going anywhere,” she pointed out, taking his objection literally, though she realized he simply didn’t want to discuss it.

“I’m annoyed with her *because* I care. She’s dragging me around by my heartstrings and I can’t let go. Not yet, anyway. I *hate* that feeling, Meeker. It’s like being chained to a comet, because

there's nothing you can do about it. It's all well and good when you're both on the same page and going after the same thing. But when she's enamored with something as despicable as *The Glow*, and you're not, it's nothing but a slow-motion disaster. You're better off living your life alone than living like that, 'cause every day is misery. I should have known from the get-go that she wasn't someone to let into my life. I should have kept her away. But I let her work her way inside my heart, and now I can't get her out."

"Not yet, anyway," she repeated, pointing out his earlier comment.

"Yeah."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if she doesn't get her head on straight by the time this business is over and done with, we're breaking things off."

"You're joking," she responded instantly, surprise written on her face. "I can't believe you'd do that."

Finding her eyes with his, the look in them assured her that he was serious.

"I never thought I'd hear you say that," she uttered in astonishment. "You've always been so steady about that sort of thing."

"You mean helpless," he corrected her. "Times have changed."

"But what about all that idealism and romance? What happened to that?"

"I grew up," he replied flatly.

"No, you're growing cold," she responded. "You're letting your heart ice over. Don't do that, Markus."

"You can't lead with your heart, Meeker. It doesn't have any sense, so it gets you into trouble."

"Good trouble," she said. "The kind of trouble that makes life worth living. If we only ever did what made sense, we'd never know what it means to be alive. We'd be a bunch of robots." She dropped her voice. "Don't do this, Markus. Don't cut things short because of all this business with *The Glow*. She'll get over that."

"That's what we're going to find out," he told her. "She's got until the end of all this to figure out where she really stands: with me,

or with them. 'Cause I can't have it both ways. I'll never go along with a bunch of vampires like them. I don't care how nobly they try to paint themselves. It's all just a sham. They're parasites who are trying to keep their feeding grounds intact and exclusive to themselves. And somehow she can't see that. To her, they're wonderful beings who make her feel and see things that she never thought were possible. She's been seduced by their way of life. Even after I'd mustered every argument I could, she only reluctantly opposes some of their behavior. That just isn't good enough."

"I heard what you were saying to her back at the cave," Meeker uttered.

"Yeah, I know that."

"And you're right, you *did* muster every argument you could. But you left off the most important part."

"What's that?" he asked without interest.

"You never made an appeal. You never asked her to go with you instead of them. You totally ignored her heart. You spent all your energy attacking her reason, trying to convince her that The Glow are bad. But she's too much of an egghead to really feel an argument like that. She treats them like they're any other animal feeding on their food source. Like cows chewing grass." She shivered again. "That was a yucky metaphor, given *we're* the grass. But that's how she sees it, and you're not gonna convince her to see it any other way. You've got to make her *choose you* instead of *excluding them*. You've got to speak to her *heart*."

"No one's gonna choose me over the bootleg paradise they're offering," he spoke with certainty. "One man can't compete with touching the sky and the ground with either hand, or soaring through the clouds."

"That depends on the man," she said in a meaningful whisper, watching his eyes as he gazed at Monroe.

"It also depends on the woman," he pointed out. "And what she really wants. Right now, being a spirit seems to appeal to her a whole lot more than whatever I can offer. Which, honestly, isn't a whole lot."

"Any woman would be *nuts* not to fall for you, Markus Ortmann," she assured him. "And she'd be even nuttier if, after

feeling that way, she allowed herself to get carried away by a bunch of ghosts. You'd be better off without someone like that. But," she hastened to add. "Don't give up on Ellia too soon."

"Wouldn't you like me to?"

"I'd like you to be actually, *truly* over her," she clarified. "But not this. You can't walk away unless you really know that she's rejected you. And I know you, Markus: you're already starting to pull back in order to protect yourself. You're betting against her."

"No," he replied, standing up and looking at his fellow Daeldisian for a moment. "I'm betting against myself."

With this he turned and carefully made his way out of the cave. Looking at Monroe, she double-checked that her chest was still subtly rising and falling. Satisfied that it was, she shook her head and sighed.

"If only you knew what you had, honey," she said quietly, adjusting the cool rag a little. "You wouldn't care about ghosts or anything else." Hearing footsteps approach from the cave's entrance, she looked up and saw the silhouette of a huge, rotund figure. "Who are you?" she demanded, recoiling and scrambling to her feet. Realizing her knife was in her pack under Monroe's head, she glanced at it without turning her head, wondering if she could get it out before he was upon her.

"Who? Me?" the man replied in a gregarious voice, stepping into the light and revealing himself to be a jolly-faced fellow of forty. A long, scraggly beard rolled across his chest and stopped halfway down his massive belly. The hair of his head likewise ran down his back, reaching his lower spine; prematurely white from hard living, it looked to have been last washed years before. His face was small, with prominent cheekbones that lent a childish air to his rather wrinkled, sun-damaged face. "Why, I live here," he explained, moving closer as she drew back. "But you're welcome to live here, too," he added with a grin. "I think we'd set up a real nice house together, don't you?"

"What do you want?" she asked, pressing herself against the back wall and feeling its craggy surface with her anxious hands.

"Tell you what," he replied, leaning on one leg and putting his hands on his hips. "Give me a little kiss, and I'll explain it all –

beginning, middle, and end.”

“Hello, Pete,” Ortmann uttered calmly from behind him, walking towards the circle of light cast by the lamp, carrying a small leafy plant. Grinding its leaves in his hand, he held them palm up just beneath Monroe’s nose. Starting a little at the first unconscious whiff, her breathing then relaxed, and her chest began to rise and fall more profoundly as the odor opened her airways and calmed her. “Was wondering when you’d show up.”

“Yeah, I’ve been around,” he said casually. “Got to say, I was expecting you earlier than this. When I got your note in Todrid, I figured you’d just be a couple of days. Not a week. Something hold you up? Get in trouble with the Vipers again?”

“She’s what held us up,” Meeker answered for him, pointing at Monroe.

“She don’t look too good,” Pete observed. “She sick?”

“In a way,” Ortmann answered, kneeling beside her and feeling her cheek with the back of his hand. Frowning at the temperature she was running, he twisted his head around and looked at Pete. “You still hanging around with that witch?”

“Ellephendra is *not* a witch,” he replied pointedly. “She’s a healer, a bonafide medicine woman.”

“Well?” he prodded flatly.

“Yeah, I still see her once in a while. But you know what she thinks of you,” he added with a laugh. “If you’re thinking of taking this little thing over to her place for some doctoring, you’re boating up the wrong creek, fella.”

“No, you’re going to bring her here,” Ortmann told him. “Ellia shouldn’t be moved any more than she already has been. Besides, the jungle is too hot for her. She needs to cool off as much as she can.”

“You think I’m gonna go traipsing halfway across this jungle just to drag Ellephendra *here*?” he asked incredulously. “You’re nuts.”

“Either you do it, or I’m going to,” Ortmann uttered inexorably.

“She won’t come back with you,” Pete shook his head.

“She won’t have any choice, after I break her legs,” he answered coldly, his eyes as hard as a pair of stones.

Rapidly Pete glanced between Ortmann, Monroe, and Meeker, finally settling on the latter.

"He's got a thing for this one, eh?" the fat man inquired, having heard Ortmann speak in that tone only one other time. Then, too, it was for the sake of a woman.

"Just bring her back here," Ortmann instructed him. "This girl's in a bad way, and needs her help. If she really is any kind of medicine woman, she won't hesitate to come."

"She won't want to see you, Markus."

"Then don't tell her I'm here," he replied. "Now get going. There's little enough light as it is."

"Alright," Pete agreed doubtfully, looking at Monroe for a few seconds before turning his eyes towards Meeker. "Save that kiss for later, alright?" he asked with a wink and a grin, heading towards the entrance and disappearing into the jungle.

"Who was *that*?" Meeker asked, hitting her knees beside Monroe, looking at Ortmann as he put a pair of fingers to the Rimmian's throat to check her pulse.

"Pete Druet," he answered simply, scowling as he drew his fingers away, Monroe's heart beating very fast. "Next to me, he's the best man for penetrating the temple region of the jungle."

"Well, why haven't I ever heard of him?" she inquired. "He's got to be pretty famous if he's that good, right?"

"No, and he works real hard to keep it that way," Ortmann said, sitting down and resting his elbows on his knees. "Sometimes I share clients with him, if they're discreet. We split the pay, and I get to head back to Boulimar early while he gets 'em where they want to go."

"And you told him to meet you here?"

"Uh huh."

"And then you just took off, leaving us all alone with him?" she objected. "Thank you very much!"

"He's not dangerous. Besides, I was close by. I could have heard if you'd screamed."

"Nothing is dangerous for *you*, Markus Ortmann. But some of us are a little smaller. Besides, you've got the only gun!"

"Oh, stop worrying. He's just a big kitten."

"One that likes to snuggle, apparently! You heard what he said about kissing him." She shuddered at the thought. "Just imagine, that horrible beard wrapped all around me like a scarf! I think I'd rather choke!"

"Well, the scarf would be right there, if you wanted to."

"Oh, Markus!" she exclaimed, smacking him on the shoulder. "Can't you take this even a little bit seriously? That guy gives me the creeps. And you know I get intuitions about stuff like that."

"Yeah, I know," he replied, inwardly rolling his eyes. "But you don't have to worry. Once he comes back with that witch, he'll have his hands full just keeping us from strangling each other. He won't have time to play around with you."

Hardly reassured by this statement, she crossed her arms in a huff and stared at Monroe until her stomach began to rumble. Fishing the knife out from under Ellia's head, she headed for the large pack and busted out a can of preserved meat. About to open it, she remembered Ortmann and grabbed a second can. Working their lids off with effort, she handed him one along with a camp spoon before leaning against the back wall and chowing down.

"I don't know why I'm being nice to you," she uttered.

"You can't help it."

"Don't I know it," she grumbled, though without conviction.

"How long will Pete be gone?"

"Depends on where the witch has decided to haunt tonight," he responded through a half-filled mouth. "Could be an hour. Could be a half dozen. She moves around."

"But...she's not *really* a witch, right?" Meeker asked. "I mean, she can't cast spells on us and things like that," she added with a nervous laugh. Her face fell when he didn't answer immediately.

"Can she?"

"Depends on who you ask," he replied with a shrug.

"I'm asking *you*."

Pausing his meal, he looked up.

"She's got some pretty strange powers, Meeks. But I've never seen anything to make me think she can cast spells. But that doesn't mean she won't try to convince you that she can. Don't

believe more than half of what she says.” He took another spoonful of meat. “Not more than a quarter would be better still. But I think you’re a little too credulous for that.”

“I am *not* credulous!” she objected.

Instead of answering, he glanced at the space off to her right and nodded.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

Instantly she gasped and jerked her head, expecting to find another visitor like Druet. Seeing no one, she frowned at him.

“Oh, that’s different! I trust you. Though I don’t know why!”

“Just keep your guard up when Ellephendra is around,” he said. “She’s not someone to let under your skin.” He gestured towards Monroe. “I wouldn’t put *her* into her hands if there was any other way.”

“But what can she do, if the problem really is psychic?”

“You’ll see.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said that today,” she grumbled, sliding down the wall and resting at the bottom. “I didn’t like it the first time, either.”

Several hours passed during which little was spoken. Occasionally an animal would patter across the stony entrance of the cave, peeking inside to see who was there. A small rock tossed by Meeker was always enough to send them on their way. Finally branches began to rustle outside the cave, and in a moment a man and a woman appeared at the opening. Bolting to her feet, Meeker’s heart began to pound as they came towards the dim sphere of light produced by the lamp.

“M–Markus,” she breathed, afraid the witch would strike her with a spell for speaking.

“I hear ‘em,” he said in a rumbling, unimpressed whisper, his back to the entrance as he tended Monroe.

“Get away from her,” the medicine woman instructed in an imperious voice, sharply waving her hand off to one side as though to dismiss Ortmann from existence. “We need to purify the aura around the young woman if I am to—.”

Her words were cut off by the sight of Ortmann’s face, which had just turned to look at her. With a hateful scowl she glared

at him for several seconds, before turning to Druet and smacking him in his greatly protruding stomach.

"What did you bring me here for?" she bellowed. "I told you long ago I never wanted to see him ever again. You knew that was my express wish!"

"He would have brought you himself if I hadn't," he uttered apologetically, his small eyes downcast. "So I thought it was best—."

"You thought! You thought! You never think, Pete Druet. That's your problem. That's why you do what I tell you to do! Do you understand me?" she demanded. Like a chastened boy with his hat in his hand, Druet could only nod. "Bah!" she exclaimed, turning on her heels and making for the exit.

"That's far enough, Ellephendra," Ortmann ordered, his voice clear and calm. "You're gonna look after this girl."

"I have no time to waste on friends of yours, Markus Ortmann," she declared, waving him off over her shoulder as she shambled towards the door.

"You'll find the time," he told her with perfect assurance, causing her to stop dead and turn slowly around.

"Are you threatening me?" she asked in a simmering voice. "Are you *threatening me*, Markus Ortmann?"

"Yes," he uttered, nearly causing Meeker's heart to stop. "You take one step outside that cave, and you'll be dragging yourself home on your elbows."

"Don't think I can't give as good as I get, boy," she snapped, taking a couple of sharp, quick steps back towards the light. "Don't think I can't put a curse on you that won't—."

Again her voice was stilled. But this time it was by virtue of the large pistol that had been drawn from the back of his waistband and leveled on her chest.

"You think your magic is quick enough to outrun a bullet?" he asked coolly.

Slowly she drew towards the light, at last illuminated enough for Meeker to fully make her out. She was old by Daeldisian terms, at least sixty. Her hair was gray, long, and frazzled by the humidity of the jungle. Her back stooped, her hands crooked and deformed, her face battered and hollow in the cheeks, she looked

like the kind of old woman that children might fancy would eat little people such as themselves. Yet her movements were surprisingly quick and sure, as though she was supported by some unseen energy that gave her strength. Her eyes were alert, penetrating, calculating. Rapidly they searched up and down Meeker, dismissing her after a moment's digestion. Moving on to Monroe, they lingered for nearly a minute before she spoke again.

"She's in a bad way," she said with modest concern. "The Glow have made themselves known to her."

"We already know that," Ortmann replied, tucking his pistol away and looking at Ellia. "That's why you're here."

Looking up from the girl to her relentless protector, the old woman's lips pressed tightly together as she thought.

"I'll heal this girl," she began. "But it's going to cost you. Oh, it's going to cost you *dearly*."

"You're partially right," he replied, once more drawing the pistol, though choosing not to level it on her a second time. "You *are* going to heal her. And it will cost *you* dearly if you don't. Do we understand each other?"

Scowling again, she nodded and got to her knees beside Monroe. Passing her hands through the air above her prostrate form, she closed her eyes and began to hum to herself. The sound grew more or less intense based on where her hands floated. It was almost fevered as she neared the head and heart, but calmed as she moved off down her legs and towards her feet. Fascinated by the spectacle, Meeker couldn't help staring at Ellephendra's closed eyes. The orbs were clearly dancing beneath the lids, as though rapidly searching. Suddenly they shot open and fixed on the young Daeldisian, making her gasp.

"Get out of here!" she ordered at once. "Your aura is all wrong. You're contributing to an environment of confusion that makes my task more difficult. I must have *peace*. I must have *serenity* if I am to understand the tumult that is within this girl. The noise of your personality is unacceptable. Get out!"

Too scared to be wounded by her words, Meeker nodded hastily and made for the exit. Passing Ortmann, she felt his hand take her arm. The certainty in his touch spoke to her at once,

stopping her feet. Slowly he drew her back, released her arm, and reached a hand across her neck and rested it possessively on her opposite shoulder.

"She stays," he informed the old woman, who had turned to make sure Meeker left.

"It's hard enough to do this kind of work in...uncongenial conditions, without her adding to that difficulty," she replied sourly.

"You'll make out alright," he assured her, a faint, cold smile on his lips. "Get to it."

Grumbling to herself, she resumed her prior hand movements and began to hum again.

"Really, I can go if that'll help," Meeker whispered in his ear, eager for the chance to get away from her. "I don't mind at all. Not even a little bit."

In reply he squeezed the back of her neck firmly, signaling that she was to go absolutely nowhere so long as the witch was with them. Wordlessly nodding her understanding, she moved a few feet away and sat down in the darkness just outside the lamp's glow.

Watching all this was Druet, who stood flabbergasted. Certain that Ortmann had invited doom upon himself by standing up to the old conjurer, his eyes dashed between the hunched over mystic and the imperturbable adventurer. When she didn't turn in a flash and cast a spell on him, he began to fear that some far worse fate awaited his friend.

A quarter of an hour passed before Ellephendra finally arose from the girl's side and turned to face her host.

"She's been poisoned by The Glow," she announced. "They've overloaded her with their essence, and her form is disintegrating."

"What!?" exclaimed in protest Meeker, forgetting herself and jumping to her feet. A stern look from the old woman stopped her before another word passed her lips.

"It wasn't *deliberate*," she clarified. "Nevertheless, she must be treated at once if she is to survive. Even with an immediate intervention, the hazards are great."

"Explain," Ortmann instructed, crossing his burly arms and tilting his head skeptically as he eyed her.

"She could never regain consciousness," she began, grinding her teeth at his manner. "Or she may regain consciousness, but be reduced to a shadow of her former self. She may end up little more than a child, mentally speaking."

"Why?"

"Because The Glow is surging through her body like a river of lava, threatening all that it encounters. The human form is simply not equipped to grapple with the load she's carrying. We can taste their luminous energy sparingly. But to drink of it with such obvious abandon is a recipe for disaster." She looked at Ellia for a moment before continuing. "The Glow should know better than to drown anyone in their essence."

"What can you do about it?"

"The Glow must be drawn from her," she explained, her manner calmer now that she was thoroughly within her professional element. "I can soften their influence for a time. Hopefully that will allow her to awaken. It should also forestall any possible damage to her mind or body in the short term."

"What's the long term answer?" he asked.

"Tholoambelet," she uttered gravely. "Only he has the strength to draw The Glow from her body."

"You've got to be kidding!" Meeker said in shock. "He's not gonna try to save her life. He's gonna try to suck her dry!"

"Nevertheless, that is the only answer," she replied. "My powers aren't great enough to save her. I can only grant her a reprieve. She must seek out Tholoambelet and hope that he will be satisfied by merely drawing The Glow's energy from her. Perhaps he'll allow her to leave with her life intact."

"There's not much chance of that," Ortmann observed.

"Better than the certainty that currently faces her," Ellephendra countered. "As is, she will die, as certainly as the sun will rise tomorrow."

"How much time can you give her?"

"A few days. Perhaps a week. It all depends on how she continues to respond to their influence. She's extraordinarily vulnerable to psychic phenomena. That's probably why The Glow overplayed their hand and got her into this fix. Besides the fact that

there's a great disturbance in the energies surrounding Daeldis. Tholoambelet is active. He wishes to pass into their domain, and for this reason they are troubled. Very troubled." Her eyes began to faintly glow purple. "And it is to Tholoambelet that you are already going. You wish...to...destroy him!" she exclaimed at once, her hands raised like claws to attack him. Surging forwards, a blow from the back of his hand knocked her off balance and onto her rear. Looking up at him, the light faded from her eyes. "You must pardon me," she uttered, embarrassed to have lost control, though indeed not ashamed to have attempted attacking Ortmann. "The power of the auras is great, and sometimes I fall victim to them."

"What on earth were you doing?" Meeker asked, much too surprised to keep her mouth shut. "Were you *defending* Tholoambelet from us?"

"I was defending balance," she uttered, getting to her feet. "Or rather the auras were. The energies generated by Daeldis do not merely compose The Glow. They are simply one side of the equation. The opposite side is represented by Tholoambelet, however imperfectly. Where The Glow is free, willful, and parasitical, Tholoambelet is dominant, controlling, and consolidating. The Glow wishes to carelessly continue feeding upon humans and flitting about the world. Tholoambelet wishes to make an empire, with himself at the head. These two attitudes roughly align with the energies themselves."

"Then why is he so bent upon joining The Glow?" Ortmann asked. "He could just take up with the other side."

"Because the other side isn't strong enough. That's why The Glow has been able to hold him back for so long. Tholoambelet's portion of this world's auras is merely a fraction of that enjoyed by his opponents. Thus he must force his way into their domain and dominate them as well. With his powerful mind he is capable of doing exactly that, but it will not be a natural fit. He wishes to become the god of Daeldis, though he will be just as much its prisoner. He doesn't truly understand the aura of The Glow. Should he ever ascend to their collective, he will find himself in very uncongenial territory. By then it will be too late. But he will be able to

assuage his feelings with the knowledge that he has vanquished an untouchable foe, and become lord of this world.”

“Then he’s rushing to imprison himself,” Meeker summarized.

“You have a definite gift for repeating the obvious,” Ellephendra retorted, eliciting an iron stare from Ortmann that made her flinch. “The two sides have held each other in check, more or less, for eons. But that period is soon passing. Destroy Tholoambelet if you must, or leave him alone. It matters not from the standpoint of balance, because either eventuality will see this world’s auras upended. The Glow will grow stronger without him, feeding all the more freely once the opposing aura lacks a focal point to center itself around. That will be bad for the human population, needless to say. Tholoambelet’s ascension would also be bad, though much worse.” She sighed. “I’m too old to care very much about such things. Soon I will pass from this dirty little orb, and it will no longer be my concern. The unbalancing of the auras will upset my source of energy, and ninety-two years of life will draw to a close.”

“Don’t say that,” Druet requested in a quietly pleading voice, while Meeker’s eyes bulged out of her head at the enormous number of years the old woman had managed to live.

“Everyone dies, Peter,” she answered, before looking to Monroe. “I’ll do what I can for her,” she uttered, glancing back at Ortmann for a moment. “Then I’ll be on my way. The final answer is to get her to Tholoambelet. The Glow is much too committed to their line of action to pull back now. I can feel their energy surging passionately through her body. They see her as their final shot, their last desperate hope for taking down their adversary. That’s why they’ve pushed her so far. They hoped to charge her to such a degree that she could stand long enough in his presence to do her job.” She shook her head. “They’ve never truly learned just how fragile a thing the human body is. They invariably go overboard.”

“Go ahead,” Ortmann nodded towards Monroe. “We’ll give you a few minutes alone.”

“Oh, it’ll take longer than that,” she responded. “At least an hour. Perhaps two.”

“Alright,” he agreed, putting a hand on Meeker’s shoulder again. “Come on, Meeks.”

Leading her to the front of the cave, they sat down on the floor and pressed their backs against the wall beside the opening. Watching as Ellephendra knelt once more next to her patient, they could hear the old woman begin to chant in a low, growling voice. Quietly Druet moved away as well, though he was careful to keep his distance from Ortmann and Meeker, not wishing to associate with them for fear that Ellephendra would take him to task for it during the trip back to her place.

“I hope she can help her,” Meeker confided in a breathy whisper, taking his arm in her hands and squeezing it. “Oh, I wish she wasn’t so bad off! I feel like I’m watching her die, just really slowly.”

“She’ll be fine,” he assured her, leaning close to her ear and keeping his voice down. “That old bat knows what she’s doing. More or less.”

“More or less?” she repeated anxiously.

“Shh, it’ll be alright.”

“But what about Tholoambelet? It’s one thing to dash into his temple and chuck some grenades at him. But it’s a whole different bag of beans to walk in there asking for help. He’ll gulp us down like a cool drink of water on a hot day. It’s suicide.”

“Doesn’t look like there’s any better way,” he shrugged. “Maybe we can let him drain on her enough to suck out The Glow, and then kill him before he goes too far.”

“But how are we supposed to know when that is?” she objected. “And how are we supposed to even stay alive long enough to do that?”

“Search me. We’re playing this one by ear.”

“And here I am, totally tone deaf,” she grumbled.

Unable to help smiling at this comment despite the heavy atmosphere, he put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her tight against his side.

“Don’t ever change, Meeks,” he said quietly, watching the medicine woman work her arcane arts on Monroe. “Don’t ever change.”

CHAPTER 10

By morning Ellephendra and Druet were long gone. The cave was quiet, though the dribbling of water a short distance from where Monroe lay gradually drew her to consciousness.

Moaning and shifting a little, she gently stretched her muscles but kept her eyes shut. She felt different, uncertain, like her body wasn't altogether her own, and she didn't want to face the world just yet. Savoring the hint of privacy provided by her closed eyelids, she allowed her intuition to wander through her body, trying to find a cause for what she was feeling.

The strange sense of overwhelmedness she'd experienced the day before was gone. No, not gone, she realized: weakened. A peculiar aura floated around her body, pressing inwards as though she was a dozen feet below water. As she put this notion to words with her inner voice, she gasped: there were more voices inside her head than just her own. Quietly, like whispers spoken at a funeral, they spoke to one another.

Trying to calm herself as her stomach tightened with fear, she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Quieting her own thoughts, she focused on the inner multitude of voices. Their language was strange and unintelligible at first. But soon she realized that their words were stimulating images in her mind. Further calming herself, she allowed the images to fill her imagination and paint a picture. Palpably she felt the hatred of The Glow as they contemplated Tholoambelet and his designs. As they grew more excited chattering about their alien rival, the images their words generated shot past in such rapid succession that she had difficulty following the narrative.

But as she continued to focus on their discussion, consciousness began to fade and she slipped into a quasi dream state. Harnessing the power of her unconscious mind, she pieced together the fragments into a whole that suddenly made her gasp and jolt upright.

“Markus!” she called out, looking all around. “Meeker?”

But she was alone. Only the dripping water broke the silence.

“Markus?” she repeated in a lower voice, unsteadily getting to her feet. The notion flashed through her mind that he might have left her there for good, fed up with her fascination with The Glow. She wanted to lay blame at Meeker’s doorstep and imagine that she’d somehow led him away from her. But she felt like such a fool because of what she’d learned moments before that all she could do was wonder that Ortmann had been so patient with her naivete. “Markus?” she asked almost sadly, her voice an appeal as she moved away from the lamp’s light and towards the sunlight that shone through the cave’s opening. Pausing halfway between the lamp and the jungle, she glanced around again and realized that she hadn’t the least memory of entering a cave. Yet it felt familiar. Evidently, even in her sleep, her mind had been actively aware of her surroundings.

“Markus? Meeker?” she asked at the cave’s mouth, leaning her hands on its stony side and peeking out. “Where are you?”

Wandering a little way into the jungle, she filled her lungs with the warm, humid air of morning and sighed. Shaking her head, she went back inside.

“At least they left me the packs...” her voice trailed as she returned to the little lamp and sat down, folding her legs beneath her. “And the light.”

Fishing out a can of meat, she dug around for a knife and managed to slice her finger when she found its blade instead of the handle.

“Ouch!” she said, drawing her hand back and sucking her finger for a moment. Watching the blood ooze slowly from the cut, she decided it wasn’t serious enough to warrant a bandage. Pulling out the knife, she began working it against the can’s lid. Finding it a

tougher prospect than she'd imagined, she ended up plunging the blade repeatedly into the thin metal until she'd worked it three-quarters of the way around its circumference. Bending the lid back, she lifted the lamp and looked for pieces of metal in the meat. Once she was satisfied that her meal was safe to eat, she took a camp spoon and settled against the back wall, her eyes on the opening.

"Can't blame them for leaving me," she grumbled at herself. "I've been a deadweight this whole trip. And a fool!" Looking down at the can with disgust, she was about to throw it away when her stomach gurgled mightily, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since the day before. Frowning, she dug her spoon into the poor excuse for meat that Daeldisian industry had managed to produce, and slowly ate. "Should have left me in Boulimar," she uttered through a half-filled mouth. "Should have let Scarlet get me."

"Scarlet's done enough killing," Ortmann countered from the entrance, his body silhouetted by the gleaming sun. Beside him stood Meeker. "She doesn't need your blood on her knife."

"Markus!" Monroe all but screamed, dropping her breakfast as she shot to her feet and dashed across the cave. Diving into his arms, she hugged him passionately. "Meeker!" she added after a moment, releasing Ortmann and embracing her.

"What's got you so excited?" she asked, surprised as the Rimmian's arms went around her neck, conking their heads together.

"I thought you'd left me! I thought you'd decided to call it quits and head back to Todrid!"

"Oh, we wouldn't do that," she assured her with a laugh. "Besides, it's not like we'd have left you both packs. Kindness only goes so far on Daeldis."

"Oh, of course," she replied, letting her go and taking a step back to look at them both. The joy quickly faded from her face, replaced by a look of shame and regret. "I've been so wrong," she admitted. "I've let them lead me around like a kitten on a string."

"Glad you realize that," Ortmann replied, walking past her towards the lamp and setting down a small sack of fruit that she hadn't noticed until that moment. Glancing at Meeker, she saw that she bore one as well.

"Come on, Ellia," Meeker said in a bright voice that contrasted with her fellow Daeldisian's heavy tone. "Have some breakfast. We've been out since a little after dawn, gathering fruit and nuts and whatnot. You might not believe this, but this part of the jungle is actually *really* fertile. Like a garden. Well, in spots."

Likewise walking past her, Monroe was left dumbfounded and alone at the entrance.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" she asked incredulously as she approached, her two companions laying out their booty. "I said you were right, that I've finally come around."

"Welcome to the club," Ortmann replied without looking at her, taking a large nut and breaking its shell with his teeth. "Some of us have been here since the beginning."

"But you don't understand," she responded, dropping to her knees. "They seemed so nice, so wonderful. But I overheard them talking this morning somehow." A shiver ran down her spine at the thought. "It's like the walls are thin between my psyche and their world, and I could understand some of what they were saying. They don't want Tholoambelet defeated because they're good and he's bad: they want him gone because he's standing in their way. They want to chow down on us just as much as he does. Probably more."

"Mhm," Ortmann shrugged.

"We know," Meeker said.

"But how?"

"First," he began, resting his elbows on his knees and looking over to her at last. "Because they're a bunch of snakes who didn't deserve to be trusted in the first place. Everything they've done since we entered that shrine of theirs should have made you see that. Second, because we had a visitor last night who helped bring you back from the brink, an old witch named Ellephendra. She said it didn't matter whether Tholoambelet or The Glow won, because we're gonna end up with a disaster on our hands either way."

"But...what do we do then?" she asked meekly.

"Take you to the temple," he answered, picking up a piece of fruit and taking a bite.

“But we can’t just hand Daeldis over to The Glow. If we kill Tholoambelet, there won’t be anything to hold them back! That’s exactly what they want us to do. It’s why they sought me out in the first place.”

“Just have a little breakfast and calm down, Ellia,” Meeker suggested, holding out a piece of fruit.

“Oh, I don’t want any of that,” she said, waving it away with her hand.

“Eat something,” Ortmann instructed. “It’ll calm your nerves.”

Reluctantly she took the fruit offered by Meeker, taking a small, token bite.

“Well, more than that, honey,” Meeker objected. “You’ve got about a day’s worth of eating to catch up on!”

“Oh, how can you two eat at a time like this?” she asked, her belly twisting into knots. “Spirits on one hand, an alien mastermind on the other, and us stuck in the middle. Don’t you feel at all worried?”

“Panicking isn’t going to help,” he said. “You can run around the cave headless if you want to. But we’re hungry.”

Struck by his words, she frowned and drew back a little.

“Why are you treating me like this? I said I agree with you. Isn’t that what all this friction has been about?”

“Your conversion is a little recent to put much weight on it,” he responded factually.

“You Daeldisians are hard to please,” she huffed, feeling flustered by all she’d gone through.

“Nobody made you come here, Ellia,” he observed. The coolness in his eyes, and the easy indifference of his voice, made her heart ache. Feeling that her presence there was no longer of any importance to him, she snatched her small pack and made for the entrance.

“Where are you going?” Meeker asked with alarm, jumping up and following after her.

“Back to Boulimar!” she snapped, halfway to the cave’s mouth by the time Meeker caught up and put a hand on her arm. Angrily she shook it off and kept walking.

“You can’t go, Ellia,” she insisted.

“Not like I’m wanted around here,” she retorted.

“No, you don’t understand,” Meeker uttered, taking her arm a second time and pulling her around. To her surprise, there were tears in the Rimmian’s eyes. “You can’t leave Daeldis, Ellia. Not like this.”

Painfully she looked at Ortmann, who continued to watch her from the back of the cave.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything to keep me here any longer,” she replied, her voice thickening with emotion as her cheeks began to redden. “The Glow is as bad as Tholoambelet. If I destroy him to avenge Daddy, I’ll just be handing Daeldis over to them.” She looked at Meeker for a long moment, and then back to Ortmann. “Besides,” she concluded, tears now flowing freely down her cheeks, “Daeldis won’t be losing all of me. A little piece of my heart will always be here.”

Pulling her arm away, she hurried for the door and disappeared.

The instant she was out of sight, she broke into a loud sob that she couldn’t suppress. Fighting her way a couple dozen feet into the jungle, her tear-blurred eyes caused her to trip over a fallen branch. Tumbling into the soft dirt, she started to get up but stopped at her knees. Sitting on her legs, she closed her eyes, let her head roll back, and wailed at the sky. Deep, primal sorrow escaped her lips as she vented her feelings; loss mingled with abandonment to produce an achingly crushing sense of rejection. The final straw had broken the camel’s back, leaving her heart broken in little pieces all around her. Lacking the emotional strength to rise, she fell forwards on her legs and wrapped her arms around her head, weeping into the soft dirt.

Half a minute later she could hear quiet footsteps approaching. Sniffing, she dried her eyes and stood up, unwilling that either of the Daeldisians should see her so broken down and defeated. Grabbing the pack again, she was about to walk ahead without looking back when a powerful hand seized her wrist and stopped her.

“Let me go!” she demanded, twisting around and trying to wrestle his mighty fingers off her thin wrist. Shifting the pack to her free hand, she swung it at his head. But he easily ducked, and it went flying into the bushes behind him. “You’ve kicked me around enough!” she exclaimed, working on his fingers once more with her little hand. “Take up with Meeker or do whatever you want! Just leave me out of it!”

Wordlessly he held on. Looking into his eyes, she saw the same coolness as before. But the indifference was replaced with something more tender. A tiny flicker of hope surrounded them, his usually skeptical gaze softened by it. Though still distant and all but certain of disappointment, she could see one more chance being held out to her.

“Let me go,” she repeated, though with less conviction as his expression quickly fascinated her and dampened her enthusiasm to depart. Slowly he moved her back until she collided with a tree. “You’re hurting me,” she uttered quietly, her wrist starting to ache as she looked up into his eyes. Taking her other wrist, he pinned them both over her head and gazed at her for a moment. Her heart beat at double time.

“That’s just as well,” he replied, slowly leaning his mouth towards hers. “You’ve caused me plenty of pain lately.”

“Markus, I never meant to—,” she began to plead. But she was silenced by his kiss.

To her surprise it was tender and gentle, a sharp contrast to the roughness with which he was pressing her arms into the tree. In a flash she realized that his mind was manhandling her body, but his heart was kissing her. With a final, desperate gamble, he was betting it all, extending a hopeful olive branch from his heart to hers. The adventurer was putting his soul on his lips and placing it before her, risking incurable devastation if she should reject him. Moved beyond words, she was filled at once with his love. Sighing softly, she gently kissed him back.

“I’m yours, Markus,” she whispered when their lips at last parted, her enchanting green eyes dancing between his searchingly, hoping to find forgiveness. “I have been since the moment we met. I just got distracted by The Glow. I—I was a fool. I let them trick me and

lead me in circles. I should have known it was too good to be true. I should have known they were playing with me.”

Wordlessly he released her arms and leaned a hand on the tree just above her head. Sliding her hands behind her, she left herself vulnerable and exposed, hoping to signal her complete sincerity.

“I’m so sorry, Markus,” she continued. “It makes my heart ache to think how I pushed you away. I’ll never do that again. I swear.”

Resting a hand on her shoulder, he brushed her lovely neck with his thumb as he leaned in once more.

“I know,” he breathed, kissing her again. Drawing her into his powerful arms, he squeezed her tight, physically promising never to let her go. Melting into his embrace, she moaned from deep within her spirit. But suddenly she gasped and grimaced in pain. “What is it?” he asked in alarm.

“I—I don’t know,” she replied, looking into his chest with confusion as she tried to understand what she was feeling. “It’s The Glow. They know they’re losing me. They’re upping the pressure. Oh, it hurts!” she groaned, her hands going to her stomach as he continued to hold her.

Her legs growing weak, she began to slide to the ground. Hoisting her up into his arms, Ortmann quickly made for the cave, snatching her small pack along the way. He found Meeker sitting cross-legged in the back, snacking on fruit.

“What’s wrong?” she asked at once, jumping to her feet.

“What do you think?” he replied, his face twisted into a scowl of hatred for The Glow. “We’re going to Ellephendra. Right now.”

“You know what she said,” Meeker cautioned. “She said if we ever sought her out again—.”

“I will crush every bone in her body if she tries to refuse us,” he growled, clenching the hand that supported Monroe’s knees.

“Now grab the other pack. We’re leaving.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” she agreed quickly as he turned towards the entrance. Grabbing the pack and lamp, she

hurried after them. "But how are we gonna find her? You know how she moves around."

"I talked to Pete before they left. I know where she is."

"What, he actually told you?"

"I didn't leave him much choice."

"Oh," she nodded, thinking for a moment and remembering a few hushed words that had been exchanged by the two men just out of earshot. Coming back to the present moment, she trotted up alongside and looked at Monroe's pained face. "Don't worry, Ellia: we'll get you there in plenty of time. Ellephendra's really good at this sort of thing. I'm sure she'll fix up everything."

"She's unconscious, Meeker," he pointed out, drawing her eyes to Monroe's slack face.

"Oh."

Inwardly Ortmann cursed the medicine woman for her failure. She'd assured him that the treatment would last long enough for Monroe to reach Tholoambelet. But it hadn't lasted even twenty-four hours. It gave him the notion to drag her along for the rest of the trip, at gunpoint if necessary. Now that Ellia had been won back, he wasn't going to let anything separate them. Especially not The Glow.

"Ooh, I know that look," Meeker uttered quietly, foreboding in her voice. "You're thinking of doing something *really* desperate."

"She should have gotten it right the first time," Ortmann replied inexorably, twisting to fit between a pair of trees.

"But you can't just ride roughshod with a woman like that," Meeker objected. "She'll cast a spell on you or something. You know how dangerous she is."

"So am I."

"I know. That's why I'm trying to talk you out of this. Don't go too far."

"It's too late for that," he uttered implacably, the helpless bobbing of Monroe's head against his arm hardening his resolve into iron. "I'll break her in pieces if I have to."

All through the day they traveled, pausing only once so that Ortmann could shift Monroe from his arms to his right shoulder. Sweating profusely, her face boiling red from the heat of the jungle and the workings of The Glow, Monroe looked worse than the day

before. Eventually Meeker moved up front under the pretense of clearing the way. In reality she couldn't bear to see the Rimmian suffer any longer.

By sunset they'd reached a strange portion of the jungle. Unusual plants grew all around, their colors bizarre combinations of purple, orange, and blue. Their leaves were sharp and pointed, like little daggers that fluttered in the wind. Instinctively the Daeldisians knew not to touch them, giving them a wide berth instead.

"Do you feel that?" Meeker asked, vaguely sensing something foreign in the air. "It's like...an essence, or something." With a gasp she paused. "Did you *hear* that?" she asked, her eyes wide as she looked back at him.

"Keep moving."

"But what was that?" she insisted. "It sounded like a voice moaning in the wind." She cringed. "It couldn't be more ghosts, could it?"

"What difference does it make?" he responded, pushing her into motion again with his free hand. "We're committed either way."

"Sure, but I'd like to know just what I'm walking into," she replied quietly, ducking her head as she simultaneously glanced around and moved a leafy branch out of the way. On the other side of it stood a skinny old man in a loincloth. With a scream she leapt back, nearly colliding with Ortmann.

"Turn back," he ordered, white bones painted onto his deeply tanned body. "This is not a place where outsiders are allowed to tread."

"We're making an exception," Ortmann retorted, moving Meeker out of his way and glaring down at the frail sentry.

"You will be stopped."

Drawing his large pistol, he cocked it with his thumb and held it at his side.

"Anyone who tries is going to be leaking blood in a minute. Now get out of my way."

Wordlessly the old man stepped aside, allowing them to pass.

"Oh, I don't think you should have said that to him," Meeker fretted once he was out of earshot. "He looks magical to me."

“He’d look a lot less magical with a couple of bullet holes in his chest,” he replied, imperiously marching through the forest with his tender cargo anchored to his shoulder by an arm of steel that pressed her knees against him. “He’d better pass the word to anyone else who might be slinking around out here.”

“You think there’s more like him?” she inquired anxiously, glancing all around.

“Just keep moving forward,” he told her. “And keep these branches out of the way. I can’t move them with a gun in my hand.”

“Alright,” she said, walking on tip toe despite the heavy, thudding steps of the man behind her.

They’d moved about a hundred yards deeper into the jungle when they were suddenly stopped by a small gang of old men dressed like the sentry. Holding long, narrow walking sticks out before them, they began chanting in a strange language. Moving their arms and legs in perfect sync with their peculiar song, they stepped out of the bushes that surrounded the trio of interlopers and drew near. Their eyes were glazed and otherworldly, as though they were deeply hypnotized.

“That’s close enough,” Ortmann warned them. When they continued to advance he put a round into the arm of the oldest looking man among them, guessing that he was their leader. Instantly they stopped chanting, their hypnosis broken. Staring at the wounded man, they looked between him and Ortmann several times before disappearing into the surrounding foliage.

The injured man, however, stood as if frozen. For a long moment he stared at his wound as it gushed blood that ran down his arm and painted the leaves and ground beside him. Then he looked up at Meeker and Ortmann.

“She will avenge my injury,” he told them grimly. “Her magic will sweep you aside like gnats.”

With this he turned and likewise disappeared.

“I *told* you there was something magical about these guys,” Meeker complained. “Why did you have to shoot him?”

“Keep moving,” was all he said, pushing her ahead with the knuckles of his gun hand.

"You keep saying that," she objected, moving tepidly forward. "Why not, 'Hey, Meeks, you darling girl you, I'll take the lead for a while'?"

"You can't carry Ellia," he responded, pushing her again. "Now pick your feet up."

"Well, I could drag her, at least," she muttered, half shutting her eyes as she wrestled an enormous, leafy branch out of the way. Grimacing as it scratched at her face, she held it aside until Ortmann had passed.

Another hundred yards of dense jungle slowed their progress before suddenly terminating in a large open area. Obviously cleared by human hands, in the center of it stood a one floor house made of wood and stones of various bright colors. Candlelight flickered in several windows, and an ornate walkway of smooth, white pavers stretched from a modest door to a path that had been carved in the jungle off to their right.

"This must be where she cooks her victims," Meeker whispered, clasping her hands in front of her to stop them from shaking.

"Come on," Ortmann replied, leading the way to the door.

Reaching it, he tried the simple wooden handle but found it locked. Putting a hand on the top of the doorframe, he raised his left boot and kicked it in, snapping off the latch in one blow.

"What do you think you're *doing*?!" demanded Ellephendra, who had been halfway to the window to find out who was trying to get in. Then she recognized him in the dim light of her candles and scowled. "I told you never to seek me out, Markus Ortmann. You're going to pay for this."

"So are you," he growled back, pushing past her and laying out Ellia on a large wooden table. "Your 'cure' didn't fix jack. She's been unconscious all day."

Distracted from her anger by Monroe's terrible condition, she moved around him and placed a hand on her broiling forehead. Closing her eyes, she inhaled and concentrated for a moment. Then she exhaled slowly and looked at him.

"The Glow fear she's lost to them," she uttered. "They're trying to take her back. Just what did you do to push them over the

edge like that? My cure would have lasted her until she'd reached Tholoambelet's temple if you'd just kept your hands off."

"I didn't do a thing to her."

"Oh, yes, yes you did," she assured him. "Her silly love for you was being suppressed by The Glow in order to keep her moving along the track they wanted. Somehow you've dragged it up to the surface, pushing them aside. That's why they've taken such a drastic step."

"Can you do anything for her?" Meeker asked quietly.

"This isn't going to be an easy case," she replied, watching Monroe's sweat-soaked face and shaking her head slowly as she thought. "It took enough out of me to set her to rights last time. That was when the collective was merely over-enthusiastic about using her as a tool. Now they're threatened, angry, and defensive. But they're not *just* angry," she stipulated, looking at Ortmann. "They're jealous and offended."

"By what?" he asked.

"You. It's hurt their pride that a girl could choose you over them. They see themselves as divine, more or less, and that a mere mortal should compete with them is insulting. So they've got a combination of factors working in their thinking right now. They want to defeat Tholoambelet, of course. But they also want to deny you Ellia. They'd rather see her destroyed than lose her to you."

"You mean they're killing her?"

"I mean they've put her in a very dangerous place," she explained. "She could tip either way without much effort on their part." She looked at the Rimmian again and frowned. "She's just lucky this didn't happen in one of their shrines. Their power is so immense there that they could have easily killed her if they wanted to, given her great vulnerability to their advances. She's like a house with no insulation when a cold breeze decides to blow through it. They could have carried her life away with the same ease that you or I snap our fingers."

"But what can be done?" Meeker inquired.

"I need Walumba," Ellephendra replied. "And his brothers."

"You mean those weird guys with the bones painted on their bodies?" Meeker asked with dread, shivering at the thought of

seeing them again. Especially given the hole Ortmann had shot in one of them.

"If you want to save this girl, it will take all the magic that I and they can muster," she responded, glaring at Meeker with annoyance. "I must begin my work at once, so you'll have to go get them."

"How?" she asked, as Ortmann made for the door. "It'll be pitch black out there in a minute. We'll never find them."

"You won't have to: they'll find you. Now get out of here and leave me to my task." Without a moment's hesitation she turned back to Ellia and raised her hands over her limp body. Waving them back and forth as she began to hum, she fell into a trance almost instantly, her mind seemingly leaving her body and inhabiting the air between them. A peculiar sense of energy filled the room at once, and Meeker felt as though she was being touched by the old woman's spirit.

"Come on," Ortmann uttered, doubling back long enough to take Meeker's arm and pull her away.

"Sure, sure," she mumbled, unable to peel her fascinated eyes off the witch's labors until she was actually outside and the wall blocked her from sight. Blinking several times, she shook her head and picked up enough of the pace that Ortmann released her arm. "That was so weird," she said quietly. "Like she filled up the whole room, or something." Passing into the trees and bushes once more, the physical reality of them brushing against her body drew her completely back to the present moment. "Oh, I hope that wasn't Walumba that you shot," she worried. "He might not help Ellia after that."

"He'll help."

"Or what? You'll shoot him again? You can't just go blowing holes in everybody, Markus! They get mad, to say the least."

"All I gave him was a flesh wound," he pointed out. "I didn't hit the bone. A couple of weeks and he won't even remember it."

"Oh, he'll remember it," she replied emphatically. "That's not the sort of thing you forget."

"I mean it wasn't serious. He'll hold a grudge like anyone else. But his life isn't in any danger. As long as he had the sense to

bandage it.”

“You shouldn’t go messing around with magical people,” she said. “You never know how they’re going to come at you. It’s all just so *creepy*.”

“Then stay behind me.”

“Oh, I intend to,” she responded, following close on his heels and glancing from side to side every few seconds. “Do you think they know where we are?” she asked several minutes later. Instantly her question was answered by a rustling in the bushes around them and the emergence of the scarcely visible silhouettes of the same gang of men as before.

“I’d say so.”

Slowly one of them approached and stood before Ortmann. A piece of white cloth wrapped around his upper arm, he eyed the adventurer for several moments before speaking.

“You have come for our help,” he uttered in a low voice. “But you will find none in this place.”

“Ellephendra wants you, Walumba,” he answered. “She sent us to find you.”

“Tell her I will not come.”

“You’ll come,” he replied coolly, returning the strange man’s steady gaze as Meeker’s trembling hands found the back of his shirt and squeezed it. “One way or another.”

“You would *compel* me to go against my will?” he asked.

“You’d be in no condition to object.”

At this Walumba’s brothers snorted and drew closer. But his hand went up and stopped them.

“I will return with you,” Walumba replied, causing the fists that gripped Ortmann’s shirt to relax. “But only if you can best me in single combat.” Instantly they tightened again, accompanied by an almost silent whimper of fear.

Hesitating not a moment, the old man drew up his foot like lightning and kicked Ortmann in the stomach. Caught off guard, he tumbled backwards and landed on top of Meeker, who screamed her surprise and then gasped as the air was crushed from her lungs. Rolling off of her, Ortmann jumped to his feet and crouched, his hands held out before him. Blocking two further kicks with his arms,

he snatched Walumba's foot on a third attempt and twisted it, spinning the old man to the ground. Like a flash he was upright again, beginning to chant quietly between breaths. Sensing that his perception was beginning to change, Ortmann attempted to close the distance with Walumba to finish the fight quickly. But the wily mystic kept just out of reach, chanting his strange magic song. Sparkles seemed to appear in the air, making it hard to see in the darkness. Trying to blink them away, he shook his head and suddenly realized that he was now faced by *three* Walumbas. Two of them moved off to either side to flank him, while the third held the middle.

"You have taken on much more than you ought to have," he taunted, as the copies took up their positions. "Now you will pay the price."

Blocking phantom blows from the middle and right, Ortmann caught a kick from the leftmost Walumba in the abdomen. Grimacing with pain, he retreated. His vision clouding further from the sparkles, it was all he could do to even see his assailant in the darkness of the jungle.

Though unaffected by the magic, Meeker quickly figured out what was going on and called out.

"He's still on your left, Markus!"

Catching several more blows from Walumba, Ortmann managed to wrap his powerful hands around the old man's ankle. Twisting him to the ground, he jumped onto his back and grabbed his wrists. Grinding his face into the dirt, he raised the mystic's thin arms until the shoulder joint would go no further.

"What do you say, Walumba?" he growled through gritted teeth. "You want a couple of snapped arms?"

"Look out, Markus!" Meeker warned him, as the old man's brothers rushed for him.

Hearing their footsteps even before she spoke, Ortmann wrapped his arm around Walumba's neck and rolled onto his back while simultaneously drawing his pistol. Seizing him with his powerful legs, he pressed it into his neck.

"Another step and your brother's a ghost!" he barked, bringing them to a halt. "*What do you say, Walumba?*" he repeated,

speaking straight into his ear. "You had enough of this life?"

In answer, the sparkles vanished from his sight, as did the bootleg Walumbas.

"*Say it!*" Ortmann ordered.

"You've won," he admitted, though without a hint of shame in his voice. His head was still held high. "You've bested me, and I will go with you."

"And your brothers, too," Ortmann specified. "Ellephendra said all of you."

"We will all go."

Sensing the sincerity in his voice, Ortmann released him. Quickly the old man got to his feet and waited for him to do the same. Then they all marched swiftly back to the house.

"What in the world happened to you?" the witch demanded, looking at the two combatants. "I said for you to bring him back. Not beat him half to death." Her eyes fell upon the blood stained bandage Walumba had on his arm and she scowled. "You *shot* him?" she rumbled, her anger palpably filling the room and making Meeker's heart all but stop.

"That was earlier," Ortmann said dismissively, leaning against the wall and returning her icy stare. "Now, do you need him for Ellia or don't you?" he asked, returning her mind to the task at hand.

She glared a few seconds longer, and then turned her eyes to Walumba.

"I need you and your brothers to help me with this one," she uttered, her voice beginning to lose its anger as she turned to business. "The Glow have overwhelmed her, and her life hangs by a thread."

Approaching with his walking stick in his hand, Walumba passed a hand through the air above Monroe and concentrated much as Ellephendra had a short while before.

"She is troubled, distressed," he said musingly. "Torn by many desires. There is no unity in her soul. She is divided. She must have unity and peace. She must have balance of mind to manage their interference."

“Yes, I know,” Ellephendra replied. “The difficulty is in the interference I am receiving from them. I can guide her towards wholeness so that she can suppress their energy for a time. But I must have room to work. You and your brothers must provide that for me by holding The Glow back.”

“We will do so,” Walumba assured her, waving them near. Surrounding the table, they rested their staffs on the floor and tilted them towards Monroe. Tightly wrapping their hands around each pole, they closed their eyes and began to chant. This proceeded for several minutes before Ellephendra at last felt capable of resuming her work. As her hum mingled with their curious song, the room again filled with her spirit.

“You can’t tell me you don’t feel that,” Meeker whispered to Ortmann, joining him where he leaned by the door. “It’s like smoke hanging in the air.”

“I feel it,” he replied, his eyes fixed on the proceedings.

“Do you think it’ll work?” she inquired.

“After the last time she screwed up, I wouldn’t place bets on anything she does.”

Though whispered, this comment found its way to Ellephendra’s ears all the same, for the ‘smoke’ in the room suddenly grew hot and angry.

“I think we’d better go,” Meeker said, taking his arm and pulling him towards the door. “They all need to concentrate.”

With a final frown at the old witch, Ortmann wordlessly followed.

“Markus, *please* stop antagonizing these people,” she pleaded once they were outside. “You saw what Walumba did to you back there,” she added, pointing off into the jungle. “That’s got to be just a taste of what someone like Ellephendra is capable of.”

“Both of them have had only a taste of what *I’m* capable of, Meeker,” he pointed out. “Besides, you saw how she stopped dead back in the cave when I pulled my gun on her. She’s not as powerful as you think. Not with physical beings, anyhow. Her magic is reserved for The Glow, more or less.”

“But you don’t *know* that!” she insisted. “Nobody does. These people have never been studied or understood. They’re a

mystery.”

“If they were as powerful as they make out, we never would have made it to this house, Meeks,” he told her. “Now calm down.” Taking a few steps away from the house, he looked up at the stars. “Not a bad night.”

“No, I guess not,” she agreed, glancing upward momentarily before looking around. “Kind of a strange place, don’t you think? Why would Ellephendra want to live in the middle of nowhere? Especially since she’s clearly some kind of healer at heart, despite all her witchiness.”

“She’s got something to hide,” he answered. “Like the rest of us.”

“Like what?”

“Search me.”

“Oh, that isn’t any kind of an answer.”

“Then why don’t you go ask her?”

“What? And get my head bitten off? No thank you! I don’t want to end up with my bones floating in a big black cauldron of soup!”

“That’s just a fairy tale, Meeks.”

“Yeah, well, maybe the guys who cook up fairy tales know a thing or two about what they’re saying. Have you ever thought of *that*?”

“I think most people wouldn’t consider fairy tales as being part of the historical record.”

“Ah! *Most* people! That doesn’t mean *everyone* goes along with that!”

“Sure, there’s always a few crazies like you who’ll believe anything,” he replied with a grin that she could only hear in the darkness.

“There you go picking on me again!” she objected. “And with Ellia lying on that table, no less! Here I am, trying to have a serious discussion about—.”

“Fairy tales?” he cut in.

“Well, yeah,” she admitted, starting to feel a little silly. “I mean, just the part about witches, of course. They’ve been around a long time, so something true must have filtered in by now.”

“Sure.”

“You don’t believe that,” she protested.

“No,” he agreed.

“Okay, fine. If you don’t want to talk about it, we don’t have to talk about it.”

“Good.”

In the distance a wild dog howled, drawing their attention towards the north.

“Funny, I haven’t really noticed any animals since we got into this neck of the woods,” Meeker reflected. “I thought they were supposed to be thick as fleas.”

“Yeah, I noticed that, too.”

As if in answer to this line of thought, a stick snapped off to the west. Then another. Faintly they could hear something rustling in the bushes.

“Get back to the house, Meeker,” he ordered quietly, drawing his pistol and slowly moving that way himself. “Tell ‘em we’ve got company.”

“What kind of co—,” she began, her words drowned out by the explosion that roared from the end of his pistol. Jumping at the noise, she double-timed it to the house and stuck her head in the door just in time for it to collide with Ellephendra’s. Cursing loudly, she drew back and put a hand to her face.

“What is wrong with the two of you?” she barked. “This isn’t any time for target practice!”

Two more shots erupted from his weapon, the mighty flash revealing a pair of savage dogs that were tearing their way across the open space to Ortmann.

“Get inside, girl,” she ordered Meeker, before turning to Walumba and waving both he and his brothers outside. “Look after her,” she added to Meeker, nodding towards Monroe.

No sooner had their collective feet reached the stony path than Ortmann was rushing towards them, waving them back inside.

“Move! Now!” he shouted over the ringing in his ears. “Get something to jam the door with!”

Flowing back inside the small house, the group of aged mystics laid hands on a large chest and slid it across the floor.

Shutting the door, they pushed it against it just as a large gang of dogs reached it and began pawing at it. One jumped through an open window, instantly meeting its end through lead poisoning to the brain.

“Shutter the windows!” Ortmann instructed, positioning himself to cover the two that flanked the door.

Doing as they were told, the house was quickly locked as tight as a drum.

“Now what?” Meeker asked, her heart pounding in her chest as the sound of scratching filled the air. “We’re trapped!”

“No,” Ellephendra uttered calmly, drawing near to Monroe and looking down at her. “We’ve got the means to call this off. But it’s going to be difficult.”

“What do you mean?” Meeker inquired, her eyes wide.

“I mean the animals sense a disturbance in the energy fields of this world,” she explained. “This young woman is at the center of a war that’s gone on for countless years. That fact has aggravated them, drawing them to this location. If we can settle her out, they’ll leave of their own accord.”

Outside the ferocity of their barking increased, making Meeker inwardly shrink.

“I hope you’re right,” she replied. “Because there sure are a lot of them.”

“Help me,” Ellephendra said to Walumba and his brothers. “Time is short.”

Circling the table once more, they positioned their staffs as before and began to chant. The witch’s spirit again expanded to fill the space, touching every corner.

“What are we gonna do?” Meeker asked, moving to Ortmann’s side and speaking as quietly as she could given the noise both from within and without.

“Hold the line,” he replied, reloading his magazine and sliding it into the handle of his pistol. “Stay away from the windows and the door. Some of ‘em are gonna get in here before they’re finished,” he said, tipping his head back towards the witch and her team.

“Oh, no,” Meeker fretted at the thought, watching as the shutter on the left window bulged and strained at its hinges with each blow it received. “Markus, the chest by the door is starting to move,” she warned him, taking a step towards it before his hand seized her wrist and pulled her back.

“Wait here,” he commanded, moving quickly for the chest and giving it a powerful kick that jammed it against the door again. Retracing his steps in a flash, his eyes shot between the three points of entry, scanning for the first sign that the dogs had made a breach. Glancing over his shoulder at Ellephendra, he wanted to spur her along with a sharp word, but thought better of it.

A sudden crash at the right window drew his eyes. A large brown snout had broken through the shutter, its nostrils flaring as it sniffed away at the occupants. A quickly discharged round ended the beast’s life in an instant, throwing it back among its fellows and dampening their ardor for a few moments. But soon the space was filled by a smaller nose that managed to fit farther into the opening. Pressing for all it was worth, the dog strained the surrounding wood and started to broaden the hole.

“Get something long to stab through that hole,” Ortmann ordered Meeker, aware that he had far too few bullets to plug each opening with lead.

Looking all around the room, she saw a broom leaning in a back corner. Taking it firmly in her hands, she pressed her foot against it just above the bristles and snapped the handle, producing a sharp, jagged edge. Rushing to the right window, she stabbed it into the dog’s nose, causing it to yelp in pain and tumble backwards.

“Just keep working that hole,” Ortmann instructed, receiving a nod of understanding from Meeker. Jerking his head towards Ellephendra, he saw her serenely waving her hands over Monroe. “Anytime now,” he muttered, as the left window’s shutter began to give way. Not content to break a hole, the dogs were throwing themselves against it, trying to burst it completely open. Certain that it must break at any moment, he cast three rounds through it to scare them off. From the subsequent whimpers he reckoned to have wounded two of them, possibly killing a third.

A loud, dramatic moan peeled from Monroe's lips, as though her spirit was being taken away by messengers of death. Turning to look, he saw her sitting upright, her eyes open but uncomprehending. They glowed yellow, animated by an energy that was at once hostile and uncoordinated. The men who surrounded her increased the fervency of their chanting, as did Ellephendra her humming and hand waving. But she paid them no mind. Slowly sliding down the table towards Ortmann, her motion was hampered by the aura that the witch and her assistants were casting around her. With a dismissive motion of her hand, she broke their concentration and sent them tumbling to the floor.

"You have interfered long enough, Markus Ortmann," the multitudinous voices of The Glow uttered, as Monroe reached the end of the table and dropped off of it onto her feet. "Now you will die."

"So will she, if those dogs get in here," he replied, drawing back to avoid having to hurt Ellia in order to defend himself. "They'll tear her to pieces."

"Savage beasts are a mere trifle to us," The Glow responded, waving Monroe's hand slowly around the house, silencing the dogs and sending them scampering into the jungle like chastened puppies. "They are of no concern to The Glow."

Turning her makeshift spear around, Meeker slowly approached Monroe's possessed body, hoping to strike her over the head.

"Put aside your weapon," The Glow uttered, sensing her without needing to look. "You may indeed do her a great deal of harm. But The Glow are endless. You shall only hurt your friend."

"That's not the way," the witch cautioned Meeker, finally regaining her feet and gesturing for her to lower the spear. Her assistants likewise found their footing again, moving carefully towards Monroe.

"Ellephendra," The Glow sneered. "You've long been a thorn in our side. But this night shall see your end. No longer shall you thwart our aims. You shall perish as all flesh. You shall never know the eternity of The Glow."

“You’re correct,” the old witch replied, moving laboriously towards the young woman’s bedeviled body on unsteady legs. Much of her stamina already having been spent trying to weaken The Glow’s influence over Monroe, she found herself short of breath and greatly fatigued. “I won’t survive the night. But you shall never again possess this girl.”

All at once many voices erupted from Ellia’s mouth, laughing their scorn for the medicine woman’s words.

“You have no power to stop us,” The Glow said contemptuously. “You’ve grown deluded in your old age.”

“It is you who are deluded,” she assured the collective, gesturing sharply for Walumba and his brothers to act. Instantly they held their staffs over their heads and barked a deafening chant that staggered Monroe and dropped her onto her rear. In a flash Ellephendra was on top of her, holding her down with her body weight as she pressed her fingers to the young woman’s temples. A scream burst from the Rimmian’s lips as the yellow light began to fade from her eyes and move into the witch’s. Tremblingly Ellephendra rolled off her and lay on her back, closing her eyes as though to hold in The Glow. “Come here...quickly!” she uttered, wildly gesturing for Ortmann to approach. “I have only...a moment. I have drained much of their influence from this poor girl,” she informed him, reaching out and patting Ellia’s unconscious brow. “But they will once again grow and assert themselves. You must... get her...to Tholoambelet quickly. No one will be able to save her if they...if...they...m—manage to...”

“I understand,” he replied, taking her hand and squeezing it. “Thank you, Ellephendra.”

“I didn’t do it...for you...” she shot back. “I did it...for...her.” Then her eyes shot open with realization. “Tholoambelet! They w—want Th—Tholoambelet to...”

“To what?” he prodded. “To *what*, Ellephendra?”

“They...want...him...to...” she struggled to say, her face contorted with effort. Taking as deep a breath as she could manage, she made a final attempt. But as her lips parted to speak, her hand fell slack in his, the light faded from her eyes, and a hazy yellow

essence rose from her body and evaporated in the air above them. She was gone.

"What was she trying to say, Markus?" Meeker inquired quietly. "What did they want Tholoambelet to do?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, holding her hand a moment longer before releasing it and standing up. Looking at Walumba, he nodded to Monroe. "Is she going to be alright?"

Taking a knee beside the young woman, the strange old man passed a hand through the air above her face and nodded.

"Yes. For now she will be fine. Ellephendra has given her life to deliver her from The Glow. She has been granted a respite. But nothing more. Soon she will be overtaken again, and there will then be no deliverance. Only Ellephendra had the knowledge and power to rescue her. There will be no second chances if you fail."

"I understand," he said gravely, nodding slightly. "Will you take care of her? Bury her?"

"Oh, yes," he assured him. "Only we know the proper way Ellephendra is to be entombed. The ceremony must be accompanied by many rituals."

"Alright, do what you have to do. We'll stay out of your way."

"Thank you," he replied, bowing slightly before gesturing for his brothers to join him in removing Ellephendra from the premises. In less than a minute Ortmann was alone with his companions.

"What now?" Meeker queried, looking up into his eyes as he gazed at Monroe on the floor.

"Give me a hand getting her onto the table. Support her head."

Doing as he asked, they got her off the floor and gently laid her out on the table. Taking the small pack, Meeker slipped it under the Rimmian's head and brushed the hair out of her eyes.

"This kid never gets a break, does she?" she asked.

"No. Some folks aren't born to."

"I guess not." Drawing a deep breath, she glanced around at the battered house and then back to Ortmann. "Are we going to spend the night here?"

"You heard Walumba," he answered. "We've got to get her to Tholoambelet as quickly as we can." Looking to where

Ellephendra had lain minutes before, he frowned. "And given their track record, we still might not get there before she's relapsed."

"Yeah," she agreed grimly. "Well, can we at least give her a few minutes? Maybe she'll wake up."

"Mhm," he responded without looking at her, still gazing at Monroe.

"I'm sure she'll be alright, Markus," she said.

"Nobody can be sure of that, Meeks," he responded, raising his eyes to hers. "Not after all she's been through. And not with all that's sure to come her way. We still have to take her to Tholoambelet, of all people."

"But you won't let anything happen to her," she said with quiet sincerity. "And neither will I. We'll both look after her."

"Yes, we will," he nodded, looking down at her once more before looking into Meeker's eyes. "And if anything *does* happen to her, I won't stop until I've destroyed every last being who's responsible. Corporeal or otherwise."

"I know," she whispered, afraid of what losing Monroe would do to him. But before she could think further along that line, Ellia moaned and her eyes fluttered open.

"What happened?" she asked, looking around. "Where are we?"

"Come on," Ortmann said, taking her hand and slowly easing her off the table and onto her feet. "We'll explain along the way."

CHAPTER 11

How are you feeling now?" Meeker solicitously asked Monroe the following morning as they walked.

"I'm fine, Meeker," she replied wearily. Though appreciative of the Daeldisian's concern, it was the third time she'd asked in the last hour. "I'm just tired."

"Like *tired*, tired, or just tired?" she queried.

"Just regular old tired."

"Oh, well, good," she nodded, following up the rear. "I know I must be bugging the tar out of you. But after last night..." her voice trailed for a moment. "Well, we just don't have a lot of margin to work with, is all. If anything *does* happen—."

"Nothing's going to happen," Ortmann cut in pointedly from the front, trying to stop Meeker's anxiety from transmitting to Monroe. Having walked all of the previous day with the Rimmian over his shoulder only to then walk the entire night, he was exhausted and short of patience. "We'll be there before The Glow have a chance to work their magic again."

"I hope you're right," Meeker muttered. "Because if we're not—."

Ortmann sharply turned and glared at her.

"Okay! Okay! No worries! It'll all work out just fine."

"What do you two say to us taking a little break?" Monroe asked, hoping to ease both of their nerves. "We can't just go nonstop, or we'll be too exhausted to grapple with Tholoambelet. We need to pace ourselves a little."

"You're right," Ortmann agreed reluctantly. Inwardly he was twice as worried as Meeker that they wouldn't get there in time, and

that fear drove him on despite his fatigue. But if Monroe was to cope with the ancient alien's powers, she would have to be at least decently rested. Glancing up at the sun, he guessed it was a couple hours short of noon. "We'll rest here for a while," he announced, working his pack's straps off his shoulders as the girls gratefully dropped to the ground and leaned their backs against a large tree.

"How much farther is it to the temple?" Monroe asked, as Ortmann passed a water bottle around.

"About a day," he answered, sitting down between them. "We might get it down to twenty hours if we can pick up the pace a little."

"We're moving as quick as we can, Markus," Meeker complained, slipping off her boots and rubbing her small feet with her square fingers. "Oh, I think I'm just one big blister at this point." She glanced past him to Ellia. "How about you?"

"The same," she commiserated, leaning her head back against the tree as sweat ran down her face and neck. "I'm not sure I even have skin on my soles any more," she chuckled dryly, likewise taking off her shoes and checking. "No, okay, I do. It just doesn't feel like it."

"Well, it'll all be over with soon enough," Ortmann commented.

"I just hope—," Meeker began, before glancing at Ortmann who was watching her out of the corner of his eye. "...that...we... come across some water," she redirected unconvincingly. "Like a pond or a stream or something. I'd feel a lot better if I could dip my feet for a little while."

"Yeah, me too," Monroe seconded, trying to help her out. "It's this heat that's killing me. I wish I could just cool off a little." Stretching her arms over her head, she rested them on her thighs and sighed. "But like you said, this'll be over soon. Just have to keep it together a little longer."

"Enough talking," Ortmann instructed. "We've only got a few hours to catch a little sleep."

"Anything you say, Boss," Meeker smiled with a hint of a wink, sliding down the tree and resting her back on the moist, cool ground. "Ooh, this isn't bad at all."

Monroe followed her example.

"Oh, you're right," she agreed, shifting a little to stretch the tight muscles in her back. "This is much better. Come on, Markus: it's a lot cooler."

"I'm alright," he responded, retaining his position to better watch the area around them. "You girls go to sleep."

"What, while you keep watch?" Meeker asked, sitting up a little. "You've been on the go nonstop for the last twenty-four hours. To say nothing of carrying Ellia to that cave before that. You need rest, too."

"We're in sylgen territory, Meeks. Blue spiders aren't unheard of, either."

"Yeah, but not in this heat," she objected. "They'll be hiding under bushes and such. Now lay down and get some sleep. You can't watch over us if you're dead on your feet."

"Go to sleep," he replied, drawing his feet close and resting his elbows on his knees. "I'll wake you when it's time to go."

"Please, Markus," Monroe seconded.

"Go to sleep," he repeated, drawing a tired breath and letting it out as he rested his head against the tree.

"Let him be, Ellia," Meeker told her. "When he's made up his mind, that's it."

"Alright," she nodded, laying her head once more in the dirt and closing her eyes. Sighing as she relaxed, she quickly fell asleep.

In less than two minutes Meeker joined her. Ortmann couldn't help grinning fondly as he looked at them both, soundly sleeping under the umbrella of his protection. Silently working his pistol out of his waistband, he laid it on the ground beside him for quick access and settled in for a long wait. Dog tired, he was nevertheless unable to sleep even if he'd wanted to. The fact that Ellia now had no lifeline if The Glow reasserted themselves scared him more than anything ever had in his life. For the first time in years he felt powerless, the victim of a ghostly collective that could, at any moment, irretrievably possess his love. What was worse was the fact that the same collective hated him with a passion, and would certainly force him to hurt Monroe in order to defend himself. Perhaps even kill her.

The notion tightened his stomach into a knot, and he turned his head aside as though to stop seeing it.

But it wouldn't go away. It had tormented him ever since they'd left Ellephendra's house the night before. Beside him lay a timebomb that could detonate at any moment. The assurances of the witch and her helpers meant nothing to him, given her previous miscalculation. The only answer, somehow, was Tholoambelet. And he was a very long way off.

A rustling in the bushes just beyond Meeker drew his attention. Placing his hand atop the pistol, he raised it slowly and returned his elbow to his knee, allowing the weapon to hang loosely between his shins. When a pair of birds fluttered out of the foliage, he relaxed and laid the weapon down once more.

The problem of how to deal with Tholoambelet floated through his mind. Given what they'd been told, it seemed they had very little chance of pulling off any kind of a deal. The ancient being didn't appear the type to cooperate with humans on any level. Though the fact that all his information about the would-be divinity came through The Glow and a handful of dreams that they may well have orchestrated gave him pause. From beginning to end, he reflected, they'd manipulated the trio with a combination of lies and selective truths. He couldn't help snorting at the idea that, perhaps, they'd reach the temple and find him a decent fellow after all. Shaking his head at the notion, he leaned back once more against the tree.

Time dripped by like the sweat that continued to gather on his brow and roll slowly down his face. Though he hadn't eaten in hours, he was too tense to have an appetite. The only thought on his mind was getting Ellia to the temple on time. Looking down at her, he had to smile again at the sweet trust with which her safety had been placed in his hands. Breathing easily in her sleep, her increasingly sunburned cheeks glowed gradually redder from the increasing heat of the day. Meeker, though infinitely more tanned, likewise blushed as the minutes turned to hours.

Glancing up at the sun after a long interval spent in reverie, he estimated around three hours had passed. Deciding to give them a fourth before resuming the journey, he shifted and stretched out his

legs to let the blood flow more easily. The sound produced caught the attention of something behind him. A sudden ferocious hiss made him jerk away from the tree and twist around just as a sylgen jumped through the air, aimed at his arm. Landing on all four of its short legs, it opened both mouths to hiss again when a round blew apart the fleshy neck that supported them. Both girls screamed and jumped to their feet, only half conscious.

“What? What’s going on?!” Meeker exclaimed, looking all around with dull eyes that comprehended nothing.

“Sylgen,” Ortmann replied, every sense alert for more. “Keep close,” he ordered Monroe, as she groggily stumbled a couple steps away, trying to get her bearings.

“Talk about a wakeup call!” Meeker uttered, looking at the exploded body of the beast. “Are there more of them?” she asked, looking around with a degree of calm that surprised Monroe.

“No, I think he was alone,” Ortmann responded, slowly lowering his weapon after half a minute’s wait. “The rest should have been on us by now.”

“Good thing you saw him,” Meeker yawned, stretching her arms over her head before approaching the sylgen and lifting it by its tail. “Big fella,” she observed, hoisting it up and down several times to feel its heft. “Would’ve made a nice meal if we had the time to set up a fire and cook him.” She looked at Ortmann with a little twinkle in her eyes. “I don’t suppose...” she trailed.

“We can’t afford the wait,” he answered, sliding his pistol into the back of his waistband.

“You would *eat* that?” Monroe asked incredulously.

“Sure,” Meeker replied in a chipper voice, swinging the sylgen a short distance away. “Actually they taste really good. And they’re mostly made of meat, anyhow, so you get a decent meal for their size. Of course, the neck *is* the best part,” she uttered, glancing at the corpse and then back to Ellia. “And somebody’s already seen to *that*. But it still would’ve been better than eating out of a can. Actually, I’ve got a really great recipe that—.”

“We’d best get moving,” Ortmann cut her off, picking up the larger pack and slinging it over his shoulder. “Get your shoes on.”

“Oh, alright,” she acquiesced, dropping to the ground along with Monroe and pulling them onto her sore feet. “Ooh, that hurts,” she groaned, grimacing as she got them all the way on and briefly tied the laces. Standing up, she hopped a little as the pain surged. “This is gonna be a fun day,” she said. Then a playful smile crossed her lips and she looked at Ortmann. “You know, you’ve been carrying Ellia an awful lot lately. Don’t suppose you’d like to do me the same favor?”

Humorously he frowned at her.

“Just a thought,” she grinned, bending over to snatch the smaller pack off the ground and likewise slinging it over her shoulder. “After you, Bossman.”

For hours they wearily trod the jungle. Despite their nap, the girls’ energy quickly flagged in the intense heat. Long since exhausted, Ortmann merely trudged on mechanically, his awareness of his surroundings dimming uncomfortably as his mind began to dull. Often closing his eyes as he walked, he relied almost exclusively on his ears to warn him of danger. This was appropriate, given the region was almost devoid of every other threat besides sylgens. Aggressive and deeply carnivorous, they’d long before eaten every last snake or spider that may have lain in wait for them. Impulsive and restlessly active, the quick movements with which they pursued their prey invariably gave them away. Only when they were unaware of a potential snack did they move quietly, as was the case with the one Ortmann shot while his companions slept. And with the level of noise the trio was making, there was no chance of that happening a second time.

“Can we stop...for...a minute...?” Meeker asked, dropping to the ground before receiving a response. “I think my legs are broken,” she added, her voice muffled as she spoke into the dirt. Turning her head to the side, she gasped a few times and then looked up. “Just a few minutes?”

“Not yet,” Ortmann replied flatly, beyond tired.

“Come on, Meeker,” Monroe said, taking her arm and helping her upright. “I’m sure we’ll reach a place where we can rest soon.”

“Easy for you to say,” Meeker responded, shaking the small pack. “You’re not carrying this!”

"I'll take it for a while, if you want," she suggested.

"Oh, I'm alright," she asserted, her Daeldisian pride rearing up. "I reckon I can make it if you can."

"Come on," Ortmann uttered as he had so many times before.

"Just a second," Monroe said, holding up her small hand as the other two began to move. "I'm...feeling something."

"What is it?" Meeker asked, her eyes instantly wide and alert despite her fatigue. "Not The Glow?" she asked with dread.

"I don't think so," she replied, looking down at the ground as she sensed the notion that dimly spoke from within. "I think..." her voice trailed. Then she lifted her head, her eyes dancing between either of them for a moment. "I think it's Tholoambelet."

"Are you sure?" Meeker asked, as Ortmann drew near and gazed intensely into her eyes for any hint of The Glow's bright yellow light. "Is he trying to possess you, too?"

"No," she responded with no little surprise. "Quite the opposite. He's *suggesting* a change in course. Something more..." she trailed again, gesturing off to the right of their path. "What direction is that?" she asked Ortmann.

"North."

"Yes, something more northerly," she nodded, glancing down once again and closing her eyes. "Some kind of...shelter. No, not a *shelter*. I don't know *what* it is. But it'll get us out of the open air."

"How far is it?" he inquired.

"I'm not really sure. I can't judge the distance too well. But I don't think it's much more than a few hours away."

"Well, at least that's one place we know to stay away from," Meeker commented. "What, you're not serious about going there, are you?" she followed up, when her companions didn't second her statement. "It's *got* to be a trap!"

"It's worth a look, Meeks."

"Are you kidding? Look, I know The Glow have been a bunch of scum from the get-go. But that's no reason to go *trusting* this guy! As far as I'm concerned they're two peas in a pod, and we're just little bugs trying not to get crushed between them!"

"That's not the feeling I got from his message, Meeker," Ellia said. "He was very clearly *suggesting* a course, laying out an option. I know this sounds strange, but he was very hands-off about the whole thing. There wasn't any of The Glow's dictatorial air."

"Yeah, and Frell was pretty nice when you first met him, wasn't he?" she objected. "And we all know how that turned out. No," she shook her head. "I vote no."

"I vote yes," Monroe said simply, before looking at Ortmann. "Markus?"

"Let's go," he answered, turning more towards the north and making a path for them to follow.

"Oh, why doesn't anyone ever listen to *me* about these things?" Meeker fretted under her breath, as the trio resumed movement.

For the rest of the day they walked, Ellia making minor adjustments in their course as the ancient alien communicated with her. The messages were faint, like whispers on the wind. But they were clear and distinct when she could manage to notice them. The product of a single powerful mind, they lacked the wispy fluidity of The Glow's communications. She found it both a welcome change and a bit unnerving, given that she felt under his watchful eye the entire time. Yet it was more familiar for that fact, much less otherworldly than communing with a collective of ghosts.

"I think we're getting close," she announced several hours past nightfall. "Yes, yes, I'm sure of it."

"How close?" Ortmann asked.

"A couple hundred feet at most. Should be straight ahead."

"What are we looking for?" Meeker inquired. "A house or something?"

"All I've been getting are glimpses," Monroe replied. "But it looks like a doorway that leads into the ground. Could be a bunker, I guess."

"That's probably where Tholoambelet keeps his food," Meeker uttered forebodingly.

"That's why we're gonna push you in first, Meeks," Ortmann whispered.

“There you go being mean to me again!” she protested.
“Look, I only said—.”

Clamping a hand on her mouth, he silenced her.

“Keep quiet,” he ordered almost inaudibly, slowly removing his hand.

Moving forward in the dim light of the stars above, his pistol held at the ready, Ortmann neared the entrance. It possessed no door, being a kind of shaft with thick purple walls made of some kind of metal that had been overgrown by vines. Reaching into his pack for the lamp, he clicked it on and began to descend into it, the girls right behind him. Twenty feet down he found a door that divided in the middle. Though designed to slide apart to permit entry, its machinery had long since broken down, freezing it in place with a one foot gap through which he had to twist in order to fit. Pushing his pack inside first, he squeezed through with the lamp and was quickly followed by his companions.

“What is this place?” Meeker asked, as they entered a large circular room that was likewise purple from floor to ceiling. Ancient computer terminals ran along the walls. Opposite the entrance was another doorway, though the light didn’t penetrate far enough for them to see where it went.

“It’s a spaceship,” Monroe observed, walking along the somewhat tilted floor carefully. “But I’ve never seen anything like it.” Walking to one of the terminals, she put her hands on a seat that began to disintegrate at her touch. “It’s so old,” she said to the others, holding up her hand as little black flecks of seat cover fell from her palm and fingers.

“Well, did the earth government send it out here?” Meeker asked. “A scout ship or something? It’s not very big.”

“It’s too soon to say how large it is,” Ortmann replied, making his way towards the rear of the room and holding the lamp out to see down the opposite corridor. “Come on: let’s see where this goes.”

“Okay,” Meeker agreed dubiously, leaving the packs by the entrance and following Monroe to where he stood.

“Be careful,” he cautioned. “There’s no telling what might be nesting down here. We can’t be the only ones to have found this

place.”

“Wait a second,” Meeker uttered, scurrying back to the packs and pulling out her small knife. “Better safe than sorry,” she shrugged nervously, aware that the blade would be of little use against a sylgen or a blue spider.

Nodding, Ortmann led the way down the corridor, flanked by doors which had been frozen by the depredations of time. A few were open, revealing only empty rooms. Towards the back was a larger pair of sliding doors. But these, too, were shut.

“The whole place is broken,” Meeker complained as her excitement died down and gave way to disappointment. “I was hoping we’d at least find—.”

“Shh!” Ortmann commanded, holding up his hand and finding his companions’ eyes. “Do you hear that?” he mouthed, pointing with his thumb to a small door just behind him. Moving on cat-like feet, he pressed his ear against it and listened. “Something’s scratching in there.”

“Like what?” Monroe breathed, squatting down and placing her head a little below his to listen. Following their example, Meeker slipped to her hands and knees and listened from below them both.

Silently gesturing for them to follow, he led the way back up the corridor into the main room.

“Let’s not find out,” he replied. “That door’s been shut for a long time, so it’s a cinch that whatever’s in there came in from the outside. Most likely a hole got knocked in one of the walls when this thing crashed, and some kind of subterranean critter decided to take up residence. Let’s not give him a reason to poke his head around the front door and meet us.”

“Sounds good to me,” Meeker seconded. Then her eyes went wide. “Do you think there’s anything in the other rooms?” she inquired, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the handle of her knife.

“Could be,” Ortmann replied evenly, making for one of the computer terminals. “Give me a hand piling some of this stuff by the door. If we get jumped by sylgens, I at least want them to have to make some noise on their way in.”

“Okay,” they assented in unison, working as quietly as possible to avoid attracting attention. This done, they moved to a place on the left wall halfway between the entrance and the rear corridor and settled down with the packs.

“Come on, Markus,” Meeker said, as he leaned an arm against the front door and looked over their pile of rubbish into the dark corridor. “Get something into your stomach.”

“I’m alright.”

“Nobody’s alright after being awake for a couple of days and eating hardly anything,” she countered, quietly working the lid off a can. “Now get over here and let me wait on you.”

Watching the opening a moment longer, he went to where they sat and slid down the wall between them. Laying his pistol on the floor between his knees, he stretched his neck and closed his eyes, leaning his head against the wall. Moments later he felt a can being pressed into his hand.

“Eat that up,” Meeker instructed as he opened his eyes. “I’ll get you another if you need it,” she added, already working on one for Monroe.

“What did we do to deserve you, Meeker?” Ellia asked with a tired smile, looking around Ortmann.

“Search me,” she shrugged. “I’ve been asking myself that for a long time,” she continued with a smile of her own. “Some folks are just lucky, I suppose.” She nudged Ortmann. “Especially this big guy. What with how he treats me and all, I’m surprised that I stick with him. Guess I’ll never learn.”

“I hope not,” he inserted, speaking around a mouthful of canned meat, his eyes once again closed as he leaned his head back in exhaustion, mechanically chomping on his meal.

“Why, Markus! What a sweet thing to say,” she purred, nudging him again as she passed the second can to Ellia.

“Sure, who’d open my cans if you were gone?”

“Cover it up any way you like,” she said serenely, half closing her eyes and shaking her head side-to-side. “I know you meant it, even if you won’t admit it.”

A loud bang at the end of the rear hall instantly broke the mood. Bolting upright with his pistol in his hand, Ortmann took the

lamp and moved slowly towards the noise, the girls right on his heels.

"There," he uttered quietly to his companions, lifting the lamp to spread its glow a little further so they could see. The doors at the end of the corridor were now partially open. "Something must have given way in the machinery."

"But why *now*?" Meeker inquired doubtfully. "Seems awfully convenient."

"Maybe our new friend had something to do with it," he whispered. Slowly moving forward, he kept his pistol leveled on the opening. Only wide enough to fit the lamp, he cautiously poked it inside and glanced around. "Looks like some kind of...stasis room. The walls are lined with cryogenic chambers. Middle of the room is filled with 'em, too."

"Let me see," Meeker said quickly, crouching beneath him and pressing one eye in as far as she could. "Whoa! I think you're right. And there's a lot of 'em, too!" She pulled her head back and looked at Monroe. "This might have been a colony ship."

"It could have been a lot of things," Ortmann replied, noticing ancient shackles that hung from the wall beside each chamber.

Noticing the subtle shift in his tone, Monroe took Meeker's place and glanced around inside.

"Yes," she agreed. "This could have been a lot of things. Maybe even a prison ship."

"But what would have brought them to Daeldis?" Meeker inquired. "I don't think anybody's ever found an ancient alien prison here. I mean, I *guess* they could have just crashed here, suffered a malfunction or something."

"Maybe they were colonists *and* prisoners," Monroe offered. "It's happened enough times in human history. Could be they were sent to smooth off some of Daeldis' rough edges."

"That seems like a pretty cruel thing to do," Meeker opined.

"Depends on the prisoners," Ortmann replied unsympathetically, pulling out the lamp and frowning as he thought. "Did you girls see anything we could crank this thing open with?"

Both of them shook their heads in the negative.

“Well, we’ll just have to do the best we can,” he replied, setting down the lamp. Taking the left door with both hands, he put his massive boot on the other door and prepared to push. “Grab ahold,” he instructed, as they stood by and watched.

“Oh!” Meeker uttered, quickly taking the reverse position while Monroe got down beneath them and took the best hold she could.

“Alright, now!” he said, straining against it for a half dozen seconds before it jumped open a few inches. “Keep going!” he ordered, managing to widen it to nearly two feet before it locked in place again. “Alright,” he spoke, relaxing his grip and letting go, the girls following suit. “That’s good enough.”

“But what...if it...slides shut on us...again?” Meeker panted. “I don’t want to...get stuck...in there.”

“We’ll jam something between the doors,” he told her, wiping sweat from his mouth with the back of his hand. “Come on,” he nodded towards the main room.

Finding a suitably large piece of computer equipment, they placed it on the floor between the doors and then stepped inside.

“Check out those shackles,” Meeker pointed out, drawing near to a large piece of metallic rope with a pair of cuffs on either end of it, hanging from a hook. Wrapping her fingers around the rope, she tried to lift it off the hook but found it surprisingly heavy. “This thing weighs a *ton!*”

“I don’t think they were made for comfort,” Ortmann commented laconically, moving deeper inside the room and looking around at the chambers. Each one was an eight foot triangle of purple metal with a transparent window that revealed a stiff looking bed that stood at a forty-five degree angle, allowing the occupant to lay down, more or less, while in stasis. He pressed several buttons that stood out on the side of one of them. But, as he’d expected, this produced no result. Checking the entire device over, he squatted down at its foot. “This was definitely a prison ship.”

“How can you be sure?” Meeker asked from halfway across the room.

“Because you don’t lock colonists inside their cryo chambers,” he explained, pointing to a latch on the bottom of the

pod. "You only put those on if you're afraid some kind of malfunction might wake them up ahead of schedule."

"Well, then it's a good thing they're all gone, isn't it?" she replied with a nervous laugh. Though certain that no *living* members of the crew were among them, her recent introduction to the ghostly portion of Daeldis' population gave her pause.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Monroe commented from the opposite side of the room. Before her stood a cryo chamber whose window had been riddled with thousands of tiny cracks, making it all but impossible to see through. Carefully moving her head around, she found a small clear spot. "I think there's someone in here."

"What!" exclaimed Meeker, all but jumping out of her clothes.

"Well, not alive," Ellia elaborated. "I think it's just a bunch of bones. Honestly I can barely see inside."

Taking the lamp, Ortmann joined her in front of the damaged pod. Meeker came as well, though she moved with reluctance, half expecting a dead hand to thrust itself through the glass and seize one of them.

"You're right," Ortmann agreed, carefully positioning the light and looking inside. "It's a skeleton." Lifting the lamp, he surveyed the window for a moment, and then looked down at the pod's latch. "Couldn't get it unlocked," he uttered, pointing out the partially damaged latch. "So they went after the glass. Look, you can see the main points of impact," he said, tapping them with his index finger, four in all. "They tried to hammer their way in. But the window held firm."

"So the guy inside starved to death?" Meeker inquired, slowly approaching the side of the pod and peeking through the window.

"Probably suffocated," Ortmann replied. "That'd make sense of why there's so few blows against the glass: he was most likely dead by the time the others got to him. They swung a few times, and then one of them realized he was already gone. As long as he had air, he could have lasted for days. But you can see they only half worked away at that latch before giving up. Once he was gone, this thing was as good a tomb as any."

“What a horrible way to die,” Monroe shook her head. “Asphyxiated in a cold, hard cryo chamber. It doesn’t get much more clinically inhuman than that.”

“Yeah, well, that depends on our friend here,” Meeker responded, tapping on the glass and taking a leaf out of Ortmann’s unsympathetic book. “He was probably a multi-murderer or something like that. A real bad dude.”

“Most likely,” Ortmann seconded somewhat indifferently, stepping away from the chamber and looking the room over. Raising his arms, he clapped them against his sides and turned back to the girls. “I don’t see anything in here that warrants our attention. A bunch of empty cryo pods, with one notable exception, doesn’t do us any good. Why’d Tholoambelet bother to let us in?”

“Maybe he didn’t,” Meeker offered. “Could be it was just a malfunction.”

“Not likely,” Ortmann shook his head. “Take a look around and see if you can find anything. Maybe there’s some kind of clue.”

Spreading out across the room, the trio searched every inch of the barren, oddly purple space. But it was spotless, save for the damages that time had wrought.

“Nothing, Chief,” Meeker said. “I think it must have been a malfunction. This place hasn’t got a thing worth looking at.”

“I’m not so sure,” Monroe remarked meditatively.

“Are you feeling something?” Meeker asked, afraid The Glow were starting to manifest themselves again.

“This room just feels important somehow,” she replied. “Like it’s a big piece of some kind of puzzle.” She looked at her companions and shrugged. “I guess we just don’t know what that puzzle is, yet.”

“Guess not,” Ortmann agreed, putting a hand on her shoulder and guiding her towards the door. “Come on, Meeks.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” she assented eagerly, not wishing to be left alone with the skeleton in the pod. Especially given that Ortmann had the only light source. Stepping over the piece of equipment they’d jammed between the doors, she paused.

“Shouldn’t we close up again?”

“Why?” Ortmann asked, still walking slowly.

“Well, what if something’s hiding in there and gets out?”

He likewise paused and turned to face her.

“We’ve checked that room from top to bottom, Meeks. Nothing’s getting out.” He resumed movement. “Not even that corpse in the pod.”

“Oh, I wasn’t worried about *that*,” she lied unconvincingly, moving to stay within the lamp’s cone of light, glancing over her shoulder at the darkness that followed in its wake. “I was just thinking of Ellia, you know, and that weird feeling she was having in there. Maybe it’ll follow us into the rest of the ship.”

“If it can pull that off, then I don’t think doors are gonna stop it,” he responded.

“No, I suppose not,” she conceded.

Having checked the barricade they’d made in the main room, Ortmann joined the girls by the packs once more, sliding down the wall to the floor with a sigh.

“That’s enough adventuring for one day,” he stated, laying his pistol between his legs and leaning his head back once more.

“How long are we going to sleep?” Monroe inquired quietly, sensing that he was already drifting off.

“Oh, a few hours,” he replied hazily. “Not long. Maybe four.”

“He needs more than that,” Meeker mouthed, to which the Rimmian nodded her agreement.

“I can hear you, you know,” he muttered. “Your lips are clicking.”

“Oh, you’re so suspicious,” Meeker jested, wrapping her hands around his right arm and nestling herself in close. “You ought to trust us by now.”

“I trust one of you,” he responded, his eyes still closed. “With the other I know better.”

“You see the way he talks to me, Ellia?” she protested in mock upset. “Honestly, I don’t know what he’s done to deserve either you or me. To have *both* of us here is a real bargain!”

“I think you’re right, Meeker,” Monroe seconded humorously, likewise taking his other arm and snuggling in close. “He doesn’t appreciate us enough.”

"Nobody could appreciate either of you to the degree you deserve," he remarked, opening his eyes long enough to move his arms around the girls' shoulders and draw them against his sides. "Now shut up and go to sleep."

"So mean," Meeker teased in a whisper, shaking her head as she looked around Ortmann to Ellia. Replying with a wink, Monroe closed her own eyes and laid her head against her lover's shoulder, quickly drifting away to sleep.

Hours later consciousness filtered slowly back into Ortmann. Still only half awake, he drew his left arm against his side and found Ellia blocking his motion. Doing the same with the right, his eyes shot open when Meeker proved absent.

The lamp was gone as well, leaving them in darkness save for a gentle purple glow that emanated from the rear corridor. Waking Monroe, he took his pistol and led the way into the rear of the ship.

"What are you doing?" he asked when he saw Meeker standing thoughtfully in the stasis room, relieved to find she was alright.

"Oh, I realized something and I had to look," she replied with a yawn, evidently having awoken only a couple of minutes before. "I think I've figured out why Tholoambelet let us in here."

"Really?" Monroe asked, instantly intrigued despite being partially asleep.

"Uh huh. Now, there's pods running along the walls, right?"

"Yeah?" Ortmann inquired.

"And there's pods in the middle of the room, right?"

"We can see that, Meeks."

"Hang on, I'm getting to the point," she insisted. "Now, the ones along the walls don't waste an inch of space. They're crammed in just as tight as can be. But the ones in the *middle* of the room," she uttered, moving in front of them and extending her arms, two pods on either side of her. "These ones stop pretty far away from the door."

"So?"

"So, I think a row of them has been taken out of here. Take a look at the floor," she said, pointing to her left and right. "It's all scuffed up, like somethings been dragged out of here."

"The whole floor's been roughed up through the passage of time," he pointed out. "Rust and everything."

"Sure. But look at the *placement* of the rust: right where the chambers *would* have been. Honestly, I don't know how we missed it last night. I guess we were just too tired for something hiding in plain sight."

Walking to where she pointed, Ortmann squatted down and felt the floor thoughtfully.

"You might be right," he allowed.

"Oh, come on, Markus: it's plain as day!"

"Yes, there are markings," he agreed. "But they could belong to other things, too. This room might have had generators to sustain the pods in case of a general power failure. They would have been valuable to the people who crashed here."

"Well, I guess that's true," Meeker admitted.

"Besides, why would a bunch of castaways cart out four cryo chambers? What would they power them with?"

"Hey, it was just an idea!" she objected. "It's too early for thought, anyway. I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"What do you mean too *early*?" he asked, his face tightening. Feeling as though he'd slept for only a few hours, he thought that it couldn't have been much past midnight.

"Oh, it's gonna be sunup in like half an hour," she explained. "You can hear the birds chirping if you stick your head over the barricade we made."

"What?!" he exploded, bolting from the room and looking over the barricade to prove it to himself. Sure enough: a faint glow was coming down the front corridor, along with birdsong. Angrily he slugged the barricade.

"Hey, take it easy, big guy," Meeker remonstrated. "We were all beaten to death, anyhow. We needed the rest."

"*She* didn't!" he snapped, pointing to Monroe. "She's on a short fuse. Even the loss of a couple of minutes might get us to the temple too late." Shoving the barricade out of the way, he strode heavily to the packs and looped them over his shoulders. "I should have stayed awake."

“Oh, you couldn’t have stayed awake forever,” Meeker replied, trying to take the smaller pack from his shoulder. But he held it firmly and glared at her. “Look, what’s done is done, Markus. There’s no use getting upset over it.”

“I’ll never forgive myself if anything happens to her,” he said with fatal seriousness, his eyes boring into hers. “Do you understand that?”

“I do,” she responded quietly, nodding and looking down to avoid his burning gaze.

“Then let’s get moving,” he uttered fumingly, leading the way out of the purple corridor and into the dim light of pre-dawn.

Wordlessly they walked as the sun emerged and climbed its way up the sky. By noon the girls were wilting, but not Ortmann. His anger at himself drove him indefatigably onward, animating him despite his having not tasted either food or drink since the night before.

“Markus, please: I need some water,” Meeker pleaded at last, straggling almost a dozen feet behind him, with Monroe in between. “And maybe a four course meal, if you’ve got one handy.”

“Dig it out of the pack,” he replied implacably, unwilling to stop for even a moment.

Catching up, she awkwardly got the main pouch of the large pack open and wrestled a bottle of water out. Taking a drink, she passed it to Monroe, who gratefully took it. Slipping it back inside, she dug around for something to eat.

“This would be a lot easier if you’d stop for thirty seconds,” she commented, feeling ridiculous as she walked with one arm stuffed inside the pack.

“You’ll manage.”

“Oh, sure. But I might...starve...to death before I can get anything...out,” she responded, struggling to speak, fish around, and not trip over the plants and dead branches that covered the jungle floor. Managing to find a can of meat, she closed the pouch and went to work on the little pack, trying to find her knife. But as she inserted her hand, she stumbled and pulled it down his shoulder, spilling most of its contents on the ground. Angrily, Ortmann stopped, causing her to collide with him. Slowly he turned around, his eyes aflame. “I’m

sorry!" she apologized quickly, dropping to the ground and trying to pick up all she'd dropped. "It'll just be a second!"

Hurriedly Monroe joined her in picking everything up and stuffing it all inside the pack.

"No harm, no foul, right?" Meeker laughed nervously when they'd finished. But Ortmann merely scowled and resumed movement. Making a face to Monroe as though she'd just escaped the gallows, she went to work on the can with her knife, careful not to trip with it as she walked. Sharing half the can's contents with the Rimmian once it was open, she knew better than to offer any to Ortmann.

Despite the tedium of the long, sweltering journey, none of them felt like speaking. The awareness that they were drawing near their ultimate destination stilled even Meeker's normally irrepressible good humor, making her quiet and withdrawn.

"We're getting close," Monroe uttered after many hours. "I can feel it – his mind reaching out to me."

"What's he doing?" Ortmann inquired in a gravely low tone.

"Just reaching out," she replied with some surprise. "Like he's letting me know he's there. Nothing more."

"Could be a trick," Meeker pointed out. "Could be he's just making you think that."

"Yes, that's true," Monroe agreed.

"Are you feeling anything from The Glow?" she followed up. "Are they reaching out, too? Or I guess reaching *up*, since they're inside you."

"Yes," she said reluctantly, causing Ortmann to instantly stop and turn around. "But they're not very strong yet," she added quickly.

"How long have you been feeling this?" he demanded, putting his hands on her shoulders and gripping firmly.

"Since a little after we left the ship," she admitted, causing him to snap his teeth in frustration and look away to hold in an outburst. "But I'm alright, Markus. They're just sort of spinning around inside. I can tell they haven't got their bearings yet."

"Yeah, and how much longer will it take them to get those?" he retorted, taking her hand and dragging her into something just

short of a run.

“Hey! Wait for me!” Meeker protested, scurrying to keep up.

Hurrying along, they finally neared the temple as the sun touched the horizon and brilliant red streaks of light colored the sky.

“I need to rest,” Monroe gasped, trying to pull her hand from Ortmann’s iron grasp, but failing. Stumbling from fatigue, she fell to the ground and was dragged for a half dozen feet before he stopped. “Just...a...minute,” she pleaded, closing her eyes and panting.

“Oh!” Meeker exclaimed, collapsing to the ground beside her and breathing desperately. “I don’t care if...Tholoambelet...kills me. Just as long as he’s got...air...conditioning.” Aware that this glib comment must have struck the wrong note with Ortmann, she glanced up and found him frowning at her. “I’m...sorry,” she shook her head. “Don’t pay me...any...mind.”

“He wants...us to...hurry,” Ellia spoke, struggling to her feet as half the muscles in her slender body cramped up and refused to move. Straightening with difficulty, she groaned as her abdominals tied themselves in knots. “I think...he can...feel them...getting...stronger,” she uttered through gritted teeth, rubbing her stomach to ease the tension. “He seems...*anxious*,” she said with some surprise.

“Then let’s not keep him waiting,” Ortmann replied grimly.

“What are we...gonna do...Markus?” Meeker inquired, fighting to get up. “Can we...trust him?”

“We don’t have any choice,” he responded. “We’re out of options.” Watching them both struggle to stand, he grasped their upper arms and began dragging them along.

Passing by a series of crumbling stone ruins that were overgrown by trees and vines, they turned onto an ancient cobblestone road that led them right to the foot of a massive rectangular structure. A broad set of stairs led into the building, though the ravages of time had broken pieces out of them in places. At their top stood a line of huge pillars that flanked a large doorway.

“Come on,” Ortmann said quietly, helping the exhausted girls up to the structure’s raised first floor. Stopping as they reached the top, he paused and threw his eyes across the ruins that surrounded them for a moment. “I’ve never been this close before,”

he muttered, releasing their arms and taking his pistol. Cocking it, he nodded to them both and slowly walked towards the opening that yawned darkly at them.

CHAPTER 12

This place is creepy,” Meeker breathed, tightly gripping her knife but certain it would do her no good against a being as powerful as Tholoambelet. Passing down a long, tall stone hallway, empty rooms stood on either side. Their wooden doors had long since rotted away, leaving only fragments that hung from hinges paralyzed by decay. “Where’s the light coming from?” she inquired, speaking of a faint glow that seemed to emanate from everywhere at once.

Not bothering to respond, Ortmann moved steadily onward. Initially regretting the loud, hollow echoing of their collective footfalls against the walls, he quickly realized that Tholoambelet already knew they were coming, and that stealth was nothing more than a formality. Straightening out of the slight crouch that he’d been walking in, he moved more boldly, horrifying Meeker.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a harsh whisper. “Do you want him to hear us?”

“He already knows we’re here, Meeks,” he answered, his voice low but conversational.

“Sure, but we don’t have to make ourselves obvious,” she replied nonsensically, gripping her knife all the tighter.

Pausing briefly, Ortmann turned and looked to Ellia.

“Where is he?”

“Straight ahead,” she whispered, nodding forwards to a room fifty feet away. “He’s waiting for us.”

“Alright,” Ortmann uttered, taking a breath and then letting it out. “Keep behind me,” he instructed them both. “Anything goes wrong, get out of here as fast as you can. I’ll hold him off.”

Taking his arm as he turned away, Monroe gave him a quick kiss on the lips and the best smile she could manage under the circumstances. Nodding in response, he was about to turn again when Meeker dropped her knife and took his face in both hands, kissing him passionately.

“For luck!” she explained, picking up her knife again.

Wiping her saliva from his lips with the back of his hand, he slowly approached the room. Stopping just short, he looked at the girls one last time and then entered.

“I have waited for this meeting a long time, Markus Ortmann,” a deeply rumbling voice echoed through the room. To his right stood a throne of stone, upon which sat a massive creature. Approximately twelve feet tall, a thick black robe covered his thin, long-boned body. His skin was gray and ancient, hanging loosely on his frame. His face bore massive eye sockets that caused the outside of his skull to round on either side. His mouth was small, a mere lipless slit. The nose, likewise, was inadequate, being little more than two holes in his face. His feet were hidden by the folds of his robe. But his hands were massive, his fingers ghastly in their length and spear-like pointedness. “You have brought many lost souls to my doorstep,” he uttered, flexing his fingers and wrapping them around the armrests of his throne. At this moment Ellia entered. Meeker did as well, though she dashed behind Ortmann and watched from around his shoulder. “But few have been quite so fascinating as this little one,” he said, standing up and approaching them. Tremblingly Meeker’s hands took the back of Ortmann’s shirt. Taking a knee before them, Tholoambelet extended a long index finger and placed it under Monroe’s chin, tilting her head this way and that to examine her. Claspings her hands behind her to keep them from shaking, she tried to stand perfectly still. “Yes, quite fascinating.”

“What do you want from us?” Ortmann demanded, ready to snap up his pistol and help Tholoambelet answer any questions he may have about an afterlife.

“What do *I* want from you?” he asked, almost chuckling as he glanced at Ortmann. “Precious little. Rather it’s what *you* want from *me* that should concern us all,” he added, tilting Monroe’s head

back and forth a little more as he gazed into her eyes. "What you *need* from me, and need quickly. This little one has nearly been lost to The Glow. The markings are there, for one who is able to see. Her time is short without treatment." Somehow hearing Meeker gulp behind Ortmann, the alien's ancient eyes went to her and a faint smile came to his tiny mouth. "You needn't be afraid," he assured her.

"We'll be the judges of that," Ortmann shot back.

"And with what will you judge me?" he responded calmly. "The lies of The Glow? Would you trust the word of a collection of *parasites*? Especially ones who have so terribly abused this one?"

"You killed my father," Monroe managed to say, her voice shaking. "You've drained the lives of countless humans."

"And yet you trust me to touch you," he pointed out. "As does he," he gestured towards Ortmann. "We are both familiar with his willingness to kill, and it is certain that he wouldn't hesitate if he felt you were in the least danger. His instincts ought to be testimony enough for the three of you. However, I am aware that humans are doubting creatures, so I shall give further proofs." Turning his hands upward, the orifices in his palms were scarred shut by terrible burns. "I am no longer capable of draining the energy from any living being. Not in my own person, in any event. I have seen to that."

"But why?" Monroe asked, stunned by the sight.

"It would take much explaining, and require a great deal of faith on your part. Faith that you are not able to extend as yet, regardless of how shocked you are to see my hands. Yet more proofs will be required. And they shall be given. Come with me."

Rising from his knee with some effort, Tholoambelet moved with long, slow strides towards the back wall of his throne room. Pressing his claw-like fingers against a pair of stones, they glowed green for a moment and machinery began to stir within the wall. A massive fifteen foot door receded into it, shifting off to one side and admitting entry to a corridor. At its end and to the left stood a doorway from which glowed a bright yellow light.

"Proceed," he told them, gesturing ahead.

"After you," Ortmann responded.

“As you like it,” he nodded, stepping inside, the three humans close behind. Turning into the room ahead of his guests, he waved for someone just out of sight to approach. “Drew Monroe, I have a special visitor for you.”

“Daddy?!” Ellia exclaimed upon seeing her father, rushing into his arms as tears began to tumble down her cheeks.

“Ellia?” he asked in astonishment. “But...how did you...” his voice trailed, as she pressed her face into his neck and began to sob. Looking over her shoulder at Ortmann, Meeker, and finally Tholoambelet, he couldn’t find further words to speak. Holding his trembling daughter for a long moment, he put his hands to her shoulders and moved her back to gaze into her face. “How did you ever come to Daeldis, honey? What brought you here?”

“You did,” she sniffled, as a handful of other people abandoned a long table in the back of the room and slowly came near. “I came to find you.”

“Oh, honey,” he uttered with a mixture of fondness and dread as he drew her back into his embrace. “This is the last place I’d ever want you to go.” He looked at Ortmann, who stood just out of reach of Tholoambelet, his weapon ready to explode into action in a flash. “But I see you’ve been in good company,” he smiled a little. “Hello, Markus.”

“Drew,” Ortmann nodded.

“I thought you were dead,” she uttered, pulling back and searching his face. “I thought Tholoambelet had killed you.” She looked over her shoulder at the silent alien for a moment, then turned back to him again. “I—I had a dream. I could see him sucking the life force out of you and a host of others. I was going to avenge you.”

“It was The Glow who sent you that dream,” he told her. “They did the same thing to me. For years they’ve been luring people out this way, hoping that one of us would hurt or kill Tholoambelet out of fear.”

“But they got lucky with you,” the alien chimed in, taking a step closer that caused Ortmann to jerk.

“You may trust Tholoambelet with your life, Markus,” Drew assured him. “He’s already saved mine once. The Glow would have

killed me if it hadn't been for him."

Frowning his doubts, he crossed an arm over his chest, taking his right bicep with his left hand. But the pistol remained cocked and ready.

"Lucky?" Ellia inquired, again looking at Tholoambelet.

"In you they found a vessel for their essence, as they did your father," he explained. "For countless generations we have been locked in a battle of wills over their fate. They have sought, by turns, to kill me, to possess my body, and to win me over as an ally. None of these eventualities were satisfactory to me, needless to say. And thus our struggle has continued."

"Struggle?" Meeker squeaked, half concealed by Ortmann's large body.

"For the fate of The Glow," he answered. "Their own explanations for their existence have changed over the years, and doubtless you have heard one of them. But what I am about to tell you is the product of many of your lifetimes worth of study and experience. The Glow are in actuality a fashion of psychic mold that springs from this world. Lacking any true intellect, they nevertheless possess instincts that guide them to seek life and growth, much as a plant grows towards the sun. Over the course of their existence, they have assimilated many personalities into what they are pleased to call their collective, and have thereby managed a kind of bootleg personality consisting of many different pieces. But it is all the same mindless mold, merely going through the motions of an independent intellectual existence. They simulate thought by copying the expressions and motivations of others. But within they're hollow, truly nothing but energy that has managed to resonate at the same frequency, if you will, of what they have perceived."

"I originally came to this world to study the source and nature of this energy in the hope of finding an alternative form of sustenance for my people. Long had we acted as parasites within this galaxy, consuming life much as you dreaded I would consume yours. But there were those of us who sought a better way. Once the peculiar nature of this world was known to me, I immediately prepared an expedition to study it. But when I arrived I found another race had already come here. A vessel bearing condemned criminals

crash landed here long ago, leaving its occupants stranded. They established a violent, primitive society that had grown to several thousand souls by the time I'd arrived. Naturally their culture was atrocious, a direct outgrowth of the thoughts and habits that had caused their people to banish their forebears from their borders forever. Daily they murdered and robbed each other, never laboring for anything that could be gotten by any illegitimate means that presented itself. Regretfully, I was forced to depend on these people to sustain myself while I searched for a way to live off of The Glow. Draining them sparingly, I spread out the burden of my existence by taking as little as possible from each of them. Over time I taught them to be civilized, establishing laws to guide their conduct. But they were a very stupid people. Their ancestors' lack of patience with either thought or discipline was, unfortunately, passed down to them. It was only with severely punitive measures that I could keep them in line for their own sake."

"And your own," Ortmann cut in.

"It is true that I benefited from this arrangement as well," Tholoambelet allowed. "In them I had a source of energy that could sustain me while I studied The Glow. They also provided a ready labor force whenever I required them. But to say that I gained more from our association than they did would be a drastic misstatement. In the early days of my rule, the laws I established, alongside the necessary punishments to make them a living force, saved countless Frellians from murder at the hands of their own people."

"*Frellians?*" Ellia inquired. "That's what they're called?"

"Oh, that must come as some surprise," Tholoambelet commented. "I suppose they've already introduced you to 'Frell?'"

"Yes," she nodded.

"He is a fictional being, a sort of archetype of the Frellians. An ideal man to represent them collectively. One cannot spend any length of time studying The Glow without being struck by the degree to which they blur the lines between fact and fantasy. Their psychic life, if one wishes to call it that, is more closely akin to a dream than reality. But, I suppose one shouldn't expect much more from mold than that."

"You scorn them," Ellia observed.

“Yes, I do,” he agreed, nodding his massive head. “They are insidious parasites that have mindlessly sought to grow themselves at the expense of every form of life that has gotten in their way. At least if there was some intelligence behind their actions, it would be possible to respect their tenacity and resolve. But it’s nothing more than an impulse, a regrettable instinct that drives them on. You could even call it a reflex – an automatic reaction to a stimulus. It’s impossible for me to have the slightest regard for any being that would heedlessly sweep life aside for no good reason at all.”

“Sounds like you’ve swept away plenty of lives in your time,” Ortmann said, trying to see if he could knock him off his game and force him to flare up. “What about when you exterminated the Frellians?”

“The Glow were responsible for that,” Tholoambelet answered calmly, though with a heaviness that indicated remorse. “Shortly before that dreadful event, I had discovered how to drain The Glow in order to sustain myself. At first they didn’t seem to notice, happily feeding on the civilization that I’d built out of the Frellians. But it became obvious when I no longer required them to sustain myself, and drew an ever increasing amount of energy from The Glow. In an act of sheer madness they herded the Frellians against me like cattle, forcing me to destroy them to save myself. It was after that that I swore never to take another life, and I bound myself to that determination by searing my hands shut.” Holding them up, they saw once more the melted flesh that covered his palms. “I would ever after live off of The Glow. That very determination nearly destroyed me, however, because they shrunk desperately with the fall of the Frellians, giving me very little to feed off of. But, for better or worse, they survived. As have I. After that I vowed to reduce The Glow so that they could no longer be a threat to anyone. Siphoning off all the energy from them that I could, I attempted to hold them back. But it wasn’t enough. My own efforts were inadequate.” Gesturing towards Drew and the others in the room, he continued. “Long have I waited for another race to arrive that could aid me in my work of taming The Glow. At last you humans came, and I have slowly assembled a team of you to assist me. But the task has been arduous. Humans have only a weak

faculty for psychic work, and thus it has been very difficult to do any real harm to The Glow. In fact, they've continued to grow steadily despite our efforts, as the human population on Daeldis increases. I fear that eventually they will succeed in their desire to spread to other worlds. If they haven't already."

"What?!" exclaimed Meeker, her shocked voice echoing through the room and drawing the attention of all.

"Oh, yes," Tholoambelet nodded. "As fleas leave their eggs on an unsuspecting dog, so too The Glow have attempted to spread themselves to other worlds. Typically this is not possible, given that the human form is not capable of bearing their influence for any great length of time. I suspect there have already been several instances of passengers breaking down on ships that have left this world, though the news of such happenings has likely been suppressed by your government."

"Um, I just thought of something horrible," Meeker said, taking a few steps forward. "If you can't drain energy any longer, how can you help Ellia? That's why we nearly killed ourselves getting here as quickly as we could."

"I have developed a method that will preserve her life," Tholoambelet assured her. "But given the immense amount of energy The Glow have already poured into her, there is some danger involved. A great deal, in fact." Eyeing Ellia, he added in a lower voice. "I suspect this has been their plan all along."

"Does that mean you won't help?" Ortmann asked, his gun still hanging from his hand just below his waist.

"It means there is risk to us all, Markus Ortmann," he answered. "But it will be easier if you are shown what I mean. Some things are difficult to convey with words alone." Suddenly his head jerked up, as though he'd heard something the rest of them hadn't. "I must go and see to something important. Drew Monroe will escort you to the next room and explain what must be done." With this the massive creature bowed his head slightly and strode quickly from the room.

"I thought he'd never leave," Meeker whispered to Ortmann, as the pair approached the Monroes. "I wonder if he *really* can't drain

life force through those hands of his. Of course, it's not like he seemed eager to make a snack out of us."

"Tholoambelet is a wonderful being," Drew assured them as they drew near. "You don't have any reason for fear."

"Anything *that* big deserves to be feared," Meeker stated emphatically, jerking her thumb over her shoulder towards the room's entrance.

"You mustn't let such things worry you," he persisted. "I've been with him night and day ever since I came here. He's kind and deeply concerned about the population of this world. His only thought is how to suppress The Glow so that all life can flourish on Daeldis." He gestured broadly towards the people behind him. "Ask any of them. They've been here a lot longer than I have, and they'll each tell you the same thing. He's as disinterested as it gets. But come," he said, putting a hand on his daughter's shoulder and guiding her towards another wall of stone. "We must proceed quickly. There's no telling how soon The Glow will manifest themselves."

Touching a large block of stone just above his head, one of his compatriots did similarly almost a dozen feet to the left. As before an enormous door receded into the wall before shifting to one side.

"Quickly," he insisted, moving into the large corridor and leading them past a succession of rooms on either side. Heading into one on the right, second from the end, they were stunned to see the three missing cryo chambers from the transport.

"See?!" exclaimed Meeker. "I *told* you it was three cryo pods!" She grinned at Ortmann and shook her head teasingly. "And you thought they were *generators*!"

"I said they *might* be generators," he replied, moving closer to the purple chambers and looking them over. Large cables reached from their backs to a massive outlet in the wall. Peering through their immaculate glass, he could see two men and a woman perfectly preserved. "Who are they?"

"Weapons," Drew Monroe answered gravely, moving closer to the pods and then looking at Ellia. "Much like my daughter, they were charged with The Glow and sent against Tholoambelet. At enormous personal risk he managed to get them into these pods and

preserve them. Their unique psychic properties make them ideal candidates for the work ahead of us.”

“Which is?” he inquired.

“Transferring the pent up energy within my daughter.”

“You mean they’re *batteries*?” Meeker inquired.

“If you like.”

“I don’t like. I just asked,” she uttered with a shiver, eyeing the trio. “Poor people.”

“Their fate is regrettable,” Drew agreed. “But unfortunately this is the only way. Given that Tholoambelet is no longer capable of draining energy firsthand, we must resort to this method in order to save the many people The Glow has taken over.” He looked at his daughter and her companions, reading the aversion on their faces. “If it makes it any easier to swallow, these three are each very dangerous people wanted by the earth government. They hid out on Daeldis, and that’s when The Glow found them.”

“You mean they came together?” Ortmann asked.

“Yes,” Drew nodded, looking at the woman for a moment, touching the glass that separated them. “Kind of hard to believe, isn’t it? She has such a gentle face. At least when she’s sleeping. You’d think she’s incapable of any kind of wrongdoing. But they’re rotten to the core. From what I can tell, they’ve each got the blood of at least a half dozen innocent people on their hands. Before they came here they were anarchists.”

“How do you know this?” Ortmann asked skeptically.

“I *am* a psychic, Markus,” he smiled faintly. “Now,” he said, clapping his hands together like a teacher about to begin class. “The task before us is difficult. My colleagues, along with Tholoambelet when he returns, will have to form a psychic bridge between Ellia and these three, channeling the energy of The Glow into them. Though in stasis, and therefore paralyzed, they nevertheless retain a psychic aura that permits them to receive energy, though, thankfully, not to send it, given that they are unconscious.”

“Then what’s the danger?” Ortmann asked. “If they’re asleep, they shouldn’t be able to do a thing to her.”

“It’s not what *they* may do,” Tholoambelet answered, rounding the corner along with the rest of the psychics. “It’s what *The*

Glow may do. Ellia Monroe is brimming with their energy. To transfer that much into them may permit them to emerge from stasis and cause untold damage.”

“You mean it could even wake them out of *that*?” Meeker queried, pointing to the chambers. “I thought stasis like that was for keeps, unless the chamber shuts off or breaks down.”

“It usually is,” he said. “Except when you’re dealing with something as powerful as The Glow.”

“We’d better get a move on,” Ortmann stated. “There’s no telling when they’ll reassert themselves.”

“I agree,” the alien nodded, waving the rest of the psychics into the room and working them into an oblong circle that surrounded both Ellia and the chambers. “Now, this ritual will require a great deal of focus,” he said, looking at Ortmann. “I must ask you and your young companion to remain absolutely still and silent. The energy we are dealing with here is immense, and the slightest flinch on our part may permit them to break out of the tunnel we shall attempt to feed them through. You see, we must form both a psychic bridge for them to cross, but also a psychic *barrier* that will prevent them from attempting to pass into either myself or my collaborators.”

“That’s what Ellephendra meant!” Ellia said at once, looking at Ortmann and then turning to Tholoambelet. “Before she died, she said that The Glow had some kind of plan for you. They wanted you for something.”

“They’ve wanted me for a great many things over the years,” he said with a dismissive wave of his massive hand. “That is nothing new.”

“But—.”

“I am perfectly acquainted with the risks, Ellia Monroe. More so than you could possibly be, given your brief experience dealing with The Glow. But there simply isn’t any other way. Were we to abstain from this procedure, they would manifest themselves once more within your body, eventually either killing you or forcing us to do so. And I must emphasize that this procedure will become all but impossible should they manifest before we start, so we must make an end of this dialogue and begin at once.”

"I understand," she nodded, clasping her hands behind her back and bowing her head a little.

"Are you all ready?" Tholoambelet asked his assistants, as Ortmann and Meeker drew silently away, standing by the doorway and watching. Receiving no objection, the ancient alien put his hands together and raised them over his head. "Then we shall begin."

Slipping his pistol into the back of his waistband, Ortmann crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway as Tholoambelet began to hum. It was somewhat after the fashion of Ellephendra, though much deeper and far more penetrating. He felt the sound was pressing its way into his body and encroaching on his mind. The air filled with an aura that was at once lively and ancient, a reflection of the psyche that produced it. Somehow it bridged the distance between himself and every other person and object in the room, making them all feel impossibly close, as though they were pressed right against him; indeed, almost *inside* him. The mind of Tholoambelet, amazingly, had negated the physical fact of distance, placing all elements within his reach, on a psychological level, on the exact same point. Ortmann could feel the impressive depth of the alien's mind as it stood beside, perhaps within, his own. It was as if he were a mere speck being drawn within a massive blackhole, swirling around its outer edge and only ever having a fragmentary glimpse of the infinitely larger entity that had captured it. In that moment he realized that the mind of Tholoambelet was orders of magnitude more capable and complex than that of any human.

As the humming continued, and the human psychics joined in, the room filled with fog. Passing his hand before his face, Ortmann realized that it was a purely psychological manifestation.

Wherever he looked, he found himself gaining incredible insight. The psyches of those around him, with certain limits, were laid bare before him. Looking at Meeker, he could feel the profundity of the fear she felt over what she was experiencing. But it was also mingled with hope, and a mystical kind of trust in the alien who was orchestrating it. Briefly she returned his gaze, and he felt the depth of her love for him, a fact that both touched and hurt him, given he could never return it. Looking away, his eyes found Ellia. Surprised

to find her serene and receptive, he squinted hard for a moment before remembering that this, indeed, was her element. Psychic phenomena were the sole focus of her life before coming to Daeldis, and, in a sense, she at last felt at home with her surroundings.

He briefly scanned the other members of the room, but took little interest in their thoughts. Mainly he wished to ensure they bore no ill will towards the girls or himself. He was grateful to find none.

The humming from Tholoambelet increased in volume and pitch, until it was a squeal that hurt Ortmann's ears. The room began to wobble and grow hazy, the very stones seeming to shake in their places. Touching the wall with his hand and closing his eyes, he was relieved to find that, once again, what he saw was purely psychological. The stones were not, in fact, moving. It was merely that their relation to his psyche had become variable.

But Ortmann had no chance to reflect further on this, for without warning Ellia's serenity vanished, and she threw her head back with a scream that caused Meeker to cry out and cover her ears. Slowly the Rimmian began to hover above the floor, her body upright but wrenched backwards as far as her joints would allow. Her arms spread wide, the orange light of The Glow came into her eyes. A wicked smile crossed her lips.

"We have waited countless ages for this moment, Tholoambelet," the collective taunted, their multitudinous voices drowning out the hum. "Your compassion for this one has been your downfall."

Spreading his hands out before him, Tholoambelet lowered his head and closed his eyes, focusing with all his might. Reflexively Ortmann reached for his weapon. But his hand froze when it touched the handle, for he knew he couldn't shoot Ellia, even to save himself. Slowly he lowered his hand to his side.

"And your love has been *yours!*" The Glow jeered at Ortmann. "You would sacrifice yourself for a girl who is nothing more now than an empty vessel for our will. That is your weakness. You have defeated yourself."

Slowly Ortmann became aware of a rising of the hum, until it was so loud that he felt he must lose consciousness despite having clamped his hands over his ears. Ellia's possessed eyes shot in

disbelief to Tholoambelet. Her mouth opened in a scream that was drowned out by the noise of the alien, and the orange light began to drain from her eyes and flow into a cloud just above her head. As the last trace of The Glow left her body and began to float away, she dropped to the floor like a ragdoll.

Watching the orange cloud as it moved towards the three chambers, Ortmann could feel the hatred and anger of the collective. For a moment he glimpsed the penal origin of what could be called their psyche: the memories that the psychic mold had drawn from the Frellian prisoners who'd crash landed so long before. A grabbag of a thousand vices, they were held together by a triad of fear, self-seeking, and murderous intent. The hard lives that the prisoners had all led before coming to Daeldis had been absorbed by The Glow, who had weaved them into a mosaic that acted as an origin myth for its development into a bootleg personality. An air of persecution, and a subsequent desire for retribution, permeated the collective's psyche. But mingled with this was the lethargy and lack of initiative typical of individuals used to prison life. The Glow was a mass of angry contradictions.

As Tholoambelet's hum continued to bore into his mind, Ortmann dropped to his knees, striving desperately to retain consciousness as the cloud reached the chambers and began to flow into them. Glancing at his fellow Daeldisian as his vision began to shrink into a tunnel, he found her passed out on the cold stones, her mouth open and drooling.

Looking back to the cloud, he saw the final wisps of it flow into the chambers. This done, the humming slowly decreased in intensity until it ceased altogether. Drawing his hands together before him, the alien took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Then he opened his eyes.

"It is done," he announced, as the psychics around him emerged from the quasi-trance they'd been in and looked around. "The Glow has been contained. Ellia Monroe has been saved." With satisfaction he smiled faintly at Ortmann. "Another life has been spared."

As soon as he said this, the windows on the three chambers exploded outwards, showering the room with fragments.

Within the pods the three killers' eyes burned a violent orange, their faces twisted with hatred. Placing their hands on the doors that held them in, they wrenched them from their hinges and threw them aside. Stepping onto the cold stones, they sneered at the retreating psychics and their alien chieftain.

"You have contained *nothing*," they uttered in perfect unison, the multitudinous voices of The Glow deeper, richer than ever before. "You have merely played into our hands." They looked at Ortmann, who'd darted to Ellia the instant the windows shattered, dragging her from the middle of the room and laying her beside Meeker. "Perhaps you most of all, Markus Ortmann. Like a puppet you've dangled from our string, acting and reacting just as we'd anticipated you would. Your every thought has been bent on delivering Ellia Monroe to this place. She was the perfect vessel for our essence: vulnerable, naive, and pliable. Never before has a human possessed such a capacity to bear our energy." They each turned and smiled sinisterly at Tholoambelet. "We knew such a payload would overload your machinery." They took a step forward. "You have failed, interloper. You have attempted to save lives through the use of these three of our servants. But now they shall destroy you. And all those who gather around you."

"Over my dead body," Ortmann shot back, his pistol leveled on the woman in the middle.

They looked at him.

"That is precisely our desire, Markus Ortmann," they both sneered and growled. "You have been a most capable servant. But also an exasperating impediment. We are glad to dispense with your services."

Instantly cranking three bullets into the woman's abdomen, she jerked from the rounds but remained upright.

"It will take a great deal more than that to stop us," they laughed, slowly approaching.

"Get the girls out of here!" Ortmann shouted to the fearful psychics, putting two more bullets into the woman without meaningful effect. "Carry 'em out!" he barked when they failed to move, rooted in place with fear.

“Go!” Tholoambelet roared, stirring them to action. “Get them away from here!”

Slowly the trio advanced as Ortmann emptied his magazine. Finding Meeker’s knife on the ground where she’d fallen unconscious, he snapped it up and threw it into the chest of the man on the woman’s right. Contemptuously he pulled it out and cast it aside, tossing it with such force that the blade shattered as it struck the stone wall. Retreating beside Tholoambelet, Ortmann reloaded his pistol as fast as he could.

“Your weapon is useless against them,” the alien uttered.

“You got a better idea?” he retorted, slapping the magazine back into the handle and firing several more times. “I don’t see you doing anything!”

“I cannot kill,” he replied with sincere regret. “I no longer have the heart for it.”

“Can’t you hit ‘em with some of that psychic stuff you were doing before?” he asked pointedly, before emptying his weapon again.

“Not without playing into their hands,” Tholoambelet uttered, his long, willowy strides backwards unsettlingly calm to Ortmann.

“There is nothing The Glow would like so much as to possess my body. With their collected energy, they would overwhelm me at once if I were to bridge the psychic gap that separates us.”

“Oh, this day just keeps getting better and better!” Ortmann growled, reloading again but holding back from shooting as he strove desperately to think of a plan.

“There is nothing for it, Markus Ortmann,” the alien’s voice boomed with fatal resignation. “The Glow have defeated me. There is no way we can counter them in this form. They are too powerful.”

“At last you recognize the truth,” they triumphed, still following with inexorable slowness, their movements steady and certain.

“Then what are we doing here?”

“Giving the others time to escape.”

“There is no escape,” The Glow taunted. “We shall hunt them down wherever they hide and consume them. One does not

cross The Glow without consequence. All of Daeldis is ours. There is not a corner of it that is beyond either our sight or our power.”

“I thought you said human bodies couldn’t hold up to that kind of energy,” Ortmann said to Tholoambelet. “Let’s just get out of here and wait ‘em out.”

“That is perhaps where you have served us most effectively, Markus Ortmann,” they laughed. “In bringing us to the witch Ellephendra, we have been empowered at last to take her into ourselves and use her magic as our own. Containing and channeling our energy, we can preserve the bodies of our hosts indefinitely.”

Suddenly a revelation flickered through Ortmann’s mind. Stuffing his hand into one of his pockets, he smiled. Tucking his pistol into his pants, he looked to Tholoambelet just as they were about to round a corner.

“Run for it!” he bellowed, jerking the two grenades Ellia had intended for the alien and dropping them at his feet. Bolting around the corner, he just managed to duck his head as a thousand bits of rock and grenade fragments tried to follow. As the air filled with a fine, choking dust, he coughed to clear his throat and stuck his head around the corner. From out of the dusty cloud emerged a hand that seized him by the neck, lifting him up into the air. Her body torn and bleeding from the blast, the female host had managed to survive the blast, unlike her companions.

“You have cost us much,” she growled, stumbling forward on a pair of legs that had been stripped of much of their flesh. “All it would take to destroy you is that we should close our grip.” She drew him close, speaking directly into his face, his feet still hovering above the floor. “But a worse fate awaits you. The love that has delivered us to Tholoambelet’s palace will now destroy you. We shall preserve you until Ellia Monroe has been found. By degrees we shall strip away both her sanity and her flesh, until she begs for us to destroy her. Only after we have granted this wish will you be permitted to die.” She smiled wickedly. “And not a moment before.”

Snapping up his legs, he kicked her in the face with both boots and tumbled to the ground atop her. Rolling off her body, he moved to a safe distance and reached for his handgun. To his surprise it was gone, as was Tholoambelet.

“Looking for this?” she asked, lifting the pistol from the ground beside her as she arose. Wrapping her hands around it, she gave it a quick jerk that wrenched the barrel just enough that it couldn’t be fired without exploding. “So much for that idea,” she chuckled, tossing it carelessly off to the side. “As you can see, your great ally has abandoned you as well,” she taunted, drawing closer. “He has seen fit to trade your life for his own. Such is to be expected from his kind. They have always used others as their pawns. He crafted an empire of slaves out of our people. He will attempt to do the same with yours.”

“Markus Ortmann!” Tholoambelet’s voice boomed from behind her, causing her to turn just as a crooked staff with a green gem in the end passed over her head. She attempted to snatch it, but was just a hair too slow, and it landed in Ortmann’s hands. “Use it!” the alien ordered.

Leveling it before him like a spear, he felt himself bond with it at once, as though it possessed a mind of its own that reached out to him. Focusing on the woman, he unleashed a dark green blast from the gem that sent her stumbling several feet backwards.

“No!” she screamed, the energy of The Glow beginning to dissipate in little orange wisps that rose from all over her body. In horror she lifted her hands before her eyes and watched it evaporate. “We cannot be defeated!” she shouted at Ortmann, taking a step forward. But another blast halted her, and a third knocked her to her back. Impotently she reached upward. “We...cannot...be...defeated!” the voices uttered, before a final blast drove them from the host’s soul forever. For a brief moment the woman’s eyes cleared, and Ortmann knew that he was looking into the face of a human being once more. Pleadingly she reached for him, and laying aside his staff, he knelt and took her hand. “I’m...sorry,” she whispered, her eyes begging him for forgiveness as they filled with tears. “I...I never meant to....” Then they clouded over, and her hand slipped from his.

Slowly Tholoambelet approached. Looking down at the woman, he hung his head, as did Ortmann. Placing an enormous hand across his upper back, he commiserated with the Daeldisian.

“Even though she was a very wicked woman, she didn’t deserve such an end as this,” the alien opined, drawing a breath and letting it out slowly. “No one deserves such an encounter with The Glow. The horror of being exposed to their true nature is enough to scar the most hardened criminal.”

Wordlessly nodding, Ortmann folded the woman’s hands on her chest and arose. Taking up the staff again, he held it out to Tholoambelet.

“Keep it,” he replied, waving it away. “The Staff of Shelembah chooses its owner, and not the other way around. It has chosen you.”

“But...what is it?” Ortmann asked, drawing it close and looking at it. “And how did I know how to use it?”

“It’s magic, Markus Ortmann,” he replied, gesturing for him to follow as he moved slowly towards the front of the structure. “It was the witch’s magic that permitted The Glow to inhabit these poor victims without negative consequence to their bodies. And, so too, it was magic that set that woman free. As for the knowledge of its use, the staff itself supplied that.”

“But where did it come from?”

“It is an artifact,” he responded. “One whose story must be saved for another time. For now, let us find your friends.”

Reaching the staircase at the entrance of his palace, Tholoambelet cupped his hands around his mouth and emitted a high pitched call that reverberated across the dark ruins. Lit only by starlight, the ancient stone complex struck Ortmann as both beautiful and terrible. It was a testament to both the powerful impulse to create civilization, and to the inevitability of decay and death.

“They’ll be here shortly,” Tholoambelet assured him, resting against a massive pillar and looking out across what was left of the city he had carved from the jungle. “This place used to be glorious,” he uttered after a moment of reflection. “I designed all of it with absolute precision. Naturally, it wasn’t *executed* with the same precision, given the crudity of the Frellians. But you can only expect so much.”

Struck by the evenhandedness of the alien, Ortmann looked up at him in the darkness. A note of sadness surrounded him,

of loss that could never be redeemed. The light of the stars reflected dimly in his eyes, revealing them to be remorseful. Shaking his enormous head, he dismissed some internal notion and looked down at the Daeldisian.

“You’re not what I expected,” Ortmann said.

“I should hope not,” he smiled faintly. “If you came to kill me knowing what I was really like, it would make you a very wicked person indeed.”

“I can understand why The Glow lied about you,” Ortmann replied. “But why Ellephendra?”

“She indulged in too much magic,” he responded with a frown. “There is a very delicate balance involved when humans play with magic. Oh, don’t worry about the staff,” he said, as Ortmann moved it a little way from his body. “It can’t hurt you. It contains itself. But Ellephendra was channeling magic through herself constantly. It’s why she was able to live so long. Such exposure is dangerous. It rotted her mind in myriad ways, until she lived in a fantasy not so different from that The Glow experiences.”

“She said she lived off the energies of Daeldis. She said you were allied to some weaker form of energy, while The Glow were attached to a stronger form.”

“Pure fantasy,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “A projection, and nothing more. Humans, I’ve learned, often make their environment intelligible by dividing it into two halves. One is good, the other bad. Another tactic is to assume there are all-pervading forces that govern events, such as the energies that Ellephendra imagined permeate this world. Placing The Glow at the head of one energy, and myself at the other, gave her an easy way to cognize what she saw happening around her.”

“Then everything she said was false?”

“I can’t say without knowing everything she told you. But you can be certain that it had all taken at least a quarter turn away from the truth.”

Beneath them they could hear a multitude of shoes begin to ascend the stairs.

“Our friends have returned,” Tholoambelet uttered with pleasure. “That is good. This is no time to be abroad, even within the

confines of this old city.”

“Markus?” Meeker inquired as the group reached the top.
“Where are you?”

“Over here, Meeks,” he answered, raising a hand that was all but invisible in the darkness.

Scurrying to his voice, she jumped into his arms and kissed his neck.

“Are you alright? What happened? The others told us those three people in the chambers broke out!”

“It’s okay,” he assured her, as Ellia likewise reached him and worked her arms around his waist. Putting an arm around them both, he hugged them close. “You’re safe now.”

“Through his ingenuity and valor, Markus Ortmann has destroyed the threat to our lives,” Tholoambelet announced, drawing applause from the psychics. “Moreover, the Staff of Shelembah has found him worthy of its allegiance,” he added, causing them to still their clapping and regard him with respectful silence. “Never before has it chosen a human for its master.” He looked at Ortmann. “I believe we can expect great things from you, Markus Ortmann. Great things, indeed.”

“Well, the only thing I expect right now is a hot meal and a place to sleep,” Meeker chimed in, making the assembly laugh.
“What’s a girl gotta do to get some service around here?”

“You will be both fed and lodged,” Tholoambelet assured her. “You have all overcome much, and now you must rest and recover. This is a night of celebration and peace. But tomorrow our true work shall begin – work that will see The Glow tamed once and for all.”

“Amen to that,” Ortmann said sincerely, before looking at the girls again and smiling. “Come on,” he uttered, pushing off the pillar he leaned upon and turning towards the entrance. “Let’s get inside.”

The End

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