

Flight of the Gryphon

Ann Durand

Prologue

"Don't take her! Please, don't take my sister."

Katera laid her fingers on the arm of Elder Torkon, but a firm hand on her shoulder yanked her back.

"Do not touch him," came the stern voice of Elder Rastonon. Katera turned around to face him. He was squinting at her with small, black eyes. A drooping mustache and tapering gray beard tugged at the corners of his mouth, intensifying his scowl.

"Please, if you must send one of us, send me," Katera pleaded, holding out her folded hands. "We are identical. For twenty-four years, our own mother has had trouble telling us apart. The Master will never know that I am not Adrella."

"Askinadon will know," Elder Torkon said, as he poured the contents of a vial into the sacred bath. "He is the Voice. He will know. She has been Summoned, not you. If you want to be with your sister during her last hours in Parallon, you will cooperate. The only reason you're being permitted in the elder's bathhouse is to calm her so we can complete preparations before the sacrifice. And if you can't do that, you will be sent away."

"No, no. Don't send me away." Katera lowered her head. "I want to be with her."

"Good," Elder Torkon said. "Then you may bring her to us. The bath is ready."

A sweet fragrance drifted up from the steamy water of the large wooden tub that dominated the room. Katera knew the water had been scented with the attar of the white urlissin in preparation for the sacrificial maiden. With a growing ache in her heart, she left the room to retrieve Adrella, who was waiting on a bench outside the bathhouse. As she looked up, Katera saw the terror in her eyes and slid onto the bench next to her, slipping an arm around her shoulder. They sat leaning into each other, as Katera savored a few precious moments alone with her. Too soon, Elder Torkon called from inside.

"It's time."

Katera turned to her sister and scooped up her hands. Hot tears threatened to escape from the corners of her eyes, and she blinked them away.

"Adrella..."

"It's all right, Katera. I'm ready," Adrella said, in a small voice. "And please, be careful; you must watch your thoughts. Askinadon will know them."

Katera forced a smile, and stood up offering an arm. Adrella took it, and they entered the room together. The steam had dampened everything in the darkened room, including the elders, who were wiping their brows. Adrella stared at the tub in the middle, a blank look in her eyes. Elder Torkon motioned her to undress, and stood back to watch. Too shaken to protest, Adrella allowed Katera to help her out of her garments. One by one, Katera draped each item over a chair against the wall until Adrella stood naked and trembling before them. Katera moved protectively behind her as Adrella climbed into the tub. She looked dwarfed inside it, like a child with her knees bunched up in front of her.

Katera settled on a chair next to the tub and talked to her softly, whispering stories of their childhood and the carefree days before Askinadon had overpowered their small village. Adrella listened in silence, her head tilted to one side and her eyes brimming with tears. When Katera spoke of Banken, the boy who had loved Adrella, a pain pierced her chest as her sister turned her head away. Still, she kept talking, as much to calm herself as Adrella.

An hour later, the elders instructed Adrella to get out and dry off. Katera handed her a drying blanket, and while Adrella wrapped herself in it, the elders poured a liberal amount of rubbing oil into a sacred gourd and handed it to Katera. She approached Adrella holding it tenderly in both hands and feeling helpless.

"It's all right," Adrella whispered. "Better you than them."

Katera kissed her lightly on the cheek, and dipped her hand into the oil. Adrella dropped the blanket, and Katera rubbed the oil in loving strokes over Adrella's shoulders and neck. As her hands worked the oil into the skin over her back, a chill spread through her chest, threatening to overwhelm her. She rubbed Adrella's legs slowly, trying to release the lump in her throat and hoping to postpone the inevitable. As soon as she finished with Adrella's feet, the elders pushed her aside.

"She needs to dress," Rastonon said, holding up a silken spullera painted with images of the rocsadons, the ferocious dragon-like creatures in Askinadon's corral.

Adrella stepped into it as Rastonon held it open for her. He slid it up her legs and over her hips, securing it around her waist. Abundant layers of soft cloth tumbled to the hemline and floated onto her bare feet, forcing her to gather and lift the material whenever she moved. She dropped the skirt when Torkon held up a red flowing top, also silken, and raised her arms to allow him to pull it over her head. Her bare breasts lifted and disappeared under it as Torkon tugged it down over her hips. Finally, he wrapped a yellow shipunta three times around her waist in the traditional fashion, tucking and pulling the tail through from top to bottom. Over it all, they threaded her arms through the leather harness that would allow Askinadon's ghastly servant bird, the giant takatak, to retrieve her at the altar and deliver her to its master on the summit of Kan Mountain.

Now fully dressed, the elders seated Adrella and allowed Katera to brush her long hair and lace it with the small, red blossoms of the lidala vine. Katera wove it delicately through the long strands of her sister's shiny, dark hair and gazed into her large, green eyes. She resisted the temptation to say goodbye. Adrella didn't need a farewell to remind her that she would not be returning. None of the maidens who were Summoned each year returned. Katera twisted the last flower into place and leaned back to admire her sister's beauty. Adrella's smooth, buttery skin and delicately chiseled features mirrored her own, though the expression of resignation and defeat did not.

"You look lovely," Katera whispered, but the words felt empty, inadequate.

She wanted desperately to reassure Adrella, to give her hope, but the elders seized Adrella under her arms and lifted her from the chair before she found the right words. As they sequestered her in the adjoining room, they told Katera that isolation would preserve Adrella's purity before the sacrifice that evening. No eyes would be permitted to fall on the maiden and devour her beauty before then.

As the sun sank into the western Shirkas, the elders marched Adrella, whimpering before her family, into the clearing in the forest where the altar at Kopa Na An was tended. She was laid on her stomach on the long table in front of it, the harness on her back exposed. A golden statue of a man in flowing robes towered over her. She waited, shaking, on the table while the elders chanted their verses to alert the takatak. Apart from the elders, families alone were allowed to witness the spectacle...and then, only as

long as they heeded instructions to join the chanting. Katera watched her mother and father, their faces ashen, as they mouthed in horror the words to beckon the beast that would approach and seize their daughter.

The wind beat into her face as the takatak approached with its black wings bent and pumping, its long shadow falling over the entire company. Dust and leaves swirled around her feet as the huge bird descended upon Adrella, screeching through its crooked beak. Adrella cringed before the beast as it clinched its talons onto the harness around her back. Then she rose within its grasp crying softly, her silky hair reaching for the ground over bare arms. A cool, gusty wind whipped at her spullera and sent it thrashing around her legs.

Katera listened to her mother's choking sobs as Adrella rose above the trees. They watched, unable to look away, until the thick ashy clouds surrounding the summit of Kan Mountain swallowed the dark takatak and the small figure of Adrella beneath it. The final sacrifice was not for them to see, and like the others before, it would remain a mystery to the villagers of Parallon. Katera swallowed hard and followed her parents home, numbly placing one foot in front of the other. Her sister and only sibling, who had held the most cherished part of her, was gone.

Chapter One

Two Years Later

The ringing in Katera's ears grew louder, and she knew the Voice would soon break through. She pulled the long, narrow Shalpacan wrap off her shoulders and cinched it around her head, but it didn't help. The ringing was inside, in her mind. She shook her head vigorously, hoping to spin off the whispers that had begun, but it was as if they were tethered to her thoughts, springing away and bouncing back again.

Katera, listen. The Voice was deep, urgent.

"No!"

The time draws near. You must prepare.

"Leave me alone!"

You have been Summoned.

"No. I'm not going. I won't go."

I await you. You must obey.

Katera flung her wrap to the ground and tore down the steep hill toward the river, sliding over the barren spots where the soil was loose. Her silken waistband caught on the branch of a bush and unraveled from her waist as she continued her wild trajectory down the slope.

Every year, several of the village girls were targeted, but *never*, in the ten terrible years that Askindon had ruled over her people in the village, had he targeted the same family twice. Two years after her sister had disappeared into the sky, the Summons had arrived for Katera. She had dared to believe this fate would escape her. She had dared to think that she'd been pardoned from this doom in exchange for the sacrifice of her sister.

The news of Katera's Summons rolled through Parallon like an avalanche from the surrounding Shirkas. Her mother had lamented this second Summons loudly, and her father, furious and still grieving the loss of

Adrella, had fought the elders as they had restrained him from rushing up Kan Mountain to confront Askinadon himself.

Katera refused to subject her parents to another presentation at the altar. Perhaps even more, she wanted to defy the god that had never appeared before her people, yet ruled them with the intensity of one who lived inside their minds and hearts, privy to every desire and weakness. She would not give herself over so easily. Better to engineer her own demise, sending the message to Askinadon that not all would obey him or his perverse Voice.

Katera. Come to the altar.

At the bottom of the hill, she slid down a short, muddy bank and plunged headlong into the raging river, hoping to drown forever the Voice that was still hissing words into her mind. Immediately, the current swept her into the frothing center and sent her bobbing downstream toward the falls. It tugged at her feet, pulling her down, and it was all she could do to keep her head above the water. Her raven dark hair, which had been bundled behind her head, tore loose from its clasp and flowed out in great lengths around her.

Come to Kopa Na An tonight as the sun touches the edge of the western Shirkas.

"I'll die first!" she shouted to the sky, and allowed the river to swell over her head.

She did not want to live another day if it meant surrendering to Askinadon. She felt herself pulled more rapidly downstream toward the falls and a sure death. Beyond the edge, the water plummeted five hundred feet onto a large pile of rocks, before cascading another hundred feet into a deep pool. Katera did not struggle. It was the only way.

As she rounded a bend in the river, her head burst out of the water, and the roar of the falls filled her ears. It would not be long now. She twisted her body around to see the edge where the path of water disappeared. Ah, there it was. She wanted to see it. She wanted to watch as she dipped over the side. She would cry out her blasphemy then, at the last moment. She'd use the old language-the forbidden one. Askinadon would be powerless to silence her.

Akka Ya Askindon. Damn you, Askinadon.

He had never before been denied a virgin. It was time. Time to crack through his fortress of uncontested power. Time to demonstrate the force of a will other than his own.

The current released her feet, so she turned on her stomach and stretched out on top of the water, bracing herself for the dive.

Something snagged her foot. A violent yank stopped her dead in the middle of the river, sending swells of froth churning around her. She gasped and shook her foot furiously, but whatever it was, it held her unyielding. Then, it slowly turned her ankle, dragging her body onto its side. In a series of short, powerful tugs, it jerked her against the current toward the riverbank.

Soon, she burst free from the ferocious tow in the middle of the river and sped toward the edge, where her legs hit the muddy bank. The thing wrapped around her foot hauled her, sliding, out of the river and up a gentle slope. She came to rest on a landing, her wet and muddy spullera forced over her head.

She pried it off her face and peered at her foot. A rope, looped tightly around her ankle, led to a large hoshdel, a four-legged beast of burden, snorting about twenty feet away. Her eyes followed the rope up the animal's shaggy, red body to a man frozen in the saddle and staring at her. Swiveling around in the

mud to sit up, she pulled her spullera down over her knees, confronted his gaze...and shuddered

He was wearing an ulli, the garment of the fearful Kastaks, minions of Askinadon who roamed everywhere to perform the dark biddings of their master. The ulli, a single, tight-fitting shiny silver suit, shimmered upon him like oil on water. The sleeves were long and extended over his hands, wrapping around his fingers like gloves. His pants covered his legs and formed snugly over his feet like silver boots. Without a seam, button, tie, or fastener anywhere in sight, it laid upon him like a coat of iridescent paint. A red emblem marked the chest with a series of three interlocking circles. His hair was long, wheat-colored and tied back off his face. His features were strong, and his blue-eyed stare unrelenting. *Hateful servant of the dark one.* She did not intend to submit and was about to curse him when he spoke.

"Where did you think you were going?"

His face softened as he broke into a grin. The non-threatening tone of his voice startled her. She looked at him more closely. His eyes were sparkling with humor, even kindness. Her Lan Ma Ke, a gift she'd inherited from her mother, glowed like an ember in her chest. Triggered in extreme circumstance usually by a human voice, her Lan Ma Ke allowed her to feel the intentions of others, be it warm and inviting or dangerous and threatening. She knew the moment she heard his voice that he was not going to harm her. This man could not have come from the cartel of Askinadon. Yet, he wore the ulli.

"Who are you?" she asked.

His laugh startled her more than his voice. It was deep...and playful, an attitude nearly vanquished from Parallon.

"I asked you the first question," he said, as if he were teasing.

She opened her mouth and was about to demand her release when the Voice slammed back into her thoughts like a charging herd of rocsadons. She jammed both hands over her ears.

Katera. You dare defy the Great One.

"Ahh!" Katera wailed, boxing her ears.

For this, you shall suffer. Katera's head slumped between her knees. You will listen to my Voice as it rings in your head like one thousand screeching whistles. It will not end until you arrive at the Kopa Na An and summon your takatak. Go now. The Voice echoed painfully.

"Nooo."

I will make you suffer, Katera. Every word unleashed an avalanche of daggers inside her skull. Katera stumbled to her feet, her arms wrapped around her head. She started back in the direction of the river...back to the falls, where she knew she could stop the pain, the suffering...forever.

"Stop!" she shouted, as the pitch and volume mounted. "Stop. Please stop." She had managed a couple awkward steps in the mud when the rope, still secured to her ankle, yanked her back to the ground.

Katera. Do not hesitate. The Voice had become so shrill that she felt her head would explode. You may not hesitate. Run, run to the altar like the hoshdel, or you shall perish in great misery.

Katera struggled to release the lasso around her ankle, but panic had made matchsticks of her fingers, and she fumbled like a small child.

"Help me!" she screamed, but the silver man was already edging forward on the hoshdel, coiling the rope. When he reached her side, she looked up at him, her face wet with tears of pain and exasperation. "Help me, please."

The large hoshdel knelt slowly in the mud beside her, the heat falling off the animal's immense belly and bathing her in its mist. The silver man's long arm reached out and hooked her around her waist. Plucking her out of the mud, he slung her over the animal's withers onto her stomach in front of the saddle horn. Before she could object, the hoshdel rose and was barreling out of the mud and into the forest at a gallop. Her heart thudded in fear as she realized the silver man was heading the animal in the wrong direction, away from the river. She tried to cry out again, but her voice faded into the noise of pounding hooves. The man's thigh was inches from her head, so she stretched her neck out and let her teeth sink into the silver suit.

The layer of suit was thin, like a single shaving from the ternok tree used for writing. Her teeth did not puncture through it though, which was odd, since she felt the flesh beneath it yield under her bite. The silver man yelped, reined in the hoshdel and pried her loose, tossing her unceremoniously onto the ground.

She landed in the dirt on her back, the lasso still attached to her foot. She stared up at him, the Voice still reverberating inside her head. He hopped off his hoshdel brandishing a long, slender dagger. Katera gulped and sat up, but he pushed her back to the ground, pinning her with one arm. With the other, he brought the knife to her forehead, pressed the sharp tip into it and sliced. A streak of warm red liquid trickled between Katera's eyes just before she passed out.

Chapter Two

Katera's eyes opened slowly. She could see nothing in the blackness. She reached out and felt a pad beneath her filled with something soft, like bird down. She felt around it. It was laid out over a hard surface. Was it rock? Stretching her arm out further, her hand hit a wall, a bumpy wall. Was she in a cave?

Her forehead throbbed, and she remembered. Her hand flew to a small bandage over her forehead. The silver man...he had cut her. What happened after that? Who had bandaged her?

She patted her hands over the rest of her head and body. Everything felt fine. Other than the cut, she was not harmed. But why did he do it? Her Lan Ma Ke had glowed in safety around him. Could it be that her gift had failed her?

She heard a faint scuffling in the darkness and froze. A dim light glowed in the distance. Someone was coming. She rolled off the pad and crawled on her hands and knees over the rock floor. Whoever it was expected to find her on the pad. If she could find a place to hide...a crevice, or maybe a way out...

Her head bumped lightly into another rock wall. She stood and felt her way down the length of it. The light behind her grew brighter. She could hear footsteps. Frantically, her hands traveled over the rough stone surface, searching.

Too soon, the light rounded a corner and flooded the cavern. She spun around to face the intruder. Under his chin, he held a lanadik, the light-without-fire carried by the Kastaks. From the dark shadow outlining his face, she recognized the silver man with the golden hair. She glanced around the room to get her bearings. A large wooden table, rough-hewn, lay against the far wall. Another wooden structure resembling a chest lay next to it. More furniture lined the wall next to the pad on the floor. Someone lived here. Her gaze turned back to the man behind the light.

"Well, I see you're up," he said. At the sound of his voice, her Lan Ma Ke erupted in a blaze of warmth. No, she realized, as her tension dissolved, she need not fear this stranger in the ulli suit.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"The last time you asked me that question, you were writhing in the mud." He crossed the floor and stuck the lanadik inside a sconce mounted on the cave wall. "Are you sure you want to ask again?" He laughed and turned to her. In a soft voice, he added, "There were words screaming in your head, right?"

Katera nodded. She'd forgotten about the Voice. She hadn't heard it since she'd awakened ten minutes ago. Again, she touched the bandage on her forehead.

"What...what happened?"

The silver man laughed. "That evil voice inside your head is gone. That's what happened."

"How? I mean...who are you?"

"Okay, that's the third time you've asked." He smiled. "I guess you deserve an explanation. My name is...well, just call me Mikolen. I have lived in these caves for ten years."

"That's how long Askinadon has been on Kan Mountain. You're not...you don't keep his company, do you?"

The smile fell off his face. "No, I do not."

"Yet, you wear the ulli."

Mikolen pinched the sleeve of the strange silver fabric. "The ulli. Yes, that's what your people call our lab suit. I wear the ulli, because I hail from the same place as Askinadon, but I do not...keep his company." Mikolen dropped his hand, paused. "Why were you headed down river? I didn't see you struggling to get out."

"I did not want to leave the river. I wanted to go over the edge."

"To your death."

He stated this as if Katera was not aware. "Yes."

"Why?"

He crossed his arms and looked at her with his head cocked. A strand of his golden hair escaped from the tie behind his head and fell loosely over his shoulder. She wondered, briefly, what he looked like with his hair down.

"Because I had been Chosen." Katera lifted her chin. "And I would rather die than go to Askinadon."

"Ah." Mikolen nodded. "One of the Chosen. Lucky you."

Katera leveled her eyes at him. "My sister was Chosen, also."

"Your sister, too? Really?" He sounded surprised. "That's a new one. Two virgins from the same family." His eyes swept over Katera's body outlined inside her clothes, and settled on her eyes. Her face grew hot.

"Askinadon is a greedy rat," he declared.

A greedy rat? How did this strange man get away with this blasphemy? And what did he mean, *as you call him?* What did *he* call him? One did not deviate from the titles that Askinadon gave himself and his servants. Did this man not fear the wrath of Askinadon? Did not the Voice scream vengeance inside his head? She had chosen to die, but why was he willing to risk everything?

Then she remembered: the Voice was gone from her head forever. Could that be true? Was he free from the Voice, as well? She fingered her bandage tentatively.

"How does that feel?" he asked.

"Alright." She dropped her hand. "Why did you cut me?"

"To remove something," he said, digging into a pocket in his ulli. "To get this out of your head." He pulled his hand up and held out a small, thin, flesh colored disc.

"That was in my head?" Katera peered at it.

Mikolen nodded. "This is the Voice. When this is gone from your head, the Voice can no longer speak inside you."

Katera was stunned. The Voice lived inside the will of Askinadon, a will powerful enough to enter into the minds and thoughts of her people, did it not? How could that big booming Voice with all its power fit inside that insignificant little round thing?

"Askinadon is a god," she said, disbelieving. "He rules over us, as well as the Kastaks, the rocsadons, the takataks...all the beasts of the realm. He resides on the summit of Kan Mountain and sees everything. He does not live in that little thing." She pointed at it. "Askinadon is all powerful."

Mikolen threw back his head and laughed. Katera waited, surprised...and more than a little embarrassed as he paraded around the room, roaring happily. When his mirth had ebbed, he drew his head down and spoke quietly, his eyes twinkling.

"My dear girl, whoever you are...the power of Askinadon does indeed live inside that little round thing. It contains the full extent of his power. With it, he controls his entire empire. When it is gone from your head, he no longer has any power over you."

It must be true. Her head, though throbbing from the cut, had never felt quite so...light. Not since she was sixteen years old, before that terrible day that Askinadon had announced his presence. She felt free, free to think...free to wonder...

"Where did Askinadon come from?" she asked, her spirits soaring for the first time in many years. "Our people...we used to be so happy. And then one day, he was just there. His kingdom simply appeared on the summit of Kan Mountain. How did he get here? And what of the virgins that he calls to him? What happens to them? Do you know if they're alive?"

"Whoa, whoa." Mikolen held up both hands. "That's a lot of asking. We're going to have to take this one question at a time." His eyes traveled over her clothes. "But first things first. You, dear lady, need a bath."

He was right. Her hair, her spullera, her panna, everything, was caked with dried mud, not to mention the streaks of dried blood on her face.

"Do you have a..."

"Place to bathe?" he finished. "Yes. And it's ready for you. You can wash while I find you some clean clothes. When you're finished, we'll eat. Then you can ask your questions."

Katera felt a wave of relief surge through her. Her Lan Ma Ke was glowing like the moon in its fullness. This silver man...Mikolen...he must be another god-a god opposed to the horrible Askinadon. A flicker of hope sparked inside her. Maybe he held the power to fight and win against Askinadon.

Holding the lanadik, he led her through a low tunnel to another large cavern, dominated by a natural pool. The room was very warm and humid. As he turned to light another lanadik on the wall, she noticed a trail of steam rising from the pool and drifting toward several small sky holes in the chamber ceiling.

"A hot spring," Katera cried, elated.

"I hope it's not too hot," he said.

Katera stuck her hand in the water. It was quite toasty-just right.

"It feels wonderful," she said, feeling shy. "Thank you...Mikolen."

Mikolen smiled warmly, obviously pleased. "There is a blanket over there." He pointed to a bench. "You can dry yourself when you're done." He turned to leave, carrying his lanadik and heading toward the tunnel. "I'll be back with clean clothes."

"Thanks again!" she called, after him. As an afterthought, she added, "My name is Katera."

She thought she heard him chuckling as his footsteps faded away.

Chapter Three

Adrella shifted Rorken to her other hip and leaned into the crank, drawing the pail of water in its final yard out of the well. Rorken, just fifteen months old, gurgled his pleasure as the pail reached its summit.

"Wa," he said, reaching out his small hand toward it. "Wawa."

"Yes, water, for your bath." Adrella tied off the line and lifted the pail off its hook, all the while juggling Rorken around her bulging belly.

"Baa baa," he laughed. "Wowon tik baa."

"Yes, Rorken take a bath."

Adrella cooed, kissing her baby lightly on the head. Swinging the pail to her side, she hoisted Rorken higher on her hip and lumbered off to her shelter, her swollen tummy leading the way. As she turned the corner toward the harem's quarters and her hosta, a dome-shaped house of clay and sticks, she froze in her tracks. A tall figure stood next to it dressed in an ulli. She spun awkwardly on her heels and started back around the corner, but it was too late.

"Adrella!" the Kastak called. Adrella turned to face him, but did not approach. "Come here," he ordered.

Reluctantly, she moved toward him, swaying from side to side over her enormous load of child, bucket, and belly. The Kastak drummed his fingers on his biston, the small device hooked to his belt that summoned the Voice. As he motioned to lift it, she picked up her gait, spilling a good portion of the water as she wobbled toward him. When she reached him, she lowered the pail onto the ground and wrapped both arms around Rorken. Carefully, she pinned her eyes on the Kastak's feet.

"What is your bidding, Kastak Morchison, greatness be yours?" she asked, addressing him in the manner of respect that was demanded of Askinadon's wives.

Kastak Morchison curled his lip, sneering down at her from his lofty height of six-feet seven-inches. He squinted with his tiny, black eyes, which appeared as dark slits in his puffy face. She knew that he hated her and would have her balancing on top the terrifying post inside the rocsadons' lair while the animals raged around her, were it not for Askinadon. Morchison had learned her opinion of him when she had acted out her mockery in front of the other wives, laughing after hours when they thought the kingdom slept, when they believed the Voice had retired for the night. She had taught the others to speak freely about Askinadon and his horrid Kastaks in those twilight hours when they assumed no one was listening. But on this night the Voice had not retired.

She had been imitating the walk and talk of Morchison, strutting with her chest held out, her chin high, when the words crashed into her head. *Adrella, you scorn the Kastak. Come at once to my palace.*

The others trembled as Adrella made her way out the door of her hosta where they had all gathered. She walked down the dirt path, past the rocsadon's high stone corrals where long columns of mist propelled into the air, and through the great gates into the courtyard of the palace. Askinadon was waiting for her, his thick arms crossed over his chest, his ulli gleaming in the light of the lanadiks dotting the walls. She lowered her head in front of him, as was the custom.

"Your bidding is my only desire, God of Parallon and Husband of my Dreams, greatness be yours," she said, mouthing the requisite words and managing, once again, to conceal her disdain.

"Look at me, Adrella." His voice was soft. She lifted her head in practiced obedience and stared into the cool, grey eyes of the man who tortured her daily with his perverted will. His face was pale and dry, etched with lines that crisscrossed over the loose skin of his cheeks. His hair, sparsely distributed, was graying at the temples. "Adrella. Dear, dear Adrella. You know the rules. No mockery of my Kastaks or me...ever."

"My deepest apology, Master." Adrella knew how to appease this monster. She needed to stay on his good side for the sake of her child, for the sake of all the children and their mothers. "Your great wisdom is, as always, received in humble gratitude." She curtsied to the ground, her hands crossed over her chest in supplication.

It had worked. Askinadon released her back to her hosta with an admonition. Yet, when Morchison learned of her ridicule of him, and astonishingly, her subsequent release without a single hour in the rocsadon's den, he openly fumed.

"One of these days," he promised her, "I will lead you personally to the rocsadons. And when I do...when I do..."

Only Askinadon's merciless grip upon his Kastaks had kept the full effect of Morchison's wrath at bay. That, however, did not prevent Morchison from deriding her at every opportunity. Even now, as she jiggled Rorken in desperation to keep him quiet, the Kastak eyed her with undisguised contempt.

"So, great whore of Askinadon, why don't you hand over your little tot to me?" He asked, watching her closely. "I'd like to start training him. Eventually, he's going to have to learn, so why don't we get started early?"

The sneer on his face grew into a sickening grin, and Adrella's heart skipped a beat. The threat was real. Only the sons of Askinadon were targeted for membership in this brutal band of slave-warriors, and while their apprenticeship did not begin until the tender age of five, a Kastak could request a charge

early. Adrella rotated her hip, moving it and Rorken away from Morchison.

"Great Kastak Morchison, why should you bother with an interest in me and mine? I am not fit to stand before you in all my humility."

Morchison snorted happily, consoled for the moment. "You got that right, whore."

Adrella lowered her head, hoping to appease him further. She heard him suck up his oral juices and spit at her feet. She watched in disgust as a foamy gob plopped onto the dust and floated near her toes, which were poking out the ends of her sandals.

"Go to Askinadon. He summons you to his chambers."

Adrella's eyes widened. "But I am eight months pregnant, Kastak Morchison. Why would the Great Master need to see me? I already carry his seed."

Morchison laughed at her displeasure. "Dunno. Probably wants to try something new."

Adrella opened her mouth to speak, but decided against it. She would have to go to Askinadon. In that, she had no choice. There was no sense in arguing with this ill-tempered Kastak who had little more power to make an independent decision than she did. She curtsied before him.

"I shall take the child to the nursery and make haste to my Master's side."

"Go, whore. And have a great night."

Morchison swaggered away, sniggering loudly. Adrella sighed in resignation and marched off with Rorken to the nursery, where Askinadon's newest wife, Shamana, abducted by the takatak last year, was watching over several harem babies. Shamana looked up as Adrella entered the room, greeting her with sad eyes.

"Hello, Adrella."

Her voice had become cheerless these past months, undoubtedly due to the hideous monotony of relentless yielding. Poor thing. She had just turned seventeen when she'd been stolen from the village. Shamana was small and had a baby face, making her appear even younger.

"Will you watch Rorken for me, Shamana? I have been summoned."

Shamana's eyes filled with a look of pity, but she said nothing. She flipped her long, thin hair behind her shoulders, reached out, and lifted Rorken from Adrella's arms. She set him in a large cradle with the other babies.

"Thank-you," Adrella whispered.

Shamana glanced at Adrella before turning her somber attention back to the babies. With one hand affixed to the cradle, she rocked it stiffly as her body moved back and forth, joined in the motion. Adrella stole out the door and headed to the palace courtyard where Askinadon received his wives. She slipped through the towering gates, which had been left open for her, and spotted Askinadon pacing across the yard. The tall, rectangular castle loomed behind him with its three, red interlocking circles emblazoned across the facade. Askinadon stopped as she drew near and looked her over. She thought she spied a hint of anxiety flicker across his face, but it was so quick she could not be sure.

"Hello, Adrella." He smiled.

"Hello, God of Parallon and Husband of my Heart. Greatness be yours." Adrella bent her head before him as she spoke.

"Yes, yes." He flapped his hand, dispensing with the formality. "I have summoned you because...I need to ask you...uh..."

There it was again. Adrella swallowed her surprise. Askinadon sounded...insecure. Could it be?

"Yes, Master?"

Adrella knew he could not hear her thoughts while he was with her. How it was possible, she did not understand. Yet, it was true. She had slipped more times in her thinking while he had grunted over her in his bed, moving her body to suit his pleasure, yet he'd never suspected her loathing. As she stood before him with her head hung low, she struggled against an urge to sneer in the face of his weakness.

"You have a sister, do you not?" he asked, gruffly.

Akka Ya. She had not expected this question. Why would he be asking after her sister? A wave of nausea rose to her throat.

"I do, Master. She is very disobedient," she said, hoping to deter any interest he may be fostering toward Katera. Askinadon was known for his liking of women who acquiesced to his will with a show of sycophantic pleasure. Perhaps, if she could convince him that Katera had a rebellious nature...

"She is, is she? Well, I'm sure you can teach her a thing or two." Askinadon paused, then, in a commanding voice, he announced, "I want her for my next wife."

Adrella steadied her breath. "Have you not already targeted my family for one Summons, Great Master? Did you tell the people that only one virgin per family would be chosen? And why would you care for a disobedient one? There are so many others..."

"Not so many like you." Askinadon reached out to touch her hair.

With growing desperation, Adrella risked appearing insubordinate and raised her head to look him in the eyes. "Great Master, she is not like me."

Askinadon dropped his hand, abruptly. "Get your eyes off my face, woman. Never look at me without permission...never."

A chill gripped Adrella's chest as her Lan Ma Ke froze within it. With her heart pounding, she cast her eyes to the ground and lowered herself, first on one knee and then the other, trembling under the strain of her advanced pregnancy.

"Forgive me, Great One! I live only to serve you."

She heard Askinadon shift, but he did not move to strike her.

"That's better," he said, sounding soothed. "You will assist me in getting whatever I want. And now, I want your sister here with me. You are not suitable for my chambers in your condition, but I think that your sister will serve me well in your stead." His voice betrayed his enthusiasm. "At least until after your baby is born." He paused. "Then you may both serve me."

Adrella shuddered. There was no end to the greed of this fiend. Askinadon waited, as if he expected her to say something.

"May we both serve you to your heart's desire," she said, choking on her words, but Askinadon seemed not to notice.

"And you will bring her to me," he added.

Why did Askinadon need her help? Couldn't he use the Voice to summon Katera?

"You, Master, may call anyone to you. You are omnipotent. Why do you want my help? I am powerless."

Askinadon's brow furrowed, and he drew in a breath. "She does not heed the Voice."

Impossible. "All must heed your Voice, Great One. How can this be?"

"She has...somehow...removed it."

The Voice can be removed? Astonishing. And Katera has done it. Oh, Lupana. Goddess of the Moon, Lupana of the old religion. Good News. Adrella trembled with excitement. There was hope. If the Voice could be removed, there was hope for all of them.

"She knows not what great charms she would learn in your bedchamber, Great One. If she did, she would beg to have ten Voices in her head."

"Yes, yes. Exactly."

Askinadon sounded animated as he reached down to lift her back to her feet. Adrella allowed him to draw her back up, averting her eyes from his face.

"But what can I do, Master? I don't know where she would hide."

"You don't need to find her. You will let her find you."

"What do you mean? I do not think she will come to Kan Mountain."

"No, but she would return to your village if she knew you were there."

Adrella waited, her heart pounding. No wife ever had returned to the village after a Summons. Oh, to see everyone, again. Mama...Papa...to show them Rorken. These were her heart's desires, but not at the expense of her sister's safety.

"Go on, please, Master."

"I'm sending you back to your village. I will turn the Voice upon you at all hours so that I may listen for her. You will request her presence with the horn when you arrive."

The horn . Each family had its own and used a series of unique blasts to call other family members missing from the village, often after a hunt. Its piercing siren was never ignored.

"When she shows herself, you will persuade her to come to me. You will then summon a takatak for her." Askinadon eyed her belly. "Then you will return on a hoshdel, since the takatak harness isn't going to fit you. Now that I see you, I don't think a saddle will fit you either. No matter-you can ride bareback."

Adrella clenched her fists. To betray her own sister... *oh, Lupana, please, no* . She would have to think of a plan...maybe on the way down the mountain...oh, if only Askinadon were not listening.

"Master, I will do what you ask. I will take Rorken to the village and we..."

"Not Rorken." Askinadon interjected, loudly. "You will go alone."

Adrella caught her breath. "The child will be such a bother to the other wives."

"That is of no consequence," he said, looking irritated. "Besides, Rorken is going to stay with me...in the castle."

No, no, no. Adrella cringed to think of it. Her baby, her soft boy...with this monster. "You have nothing to worry about," he continued. "Unless..."

"Master?"

"Unless your sister or you do not return within three days. If I am missing either one of you..." His voice turned sour and menacing. Adrella's chest iced over, and with a deadly certainty, she knew his next words. "Then Rorken will die."

If he had taken a knife and wedged it into her heart, it would have felt the same. What manner of choices were these? If she saved her sister...if that were even possible, she would lose her son. And if she helped to lure her sister into Askinadon's castle on the mountain, Katera would be doomed to a life of ruthless submission, in and out of the royal bedchamber.

I cannot win...Lupana , save me.

"You will leave in the morning for your village. Rorken has been disposed to the inner castle with a nursemaid where I will keep him close to me. Do you understand your mission?"

"Yes, Master," Adrella said, squeezing back the tears. "It shall be as you command."

"Good." Askinadon nodded. "You may go."

Adrella curtsied low, backed away from Askinadon, and headed down the path toward her hosta, the tears flowing freely down her cheeks.

Chapter Four

Good God, she's gorgeous, Mike Leno thought, smiling as he rummaged in a large wooden box for an extra ulli. Even plastered with mud, her beauty was apparent. It had been years since he'd spent any time with a woman, let alone one of such appeal. He felt a strong stirring...but no, he would not pursue it. *No distractions* . That was his credo. Especially now, when he was so close. Finally, the project was almost finished, the project he'd worked on, alone, for ten long years. Nothing must deter him.

He would feed the woman...what was her name? Katera... *a fitting name for such a beauty* . He shook his head to dispel the thought. Business only, he warned himself.

Once she'd rested and her clothes were clean and dry, he would release her. She could go anywhere she liked now that the disc, or the VisiOrb as it had been called at Tescali Laboratory, was gone from her head. He would tell her to leave Parallon and go to a region not controlled by Askinadon.

She could make her way in a new land. There were many opportunities on her planet-it was much bigger than her people suspected. Even locally, there were hundreds of villages like hers dotting the plains and hills beyond the Shirka Mountains. He would lead her out of Parallon himself, making sure she made it over the mountains. Then he would return to Kan Mountain and the secret network of caves beneath it

that he called home, and he would finish his work.

He fished out a clean ulli and headed back toward the hot spring. As he entered the tunnel and neared the room, he stopped.

"Are you in the water yet?" he called.

"I'm in," came the soft reply.

"Is it okay to come in and drop a clean ulli on the bench?"

"An ulli?" She sounded incredulous.

"Yeah," he said. "It's great. It will adjust to your size, and it's environmentally controlled. When it's hot, the suit will keep you cool, and when it's cold, you'll be very comfortable in it."

"An ulli," she breathed. "Okay, you can come in."

Mike skirted across the floor to the bench where he draped the ulli next to the blanket. "It's easy to put on. It'll stretch in whatever direction you pull it, and it snaps into place when you let go. There are no ties or fasteners. And if you need to dry your hair, stand near the tunnel at the other end of the pool. There's a warm wind gusting through it."

"Thank-you."

As he turned around, his eyes caught an unexpected view of her naked backside under the water. The sight of her pale skin glowing in the pool made him feel rubbery inside, and he hastened out of the room without speaking to her again. *No distractions.*

He busied himself for the next half-hour with meal preparations. Yesterday, he had skinned and gutted a large kiddik, the meaty mountain elk that grazed in abundance on the green pastures of the meadows in and surrounding the Tikon Forest near the caves. He dropped sections of the meat into the kettle along with some tasty roots and herbs to flavor the water, which had grown hot from the fire beneath. A natural sky hole in the roof of the cave provided ample ventilation. As he turned to scoop up another handful of roots, something in the entryway caught his eye.

The woman was standing there, holding a lanadik and watching him. He turned to face her. She was wearing the ulli, which hugged her form like a layer of silver skin. She looked stunning. In a heartbeat, his breathing changed, and he struggled to steady it. He had never seen an ulli on a woman with her proportions and hadn't counted on his response to it. Her breasts, small and round, jiggled slightly as she shifted her weight. Unable to help himself, his eyes journeyed across her chest to her small waist, then over her curving hips to her shapely legs. Finally, his eyes rested on the tiny silver boots that formed around her feet.

"I see it fits," he said, forcing his eyes back to her face. "You look nice, uh...I mean, without all that mud."

He was noticing her eyes. They were a bluish-green like a fine emerald from his world, and rimmed with thick, dark lashes. Her hair, gleaming from her bath, fell in soft, wavy columns past her shoulders, the ends curling around her elbows.

"It fits alright, but it's so light. I can't even feel it. It feels like I'm..." A pink flush rose to her cheeks.

"Yeah, I know," he said, quickly. "It covers everything, though, so don't worry. You'll get used to the

weightlessness." He smiled reassuringly. "The next time you try on your own clothes, you'll think you're wearing a suit of armor."

"Armor?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah. It's...very heavy."

"Oh," she said.

Dear God. She looks so...vulnerable. He fought an urge to wrap his arms around her...to promise that no harm would come to her. Instead, he turned back toward the kettle, feigning interest in the broth and hoping the impulse would pass. For the first time since he'd donned an ulli, he wished he were not wearing one. They were too revealing. He felt stirrings in his lower body and, in a moment of dread, realized that his own form was changing inside his ulli. As soon as he could manage it, he'd escape the room and slip on a pair of regular pants.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, trying to concentrate on the broth.

"Mm. Smells wonderful," she said, wiggling her nose. "Is that kiddik stew?" She moved next to him and peered into the pot. "Ah, tarola root, yummy."

Her arm brushed against his, and he felt his pulse quicken. *Good God, you'd think I'd never stood next to a woman.*

"Yeah. Tarola. Grows all over. In the meadow. Favorite food of the kiddik." *Just great . Now I'm talking in staccato.* He looked at her and grimaced. "How would you like to stir this for a while? I'll be right back."

Without waiting for an answer, he thrust the spoon into her hand and rushed toward the exit at a frenzied clip. The moment he cleared the room, he leaned back against the tunnel wall and glanced down at his body. Yep, got out of there just in time. *Nothing like giving yourself away*, he thought ruefully, as he fumbled through the dark tunnel without his lanadik, which he'd left behind.

He groped his way into his sleeping chamber, lit the wall lanadik, and rummaged through a wooden box where he kept his meager supply of clothes. *Guess I'll have to keep my ulli off as long as hers stays on*, he thought, wishing now that he hadn't given her one. He located his cotton pants, the only pair he owned on this planet; the same pair he'd been wearing that day ten years ago when he was cast into this strange world. He had sequestered off a few ullis from the lab soon after, retired his cotton pants into the wooden box and had not worn them since. The ullis had served all his needs superbly...until now.

He pulled off his suit, slipped on the old civilian pants and cinched up the belt. *What do you know? They still fit*, he thought proudly. At thirty-six, he was in the best shape he'd ever been in. *Probably from chasing all those kiddiks*, he thought, smiling as he donned the one shirt he had to go with the pants. *That and dodging Askinadon and all his so-called Kastaks.*

Feeling appropriately concealed and more confident in his old pants, he grabbed another lanadik and headed back to the kitchen. When he found Katera, she was ladling the meat and broth into two wooden bowls she'd located on a shelf. She'd even spread a Shalpacan cloth over the crude table set out in the middle of the room. She looked up at him. Their eyes met, and he looked away, feeling stunned all over again. *God, what a beauty.*

"You sure disappeared in a hurry," she said, carrying the bowls to the table.

"Yeah. Well, I had to...uh...get something."

"Another outfit?" she asked, eyeing his clothes.

"Um, yeah." He did not elaborate.

"Okay." She sounded mildly confused. "You have an interesting wardrobe. I've never seen anything like what you're wearing. What is it made from?"

"Just cotton. Cotton pants and a shirt," he mumbled, sitting down at the table.

Katera looked at him curiously as she set the bowls down and joined him on the opposite side. They ate in silence, stealing glances at each other and looking away when their eyes met. When they had finished, Mike offered her some more, but she declined.

"Well then," he said, looking at a barrel on the floor next to the wall, "how about a little of my own special brew?"

"Really? What is it?"

"It's wine. I made it from the fruit of the hummel plant," he said, moving toward the barrel.

"The hummel...oh, yes, a small fruit. They grow in bunches. They're very sweet when they're ripe."

"Right." He poured a sample of the drink into a small, clay mug. "It reminds me a lot of the grape we have back home."

Katera paused. "Where is home, Mikolen?"

Mike raised his head to look at her. "Not in these caves, that's for sure," he said, avoiding the question. He returned his attention to the wine, filled the second mug and carried both to the table, handing one to Katera. She held it under her nose and sniffed.

"Oh! That's minola," she stated. "My father makes it, but he uses the fruit of the peras. It's like the hummel plant, only much bigger and lighter in flavor."

"Okay, minola then." Mike raised his mug for a toast. Katera stared at his elevated arm with a blank look. "You're supposed to tap your mug against mine, then one of us says something for good luck."

Katera raised her mug, her dark eyes glittering with amusement. *Could she get any more appealing?* If only he didn't need to get off this godforsaken planet; there might be something worth pursuing here, but no. Mentally, he pinched himself, remembering his mission.

"Something for good luck?" She repeated. "Okay, how about...may the towers of Askinadon crumble into dust."

Yeah, sure, crumbling towers would work, but not before he'd finished with the project, of course.

"Hear, hear," he said, clinking his mug against hers and lifting it to his lips.

Katera took a measured sip from her mug, while Mike downed a long draft.

"Mm," she exclaimed, sounding surprised. "This is so sweet. And the flavor...much stronger than minola. It's good."

"Thanks," Mike said, plunking his mug back on the table. "I picked the fruit at its ripest...after botrytis had set in."

"Bo...trytis?"

"Yeah. It's a benevolent form of a grey fungus. If you pick the fruit at the right time, and then expose it to drier conditions, it can produce a very concentrated, sweet wine."

Katera smiled appreciatively. "My father would love this minol...this wine. I'd love to bring him some."

Mike grimaced. This could never happen. Her father would not taste it. Giving it to him would betray Mike's presence here within the mountain. Katera was the first person, ever, to know about his hideaway. This knowledge must not go any further. It could ruin everything.

She must leave Parallon without any good-byes, he thought, feeling desperate for both of them. If she stayed, Don Askins, or Askinadon as he was known in this land, would find her again. After reinserting another VisiOrb, there was no telling what he would do to her. Mike would apprise her of the dangers first thing in the morning. Right now, he'd let her relax, enjoy herself. They had a long ride ahead of them through the Shirka Mountains, a week's worth at least, and she would need her strength. No need to upset her just yet. And besides, he could not remember spending a more pleasurable evening. Not even back in his world, where the women had been plentiful and willing. None, however, had rung his bells...certainly not like this one. No, there was no rush. He picked up his mug again.

"Another toast," he said, lifting it high. "To the beautiful moon of your planet."

Katera looked puzzled. "What is a planet?"

Mike set his mug down. Even Astronomy 101 was too advanced for the age she lived in.

"It's the ground under your feet," he told her.

"Why is it my planet? Why not yours?" Sharp questions from this one. "You're not from here. And neither is Askinadon. You both come from the same place, don't you?" She was studying him carefully now. "Where is that place, Mikolen? Where are you from?"

"You'd never believe me," he said, pulling back.

"Please give me a chance," she said, straining toward him.

Mike sighed. She looked determined. If he had learned anything in his life, it was never to thwart a determined woman. And besides, if she were going to leave Parallon, she'd need to know what the stakes were. She deserved to know. He drew in a deep breath and looked into her eyes.

"Okay," he said, "listen carefully. I'm going to tell you a story about a different time and place far removed from this one. And it's going to take a while, so get comfortable."

Clutching her mug to her chest, Katera leaned back into her chair to listen.

"I'm all ears," she said.

Chapter Five

The morning was pale grey and the air brisk as Adrella started her journey to the bottom of Kan Mountain. It was a long way down, and the path was rocky and steep. Unable to balance properly without a saddle, and with her huge stomach protruding in front of her, she bounced across the hoshdel's broad back like an unwieldy ball. She rode an older mare named Chilika, who normally offered a smooth ride. On this path, however, every leap over ditch or small boulder left her slipping off the side or

worse-nearly up and over Chilika's bowed head. She tried gripping the shaggy hair on the animal's withers for support, but it didn't help. In the end, she simply got off and walked, leading the beast with a rope. It was slow going, but at least the ground felt steady under her feet.

She reached the base of the mountain before nightfall and climbed onto Chilika's back. The rest of the trail would be flat. It wouldn't be long before she arrived at her village. In spite of the sinister purpose Askinadon had imposed upon her visit, she couldn't help feeling a growing sense of jubilation at the thought of seeing her parents, Moreesha and Rinden, again. It had been two very long years since that day the takatak had snatched her from the altar at Kopa Na An. Her parents didn't even know if she was still alive.

She urged Chilika forward, and the hoshdel lunged into a smooth-gaited run. She rode through the cool forests along the Kala River in the Tikon Forest while absorbing the remembered sights. The gushing sounds of the river, full from recent rains, comforted her, and the familiar scents of the forest with its tall sheltering trees conjured up a flood of memories. She thought about her childhood when she and Katera used to run barefoot over the thick mulch of the woodland floor next to this very river. She passed a small pool where they had spent hot summer days wading and splashing each other, engaged in great laughing contests with little more to tether them than the safety directives of their gentle parents. And over there, she glanced at a wide stump, was the place where Banken first kissed her. Dear, sweet Banken...killed by Askinadon before he could claim Adrella for his own.

As she drew closer to the village, nostalgia weighed heavy upon her heart. Would she ever know such simple pleasures again? Would her son...her unborn child? Or were they doomed to a life of servitude, attempting to placate an insatiable ego with the capacity to steal the very privacy of their thoughts?

With a nervous twitch, she reminded herself that Askinadon might be listening to her thoughts at this very moment, and with accomplished attention, she supplanted her thinking with happier visions of Rorken. Experience had taught her that Askinadon did not listen fulltime-possibly not even half time, but there was no point in getting careless. Especially given the nature of her trip-he would surely be tuning in more frequently.

The path through the forest opened up to an alpine meadow...the meadow that used to be her home. Clusters of hostas filled it end to end, especially around the perimeter of Kala Lake. Hoshdels, milling about in their corrals, were lowing softly to each other. Thin columns of smoke billowed up from stone chimneys, and the aroma of burning chipil wood from newly stoked fires tweaked her nose. It was almost dark- tummies would be full from meals of spit-roasted meats and seasoned broths. Across the meadow, lights flickered on inside the hostas as candles and hearths were lit in preparation for the night ahead. Children would soon be tucked into their beds, their prayers heard, their foreheads kissed.

She sat quietly on Chilika, engrossed in every detail as the sun slipped behind the Shirkas to the west, and the shadows dissolved into the darkness. Suddenly, she was blinking at the night, surprised that she could no longer see. With a sense of urgency fueled by impatience, she leaned forward in the saddle and the sure-footed hoshdel sprinted down the bank and into the meadow. She rode past the lake toward a group of hostas on the southern end of the village. Along the way, several heads poked outside front windows and doors to see her, and she heard a few fervent whispers.

"No, it couldn't be," said one woman's voice. "Are you sure it isn't the sister?"

"She's what?" asked another. "How far along?"

As Adrella neared the hosta of her parents and spied the familiar fence ringing it, her eyes welled up. Through the window within the firelit room, she could see her mother's shape huddled over the hearth

prodding the flames, her profile glowing in the light. Adrella stopped in front of the window to watch her. Mama's Shalpacan spullera spilled onto the floor in front of her as she stoked the fire.

Papa appeared, strolling across the room toward Mama. His beard seemed longer and his temples grayer. Mama turned around as he approached, and Adrella saw her eyes. *Merciful Lupana*, they looked so sad. Mama laid her head on Papa's shoulder and they stood quietly holding each other, as if they had nothing else to do.

Adrella slid off Chilika and tied the reins to a post outside the window. She approached the front door with her heart pounding, and knocked. A pause inside, and then she heard her father's footsteps. As the door opened, she struggled to contain her excitement.

"Papa."

"What?" He peered at her. "Adrella?" His eyes grew wide.

"Who is it, Rinden?" her mother asked from inside.

Papa was staring at her belly. "Well, it isn't Katera. She's not pregnant." His voice sounded numb with disbelief.

By now, her mother had reached the door and was squeezing in front of Papa. Her hands flew to her mouth when she saw Adrella.

"Ohhhhh."

"Mama, it's me," Adrella said, moving closer as the tears escaped.

"Oh, merciful Lupana, my girl," Mama cried, and swept Adrella into her arms, plastering her wet face with kisses. "Adrella, Adrella," she repeated, her tears mingling with Adrella's. She leaned back for a moment and laughed, and then fell into the kisses once more. Then, she burst into tears again as if she'd just begun. At last, her hand found Adrella's belly and the laughing resumed. Then Papa moved in. He grasped her head in the crook of his arm and kissed the top of it. His strong shoulders shook from his dry sobs as he held her. A few curious neighbors gathered around the doorway, staring at Adrella in stunned silence.

"It's Adrella. She's back," Mama announced in a proud tone as she sequestered Adrella indoors. "You can see her tomorrow."

Papa shut the door behind them, and the three of them gawked happily at each other.

"You're alive," Papa said.

"I am alive, very much so. And so is the baby inside me."

Papa laid his hand on her stomach. "Askinadon?" His voice sounded threatening.

Adrella nodded. Papa's dark eyes sparked with fury. Adrella spoke quickly.

"Papa, I have another child—a son, Rorken. He's fifteen months old already."

Mama wrapped her arms back around Adrella. "Two grandchildren, Adrella? What wonderful news. You bring us such happiness, doesn't she, Papa?" Mama turned to look at Papa.

"Yes, yes," he said, but his eyes looked troubled. "I'm afraid not all is well here... I don't know how to tell

you this, but recently, Katera..."

"Yes, I know," Adrella interrupted. "She's missing. That's why I've come."

Adrella took a step backward and looked at them both. They returned her gaze, inquiring with raised brows and fearful looks, asking her what she knew, what she could tell them about their other daughter. *First I disappear, and then Katera*, Adrella thought, reading their anxiety. *They're wondering if we're going to disappear together this time...and they will be right.*

She wished with all her heart that the news she was compelled to deliver, the news that would send them into a tailspin of grief and worry, would evaporate into a bad dream. She wished the Voice would speak to her. She wanted to hear Askinadon announce that he had abandoned the project, that it was no longer necessary for her to find Katera.

And somewhere else, deep in her soul, she wanted to embrace the joy of this reunion without distraction. Like a small child indulging in a simple pleasure, she wanted to root upon this spot forever, hugging Mama and Papa and drowning herself in their kisses.

However, no Voice interrupted her, and her parents were waiting, their expressions growing impatient.

"Mama, Papa," she began, but in the next breath, before she understood what was happening, something splashed onto the floor at her feet.

She looked down. She was standing in a puddle of water. Mama gasped.

"Your water broke. Your baby..."

"It's too early," Adrella said, gaping at the floor.

"Your trip down the mountain must have triggered it," Mama said, placing her arm around Adrella's shoulders and leading her to the bed. To Rinden, she called, "Bring me some clean blankets."

"Oh, no," Adrella moaned. She lowered herself to the bed, a sharp pain wracking her lower body. "Mama..."

"It's okay. You're home. I'll take care of you."

Adrella smiled at her mother, but as she lifted her legs onto the bed, another pain tore through her like a tidal wave, peaking and crashing in her middle. She struggled not to cry out, but then another one came upon the heels of the last, and she heard herself scream. Mama was talking rapidly now, hoping to calm her, but Adrella couldn't understand the words through her pain...it sounded like gibberish. As the pain subsided, Adrella placed her hand on her belly, felt it heave as her baby lurched inside. Then, new waves of pain streaked through her center.

What was going on? Rorken's birth did not cause her so much pain, even at the end of her labor. Why did this feel so different? A sense of dread, as if a predatory takatak were watching her, seeped into her gut.

Then, as quickly as it came, the pain ceased. Papa brought a bowl of water and a cloth to Mama, who wet it, wrung it out, and used it to wipe Adrella's face and forehead. It felt cool on her hot cheeks. Before Adrella had a chance to thank her, another pain hit, this one harder than the others. She writhed on the bed, too surprised to cry out. Mama chanted softly, trying to soothe, but her voice was trembling.

The pains came one on top of another for hours. Adrella's cries sliced into the night air with unrelenting

intensity. Mama peeled Adrella's clothes off and massaged her body and aching muscles throughout the ordeal. Finally, as the first rays of light filtered through the window, Adrella birthed a pale blue baby girl. The infant did not move or cry out.

Moreesha swept up the tiny body and retreated, but before she could exit the room, Adrella called for her infant. Biting her lip, Moreesha turned around. She walked back to the bed and handed Adrella the lifeless body. As Adrella cradled it in her arms, a drop of colostrum fell from an expectant breast onto the unmoving lips of the infant.

A low, roiling sound welled up inside Adrella's throat. Deep and involuntary, it carried grief amplified by newly unleashed suppression. She raised her head as a roar grew within her and let it spill out, unrestrained. Outside the open window, in the meadow, heads turned and voices hushed. She wailed, uninterrupted, while Mama sat wringing her hands.

When she had spent herself, Adrella lowered her head and wept softly over her baby's head and the thin coating of fine, dark hair. She wept, clutching the dead child and kissing the small, cold fingers and lips. Finally, she fell back on the bed, exhausted and unable to weep any longer.

She fell asleep then, her head rolling off to one side, her arms clasping the baby to her bosom. After a time, Mama reached over, untangled the baby from Adrella's arms, and handed it to Papa. She instructed him to bury it in the Tikesh Fields next to the grave of her own mother, Lonalla.

"So she can watch over the baby," she explained.

Papa nodded, wrapped the baby in a swaddling cloth and stepped outside to saddle up his hoshdel. He left for the northern fields, solemn and quiet as he clutched the tiny bundle in one arm. Mama pulled the blanket over Adrella, smoothing it around her body. For a few moments, she checked her daughter's breathing-soft and even for the first time that night. Then, she laid a hand upon Adrella's cheek, bowed her head, and let her own tears fall silently into her lap.

Chapter Six

For the first time in a decade, Katera did not want to stop dreaming. She'd been dreaming all night, waking intermittently and falling back into delicious sleep. No Voice lurked in the spidery recesses of her mind, waiting to violate her sense of well-being. There were neither screeching takataks nor commanding Kastaks wielding bistons and ill tempers. Askinadon and his dark servants were absent from these dreams.

Instead, she dreamed of simple things made blissful by their nearly forgotten status. Her head felt weightless and unburdened, as if a bright light had turned on, dispelling all dark things. Early in the night, she dreamed of sharing secrets with her sister the way they used to share them-alone and in the forest together. She could feel Adrella's breath in her ear as her sister divulged the intimate details of a boy's kiss...was it Banken? Later, she dreamed about Keshun, the boy who had loved her before Askinadon had him killed. She dreamed of Keshun's arms around her on that day he'd confessed his love. It felt as if it was happening all over again...the long, lingering embrace mixed with slow words that sighed with yearning.

These intimate encounters from the days of old-the days before Askinadon-made up the stuff of her dreams on this night. The small acts, the ones forever unobserved save by the participants, danced in and out of her procession of images throughout the night. She felt as if the expression of her soul had resurrected inside her dreaming like the rise of a glittering full moon.

And then, in her final dream of the night, her imagination leapt forward, out of the past. She found herself riding on the back of a hoshdel as the animal loped through Kiddik Meadow alongside the Hapa River in the north. A man was sitting behind her, his body pressed against her back. She felt his arms, warm from the sun, reaching around her to grip the reins. His breath puffed against the side of her face, carrying the sweet scent of minola. The sensations created from his nearness tickled her and she laughed, unrestrained. *Ne Kamana Ya*, she whispered in the old language. *I could love you*. She twisted around to see him, but there was no one behind her. Then she heard his voice again, but it was coming from somewhere else.

"Katera, wake up." *Nik. Ya nik rastan...I don't want to.* "We have to get ready, Katera. We have a long ride ahead of us."

What? Katera opened her eyes and blinked into the dimly lit cavern. Mikolen was kneeling beside her.

"Hello," she said, smiling.

"Hello." His voice was soft. "I have saddled and packed a hoshdel for each of us. We must eat and leave right away. We've a long way to go."

Katera sat up, surprised. "Where are we going?"

"Out of Parallon. To another village on the other side of the Shirkas. We'll head north, first. It's the quickest..."

"No." Katera was now fully awake. "I'm not leaving Parallon."

"Katera, you must. If you stay, it's just a matter of time before Don...I mean Askinadon finds you again." *He calls him again by that other name*, Katera observed. "And it will not go well for you when he does," Mikolen finished, looking worried.

Katera stood up, stepped off the sleeping pad, and walked to the opposite wall. She stood facing it for a moment before turning back around. Mikolen had stood and was watching her.

"I'm not leaving Parallon," she announced again, quietly.

Mikolen sighed, as if he were summoning the patience to argue with a child. "Last night...I thought I explained it to you. You can do nothing for your people. You must save yourself. Do you want to return to a life where your thoughts can be policed at any time? Where you must obey the commands of someone you can't even see? Can you find happiness in a life like that? When everyone around you is just as miserable?"

"No, I cannot find happiness in that life. But I would rather live it for rest of my days-in misery if I must-and stay with my family and my people. I'd rather do that than live in complete freedom with strangers. Besides," she said, lowering her voice, "you will help me free my people. Won't you? You can remove the Voice from their heads." She touched her forehead. "Like you did for me."

Mikolen's head drooped. When he lifted it again, he looked exasperated.

"Do you realize how impossible that would be? As soon as Askinadon got wind of it-and he'd get wind of it real quick-he'd have his Kastaks and rocsadons and takataks swoop down into your village like ants on syrup." Mikolen paused and crossed his arms. "And, in a heartbeat, he'd have new discs installed in the foreheads of every one of you."

Katera sat down in a wooden chair against the cave wall and paused to think. She had learned last night

that Askinadon was not a god. He was merely a man-and a bad one at that-a murderer from Mikolen's world. Mikolen had called this world Earth. Both men had come from Earth and arrived in Parallon by way of a special device that had allowed them to disappear from one place and reappear in another. It had been destroyed in a struggle that ensued after they arrived in Katera's world. Katera didn't understand how any of it was possible, but she felt certain she had heard the truth. Throughout his tale, her Lan Ma Ke had glowed like a torch. When she looked back at Mikolen, he'd cocked his head to one side as he studied her.

"You know that each family in your village makes an annual pilgrimage to your altar, right?" he asked. "The...uh, Kopa...Kopa..."

"Kopa Na An," Katera finished. "My people have used the altar for centuries. Before Askinadon arrived, we prayed there and left gifts for Lupana, the Goddess of the Moon who reigns over us."

"Yeah, Kopa Na An. That's the place," Mikolen said, nodding. "It is at the altar that the Kastaks insert the disc into your foreheads. It's a simple, painless procedure. Not a single drop of blood is shed. They use a sophisticated surgical instrument called an Insertech to imbed it."

"I don't remember a surgic...sur...the Insertech thing. When our families were summoned to the altars, we chanted and paid tribute to Askinadon, then we received a blessing from him, with the Fortune Maker. It's this grey, oval thing about..." Katera held her hands a foot apart. "...this big, and it has a handle. The Kastak would place the end of it right here." She raised a finger to her forehead and froze.

Ma Lan Kena Lupana. Merciful Lupana. That's it. Her hand fell from her face. Mikolen watched her, grinning broadly.

"Yep. And that's no Fortune Maker, at least not a maker of happy fortunes. The grey, oval thing as you describe it, is the Insertech, the instrument that empowers Askinadon to be what he is. With it, he inserts and activates the Voice, along with its living hell, into your thoughts. He used it to insert a disc into the heads of all of you when he arrived from our world ten years ago."

His world, he'd explained last night over their second glass of minola, was a planet-a huge rock, like a ball, floating in the vast ocean of space...just like her world. She'd asked him why they didn't fall off the bottom and sides. He'd talked about a force called gravity. It was such amazing news and she'd done her best to absorb it. Now, he was walking across the floor to her. He crouched in front of her chair.

"And since then," he continued, "Askinadon checks the discs for accuracy once a year, tunes them up...whatever they need. That's why he has you all make your so-called pilgrimage to the altar."

Katera was dumbfounded. "But how does the...Insertech work? I mean, how do they get those discs inside us? We felt nothing but a pinch."

A look of concentration settled over his features. He'd had the same look last night while explaining the concept of planets within solar systems and galaxies. She'd felt deliciously safe as he'd wrestled with his words, trying to make them clear. His patience had worn steady as she'd rattled off a multitude of questions. He was striking a similar pose now, as if he was glancing up at an unseen tablet. Thoughtful...and handsome, she realized as the light of the lanadik fell across his face.

"Originally, the Insertech was designed to perform surgeries," he began, gesturing with his hands, "which is a way of cutting into the body to fix something that's wrong inside. The Insertech allows the skin and tissue to avert insult from the incision. It has a feature that allows it to slice through tissue and preserve the integrity of the exposed cells during the procedure. When the surgery is completed, it slides everything back into its original position. The tissue has no memory of ever being cut, so it reattaches itself, and

presto! No marks, no nothing." Mikolen lowered his hands. "That's the simple explanation."

Katera gave him a blank look. "You mean that Insertech was cutting open our heads?"

"In a way, yes. Then, a VisiOrb-that's the disc-was inserted through a small opening on the end of the Insertech."

"You used this...VisiOrb on your planet?"

"Yes, but for a different purpose. We used it on patients demonstrating symptoms of dementia or Alzheimers."

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's usually an old person's disease. They become very forgetful. They can forget the simplest things...like how to lift a fork or dress themselves."

"Oh, yes. My aunt Tasha became that way before she died," Katera said, remembering. "After a while she didn't know us anymore-she didn't know anybody. She could not even remember how to lift herself onto a hoshdel, and she'd been a prize rider."

"Exactly," Mikolen said. "On our planet the VisiOrb was used to guide these people through the simple actions of daily living, like eating and using the transport system. One attendant was able to monitor three or four patients from a remote site and direct them through their days. It enabled them to have a certain measure of independent living before the final stages of memory loss set in, when they became incapable of processing even simple directions."

"I see," Katera said, quietly. "So the disc, the VisiOrb, was a good thing in your world."

"It's merely a thing in any world. In mine, it was used well. Until Don...Askinadon got a hold of it in this world."

"Why do you keep calling him Don?" she asked, shelving other questions about the VisiOrb.

"Because his name is Don. Don Askins."

Katera frowned. "Why did he change his name?"

"For your people...because all of the males in your culture have a name that ends in o-n, or e-n, or i-n. Something with 'n'. The females all have names that end with 'a', as you know. I'm sure he used it to assist him in creating a new persona for your people...a god-like persona."

Katera paused, wondering. "Then is your name really Mikolen?"

Mikolen smiled sheepishly. "No. I did the same thing, but for a different reason. I am no god any more than Don Askins, but I wanted to give you a name you could relate to."

Katera raised an eyebrow. "So, your real name?"

"It's Mike. Mike Leno. On my world, we have two names instead of one, like your people. Don and Askins. Mike and Leno. So, I just mixed up my name to come up with a new one."

"Shall I call you...?"

"No, call me Mikolen. It's fine." He smiled. She wanted to reach out, touch him. He stood up and took a

deep breath. "Katera, please, " he said, and hesitated. He looked at his hands, looked at her. "I know how you feel about your family, but we can do nothing for them or anyone else in Parallon. Won't you let me guide you through the Shirkas to a new home? Maybe, some day you can return...who knows?"

Katera stood up quickly and moved around him, as if he were in her way. She strode to the exit and turned to face him again, hands on hips.

"I told you. No," she said, firmly. "You don't have to help me, but I'm staying in Parallon." She dropped her hands to her sides. "Don't worry," she added, lowering her voice. "I won't tell anyone about you."

She knew from their conversations that Askinadon hadn't the slightest notion that Mikolen lived in this dark, subterranean world within the mountain. He was not even aware that Mikolen existed on the planet, believing instead that he'd been killed in the first hour after they'd materialized on the summit. This allowed Mikolen to slip inside Askinadon's castle undetected in the darkness, when few Kastaks were on hand to watch the numerous gates and doors. In those stolen moments, he would sequester whatever he needed for his project-a special project with a purpose he'd guardedly kept from her, but Katera knew from listening that it held high hopes for him. Probably, she mused sadly, he was building a way to escape and return to his home on that planet...Earth.

"I promise. I won't tell anyone that you're here," she repeated.

Mikolen shook his head from side to side. "You won't have to tell anyone. As soon as a new VisiOrb is inserted in your head, all you need to do is think it, and there'll be a horde of rocsadon's charging through that thin layer of brush shielding the front entrance of these caves."

Katera gulped. If Askinadon learned that Mikolen lived and worked within the mountain beneath his castle, he would destroy him. More importantly, she sensed that Mikolen had a chance to return to his home, the one he ached for, and she did not want to ruin it for him. She wanted to see him succeed, even if it meant that he must leave Parallon for his own world.

"What would you have me do?" she asked.

Mikolen stared at her. Then he bowed his head and walked to the opposite wall. When he turned around, he had a preoccupied look in his eyes as they surfed some unknown horizon. He lowered his head again and paced the floor, crossing from wall to wall as her impatience grew. Finally, he halted and turned to her with an open mouth.

"It might work. Maybe...I think I have the tools."

"What is it?"

"The VisiOrb-I think I can modify it. I simply need to substitute the signals to the VisiOrb for the electrical impulses to and from the brain. I can redirect them from the piezoelectric crystals in the Orb to a converter that will mimic the neurotransmitters in the brain...yes, I believe it can work."

Katera had no idea what he was talking about, but felt her hopes lift. In all likelihood, the salvation of her people rode dimly upon this dubious inspiration, but she could not resist grasping hope.

"What can you do?" she asked, excitedly.

Mikolen rushed to her and grabbed both shoulders. "I think I can create the Voice outside of the head. To fool Askinadon. You can listen to the Voice through an earpiece outside of your head and respond to it using a microphone-you know, with your voice instead of your thoughts. Askinadon won't know the difference."

Katera let this sink in. "You mean I can tell him what I want him to think I'm thinking?"

"Exactly."

Katera inhaled sharply. "Can you make one for all my people?"

Mikolen dropped his hands. "No, Katera. I can only make one. I have the materials to create one, maybe two at the most. I will use the VisiOrb that I cut from your head and convert it. Perhaps, I can convert it into two sets. That's the best I can do. But it will allow you to escape the thought police."

Katera drew in a deep breath. It was the best chance she had to save herself and her sister. Maybe she could even infiltrate Askinadon's camp.

"Yes, do it Mikolen... please."

"I will. Yes, I will." He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward a connecting tunnel near the cavern's entry. "You can assist me in my lab. It's a little ways down this tunnel," he said, as they ducked into it.

Katera's heart vaulted in a series of leaps, but she couldn't be sure if it was Mikolen's grand idea that thrilled her, or the warm touch of his fingers intertwined with hers.

Chapter Seven

Kastak Morchison slid the bolt from the heavy gate that led into the corrals housing the rocsadons, the fiendish dragon-pets of Askinadon. He dreaded the assignment ahead, though it was supposedly an honor to perform it. Askinadon had given the order to him personally, not through the VisiOrb. To defy such an order was an invitation to torture, perhaps even death, though it was rare for Askinadon to kill a Kastak.

Long, intense indoctrination and training marked the creation of this pseudo-elite corps, and at only thirty-one strong, they were too few in number for Askinadon to eliminate any of them without a cause for concern. Still, all were well acquainted with the wrath of Askinadon. On several occasions, when goods or materials turned up missing, such as lab equipment, ullis, even food, they were collectively tortured, even after the VisiOrbs had cleared every one of them.

Wearing a scowl, Morchison shoved the gate open several feet and poked his head through it to the large holding area on the other side. Several chained animals lifted their massive heads and eyed him. He struggled to keep his breathing slow and even. He knew how well these beasts could smell fear... rumor had it they could detect your sweat half a mile away. He wiped his brow. It was said they could feel your heart pounding through their feet as the vibrations traveled from your body across the ground.

Not that they could harm him now, he reassured himself, closing the gate while surveying the thick chains and short leads that wrapped from gigantic posts to equally formidable legs. Morchison waved to Kastak Timoton, who had just finished tethering a rocsadon. Timoton swiped an arm over a sweat-drenched brow and waved back, wearing a look of exhaustion. Timoton appeared more than ready to relinquish the arena. Before he could escape, Morchison called to him.

"I need you to spot for me."

Timoton slowed-gave Morchison a pained look. "Which one?"

"Gorgeron."

Timoton stiffened. "Gorgeron?" His voice had risen an octave. "Crap, I don't know..."

"Askinadon's orders," came the quick reply.

No way did Morchison intend to handle this monstrous alpha male by himself. Timoton didn't have to know the job had been entrusted to Morchison alone. Timoton's shoulders slumped, but he nodded and retrieved his tiket, the long pole with fine claws for gripping and maneuvering the locks and chains around the animals' feet.

"Who's on the menu?" Timoton asked, as he trudged back toward Morchison.

"Don't know, but I don't think it's a random pick. Askinadon seemed very...intent."

"This one's not for sport, then?"

"No, I don't think he's trying to terrorize the whole village this time. He's targeting a single individual." Morchison released a piece of torn fabric that hung from his belt. "Here's the scrap with the victim's scent. It's already been fixed."

"Did you do it?"

"Yeah. Used extra suderik, too. Enough to get him down the mountain to the village and back up again. It's also impregnated with the scent of a goat that we'll drag into the corral to get Gorgeron back up here. I needed the extra suderik to hold the two scents."

"Extra suderik?" A look of fear flashed across Timoton's face. "As if it isn't bad enough fixing the deadliest rocsadon in the corral, but to add more suderik?"

He shook his head, looking dismayed. Morchison understood. Suderik, a natural secretion produced within the olfactory system of the animal, created the unfaltering focus of a rocsadon to destroy a specific prey animal with single-minded ferocity-to the exclusion of all other prey. Suderik was the catalyst behind the crazed predatory behavior of the rocsadons. They were milked for it in order to redirect their behaviors toward selected individuals. Small vials of the stinky substance were kept in the lab for this purpose and mixed with the scent of the chosen victim.

"Well, whoever wore this garment will be dead before nightfall...that's a fact," Morchison said, positioning himself in front of Gorgeron.

Timoton approached the beast from behind with the tiket. Morchison stood with his feet splayed, ready to drop the fixing cloth from a tiket in one hand, while gripping a set of ripping tails in the other. Gorgeron, who had been slumbering between his posts, rolled up onto his knees and snorted in anticipation. His back, a slate gray mountain of hard flesh, swayed as he lifted his massive head, perched like a unweildy anchor at the end of a long neck.

"Up, Gorgeron!" Morchison yelled, and cast the ripping tails into the air, allowing the needle sharp tacks to whistle past the beast's nose.

A low growl of protest rumbled from Gorgeron's throat, but he shifted his weight over his front legs, hoisting his tonnage forward. When his back legs escaped and sprang free, he pushed his chest up over his front legs, grunting. Then he stretched his neck up, up, until it reached its full height twenty feet over the ground. Morchison swallowed hard as he stepped back out of range.

"Head down!" he commanded.

Gorgeron lowered his neck to the ground, gnashing his long teeth at Morchison, who whipped the tails past his nose again for good measure. Then Morchison raised his tiket, preparing to drop the fixing cloth.

The timing for this exercise was critical, and a mistake could cost the handler dearly.

"Be careful," Timoton warned. "I'll let you know when the last chain is released. Wait until I shout 'now'. Don't wait a single second after I shout. Remember what happened to Kastak Stanson two years ago...he threw the cloth too late."

"Yeah, I was there. I saw the rocsadon fix on him instead."

"Really? I heard the rocsadon ignored the cloth...advanced on the poor chump."

"Yep. Stanson lashed the ripping tails into its face; a tack even lodged in the animal's eye and ripped it, but it didn't make any difference."

A reverent silence fell between them as Timoton fumbled with the last lock and chain. Visions of Stanson inside the rocsadon's mouth head first, his legs jutting from the jaws and slicing the air like scissors, played through Morchison's mind as the last lock fell open.

"Now!" Timoton shouted.

Morchison lowered the tiket toward Gorgeron's prostrated head as the animal snorted in anticipation. The cloth fell over his wide nostrils. Gorgeron bellowed painfully and shook his head, sending the cloth drifting to the ground in front of him. There he plunged his head into it, thumping and rubbing his nose over it as the muscles along the length of him twitched and tensed. Morchison lifted the ripping tails over Gorgeron's head.

"Go!" he shouted, and lashed the tails into the air. They whistled, stinging the air just inches from the great beast's head, and still he thrashed his nose into the cloth as if nothing else existed. "Go!" Morchison commanded again, allowing the ripping tails to tear a gash in the side of the rocsadon's head.

Gorgeron blinked, shook his head, and stretched his neck up and out. He opened his jaws wide and inhaled, then blew out a long and haunting cry. It resounded over the high walls of the corral and sent an ominous warning to all on the other side.

Good, the hunting call. He was ready. Morchison nodded to Timoton, who removed the bolt and pushed the gate wide open. Huffing wildly, Gorgeron dashed for the opening with the explosive force of a volcano. As he disappeared through it, Timoton screamed into a megaphone.

"Rocsadon coming through!"

A thick, dark cloud of dust churned behind Gorgeron as he thundered past rows of hostas bordering a trail down the mountain that had suddenly been rendered empty. Morchison sighed heavily, returned the tiket to its sheath, and motioned Timoton to follow him out of the corral. It would be eight hours before Gorgeron returned, and Askinadon was busy in his bedchamber. He'd delivered the new wife, Shamana, to the horny old goat himself. Morchison had two good hours of precious time without labor or duty or that damned Voice inside his head.

He'd use the time to dream about unleashing a rocsadon on Askinadon and eliminating the jerk. He'd love to do more than merely dream about it...if another Kastak hadn't already tried it and failed. Askinadon alone kept weapons powerful enough to destroy a rocsadon. He had put one of the monsters down as it had charged toward him a few years ago. Then he'd undertaken an intense investigation using the VisiOrbs to read the thoughts of every Kastak. The renegade Kastak had finally revealed himself and, after several long days and nights, had succumbed to his tortures. Nope, no one had tried it since. But he could dream-yes, he could.

Chapter Eight

With her heart breaking, Adrella kissed her father on both cheeks and held her mother in a tight embrace before stepping back to look at them. Her mother's face had turned a splotchy red, though the morning was cool and breezy. Adrella drew in a quaking breath that threatened to shatter her frail composure, but at the last moment managed to press her lips together and smile. Mama was wringing her hands and looking strained. Papa cleared his throat and looked at his feet.

"Maybe it would be easier if..." he mumbled.

"I should go," Adrella interrupted.

"Yes," he said, and looked at her. "Go north, Adrella. Katera is not in the southern territories, or she would have heard the horn and come home. Our horn does not reach the northern region of the Tikon Forest." Papa turned to Chilika, Adrella's hoshdel, and stuffed the family horn into a saddlebag draped over the animal's back. "She must be in the north, and if you leave now you'll be able to reach Kiddik Meadow in three and a half hours. You can blow the horn in the place where the woods lead into the meadow. The blast should reach all the territory leading up to the Shirkas. If Katera is anywhere around there, she will hear it."

Papa cinched up the saddlebag and turned to Adrella. She nodded sadly, hearing his unspoken words. *If Katera is anywhere at all, if she is still alive...that's what you mean, isn't it?*

They had spent the last two days sounding the horn with the unique series of blasts devised to summon members of her family from a distance—one long toot, three short, and another long. First Papa, then Mama had blown the instrument for hours. They would not give it to Adrella, who was still weak after losing her baby. Though Askinadon had awarded her one extra day to recover, she had not regained her full strength.

Katera had not responded to the summons, which could only mean that she was either out of range, lost, or...Adrella did not want to dwell on other possibilities. Katera was out there, and Adrella was going to find her. She had mixed feelings about luring her sister with the horn. She wanted to see Katera and know that she was all right, but it felt like a betrayal. She'd never before displayed disloyalty to any Parallonian, let alone her sister.

She had explained to Mama and Papa that Askinadon held Rorken hostage, and while they had proffered their understanding and support, the deception she must instigate to find her sister haunted her. Would Katera appreciate her fierce desire, her need, to protect her child as well as Mama and Papa? Would she be willing to aid her nephew, to keep him from peril? Mama had told Adrella that she had no choice—she could not endanger Rorken. Then, naively, she had added that she and Katera would be together on the mountain—and wasn't that a good thing?

"You can watch each other's children grow up," Mama had said, with a wan smile. "Won't that be nice?"

Adrella did not tell her mother about the long hours of hard labor forced on the wives. She did not tell her about the bullying Kastaks, or mention the dreadful hours in Askinadon's bed. Nor did she tell about the omnipresent Voice that badgered them much more than anyone in the village could imagine. She did not describe the horrid corral...oh. That awful pole inside the dirty pen of the rocsadons. No, there was no point in inflating the acute anxiety that her parents were already feeling.

Last night, Askinadon had given the order to leave in the morning and look for Katera. *You must find your sister quickly and bring her to me*, he commanded. *You have two days to accomplish this. For*

the sake of your son, do not fail in this mission.

Adrella accepted the reins from Papa and allowed him to hoist her into the saddle that he'd provided. She settled into the comfortable seat and looked at her parents for what might be, she realized with a heavy heart, the last time.

"Thank you, Mama...Papa. Someday..."

"Someday we will see you, your sister, and your children, too," Papa said, trying to sound cheerful. He turned to his wife. "Right, Moreesha?"

Mama smiled, and Adrella nodded, hoping her angst didn't show. Not wishing to prolong the agony any further, she urged Chilika forward. The animal broke into an eager trot before Adrella reined her to a brisk walk. She peered back over her shoulder to see Mama leaning into Papa's shoulder as he placed his arm around her. They looked frightened. Adrella swallowed, waved and turned her attention toward the path ahead.

She was in no hurry to leave. Not this meadow-this place of happy memories. The meadow was at least seven miles long, and her parent's hosta was located on the southern end. It would take a couple hours before she cleared it. She rode for about a mile and neared the Kala River. As Chilika plodded along, Adrella looked from side to side, greeting her old neighbors as they strolled toward the path to see her off. From their solemn faces, Adrella knew the rumors generated from her cries of the night before last had reached their hostas.

The morning air was crisp, and the sun sparkled as it climbed into the sky over Kan Mountain. Everywhere, as the dawn emerged, villagers arose and assumed the routines that had sustained them for many generations of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. She watched an old friend, Mashtun, as he led the family hoshdels to the feeding troughs. His wife, Likera, was hacking at the ground alongside their hosta with a horn-shaped tool, a bag of seed by her side. They both stopped to watch her pass.

Further down the path she spied Pantera, the youngest child of Mankin and Rokana, as she prepared a Shalpacca for shearing, brushing the long, dense hair of the animal with the spiky bristles of the Chipinet plant. Pantera looked up as she rode by the corral and waved. Adrella waved, struggling to hold back the tears.

For them, it was a morning like any other; full of the usual chores and animals and gardens. For her, it was like moving through a sweet dream that was slipping away. Soon, too soon, she would leave the peace of the village and return to her hellish life with Askinadon and his many unhappy wives. If it weren't for Rorken...

Chilika was trotting again, so Adrella pulled back on the reins, but this time the hoshdel struggled against them, thrusting forward and bleating urgently. That was funny. Chilika rarely got nervous, unless...

Alarmed, she looked around and saw that Mashtun's hoshdels had bolted and were rushing the length of the fence, spinning at the end and charging skittishly back again. As she surveyed the surrounding hostas and their adjoining corrals, she noticed many of the animals appeared highly agitated. Curious, she tried to turn Chilika to investigate, but Chilika refused, stubbornly shaking her head. *Strange . She only acts like this if there is a rocsadon around.* Her heart quickened as she scanned the horizon.

There. There it was by Kala Lake... *Mericful Lupana.*

She heard the screaming first, and then the rumble of heavy, maddened feet pummeling the ground, like an avalanche of boulders tumbling from a hillside. There was no mistaking that sound. A rocsadon was

loose in Parallon. With her heart pounding, Adrella stretched her legs in the stirrups to see better. A cloud of dust led from Tikon Forest to Kala Lake, and it was advancing rapidly along the lakeside trail.

And then, she saw it. It tore randomly through a group of hostas, toppling walls and trampling contents. This rocsadon was huge, likely a male, and was charging down the path in her direction. She sucked in her breath and gave Chilika free rein. The hoshdel leaped off the path, heading south again in a panic. Adrella felt the tremors in the ground as the rocsadon blew past them on the trail. She knew it had locked onto a target and would stop at nothing, which meant that she was not its intended victim.

With some measure of relief, she struggled to regain control of Chilika, who was galloping recklessly. Adrella reined her to a trot, then a brisk walk, and turned to look over her shoulder. The rocsadon screeched to a halt in front of Pantera's hosta. It paused, sniffed the air, and lunged into it, throwing its colossal body against the adobe walls.

The first surge sent a fatal fracture across the length of the front wall. The second one brought it down with a loud crash, as well as most of the two adjoining walls. The roof toppled forward onto the rocsadon's chest, splintering around it. The beast did not budge. The far wall remained standing.

Pantera's parents, Minken and Rokana, who must have been huddled together inside, dashed out the back door located in the middle of the standing wall. When the rocsadon spied them, it lifted its long neck and howled at the sky. Adrella recognized the frenzied hunting call of the rocsadon, a wretched, piercing wail signaling the advent of a kill. A shiver ran up her spine.

She watched in horror as Minken and Rokana met Pantera in the corral. The three of them wrapped their arms around each other, shaking while the rocsadon tramped over the broken hosta and crashed through the fence. In desperation, Minken grabbed a gardening tool with a long handle and a sharp end. Holding it aloft, he charged the rocsadon yelling at the top of his lungs. The rocsadon skidded to a stop in front of him, creating a plume of swirling dust. It grabbed Minken's tool in its long teeth, and lifted its enormous head. For a moment, Minken rose with it, then he let go and dropped onto the hard ground on his back. The rocsadon shook his head ferociously and sent the tool flying through the air like a spear. It landed a hundred feet away with its sharp end stuck in the ground.

Minken lay very still. Adrella could see that his eyes were open. *He's resigned to his fate. There's nothing...nothing in this world that he can do.*

The rocsadon snorted, turned, focusing his steely attention back on Minken. Baring its long teeth, it leaned over. Adrella did not hear Minken scream or cry out. She saw his body lifted inside the jaws of the beast, his arms and legs hanging limply on either side, unresisting. The rocsadon bit down and a fount of red poured from its mouth. Rokana sobbed as she held her arms over Pantera's head, shielding her daughter from the grisly scene. Adrella felt nauseas and turned her head away. Within minutes, the rocsadon had finished its meal and was thundering back down the path toward Kan Mountain, its long tail sweeping the ground.

Clearly, this was not a feral rocsadon. It had not fixed on Minken's scent within sight range as the wild ones did. This one had been baited with a fixing cloth, which meant Askinadon had sent it. And now, it was headed back to its master...to the corral at the summit, lured by yet another scent.

Neighbors were already rushing toward Rokana and Pantera. Shaking, Adrella guided Chilika back onto the path, heading north again on her own grim mission.

After living on the mountain for two years, Adrella had almost forgotten about the rocsadon raids that Askinadon orchestrated several times a year. The raids kept the villagers sufficiently cowed to respect the Voice, obey all directives and assume that Askinadon held all the power.

Askinadon could be listening at this moment, Adrella reminded herself. As soon as she had the thought, the ringing started up in her head. The Voice broke through, and her head crackled with the intrusion. She turned her thoughts to images that pleased Askinadon. She imagined herself dancing before him in her silken spullera, but he did not respond to it. Instead, the Voice hissed in her mind like the hot breath of a rocsadon.

Did you see it, Adrella? He paused to listen. *Ah, I see that you did. Good. Nothing quite like a rocsadon feasting, is there?*

Adrella cringed, but forced herself to answer. *The mighty rocsadon has disappeared back into the forest, dear Husband and God of Parallon. You rule with almighty power. May all glory be yours, oh, Great One.*

This phrasing rarely failed to subdue Askinadon, and this was no exception. There was another pause, and he replied in a softer tone.

Just remember not to fail in your mission. We wouldn't want any rocsadons bearing down on your parents' hosta, now would we?

Adrella's stomach did a sickening spin, but she forced herself to answer, *No, Master. I obey.*

Askinadon's Voice faded into a buzz, which subsided and died out. Adrella spurred her hoshdel into a trot, then a gallop as she responded to a new sense of urgency. *I must find Katera... today. I must find her today .*

Chapter Nine

"That's it!" Mike cried. "I think we've done it." He grinned as he held up the new VisiOrb, which he had modified into a small ear set. "You can receive the Voice and send your own through this device. It fits comfortably in the ear, and no one will see it if your hair is down."

Katera clapped her hands together and laughed. She'd changed back into her freshly cleaned spullera and panna, and beamed with an earthy femininity. Much easier to work around than the form-fitting ulli, Mike noted with relief.

"Let's try it," she urged. "See if it works."

The smile faded from Mike's face as he set the Orb down on his workbench. "No test runs, Katera. As soon as you activate it, Askinadon will know where you are and demand that you come to him...if he doesn't come for you himself. I sure as hell don't need Don Askins poking around these caves, and I don't think you're ready to march up the hill to see him either, right?"

Katera shook her head. "I'd like to use it soon, though. I want to find out what happened to my sister."

Mike stared at her. She certainly stayed true to her purpose. He sighed. She deserved to know what probably happened. Maybe it was time to tell her.

"I think I know where your sister is. I've been up there on the summit many times, always at night and always in secret. I know that Askinadon keeps many wives. Sometimes I hear them at night in their hostas, talking and laughing while Askinadon and most of the Kastaks are sleeping." Mike paused. "I believe your sister is one of those wives."

Katera gasped. "Adrella's alive? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know for certain that she is. I've never seen her or the other women. I've only heard them on several occasions when I was slipping by on my way to the lab. They talk about Askinadon, their lives on the mountain...I don't think they're very happy."

Katera was staring at him wide-eyed. He wanted to reach out, draw her to him, tell her everything would work out, but he didn't know if he could promise that. Even with the modified Orb, Katera's safety was in grave peril if she joined her sister on the summit. If she got caught, Askins would not take lightly to her betrayal.

"Adrella's alive," she breathed again.

"Maybe," he reminded her, but she was no longer listening.

Her face filled with hope, the light in her eyes sparked with enthusiasm. "If we can get her away from Askinadon...didn't you say you could modify another Orb?"

Mike groaned inwardly. All he wanted to do was get off this world, so why was he getting involved with this woman? He'd saved her life once, and yeah, that'd been all right...okay, nice, very nice, but where had he signed up to do anything else?

"Listen," he said, but then caught the look in her eyes: trusting, soft. *Oh, Lord, don't show me that* . Mike drew his hand across his brow. He must not forget his purpose. He was so close. "Listen," he began again.

She was gnawing on her lower lip. "Mikolen," she interrupted. "If it brings you distress, I will not ask more of you. I will find Adrella on my own. You have saved me from the Falls and the Voice. It is enough, and for this you have all my gratitude." She touched her forehead and chest with two fingers, and then brought her hands back together in a Parallonian gesture of appreciation. She bowed her head and said something in the old language.

Mike felt his heart sink into his feet like a dead weight. *I'm a cad. She doesn't stand a chance in hell without me. Of course, she doesn't stand much of a chance with me, either* .

"Yeah, well, it's just that..." Mike struggled to find words that were not there. "As I told you, I have this project..."

"Shh!" Katera hissed unexpectedly, pressing one finger to her lips and turning her head. "Do you hear?" Mike strained his ears, but heard nothing. Then the distant sound of something shrill drifted into the chamber...a horn, it sounded like a horn. "One long, three short..." Katera whispered. Another faint blast. "And that's a long! That's my family horn. That blast-one long, three short, one long-they're calling me." She grabbed Mike's hands and bounced on her toes. Her face glowed even in the dim light of the lanadik. "Oh, Mikolen. They're looking for me." She was so close to him that he could smell her honey-sweet breath. Her hair fell in splashes over her arms as she hopped. Then she stopped. "I must go meet them...I-I need to go." She looked into his eyes and held his gaze. "We must say good-bye."

She paused, as if considering her next move, then flung her arms around his neck and pressed her lips into his, startling him. He felt a jolt, a current, rip through his body. His arms encircled her as if they had a life of their own. Katera leaned into the kiss, pushing her body against his. Mike struggled to keep his balance and sense of control, but realized he was losing the battle as his tongue, in a disobedient gesture, flicked out of his mouth and darted into hers.

He heard a soft moan glide from her throat. Then she pulled back, her hands pushing on his chest. She looked into his eyes. Her own were misty, her face flushed. What in the world was she doing to him? He

did not want to quit and bowed his head to find her lips again. He kissed her harder this time, revealing his urgency, and pulled her closer, tighter. Ah, it had been so long...so long...

She was pressing her hands against his chest again. *What?*

"Mikolen." She pushed harder. "Mikolen, stop."

Mike let go, feeling dazed. "Katera..."

She stepped back with a bewildered look on her face. "Mikolen, I have to go...now." She opened her mouth to say something else, then closed it, looking uncertain. "Good-bye," she blurted, and darted for the chamber opening.

Mike watched her scurry away into the tunnel, feeling confused. He dropped his head, struggling to quell his raging emotions.

Then he saw it. The Orb sat in the middle of his workbench. The Orb...she'd forgotten it.

"Katera! Wait!" he called, snatching it off the bench. And then, he said the strangest thing. He hadn't planned to say it, but when he did, he knew that he meant it. "I'm coming with you," he shouted, dashing into the tunnel after her.

Chapter Ten

Katera stumbled through the cave in her haste to find the exit. Warm, moist drafts of air from the hot springs blew into her face as she fumbled past the entrance to it. She groped the rock walls with her hands. Every so often, she passed a lanadik-lit chamber adjacent to the tunnel and used the light inside to guide her more swiftly, until her path dissolved into the blackness again, forcing her to return her hands to the tunnel wall. Her pounding heart felt large and disembodied in the blackness, as though she were inside it listening to its thumping sounds echo back at her. Here in the dark, everything seemed hidden, except for her thoughts and feelings.

Why ? She felt like crying. Why must I feel this way? He is leaving Parallon, and I will never see him again. Why do I care?

A shaft of light fell on the wall ahead, and she raced to it. She followed it around a corner and into an antechamber that led outdoors. Two hoshdels were tied to a post in the antechamber, their noses stuffed into bags on the ground that were filled with the delicate shafts of the Kilpantra plant. One lifted its nose out of the bag and snorted at Katera. Working swiftly, she hoisted the saddle off the horizontal bar constructed over the posts and tossed it up onto the hoshdel's broad back. It straightened its woolly head, bleating and stamping its feet. Struggling against a deluge of tears, Katera fumbled with the cinch under the animal's round belly.

Why? she wondered again, in a state of disbelief. *Why now?*

Before she'd run into Miloken, she had been prepared to die...prepared to sacrifice herself in an effort to undermine the will of Askinadon. Merely a day later, she wanted to live forever. She wanted to live and love and laugh-she wanted to turn into a withered old lady some day, in the company of a withered old man.

But this cannot be, she admonished herself sternly. She did not live a life given to such freedom. Love? She'd abandoned all hope for it after Askinadon had arrived and ordered all the virgin maidens to guard their status until he either forced them to marry or Summoned them to the altar.

Her feelings for this man, Mikolen, she must crush them. Love-the romantic kind-was not one of her options. She would resist its impulse. That had to be all it was anyway, an impulse. Besides, she had much to accomplish. She needed to find her sister, cut out her Orb, and give her the new one; the one Mikolen had built.

Katera's fingers froze on the cinch. The Orb? *I don't have the Orb*. She'd been so flustered with that kiss that she'd left it behind. She stood up and looked back toward the tunnel.

Mikolen was standing there watching her. He wore a smile, and in his open hand, he was holding the Orb for her to see.

"Mikolen, I...thank you. I just realized that I forgot it."

"Yes, but I'm not giving it to you."

"What?"

Mikolen crossed the floor, watching her intently. He stopped when he stood facing her with the hoshdel between them.

"I'm going to keep it," he said, a soft look in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked, surprised.

"If you want it, you're going to have to bring me along. That's what I mean."

Katera's heart fluttered. All her suppressed hopes resurfaced, like a buoy refusing to sink.

"Mikolen, this is not your problem. You have done enough. I..."

Mikolen reached across Chilika's back to press a finger to her lips. "Shh," he whispered. "I'm coming." He removed his finger, and when she opened her mouth to object, the finger raced back to her lips. "I'm coming," he said, more forcefully.

This time, as he lifted his finger, Katera smiled at him. She knew he meant it. She also recognized a longing in his eyes...a longing that matched her own. Her heart soared. Oh, if only things could be different. If only she had the freedom to choose her destiny...if only Mikolen were not leaving Parallon, for she was sure that he intended to do just that.

At that moment, she understood that her heart had leapt far ahead of her better sense. It amazed her that she could feel this strongly about someone who was, essentially, a stranger. Without a rational reason, her morning dream threaded back into her conscious mind: once again, she was gliding over the ground on a hoshdel with... *Merciful Lupana*. The man sitting behind her in the dream *was Mikolen*. *He* shared the saddle with her. The words returned: *Ne Kamana Ya. I could love you*. Her Lan Ma Ke rumbled in her chest, and she remembered that it sometimes delivered its gifts inside dreams. Could this be one of those times? She was still locked into his eyes when the sound of a horn blared again, jarring them both. One short, two long, one short...

"My family..."

"Let's go," Mikolen urged, swiping the second saddle from the bar and swinging it onto his hoshdel.

He secured the saddle and walked to the exit, shoving aside the brush that hid the opening to the cave. They led the hoshdels into the sunlight. Katera held both reins as Mikolen replaced the brush, working

the branches so that they reached over the cave mouth entirely. There was nothing left to do but wait for the next horn blast. They stood, stroking the hoshdels, who were blinking lazily in the warm sun. They didn't have to wait long. Another series of blasts resounded from the nearest ridge. Katera jumped.

"That's close," she cried, thrusting her foot into the stirrup and swinging up into the saddle. "It came from over there."

She pointed to the ridge, but Mikolen had already mounted and was riding toward it. She

gave her hoshdel a kick and it lunged ahead, falling into step behind Mikolen's hoshdel. They rode swiftly into the trees and climbed the hill. The forest felt cool as the hoshdels pressed forward, crunching twigs and leaves beneath their hooves. Mikolen and Katera crested the ridge and reined in the hoshdels, peering into Kiddik Meadow below them.

It stretched six miles from end to end. Toward the west, Hapal Lake gleamed in the sun, a half mile away. At first, only the lime greens of the meadow grasses dotted with yellow wildflowers greeted them. A herd of kiddiks grazed near the lake. A sudden breeze drifted up from the meadow, presenting the sweet scent of the blossoms. The hoshdels answered with soft lows. Katera sighed.

The screech of the horn startled them both as it pierced the air from close range. Katera whipped her head to the right. She spotted Adrella at the bottom of the hill, just five hundred yards away. Katera gasped in surprise.

"It's Adrella. She's alive!" Impulsively, she kicked her hoshdel to spur her down the hill, but Mikolen's hand streaked to her reins. He caught them and pulled her hoshdel back. "What?"

"Katera, wait...think. She's got a VisiOrb in her head. Askinadon may be listening." He backed away from the ridge, pulling Katera's hoshdel with him. He reduced his voice to a whisper. "He'll find out that you and I are here. He'll tap into Adrella's thoughts...then, in a very short period of time, we'll have all kinds of company."

Katera stared at Mikolen as she imagined Kastaks, takataks, and even rocsadons swarming into their midst. She turned to look back at Adrella, who was raising the horn to her lips again. The blasts punched into the quiet air, sounding both harsh and forlorn. Then she lowered the horn, lifted her chin, and called out Katera's name. Her cry held the same desperation as the horn, only more muted.

A cold spot opened up inside Katera's chest, as if an icicle had formed there. She clutched at it. Why did her Lan Ma Ke freeze up this way? She shivered as the chilly feeling spread throughout her upper body. Mikolen looked at her, but she could only shake her head. How would she explain it? She did not understand it herself. This was her sister, her identical twin. Adrella would never harm her...would she?

She motioned for Mikolen to follow her into the trees, and he let go of her reins. They ducked back into the dark forest and turned the hoshdels around to watch Adrella, who was sitting with the horn poised at her lips, her neck stretched forward, listening intently. Katera felt an overwhelming sadness. Something was terribly wrong. Her Lan Ma Ke had glowed in warmth all of her life around Adrella, and this abrupt change could only mean one thing. Adrella was in some kind of distress...and she was deeply frightened. She...they were in danger. Katera turned to Mikolen.

"Can you get the Voice out of her here...right now?"

Mikolen shifted on his hoshdel. "Yes, but it won't be easy. Askinadon is listening to her as much as possible. Whatever she's doing, he put her up to this, and if she sees you and transmits the thought to Askinadon before I can get the Orb out, it'll be the end for all of us. He knows where she is. The VisiOrb

transmits her location with directional coordinates."

Katera wrinkled her brow. She didn't know what directional coordinates were, but she understood the problem.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked. Mikolen glanced at Adrella, then reached around to his saddlebag and drew out a blanket. "Why did you pack a blanket?"

"You have one in yours as well," he answered. Katera stole a glance at the bags looped over her hoshdel's haunches. They looked stuffed. "I had plans for us to trek over the northern Shirkas and out of Parallon." Mikolen sighed, as if he wished they had stuck to the plan. "There's also a good supply of dried food and water should you get hungry or thirsty."

Katera cocked her head to study Mikolen. She'd already been a whole lot of trouble for him, but he hadn't complained. "Thank you, Mikolen...for everything."

She watched his eyes soften. "It's okay, Katera."

The way he said her name made her blush, and she turned away. "What should we do?" she asked again, gazing at Adrella.

"Sooner or later, she'll leave this area, and then we can follow her. This is too close to the caves, and Askinadon will come to the last place the VisiOrb transmits its signals. We don't want to attract him to this spot. Once she's far enough away, we'll toss the blanket over her head. Then, I'll administer a shot of sleeping medication that I use to drop a kiddik now and then. That'll put her out for awhile."

"Sleeping medication?"

"Yeah. It will put her to sleep for a short time. Enough for me to remove the Orb and get her back to the caves."

Katera considered it. It was a good plan...and it could work, if only Adrella would leave Kiddik Meadow. As it turned out, she took another two hours meandering around below them, puffing into her horn every few minutes. Finally, she headed out to the far end of the meadow and the northeastern edge of the Tikon Forest. Mikolen and Katera followed her progress from the top of the ridge, staying just out of sight. As soon as Adrella disappeared into the forest, they snaked down from the hill and into the forest after her.

"She's heading for Tikesh Fields," Katera observed, as they kicked the hoshdels into a trot. "She's searching for me in the northern territories, which means she's tried calling me in the south."

Clearly, Adrella had seen their parents. It explained how she had gotten the horn. Katera pictured her with their parents as they blew the horn outside their hosta in Kala Meadow. She wondered how long they had been looking for her.

They followed Adrella at a safe distance, stopping whenever she did, keeping the forest behind her as quiet as possible. Adrella paused every hundred feet or so to blow the horn, then she'd shoot off again at a brisk trot. She was working her way swiftly through the forest. Why is she in such a hurry? She's fighting against time. Why?

At last, Adrella cleared the forest and started into Tikesh Fields. She did not blow the horn again, however, riding instead to the Parallonian graveyard on south end. What was she doing? Katera knew that some of their family members were buried there, but this was an odd time for her to visit. Adrella reined her hoshdel in front of a small marker near the headstone of their grandmother. She bowed her

head. Whose stone was that? Katera didn't remember it. It had to be very new.

In the next moment, a sense of sharp sorrow shot across the meadow from Adrella and walloped Katera in her solar plexus like a hard ball. She doubled over in pain, staring at Adrella in surprise. She knew then that Adrella grieved-she knew it as only an identical twin with a shared Lan Ma Ke could know. The person beneath the stone...it was someone with whom Adrella felt an intimate connection. Oh! Unbearable loss. But, who was it?

After a minute, Adrella turned her hoshdel away and rode out into the meadow. Katera straightened in the saddle, rubbing her stomach. After a few hundred feet, Adrella reined in her hoshdel, blew the horn and waited. Katera looked at Mikolen.

"We are eight miles from the caves," she whispered. "It is far enough. You can sneak up on her while her back is turned."

Mikolen nodded. "Stay close to me. Once I get her off the hoshdel I may need your help."

They waited until Adrella lifted the horn back to her lips, then charged out of the forest. Mikolen held the blanket up with one hand and the reins with the other. So shrill was Adrella's horn that she did not hear them approach. Mikolen managed to toss the blanket over her head from behind as he leaped toward her, snatching her around her middle, mid-flight. They toppled off her hoshdel and onto to the ground. Adrella screamed. Katera wanted to call out and reassure her, but thought better of it and bit her tongue. She hopped off her hoshdel and rushed over to where Mikolen had wrapped his arms and legs around Adrella, who was struggling like a wild boar under the blanket.

"Here. Take it," he commanded, holding out a tube. "You'll have to give her the shot. I'll hold her down." Katera grabbed it while Mikolen struggled with Adrella. She stared at the long, white tube in her hand. "Open it. Hurry!" She lifted the top off the tube to reveal another tube inside with a silver point jutting out one end. "Stick it in her," he said, huffing against the lurching blanket. "It will dispense the medication."

Katera felt her throat constrict. He wanted her to stick this long, sharp thing into Adrella?

"Where? How should I stick it in?" she asked, gripping the tube in her hand.

The fury under the blanket abruptly ceased. Mikolen's mouth fell open in surprise, then he moved a finger swiftly to his lips, but it was too late.

"Katera?" Adrella asked. "Is that you?" Mikolen rolled his eyes and grabbed the tube from Katera. In the next moment, Adrella stiffened under the blanket. "Yes, yes, Master. It is Katera. I heard her."

Before she had a chance to speak again, Mikolen stabbed the long, silver point through the blanket and into Adrella's thigh. Within seconds, her body fell limp. Mikolen untangled the blanket and lifted it away from her body. Katera gazed at the sister she had not seen for two long years, the sister she had presumed dead, who now lay unconscious on the ground. She looked peaceful, and Katera's Lan Ma Ke flushed warmly once again. She bent over Adrella's body and kissed her on the cheek. Mikolen rose and fished the Insertech from his saddlebag.

"I have to do this now," he said, gently.

She sat up and leaned back, allowing Mikolen to cradle Adrella's head. With the InseTech, he made a swift incision and revealed a small object that glinted in the sun. Deftly, Mikolen plucked it from her head and held up the VisiOrb for Katera to see. Katera clapped her hands and Mikolen smiled. Then he aimed the Insertech, pressed another icon, and just as swiftly the incision sealed neatly back together.

There was no trace of it.

"Gee," Katera said, fingering the small scab on her forehead, "why couldn't you have used the InseTech on me?"

Mikolen cast a sidelong glance her way. "Because I did not have the InseTech with me when I found you."

"Oh," she said, smiling meekly.

"Okay," he said, stuffing the InseTech back into his saddlebag and Adrella's Orb into his pocket. "Let's go. Askinadon has surely sent a horde of beasts in our direction, and we do not have much time."

Katera helped him slide Adrella's body, face down, over the withers of Mikolen's hoshdel. He sprang into the saddle behind her and spurred his hoshdel toward the cover of Tikon Forest with Katera not far behind, leading Adrella's riderless hoshdel by the reins. Somewhere, off in the distance, the ear-piercing shrieks from a flock of takataks punctured the quiet morning air.

Chapter Eleven

They rode furiously through Tikon Forest, opting for the longer route around Kiddik Meadow in order to stay under cover. The dark-bodied takataks glided over the openings in the tall trees on their way to Tikesh Fields, where the VisiOrb had secured Adrella's last position.

Thankful there were no rocsadons on their trail, Mike breathed a sigh of relief. He felt confident they could elude the takataks, at least initially given the animals' negligible sense of smell, but they would still need to hurry. Eventually, the large birds would turn their sinister attention to the forest and use their keen sense of sight and sound to detect movement within. When they sensed something, the entire flock would descend into the nearest clearing, one by one, and take off running in frenzied, single-minded pursuit. The towering legs of a takatak could easily outpace a hoshdel. Still, Mike and the women stood a good chance of making it to the caves undetected, but they'd have to push the hoshdels at a steady pace, and these were not high-speed endurance animals. They were already slowing from exhaustion.

By withholding the rocsadons, Askinadon had revealed his desire to collect both women alive. *Greedy asshole*, Mike thought, glancing at the unconscious figure of Adrella draped in front of him over the hoshdel. Her soft, shiny black hair almost covered the length of her slender arms, which were swaying over the broad side of the hoshdel. Between struggling with her blanketed body and viewing her backside, Mike hadn't seen much of her face, except for the instant he'd lifted her off the ground in Tikesh Fields. As he'd gripped her under the arms, her head had rolled toward him and landed inches from his nose. It had been like staring into Katera's face—the same luscious, lime-green eyes, dark lips, and porcelain-smooth skin. A perfect double.

He twisted around in the saddle to check on Katera's progress. She was keeping up the frenetic pace by goading both Adrella's hoshdel and her own with a long whip. Remarkable fortitude. He focused his attention back on the route ahead, keeping to the trees and avoiding all clearings. In several spots, the hoshdel's hooves crunched over dry twigs on the ground, and he slowed their procession to a quieter gait until they'd cleared them. Twice, the takataks passed directly over the canopy above their heads, momentarily blinking the sun away. Each time, they appeared abruptly, gliding in deadly silence. Mike halted the party while they waited with stilled breath for the birds to pass.

Two exhausting hours later, they neared their destination with the hoshdels huffing, their sides dripping with sweat. As they approached the clearing leading to the cave opening, Mike craned his neck to see

through the trees. What he spied made his heart jump.

One lone takatak sat perched on a boulder near the brush that covered the opening to the caves. The bird appeared distracted, busily grooming a wing. Mike squinted and looked closer. The wing was bent backwards in the middle at a critical angle...broken. This bird wasn't going anywhere.

As Mike studied it, the gravity of their predicament dawned on him. The bird could not fly, and eventually the other takataks would come looking for it. He did not see a way to get around the beast and uncover the brush to steal inside the cave. Even if he managed it, the bird would unveil their hiding place to the other takataks, who would bring Don Askins to it. If he tried waiting in the forest with the women, chances were that one of the takataks would eventually spot them hiding in the trees and assail them.

That left one option. He would have to kill the bird blocking the route to the safety of the cave. And he would need to accomplish this by staging an accident, lest the bird's death draw suspicion from Askins. As he fretted over this, Katera maneuvered her hoshdel next to him, and stared out at the wounded creature. She looked dismayed and started to say something, but Mike fitted his finger over his lips. Katera nodded and turned to stare at the beast.

Mike's palms grew sweaty on the reins as his heart pounded. There was very little time. It would not take long for the other takataks to discover the bird missing and locate it. He drew in a steadying breath and scanned the surrounding trees. His eyes fell on a tall tree with a rotting middle on the edge of the clearing, and he had an idea.

Motioning Katera to stay put, he slipped off his hoshdel and opened his saddlebag. Fishing into its depths, he pulled out the Insertech. Hardly daring to breathe, he stole silently toward the target tree. Halfway there, he stepped on a dry twig hidden under a leaf, sending a loud crack reverberating into the air. He held his breath, but the takatak did not stir from its preoccupation with the injured wing. *That's one sore bird*, he thought, with relief.

He arrived at the tree and pressed the Insertech into the weakened area. Designed to cut through bone and tissue, he hoped it would make short work of his task. He released the safety clip and adjusted the beam to three inches by four inches, the largest capacity for a cut. He would need to slice through the tree at an angle so that it fell over the takatak. Yet, he had to make it look like a natural break in the event that Askins investigated the scene.

He turned on the device and allowed the beam to slice into the thick trunk. In the distance, the raucous call of distant takataks resounded through long valley between the Shirkas. The secluded bird in the clearing raised its great head, opened its crooked, black beak and screeched back.

His temples pounding, Mike struggled with the Insertech as the call of the takataks grew louder. Pressing the 'dissect' icon in furious repetition, the cut deepened. The tree creaked loudly and leaned unsteadily forward, swaying as if it might topple any second. With a sickened awareness, he saw that it was going to miss the takatak by a few feet. He looked over at Katera, who was watching him closely. She seemed to understand the dilemma, pointing first to the takatak, then to the tree while shaking her head.

He was about to shout at her to flee into the forest when, without warning, she stepped out of the trees on her hoshdel and into the clearing in full view.

"Hey!" she called, to the takatak. "C'mere, you ugly bird."

The takatak swiveled its head toward Katera and pinned her with its obsidian-dark eyes. Mike sucked in his breath. She was baiting the bird to lure it within range of the tree when it fell. His heart drummed like a wild thing inside his chest as he dove into the clearing to distract the bird from Katera.

"Over here!" he shouted, but the takatak ignored him.

It extended its one good wing out ten feet and stood up to face Katera. Another screech, and the bird tottered a step toward her and stopped. It drew in its good wing and stood waiting, looking dangerously alert. Katera edged closer, her hoshdel snorting nervously.

"C'mon!" she shouted, her voice shaking.

Realizing that he had to act quickly, Mike jumped behind the tree with renewed vigor. He jammed the Insertech into the break and pushed through another three inches, then another...and another...almost there. When he glanced back into the clearing, the takatak was extending its head toward Katera, preparing to strike. Katera was ten feet away, a mere hop for this bird, even with a broken wing. He pressed the Insertech for another slice, and with a loud crack, the tree began its descent in slow motion.

At the same moment, he watched in horror as the takatak's feet left the ground in a wide leap toward Katera. The hoshdel reared up, flailing its front legs at the bird, which was in mid-air. The takatak landed with a great thud in front of Katera as the toppling tree neared the ground. The bird reached around the hoshdel, poked its great beak through Katera's spullera, and plucked her out of the saddle like a piece of lint on a Shalpacan coat.

Good God, Mike thought. She's going to get crushed under the tree with the bird.

The takatak stretched its neck forward in obvious delight and let out a muffled screech. An answering call from the approaching flock, now ominously close, sounded just as the tree smashed into the bird's middle, snapping its backbone and crushing it into the ground. Katera burst from its beak like a shot, tumbling back into the trees.

Mike wanted to rush to her, but in an instant, she was up and racing toward Adrella, still lying unconscious over Mike's hoshdel. Relieved to see her unhurt, Mike ran to the cave entrance and thrust the brush aside. As he flipped the last branch away, Katera darted through the opening with Adrella and the animals. As soon as she cleared it, he backed inside, dragging several large branches with him to conceal the opening again. At that moment, several takataks arrived in the clearing. The gusts created from their beating wings rattled the brush over their hideaway, lifting the branches a few inches off the ground, but they settled back after the birds landed.

Mike knew the other takataks would shove and roll the trunk off their broken comrade. A host of them would then grip its body in their sharp beaks and take off, ferrying it to the summit. Letting out a long breath, Mike led the women and hoshdels deeper into the cave toward the dark security within, as the high-pitched shrieks of the Takatakats faded behind them. They were safe for a while.

Chapter Twelve

For a moment, Adrella could not remember what had happened. She opened her eyes and stared into a dimly lit room. Or was it a room? The walls looked bumpy. Strange. Two figures stood nearby chatting softly. She focused. It was Katera. With a man. Who was he?

In a flash, her memory flooded back. Katera's voice...she'd heard it in Tikesh Fields. Someone, perhaps the man with Katera, had thrown a blanket over her and knocked her off her hoshdel. Why had Katera allowed him to do that?

Perhaps Katera's Lan Ma Ke warned her. Her entire chest had probably chilled after sensing Adrella's ugly objective. A freeze like that would have been a first between them, she realized with a pang of guilt. A small ache throbbed between her eyes and her hand flew up. What had happened? She fingered it.

"Adrella?"

It was Katera's voice. Adrella dropped her hand and gaped at her sister, not knowing what to say. Both Katera and the man stared back at her. Adrella drew in a deep breath.

"Katera," she said, weakly.

Their eyes locked. The air between them crackled, and Adrella's Lan Ma Ke burst in a flush of radiance. Merciful Lupana, had it really been two years? Katera rushed to her, her face contorted with a sob.

"Sister!" Katera cried. Adrella sat up and Katera threw her arms around her neck. "Oh, I've missed you so much." She leaned back to gaze at Adrella. "Dear sister, you're alive. Mama and Papa thought...I thought you'd been killed...you know, the sacrifice."

Adrella wrapped her arms around Katera with a sinking heart. "I am alive, Katera."

Katera pulled away and cocked her head to one side as doubt crept into her eyes.

"Adrella? Is everything alright? My Lan Ma Ke...it's..."

"I know; it's cold," Adrella interrupted, in a whisper. "Be careful. We will be heard."

"No," Katera laughed. "We will not be heard." Katera touched Adrella's forehead. "The Voice in your head...it's gone."

Adrella dropped her jaw. "Really?" she asked. Then, she remembered Askinadon's anxious words when he spoke of Katera's Voice: *She has somehow removed it.* "But...how? No one can stop the Voice."

"He can." Katera tossed her head toward the man standing next to them.

Adrella looked up at him in quiet amazement. He looked strong and very handsome. He was blond like some of the Kastaks, not like the dark-haired men of Parallon. Nor did he wear animal skins like the men of her village, but he didn't wear an ulli like the Kastaks either. His pants looked smooth and had a crease running the length of them. He wore a seamless top that had no fasteners. She looked into his eyes and found a soft expression there. She glanced back at Katera, her brow raised. How? How had he stopped the Voice?

"Askinadon's power does not come from the Heavens," Katera announced. "It comes from this." Her hand slipped into her pocket and pulled out a small disc. "It's called a VisiOrb."

Adrella's peered at it, awe-struck. "The Voice from that tiny thing?"

Katera placed a hand on her shoulder. "Adrella," she said, smiling, "we have much to talk about."

"Yes, we do," Adrella agreed, sadly.

The smile fell off Katera's face and her hand sank back to her side. Adrella understood her sister's Lan Ma Ke was growing cold again, and she thought her heart would break. This would never do. Tossing aside all other considerations, she decided to tell Katera everything. She would divulge her ugly mission, including the danger for Rorken and the horror for Katera. Yes, she would reveal Askinadon's entire plan, so that Katera's Lan Ma Ke would glow warm with trust once again.

Chapter Thirteen

"Yes, Husband and God of Parallon, she is with me." Adrella sounded frightened and adjusted the Orb

tucked neatly inside her ear. "What would you have me do, Master?"

Katera could not hear his response, but Adrella's features relaxed as she listened. She looked at Katera, and mouthed the words, *It's working*. Wonderful. The modified Orb had Askinadon fooled. He did not suspect that his Voice operated outside their heads.

A faint ringing filled Katera's Orb and she felt the old revulsion, even though Askinadon could no longer penetrate her thoughts. *Katera*, the Voice rang into her headset, *why did you run from the altar at Kopa Na An?*

"I didn't realize why you wanted me, Great Master, but now that Adrella has explained it, I am so pleased. I cannot wait to meet you, Great Master and God of Parallon. I come to you in grateful obedience," Katera said, in a lilting voice, repeating the words she'd rehearsed with Adrella.

Where have you been? You've been missing all day. Why did you not respond to my Voice?

"I don't understand why we couldn't hear you, Master. We were waiting for further instructions, but none came. Everything is fine. Adrella and I left Black Rock just a little while ago to come home...to be with you."

You were at Black Rock?

"We were in the northern Shirkas, just north of Tikesh Fields. I was near Black Rock when Adrella found me. So we moved to the rock and have been waiting there."

There was a long pause on the other end, and Katera felt her heart leap. He was buying it. Mikolen was right. He'd said Black Rock was a form of magnetite, a huge lodestone that would eliminate Askinadon's Voice. He'd added something about naturally occurring magnetic rocks interfering with transmissions, but Katera didn't understand it. She did understand that if Askinadon thought they'd been near Black Rock, he'd assume the dark boulder was the reason for their communication failures.

I see that you are in Tikesh Fields. Good. Stay there and I'll send two takataks to get you.

"We await the takataks in great anticipation, Master," Katera finished.

The Orb in her ear squealed and fell silent. Next to her, Adrella jumped to attention as she, too, promised to wait for the birds. Finally, she dropped her hand from her ear and looked at Katera.

"So far, so good," Katera said.

Adrella was slow to smile. "I hope so. If I'd waited another day, he'd have killed Rorken."

"Everything's fine, Adrella. He didn't sound angry."

"No. That's what bothers me." Adrella smoothed her hair with a nervous hand.

"Well, let's stick to the plan. He has no reason to suspect anything yet."

Adrella stared off quietly toward Kan Mountain. Somewhere in the distance, the call of the takataks sounded, and Adrella flinched. Katera wrapped an arm around her sister's shoulder.

"We can do this," she promised. "It's going to work, and Rorken will be safe." Adrella looked at her and drew in a shuddering breath. "Don't worry, Adrella. Nothing will go wrong."

Adrella laid her head on Katera's shoulder. "Sister."

"I know. I love you, too."

Katera held her for a moment, then Adrella reached into her ear and pulled out her Orb.

"It's time to trade," she said, solemnly.

They exchanged orbs and readjusted them in their ears.

"All set," Katera said, with as much cheer as she could muster. Adrella smiled weakly.

Ten minutes later, the enormous shadows of the takataks fell over them. The grass around their feet churned in all directions as the birds approached. The women walked in opposite directions until they were twenty feet apart. They lay face down in the grass to expose their harnesses. Adrella had brought only one, since she'd been pregnant when she packed. They had made the second one from a rope Katera pulled from her saddlebag.

The birds descended upon them and snatched both women from the ground, lifting them into the air. Katera looked into the forest as they rose and spied Mikolen watching from the trees. He waved and flashed a thumbs up, his arm outstretched. She dared not signal back lest they were under surveillance, but felt a surge of confidence rise within her. With Mikolen's help, they stood a good chance of making it. They had a plan: he would retrieve their parents, remove their VisiOrbs, and lead them to the safety of the caves. Next, he'd work his way up the mountain to meet Adrella, wrest her away from Askinadon, and bring her down to join their parents. If all went well, Katera would have already escaped with Rorken and made it to the caves.

And while Mikolen was on the summit, he would grab the final item needed for his project, the last ingredient that would enable him to flee Parallon and return to his world. And there, in Mikolen's world, Katera and her family would learn to live anew, because they were going with him. They could no longer stay in Parallon. Eventually, Askinadon would find them, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that none would survive his wrath after learning of their betrayal. They had no choice. Though she understood she'd never see the cool forests and peaceful meadows of Parallon again, the thought of leaving excited Katera. Her family would be with her, which made all the difference. And together, they would be free. She welcomed the idea of the freedom to think and feel as she wished, freedom to love whomever she chose without restraint, perhaps even with abandon.

As she gazed at the diminishing figure of Mikolen in the trees, her heart swelled. Even in the days before Askinadon ruled over Parallon, she did not remember feeling so exhilarated about another person. She felt lost in her feelings for this man. How, after mere days, could she feel so strongly about another? *Ne ahno ya domo ko ne. I want you with me.*

If only she and Adrella could pull off this switch-everything depended on it.

She glanced back, but they were high above the trees and she could no longer see Mikolen. The Tikesh Fields shrank into a small oval, and the trees around it blended into a stubbly, green carpet. The village at the summit came into view. As they neared it, she spied a smattering of hostas around a large building, a phenomenal building. Impossibly long and rectangular, nothing about it resembled the small, round hostas of her people. It was huge. *Kapta lapo ta rocsadon.* Big enough to swallow a rocsadon. Her jaw fell in amazement as they drew closer. It looked both high and wide enough to hold many herds of rocsadons.

Next to it, a tall stone fence ringed a large group of the beasts, each tethered between four posts. They reached their long necks skyward as the takataks flew above them, bellowing and stamping their feet. As the birds hovered above the building, she could see two additional long buildings attached to the first one, forming a square-cornered U with a courtyard in the middle. A man in an ulli was standing in the

courtyard looking up at them, shielding his eyes from the sun. Askinadon?

She glanced over at Adrella, who was waving at him. Must be. Katera turned her attention back to the man in the courtyard. He was alone, as Adrella had predicted. She'd said that he always met his women alone. Kastaks were dismissed to the outer areas surrounding the castle whenever Askinadon romped within. So far, so good.

The takataks descended to a spot in the courtyard and dropped the women onto a pad a few feet below. Katera fell and rolled onto her side. She looked at Adrella, who had managed to sit up. Adrella tossed a furtive glance at Katera, and blinked twice. That was the signal. Katera sprang to her feet, brushed off her spullera and smiled up at Askinadon, who was standing a few feet away, tossing glances back and forth between them.

"Master, and Husband, God of Parallon," Katera began, her voice an octave higher than normal. "I've missed you so much. At last, I have returned to you. And look whom I've brought." Katera gestured to Adrella, who stood gracefully and curtsied. "Please, allow me to introduce my sister to you," Katera said, swallowing nervously. "This is Katera."

Askinadon broke into a wide grin. "Ah, yes," he chortled. "You look exactly like your sister. Good, good. Just as I had hoped."

He's going for it. He thinks Adrella is me . Katera laid a hand on her chest, realizing that her Lan Ma Ke had not been activated-meaning Askinadon meant them neither harm nor good.

"I am at your service with all my gratitude, Master," Adrella said, softly. "Your wish is my command."

"That's right," Askinadon said, stroking his chin and running his eyes over Adrella's body. "And right now my wish is for you to make the final sacrifice. And that, my dear, will be your honeymoon. We'll just skip right over the wedding and get to it, shall we?"

Katera cringed, knowing that Adrella had surrendered to him on her behalf, to spare her the violation and protect her virginity. *I've already spent two years in his bed* , she'd insisted. *What's one more time?* And so they had switched identities. Adrella had warned her that Askinadon would be interested in bedding his new conquest immediately, which meant that Katera would need to execute the next stage of the plan without delay.

"I hasten to learn your desires, Master," Adrella cooed. "When may I...I mean we...complete the final sacrifice?"

Askinadon threw his head back and laughed as the loose skin on his jowls shook.

"Ah, yes," he said, his eyes filled with anticipation. "We shall not tarry any longer. You will accompany me to my bedchamber at once." He indicated the direction with a grand sweep of his arm. "After you, my dear."

"Uh, Master," Katera interrupted. Askinadon swung his head back to her, his eyes filled with impatience. "Forgive me, Master. Rorken?"

"I just had him delivered to Shamana in the nursery," Askinadon said, waving his hand and turning back to Adrella. "You may retrieve your son."

Katera bowed, stealing a glimpse at Askinadon as he followed Adrella across the courtyard, leering at her backside.

"Thank you, Master, Husband of my Heart, and God of Parallon," she called after him.

He did not look back and disappeared with Adrella through a door in the north wing. Katera stood alone in the courtyard. She looked cautiously around, trying to visualize the map that Adrella had drawn for her of the castle, and feeling dwarfed by the sheer size of the building in front of her. Not only was it long, it stood fifty feet high. Somewhere inside this maze, she must find the nursery.

A door...she had to find a door into the southern wing. Ah, there it was. She raced toward it, pressed an icon as she'd been instructed, and stepped inside when it slid open. A long hallway stretched before her with numerous doors lined up along one wall about fifteen feet apart. Though Adrella had described it, it still took her by surprise. The walls were straight and perfectly smooth, not lumpy like the clay walls of a hosta. And so many doors. She glanced at each one as she rushed by. What was behind them? Did people live in there? At the end, she spied a staircase, the first one she'd ever seen. It held perfectly formed rectangular blocks, each one positioned higher than the last and extending up until they disappeared around a corner. She marveled at it for a moment before turning right down another hallway.

She passed a few more doors and turned left into a shorter corridor. According to the map, the kitchen should be the first door on the right. It certainly smelled like one. Her nose caught the scent of meaty broths and aromatic herbs as the sound of clanging pots rattled into the hall. The door was open, and she peered inside. It was bustling with the activity of several women chopping meat and stirring the contents of large kettles. They looked up as she strode by and waved. Katera waved back.

"Welcome back, Adrella," one of them called.

"Thank you," Katera called back.

She found the next door on the right and stopped. This should be it. She pressed an icon and it slid open. Inside, Shamana, the shy one from her village who had been Summoned only last year, sat on the floor playing with a toddler. She looked up as Katera entered.

"You're back," she said, in a small voice.

"Yes, I'm here for Rorken." The child on the floor squealed when he saw Katera, and she knelt on the carpet to get a good look at her nephew. He looked like his mother and herself, with large green eyes and jet-black hair. As Rorken toddled toward her, he stopped with a funny look on his face. Then he stuffed a hand in his mouth, staring. *He knows I'm not Adrella*, Katera thought, hoping he would still come to her. She held out her arms, and Rorken wobbled a few more steps, but stopped again.

"Where Mama?" he asked.

Shamana looked back and forth between them, then raised a hand to her mouth, and gasped, "Why you're...you're Katera. Aren't you?"

Katera sat back on her heels and smiled at Shamana.

"You won't tell, will you? We need just a little time. Please wait until Askinadon reads it in your thoughts. He's with Adrella. He thinks she's me. Give us some time, Shamana...please?"

Shamana paused, considering this. "What are you going to do?" she asked at last.

"I'm taking Rorken, and we're leaving Kan Mountain."

"You can't do that. The Voice will find you."

"No," Katera explained. "I don't have the Voice in my head any more."

Shamana's eyes widened. "How?"

Katera explained the VisiOrb and showed her the headset she was wearing. Shamana looked at it. Then she looked back up at Katera with a resolute look on her face.

"Take me with you. Wherever you're going... whatever the plan is, I want to be part of it."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can... and you will," Shamana insisted, setting her mouth in a firm line.

Never, in all the years they had spent growing up together, had Katera heard such determination in Shamana's voice.

"You have the VisiOrb in your head. We will never succeed if you come with us."

Shamana stood and quietly left the room. A moment later, she returned carrying a sharp knife that she'd picked up in the kitchen.

"Use this," she said, kneeling in front of her. "Take it out. Take the Voice out of my head."

She set the knife on the carpet between them and parted her hair to expose her forehead. Katera sighed and picked up the knife.

"Hold still," she said.

Chapter Fourteen

Askinadon looked spent. His hair had fallen from its crown where he liked to sweep it back to cover sparser areas. Now, it lay in long, greasy tendrils that snaked over his pillow. His large belly protruded above him, though he was lying on his back. The whole bedchamber reeked of his sweat. Adrella fought back the nausea, wondering how much longer she'd have to suffer this ordeal.

Her thoughts turned to her sister, hoping she'd made it most of the way down the mountain with Rorken. She had to be at least halfway, but Askinadon would need further stalling for Katera to complete the trip. Inhaling deeply, she leaned over him once again.

"I am so pleased that you claimed my virginity, Master. Never have I known such pleasure. I must show you my gratitude... again."

Askinadon looked at her and groaned. "No more today, Katera. I've had enough, but hang around. I've got both you and Adrella on the menu tomorrow."

Through a new onslaught of nausea, Adrella forced a smile. "Must I share you, Master? She's had you for two entire years; and I for only one, short afternoon."

Askinadon chuckled, reached out, and cupped her breast. "I wouldn't call four hours short, but don't worry. You'll be getting more from me, though you're going to have to learn how to share. Next time, I'll be wanting four of these." He squeezed and jiggled her breast.

"If I must then, Master," she said, gritting her teeth, "but if that's the case, then give me more time with you. This is our first lovemaking. I want to always remember this."

Askinadon smiled wickedly. "Your sister never asked for this much." His hand slid onto her leg, and she thought he might succumb, but then he rolled over and sat up. "Nah. No more today. Now, twenty years ago, when I was a mere lad of forty, I could take on four, five Parallonian maidens and last all day-sometimes well into the night."

He gave a deep laugh, stood, and lumbered over to his ulla with the uneven walk of a man battling the early stages of arthritis.

Four or five maidens from Parallon when he was a lad of forty? Impossible. Askinadon had arrived in Parallon only ten years ago. *Empty-headed bragging-that figures.* She swung her legs off the bed.

"This wonderful day has made me hungry for a large meal, Master," she said, in her sweetest voice. "May we have one together? I'm not ready to part with your company yet. Please?" She sashayed next to him as he gazed at her naked body in the dresser mirror. "You don't blame me, do you?" She hoped she wasn't laying it on too thick.

Askinadon gave her an unsuspecting smile.

"No," he said, and patted her bottom. "I understand. We'll order something to eat in the royal dining room."

Adrella threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, thank you, Master."

As they dressed, Adrella slipped her headset, which had been hidden in her clothes, back into her ear in a single surreptitious motion, then fluffed her hair over it. Turning, she looped her arm inside Askinadon's, and walked with him down the hall toward the dining room, which was located on the third floor of the castle along with his other private quarters. As they entered, the aroma of roasted goat mixed with the scent of spicy tarola root lifted her nose and reminded her of the golden spoon that Askinadon had given her a year ago. He'd insisted that she bring it with her every time she dined with him. She did not have it, and he expected her to carry it with her at all times. That small act of forgetfulness was exactly the type of behavior that sent him into a rage and earned his wives their time in the rocsadon's den. She unthreaded her arm and pulled back.

"Master!" she cried. "I left my golden spoon in the hosta. Let me get it, please. I cannot bear to eat without..." She gasped as she realized that Katera didn't own a golden spoon. "I mean, I heard about it from Adrella. She said she never wanted to eat without it. Might I try it, please?" She felt herself shaking and clasped both hands together to steady them. Askinadon had frozen to the spot. He turned slowly to face her. Adrella's Lan Ma Ke turned frosty, and she shivered with dread. "I can't help it, Master. I am so jealous. She has received this lovely gift from you. I want to try it, too." Adrella rambled on, fearful to let him speak. "I won't be long. I'll just..."

"Silence." Askinadon grabbed her arm and yanked her into the dining room where he threw her into a chair. "You will wait here," he commanded, and stomped over to the wall where he pressed an icon on a panel. "Kastaks to the dining room!" he called. Moments later, she heard footsteps thundering up the staircase and two Kastaks streaked into the room. She felt her heart sink as she recognized Kastak Morchison behind Kastak Timoton. "Guard her," Askinadon ordered, as he barreled out the door. "I'll be in the control room."

Adrella felt dizzy with despair. She had never been in the control room-no one but Askinadon ever went there. It was the place he manipulated his Voice. *Oh, merciful Lupana.* He wanted to summon her sister. Had she ruined everything? Would Askinadon discover Katera and Rorken halfway down the mountain? Surely he would, but would he know it was Katera with Rorken? Their orbs transmitted identity. It was the reason they'd switched. If Askinadon checked their identities in the control room, the

Orb in Katera's ear would tell him that Adrella was trying to escape. Still, if he demanded that Katera return, they were all in trouble. Nervously, she drew a hand over her mouth, trying to think.

"You looked disturbed, my dear," Morchison said, in a dangerously soft voice. He jabbed her with his finger. "Are we in trouble, great whore of Askinadon? Maybe it's finally your turn to spend time with the lovely rocsadons, eh? Just like I promised you."

"I think you have me mixed up with my sister, Kastak. I am Katera, her twin."

Morchison furrowed his brow, studying her. Obviously, he hadn't been informed that Askinadon had claimed Adrella's twin as his new bride. It seemed that Askinadon did not divulge much to his Kastaks. He was inclined to hoard all information, power, and women to himself. Morchison shook his head.

"I don't care if you're her twin or not," he said, lifting a strand of her hair and letting it fall as if it were a nasty thing. "You're still Askinadon's whore. Both of you are, if you even have a sister. You are nothing. You may be used and abused and tossed aside easily for another." Adrella felt the heat rising to her face as Morchison circled around her. "Soon, very soon I think, we shall find you inside the pen with our roaring, little pets. We'll look for you in the middle of the yard, perched on top of a tall pole, hm?"

He was describing the horrid post created from the trunk of a tree driven into the ground inside the rocsadon's pen. The sheared off top made for a small standing platform for the unfortunate wives that displeased Askinadon. There, on an area big enough to contain two footprints, Askinadon forced a wife to stand for hours, sometimes an entire day and night. During the grueling ordeal, the tethered rocsadons stretched their long necks toward the wife, spitting and gnashing their jaws just out of reach, sometimes by mere inches. Sitting and dangling feet was out of the question, and the women warned each other not to try it. So far, no one had slipped, no one had fallen, but all who'd experienced the post had nearly done both.

Adrella looked up into the hard face of Morchison and sighed. She could see the pleasure in his eyes, and it wearied her. Even if he believed she was Katera, he would love to be the one to shove her up the ladder and onto the post, then leave her tottering as he pulled the ladder away. It was easy to imagine his delight as he unleashed the rocsadons upon her. If given the chance, he might even dare to embed her scent into a fixing cloth, making it nearly impossible to lure the animal away and bring her back down to safety after she'd served her time. Adrella turned her head away.

"Do what you must, Kastak," she said.

Morchison reacted instantly. "Don't turn from me, woman!" he cried, and grabbed a fistful of her hair, yanking her head toward him. "Look at me."

Resigned, she looked back at him. As he held her hair aloft, she watched the anger slip off his face, supplanted by a look of surprise. In a wave of horror, she realized that her ear was exposed. She reached up to free her hair from his grasp, but he was digging into her ear and dislodging the tiny Orb. He dropped her hair and stood back to study the modified Orb in his palm.

"Well, I'll be. What do you know?" He glanced at her, astonished, then returned his gaze to the Orb. "How in the world does a stupid savage like you modify a high tech item like this?"

Adrella felt herself shaking. "I didn't make it, Kastak. It...was a gift. So that I might have two Voices...the one in my head and that one."

She gestured to the Orb in his hand. Morchison blinked, his mouth open, then turned to Timoton.

"Get Askinadon. Tell him we need him here. This wench has managed to remove the VisiOrb and create an alternate system. He'll want to know about it right away."

"On my way, Kastak Morchison," Timoton said, and bounded out the door.

Adrella dropped her head and struggled to hold back the tears. All was lost. Surely, all was lost.

Chapter Fifteen

There were no clouds to blanket the sky and shield the trail from the sun's burning rays. Katera wiped her forehead and slipped off the heavy backpack with Rorken inside, guiding it gently to the ground. Shamana crouched low and wriggled into the straps, then stood up, her legs shaking. She looked as exhausted as Katera felt.

"Thank you, Shamana," Katera said, grateful that she'd brought her along. "I'm not sure how I could have done this alone. I'm glad you found another wife to watch the children so quickly."

Shamana smiled. "And I am so grateful to you."

"Even if a horde of rocsadons comes rumbling down the trail after us?" Katera laughed, though she wasn't entirely joking.

"Even so," Shamana answered, quietly.

They resumed their trek down the mountain. Katera wanted to ask Shamana about her life with Askinadon, but was afraid the conversation would slow them. She picked up her pace, hoping a few more hours would bring them to the safety of the caves. The Orb in her ear sputtered, and Katera felt her heart stop.

Askinadon. Already? A bad sign. It meant that Adrella had not been able to detain him long enough. And Mikolen was not on the summit yet, as planned—they should have passed him on his way up. Katera lifted a shaking hand to adjust the volume as Askinadon's voice squealed into the modified Orb.

Well, well, my dear. It appears that you are halfway down the mountain. Straying a little far from home, aren't we?

"Master, Rorken begged for a walk and..."

A four-hour walk away from the compound without my permission?

Askinadon was shouting, and Katera felt her heart hammering inside her chest. "P-please, forgive me, Master. I'll turn around right away."

Yes, you will turn around...Katera.

Hearing her name, she felt like she'd been clubbed on the side of her head. *Merciful Lupana*. He knows we've switched. He must have discovered the Orb in Adrella's ear.

"What do you mean?" She tried to sound innocent.

I mean your sister, the mother of Rorken, is paying for both of your sins, your lies, and your betrayal of my trust.

Adrella. What was he doing to her? Katera felt the acid rise to her throat. I must stay calm, she reminded herself, trying to swallow her panic. With every ounce of her will, she forced herself to answer with a

steady voice.

"Adrella did not betray you, Master. She could not wait to see you, that's all. She wanted you all to herself. Can you blame her for that? And then, I begged her to let me see my nephew. I insisted. It wasn't her fault." The Orb droned into the silence. "What would you have me do, Master? Please, offer me an opportunity to show you that I am at your service. I will obey in gratitude."

Another dangerous silence. And then: *I am sending a takatak for you. You will return at once.*

"I don't have a harness..."

I'll have one strapped to the takatak's leg.

"As you wish, Master."

With a fading hiss, the Voice disappeared. Katera looked numbly at Shamana.

"You're shaking," Shamana said, grabbing Katera's hand. "What happened?"

"We've been discovered; we must go back."

Shamana's eyes widened, and she dropped Katera's hand. "I'm not going back," she said, her tone rigid.

Katera stared, her thoughts tumbling over each other. "You don't have to. Askinadon is not missing you. I've told you where the caves are. Go there with Rorken. Mikolen will join you and take you both to his world with our parents. There, you will all be safe."

Shamana looked into Katera's eyes, searching. "And what of you, Katera? And Adrella? What will happen to you? And what will Askinadon say if you do not return with Rorken?"

Katera bit her lip. She had no idea. She'd make up some lie about Rorken, and maybe she could soften Askinadon-somehow-and save Adrella in the bargain. Most likely, though, she was returning to her death.

"I'll think of something," she told Shamana, smiling.

From above, the shrill cry of a takatak drifted over them. "Go now," Katera said, waving her on with both hands. "Hurry."

Shamana scrambled down the trail. Katera watched as she disappeared around the next bend with the sleeping Rorken, his small head bobbing loosely in the backpack. A moment later, a long shadow appeared over Katera. She glanced up to see the takatak descending onto the trail from above. It landed ten feet in front of her with a harness strapped to its leg.

She edged toward it, eyeing the enormous beak. The bird blinked and turned its head to study Katera, but otherwise did not move as she struggled to release the harness with fumbling fingers over a tight knot. The bird squawked impatiently. Finally, she managed to untie it and free the harness. She slid her arms inside the straps and fastened the clips in the front. Walking around the bird to face it, she lay down on her stomach. The takatak lifted into the air forty feet and hovered over her, its large wings pumping furiously. She felt the wind on her back increase as it descended upon her. Its large claws connected to the harness with a jolt.

Suddenly, she was rising. She looked up into the expansive underbelly of the bird and a sea of feathered blackness. The feathers were almost indistinguishable from each other. She was six feet off the ground

when she felt something heavy grab onto her feet. She yelped and looked down.

Mikolen. He was gripping both ankles, hanging on. The takatak, now doubly burdened, wove uncertainly through the air, dipping dangerously before shooting straight up, almost out of control. For a moment, Katera thought it would drop them both. Then, to her relief, it stabilized and leveled off. With the extra load, however, it seemed unable to fly any higher than fifteen feet over the trail. Mikolen's feet cleared the ground by only a few feet. He grinned up at her sheepishly.

"Thought I'd catch a ride the rest of the way up."

"Mikolen!" she cried, overwhelmed with relief. "What took you so long?"

"It took some convincing to get your parents to leave their hosta and come to the caves. I persuaded your father to let your mother carve the VisiOrb out of his head. That did it. Then he carved hers out, and now they're safely hidden inside the caves."

Katera choked back a sob. At least some people she loved were safe. "Thank you." Her gratitude vaulted inside her, and she almost laughed until she remembered her own sobering news. "Mikolen, Askinadon knows. He found out that Adrella and I switched. He must have found the Orb in her ear."

Mikolen grimaced. "I know. I just met your friend on the trail. Shamana gave me the quick version, and I rushed right up here."

"What should we do? He's got Adrella, and she's being punished."

A shadow of concern flicked across Mikolen's face. He nodded. "I'll find her. Do you think you can stall Askinadon? Do whatever you can to keep him busy." He paused. "As long as it's not in his bedroom."

Katera smiled. "And how will you find Adrella?"

Mikolen looked up with a blank expression, and Katera realized that he didn't know. "Just be ready," he said. "Keep Askinadon off guard. I'll find Adrella, then I'll find you." They were nearing the summit and Mikolen surveyed the ground below. "This is where I get off." He looked back at her. "Don't worry, you'll be all right."

Katera noticed a longing in his eyes. "Thank you," she said. "Oh, and Mikolen?"

"Yeah?"

"You've really got to stop grabbing my feet-first the river, and now this?" Mikolen was laughing as he released his grip and dropped onto the dusty trail below. "Ne Kamana Ya!" she called after him, in the old language.

I could love you...and maybe I already do, she realized as her Lan Ma Ke crackled inside her like a newly lit fire in its hearth.

With the lightened load, the takatak shot up into the sky, up, up, and up until the castle came into view. The bird reached the courtyard and circled above it. Katera spied Askinadon waiting in the middle with his arms crossed. He wore a snarly look. *Ah, here goes*, Katera thought, as the takatak swept low into the yard and released her over the pad. She fell with a thud, rolled, and stood up with her head bowed, as Adrella had taught her.

"Master, I have lost Rorken," she announced, breathlessly. "He has fallen from the harness onto the path. I fear he has perished."

Askinadon paused, and Katera's heart skipped a beat.

"Is that right, Katera?" he said, his voice soft and menacing. Inside her chest, a chill gripped her. With an inner twinge, Katera realized that he meant to harm her. She looked up in time to see two Kastaks rushing toward her from behind Askinadon. "Take her to the pole with her sister," Askinadon instructed, eyeing Morchison. "Then we'll find out which Kastak modified those orbs." He turned and walked away.

Chapter Sixteen

Mike dashed between the trees and into the empty courtyard of the lab complex, and then bolted for the door in the northern wing. There was just one item left to seize from the second floor of the lab before he gathered Katera and her sister and fled Parallon forever. One last item.

He needed the EM Sphere. With it, his stargate would be complete. He'd named it Silver Gate after its slender silver walls. Silver Gate was ready-it had everything except for the sphere-the one item necessary to power it.

Mike knew the exact location of the sphere from his previous raids, but never had he dared to lift it from its sealed container. It would have been missed immediately. The sphere alone powered Askin's control center and the insidious Voice. He knew Askins had a spare EM sphere, which meant the VisiOrbs would not have been disabled for long. Even so, Askins would have sought the thief with unparalleled aggression. Mike doubted he would have been able to steal anything else for his project after an event like that.

No, it had been better to work in secret and let Askins use the exotic matter in the EM Sphere to power the control center, until Mike was ready for it. He was ready now. The EM Sphere, though it held more energy than Askins would ever use, would provide enough to send Mike and his small party to their destination.

It was the first time Mike had sneaked into the lab in broad daylight, and he'd never done it without casing the area thoroughly for Kastaks. Ten years ago, the Kastaks had been technicians working in Teskali Lab, but since their abduction into this world, Askins had transformed them into cruel and churlish men intent on their own survival. Though their loyalty to Askins was questionable, his control over them was not. He had wasted no time implanting VisiOrbs into their heads after they'd arrived in Parallon. Now, many of those peaceable men had turned into competent killers who would slit another man's throat in a heartbeat.

Mike was not familiar with their daytime schedules and stations, and as he ducked inside the building, he half expected to run into one or two of them. Getting caught could ruin everything. If Askins knew that Mike was alive, he'd know who'd modified the Orb for Adrella. He'd realize that Mike was helping Katera and her sister. Nothing Katera could say to Askins would assuage the rage he was sure to feel after learning she'd partnered with his archenemy. Not only would Mike lose his opportunity to flee from this god-forsaken place, but his incentive for survival would evaporate if he lost the one person who, lately, made it seem worthwhile.

The hall was empty, and Mike sprinted soft-toed to the end where he turned right up a staircase. On the second landing of the stairwell, he poked his head around the corner into another hallway. It, too, was empty. A true sign of uncontested power, he mused: a lax guard policy. Askins had little to fear. In this primitive civilization, no one existed with enough knowledge to challenge him. Only the Kastaks posed any semblance of a threat, and Askins kept them tightly reined. The spoils of his conquest were his for the taking. Human spoils, Mike thought grimly, and now Katera was with him.

With renewed haste, he sped to the third door, the one he'd visited so many times before, the one Askins called his control room. Swiftly, he played the sequence of numbers on the combination lock that had kept everyone in Parallon out of the room, except Askins...until now. Mike had created the sequence as the new Director of Research at Tescali Lab twelve years ago. He'd entrusted it to only a few of his lead scientists who'd worked on Star Gate One with him; including Don Askins, his primary Associate. He punched the final number and heard a click. The door opened. He slipped inside, and closed it behind him.

In front of him, a large, transparent and luminous panel blinked with various icons. Several seats positioned before it reminded him of its former purpose in 2275 AD. Here, qualified social workers obtained entry in order to deliver their gentle prompts to patients of Alzheimer's and dementia. All this in the days before Askins had twisted the entire operation to suit his needs.

Mike slid into one of the seats and stared at the panel, wondering if he could use it to speak to Katera before he snatched the EM Sphere and temporarily disabled the network. It'd be good to find out that Katera was safe. Probably, Askins had seized her modified Orb, but in case he hadn't, there was no harm in trying. Scanning the labels on the icons, he found one for Kastaks, one for Parallonian males over twelve, one for the elders, one for females between seventeen and twenty, another for wives, and dozens more revealing his system for control over thousands of people. Mike reached up and touched the one labeled 'wives'. The numbered names of thirty-four women flashed onto the panel. Katera's name was at the bottom, Askins's latest acquisition. Mike's temples tightened as he stared at it.

It'd be a pleasure to defrock this creep, if only he could. Askins had a spare Em Sphere. There'd been two in the original stargate, and Askins had removed both minutes before the stargate was destroyed in the struggle between them. All other sources of energy were severed when Tescali Lab, with everyone inside it, was yanked into the wormhole. The EM Spheres alone powered the lab in Parallon. Without them, Askins had nothing. Obviously though, he would dump the second sphere into its home in the control center the moment he found this one missing. The crazed pervert would live on terrorizing the lives of every Parallonian.

Mike reached up and laid a finger on Katera's name. The icon blinked. The channels were open to her Orb, and if she still wore it, she'd hear him.

"Katera. Hello, Katera. Are you there?" A moment lapsed, and Mike heard a dull roar escape from the speaker. "Katera!" he called, feeling desperate. "Please, respond."

And then a small, frightened voice, asked, "Is that you, Mikolen?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

A screech filled the background, and Mike recognized the terrifying roar of a rocsadon fixed on a new scent.

"I'm being escorted," she whispered.

"Where?"

"To the rocsadon's den. We're outside it."

A silent cry erupted in Mike's head. He bit down on his fear. "I'll be right there," he said.

Without waiting to hear her response, he moved swiftly to the container that held the EM Sphere. With shaking fingers, he played the combination of numbers and watched as the metallic sections opened like a

blossoming geometric flower. Inside, a translucent ball two inches in diameter glowed on a customized pedestal. A perfect sphere, Mike thought as he plucked it from its throne and slipped it into his pocket.

Dashing past the VisiOrb panel and out the door, he noticed all icons were flickering and disappearing from the surface. If only they were disappearing for good, he thought, as he scrambled down the stairs.

On the other side of the lab complex, a shrill screeching from a throng of rocsadons was shaking the walls.

Chapter Seventeen

Katera wrinkled her nose at the stench coming from the other side of the high stone wall. It was pungent and acidic like urine, only riper, as if it had been collecting and steeping in the dirt for days. Kastak Morchison tossed her a gleeful look as he slid the bolt from the tall gate.

"After you," he said, bowing gracefully, one arm flung toward the pen.

Katera swallowed hard and stepped forward. Stretching her neck through the gate, she peered around the corner and spied dozens of rocsadons snorting and kneeling on the ground, secured between posts with thick chains. She'd never seen more than a few of the monsters at a time, and only from a distance. She stared in awe at the huge bodies as they shifted and swayed. Frozen to the spot, she gawked with a dark fascination.

A shriek—a human shriek—split the air. Squinting, she shielded her eyes and gazed toward it. What she saw nearly caused her heart to stop.

Adrella was standing on top of a pole fifteen feet high and a few feet in diameter. Katera watched in shock as several rocsadons thrashed their long necks toward her, gnashing their teeth with a ferocity that only beasts fixed with a scent displayed. Obviously, they'd been fixed with Adrella's. From her high perch, Adrella was eye level with them.

Ma Lan Kena Lupana. Oh, Merciful Lupana. She must be looking into their open throats. Each beast had chains around their back legs that led to large winches managed by Kastaks, who kept the rocsadons out of range. The animals flung their gaping mouths six feet from Adrella, but could not get any closer, she noted with some relief.

Then one Kastak threw his weight onto a handle and released a length of chain. In the next heart-wrenching moment, the rocsadon at the end of it roared and leapt toward Adrella, coming within two feet of her face. Adrella screamed, and in desperation, Katera shouted her name. Adrella cast a furtive glance in her direction, but was distracted by a second rocsadon, who had also gained a length of chain. This time, Katera screamed.

Kastak Morchison grabbed Katera's shoulder and pitched her forward onto the ground. While he turned to close the heavy gate, she scrambled to her feet and sprinted toward Adrella. Instantly, she heard Morchison's heavy footsteps behind her. He grabbed her around the waist and they crashed to the ground together. She landed on her face with Morchison on top of her.

"What's your hurry, whore?"

He jumped up and pulled Katera up by the silken shipunta wrapped around her waist. It unraveled as she stumbled to her feet. Morchison tossed it to the ground and clamped his fingers around the back of her neck. He shoved her forward, tightened his grip and shook her head back and forth at the scene in front of them.

"Is that where you want to go? Huh? Like what you see? Want to join her? That's fine with me, because that's where you're going." He marched her toward the other Kastak. As they neared, Morchison called out, "Timoton, rein 'em in. I got another one."

Timoton nodded, and tugged the winch handle in the opposite direction. Every time one of the rocsadons paused after a lunge, he'd pull in a little more chain until all three were ten feet from the pole on one side. Timoton ran wide around the animals to a ladder that he picked up and carried to the pole, with Adrella trembling and whimpering on top. Morchison leaned the ladder against the pole, which Katera could now see was the trunk of a tree. He shoved Katera toward it and gave her neck a final shake.

"Climb, whore," he ordered.

Katera blinked up at Adrella, who was staring down with a look of grief. "Katera," she cried. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry."

Katera stepped onto the ladder and climbed. As she neared the top, Adrella held out a hand. Wobbling dangerously, Katera placed one foot onto the platform while Adrella steadied her. There was no room to stand without both of them splaying their feet as they faced each other. Morchison lowered the ladder. Kater and Adrella clasped hands, struggling to keep from swaying.

"Rorken is safe," Katera whispered hoarsely, bending her knees for better stability. "Shamana has taken him to the caves. He'll leave with Mikolen and our parents to a safe place." Adrella struggled to swallow a sob, and Katera knew her sister's heart was relieved. "He'll be fine. He's going to grow into a man in a world where there is no Askinadon or Kastaks or rocsadons. He'll be free and happy." Tears leaked from Adrella's eyes-tears, Katera imagined, both bitter and sweet.

"Thank you, dear sister," Adrella said, and kissed her cheek. "For that, you have every ounce of my gratitude." Adrella reached one hand behind her head and lifted up a long necklace. Katera recognized the simple wooden crescent moon that Adrella had carved years ago from the wood of the ternok tree. It was threaded with a single leather string. With one arm gripping Katera's waist, she raised the other and let the string slip over the back of Katera's head. The crescent moon fell on her chest. "This will bring you the luck of Lupana," she said, fingering the moon.

The luck of Lupana? "Oh! You had it blessed. But you should wear it, Adrella."

Adrella pressed two fingers to Katera's lips. "No. I would leave this world satisfied, except for the fact that I got you involved in this horrible mess. This will give you a chance, otherwise, you will surely perish. Askinadon has promised me the rocsadons shall have their treats."

Katera shook her head. "First of all, you didn't get me involved without my consent. And secondly, I'd trade my life for Rorken's any day. And don't be so sure that either one of us will perish, either." Katera leaned into her ear. "Mikolen's here. He's on his way to us right now."

Before Adrella could answer, the trunk shuddered from the vibrations of heavy feet pounding into the ground as three rocsadons charged forward on their newly lengthened chains. Katera and Adrella gripped each other as the beasts roared and jostled for the lead. A weakness gripped Katera in her knees as she held Adrella's trembling body. She stared, strangely captivated, as the beasts rumbled to within a few feet of them. Their open mouths looked cavernous, their teeth long and needle sharp, dripping with saliva like wet daggers. As they flung their wide heads, froth flew from their mouths in great strings, showering both women. The foul-smelling heat from their breath belted Katera in the face. Adrella buried her head in Katera's shoulder and wept.

Katera stole a glimpse toward the gate. Still no Mikolen. Where was he? *Please, hurry.* Her heart

flipped wildly inside her chest. *We don't have much time.*

Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, a Rocsdadon bellowed behind her. She swirled around in time to see Kastak Morchison fixing another animal with a piece of cloth and a large dose of suderik. The rocsadon thumped its head into a piece of cloth on the ground. Her body stiffened as she recognized her own shipunta. The animal lifted the waistband in its mouth with a savage look in its eyes. It reached its long neck skyward and screeched again. The shipunta, dripping with spittle, fell to the ground where Morchison snatched it with a long tiket. Katera watched spellbound as the rocsadon turned toward her. Straining forward, it fixed its dark, unblinking eyes on her as Morchison worked furiously to unwind the winch that would release more chain. Behind Morchison, she watched with mounting horror as Timoton carried her shipunta to another rocsadon.

Merciful Lupana.

Adrella screamed again, and Katera felt the hot breath of another beast on her elbow. She turned to see that three rocsadons on the other side were a foot away. Another length of chain and that would be the end. But no, these rocsadons weren't looking at her. They were fixed on Adrella, their eyes focused as they lunged toward her. These rocsadons were not her predators.

She turned back to Timoton. Another rocsadon was thumping its head into her shipunta. So, that was the game: three rocsadons for Adrella, and three for her. This was part of Askinadon's revenge: to unnerve them before they died.

Morchison worked the chains on the rocsadons designated for Katera as Timoton trotted back to the winches on the other side. When he reached them, he waited with hands on hips as Morchison played out his chains until the newly fixed rocsadons were snapping at Katera from ten feet away. The noise was deafening, and the pole vibrated violently as Katera and Adrella struggled to keep their balance.

"I can't do this!" Adrella wailed. "I'm going to fall!"

"Hang on! It won't be much longer. Mikolen's coming!"

The pole shuddered again, and Adrella's foot slipped. She stumbled onto her knee. Another shudder, and she was off the platform, hanging on by her fingers and clawing the surface. Katera leaned over and grabbed her by the hair, jerking her chest and head back onto the platform. She stepped over Adrella's head so that she was straddling it and revived her grip on her hair. There was no way, with all the shaking, that she could help her sister stand back up onto this tiny platform. She prayed that she could hold her long enough for Mikolen to arrive.

Beneath her, Adrella was kicking her feet trying to propel herself back on top. As her foot jutted out behind her, a rocsadon reached out its long neck and deftly grabbed it. In a terrifying moment, it tore Adrella shrieking from the pole. The rocsadon lowered its neck to the ground, and, for a moment, Katera thought that it was going to deposit Adrella there. But then, it whipped its head back, tossing her up, up and over Katera's head. She flew thirty feet before she came screaming back down, her arms and legs fanning the air. The rocsadon lowered its neck again-its head bent up at an odd angle to receive her in its wide mouth.

Lupana, no.

With her eyes frozen on the rocsadon, Katera almost missed what happened next. She sensed it in the rush of the body, the long, extended neck, and when she looked again, Adrella was gone. She had never reached the mouth of the expectant rocsadon, who was roaring in frustration. Katera turned her attention to another rocsadon backing off from the fray. It was chomping its teeth together, its mouth filled with

blood. In one hellish glimpse, Katera spied a delicate, disembodied arm inside its mouth. She recognized the rings on her sister's hand. And then, the horrific vision was gone. The beast threw back its large head, opened its throat, and gulped. In several spasmodic swallows, the business was done.

Trembling, Katera lowered herself into a crouching position, her eyes glued to the monster as she struggled to comprehend what had happened. Where was her sister? Did that rocsadon swallow Adrella? Was that Adrella's blood flowing from its mouth? Katera blinked in disbelief.

Driven by an overdose of suderik and with their primary target gone, the rocsadons formerly fixed on Adrella sniffed at the air around Katera. Soon, they too fixed on her. Within the minute, all six rocsadons thrashed around her, diving viciously toward her face against their restraints, but Katera was too numb to care.

Chapter Eighteen

Mike stormed out of the lab and into the courtyard like a charging takatak. He had little time to reach Katera. He didn't think Askins would kill one of his own wives—they brought him too much pleasure—yet Adrella's betrayal signaled the ultimate insult to a man who'd grown more egomaniacal as time passed. A death sentence was not out of the question, and since Askins had sentenced Katera to the rocsadon's pen, the penalty had likely extended to her. Mike quickened his pace, bolting between the pine trees and onto the path toward the rocsadons' lair...then he skidded to a halt.

Ten feet away, his archenemy was walking briskly toward him with his head bent, lost in thought. Mike attempted to draw back out of sight, but his foot crunched over a twig. Askins looked up, startled.

"Who are you?" he demanded. Mike froze as Askins' eyes swept over him, his face, his cotton pants and shirt. "You're not from Parallon," Askins said, in amazement.

"No."

Mike stepped onto the path and into full view. Askins moved closer, peering intently. Mike tightened his grip around the knife in his belt and waited for recognition to register. Slowly, Askin's forehead creased as his eyebrows floated up, a look of disbelief in his widened eyes.

"You," he breathed. "But how? I killed you. Unless..."

Mike laughed dryly. "No, I have not arrived from a parallel universe. I'm the same Mike Leno you betrayed on Earth...2275 AD, wasn't it? I'm the same Director of Research at Tescali Lab...that is, before you killed seven of our scientists and *stole* Star Gate One."

Mike's cheeks turned hot as he remembered.

"I shot you," Askins said. "I shot you with a Beam 4000. That thing tears holes as big as melons through people. And I saw your body...your guts were hanging out all over the place."

"Not my guts," Mike said, wondering if Askins still carried the deadly Beamer. Those lasers could tunnel through thick metlon one thousand times more resilient than steel in a second. "Trust me, you never shot *me*."

"But the blood...I saw your intestines, and animals dragged your body away and devoured it."

"You saw the intestines of the young kiddik you killed while you were aiming blindly through the trees trying to hit me."

Askins blinked in surprise. "I didn't see a kiddik. The blood was on your body..."

"Kiddik blood," Mike repeated, waiting for Askins to comprehend. "I scooped out the animal's guts from the hole your laser made, then dragged its body into the brush. I returned to the spot, lay down, and hoisted the entire mess onto my stomach. The only way to keep you from hunting me down was to play dead. After you left I used the guts to map a trail into the trees, so you'd think animals dragged me off and you wouldn't look for my remains."

Askins curled his upper lip. "You were taking quite a chance. I might have shot you again just for good measure."

"No, I don't think so." Mike eyed him carefully. "There is no way to recharge those Beamers in this world. Even the Sphere doesn't work for that-the lab has no energy transfer mechanism. You left all the compatibles behind when you brought us here. You fire a Beamer a dozen times, and the power's spent...you weren't going to waste any shots. You couldn't afford to fire at me again." A flash of fear sparked in Askin's eyes, and Mike knew he'd hit a nerve. "Yep, that was ten years ago. All the Beamers are dead soldiers by now, right? Must have used them up years ago." Mike relaxed his hold on the knife. "Hell, there were only ten in the lab to begin with."

"Yeah, and you forced me to use the charge of one entire Beamer when you hid behind Star Gate One. I had to destroy it-I thought you were hiding on the other side. Our only stargate, and our only hope of getting out of here. When Star Gate One went up in smoke, the spare EM Sphere went with it. Did you know it was still in there?" Askins lifted his chin. "I only had time to grab one sphere for the control center. I never got the other. It was still inside. You made me do it, Leno."

He said this as if Mike had aimed the deadly shot that had sent Star Gate One splintering into countless fragments.

Then it hit him. *No extra sphere?* That meant that Askin's power base had crumbled. The last EM Sphere in existence on this planet was at this moment in Mike's pocket, bumping against his thigh. He smiled as he savored the thought: this was the end for Askins, and the creep didn't even know it.

"But you didn't really care what happened to Star Gate One, did you, Askins? You didn't want to return to our time, to 2275 AD, because you had no plans to ever leave Parallon again, isn't that right?" Mike wondered if Askins would admit it. "It didn't matter to you whether you kept Star Gate One intact or not. Getting out of our world and back to the past...to here, Parallon, was the whole point, wasn't it? To return with the lab was the plan, because you'd been here before, and it was all you ever wanted."

Askins' eyes glazed over. "Sure. Why not? Beautiful virgins...unlimited power."

"And that's why you waited twenty-five years before returning to the future and Teskali Lab, to ravage all the virgins first, right?"

"What twenty-five years? I was only gone one day in your time." Askins threw back his head and laughed. "One day and two hundred virgins later." He brought his chin down and leveled his gaze at Mike. "Must have been quite a shock to see an old gray-haired guy when I got back, but at least you knew Star Gate One worked."

"Yes," Mike said, quietly. "If only the scientist operating it had been working, too."

He drew in a deep breath, recalling the betrayal in full measure. Askins had been entrusted with one of the greatest missions ever handed to a man-to travel through time in Star Gate One, the first stargate ever built, to discover other eras and cultures, to collect data, and, after a month, to return home. He had

pledged to leave the people he'd visited in peace, and to come home when his work was done. Instead, he'd spent 25 years in the past, though it had only been a day in Mike's time. But in that time frame, he'd ruined an entire village, violating his oath of non-interference.

When he did return, he claimed he'd been imprisoned and forced to work in a slave labor camp. Mike believed him even as the others questioned it by pointing to his soft hands and fat belly-not the physical profile of a prisoner, they said. Yet Mike staunchly defended him, until they pulled the telescan recorder from the stargate the next day, revealing the undeniable truth. Hordes of Parallonians were seen in the recording as they surrounded the stargate, yelling obscenities and cursing Askins' tyranny.

Before the authorities in 2275 had a chance to arrest him, Askin's repositioned Star Gate One's electronic magnetic plates to encompass the entire lab. When he activated the exotic matter in the EM Sphere, the whole lab and every scientist and technician within it at that moment was spirited six thousand years into the past...to Parallon.

Mike shook his head in disgust as he recalled the events afterward: the needless and ruthless killing as Askins promptly shot every scientist with one of the Beamers recovered from his prearranged secret stash. They'd all been killed except Mike, who escaped by feigning his death. Askins had then secured his position of power by locking the sphere into the control center for the VisiOrbs. The technicians, herded earlier from the wrong side of a Beamer into a locked room during the melee, were forced to accept the VisiOrbs into their foreheads one by one, collectively sealing their fate as members of Askin's slave army. Mike studied the hard look in the eyes of the older man, a man who had once been his own age...a man who had once been his friend.

"Tell me, Askins, I'm a little curious. Just how hard was it for you to forget every shred of trust and faith that everyone at Tescali placed in you?"

"It was easy. So what? Tescali never did anything for me."

"An Associate Directorship wasn't doing anything for you? Being the first human to travel through time wasn't good enough?"

Askins laughed. "Petty stuff. No, I never got first prize. It was always you. Starting with our graduating class at that venerable old institution, M.I.T. You took the top honors. Then, you were the first to publish those oh-so-laudable groundbreaking papers on time travel. If that weren't enough, you were made the first Director of Tescali Lab, and you were only 25 years old. Unprecedented. Then, of course, you had to be the first person to actually build a working stargate."

"Is that what this is about? Me being first?"

"No. Not any more. Once I discovered Parallon, none of that mattered. Hell, I didn't need to prove myself here. In Parallon, I was king. All do my bidding. I had everything: servants, slaves, women...oh! The women! And the feasts: the wine, music and dance, jesters, all the entertainment a man could possibly wish for. I was having the time of my life. It was the perfect world, until..." His face clouded over.

"Until that...little rebellion?" Mike asked.

Askins straightened his carriage. "It wasn't little. Half the men in the village came after me. They stormed my villa one night. I barely got out with my life. It's a good thing I kept Star Gate One in working order. I jammed that thing back to 2275 AD in a hurry."

"Yeah, the telescan tapes showed us everything."

"The second time in Parallon was much better." Askins' eyes sparkled with twisted joy.

"No great feat when you bring the entire lab and all its technology with you."

Askins smiled. "Yeah, you can only get so far threatening people with mere weapons. I couldn't wait to get back here with the VisiOrb Control Center." Askins looked elated, as if he knew his story was torturing Mike. "Ruling over Parallon was about to become as easy as strolling in the sunshine. With the orbs, I knew I'd have the fear and respect of every man, woman, and child." Askins' face flushed as he rubbed one hand over the fist of the other. "Read a few minds and everyone bows to a new god. No one dared to challenge me this time around." He shook his fist for emphasis.

"So, you started over." Mike said, recalling that Katera and Adrella had no memory of Askins before ten years ago.

That meant that Askins had arrived in Parallon moments after his first arrival twenty-five years earlier. Since it's impossible to coexist with oneself in the same time period, the wormhole for Star Gate One had warped and created a parallel universe where there would not be two Askins. The new Parallon they were now in had been created when Askins bent the fabric of time by arriving simultaneously with his other self, the one who was twenty-five years younger. Mike narrowed his eyes.

"No one in the new Parallon knew who you were, did they? Because you had never been here, in this new universe."

Ironic, Mike mused. Somewhere in another universe, a different Parallon existed without Don Askins, a Parallon with villagers that had overthrown him and were able to live in peace.

"Yeah, I could have come back and taken up where I left off, but the villagers would have known me as the guy they had overpowered. They'd have known the VisiOrbs were only a device. My power would've been compromised. If they had no prior memory of me, I'd be able to convince them I was a god. A god who could enter their minds and read their thoughts." Askins laughed, his eyes glowing. "I have all the power I need. I even have my own little army this time around. Those mild mannered technicians make surprisingly good Kastaks, don't you think?"

"The scientists you murdered would have made good Kastaks, too."

Wondering if the man had any remnant of a conscience left, Mike asked quietly, "Why'd you kill them, Don? Was it really necessary? Greg Kurtz, Walt Schneider, Lon Sandersen, Jaime Sanchez...all of them. Marianna Lennon, Rito Vargas, Jamieson Williams...they were all your friends. Why did you kill your friends?"

Askins grinned, showing his yellowed teeth. "First, they were scientists, not friends. And scientists know too much. Eventually, one of them would have done something to modify the VisiOrb system so it wouldn't work. They had the knowledge. If anyone was going to overpower me, it would've been one of them."

Mike paused, staring at the man he thought he had once known. "Maybe one of them already did."

He knew that Askins hadn't discovered the missing sphere, and he couldn't resist planting a seed of doubt. Askins studied Mike carefully, and dropped his jaw.

"You." He raised a finger at Mike. "You modified the Orb in Adrella's ear." Once again, anger flooded into Askins' eyes, crowding out any semblance of reason. "Why are you helping them? Are they giving you favors? You keep your hands off. They're mine. They're my wives, you greedy sonofabitch."

"No wife is a wife if she is forced to wed. They do not belong to you."

A rocsadon's squeal punctured the air, and Askins gave him a wicked grin. "In a very short while, they may *not* belong to me...or anyone else."

Mike's blood curdled. "What have you done?"

Askins gave a low laugh. "I thought it was nice of me to allow them to ride out their terror together. They're on the pole. Do you know of this pole from your clandestine forays past the pen? Hm? Ah, I can see that you don't," he added, when Mike frowned. "Well, allow me to explain."

Askins revealed the plan to feed the rocsadons' chains out until the beasts had plucked both Adrella and Katera from their perch. The blood drained from Mike's face, and while Askins laughed, he pulled his knife and sprang toward him. As if expecting the move, Askins pulled an object from a sheath secured to his belt. Just in time, Mike pulled up short in front of the narrow muzzle of a shiny Beamer pointed straight at his belly.

"That's close enough, Leno." Askins raised the gun higher, so that the red laser spot from the rangefinder landed in the middle of Mike's chest. "Yeah, you're right about the Beamers being dead, all except for this one. I saved one, just in case. So drop the knife." Mike let the knife fall to the ground, and Askins grinned. "This is all I need to put you under, just like you should have been put under ten years ago." His eyes danced with a mixture of madness and delight. "Say good-bye, Leno, and don't depend on any kiddik saving your ass this time."

He hadn't finished the sentence before Mike dove at his knees. In a flash, Askins was on his back in the dirt with Mike gripping the wrist that held the Beamer. Askins pounded the side of Mike's head with his free hand and bit into his shoulder, but was no match for the younger, fitter man. Mike wrested the Beamer from him and scrambled to his feet, his shirt torn, his shoulder bleeding. He plucked his knife from the dirt and sheathed it, keeping the Beamer trained on Askins' head. Askins swiveled into an upright position, spotted the Beamer in Mike's hand, and scuttled backward in the dirt on his elbows, his eyes focused on the weapon.

Holding the Beamer firm, Mike glanced at the window in its side panel to check on the number of charges left. Only one remaining shot registered, but it was enough...enough to rid the universe of one vile sonofabitch for good. He raised the gun to Askins' head. Mike had never killed a man before, but felt no qualms about killing this one. If ever anyone had lived without a shred of decency or redemption in his bones, this was the guy. Mike took careful aim.

"I wouldn't do it-you're going to need that charge. Listen." His tone held an edge of desperation. Mike cocked an ear in spite of himself. "Listen to the rocsadons."

The roars from a small horde of the beasts glided over the treetops. Alarmed, he realized he was also feeling vibrations through his feet. These animals were not on a routine feeding exercise-they were raging.

"You're going to need that charge," Askins said again. "There are six rocsadons fixed on those girls. The Kastaks were told to let them feast. If you hurry, you might save them. But you're going to need the Beamer. You know nothing else will stop a rocsadon fixed on a scent."

Mike's adrenalin erupted into high gear as he steadied the gun on Askins. What if he wasn't telling the truth? Could he take that chance? The thought of Katera in danger filled him with more dread than he'd ever known. He must do everything in his power to save her. Little else mattered.

Askins, sensing his distress, rolled into the trees and raced away. Mike didn't follow him. There wasn't

time, and Askins was right. He might need the one charge. He'd deal with Askins later. The man had no more power anyway-Mike had the sphere. As Askins' footsteps galloped away, Mike wheeled around on the path and sped toward the rocsadon's pen, clutching the Beamer.

Chapter Nineteen

Katera's mind had gone blank, more from shock than fear. She stood on top of the pole, oblivious to the thundering beasts charging at her from all sides. The pole swayed and shook, and still her face registered nothing. Her knees bent automatically with the movements, as if she were standing in a boat on a choppy lake. At the other end of the pen, a shout erupted over the roaring rocsadons. Something inside her stirred. Again, the shout.

It was her name. Who was calling her name? From a distant place in her brain, she recognized the voice. A small ember, a warmth glowed inside her chest as her Lan Ma Ke sizzled to life. *Mikolen*. It was Mikolen...he had come. Suddenly aware of the long, sharp teeth snapping around her head, she shrieked.

"Mikolen!"

"Katera! Don't move. I'm coming."

She switched her head as far round as she could to see him. He was running full speed toward her, kicking up a storm of thick dust behind him.

"Mikolen! Be careful, the Kastaks."

As if on cue, Kastak Morchison yanked the brake on his winch and signaled Timoton to do the same. Both men waited, their eyes fixed on Mikolen, who had slowed as he approached Katera. Just out of reach of the rocsadons, he looked up, his face contorted with worry.

"Hang in there! The brakes are on. The rocsadons can't get to you unless you fall."

Katera nodded and turned her attention back to the beasts, who had not quit their incessant lunging. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Mikolen approach Kastak Morchison. Mikolen walked swiftly. She spied something in his hand. Morchison was watching him carefully, and as Mikolen came within six feet of the Kastak, Morchison reached one hand toward the winch brake and held up the other for Mikolen to stop.

Mikolen paused, his feet apart, knees bent, and shoulders rounded. He held a Beamer in one hand, pointed at Morchison. She'd heard of this weapon. Only Askinadon had them, and they were powerful-capable of blowing large, solid objects into smithereens. *Lucky Lupana*. Where and how had he gotten it?

She studied him more closely. His hair was mussed, his face dirty, and his shirt torn at the shoulder and stained red. He was bleeding. What had happened? Had he fought Askinadon to get the Beamer? In her peripheral vision, she realized no one was standing at Timoton's post on the other side. Where'd he go? Alarmed, she moved her head around until she spotted Timoton. He was sneaking up on Mikolen's backside.

Cupping her hands to her mouth, she shouted, "Behind you!"

Mikolen swirled around and faced Timoton, who stumbled backward when he spied the Beamer, now pointed at him. Mikolen edged away bringing both Kastaks into range, swiveling the muzzle back and

forth between them. She couldn't hear their voices, but she saw Mikolen freeze as Morchison's hand wrapped around the brake that would release the chain, allowing a rocsadon to reach her.

Then Mikolen did something astonishing. He wedged the Beamer inside his belt. His hands were empty. Why did he do that? Didn't he want to shoot Kastak Morchison?

He reached inside his pants pocket and pulled out... a ball? A small, luminous ball filled his palm, but it wasn't made out of clay or carved from wood like the ones she knew-you could see through this one. It was so smooth, like nothing she'd ever seen. It shimmered in the shadows as if its luminosity were self-contained. Mikolen held it up for the Kastaks to see, gesturing. Both Kastaks looked astonished. Timoton stared with his mouth open, and Morchison removed his hand from the brake and inched forward, staring at it. Mikolen popped it back into his pocket and pointed south toward the trail that led down the mountain. Both Kastaks approached Mikolen listening intently. They did not attack him. What was going on?

A roar and a scuffling at the other end of the pen, and all three men's heads turned toward it. She saw their eyes grow wide. Unable to contain her curiosity, she turned on her pedestal, careful to keep her arms locked at her sides and away from the snapping heads. At the other end, near the gate, she spied Askinadon. He was working with a chained rocsadon, tossing a piece of cloth in front of it, fixing the animal. She wondered who was getting the fix this time.

Then she remembered... Mikolen's shirt was torn. She looked back at him. Yes, the missing piece looked like the cloth Askinadon was using. Mikolen gestured toward Askinadon as the two Kastaks bent in a huddle in front of him. With nods all around, both Kastaks bolted toward the gate. They ran wide along the walls on either side, as if to make room for the rocsadon that was sure to charge down the middle.

She looked back at Askinadon. He was racing from post to post unlocking each chain with the tiket until the stomping animal stood free. For a second it froze, as if stunned by its freedom. Then the large head swiveled on its long neck. Nothing else moved but that enormous head. When it stopped, it was staring wild-eyed at Mikolen. The great chin lifted skyward, the neck stretching up and up as the mouth opened. It sucked in a huge breath. The screech that followed sent Katera's hands flying her ears. The battle cry of a rocsadon was unmistakable.

The cry ended, and the rocsadon thundered down the middle of the pen bellowing and heading for Mikolen, stirring up a plume of dust behind it. Katera tried to scream, but her throat snapped shut. She couldn't bear it... not again... it was too much. First Adrella, and now Mikolen. *Merciful Lupana*. No. She drew her trembling fingers over her mouth, staring helplessly at Mikolen. Why wasn't he running away? Maybe if he ran, he could scale the wall... get over it somehow. No one stood a chance against a fixed rocsadon. She must tell him to flee. She opened her mouth, and this time, found her voice.

"Mikolen, run!"

But he did not. Instead, he lifted the Beamer from his belt, his eyes glued onto the rocsadon. Yes. In her panic she had forgotten the weapon. With a quickening heart, she watched the rocsadon as it rapidly closed the distance between it and Mikolen.

Shoot now. Shoot!

Mikolen held the Beamer steady, his arm fully extended and trained on the animal. When she thought it was too late-when the creature had begun to lower its neck to capture Mikolen-he fired. A thin line of red light leapt from the Beamer and landed on the chest of the charging rocsadon. There was a sizzling noise, and the animal let out a surprised squeal before a great popping sound filled the air, and chunks of

flying flesh shot out in all directions.

Katera pulled her arms over her head as it rained small gobs of meat near her. It probably only lasted five seconds, but it felt like an eternity as the pieces plopped into the dust. After a moment of silence, she peered through the crook of her arm and looked around. Tissue bits covered the ground everywhere. A large piece of the carcass lay in a puddle of blood twenty feet from her post. The explosion had silenced the rocsadons surrounding her, but only for a moment. In the next instant, they were thrusting toward her again. She looked over at Mikolen, who picked himself up off the ground and tossed the spent Beamer over his shoulder. He waved at her.

"I'm going to pull them back!" he shouted, pointing at the rocsadons.

She nodded and turned back to the Kastaks, who had each grabbed Askinadon under an armpit and were marching him toward Mikolen. Askinadon was snarling and kicking. They dropped him onto the ground face down, snatched his wrists, and dragged him.

The clatter of chains caught her attention and she turned in time to see one of the rocsadons stumbling backward toward the winch. Mikolen's muscled arms swelled as he leaned into the crank and reined it in, little by little. He heaved and shoved the crank until the animal was twenty feet away from her, then he secured the brake, and headed for the next winch. The Kastaks, with Askinadon cursing between them, looked on as Mikolen reined in each animal in the same manner.

At last, freed from the clashing beasts around her, Katera lowered herself on the post to a sitting position with her legs dangling over the side. Mikolen retrieved the ladder and brought it to her. Sliding it up against the post, he climbed up until he faced her.

"Mikolen."

She stopped, unsure of what to say next. Then he did something that made her dizzy. He picked up her hand and kissed it.

"I was afraid...so afraid I wouldn't get to you in time," he said, his voice choking.

She ran a finger through his hair and swallowed hard. She sorely wished she didn't have to tell him the next piece of news. "Mikolen, Adrella..." Her voice strangled on her sister's name.

"I know." He lifted a hand to stroke her cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," she assured him, but the memory was fresh, and she couldn't stop the tears from spilling over. "Look," she said, pulling the crescent moon from her neck and cradling it in her hand. "She gave me this; it's blessed with the grace of Lupana. That's why I lived and she..."

Again, Katera could not finish and looked at Mikolen helplessly. He wrapped his arms around her and she wept with her head on his shoulder. She wanted to let go and sob like a baby, but they were not out of danger. Over his shoulder, she spied Askinadon and the Kastaks on the ground watching them carefully. She pulled away.

"How did you know that Adrella had...that a rocsadon..."

"Jim Morchison and Tim Tonnelly told me what happened."

Adrella scrunched her brow. "Who are they?"

Mikolen tossed his head toward the Kastaks. "Those are their real names, their names in my world. Like

me, they changed them to suit the nomenclature for the males of Parallon."

"Do they know you?"

"Yes, but they thought I was dead. I've been hiding for ten years."

Katera glanced at the Kastaks and back at Mikolen. "They are very bad men, Mikolen. I thought they were going to kill you. Why didn't they?"

Mikolen leaned into her ear, his breath warm and sweet. "Because I promised them I would take them home, away from Parallon. They hate this life. Askinadon has forced them to live it. But now they have a choice, and they want to go."

"They cannot go free. They have been too cruel to my people."

Katera felt her cheeks burn. Surely, Mikolen was not going to help these evil men—they had allowed the rocsadons to reach Adrella.

"I know," he whispered. "But right now we need them. And they need me. They can't get out of Parallon without Silver Gate, and we can't get out of this pen without their help." He gave her a long look. "And there's something else, Katera." He paused. "This may change your mind about coming to my world, but you deserve to know..."

She had no desire to imagine a life without him and felt her heart sink. "What do you mean?"

He drew in a deep breath and looked her hard in the eyes. "Askins has no more power. The VisiOrb control center is disabled. I hadn't planned on this or expected it, because I thought there was a second EM Sphere, but Askinadon told me it's been destroyed." He paused. "Do you understand what this means? Your people are free. The Voice...it's gone forever."

Katera closed her eyes. *Kam Lan Lukora?* Could it be true? At last, her people free? Free to live, work and play? For a moment, she couldn't wait to tell Adrella—to share it with her the way they shared everything. Then, she remembered, and her joy crumbled away. The shock of Adrella's death surged through her anew.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Adrella was gone for good. A wave of grief mounted inside her and crashed onto her senses, flooding her with an acute emptiness. She wanted Mikolen to hold her...tight...let him strangle out the hurt. No, no, no. She could not afford to fall apart; they were not yet safe.

In desperation, she turned her thoughts to Rorken. She still had him—Adrella's only child. Yes. She must hold herself together for the boy. She would raise him as her own. Rorken would grow up in a free society where he could learn things and grow happily into adulthood...free to think his own thoughts and feel as he wished. For him, there would be no threat of intimidation—he would be his own man. The legacy of Adrella's son would be a fearless one. Her sister would have cherished this for him, even over her own life. Rorken. She had Rorken.

Katera opened her eyes and looked at Mikolen. His eyes held a mixture of concern and compassion...she felt herself falling into those bottomless pools of sparkling liquid lights. *And you, Mikolen. I will hang on for you, too.* As if reading her thoughts, he reached out a hand and touched her cheek.

"Mikolen," she whispered. "I know what freedom can bring for me and my people. And Adrella's son."

Mikolen nodded, as if he understood what she was feeling. "You still have your sister's heart in that boy,"

he said. Then he cast a furtive glance at Askinadon. "I know it's hard, but we have get down...now. Will you be okay?"

He held out both hands. She had much to say to him, but this was not the time. His strong arms beckoned her into them. She allowed her body to slip next to his as he wrapped one arm around her waist, and with the other, guided them down the ladder.

"I want you to go outside the gate and wait for me there," he whispered. "I have one more detail to attend, then we can return to the caves." He threw his chin in the direction of the gate. "Go, and wait for me."

"What are you going to do?"

Mikolen gave her a firm look. "You don't need to see this. Please, go."

Katera peered over at Askinadon, who was pleading for mercy from the Kastaks. She glanced back at Mikolen. He gave her a knowing look. Katera turned away and walked briskly back to the gate. Behind her, she heard the choking sobs of unmitigated fear as Askinadon considered his impending fate. She heard Mikolen's footsteps as he approached Askinadon.

"Ah, no, no, Mike! For old time's sake. Come on...hey. We went to school together...remember? You're a good guy, Mike. Aw, you're a good guy. You don't hurt people. Mike. Mike? Mike, noooo!"

Katera wanted to turn around, wanted to race back and vent her ten-year-old anger on this demented assassin, but she forced herself to keep walking. Mikolen didn't need her interference. As she neared the gate, she heard the long, shrill cry of a fixed rocsadon as it drowned out the enfeebled wails of Askinadon. Before leaving the pen, she stole a glance backward-just in time to see Askinadon seized by the rocsadon and tossed like a stick into the air.

His scream was deep as he hurtled skyward, then piercing and high-pitched as he shot back down. The rocsadon caught him by the arm just before he hit the ground, but it tore loose in the beast's mouth. Askinadon fell into the dirt below with a sickening thud. There he writhed awkwardly, struggling with one arm to get up. The rocsadon lowered its head until it was poised above his torso. Gingerly, it scooped Askinadon's body between its teeth, and then yanked its neck into the air like a whip. At the apex of its thrust, it opened its mouth and Askinadon careened back into the sky, howling again. This time, as he dropped down, the rocsadon snatched him from the air in its open mouth and swallowed him whole.

In a flash Askinadon was gone. The former ruler and god of Parallon...gone.

Nik erpen pan yana. Not for wasting farewells.

Satisfied, Katera slipped out the gate, leaned back against the stone wall, and drew in a long breath. She wanted to think alone while she had the chance.

Everything was different now. Her people were no longer subject to Askinadon's rule. For the first time in ten years, they would be free to create a new government, elect new leaders. The prospect of peace, the opportunity for everyone in Parallon to thrive, had arrived.

Katera pictured the happy hubbub of busy roads filled with merchants in hoshdel-pulled wagons on their way to the market, young children skipping off to school, the older ones to work. It would be like it used to be-the way she remembered it as a child. Shops would open as free enterprise blossomed in their village. Teenagers would soak up new skills working as apprentices under master tradesmen. Schools would spring up to teach young people math, agriculture, and religion...the old religion. And the

language-they would learn the language of Lupana once again. Men and women would fall in love freely-and marry. What bliss-no one coerced to take a mate. Those days were gone forever.

Katera sighed to think of it. Families growing, the village expanding, maybe even into neighboring meadows. Her parents would not want to leave Parallon now. The Parallon of old was back, the one they cherished. They would want her to stay, too, with Rorken of course, and pick up their lives in a world they remembered and loved. For them, Mikolen's offer to escape to the future was no longer attractive or necessary.

She would have to stay. It was her duty. That much was clear. Her family needed her, especially after losing Adrella-they would need her desperately. And she needed them, but what did that mean for her and Mikolen? Would he leave Parallon...and her? She didn't think she could endure his absence from her life. With a certainty that tugged at her heartstrings, she knew she belonged with him. She could no longer deny it-she needed him, too.

The choice seemed too impossible to consider. It made her head throb and she squeezed her eyes, trying to shut out the pain. How could she have it both ways? Maybe she could convince Mikolen to quit his dream and stay-to live with her and Rorken and Mama and Papa here in Parallon...but would he be willing to give up the home he had worked so hard to get back to? Would he abandon the Silver Gate after working on it for ten long years? Even if he did, how long could he ignore his home when he had the capability to propel himself back to it? Home...a place where everything would be familiar and comfortable for him-a place where he belonged. Did she even dare ask him to consider such a sacrifice?

Oh, Mikolen. *Ne mana ya, ne mana ya.* There was no mistaking how she felt anymore. She was in love, and her heart ached to think that she might lose him.

Chapter Twenty

Mike turned away after Askins dropped to the ground, a jagged hole yawning in the place where his arm had been. Tim Tonnelly and Jim Morchison, the former Kastaks, laughed coarsely and pointed as they worked the winches, throwing their weight into the cranks to feed the rocsadon more chain, giving it plenty of room to attack. Mike walked behind the Kastaks to wait until it was over. He didn't care to watch. His turned his thoughts to Katera.

She had a lot to think about. So did he. Though he'd been pleased to announce the liberation of Parallon from Askins' tyranny, a sinking feeling told him that Katera and her family would want to stay and build a new Parallon. There was much to do, and they'd want to help, of course. Phenomenal growth would grip the village in a happy frenzy for years to come-there'd be remodeling and the construction of new schools, markets, government buildings for the elders, libraries for their primitive books, healing houses for the sick. And they'd build new homes everywhere as their numbers grew.

A variety of jobs to sustain the infrastructure would arise, as well, with work flourishing for architects and masons, leaders and politicians, judges and men of law, herbal doctors and medicine men, teachers, artisans and tradesmen. The idea of immersing themselves in all that activity would be irresistible for Katera and her family, as it would be for all Parallonians. Hell, even Mike wanted to stay and help. To be truthful, however, he had another reason, a far more powerful reason, for wanting to stay.

The reason had green eyes and long hair that tumbled, soft and dark in voluptuous curls down a pair of delicate arms. The reason moved with the grace of a meadow doe. The reason had breath that smelled like the sweet sap of the ripened lidala vine. And every time the reason smiled, Mike felt his heart thump, as if this were the reason he'd been born.

Mike sighed. How had it come to this? It used to be so simple. He'd had a mission with nothing to distract him, but after meeting Katera, he'd lost something...what was it? His momentum-he'd lost his momentum. His motivation had screeched to a grinding halt. Good thing the project was nearly complete, except for the EM Sphere. He fingered the slippery orb in his pocket. He doubted he would have built Silver Gate if he'd met Katera first. Damn. Without any effort his heart had taken over and made the stargate less important than...her. When did that happen? At what point, exactly, did he start wanting to be wherever she was? He wasn't sure. He only knew that he felt willing to give it up-all the years of waiting and building and pilfering materials and supplies-the whole stargate dream...willing to quit it just to be with her.

So, how much better did that make him than Askins? Askins had made his involvement with the people more important than the mission. He'd done the unthinkable-he'd interfered in a negative fashion. He'd used his knowledge to enslave an entire people. Mike was on a mission, too. In his mind, he heard the oath that every scientist at Tescali Lab had chanted dutifully before the board and its members. They'd been sworn in one at a time after agreeing to work on Project Stargate. The words to the pledge drifted through his head like an old recording:

I swear upon my life that I shall uphold all values of integrity and esteem held dear by the members of Tescali Laboratory and the Board of Directors. If I travel to other places in time, in reverence of all people, I hereby swear not to interfere. I will collect data and evidence and bring it back to the Tescali Laboratory in 2275 AD, or the equivalent present time as soon as possible for the purpose of study and scholarly reflection. I swear to leave all people and their civilizations intact, exactly as I find them, except to advert calamity or disaster instigated by myself or another member of Tescali Laboratory, either willfully or accidentally. I will keep my purpose and mission in mind at all times: to 1) bring back evidence that substantiates a successful traverse through time, 2) practice peaceful non-interference with any cultures, past or future, and 3) return promptly to Tescali Laboratory when the mission is complete.

True, he hadn't traveled through time by choice; he'd been abducted by a madman. Ten years had passed since he'd been home, but did that diminish his purpose? He had built Silver Gate to keep good his oath and return to the lab with the data. His allegiance to the men and women of Tescali was sealed, and he would not break his word. He had no choice. He had to go home, back to his time. He could not abandon the plan that others had entrusted to him. Especially after Askins' betrayal.

Nor could he forget that he had a duty to perform in the name of the seven murdered scientists-his friends-a duty to return and report everything. Their widows and widowers deserved to know the truth. As it dawned on him what he must do, he understood this would end the budding romance between him and Katera. He must forget all hope of a life with her. The thought of it snagged him like a spear to his gut, and he clutched his chest. He had to get through this. He must somehow get through this. He had a duty to perform. He would force himself through it, step by numbing step.

The sudden absence of screams told Mike that the rocsadon had finished its dirty business. He turned to see Morchison and Tonnely tethering the animal as it swayed back and forth on the chains, looking extremely agitated. Probably too much suderik. Reluctantly, Mike allowed the former Kastaks to follow him outside the pen to join Katera. As Morchison and Tonnely recanted the gorging of the rocsadon play by play, Mike realized that eventually he was going to have to deal with these two. There was no place for them in a free society, neither here nor back home. When he brought them back to Earth 2275, he'd have to notify the authorities and have them arrested. Their crimes against humanity were relevant in both Parallon and his world.

As he rounded the corner, his eyes met Katera's, and he knew from the slight redness that she'd been

crying. He felt the pain in her heart with a jolt in his own. She looked lost, as if she didn't know what to do. Was she worried about her family? Her future? Was she grieving for Adrella? Whatever was causing her anguish, he wanted to make it stop.

"Katera, I..." He pulled her to him and tucked his chin over her head. A strangled noise fell out of her throat, as if it was all too much. "Don't worry. There are wonderful things ahead for you and your family. You will heal in time. You will thrive and live a long, long life."

Katera looked up at him, her eyes spilling over. "Mikolen, my family will want me to stay in Parallon with them and Rorken."

"I know." He forced himself to speak softly, though he wanted to shout from the pit of his stomach: *Don't leave me!*

"But I don't want to stay without...you, Mikolen."

Mike lurched in surprise. What was she saying? Did she mean it? Was she suggesting that she leave her family to go with him? On wings of soaring hope, he grabbed both her hands.

"Then come with me," he whispered, turning his back on Morchison and Tonnelly. "Come with me to my world, and I will take care of you for the rest of our lives together." Mike cupped her hands inside his and pulled them to his chest. "Katera..."

He wanted to ask her...what? Oh, God, that was it. He searched her eyes. Ah, those eyes. The color of sea waves backlit by the sun. What he would give to bring this promise of happiness with him! He would do it now...yes. He would ask her to marry him, right now. He would tell her that he loved her, that he would love her always. Even with Morchison and Tonnelly standing two feet behind him, he was ready to say it. There was no time to search for the right place, the perfect moment. If he didn't say it, she might be lost to him forever. He was ready...but she was pulling away. What?

"Mikolen..." He saw the look in her eyes and with a flash of understanding, let go of her hands. His hopes plummeted. "Please, I must stay *here*. I cannot leave Parallon." She reached out a hand and placed it over his heart. " *You stay here with me* ."

Mike thought his heart couldn't plunge any lower, but it dropped through the bottoms of his feet.

"I cannot," he said, "I..."

His mouth froze open. He knew he should explain-he should say more, but he could not find the proper words. No words existed to describe the desolation he was feeling.

"Stay with me," Katera repeated. "Stay with me and help us rebuild Parallon. Stay."

That was impossible, but Mike could not bring himself to tell her. He swallowed hard and drew her to him, wrapping his arms around her slender frame. He held her tightly, afraid to let go. Behind him, Morchison and Tonnelly were whispering and shifting. He had no desire to surrender this moment. Katera must have felt the same way, because she was tightening her grip around his neck. He heard a muffled sob, her head buried in his chest, and he pressed his lips into the top of her head, feeding on her desperation and offering his own.

Too soon, he felt a rough hand on his shoulder, and Morchison's gravelly voice, thick with suspicion.

"Hey! C'mon. We gotta go. You promised us a trip back home. Remember?"

Reluctantly, Mike loosened his grip on Katera and turned to face Morchison. "Do we have some kind of emergency? You've already been here for ten years. Do you think you can handle another five minutes?"

Morchison glowered, his eyes hardening. Mike turned back to Katera. Her eyes were glued on his.

"Stay," she repeated.

Mike cupped her chin with his hand. How was he going to break the news? How did one present such a final farewell? *Well, Katera, not only must I leave, but this'll be it for us, so please don't wait for me. You'll grow old and gray without me.*

He wanted to turn away, avoid the pleading look in her eyes. She looked so...hopeful. He searched his brain for any vestige of an idea that would keep them together, but he could see no way out of this one. The oath was clear. Since calamity and disaster were no longer driving the lives of her family, he could not justify staying in Parallon-the policy of non-interference was etched in granite. He had to go.

"Katera," he began.

The pain exploded on the side of his head as something hard and cold connected with his skull.

He heard Katera scream as he stumbled sideways into the dirt. He landed in a pile on the ground and looked up, stunned. Morchison was holding a short length of chain, which he must have plucked from the rocsadon's den and hidden in the satchel he carried with him. Mike's hand went to the searing heat in his head and pulled away blood-smearred fingers.

What? Why would he? He needs me; I'm his ticket home. In the next instant, he understood. *He thinks I'm going to stay in Parallon with Katera; he thinks I won't take him back to our time.*

In the same moment, he realized Katera was in danger. If Morchison wanted to force him to do something, Katera would be the natural pawn. He sprang to his feet with a howl, ready to lunge, his back hunched and knees bent cat-like, but it was too late. Tonnelly had snatched Katera around the neck and was brandishing a long, thin knife under her chin, forcing her head up. A look of disbelief spread over her features.

"Throw your knife down," Morchison commanded. "Now!"

"Let her go," Mike said, lifting his knife from its sheath and tossing it on the ground in front of Morchison. "Let her go, and I'll give you whatever you want. But I swear, if you hurt her-if you damage one single hair, you'll never see 2275 AD or anything like it again...ever."

"Calm down, Leno," Morchison said, as Tonnelly scooped up the knife. "You get us back to the future, and she'll be just fine. Nothing's changed-nothing at all-we've just secured a

little insurance for the plan. You can bring your little wench to the future with you, if you want."

"Trust me, you'll have no plan if you hurt her." Mike glanced at Katera, who seemed to have recovered from her surprise and was narrowing her eyes at Morchison.

"I'm not going with you to your world," she told him.

Morchison cast a fleeting look in her direction and turned away wearing a wan smile, as if to dismiss her. His gaze settled back on Mike.

"The wench wants to stay, Leno. She doesn't want to go with you." Morchison paused to let this sink in.

Mike's jaw tensed. "Why in the world would we want to take her back with us anyway? She'll only make a stink about our involvement here, probably tell them we hurt people or some other ridiculous story."

"You did hurt people," Katera hissed.

"Shut up, whore!" Morchison bellowed in her direction. Blood rushed to his face, turning his cheeks a deep, blotchy rose. "You were not given permission to speak." Mike watched Katera fall silent, but she did not shrink from Morchison's gaze. "When I want you to say something, you'll know it."

"Hey!" Mike yelled, drawing Morchison's attention away from Katera. "You want my help? Then leave her alone."

Morchison grinned, showing a cracked front tooth.

"Sure thing, Leno." Morchison held up his empty hand. "I won't hurt her if you deliver. Promise."

Mike had no doubt that Morchison and Tonnelly *would* hurt them and dispose of their bodies as easily as they'd chuck the shell of a nut...if they didn't need him. That, and that alone would keep them alive. The man had the compassion of a rocsadon with a toothache, he thought bitterly as Morchison motioned for him to start down the trail. As he moved onto the path that led down the mountain, he heard Tonnelly command Katera to stand still. Mike spun around to see Tonnelly tugging on a secured knot in a length of rope that bound her wrists behind her back.

"Keep moving and keep your eyes forward," Morchison ordered, nudging Mike from behind with a long stick. "One wrong move, and Tonnelly's going to cut something off that little beauty of yours. Maybe just a finger or a toe, but who knows? If you want to play it safe, I think you'd better keep walking."

Ignoring him, Mike waited, watching Katera as she winced from the tightened bindings. Morchison slapped the stick against the side of Mike's face. Mike grabbed the end of it and yanked. Morchison, his balance upset, let go of the stick and stumbled forward. Mike tossed the stick and leaped into Morchison at the level of his solar plexus, propelling them both onto the ground. Sucking up a mouthful of dust, Mike rolled with Morchison in a violent tangle of limbs and fists.

Then he heard her scream.

Mike shot a stunned look in Katera's direction and froze in ice-edged horror. She'd been turned around so that her bound hands were exposed to him. And, oh, God, they were a bloody mess. He couldn't see the problem at first, and then Tonnelly flung something small at him. It landed with a plop in the dirt a few feet away...something pink, bloody, now caked with dust.

Damn. It was her finger. Her pinky, he thought, though it was too bloody to be sure. His mind reeling, he rolled over and scooped it up as Morchison scrambled to his feet. As soon as Morchison was erect, he kicked Mike sharply in his stomach. Mike slammed his knees into his chest, cringing from the pain, the finger pressed inside his fist like a precious jewel. He held himself as tight as a ball while the kicks and blows rained upon him.

When Morchison had spent his anger, Mike opened back up and heard Katera's sobs. He wanted to tell her he was all right, but Morchison was forcing him to his feet, and Mike's mouth was full of something...blood. He spat it out and heard Katera sob again.

"Keep walking or she loses another digit," Morchison said. This time, Mike obeyed.

They moved down the trail a few hundred yards to the hoshdels' barn and corral. Tonnelly saddled up a hoshdel for Katera while Morchison grabbed a spear leaning against the fence. Tonnelly bandaged

Katera's wound with some cloth to stop the bleeding, then tossed her like a sack of potatoes over the hoshdel's withers onto her stomach, her tied hands stretched behind her. It had to hurt.

"Please," Mike whispered. "I'm begging you. You don't need to do that. She's not going to run away. Let her sit up and ride. Or at least walk. That position is going to kill her."

Morchison blinked stupidly at Mike, as if he couldn't fathom what he'd heard. Then his expression contorted into a scowl, and Mike felt a sense of dread rise like bile in the pit of his stomach. Morchison spun around, still carrying the spear, and walked over to Katera. He snatched a fistful of her hair with his free hand and used it to wrench her head back.

"You want to walk, bitch?" he said, pressing his face into hers. "Would you like to walk? Tell you what, I'll tie your sorry ass to the hoshdel's tail, then you can dodge his kickin' feet all the way down the mountain. Would you like that? You want to walk?" Katera shook her head, grimacing, and Morchison shoved her face back into the hoshdel's neck. Mike's blood sizzled as he watched Morchison stroll back toward him. "She doesn't want to walk," he said, shrugging, as if he'd just given it his best try. "However, you may walk, though I think a small adjustment is needed first."

Morchison pointed a finger upward and painted a circle in the air. Still seething, Mike turned around and offered his clenched fists behind his back. Morchison motioned for Tonnelly to grab a length of rope from the hoshdel's barn. He wound it tightly around Mike's wrists. When he'd finished, he gestured grandly toward the trail.

"Shall we go?"

Without daring to look back at Katera, Mike turned and stumbled onto the path that led them to the caves at the bottom of Kan Mountain. Morchison fell in behind him, aiming the tip of the spear at his back. It was mid-afternoon, and the hike normally took most of a day. Leaving at this hour would place them at the caves around midnight. That gave him plenty of time to think. He needed to think.

He didn't believe Morchison and Tonnelly were planning to take him and Katera with them to the future, nor did he believe they planned to leave them behind. He had little doubt that as soon as the EM Sphere was in place and Silver Gate ready to go, these two men would make short work of killing them both, if only for the sheer pleasure of it. He had to come up with a plan before then. He had to think.

To keep him focused, he reflected on the bloody finger tucked gingerly inside his fist, and a slow rage seethed inside him.

He would find a way.

Chapter Twenty-One

Katera, doubled over the hoshdel's back, squirmed in agony. A searing heat ran up her arm from her wounded hand. She could see the dark, silhouetted shapes of Mikolen and Morchison on the trail ahead. The hoshdel leapt over a large rock in the trail, and a sea of nausea rose inside her, filling her throat. Struggling to keep it at bay, she lifted her head off the hoshdel's neck to breathe.

"Mikolen," she called, weakly.

There was a scuffle on the trail ahead, and she heard Mikolen's voice. "She sounds feverish. Let me go to her." Who was feverish? Was he talking about her? "Katera? Hang on!" he called to her.

She heard a smack and realized that Morchison had pelted Mikolen-probably slapped him. She resolved

not to speak again as long as Mikolen had to take punishment for it. She lay her head back down, but the nausea surged into her throat again. This time, she couldn't hold it back and heaved over the hoshdel's side.

"Oh, crap!" yelled Tonnelly. "She upchucked all over me!" Trembling, Katera lifted her head. Tonnelly hopped off the clean side of the hoshdel and rummaged through the pack on the hoshdel's hindquarters. "I smell like shit," he cried. "Great way to return home, smelling like a sewer!"

He produced a torn cloth from the satchel and stood back to wipe his pants. In the meantime, Morchison tied the length of rope around Mikolen's wrist to the branch of a tree, and headed back to her and Tonnelly.

"Okay, you can sit up, bitch. And you can walk, Tonnelly."

"Fine. I don't want to get back up there. It's contaminated." Tonnelly tore the top off the water container secured to his waist and spilled it onto his pants. "Damn stink."

Morchison ignored him as he pulled Katera off the hoshdel and hoisted her upright into the saddle. She struggled to keep her balance as her head went swimming. Morchison reached around her back and fiddled with the knot on her wrists.

"You're going to let her ride free?" Tonnelly asked, looking up.

"Yeah. She's not going anywhere," Morchison said, under his breath. "She's delirious, got a pretty serious infection. It might kill her, maybe soon. We've got to keep her alive long enough for Leno to give us what we want. That's two more hours." He looked up at Katera. "Think you can handle that? Two hours, that's all we need. Then you can keel over. Okay?" He grinned and patted her bottom, then fed the reins back over the hoshdel's head and handed them off to Tonnelly. "Watch her closely. If it looks like she's going to pass out, throw her back on her stomach over the hoshdel, so Leno doesn't know she's lost it."

Tonnelly flashed a thumb's up. "Got it." He gave an excited laugh. "Man, I can't wait to get home. They probably think we're dead back there at Tescali. Won't they be in for the shock of their lives?"

Morchison sighed, as if he were dealing with a tiresome child. "They won't think we're dead. They won't have had time to think that. We'll be returning only one day after Askins disappeared with the entire lab. So there'll be no Tescali Lab when we return. It's on the top of Kan Mountain, remember? They'll be in shock from that, and from the disappearance of every scientist who happened to be inside the lab at the time. And when we show up, we'll be ten years older. They'll be so dizzy with it all, they'll eat up whatever story we feed them." Morchison cast a surreptitious glance at Mikolen, who was struggling with his bindings. He turned his back and lowered his voice. Katera leaned forward in the saddle. "We can tell them anything we want. We can say Askins killed Leno after Leno built another stargate, and we escaped just in time. Of course, we can't have Leno around telling them he's alive."

"We're not bringing him with us?" Tonnelly looked worried. "But we need him to configure the stargate."

"I know something about it. I was one of the original technicians that helped send Askins off on his first trip into the past. I need Leno to lead us to it and dial in the settings, then I'll double-check them. If they're off, I'll know it. We'll use this little beauty here to motivate him, if we need to."

They both glanced at Katera. She let her chin wobble onto her chest, as if she were losing consciousness.

"She doesn't look like she's going to make it that far," said Tonnelly.

Morchison scowled. "She'll make it. Give her water. Give her whatever she needs. We'll be there soon."

"All right...so, we're not going to let them live?"

Katera opened one eye to see Morchison silently drawing a finger across his throat. So, that was it. They planned to kill them both at the caves. Well, let them try. There was help back in the caves. These men were not aware that her parents, Shamana, and Rorken were already there. Mama and Papa would help. Shamana would help. They'd see them coming, then they'd surprise the creeps and overpower them. Simple.

Tonnely reached up and shook Katera by the arm.

"Hey, you. Wake up," he said, gruffly.

Katera let her eyes flutter open. "Huh?" she asked, feigning confusion.

Tonnely thrust his water container at her. "Drink," he commanded.

Katera took it and sipped. She would make it, she thought, as she handed the container back. She pressed one hand against the wooden crescent that lay against her sternum under her panna. She would make it.

She slumped into the saddle as they set off into the cool night. She would pretend to be weak, so they would not suspect it when she hurled something at them-maybe she would be able to grab Tonnely's knife if she was fast enough. Maybe...

Katera felt her head spinning and grabbed the saddle horn for balance. She missed and caught a fistful of hoshdel hair. The momentum propelled her forward. Unable to stop, she slipped up onto the hoshdel's neck, then over and onto the ground where she rolled onto her back. Tonnely kneeled beside her and pressed his fingers roughly into her neck to take her pulse.

His breath smelled foul, like a rotting piece of meat. She tried to turn her head away, but it felt too heavy. She wanted to rest, to nap for a little while; regain her strength, so she could help Mikolen. She would rest just a little.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"They're coming. I hear a hoshdel," Shamana whispered excitedly to Katera's parents, standing behind her as she peered through the mouth of the cave. They strained forward to examine the dark shapes moving through the brush outside. "It's Mikolen...and others are with him. Quick. Turn off your lanadiks."

Moreesha and Rinden switched off their lights, plunging the cave into darkness. Mikolen's voice drifted toward them from the advancing party.

"I want to check her. Let me see her." His tone held a blend of insistence and desperation. "I'm not doing anything for you unless she's okay."

"Take my word for it. She's okay," said another voice, one that sent an icy shudder through Shamana. She knew that voice. Kastak Morchison. What was Mikolen doing with him?

"We have to hide," she spluttered, stumbling away from the entrance.

"Who is it? Who's out there?" Moreesha asked, looking alarmed.

"It's a Kastak," Shamana said, her voice trembling. "A really bad one."

Moreesha jockeyed in front of Shamana and peered into the night, struggling to make out the figures as they approached. Then she gasped.

"Merciful Lupana. It's Katera...or is it Adrella? Oh, she's hurt! Look, Rinden." Moreesha pointed an unsteady finger at the silhouette of a hoshdel with a body draped over it. "That's one of our girls."

Moreesha charged out of the cave, stumbling blindly toward the hoshdel that bore the shape of a young woman bent over the saddle.

"Moreesha!" her husband called after her, and then he, too, barreled out of the cave.

As Shamana edged away, she heard Moreesha's shrill scream outside, then the muffled shouts of men. She heard a brief struggle, and then silence. She froze with the stillness and waited breathlessly. More shuffling, more voices. Whose?

Morchison's harsh voice sliced through the blackness. Shamana felt panic grip her in the gut. Twirling around, she spied a box used for storing tack and other hoshdel gear. She opened it and scrambled inside, pulling a saddle and blanket over her. A small crack in the boards gave her a way to see out, and she pressed her eye against it. Her entire body trembled as she struggled to stay calm.

A moment later, Mikolen entered the antechamber, followed by Morchison. He lit the wall lanadik. Rinden entered next with his hands in the air. Tonnelly followed, brandishing a knife under Moreesha's chin. A hoshdel lumbered in after everyone, bearing Katera's body.

"Get over there against the wall," Morchison said, signaling with his spear to Rinden.

Morchison approached the hoshdel and pulled a length of rope from the animal's satchel, which he used to secure Rinden's hands behind his back. As he worked, Moreesha babbled, her chin poised over Tonnelly's knife.

"Please, help her. Help Katera. She's very sick. Look at her arm. It's red and swollen. And where is Adrella? What have you done with her?"

"It's not what I did with her," Morchison said, as he yanked the knot behind Rinden's back, tightening it. "It's what a rocsadon did with her."

Shamana detected a demented satisfaction in his voice. A pregnant silence fell over Moreesha as she struggled to absorb the information. She looked at Katera, then back at Morchison. Gasping, Moreesha drove her chin into the air and let out a long wail.

"Nooooo!"

"Shut-up!" Morchison yelled, but she either didn't hear him or didn't care. Tonnelly held the knife under her chin as wracking sobs shook her body. Morchison looked at her with disgust, yelled "shut up" again. When she didn't, he closed the distance between them with a couple of swift strides. He shoved his face into hers. "Shut-up or the other one gets it, too," he spat. Then, he lowered his voice so that Shamana couldn't hear what he said next, but whatever it was, it reduced Moreesha's cries to a whimper. Morchison sneered at Moreesha and turned around, tossing his head in Mikolen's direction. "I'd really like to keep Katera alive." He flashed a wide grin. "If *you'd* like her to stay alive, I suggest you fix those settings on that time machine of yours."

Mikolen nodded and turned halfway around to show his bound wrists. "Can't do much with these."

Morchison motioned for Tonnelly to untie Mikolen while Morchison guarded Moreesha. When Tonnelly

finished, Morchison used the rope from Mikolen's wrists to tie up Moreesha, who was still sobbing, though more subdued. Next, he secured Rinden and Moreesha to a wooden bar used for the animals. After tying Katera's hoshdel to the bar, he straightened and turned to Mikolen.

"Let's go," he said. "I want to see your stargate."

"Lemme come, too," Tonnelly said, and pointed at Rinden, Moreesha, and Katera. "They're not going anywhere. C'mon. I gotta see this thing."

"All right," Morchison said, obviously feeling generous. "Let's check this jewel out."

They left, pushing Mikolen ahead of them. Shamana listened as their echoes faded away. When she could no longer hear them, she lifted the lid on the box and peered out. Moreesha and Rinden stared at her. She lifted a finger to her lips, crawled out of the box, and tiptoed across the floor to them.

"I'm going to get help," she whispered.

"Take us with you. Untie us." Rinden sounded harsh.

"If I do that, they'll follow. And we can't get Rorken, who is asleep in a cave room near the stargate. If he wakes up and cries, it'll be all over. Plus, we only have one hoshdel, and Katera's on it. Mikolen's hoshdels are outside, but I doubt we have time to round them up and get them saddled. We're sure to attract attention if we try. And think about it...one person will have to ride with Katera, and two of us will have to walk, one carrying Rorken, so we can't go very fast. They'll catch up for sure, and I don't know what they'll do to us," Shamana said. "They don't know I'm here. I can run like the wind and get to the village in an hour. I'll return even sooner on hoshdels with lots of help."

Rinden raised an eyebrow. "Why would anyone want to help? It's dangerous for them. Askinadon punishes treachery with torture and death."

"I'll show them the VisiOrb and how to take it out of their heads." Shamana tilted her head. "Do you think they will resist this freedom?"

Rinden fell silent for a moment. "No," he said, finally. "They should go for it."

"You did," Shamana reminded him. "And I did."

"Yes, but we believed we could escape to Mikolen's time," Rinden said, sounding doubtful.

"I would have done it, anyway. I would have fled through the mountains."

Rinden nodded. "You may have something there. But if it takes two hours to get back here-that's one and a half if you're quick-it could be too late. We may be all be dead."

"It'll be too late for all of us if they catch us on the move," Shamana said. "At least this way, it is guaranteed that I will reach the village to get help. And they don't know Rorken's here. He can go undetected until he wakes up tomorrow morning. There are many rooms in this cave. They have no reason to investigate them. Rorken is safe. If I am not discovered, I am free to come back and get him." She didn't add: *In case everything else goes wrong.*

Rinden looked thoughtful. "Okay, but please, for the sake of Katera, hurry."

They both glanced in her direction. Her head lay motionless on the hoshdel's shaggy neck. Shamana drew in a deep breath and placed a hand on Rinden's shoulder.

"Ne pak falennik o Lupana," she whispered. "I go on the wings of Lupana." Then she placed her other hand over her heart. "Lan lukora pak ya."

"And truth and light go with you, too, Shamana," Rinden said. "Taka Ra. Good luck."

Shamana smiled, then turned to Moreesha. "Don't worry. I'll be back."

Moreesha, who had been staring at Katera's motionless form, turned to Shamana with a glazed look in her eyes, adding to the sense of urgency that Shamana felt. Shamana reached over and held her hand against Moreesha's cheek.

"I will bring the herb doctor with me. He will help Katera."

Moreesha smiled feebly. Interpreting this as sanction to leave, Shamana rose and stole out of the cave.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mike led the former Kastaks to a chamber far back in the heart of the tunnel system—the chamber where he'd labored for ten years collecting and assembling materials to recreate the greatest device ever known to his planet. As they turned the corner, Mike lit the wall lanadik. In the sudden flood of light, a giant silver cylinder in the center of the chamber cast a brilliant glow into the room. Equipment and tools, set on and around two long wooden tables, lined the periphery of the chamber. Silver Gate looked deceptively simple. The walls were fifteen feet high and fashioned from a shiny, polished metal. There were no portholes or roof, and the walls curved in a single elegant line, broken only by a two-foot wide opening that reached from top to bottom and served as a doorway. Within, a translucent panel blinked with numerous icons.

"It looks like Star Gate One," Tonnelly said, sounding disappointed.

"It was modeled after it," Mike said. "I built the first one, so I figured I could build another one like it, providing the lab had the materials I needed. And it did."

"Good," Morchison said, shoving Mike toward the opening. "Go set the time. I want our arrival to be one day after Askins escaped with us in 2275." Morchison watched him as Mike manipulated the controls. "We don't want to arrive before that. We'll go spiraling into another universe if we do."

"Yeah, we already had that happen once," Tonnelly snorted, stepping inside, "when Askins came back to Parallon while he was still in it. Started up this whole new universe with those ugly rocsadons." He gestured to the walls around him as if rocsadons were waiting on the other side. "If that's what happens with a universe warp, count me out." He turned to Morchison. "You think rocsadons will still be around when we get back home?"

"Maybe," Mike interjected, hopefully. "Maybe they've taken over the earth, and there'll be no more humans. You sure you want to do this? This is not our original universe. Everything could be very different."

Morchison sneered, "You know very well that isn't true. The only thing that distorts in a new universe is the lower forms of life with their slower vibratory energy. That's how we got takataks and hoshdels and rocsadons. They didn't exist in their present form in the other universe. Humans never warp. They just clone into the new universe without changing a single hair. We'll have the same people in 2275 that we had in the old universe. Plus maybe a rocsadon and a takatak or two. That's all."

Mike turned away and made his final adjustments to Silver Gate, expanding the walls so they'd fit around

the traveling party. Morchison was right. The future in this universe would have all the same players, the human ones, that is. It was part of the mathematical Displacement Law established by colleague and close friend, Greg Kurtz. All warped features, whether plant or animal, molded into the time structure of the new universe without effecting humans and human events, which belonged on a higher, more resilient vibratory scale. The new warped elements, like the rocsadons, could not interfere. If a rocsadon devoured a person, it was because that person would have died at that moment from another cause. It had been a profound discovery, leading to a plethora of implications. Kurtz had been working on it when his life was cut short, leveled by Askins with a Beamer when they'd first arrived in Parallon.

Mike's thoughts turned to Kurtz's widow, Felipa, now the sole owner of Kurtz's Quantum Energy Sources. She wouldn't even know she was a widow until someone told her. This would hit her hard, and he wanted to be the one to tell her-to break it gently. Greg and Felipa had been good friends. Felipa didn't need one of these hardened former Kastaks unloading information about Greg's death like they were reporting on a slaughtered chicken.

Mike glanced at the final settings, which read July 24, 2275 AD-one day after the lab had disappeared into the past. He was almost finished-one item remained. He gingerly extracted the EM Sphere from his pocket and held it up. All three men gazed in amazement at the incredible sphere, three inches in diameter and pulsating with a soft inner light.

"Careful," Mike warned, as Morchison edged in closer. "It's the last one left in this world...no technology exists here to mine another one."

"How much energy does one of them hold?" Tonnelly asked, raising a bushy brow.

"More than enough Planck energy to power the stargate," Morchison breathed. His eyes, gleaming with greed, locked on the sphere. "And one infinitesimal unit of Planck energy is one hundred billion, billion times the energy locked inside a proton."

Mike glanced at Morchison. Clearly, the man knew his stuff. Mike would have to move very carefully. Still, Morchison wasn't a scientist, just a well-informed technician. Hopefully, he wouldn't notice the small adjustment Mike was about to make.

"I never did too good in physics," Tonnelly commented. "How does that little ball hold all that energy without exploding or something?"

"The boundary, or containment material, which keeps the energy from erupting into our dimension, is extracted with it," Mike said.

"What?" Tonnelly bent his neck forward.

"The material that holds it together is taken from the same place as the energy," Morchison added, looking at Tonnelly.

As Morchison turned away, Mike's fingers moved swiftly over the panel activating the unlabeled icon-the one Mike had added for emergencies. A small, red light near the bottom of the panel flashed on. Just as swiftly, Mike withdrew his hand and feigned interest in the settings in front of him. He realized he'd been holding his breath, and exhaled softly. Tonnelly smiled.

"Extracted...containment material, huh? Well, never mind. As long as it gets us home." He patted Mike on the shoulder. "Good work, Leno. Too bad you won't be coming with us."

Morchison threw Tonnelly a pained look, and Mike realized that Morchison understood his cover was

blown. Mike knew he never intended to include him in his travel plans, but now Morchison knew that he knew. The real plan, glaringly obvious, held little value for the lives of Mike, Katera, and her parents. Morchison's insurance and Mike's cooperation evaporated simultaneously. Morchison would need new motivation to force Mike into finishing the task.

"Get out and guard the girl!" Morchison roared at Tonnelly. "Now!"

As Tonnelly swung around to leave, Mike dove into him, sending them both hurtling into the cave wall. Morchison charged past both of them, heading out of the chamber. Mike attempted to seize one of Morchison's legs as he bulled past, but Tonnelly threw his weight over Mike, throwing him off-balance.

Mike managed to power into a roll and came out of it on top of Tonnelly. In the confusion brought on by the suddenness of the maneuver, he slipped from Tonnelly's grasp and sprang to his feet. He dashed into the cave tunnel after Morchison. Racing through it with long, desperate strides, he soon skidded into the cave antechamber, his arms flailing. There he pulled himself up, regained his balance ...and slowly raised both hands.

Morchison had pulled Katera from the hoshdel and was crouching with Katera's unconscious body splayed across one raised knee. He had a knife perched at her throat. Moreesha, sobbing a few feet away, grappled with the rope around her wrists. Rinden looked miserable in his helplessness as he, too, struggled with his bindings. Mike heard Tonnelly stumble into the antechamber, but didn't turn around.

"Tie him up," Morchison instructed, tossing his chin at Mike. "Tie him to the post here with the parents. They can keep each other company."

Mike took a cautious step forward, but Morchison pressed the knife into Katera's soft, skin, drawing a dark, red bead from her neck. Mike felt his hands shaking as he held them higher for Morchison to see.

"Okay, okay. Look. No weapons," he said, struggling to control his voice.

"Get your hands behind your back," Morchison ordered.

Mike quickly obliged, crossing his wrists loosely as Tonnelly wound a coarse rope around them. When Tonnelly finished, he tugged on the rope, pulling Mike over to the bar where he tied him next to Rinden.

"Let her go." Mike mustered up the gentlest voice he could manage. "Just put her down. You've got what you want. Take Silver Gate and go."

A grin spread across Morchison's face "Well, now Mike, I just don't know about that."

A thick cord of fear rose in Mike's throat. "Don't even think it," he said, evenly.

"Think what?" Morchison asked, as he stroked the knife under Katera's chin.

"You don't want to kill her...us."

"And why shouldn't I, Leno? Do I owe you something? Oh, yeah, maybe I do. You built the stargate, didn't you?" He laughed derisively. "But so what? Slicing the throat of this wench sounds like more fun than doing you a favor." Moreesha cried out, and the corners of Morchison's thin lips curved down as a fierceness entered his eyes. "Her sister was nothing but a whore who thought she could mock me." Flecks of spittle flew from his mouth, and Mike thought Morchison might lose it. But then, he caught his breath. "It will give me great pleasure to slice this one. Perhaps as much as watching the rocsadon guzzle her sister."

With a mad look in his eye, he raised the blade. Moreesha sobbed uncontrollably.

"No!" Mike shouted. "If you do that, I won't make you a rich man for the rest of your life." Morchison's knife froze in the air. Mike launched into his pitch, the one he'd been planning since they left the summit of Kan Mountain. "As you may remember, in the year 2275 AD, I am a rich man-very rich." Morchison straightened, and Mike forged on, encouraged. "You may recall that I secured the rights to the special technology needed to harvest energy for the EM Sphere. Remember? I created it."

Morchison lifted a brow. "Greg Kurtz owned the company that mined Planck energy."

"I leased the rights to Kurtz to *use* the technology and mine energy at the quantum level, but I own them."

Morchison didn't need to know that Mike *had* sold the rights to Kurtz. He had not been interested in developing the company and knew that Kurtz had the mind and will to do it. Mike had signed them over to his good friend. It was a way for the world to leap forward with a major technological development. He was betting that Morchison would never understand the relinquishment of a fortune for any reason. Morchison lowered his arm.

"All right. So?"

"So I can give you the numbers you'll need to claim those rights. I can give you my signature numbers, which will allow you to transfer the rights to your name, along with my signed release. You can tell them I signed them over to you just before I died as a gesture of gratitude for ten years of loyalty. I'll even include that in my statement."

Morchison was listening closely, his hold on the knife relaxed. "Go on."

"Not only will you inherit fifteen million dollars, but the rights alone will keep you and your heirs sinfully wealthy for many, many decades...maybe centuries."

Morchison re-sheathed the knife and lowered Katera to the cave floor. He stood up and walked over to Mike, towering over him.

"You're going to give me those numbers, and you're going to sign a release. And if you give me the wrong numbers, I'll seek out and destroy every single person in our time that you care about. You have a brother, right? James, isn't it? And his wife Lisa? Two kids? And the Kurtz widow...what's her name? Felipa?"

Mike glared at him, but spoke softly. "You'll get the right numbers, but not until I see Katera and her parents safely leave this cave."

Morchison stared for a moment, smiled, and turned to Tonnelly. "Untie them. Put the wench back on the hoshdel and let them go." Tonnelly didn't budge. "I said untie them!"

"Not unless you share that fortune with me," Tonnelly said, looking surly. "Why should you be the only one to get rich?"

"Of course I'm going to share it with you," Morchison said, smoothly. "I wouldn't have it any other way." He smiled. "We'll have Leno make out the release to both of us."

Tonnelly chuckled, and moved to where Katera lay on the floor. "Man, this gets better all the time," he said, shaking his head. "What a great life we're going to have. Money, cars, the clothes--oh, man! The women will flock to us."

It happened more quickly than Mike could have predicted. Morchison's torso moved like a jungle cat. In one unified motion, he lunged toward his prey. Mike watched as the hand jerked the head back by the hair. An astonished look appeared on Tonnelly's face...then, the whiteness of the exposed throat...a stroke, a slice...and it was all over. Tonnelly crumpled onto the floor in a lifeless heap, a fount of red liquid pulsating from the wound in his throat. A silence filled the chamber as Moreesha, Rinden, and Mike stared, mesmerized by the blood spurting over the floor of the cave. Soon, that too ended.

Mike gulped. A ruthless man certainly, hardened from a decade of abuse and harsh living, but to kill his ally, his comrade, and partner without so much as blinking an eye...Mike drew in a deep breath.

"Well, I guess this means the release will be made out only to you," he said, casting a wary glance at Morchison.

Morchison plucked Tonnelly's knife from his body and sheathed the weapon with his own. He stepped over the body, carefully avoiding the blood, and kneeled in front of Katera. A sliver of alarm shot through Mike, but Morchison lifted her and carried her over to the hoshdel, draped her over the animal's back. As he moved to untie Moreesha, he cast a long look at Rinden.

"You try anything, and I'll kill you all," he said.

Rinden nodded eagerly. "Just let us go."

Rinden sounded like a man snatching a tall glass of water in a hot desert. Morchison released Moreesha, who rushed to Katera and lifted her hand to examine her finger. While Morchison worked the bindings on Rinden's wrists, he glanced at Mike.

"Remember, you give me the right numbers, or your family and friends disappear, one by one."

"You'll get them...when Katera and her parents are well out of the cave."

With Rinden free, the small party headed out through the cave opening, but not before Rinden and Moreesha turned to Mike and touched their head and hearts in the traditional gesture of thanks. Mike smiled weakly, realizing they didn't stand a chance in hell of saving Katera. They'd take her to an herb doctor, who would apply a salve to her skin that would not relieve the raging infection inside her arm. Only contemporary medicine could reverse the effects. She needed Serulin, a powerful anti-bacterial agent that would neutralize the infection within minutes. He needed to get some for her, but how much time did he have before the infection reached her heart? One, two hours? He didn't know.

Morchison disappeared into the tunnel and returned a few minutes later carrying a small table with a writing utensil and a sliver of parak on it. He freed one of Mike's wrists and gave him the utensil, then slid the table and parak under his poised hand.

"Write," he commanded.

Mike wrote. He scribbled a release, deeding the rights he didn't own to Morchison, then he added phony signature numbers before signing it. But it was real to Morchison, and Mike had signed away the last reason for the man to keep him alive.

As he handed over the document, he said quickly, "There's a number missing at the end."

"What?"

"It's missing a number, and I'll shout it to you when you press the GO characters on the panel of Silver Gate. It'll take five seconds before the EM Sphere engages, and I'll shout it to you then."

Morchison scowled. "How do I know you'll give it to me?"

"You'll know because I want my family and friends to stay alive."

Morchison gave him a hard look before reaching around to untie Mike's other wrist from the bar. He bound both wrists behind his back again and nudged him forward with the knife toward the inner chambers. Mike led Morchison back through the tunnel into the stargate chamber. Morchison wasted no time tying Mike to a pole in the corner of the room and rushing over to Silver Gate. He stepped into the doorway, then turned around to face Mike. His face shone with expectancy and...what was it? Something else...was it avarice?

"It's ready to go," Mike said, "as I'm sure you can see. The day and year are set as you requested. I just need to reconfigure it. It's been set for a party of six and needs to be downsized."

"It isn't necessary," Morchison said. "You don't need to downsize it. It'll still work."

He knows too much, Mike thought, holding his breath. And if he notices the activated icon, the unlabeled one, it'll be over before it starts.

"Yeah, but it wastes a lot of EM Sphere energy if the ratio of traveler to cylinder size is off by too much," Mike said. "You might not have enough energy to get you home, then you'll end up back here with no more EM spheres."

Morchison cursed and stepped back outside Silver Gate. Huffing, he condensed the panels, moving them manually to create a smaller cylinder. Ten minutes later, he stepped back inside.

"Okay," he said, impatiently. "Let's get this thing moving."

"Alright. All you need to do is close the cylinder, secure yourself into the chair with the overhead bar, and press GO on the panel. I'll hear Silver Gate as she starts to hum, then I'll give you the last number."

"See that you do," Morchison said, and closed the cylinder door. A few moments passed, and he yelled, "GO has been activated. Give me the number." A hum filled the cave's chamber, vibrating the walls, floor, and ceiling.

"Seven!" Mike shouted.

"Seven?"

"That's it."

"Well, maybe we'll spare your people after all!" Morchison called, laughing. "Maybe."

As Mike concentrated on Silver Gate, the walls lost their look of solidity, bending in the light as if a heat wave had entered the chamber. Soon, the cylinder was undulating as if it were liquid. And then, it vanished. In a flash, Mike was standing in the room alone. No Silver Gate, no Morchison. Good. So far, so good. And if everything went according to plan, he had one hour, no more. It would be close.

Mike forced the fingers of one bound hand into his back pocket where he had stuffed Katera's severed finger. Next to it, he fingered another treasure, one that he always carried. He had been edging it up from the bottom of his pocket since they had started their walk down Kan Mountain. Now he could feel it near the top, and with his thumb and forefinger, he drew out a small pocketknife. He pressed a side button and a two-inch blade sprang out of its sheath.

With single-minded concentration, Mike gripped the knife behind him and cut methodically into the rope wrapped tightly around his wrist. Within five minutes, one strand fell away, and in the next few minutes the hand was free. He used it to untie and discard the rope from his other wrist.

Bolting for the tunnel, Mike careered through it in record time. In the antechamber, he stepped over Tonnelly's body and threw open the hoshdel gear box. He snatched a bridle, and without waiting to grab a saddle, sped into the clearing outside where he kept the hoshdels. He spied the young male, Grindon, a swift-footed stallion not yet fully broken. He needed speed more than manageability, so he approached Grindon cautiously and slipped the bridle over his nose and neck. He threw his stomach up onto Grindon's back. The animal broke into a gallop before Mike was able to seat himself. Wrestling with the rough ride, Mike swung his right leg over Grindon's back and sat up. He pressed his knees and heels into the hoshdel's side, urging him into top speed.

"C'mon, c'mon," he beseeched the animal, leaning into his neck. "There's no time for mistakes."

The hoshdel's ears flattened into the wind as his hooves pounded against the hard ground like rocks rolling off a mountain.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"I want to destroy that Kastak!" Moreesha cried, shaking her fist.

She and Rinden led Katera's hoshdel over the trail toward the village. The tall pines surrounding the path seemed to whisper their assent as their branches rustled in the wind.

"Those Kastaks are probably long gone," Rinden said. "They've left for the future by now."

"Good riddance. Parallon is far better off without them."

"We still have Askinadon," Rinden reminded her. "And he will kill us if we try to stay in Parallon. We must escape through the mountains now that we are free from the VisiOrbs. Without them, he cannot track us. We will begin a new life on the other side."

The hoshdel behind them clipped the hard ground as it stepped high in an effort to keep up the brisk walk. Katera's body swayed over its back.

"Katera won't make it through the mountains," Moreesha said. "We must cure her first. We'll take her to Elder Toponin. He has all the herbs. He'll know what to do. Then we'll go back and get Rorken... Adrella's baby." The sound of Adrella's name ran over Moreesha's tongue like a knife. She drew in a deep breath and steeled herself. It was not time to mourn. "We must hurry and deliver Katera to Elder Toponin. He's the only one who can help her."

Silence fell between them, and Moreesha knew that they were both thinking the same thing. The elders were carefully monitored by Askinadon—they worked more closely with the tyrant than ordinary citizens. Each elder had been hand picked to perform a special duty, such as preparation of the sacrificial maiden, the selection and training of servants for Askinadon, performance of mass wedding ceremonies for the young men and women chosen for compulsory marriages, as well as general managerial tasks. They enjoyed special privileges as well—their houses held more meat, minola, and material treasures. They were allowed more leisure time, too, and their loyalties to Askinadon played out differently. Toponin may not want to help—he may not even want to remove his VisiOrb. Worse, he might turn them in, but what choice did they have? Toponin alone kept a vast stash of herbs and special potions for ailments. They must risk it. A heavy air settled over them as they trudged on.

Moreesha felt the vibration in her feet first, stopped, and strained an ear.

"Listen," she whispered, cupping a hand to her ear. "Do you hear it? A hoshdel...and it's coming fast."

"Get off the trail," Rinden ordered, tugging on the reins of Katera's hoshdel and coaxing it into the trees.

Moreesha followed, her heart racing. They ducked behind the trunks of several giant pines. The sound of hooves beating the ground increased until a hoshdel appeared at the crest of the trail galloping at full speed in the moonlight, followed by a thick cloud of dust. They stared through the trees at the approaching animal and its rider, a dark silhouette hunched over the animal's back. Moreesha gasped as hoshdel and rider drew close.

"It's Katera's friend, Mikolen." She raced into the path of the charging hoshdel, waving her arms.

Mikolen spied Moreesha and reined in the animal, hard. It came to a halt in small bucking leaps, as if it wanted to keep running. Mikolen threw his leg over the back of the skittish animal and slid off.

"Where is she? Katera? Is she with you?" he asked, breathlessly.

"She's over there."

Moreesha pointed to the trees as Rinden stepped out onto the path, leading the hoshdel with Katera on it. Mikolen rushed to Katera and lifted her off the hoshdel. Cradling her unmoving body in his arms, he carried her to the side of the trail and sat on a fallen trunk. Tenderly, he lifted her arm, inspecting it. The look in his eyes held concern...deep concern.

It hit Moreesha like a wall of water. She stared in amazement. *He's in love with her*. She could see it in the way his eyes moved over her arm, her hand, her face. Slowly, tenderly he stroked the length of her arm. There was no mistaking it, but how? It must have happened over the past week. And did Katera love him? Something told her that she did. Moreesha stole a glance at Rinden. It had been love at first sight for them, too. She understood perfectly.

"Has she regained consciousness?" Mikolen asked.

"No." Rinden said. "We were taking her to Elder Toponin. He has herbs and salves."

"Herbs and their useless pastes are not going to fix what's wrong with her," Mikolen interrupted, his voice tense. "She's very ill and hasn't got much time. When this infection reaches her heart, it will stop beating."

He pointed at the line of angry redness that scaled most of her arm from her four remaining fingers, which looked like fresh sausages: fat and pink, tight and tender. Moreesha's hand flew to her chest.

"What can we do?"

"Nothing," Mikolen said, quietly. "Nothing in this world."

"What do you mean?" Rinden asked. "Can you help her in your world?"

Mikolen nodded. "I think so. I'll need Silver Gate to take her there. We have a fast-acting medication for infections like this called Serulin, but I have a problem. Silver Gate's gone; Morchison took it."

Moreesha and Rinden exchanged worried glances.

"Is there anything you can do?" Rinden asked.

"I've done it. I installed an emergency feature in this Silver Gate. It's designed to bring the traveler back in one hour. I installed it in case something went wrong while Silver Gate passed through the wormhole. It brings the traveler back to the locale he left an hour after he left it. It was meant for aborting a trip after Silver Gate had been energized, but in this case I aborted the trip before it even left."

"Are you saying Morchison will return in an hour?" Moreesha asked.

"Half an hour now," Mikolen said. "And I must go. I need to be there when he returns. I have an advantage. Morchison doesn't know that Silver Gate will abort. When he returns here, I can surprise him. Then I'll reclaim Silver Gate, and..."

"Take us with you!" Moreesha cried. "I want to be with my daughter. And Rorken. Take us all. The way we planned it in the beginning."

"I would," he said, looking disturbed, "but I can't. I had to reconfigure Silver Gate for one or two people, or Morchison would have used too much of the Em Sphere energy on his trip, which might not have left enough to get anyone else out of here. Silver Gate is now too small to hold us all. There'll be no time to reconfigure the walls. The ship is going to take off again automatically after only a few minutes."

"So, is it impossible?" Moreesha asked.

"I'm sorry..."

Moreesha paused to think. "Then are you saying that you wish to take our daughter into the future without us?"

"To save her life," Mikolen said. "There is no other way."

"You will bring her back, won't you? You'll have the time machine to do that, right?"

"I must first fulfill my part of an oath that I took before I came to Parallon and report to the people that let me build the time machine. The decision for me to return with Katera is up to them. The only reason I'm allowed to bring Katera back with me now is that her condition," he indicated her infected arm, "is a result of Morchison's actions. They have rules that say we are not supposed to interfere with your lives, but if bad things happen because of our presence here, we should try to fix them. They will, I'm sure, not only allow me to return with Katera, but they'd insist on it because that would be part of fixing this problem. They'll want to see her restored to her home."

"But we were all planning to leave with you before; we were going to live in your world for the rest of our lives. Why would they allow us all to stay when you're saying they won't want Katera to stay? What's the difference?"

"Because before it would have been dangerous for any of you to return to Parallon with Askinadon in power. He would have killed you all. Now that your world is safe, they'll want me to return Katera to it."

Moreesha caught her breath. "What do you mean, our world is safe?"

"Oh, that's right. You haven't heard." Mikolen smiled. "Askinadon is dead."

Moreesha gasped. "He's dead?"

Rinden's mouth fell open. "Dead?"

Mikolen smiled. "Parallon is free. The control of the village returns to you and your people. Katera

wanted to stay with both of you and Rorken to help rebuild it."

Moreesha clapped her hands and turned to Rinden. "Merciful Lupana, Rinden. Finally, some good news." She turned back to Mikolen. "Katera knows her parents well. We must stay. You have saved our lives, and now you want to save Katera's life. For this, we thank you, but please, bring her back to us when you have made her well."

"I will try, but you need to understand that she may not receive the medicine in time, but you can believe I will do everything in my power to help her and bring her home."

Moreesha's Lan Ma Ke erupted in a wave of warmth, and she understood the level of caring this man had for her daughter. She knew with pristin clarity that his devotion and commitment were both genuine and rare; it would have been rare in the days even before Askinadon ruled over Parallon when men and women were free to choose each other. She couldn't have hoped for a better man to love her daughter. As the heat from her Lan Ma Ke grew into her throat and face, she smiled and cocked her head, probing Mikolen with her eyes, wondering if he was ready to declare it.

"Tell me, why would you work so hard to save the life of our daughter? What does she mean to you that you would go to this trouble? I cannot believe this is solely for the sake of an oath."

Rinden nodded in agreement, and Moreesha watched the color rise to Mikolen's face, but he didn't look away. He paused, as if summoning the courage to say the next thing.

"I would bring her with me as part of my oath, but there is another reason. I-I haven't even told her this, yet..." He looked vulnerable, but lifted his chin. "I'm in love with her, and I don't want to return to my home without her." He paused. "She is my home."

Moreesha moved forward and sat next to Mikolen on the trunk, laying her hand on his arm. "You have our blessing," she said, quietly.

Mikolen bowed his head. "Thank you."

"Does that mean that when you return Katera to us you will be staying behind in Parallon, too?" she asked.

He nodded. "I want to be with her for the rest of our lives, and I...I want to marry her if she'll have me."

Moreesha smiled. Her Lan Ma Ke, which had grown more incisive over the years, told her that this man and her daughter belonged together, that Lupana blessed this union. Yet, when she glanced at Katera, a cold sliver punched into her heart. How could she stand to part with her daughter, the only child she had left in the world?

She leaned over and planted a lingering kiss on Katera's forehead, soaking up her sweet scent. Could she bear it if Katera never returned? Not one, but both her daughters would be lost to her. Oh, no. *Ma Lan Kena Lupana*. So much comfort and happiness to miss in her old age. But what choice did she have? She must let her beautiful girl go; her life was in danger.

If, however, Katera must stay in this future world; if for some reason she couldn't return, she would have someone to love and care for her—a comforting thought. Katera would be all right. If that happened, Moreesha would rebuild her life around Rorken...Rorken and Parallon. Yes, there was much to do. She would let Katera go. Mustering her resolve, she inhaled.

"You must hurry, then," she said. "Take her and go."

Blinking back the tears, she turned to Rinden and beckoned him to bid farewell to his daughter. He approached with misty eyes while Mikolen retrieved Grindon. Mikolen hopped over the animal's back and rode over to Rinden and Katera. Rinden had wrapped both arms around his daughter, her arms hanging loosely over his. With a wrench in his gut, Mike noticed that the infection had reached her shoulder.

"I need to take her," he said, gently. "There isn't much time."

Rinden carried Katera to the hoshdel's side, a tortured look on his face. He lifted her toward Mikolen, who hooked her around the waist and pulled her onto the hoshdel in front of him, seating her upright. Her head drooped to her chin. He wrapped a solid arm around her and grabbed the reins with his other hand.

"Thank you," Mikolen said again, turning Grindon toward the caves.

He nudged the animal forward, and it broke into a gallop. Rinden and Moreesha watched as it tore up the path to the crest of the hill and disappeared. For several minutes, they stood staring at the spot where they had last seen their daughter before Rinden spoke.

"Come, my dear Moreesha. We must alert the villagers."

"Yes, Rinden, but we must get Rorken, too. He's still in the caves."

"He's all right for a while. Adrella said he sleeps like a winter bear, remember?"

"Still, we shouldn't leave him for too long."

"We won't, my dear wife."

Rinden walked to the hoshdel, bent down and held out his cupped hands for Moreesha to step up.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mike no longer owned a timepiece—it had been destroyed when a hoshdel had stomped on it after it fell from his wrist eight years ago. Not a great loss; there'd been no need to tell time in a world where he'd led a solitary existence, never meeting with others, never sharing information. It hadn't been necessary...until now, when he needed to know how much time he had left before Morchison returned in Silver Gate. Had it been an hour yet? He didn't think so, but couldn't be sure.

He spurred Grindon through the mouth of the cave and into the antechamber. A draft of warm air from the hot springs puffed into his face. He maneuvered Grindon around the body of Tonnelly, whose face had turned a waxy blue. Holding tightly onto Katera, he slipped one leg over the hoshdel's back and slid off. Without waiting to tether the animal, he lifted Katera over his shoulder and charged into the tunnel network, racing for the chamber near the back that housed Silver Gate. He arrived huffing and half expecting to spy Silver Gate shining in the center of the chamber.

Save for the work tables, the chamber was empty. He set Katera down and searched for a tool that would double as a suitable weapon. His eyes fell on a long, metal bar used for leveraging heavier materials. He picked it up and slapped the length of it into his other hand. Heavy, solid. Perfect. A good crack on the head should do the job. He moved Katera closer to the spot where Silver Gate would reappear and, crouching low, gripped the bar and waited. It shouldn't be long.

The minutes ticked by. It felt like an eternity passed, but still no Silver Gate. Had he arrived too late? Had Silver Gate come and gone already? He shuddered to think of it. Katera would not survive without

medication. He pulled a cloth from his pocket and wiped his brow and hands, then grabbed the bar again. The tension felt thicker than swamp mud. He drew in a deep breath. A moan startled him and he jumped, the bar raised and ready. He heard it again and looked down.

"Katera?" Her eyes rolled beneath closed lids, a small twitch pulled at her mouth. He knelt down beside her. "Katera? Are you awake?"

Her eyes fluttered open. A look of confusion clouded them as she cried out. Her right hand flew to her infected left arm.

"Ow!"

"That must be painful," he said.

She winced and squeezed her eyes shut. "How does it look?"

"Right now? Not great, but we're getting help."

She opened her eyes again, and he could see recognition and memory flood into them. "What happened? We were on the trail..."

"You passed out."

She tried to sit up, but reeled from the effort and fell back. She glanced around the chamber and then back at Mikolen.

"We're in the caves?"

"Yes, and Silver Gate will be arriving any minute."

"Silver Gate?" She sounded surprised, then a look of resolve settled on her features. "You know I won't leave Parallon."

"I'll bring you back, but we have to go now. Your life is in danger. That infection is already up to your shoulder."

Katera looked at her arm and grimaced. "It looks awful."

"You need medicine...and soon. We have it in my world. Will you trust me?"

Katera searched his face, unblinking, and he saw an unfaltering honesty in her eyes. Then, as if she'd found her answer, she smiled. Mike thought his heart would stop with that smile.

"I trust you, Mikolen," she said, in a matter-of-fact voice.

She looked impeccably soft and accepting. He wanted to lean over and press his lips into hers, feel the soft yield of them. He wanted to lift her head and...

The hum arrived first, vibrating the walls. Mike shot his gaze into the center of the room. The walls of Silver Gate rippled in front of them. He sprang to his feet, bar in hand. Behind him, he heard Katera struggling to get up.

"Stay there!" he shouted, without turning around.

In a flash, Silver Gate settled into the room gleaming in the light of the lanadik, as if it had never left. Mike

lunged toward the sealed door. The controls to open it were on the inside. He'd have to open it manually. Dropping the bar, he slipped the fingers of both hands behind the small ledge of the door that overlapped onto the wall, and tugged. The door shot open. Inside, Morchison stared stupidly at him.

"You. What have you done?"

Mike dove for the bar on the ground, but before he could reach it, Morchison flung himself out the door and into Mike. They tumbled onto the ground, trading punches and kicks in a tangle of limbs.

Dammit, Mike thought. His window of opportunity, the precious minutes before Silver Gate left again, were fading with each blow. His thoughts shifted to Katera, her life...her only chance to live...and with a new wave of strength, he gripped Morchison's legs with both of his and wrapped his hands around his neck. Morchison choked and sputtered, yet managed to reach out and pummel Mike's head with one fist. *I don't have time for this*, Mike thought desperately.

A streak flashed across his line of vision and landed on Morchison's skull. Morchison slumped like a piece of wet parak. Mike shoved him away and hopped to his feet. He looked at Katera, who was holding the bar in her good hand, her arm raised like the tail of a riled scorpion, ready to strike again if necessary. Mike grabbed the bar and flung it away, then pulled her into Silver Gate. He pressed the door icon on the control panel. Before it closed, Katera pointed to the chamber entrance.

"Look," she said.

A crowd of Parallonians were filing into the room, dozens of them. The door to Silver Gate closed, but they could still hear the voices.

"What is that thing?" someone asked.

"That's Silver Gate. It's the time machine I told you about." It was Shamana's voice.

"Hey, look. On the floor. That's Kastak Morchison. He's unconscious!" someone cried.

"He's not a Kastak anymore," said another.

"No, Askinadon is dead!"

Evidently, the crowd had found Moreesha and Rinden on their way to the village. People cheered, still celebrating the news.

"He's moving. Quick! Someone grab him!" a woman shouted.

Some scuffling, and more shouts followed.

"Leave me alone!" Morchison's voice rang out, surprised and threatening. "Don't touch me. I'll see you flogged if you touch me."

"Yeah?" said a man's angry voice. "And who's going to do the flogging? You? Askinadon is dead, and you're a prisoner now...Morchison."

He said Morchison's name loudly, as if to underscore the absence of his former title.

"If I were you," said another man, "I'd start worrying about who exactly is going to get flogged."

A nasty pause hung in the air. It seemed clear that Morchison was sizing up his sudden change of circumstance.

"Wait. No, I had to do those things." Morchison's tone had shifted from harsh to ingratiating. "Please, I was forced. Askinadon...he forced me."

"Did he force you stop by our hostel to steal our minola every time you had errands in the village?" a woman said. Mike heard a thud and a moan.

"Did he force you to beat my son when he was eight years old because he didn't answer your question quickly enough?" another man cried.

More thuds. Morchison yelped in pain.

"Did he force you to rape my wife?" another man said in a low, dangerous tone.

Mike heard a sickening thump and a crack, and then Morchison's sobs. An outbreak of voices filled the chamber, then scuffling, and the crowd began filtering out of the room amidst cries of protest from Morchison, who from the sound of it, was being dragged.

"He'll be lucky if he get a simple flogging before he dies," a woman spat, but her voice was fading, but not because she was leaving the chamber...it was fading from the very ether itself.

Mike peered up at the stalactites on the cave ceiling. They, too, were fading as something else, a soft and fleshy looking surface, materialized. He fell into the chair, pulling Katera on top of him. He snatched the security bar from above and lowered it over them. With a sudden jolt, Silver Gate lifted and turned onto its side. Mike looked up through the top in time to see it plummeting headlong down an organic looking tunnel, curving into unknown stretches ahead. It plunged and twisted at alarming speeds through the wormhole, rising and dipping in dizzying sequences. It seemed as if Katera might slip away from him with each startling jerk, and he tightened his embrace, though he knew the bar would hold them. His stomach jumped and dove with the lurching stargate.

It was a phenomenal ride, yet he felt no reaction from Katera, who was sitting motionless on his lap, her head resting against his chest. He craned his neck to see her face. Her eyes were closed, her lips part way open. She had passed out again.

Above him, the soft-walled texture of the tunnel faded away, replaced by a bright, crystal blue. He realized he was looking at the sky. They were landing on July 24, 2275, one day after Askins had escaped in Star Gate One with Tescali Lab. The coordinates had been set to return to the exact spot where the lab had disappeared. There'd be quite a turmoil when he opened the door to greet whomever may be on the other side. Even as he lifted the bar to stand up, he heard excited voices and the sound of feet running toward the stargate.

"Look! Over there."

"The stargate. It's back."

"It could be Askins. Careful. Get the police!"

"They see it. They're coming."

Holding the listless body of Katera in both arms, Mike leaned into the door icon on the panel. As the door slid open, he spied four policemen standing like statues in their green uniforms, each with a Beam 4000 trained at his head. Mike shifted Katera's weight in his arms and stepped outside into the sunshine. An empty field of dirt and pebbles stretched before him, the field where Tescali Lab used to sit. He stared into the Beamers.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Mike Leno, Director of Research at Tescali Lab, and this woman needs our help."

Chapter Twenty-Six

"My God, Leno, is that you?" a voice from behind the line of policemen called.

Mike recognized Will Carlsen, CEO of Tescali Lab and Chairman of the Board. Beside him stood several other board members and a group of scientists, who had all turned and were staring at Mike. They looked as if they had gathered in the field and were trying to piece together the story about Askins and the missing lab.

"Hello, Will," Mike called back. He realized that his long hair might be throwing everyone off, not to mention his face, which had aged ten years. "I have a woman here from six thousand years ago. She's dying, and she needs our help."

Carlsen, a short man of fifty-something with a thick thatch of blond hair and smiling blue eyes, waved the policemen aside and rushed in to see for himself. Several other board members and scientists followed.

"Wow," Carlsen said, staring at Katera. "She's a beauty. Is she really six thousand years old?"

"Yes, she's from the past, and she's dying, Will. She needs Serulin, quickly. Do you have some nearby?"

"There's always Serulin nearby. Thank God, we still have the Administration building. The health clinic is in there."

Carlsen motioned for an attendant and instructed him to bring a batch of Serulin on the double. The young man took off toward the three-story building ahead, the only building left from the huge Tescali Lab complex. The emblem of three interlocking red circles, representing the unity of three global powers within the World Union Council, stretched across the façade.

"How bad is she?" Carlsen asked, as Mike lowered Katera to the ground.

"Pretty bad. It's her arm."

A large group was forming around them. Mike recognized Rebecca Cohn and KeShawn Jackson, two scientists, who by pure luck of the draw, had not been in the lab when Askins had escaped. Other scientists surrounded them, but he didn't know their names. There had been hundreds of them working at the lab when he'd left. He spotted Nicole Rose and Paul Farley, two members of the board. Then his eyes fell on the figure of a short woman with a head of cropped dark hair framing her oval face. *Felipa Kurtz*. Greg Kurtz's widow. Mike looked away. Not yet—he didn't want to explain it now, here...in front of everyone.

"Oh. I see what you mean," Carlsen commented, lifting Katera's arm. He whistled.

"Yeah. You think the Serulin can turn this infection around?"

"I don't know, Mike. It looks advanced. What happened to her finger?"

Mike had forgotten. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out her bloody, deflated finger. A murmur floated up from the group.

"Morchison and Tonelly did this," Mike said, holding the finger up and emphasizing each word like a well-flung dart.

"Morchison? James Morchison and Tim... Tim Tonnelly, the technicians?"

Mike looked into Carlsen's eyes. "The same."

"My god. What happened? What would make them do that?"

Mike sighed. "It's a long story, and a lot has changed."

Carlsen looked intently into Mike's face. "Mike, Star Gate One has only been missing for one day. How long have you been gone?"

"Ten years," he said, quietly. "And that's not Star Gate One behind me."

Carlsen's eyes flew to Silver Gate. "Really? Where'd you get it?"

Mike paused. "There is much to tell you, but first, let's take care of her."

Mike wound his arm under Katera's head and lifted her onto his knee as Carlsen watched.

"What's her name?" he asked.

"Katera," Mike said. "Her name is Katera."

"And her last name?"

"She has none. There are no last names in Parallon."

But I'd sure like to give her one, Mike thought. Carlsen nodded, studying Mike carefully as if he understood there was a bigger story. He pointed over Mike's shoulder at the attendant, who was running toward them.

"Here's the Serulin," he said. "And while you're administering the dosage, I'll locate a Restortech, and we'll see what we can do about that finger."

"Thanks," Mike said, feeling a rush of gratitude. "You'll need this, then."

He handed the finger off to Carlsen, who pulled a square of cloth from his pocket to receive it, then got up and sprinted toward the admin building. The attendant kneeled next to Mike and held up a vial one half inch in diameter with a small insertion device on one end.

"It's full," he said. "You have to release the serum at the line of infection, between the healthy tissue and the infected tissue right...there." His finger landed at a point on Katera's shoulder where the redness stopped.

"Thanks. I'll do it," Mike said, taking the vial.

He drew the instrument to the spot. It connected and penetrated her skin, reading the heat and extent of the infection before dispensing the appropriate amount of Serulin. Mike counted to five as the serum dispensed, then drew out the insertion device. There was nothing to do now but wait and see.

The group surrounding Mike dispersed, running off in different directions to get various items to help. One man returned with a FloaterCot, a gurney that floated while suspended above the ground, designed to carry disabled people. Like so much other technology in this world, it was powered by a tiny EM Sphere. The man helped Mike lift Katera onto it and handed Mike the remote. He aimed the signal at the receptor on the gurney, which lifted it into the air. Mike guided it to the admin building as he walked

behind it.

Gazing at Katera, he noticed the redness and swelling on her arm had receded several inches from her shoulder, and his heart did a leap. Excellent. The Serulin was working and Katera was going to be all right. All he needed to do now was find Carlsen and the Restortech to reattach her finger.

A feeling of relief flooded his body, pumping up his confidence. If Katera was okay, then the world was right again. He would appear before the board-they'd summon him in the next day or so, anyway-and he'd secure permission to return to Parallon where they could start their new life. Hopefully, as husband and wife. He couldn't wait to deliver the string of great news. First, that she was as good as new; second, that he'd be taking her back home; and third, that he wanted to stay with her in Parallon.

The euphoria was not to last. Someone fell in step next to him, and when he turned his head, he cringed. Felipa Kurtz was staring at him with a furtive look in her eyes. No one had yet brought up the question as to why Mike had returned alone, but everyone needed to know...especially Felipa.

"Mike."

"Felipa, good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too. I'm just wondering why Greg and the others aren't with you." Mike gulped and looked away. "Oh, Mike, I have to know."

"It happened ten years ago, Felipa."

"What happened?" She sounded forceful, though a trembling hand flew to her chest.

"I'm so sorry."

"He's not..."

It took every ounce of Mike's strength to look at her, to allow his eyes to offer their compassion. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "He was injured in the initial blast when Askins destroyed Star Gate One. He had a serious leg wound. I was able to drag him into a supply closet, and I told him I'd come back for him. But Askins saw me leave the closet and went after me. He was intent on killing all the scientists. Only ten minutes after landing in Parallon, Askins was chasing me outside the lab. I had to play dead to get him off my tail. I wasn't able to sneak back right away. By the time I got back to the closet, Greg wasn't there."

"Then he might still be alive."

Mike took in a shaky breath. "He wasn't there, but I found..."

Felipa froze. "Found what?"

"Felipa..."

"Found what? I must know."

Mike hung his head, raised it again, looked into her eyes. "I found only part of him."

"What part? An arm? A leg? An arm or leg could've been anybody's."

Mike drew in a deep breath. "No. I found part of his head...his face. He's dead."

A throaty groan, deep and low, dropped like an anchor out of Felipa's mouth. Staring open-mouthed, she crumpled to her knees. Mike immobilized the gurney and knelt beside her, wrapping his arms around

her slender frame as the first sob wracked her body.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Paul Farley slapped his palm onto the table. "We have a situation here, a serious one that has left seven of our finest scientists murdered, and thirty-nine technicians stranded in a dog-eat-dog environment existing six thousand years ago."

Temperamental hothead . It was a mystery to Mike how Farley managed to hold his position on the Tescali Board of Directors. He opposed nearly every idea and presentation that the scientists placed before the board. It was known that no scientist or board member enjoyed his presence, let alone his ill-temper.

"Thirty-eight," Mike said.

"What?"

"There were thirty-eight Kastaks, or technicians. In the ten years I lived there, I counted them many times. I'm sure of it."

Farley shook his head, staring at his list. "No. You're wrong. Our list shows that thirty-nine technicians are missing."

"I don't care if there are fifty names on your list. Thirty-eight technicians were left standing after Askins finished his dirty work. Several were killed in the years that followed, but there were never thirty-nine." Mike pressed an icon on a panel embedded in the table in front of him, and it lit up. "Send your list over here, and I'll see if I can figure it out. I know most of them by name."

"Yeah. You do that." Farley pressed several icons on an identical panel, and a list of names appeared on Mike's panel.

"Could you shoot us all a list, Paul?" Will Carlsen asked.

Paul worked the icons until the other seven members of the board were leaning over their panels. A somber silence fell over the room as each man and woman searched the list for the names of friends and acquaintances.

Mike scanned his list: Robert Bailey...that would be Kastak Bailenon, Randall Drake or Kastak Randrakin...his eyes fled down the list...Morchison, Lyndon March, Derek Mallard, Patrick O'Malley...O'Malley? He'd never seen O'Malley in Parallon.

"I got it," Mike said, softly. The eight members of the board turned to stare at Mike. "Patrick O'Malley. Never saw him there."

"Really?" Will Carlsen tilted his head in surprise. "He was scheduled to work in the lab on July 23rd, and he's been missing with everyone else. His wife confirmed that yesterday. I talked with her myself. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I don't know what happened to him, but I never saw him. Maybe he got killed, and I missed it, though I know Askins kept all the technicians alive." Mike paused. "Maybe O'Malley got caught in the crossfire or something."

The room fell hushed again as heads bowed. *They're still absorbing this mess* , Mike realized. He'd had ten years to adjust; they'd only had two days. So many people they'd just seen, had a drink with,

enjoyed a conversation...gone from their lives.

Or were they? Maybe this was the time to present his case for the missing technicians, as well as for Katera. Carlsen had prompted him last night to use this meeting to ask for permission to take Katera home, and permission for Mike to join her. The latter might be tricky, though, Carlsen had warned. Mike cleared his throat.

"As you know, we cannot reverse a person's death. Once someone has been killed, whether in our time or in the distant past, his or her death is permanent. It's part of the Displacement Law established by Greg Kurtz." At the mention of his name, board members shook their heads, the shock showing in their eyes. No surprise. Greg had been well-liked. Mike continued. "The dead cannot be resurrected through the use of a time machine or anything else. Interference may cause them to die differently, but die they will, and at the same age...down to the moment. That, of course, means that even if Askins had not fled with Star Gate One, those scientists would have died by other means."

"I don't think so." Nicole Rose, a junior board member, sounded irritated. "Askins would have killed them here instead of in the past, that's all. It's the obvious MLS." Everyone nodded. MLS, or Most Likely Scenario, carried the highest probability, and in their minds, Askins would have killed the scientists no matter where they had been. "He returned after his first trip to Parallon a murderer, not the scientist we had entrusted to launch the world's first time machine. He was ready to kill here...there...it wouldn't have mattered to him."

Sharp whispers and nods of agreement swelled around the table.

"My point," Mike said, raising his voice, "is that there is nothing we can do for the dead. However..." He lifted his hand, signaling for conversation to stop, and when it did, he began again. "We cannot bring back the dead, but we can return to the past and bring the surviving technicians back to their own time. As I said, they've all changed for the worse. It's been a hard life, but at least we can bring them home and offer rehabilitation." *And while we're on the way*, he thought, *we can just drop off a couple of extra passengers*.

"That's not going to happen, Mike." Will Carlsen said, his voice soft.

What? What was Carlsen saying? Hadn't he just advised Mike...? A knot of foreboding rose from Mike's gut and lodged in his throat.

"What do you mean? We have to restore everyone to his pre-travel locale, just like it says in our mission statement. We need to return the Parallonian woman, Katera, to her home. We have a duty to do that for her..."

"Duty?" Farley stood up, and pounded the table again, the color rising to his cheeks. "Duty applies to a mission that hasn't been botched to Hell. We hardly have a situation here that can be restored to normal."

Carlsen shot him a stern look, and Farley sat down, still fuming. Carlsen turned to Mike.

"Look, Mike, it's out of our hands." Out of their hands? The only entity that had the authority to do that was... "We got the word from the President of the World Union Council this morning. I haven't had a chance to give you the news."

Mike reeled back in his chair. *President of the World Union Council?* The council charged with the welfare of the entire planet?

"What did they say?"

"They've suspended time travel indefinitely." Carlsen placed both hands on the table, palms down. "I'm sorry. I know I told you last night your request would probably fly..."

"What request?" Nicole asked.

Carlsen looked at Mike, and Mike turned to Nicole.

"I told him that I'd like to request permission to return to Parallon with Katera."

"You mean...?" Nicole's mouth fell open.

Mike nodded. "Yes."

"You want to go back there?" Farley interrupted, stunned. "What kind of a fool would..."

"Enough!" This time Carlsen smacked the table. Farley narrowed his eyes and leaned forward in his chair, but he shut up, thankfully. Carlsen turned back to Mike.

"The Council was never overly enamored with our work given the morality issues involved with time travel, and now they've got the excuse they need to shut us down. They've issued a mandate to our donors not to provide any further funding. We will not be able to build a new lab. We've also been ordered to dismantle Silver Gate. The process will begin today."

"But surely...perhaps later, we can make arrangements..."

"No, actually Mike, this is permanent. There will be no more Tescali Lab once the dismantling is over. We're all sick about this. I'm so sorry."

Mike did not have the strength to utter a word. His shoulders sagged. What would he tell Katera when she revived? She would come out of her induced recovery-sleep in the morning. He'd made a promise-he had told her he'd take her home. How could he face her with the news that she was now stuck in the future without her family? What would he say? How could he soften this terrible news?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Katera awoke as Mikolen's face materialized before her. She heard barking and realized it was the sound of her own throat clenching around a dry lump. They were in a room larger than any she'd ever seen. The walls were smooth, like those back at the lab on Kan Mountain. Mikolen sat in a chair next to her, and she lay in a bed, but it was nothing like the straw mattresses back home. In fact, she could hardly feel it. She wondered if she were floating and turned her head to see what lay beneath her: a white, translucent material inside a long silver frame...a cloud maybe? Mikolen laughed.

"You are lying on a SleepLift suspension bed. It's a porous material pressurized to blend with the surrounding air, and it has an almost transparent boundary. It conforms to body contours, and it's so light and airy that you hardly know it's there."

Katera started to tell him how it reminded her of a cloud, when the hacking cough returned. Mikolen leaned over and grabbed a tall, transparent cup and held it out to her. Still sluggish, she crinkled her brow, wondering why she could see through the cup.

"Drink this," he said. "It's water."

Katera took a long sip, then held up the cup. "I can see you through this. Is it made out of water that's been turned into stone?"

Mikolen laughed and shook his head. "No. It's glass, and it's made from sand and other powders that are melted at an extremely high temperature to produce a white-hot liquid. It used to take all day just to heat the sand properly, but now it can be heated instantaneously."

"This is sand?" Katera asked, turning the glass in her hand.

"Not any more," Mikolen said, sounding serious. "It's undergone a chemical change...it's a little complicated."

Katera had more questions, but she could see from Mikolen's expression that he thought this astounding vessel an unimportant item, so she pressed the cool glass to her lips and emptied it. She noticed while staring through it that Mikolen had changed his clothes. He was no longer wearing his cotton shirt and pants. The material of his blue shirt looked slick and smooth and shimmered like the surface of a lake. And his hair. It was cut short, up over his ears. She'd never seen a man with such short hair. When had he done that? They'd just climbed into the time machine, hadn't they?

She remembered her arm and her hand...her finger. She didn't feel any pain. She lowered the glass, alerted, looked at it...and nearly screamed. Her finger was back. The finger that Tonnelly had cut off was wiggling on her left hand without even a tiny scar to mark the event. How could this be? Was she dreaming?

"My finger...how?"

"You remember the Insertech, Katera?" She nodded. "Well, another amazing instrument from my world was able to reattach your finger and restore the tissues."

Gawking at her pinky, Katera made a fist and opened it. "Your world?" she asked, staring at her hand.

"Yes. We made it, Katera. We're here-in my world, your world...this is our world now."

She felt a drumming in her chest as a seed of fear gripped her. She sat up.

"Not for long, right? You're taking me back home." Mikolen dropped his head and folded his hands, elbows on his thighs. She waited, her fear mounting as he struggled with his words. "Mikolen, what is it? Tell me."

He drew in a deep breath. "I can't take you home. I'm sorry. Silver Gate has been dismantled, and time travel...has been permanently suspended."

"You mean...you can't? But you said..."

"I know, I know. I'm so sorry."

"I wouldn't have come here if I'd known."

"You had to come here. You would not have survived any other way. Look at your arm, your hand. You're healed."

Katera looked once more at her hand, which was trembling. "Perhaps they'll change their minds."

"They're not going to do that. I had no way of knowing this would happen, but

I promise you I'm going to stay with you every step of the way."

"You can build another one. Another time machine."

"No, I can't."

"You built one in Parallon-with materials you stole from the lab."

"It's different here. You have to pay for everything. The materials for even one stargate cost far more than my entire fortune."

"Steal the materials again. You did it before, right?"

Mike smiled weakly. "They have very sophisticated security in this world, Katera. That would be impossible, even if I were inclined to do it."

Katera's breathing quickened as she considered her predicament. She'd arrived in the future without her family...Mama, Papa, Rorken. How would she get along without them? And would they be okay without her? What would she do in this new land filled with amazing things like time machines and tools that could replace body parts, not to mention see-through cups? Such strangeness. Would she feel welcome in a world without goats and hoshdels and warm hearths blazing with logs from the fragrant ternok tree? Would she have an opportunity to prepare another kiddik stew? Did kiddiks exist in this world? Would the people of this land accept her, welcome her...would they like her?

She let out a shaky breath and swallowed. Whatever was in store, whatever surprises this world held for her, she had no choice. She would have to face them-meet them head on. She'd been forced to flee to save her own life. Now she was forced to go on without her family. But she was not alone, she reminded herself, struggling to keep her panic at bay...far from it. She looked at Mikolen and caught his gaze. His eyes looked tender, as if he were trying to read her thoughts. A warm, liquid feeling oozed into her chest.

"Shall I call you by your other name? The one they use in your world. Shall I call you Mike?"

Mikolen smiled. "No. You can call me Mikolen. I like it."

She nodded. "Me, too."

He exhaled and swallowed. "Look, I know this world will seem strange to you at first, but I promise you, I'll do everything I can to help you adjust and learn."

Katera tried to smile, but she felt too dizzy to receive his assurances. He lifted her hand, the newly healed one, and stroked her fingers with his thumb. A warmth spread from her fingers and traveled like a current through the rest of her body.

"Katera," he said, his voice soft. "I want to be with you. I mean...for always, for good." His eyes caressed hers, reached into them. "I will take care of you for as long as we are together. I will teach you what you need to know to get along in this world. I will hire people to teach you what I cannot. And I want you to live with me in my home, so I can help you...but not just as a friend."

He paused to reach into his pocket and pull out a small, shiny box. He pressed the top, and amazingly, it slid open by itself. Katera suppressed an urge to gasp. *Guess I'd better get used to magical things* . Inside the box, on a bed of material looking softer than a butterfly's wing, sat the most amazing ring she'd ever seen. Rings from Parallon looked nothing like this. Rings from home were fashioned from wood, clay, or soft stone by the hands of skilled artisans. If there were any gems, they were polished in their natural form, rough-hewn and irregular. This ring had a perfect shape, a smooth silver oval. A tiny design of exquisite symmetry dripping in delicate tendrils adorned the top, holding a transparent stone aloft. The evenly chiseled faces of the stone reflected endless glittering patterns of light.

"This belonged to my mother," Mikolen said. "And her mother before her. For three hundred years, it's

been passed from one generation to the next in my family." He slid the ring onto her finger next to the healed pinky. It felt snug. "And now I want you to have it."

Katera stared at it. She knew from the way his hand was shaking when he slipped it on her finger that it meant a great deal to him, but she didn't know how to respond. She understood why the ring was important to him-it had belonged to the women in his family-but why was he giving it to her?

Mikolen sensed her confusion and added, "In my world, when a man wants to marry a woman he gives her a ring like this one." Ah, marriage! This she understood. He gathered up both her hands. "Katera, I want you to be my wife."

He had fallen to his knees next to the cloud bed and was looking up at her. Her heart soared with every beat. The man of her dreams wanted to marry her. She wanted to laugh and cry and throw her arms about his neck, but something held her back...a whispered feeling, small yet insistent, pressed for attention and tempered her joy. She squeezed her eyes shut.

What was it? She felt vulnerable in this new world, perhaps even helpless...not a trait that she entertained or enjoyed in herself. Yes, she wanted to marry Mikolen, but not as a defenseless, ignorant woman. When she married Mikolen she wanted to feel competent and confident. She wanted to be someone who filled his heart and eyes with pride. Her eyes shot open. She knew what she had to tell him. It scared her to think she was going to turn him down, but accepting his proposal scared her even more.

"Mikolen, never have I felt so right about a man," she began, and his eyes flashed with expectancy. "Wait. Let me finish." Mikolen moved next to her on the bed. She charged ahead, wishing to get it over with, hoping he'd understand. "I know that you want to help me. Maybe that's why you're asking me to marry you."

"No, Katera. Well, yes, in part. But I wanted to marry you before we left Parallon. It's my heart that's telling me to marry you, not my head." He reached out and cupped the back of her neck. "I love you, Katera. That's why I want to marry you."

Her Lan Ma Ke rumbled warmly inside her, and she knew that he spoke the truth. Still...

"It's just that I'm not ready...not yet. I don't know anything about this world...your world, Mikolen. I need to understand it first, or at least enough about it to know my place in it. I need that before I can understand how I'll fit into it with *you* ." He was listening intently, his head cocked, so she went on. "Help me discover your world, Mikolen, so I'll know. I will listen carefully and learn as much as I can. Give me time to absorb all the magnificent inventions and surprises that the future...the present...holds. And when the time is right, when we both feel comfortable here together, then, please, ask me again. Will you?"

He let out an audible sigh and pulled her to him, wrapping his long arms around her. "Katera, you can be sure this is now my number one project." *Thank you, Lupana* , she thought, sending her eyes to the heavens. He understands, and I haven't lost his love. "I hope you'll still wear my ring," he added, and held her at arm's length.

"Of course I'll wear it." She fingered the ring and smiled. Being with Mikolen felt so right. If only her family could be with her-she needed to share her joy with them. An ache tugged at her heart. Would she really never see them again? Were Rorken and her village lost to her forever? She buried the thought as quickly as it had arrived...no. She refused to believe that. There must be a way. There had to be a way...Mikolen would find it.

"And I still want you live with me, of course." Mikolen picked up her hand. "I can offer you your own bedroom...though it's going to be hard for me to keep out of it." His voice sounded strained, husky. "It's

all I can do to keep my hands off you right now."

A shudder of anticipation shot through Katera's body. Mikolen lowered his head to her forehead and kissed it. He bent further to land a peck on tip of her nose, then poised his lips over her mouth. The warmth of his breath drifted over her lips.

"Mikolen?"

He moved his mouth to hers. She inhaled, drawing in the scent of him, and closed her eyes to feel him more fully, to drink in the pressure of his touch. Their lips connected, softly searching, tasting. His hand moved to the small of her back and rubbed lightly, circling. He circled higher, until his hand slid up her spine to her neck. There he cupped the back of it, held it firmly while his mouth explored hers more deeply. Never had Katera known such a kiss. Surrender was the imperative behind it.

She met his probing tongue with a low moan. Maybe this was the time to give him what she'd saved all her life. She felt ready...almost.

She dropped her hands and pulled out of his embrace. His eyes opened. They held a surprised look.

"What?"

"Believe me, there's nothing I'd like better." Heat spread into her face. "But I need time...time for everything. Do you understand?"

He lifted a finger to her lips. "I understand. And I want you to take all the time you need to feel as comfortable as you can, okay? But I must warn you; when you are ready, when you're real comfortable," he leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips, "then we're going to start the next stage of your education."

His gentility, his acceptance, warmed and relieved her. She blinked, feigning innocence.

"Really? And what stage are we talking about?"

"The stage equipped with soft lights and lots of pillows," he said. "Only, we won't be just acting." He tried to kiss her again, but they were both laughing.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Why can't I drive one of those?" Katera asked, jerking her head toward an AeroCar that had taken off and was streaking skyward.

"Because," Mike explained for the second time that afternoon, "you have to master your ground skills and get a license before you can start on the flyers. It takes practice." He pointed to the *forward* icon blinking on the console in the Micro, the smart looking LandCar that he'd purchased to teach Katera to drive. "Press that," he said, and settled into the passenger's seat.

It was a little disconcerting to hand her the controls after a mere seven-month's exposure to his world, but she'd insisted. The weather in Ocean Park where they lived had look good that morning. It was as good a day as any for a ride. At least driving was not a difficult skill to master. Ease of operation made it a child's game. Still, there were rules.

"I've had practice flying...lots of times."

Mike laughed. "Takataks don't count for squat here. There are no Tatatak licenses at the LAUD Bureau."

The officials at the Land, Air, and UnderSea Driving Bureau would likely tip over when she appeared to get her license. A life filled with rocsadons, kiddiks, and simple bows and arrows was hardly a commendation for driving in the twenty-third century.

"Only because there are no takataks," she challenged. "If there were, I'd be an ace pilot."

"As I recall, the takatak did all the driving, and you just went along for the ride."

"Hey," she barked, feigning indignation. "Those leather harnesses are complicated. If you don't center it just right, it could throw the takatak off balance, and it would drop you like a...like an *anchor*."

Mike heard the pride in her voice as she belted out one of her new vocabulary words. Since he'd employed the tutor several months ago, she practiced new words constantly. *Amazing progress*, Jay Schneider, the tutor told him. That, and *she's a genius. What an intellect*. Jay had explained that she'd transferred her writing skills from Parallonian to the English alphabet with incredible ease. She also excelled in science and math, which he tailored to aid in her assimilation. She asked tons of questions and advanced so rapidly that it sent Jay scrambling back to the master plan every few days to modify her curriculum.

"An anchor. Good analogy," Mike commented.

He cast a sidelong glance at her as she eased the Micro past a group of children, tracing her finger around the representational images of the children on the simulation pad. The Micro responded efficiently, veering off the main track and onto one of the innumerable side tracks that were buried underground and kept the vehicle magnetically on course.

She was fully occupied, fitting for a first driving lesson, so he relaxed a little. It was good to see her engaged, and he knew she needed this-this, and the tutoring sessions. And not just to aid in her adjustment to his world-her world, he reminded himself-they served as distractions to keep her mind off the tricky stuff...stuff that had the power to turn her instantly misty-eyed, such as any mention of Parallon or her family.

Since she'd been asking to see the underwater city of Suela del Mar, he figured he'd let her drive there for her first lesson. Located twenty miles offshore from Ocean Park past the San Pedro continental shelf, the ride would allow her both land and underwater driving experience. With the advent of atmospheric controls, and more importantly, the seal created from an impenetrable material, the conversion of LandCars into underwater vessels had become a reality. It was no longer necessary to switch to a WaterCar to finish the route. Since driving underwater was easier than driving on land, the trip to Suela del Mar seemed like a natural choice. She should have a smooth experience, except for the Transition Belt, of course, but he'd help her through that.

Pushing her finger over the pad, Katera guided the Micro onto the busy Landway, the six-lane thoroughfare that ran through the city of Ocean Park in the West Divide of World Union I. The sun sparkled off the tall buildings as she navigated through the speeding traffic. Five miles ahead, the Landway ran into the Transition Belt, a stretch of track a mile long that allowed drivers time to convert their LandCars into water vessels before plunging down the track onto the Waterway, and disappearing into the Pacific Ocean. It would require special attention as controls were adjusted to create the appropriate internal atmosphere and cover the exterior with an ultra-thin layer of indestructible Planck material.

He braced himself for the transition. If something went wrong and the LandCar did not seal properly, the ocean would seep into the car as they sped out on the San Pedro shelf along the ocean floor. As the track carried them deeper into the ocean, the Micro would implode from the pressure of the heavy sea.

Mike trained his eye on the front window, searching for the beams of red light that streaked across the Landway, signaling the approach of the Plunge, as it was affectionately called. There would be thirty seconds on the Transition Belt between the Landway and the Waterway to secure the LandCar for the dive.

He considered how much time he'd give Katera before he intervened, if necessary. Ten seconds, he decided. Ten seconds was plenty of time. At 112 miles per hour, the thin streaks of red light fell across the thoroughfare a minute and a half later. Mike stiffened, but kept his voice even.

"Now, Katera."

Katera pressed the icons, *Transition, Air, Transition, Seal* in the correct sequence to adjust the Micro for the ride under the waves. Mike tuned his ears to listen for the telltale clicks, signaling that a layer of transparent Planck material had enveloped and sealed the Micro. Nothing happened. The secure environment icon did not light up. A glitch in a brand new Micro? What were the odds?

It wouldn't matter what they were if he didn't do something fast. Swallowing his panic, Mike stretched his arm over Katera's and pushed the emergency icon, which had the capacity to assess the situation in half a second. That would leave precious seconds to make the decision to abort and follow a track off the Landway...or to continue straight ahead into the Plunge.

"The starboard ridge seal over the door is broken," a calm, feminine voice from the console announced. "Repairs by the InCar Engineer will require ten seconds."

Good God. They didn't have ten seconds. He opened his mouth to order Katera to hit the *Abort* icon positioned off the main console near her left elbow and out of his reach...but she was already pressing it. Abruptly, the Micro split from the main route and barreled down a smaller, parallel route.

As they approached the divide where drivers could choose to reenter the Landway or head back to Ocean Park, Katera asked, "How many seconds before we hit the ocean if we go back on the Landway?"

"Seven, but we're turning around and going back to Ocean Par..."

With a sudden veer, Katera guided the Micro back onto the Landway with six seconds remaining to complete the repairs. Mike held his breath. There was nothing left to do but wait. His eyes grew wide as he watched the timer on the console. With the blood pounding in his head and a fraction of a second remaining, the Micro dipped over the edge of the Transition Belt and into the Plunge.

Down, down at two hundred miles an hour onto the new track. Mike felt his stomach drop, slipping away like dead weight. Katera gasped as the sea raced toward them. With a jolt, the world turned a liquid milky green. The Micro slowed to 125 miles per hour. Mike glanced at the driver's console. The *Environment Secure* icon was lit. The InCar Engineer had done its job. He let out a deep sigh.

"Do you think you might have timed that just a little closer? I was hoping for some excitement."

Katera laughed. "I'll try to do better next time." She sounded pleased. He decided to explain the dangers and precautionary measures to her later. He had no desire to spoil the moment. Pleasure eluded her too often these days, Mike thought with a twinge.

"Ooh, look!" she exclaimed, pointing ahead.

"Yes, that's the giant kelp forest. It's grown to form a tunnel around the tracks."

"How did it do that?"

"The kelp was cleared to lay the Waterway tracks, and then grew together over the top forming this tunnel."

"The...kelp? It's so beautiful. The light seems to be coming from inside the leaves. Oh, they're...translucent," she said, practicing one of her vocabulary words. "Is it really a forest?"

"Yes. It *is* a forest. It has a canopy and different layers just like the terrestrial one."

Katera glanced down at the simulation pad, and a look of alarm registered on her face. "There aren't any pictures on the screen."

"It's alright," he assured her. "There are only two tracks on the Waterway, and they lead to and from Suela del Mar. Since there's nowhere else to go down here. Driving isn't necessary, so the pad shuts off and the Micro propels itself along the magnetized track." Katera blinked, exhaled and leaned back. "That's right," Mike said, softly. "Enjoy the ride."

For several minutes, a comfortable silence fell between them as Katera gazed out over the gently waving fronds in the kelp field, her lips slightly parted. He imagined how it must appear to her, and was reminded of his first trip under the waves. His father had driven him out after the city had first been built. He'd just turned thirteen. They'd spotted a pod of dolphins weaving in and out of the tall fronds, as if it were a playground designed for their amusement.

And now, a school of brilliant orange fish drifted above them like a single organism, abruptly switching and turning like so many leaves whipped by the wind. Katera gasped.

"Oh, they're lovely," she whispered. "There's so many."

"Those are giribaldi," he told her. "You see a lot them down here."

Mike caught a flash of something large bobbing in and out of the kelp on the left side of the track next to Katera. Dozens of huge fish were poking their enormous heads in and out of the shadowy kelp with fixed stares. Katera saw them, too, and craned her neck to see better. Several swam out from their shelter revealing their fat, six-foot long bodies. She let out a small shriek.

"Don't worry-they're harmless," Mike said, quickly. "Those are giant sea bass, and they know better than to swim in front of the Micro. Even if they did, it wouldn't derail us."

"Merciful Lupana!" she cried. "They look as big as my aunt Tasha."

"Aunt Tasha weighed more than three hundred pounds?" Mike asked, incredulous. He didn't think anybody in Parallon weighed more than 180, given all the effort it took to survive.

"We didn't have...what do you call them?"

"Weight scales?"

"Yes. Scales. We didn't have them, but she became as big as one of those fish. She did little else but eat after her mind started going. She sure could have used one of those VisiOrbs before she died. Not the way it was used in Parallon, but like it's used here-as a device to help people with dementia. You know, with someone watching from a control center, guiding her through her day. It's wonderful the way it's used in your world."

Mike paused. "It's your world, too, Katera."

He did not miss the expression of sadness that flickered across her face, and again felt a stab of regret that he'd stolen her from her true home and brought her to Ocean Park, even though he'd had little in the way of choice. In a sense, she was adjusting well and learning much, if you assessed her accomplishments alone.

And he wasn't the only one who thought her strides and achievements were phenomenal. The entire world was enchanted with Katera from Parallon, as she'd been warmly dubbed. At media conferences, she was soft-spoken, yet charming and communicative while answering everyone's questions, sharing the exciting things she was learning about the new world she lived in. The whole of the World Union never seemed to get enough of the beautiful woman from the past, and the demand for her presence at global events was incessant.

Only Mike knew how she truly felt, for only he witnessed the long hours spent late every night staring up at the night sky. He knew she was imagining her home—he could feel it. She'd stare relentlessly at the stars, the only part of the modern world unchanged since the days of Parallon. She'd crane her neck upward for hours. At times, she lowered her head in prayer before the moon. Otherwise, she searched the constellations hungrily for the stars that her mother and father had taught her to recognize and use to find her way home, if ever she was lost. He knew she felt lost, but no amount of searching the heavens was going to bring her any closer to Parallon.

As the Micro sped along the tracks over the hard, shale ocean bottom, the scene around them grew darker as they descended, deeper and deeper, until shadows merged with shadows. Soon, all was black, densely so. Every now and then, a glowing thing, like a set of disembodied shining stripes or long tentacles, would appear and glide away. Whether Katera knew that these were fish, she did not let on and they rode in silence, which seemed fitting for the hushed world surrounding them.

Soon, a faint light appeared on the ocean bottom in the distance, smeared and blurry through the water. As they drew closer, the light grew larger until a shape emerged, something with rounded top... a dome.

"Suela del Mar?" Katera breathed, breaking the silence.

"Yes, it's a rather squat dome. One-quarter mile high with a diameter of three miles."

"That's... that's huge."

"Not by terrestrial standards, but for an underwater city it is big, one of the biggest. Most of them are only one or two miles in diameter. They're still a big experiment."

"How many are there?"

Mike had to think. They were building new ones every year.

"Maybe... fifty or so. They dot the continental shelves and Mesopelagic zones around the world."

"I know about the zone and the continental shelf," she said. "The shelf is a shallow part of the ocean surrounding continents. It drops off into the deep ocean. The Mesopelagic zone is between them."

She sounded pleased with herself, and Mike smiled. She sucked up knowledge so quickly, it was dizzying. If she'd been born and bred in this era, there'd have been no stopping her. Surely, she would have taken her place among the great scholars of his time.

"Right, but there are no cities in the deep ocean... yet. There are plans for one, though."

They were approaching the translucent and artificially radiant dome. The vague shape of buildings merged gleaming into the light. The Micro slowed as it neared the entrance and stopped in front, behind a line of LandCars. A large entryway, thirty feet across, opened slowly. The Micro moved inside with a couple other cars and the entry door closed behind them. They were inside a chamber. Another door sat in front, but it did not open. Katera pressed the icons for *Transition, Unseal, Release Planck Shield*. Mike heard the series of clicks as the shield withdrew. A loud noise filled their space and the water level decreased inside the chamber. Finally, it reached bottom and the doors in front opened up into the sparkling city of Suela del Mar.

Except for the fact that it lay 1,000 meters under the sea, the roads and buildings looked a lot like Ocean Park, with the marvelous exception the landscape of Suela Del Mar featured the flora and fauna of a tropical rainforest. Orchids, bromeliads, and other flora erupted in vivid color, contrasting with the moss and lichen-covered trees. Ferns dotted the landscape everywhere. Unlike the natural rainforest, however, these trees were clipped short to a modest ten to thirty feet, allowing the taller buildings to reach over them and form the canopy.

"Oh, lovely," Katera said, planting her palm on her chest. On the console, the simulation pad blinked on. She looked down and dutifully moved her finger onto the pad. "Where to?"

"I thought we could visit Poseidon's Palace. They have a nice restaurant there and great seafood. We could try a slice of their giant sea bass."

"As long as they don't serve me a piece with those creepy eyeballs, I'll try it. Hey, I'll even buy."

"This is my treat, Katera."

"No, I insist. You do so much for me. And what am I supposed to do with all this money they're giving me? I can't spend it fast enough."

"Save it. Invest it. That's what people do with money. And they're not *giving* it to you. You earn it from your appearances."

Katera shook her head. "Talking and more talking. Such a strange way to make a living. I don't do anything but answer questions. We used to do that for the Kastaks for free."

They both laughed, and Mike pointed down a side street that led to the restaurant.

"Okay," he said. "You're on, moneybags."

Katera pointed the Micro in the direction of Poseidon's Palace, a three-story building with towers and attending spires. Large trees flanked the exterior with tall birds of paradise blooming among them. Smaller ferns, hibiscus and orchids, ringed the larger birds. She directed the Micro into one of the many LandCar parking tracks that snaked through the gardens.

"Not bad for a first ride," Katera said, smiling as she pressed the console icon to unseal and open the doors.

"Even better for a last one."

Mike laughed and pulled himself up from the low seat. The eternally warm and humid air of Suela del Mar wrapped around him like a moist blanket. Katera hopped out and joined him from the other side.

"You'll want to be nice to the driver," she said, taking his arm. "You're a long way from home."

And so am I, came her unspoken words. She smiled, but he noticed that once again, her eyes took up that hollow look...and he knew her thoughts had turned to Parallon.

"Yeah, you're right. And I didn't bring my swimsuit. Guess I'll have to kiss up...damn."

Katera squeezed his arm. He enclosed her fingers with his and squeezed back, but he could feel a sadness settling over her like a cloak—a sadness that visited with a growing frequency. Mike sighed. She had quit talking about going home, finally convinced that he didn't have a solution. She understood that there'd be no returning to Parallon, that she was going to grow old in this world.

Yet her silence pained him even more than when she had probed him with endless questions. The dark moods that accompanied her withdrawal...it didn't feel good. He recognized that for her to stay strong, she would need to talk about how she felt. He'd try to draw her out. If she was going to heal, if they were going to have any chance at a life together, he had to keep her connected to the things that were important to her, which meant, in her case, her former life and her family. At least until she adjusted, if she ever did.

The doors to Poseidon's Palace retracted into the surrounding walls, and Mike stepped inside with Katera, her arm looped through his as if she needed holding up.

Chapter Thirty

Katera struggled to keep smiling as Mikolen guided her through the front courtyard toward Poseidon's Palace. It wasn't Mikolen's fault that most of the time she felt like shedding a river of tears. If anything, her desire to please him kept her going. If she were to admit the truth, nothing else motivated her to get up in the morning. Watching the pleasure in his eyes when her tutor, Jay, bragged about her progress made her want to study all day long, to absorb as much as possible. If only it were enough.

She hadn't felt like this in the beginning. She'd been absorbed in the miracles around her, enchanted as she marveled at every technical wonder, large and small: from the communication system, like the wrist screens that allowed you to talk with and view anyone, anywhere, to the incredible Earth satellite stations containing small cities where people worked and lived. For her, new discoveries lay around every corner, although they no longer captivated her with the same intensity as in those first few weeks.

Something else had surfaced...a feeling, sharp-edged and persistent. Steadily, it had carved a path through the center of her joy leaving a dead hole, a place of emptiness. Yes, the people in this world treated her well, but buckets of adulation from World Council members didn't feel as good as the simple approval from Mama for a job well done. She received incredible gifts from dignitaries all over the world, but it didn't warm her heart as much as the crudely crafted wooden moon that never left her neck. Certainly the rides in the AeroCars were thrilling, but it didn't match the exhilaration she'd felt when Papa had hoisted her onto the back of her first hoshdel.

And these feelings had increased as the weeks passed. The images of home grew more vivid, especially at night when Lupana showed her face. Oh, if only there was a way...

She knew Mikolen would build her another stargate if he could, but he could not and she must accept it. He deserved better than someone who always wished to be somewhere else. With great effort, she smiled up at him as they walked across the wide lobby of the restaurant, hoping she could act her way through another afternoon.

Poseidon's Palace from the outside resembled something out of one of those digital history books that Jay had given her. What was it? Oh, yes—a late gothic cathedral—tall and airy with lots of windows and

decorative flying buttresses pressed into the external walls. The doors to the lobby opened as they approached, and they stepped inside.

Katera sighed. It was one thing to look at a picture and quite another to see it in person, even if it was a replica. The interior walls soared upward into delicate ogival arches and ribbed vaults. Above, rose windows sparkled like the inside of a kaleidoscope. She followed the colored beams of light to the marble floor below, where an elaborate arrangement of inlaid tiles depicted Posiedon on his throne.

Katera was marveling at the details when the maitre d' appeared in the lobby. He pattered towards them like a swift penguin, stopping in front of Katera. In the middle of a little bow, he froze.

"Oh, oh!" His hand fluttered to his chest as he straightened. *Here it comes*, Katera thought. "Is it really you?" His thin lips curled up like a potato chip. "Katera from Parallon? Oh...my!"

He slapped his hand to his cheek. Katera nodded weakly, but before she had a chance to say anything Mikolen came to her rescue.

"It is Katera, and she's very hungry. Perhaps you could find us a table?"

The maitre d' wagged his head and clapped his hands together. "Of course. And what an honor for our humble establishment to be graced with the presence of someone such as..."

"The table?" Mikolen interrupted.

"Oh, right away...Dr. Leno, isn't it? We have the perfect spot for you." His eyes flitted to Katera. With a flourishing twist of his wrist, he indicated a side aisle. "Right this way, please." As they fell in step behind him, he flipped his head back at Mikolen and said in a conspiratorial tone, "You're going to love your table. It has the best view of the garden."

Mikolen nodded as the maitre d' led them briskly past other tables and patrons toward a glass-encased room at the far end. It showcased a 180-degree view of the garden. As they entered, it felt as if they'd crossed a threshold into a jungle, thick with trees and ferns. He offered a table with high partitions "so they might enjoy their privacy". Katera slipped into the form-fitting seat across from Mikolen. After pointing to the menu icons, the maitre d' instructed them to order at their leisure. He bowed again, gave an extra nod to Katera, and left. Mikolen leaned forward on the table and searched Katera's eyes with his own.

"Katera," he said, softly. "I know you've stopped asking, but...you know, I still wish I could take you home..."

"I know, Mikolen," Katera interrupted. "I know you would if you could, and I'm sorry I haven't been much company for you lately."

He waved his hand. "I'm not worried about that. It's you I'm worried about. You put on a brave front, but I know you're unhappy."

He knows. Katera bit her lip. "I just need time."

"And you have it, but sometimes I think it's getting worse. Do you think we're taking this in the right direction?" He reached over and picked up her hands. "Do you think it might help to stop stargazing until 3:00 in the morning? Is this making it any easier for you? Because I promise you, the moon doesn't care. It's still going to rise and fall without your eyes pinned on it."

Katera pulled her hands from his. "On *her*, Mikolen, not it. And my religion happens to be up there in

the starry heavens. I find my peace when I talk to Lupana."

"Do you?" he asked. "Because it sure is hard to tell from watching you. By morning, you usually look pretty lost."

Katera lowered her head. He was right, of course, but it was so hard to stop. Praying to Lupana provided her with a potent connection to Parallon-the last one she had. When she prayed to the moon in whatever form-full, crescent, or slivered-she knew who she was. When she gazed at the home of the goddess, she could remember the important things, the values she'd grown up with. True, it also beckoned eruptions of sorrow...

"I-I can't stop. I need Lupana. She guides me in this world. I must pray to her."

Mike sighed. "Katera, you've been around the moon in an AeroCar. Does it really look to you like an immortal goddess lives there?"

Katera looked at him sharply. "Lupana's spirit is felt, not seen." Her chin lifted. "Lupana is there."

"Okay. Okay." He lifted both hands in supplication. "But have you asked her to help you live happily in this world?"

Yes, Katera thought, a lump rising to her throat. *If you only knew*.

"I need time," she repeated.

Mikolen nodded, but looked unconvinced, his thick brow knitted over his light blue eyes. He reached again for her hands, but she moved them under the table. He sighed.

"You miss your family, I know. And I can't bring you to them or them to you, but you and I...we can make our own family together. You can have a family; it'll just be a new one."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Mikolen leaned forward, stretching his arms across the table, "let's get married. I know you wanted to wait until you felt competent in this world. Well, you are. You're highly competent. You have mastered more in seven months than anyone would have thought possible. And you can continue to learn things for the rest of your life. In the meantime, let's have children and begin our lives...together." He cocked his head and looked at her, a pleading look in his eyes. "C'mon."

The invitation to surrender was clear. She placed her hands on the tabletop, and felt thankful that he did not reach for them again.

"It's just that I'm not ready. I still don't...I mean, it's not your fault, but I don't feel like I belong here. You've been wonderful-that's not the problem-it's just...not my world. And how can I possibly get married and have children in a place where I don't belong?"

"You belong, Katera. Ask anyone."

"Belonging goes both ways. Everyone has been so kind, and I'm grateful for that, but I still don't *feel* right here. It's not *my* home."

Mikolen dropped his head to the side, looking pained. When he looked back at her, his eyes looked glazed over and his smile forced.

"Take all the time you need," he said.

"Mikolen, please..."

She wanted to ask for his patience, ask him to wait until she felt more comfortable, more confident, but he'd already risen and was making his way past the tables toward the exit. She grabbed her wrap and pocketbook, and scurried after him.

* **

Seated alone on the other side of the high partition, Felipa Kurtz, deep in thought, turned around to finish her abalone. She'd heard enough. Mike Leno's lady, Katera from Parallon, wanted to go home. It gave Felipa an idea...an absolutely marvelous idea.

Chapter Thirty-One

Mike guided his Lynx, a sleek-looking LandCar, through the Identi-Gate as it opened for him. Good, he thought. Felipa had programmed the gate to recognize his car-so much easier than fumbling with those damn Permit-to-Pass request icons. As he pulled up in front of her stylish and rambling home overlooking the Pacific Ocean, he realized it had been ten years since he'd been up here, though Felipa would remember seeing him one year ago at her dinner table with Greg. Mike had wanted to come up and offer his condolences after Felipa had learned about Greg's death, but she'd said she wasn't taking visitors. He'd sent flowers, notes, and for weeks...nothing. Until last night-suddenly this phone call.

"Come see me, Mike," she said, cheerily. "It's been a while." He asked her if she was okay. "Fine, fine," and "Sorry I haven't called you sooner."

Very curious, but why argue with a good thing? It was great to hear the melancholy tone absent from her voice-maybe she was finally on the mend.

He turned his Lynx into a guest slot at the end of her driveway and hopped out. Before he reached the front door, it retracted into the surrounding wall. Clearly, she was waiting for him.

He stepped into the foyer, and as he had on past visits, admired the golden aura emanating from the walls of the room. Greg had installed Sunner Beams inside them, creating a warm, golden glow that reached several feet into the room from each wall. Felipa had furnished two corners with SunLit Objects d' Art, an art form that allowed the artist to fashion invisible, curving boundaries revealed only by interior illumination. Balls of light traveled the width and breadth of the structure, lighting different sections in isolation of the others. The result was an eerie impression of twisting, changing abstract forms of luminosity. The objects played off the walls, ingesting their aura and growing brighter, while at other times the light leaked out and entered the walls. It was a cyclical glowing and dimming process and an endless source of fascination for him.

He was studying a path of light as it curled upward to the ceiling, when he felt a presence behind him. He turned. Felipa looked elegant in a tunic style top covered with glittery Scaleys, a product created to resemble the sparkling flanks of the popular Rainbow fish. Her hair appeared thin, but clean; her eyes watery, but interested. She'd lost some weight.

"Hey, Felipa." He held his arms open, and she walked into them, allowing Mike to give her a bear hug. "So good to see you."

"Good to see you, too, Mike." She stepped away, smiling. "And thanks so much for coming. I'm sorry not to invite Katera, but I have some important things that I want to discuss with you, and she shouldn't hear about it until everything's settled."

"Until everything's settled? Sounds like you've already made up your mind. Are you taking input or is the plan already hatched?"

"Don't worry. Nothing will be decided without you, since you'd be the major player...if you decide to do it." Her smile disappeared, which made her look much older than her thirty-six years.

"Sounds serious."

A twinge wrested his gut. Something didn't feel right. He looked at her curiously, but she had turned, motioning for him to follow.

"C'mon. Let's go to the south wing where we can talk."

She led him through the house, past the living room where a servant stood on tip-toe polishing a spherical lanadik, past the great room boasting an illusion of forty-foot high walls and a revolving star-studded ceiling, past the kitchen where a cook was dropping something into a self-regulated cooking pot, past the reading room filled with SleepLift suspension couches and chairs, through the outdoor atrium where Blue Crown conures, lories, and macaws squawked inside invisible-walled aviaries, and into the opposite wing of the house. Down another hallway, and she turned into the conference room, the one Greg had built to conduct meetings with other scientists. She closed the door, and motioned Mike to sit down at the long table. He slipped into the SuspensionChair behind it and waited for Felipa as she instructed the servants, via the HouseSpeaker on the wall, not to disturb them. As she sat down across from him, he noticed for the first time that she looked pale, almost ashen. Was she frightened? She folded her hands on the tabletop and leaned forward.

"Mike, I have good news and bad news."

"Okaaay." He braced himself. "Gimme the bad first. Then maybe the good news will seem even better."

She smiled. "As you wish. Actually, it will make more sense this way-telling the bad news first." She sighed deeply, summoning her courage. "I haven't got much time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm dying. I've been diagnosed with late stage cancer. It's all over my body...a very aggressive form. There's too much damage for tissue restoration to do its magic. No amount of Serulin will help me now."

Mike was stunned. Nobody died from cancer anymore unless it had progressed to the final stage, which it rarely did. How did she let it get this far? Diagnostic medical equipment allowed instantaneous assessments of all body systems. Had she not been to a clinic?

"Felipa, no. My God. How?"

"I ignored the signs. I felt terrible after Greg's death. I thought my symptoms were a result of my grief, that's all. By the time I went to the health clinic, it was too late. I walked into the assessment chamber, and the cancer icons began blinking all over the body map like city lights from the air. It's in my organs, my bones."

"Felipa...Oh, I'm so sorry."

She reached over the table and laid a hand on his arm. "You know, in a funny way, it's all right. Greg was the love of my life, and now very soon, I'm going to be with him again. I don't mean to sound morbid, but I can't help it. I'm not unhappy about this."

Mike found no reason to celebrate and didn't want to encourage it. "You know, there are a lot of people that care about you, Felipa. Greg wasn't the only one. People are going to miss you. I know you don't have living relatives, but you have lots of friends. Did you think about how everyone is going to take this news?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry. I love my friends, and that includes you, but this is how I feel."

Mike drew in a long breath. "How long?"

"Not long, maybe three...four weeks. Anyway, that's the bad news."

Mike shook his head. "Your bad news has to dwarf any good news you could offer."

"Actually, the good news is pretty big, too."

In spite of himself, Mike cocked an ear. "Well, don't keep me in suspense."

Felipa drew in a deep breath. "As you are aware, I am a very rich woman. I am the sole owner of Kurtz's Quantum Energy Sources. I have no use for money, and I have no heirs. I want to do something good with it before I die."

"What did you have in mind?"

"It'll take most of it to do what I want, but there's enough."

"Enough for what?"

Felipa leaned back. "Enough to build another stargate. A stargate to take you and Katera back to Parallon...where Greg is buried. I want you to build it."

Mike straightened his spine and shifted in his seat. "Go on."

"Not only do I have the funds, but only KQES makes the EM Sphere, as you know."

Mike brought the fingertips of each hand together and leaned forward, thinking hard. This could work. KQES not only created the specialized EM Sphere needed to power a stargate, but offered an army of technicians to aid in the construction of a stargate. Mike felt as focused as a laser beam. This could be the answer-for Katera...for him.

"Felipa, are you sure? I mean, there are many, many charities that can benefit..."

"I'm sure," she said, sternly enough to silence him. "I've thought about this thoroughly, and this is what I want to do."

A question lingered, and he knew he had to ask it. "Why? Why do you want to do this? What makes sending Katera and me back into the past so important?"

A shrewd look settled on her features, and Mike knew there was more. "I want to go with you. I want to find Greg's grave. I want to mourn him at his grave. You do know where his remains are, don't you?"

Mike nodded. "Yes, but it was a mass burial. There are no markers. Could you handle that?"

"Yes, and it gives me all the more reason to go with you. I must perform the proper ministrations to bless the site."

"I can do that for you. You may not want to travel to the past. Katera's world is rough, violent compared to ours. You may find it very uncomfortable, especially in your condition. If you'll allow me, I promise to administer all the appropriate blessings."

"Thanks," she interrupted, "but I need to be there. I need to be near him when I die; near his remains, and...and I want to be buried with him. I want to lie next to him forever. You'll do that for me, won't you, Mike? Let me go with you...bury me?"

So, that was it. The bottom line: she wants to be where Greg is even if he's dead. Not surprising. Felipa had lived her life for Greg, revolving around him and his activities like a satellite, tending to his every need. Obviously, the bulk of Felipa's routines had ground to a screeching halt with Greg's death.

"Mike?" Felipa was staring at him, hard. "I haven't got much time. You need to build this now. I will place every technician at KQES at your disposal. With their help you should be able to complete it in two to three weeks."

Mike met her determined gaze. "Felipa..."

"This is a dying woman's wish. I want you to build it, and I want to go with you."

Mike bowed his head. What could he hope to accomplish by talking her out of this? She only had a month to live, maybe less. What possible satisfaction would she gain by staying behind? She had her passion, her remaining strength, invested in this project-that was plain to see.

"And if I happen to die before you finish, I still want you to complete the stargate. And then, I want you to take my body back to..."

"Felipa!"

"Take it back. Take it back, and bury it with Greg's. This is my wish, Mike." She leaned back in her chair breathless, as if the excitement had taxed her last ounce of energy. When she spoke again, her voice was a hoarse whisper. "Will you do it? Will you build another stargate and let me come with you?"

Mike gave her a long look. "Yes," he said. "Yes and yes."

A light flickered into her eyes and she smiled, but in the next moment, the look of infinite weariness returned.

"Good," she said, leaning back. "Then you may begin tomorrow. The technicians will be waiting for you."

Chapter Thirty-Two

The sun dipped below the Pacific in a burning sky that glazed the surface of the watery horizon in an array of burnt oranges. Mike entered the house and paused in the living room after spying Katera, who was sitting outside in the atrium. She sat with her back to him, her face strained toward the heavens. He strolled to the door and followed her gaze up, though he knew the object of her attention. A full moon was making an early appearance and lay pasted like a white wafer on the darkening sky. If he'd had an EnergyCam, the viewer that recorded invisible forms of energy, he'd probably spot a tether or some ethereal umbilical cord leading from the moon all the way south to her navel.

She must have felt him standing there, because she tore her face from the orb in the sky and turned around.

"Mikolen!"

She hopped up as Mike stepped outside. He knew she was anxious to hear the news. She'd begged to go to Felipa's with him, but Mike had been firm. Felipa said come alone. Yes, he'd confessed to Katera, it concerned her, but Felipa wanted Mike to hear it first and approve the plan. Katera had made him promise to tell all as soon as he returned. He made a deliberately sour face, gathering his lips in a pout. *Let's not make this too easy*, he thought. Katera looked stunned.

"What happened?" she asked. "I thought this was supposed to be good news." Mike worked at his mouth, straining to keep the corners down. Katera yelped. "*Ya takano* !" she swore, with a laugh "You're teasing me. You'd better tell me some good news, *takano*, before I knock your head off."

Mikolen's scowl evaporated into a smile, and he caught her rising wrists. "Just wanted to give this news the proper build up; make sure it has the right impact."

"What news? What impact? Tell me." She laughed, wrenching her hands free to pound his chest with both fists. "Tell me, or I'll turn you into Miss Meat."

"Miss Meat?" Mike laughed. "Oh, you mean mincemeat, goofball. Ow!" Mikolen threw his head back as she pummeled him, grimacing in defeat. "All right. Anything you say." He grabbed her wrists again, pulled them to her sides. "Stay," he instructed, pointing a finger at them.

"They do not obey those who hesitate," she said, lifting a fist in front of him. "Give it up."

He raised both hands in surrender. "Please, don't hurt me. You're going home, that's what. Put those ferocious dukes down."

Katera froze as the smile dropped off her face. "That's not funny, Mikolen."

Mike straightened and dropped his hands. "I wouldn't kid you about something like this. You're going home."

Katera's eyes popped open. Her mouth flapped several times, but no sound came out.

"How?" she asked finally, as if she didn't trust her tongue to wrap around another word.

"In a stargate. Felipa has enough money to build one, so she's sending us back. She wants to go with us." Mike paused. "She has cancer. She's not going to live much longer."

"Cancer?"

"Yes. She wants to go back with us, so she can be buried with her husband."

Katera blinked. "Go back with us?"

"Yes, to Parallon." Katera looked dumbfounded, so Mike tried again. "You're going home. You're going back to Parallon-back to your parents and Rorken. It'll take me a couple of weeks to assemble a stargate. Then we're gone. We'll be leaving for 3540 BC."

For a split second Katera's face registered an expression of limbo, as if the risk in believing his words were equal to the risk of not believing. And then, it hit her as if a huge ball of air smacked into her middle. She staggered backward a few steps and caught herself, her feet planted wide. Her hands flew to her chest, one over the other. She rocked forward, and then back again, lifted her head and stared open-mouthed at the ceiling. A small noise gurgled up from her throat, or was it a laugh? A sob? Maybe it was both. Yes, he could see her face as she drew her head down. Happy tears streaked her cheeks as she laughed out loud. She walked unevenly to him, her eyes dancing, and flung her arms around his neck.

"Oh, Mikolen."

He leaned over and pressed his face into the side of her head, into the soft, thick curls of her hair, and pulled her to him. At that moment, he would have died to keep her this happy. Whatever it took—move a mountain, build a stargate—nothing was too much. She gazed up at him. Her breath was fragrant, sweet.

"You're coming back with me, too, right? You'll stay with me in Parallon, won't you?"

He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulled her body closer. "Only if you promise to marry me," he said, huskily. "Will you? Will you marry me in Parallon?"

She flashed a quick smile, her eyes flickering with verve. "If that's what you want, show me you mean it," she commanded. "Kiss me. Prove to me that you're willing to leave your world and stay with me forever."

She flipped her head back daringly and closed her eyes. Wearing a small, expectant smile, she licked her lips. A primitive urge stirred within him as he soaked up her presentation, at once seductive and innocent. He wanted to ravage her, and with great restraint, lowered his lips slowly to hers. She met them softly, lip brushing lip. He used his tongue to tease hers further apart, tasting, possessing. Her mouth opened, and he took in several honeyed sips as waves of heat unleashed into his body.

"Mikolen."

Her voice was silky, low. He didn't remember ever feeling this keenly aroused—arousal spiked with a razor-edged tension generated from almost eight months of covert foreplay made intense by the denial of its power over him. His body was demanding payment. He felt her arch against him, felt the soft yield of her mouth, and he kissed her, drinking deeply. Her supple form twisted beneath his hands as she rubbed against him. He struggled to stay focused and rational. Wary of grabbing too much too soon, he fought the urge to thrust his hands under her skirt.

She's a virgin, Leno . Go slow for Chrissake.

But Katera wasn't going slow. Standing on tiptoe, she nipped his ear with her teeth, dashed her tongue lightly around his lobe, and slid it down his neck. His senses reeled, and unable to control the impulse any longer, he slipped both hands under her skirt, grasped her bottom and lifted. She gave a little hop and wrapped her legs around his midsection. His constrained arousal pressed against her. He tried to say to her name, but a moan fell out of his throat instead.

He carried her to the bedroom, her legs still wrapped around him. New sensations erupted inside him every time she squeezed her legs, nipped his neck, his ear. He reached the suspension bed and fell forward onto the cushion of air with Katera under him. Gazing into her eyes through the growing darkness, he reached one hand over her head and snapped his fingers. A soft, dim light enveloped the room.

"Mikolen," she said, "I..."

She did not finish, because he'd rolled off her and pulled the release tab located over her solar plexus on her form-fitting top. It was opening along diagonal seams like the petals of a flower, peeling away. He watched, breathless, until her white breasts and tummy were fully exposed. He sighed and let his fingers glide over the smooth skin of her tummy, up the center to her firm breasts, small and round. He cupped the one farthest from him and let his mouth slip over the pink tip of the other. Katera's breathing deepened, and beneath his fingers he felt small tremors streak through her body. Her hand moved past his head to the fastener on her skirt, but he reached for it and stopped her.

"No," he said, hoarsely. "Leave it on."

The skirt looked gorgeous on her, and he wanted to admire her in it a little longer. He sat up and shifted his body, straddling her, then reached under her skirt and snagged the top of her panties. She lifted her hips, and he moved off the bed taking her underwear with him, slowly past her muscled thighs and shapely calves, past the tiny slipper-shoes and onto the floor. When he glanced back at her, she was tugging at her skirt, pulling it back over her hips as if gripped by sudden shyness.

He realized he was fully clothed and, in a flash of understanding, felt her vulnerability. Immediately, he unhitched his pants, stripped them off, shed his shirt, shoes, underwear and stood up, completely naked. A column of hard flesh fell between them. With some relief, Mike knew he didn't have to worry about the visual effects of an erection with her-she'd seen plenty of them on the young men who paraded nude while working in the fields of Parallon. The ease in which they produced an erection was a fact-of-life in her village. Still, he didn't think she'd been this close to one, and he knew she'd never touched one.

"I didn't think it was fair that you were the only one to undress," he said, crawling back onto the bed. The diversion seemed to work. She appeared calm and interested.

"Yes, well, I do think you've outmaneuvered me."

Her eyes shifted to his groin. A delicate flush rose to her face, and her chest heaved. He laughed, pleased with her response.

"Would you like to touch it?" He rolled onto his back. She reached out gingerly. "Go ahead. You're not going to hurt me."

She touched lightly at first, then wrapped her fingers around and squeezed. Mike exhaled. Maintaining his composure would not be easy. He buried his mounting compulsion to toss her skirt over her head with a deep inhaled breath. He allowed her to explore, prodding and squeezing, dragging her fingers over the surface while he fought for control through a thinly managed tempest of desire. She squeezed him again.

"The skin is soft, but it's hard underneath," she said with perfect innocence.

Another sensation rocked him. "Katera," he moaned, and rolled onto his side facing her. "Please."

Through the fog of his brain, it registered that she was studying his face, her eyes soft and knowing. She sat up, reached for the hem of her skirt, lifted. Slowly, she carried it with her as she lay back down, her head sinking into the pillow. She dropped the hem, letting it fall to her waist. Only the vaguest sense of control remained as Mike reached for her, groping for the secret treasures now exposed. She opened her legs, and he cupped her there, inserted a finger...felt the layer of skin inside that he would soon break...felt the wetness...heard her moan.

She's ready, he thought. He didn't want to wait, not this time. It had been so long. Later, they'd explore...later when his brain would allow him to savor and relish her. Right now...

He rose over her-over the rustling folds of her skirt ballooning from her waist, over her trembling breasts and luscious inner thighs. He lowered his body, aimed, and pushed. And hit a wall.

"Again," she huffed into his ear.

He shoved. The membrane burst and fell away. Katera cried out as he slid past, driving deep into her body from the force of his thrust. He paused, buried to his groin in soft velvet...and waited. She moaned.

"You okay?" he breathed. She moaned again, rotating her hips. "I'll take that as a yes," he said and

withdrew, slowly, then plunged.

Katera arched her back. Again, he withdrew and plunged, listening to the sounds of their lovemaking. Katera caught his rhythm and matched him, riding the wave of their heat. He picked up the pace, fisting his hands in her hair, devouring her mouth, murmuring incomprehensible things about love that not even he understood. Guttural sounds pulsed from her throat, and Mike lost every ounce of reserve. He let himself go and drove mindless into her flesh, without thought or reason, melding into her as one. When Katera called out, deep in the throes of her own ecstasy, he released.

When he rolled off and drew her into his arms, he felt like he'd just delivered his heart, his body, and his soul to her.

* * *

A thin strip of morning light escaped from the groove between the window covering and sill, landing on Katera's face. *Merciful Lupana. Blessed lady of the moon. Did I dream? Did it happen?* She opened her eyes and smiled, ruminating over the details of the night before. A vague soreness pinched between her legs, but she didn't mind. She felt luxurious, utterly relaxed in a cozy afterglow. *I'm not a virgin any more*, she thought. *Raka tan.* Thanks for that. Because if that's what I've been missing, I've waited too long.

Another thought struck her, and she sat bolt upright in bed. *Neya pak hostan.* I'm going home. Her hand flew to her bare chest. Home. My beautiful Parallon. She turned to Mikolen, still sleeping beside her. Was he really coming with her? It seemed too good to be true. What if he got to Parallon and missed his home the way she missed hers? Would he leave her? Would he escape in the time machine and return to the future?

Why did it have to be so complicated? Why couldn't they both have been born at the same time and in the same place...or at least the same age, so they wouldn't have to deal with so much culture shock. True, Mikolen had lived in Parallon for ten years, but not as a villager or a citizen. And he sure didn't look like he belonged there any more, not with his short hair and shiny, clean-shaven face.

She leaned over him and inhaled the musky scent of him. His eyes rolled under his lids like large marbles, and she realized he was dreaming. What, or who was filling his dreams? Was it she? Was he watching her image dance across his eyelids? She propped herself up on one elbow, and with her other hand lifted a strand of hair from his forehead and threaded it back over his head. What would she do if he changed his mind and left her? No. She didn't want to think about it any more; not after last night. She lowered her face toward his until she felt his warm breath on her lips. She lingered, reliving the night before, recalling flesh to flesh, the passionate thrusts.

A hand jutted out and caught her on the back of her neck. She squawked in surprise as Mikolen pulled her lips to his. He pressed hard, devouring and hungry-a kiss that demanded more. Lines of hot pleasure radiated from her hips.

"Katera." His voice was breathy, deep. His chest heaved. "Katera, climb over me."

He wasn't asking. It sounded like he'd used up his last rational thought to utter those few words. For some reason, she could not resist. He moaned again as she lifted a knee over him, dropped it on the other side and lowered herself.

Chapter Thirty-Three

A flurry of activity didn't describe the past two weeks. A hurricane of epic proportions was more like it.

Working round the clock, grabbing tools and materials and jamming them together to reconstruct the design, working the plan at a frenzied pace, and finagling technicians to do the same, had fatigued every cell in Mike's body. As he made the final adjustments to the control panel of his third stargate, Gryphon, he breathed a sigh of relief and stretched his curled and stiffened spine.

"Are you ready for this?" Juan Noriega, a technician, approached him holding out his hand. Mike spotted the EM Sphere cupped neatly in his palm.

"Yes. We're ready for it. Gryphon is finished."

"Amazing, Dr. Leno." Juan handed the sphere to Mike. "I never would have believed it possible...building a stargate in two weeks. What a feat."

"Wouldn't have happened without you and the rest of the team," Mike said, sliding the Em Sphere into the curved slot under the translucent control panel. He stepped back to admire their work.

"It looks great," Juan said. "Exactly like the other two, right?"

"Yes, except for some added emergency icons and safety features, it's the same."

"Well, no need to improve on success." Juan patted a smooth, curving wall.

"Right," Mike agreed. "Especially with only two weeks to get it done."

Several other technicians, who had been making last minute adjustments, laid down their tools and joined Mike and Juan to stare at the finished stargate. They stood back in silence, savoring the satisfaction of the completed task.

"I haven't worked that hard in years," Alice Turner, an older technician, said. "And I don't think I ever will again."

Several heads nodded, laughing.

"If I'd pushed myself any more, they'd have entered my name under martyr in the dictionary," said Maria Costas, untying the knot of hair behind her head and letting it fall. She looked at Mike. "So, Dr. Leno, now that it's ready, when do you plan to go?"

Mike drew in a deep breath. "Tomorrow morning, providing Felipa agrees. She's pretty anxious for me to get it done. I think she wanted to leave yesterday."

"Tomorrow morning should be just fine, Mike."

Mike whirled around. Felipa had entered the room on a FloaterChair. She glided across the room in it, coasting like a bird headed for a landing. She slowed gradually and stopped in front of Mike, guiding her chair to the floor. Her skin looked sallow, waxen, and her cheeks, nose and chin held harsh edges, devoid of extra padding. Dark circles surrounded both red-rimmed eyes. *Christ, I hope she makes it to tomorrow .*

"We can leave first thing," he said. "Katera and I will be here at 6 AM for a prompt departure."

Felipa smiled feebly. "I'll be here, ready to go."

"Alright," Mike said, softly. "Anything you need to bring, give it to the technicians to pack in tonight."

"Yeah, I'll be here for a while longer," Maria said. "We have to clean up."

The others nodded, offered their support.

"No, thank you," Felipa said. "I'll be traveling light." A nasty cough intervened, shaking her slight frame violently. She leaned forward, hand over mouth, hacking. Mike reached into the pouch over the back of her chair, pulled a water bottle and handed it to her. "Thanks," she said, her voice strained. She downed a hearty swig and looked back at Mike, smiling. "Will you show me the inside of Gryphon, Mike? I'd love to know how it works."

"Sure, would you like to bring your chair in?"

"No, I can walk."

Wishing she'd asked to include her chair, Mike held out his hand. Felipa grabbed it, and he pulled her up. Leaning heavily on his arm, she shuffled into the stargate. Inside, he offered her a seat, but she insisted on standing in order to see everything on the control panel.

"And what does this do?" She pointed to the TimeSet icon.

"This is where we program it for the exact time we want it to arrive. You can set it down to the second with this. Look." He fiddled with the icon. "There. Now it's set to arrive a day after Katera and I left Parallon. We're ready to go."

"You can't set it much earlier, right?"

"No. If we do, Katera and I would meet ourselves and cause a time warp."

"Then we'd all go spinning off into another universe?"

Mike nodded. "That's right. I've already done that once. It can cause changes in the new universe-in matter and lower forms of life. Did you know there were no rocsadons in my universe, the one I was born in?"

"It's so strange to think there's another whole world spinning around with us in it," Felipa said. "Without rocsadons, of course. Guess the world could do without them, even if they have become an endangered species."

Mike laughed. Felipa pointed to another icon displaying a set of coordinates.

"What's this one do?"

"That's where you program where you want Gryphon to land. You enter the coordinates like this." He punched the numbers in. "See? It's set to land back in the caves where I kept Silver Gate."

Felipa asked dozens of questions, standing the whole while and trembling on uneasy legs. Mike obliged her, though he thought it was a little much given the strain it obviously exacted from her. Finally, she seemed satisfied and allowed him to guide her back to her FloaterChair. Settled, she powered the chair off the floor so that her head was level with Mike's.

"Whatever happens, I want to thank you for this, Mike. No matter what."

She's nervous , he thought. *Nervous and excited* . He reached out, laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Nothing's going to happen, Felipa. We'll have a safe ride. We'll land in the past and the first thing I'll do is to help you find Greg's grave."

She inhaled, exhaled hard. "Okay, fine."

She opened her mouth, closed it again, and gave Mike a blank look before spinning the FloaterChair around and aiming it at the exit. With her back to Mike, she poked a hand in the air as she shot away.

"See you tomorrow."

"Sleep well, Felipa," Mike called.

Mike watched with the technicians as her retreating figure floated out the door.

"Well that was...aloof," Alice observed.

"You'd be aloof, too, if cancer had invaded every organ in your body," said Juan.

"Yeah, I guess." Alice didn't sound convinced. "It's not like her, though, not to say something to us. She always thanks every one of us at the end of a long day around here."

"Maybe she's having second thoughts," said Maria.

"This is what she says she wants to do," Mike said, pricked with guilt. "It was her idea."

Juan patted him on the shoulder. "You're doing a good thing, Dr. Leno. She's dying-that's what's wrong with her. You can't expect a dying person to act like the rest of us."

"And when is acting like the rest of us such an endorsement anyway," Maria joked. Mike chuckled, feeling reassured, though an odd feeling gnawed at his gut. "Why don't you head on home, Dr. Leno. We can finish up around here."

Mike looked at Maria and the other technicians, who were all nodding. "Thank you," he said. "I sure could use some sleep before the trip."

"Yeah, and you've got some packing to do, too, don't you?" Juan asked. He furrowed his brow. "How do you pack for a trip to a place that existed six thousand years ago, anyway?"

"I don't need much," Mike said. "In the spirit of non-interference, it will be up to me to adjust to their way of life. I can't bring tools that will set me apart. Though, I'm no longer beholden to the former policies of Teskali Lab, there are certain elements about our oath that I'd like to honor."

"Not even one tiny little EM Sphere?" Maria cocked her head. "How can you resist? At least take an AirPillow with you. You'll sleep better at night."

Mike laughed. "No, actually, I will have everything I need; all the comforts of home at my fingertips."

"How do you figure?" Juan asked.

"I'll have Gryphon. I can come back and visit whenever I want."

"Ahh. So that's it." Alice stabbed the air with her forefinger. "No wonder you're so calm about leaving all the modern conveniences. You're not leaving them."

"Yes and no. I intend to live in Parallon, but there's no reason to ignore certain benefits from our time, such as the medicine."

"And AeroCars and SleepLift suspension beds." Alice tossed her chin, grinning.

"And chocolate," Maria added.

Everyone laughed.

"Well, why not the best of both worlds?" Mike felt pleased with himself. "We do have a choice."

"Does Katera know you'll be traveling back and forth with Gryphon?"

Mike shook his head. "No, haven't had a chance to say anything yet. I've been here every day and night since we started this, but I'll tell her before we leave. I intend to bring her with me sometimes, too. She doesn't like living here, but she may enjoy visiting."

Maria laughed and stuck out her hand. "Well, go get some rest, Dr. Leno. It's been a pleasure. Good luck to you."

Mike shook her hand and grabbed the others as they were offered. After pumping all around and proffering his gratitude, he strolled to the door and headed home for the first time in two weeks. Home, where he knew Katera waited, anxiously. Home, to fall into the arms of his beloved.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Katera smoothed the material of her spullera laid out next to her panna on the glistening silver cover on the air bed. With delicate strokes, she brushed the soft fibers of her spullera with her fingertips. The moment she'd learned that she was going back to Parallon, she'd rescued the skirt and top from an antique, carved wooden chest at the foot of their bed. Both garments, cleaned of the splattered blood from her severed finger, had been stored in the chest soon after her arrival in 2275. They looked as good as new. She didn't need anything else for this trip. Everything she wanted existed in Parallon.

She heard Mikolen locking his Lynx in the front of the house and raced from the bedroom to meet him at the front door. It retracted to reveal him looking rumpled and tired. She threw her arms around his neck. He wrapped his around her waist and lifted her feet off the floor, his nose tucked in her hair.

"You smell good," he mumbled.

Katera laughed and asked him the question that had been perched on her lips since she'd seen him two weeks ago. "Mikolen? When do we get to leave? Are you finished with Gryphon?"

He allowed her feet to slip back to the floor and held her at arm's length. "Is tomorrow morning soon enough?"

Katera clasped both hands over her chest. "You mean...?"

"I mean, are you packed, yet?"

Katera inhaled sharply. "Tomorrow?"

Mikolen's face cracked into a smile, and he nodded. "Tomorrow morning at 6 AM you, dear lady, are returning to the caves near the village of Parallon. The date is set for July 25th in the year 3,540 BC, one day after we left it seven months ago."

"Oh!" Katera did a little hop. "Mama and Papa will be so surprised."

Mikolen laughed. "They won't have had much time to miss you. Remember, you've only been gone a day. They're still celebrating Askinadon's death and their new freedom."

"Yes. A big party." She clapped her hands together.

Mikolen smiled. "Yes, and we're going to join that big party, but in our own way."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, pulling her to him, "that you'd better skip over to the Elder House and grab one of those old guys, tell him meet us in the village square, you know, outside the temple."

"The Temple Lukora Lupana? Really? Should he bring the Book of Lupana with him?"

"Do they use the Book of Lupana to read inspiring things at a wedding?" Mikolen's voice had turned soft.

"Mana ke, das rana rana ke, Lupana na te kopa oni, ken dokoru chena chena oni sta," Katera said, sliding her arms back around his neck. "Gift of love, gift of two hearts, Lupana bless this sacred union for all of their lives together. I believe that's how the opening goes."

"Ah, yes," Mikolen whispered, leaning into her. "That's perfect for us...for all of our lives together."

All our lives together...that means for the rest of his life in Parallon, Katera realized. Doubt, that familiar shadow, seized her gut. Maybe now was the time. She needed to ask...to know that he was sure. Mikolen was looking at her thoughtfully.

"Are you okay?"

Katera sighed. "I have to know. Are you going to be happy living the rest of your life in Parallon six thousand years in the past? Won't you miss your world...all the magic here? AeroCars and underwater cities, and your Lynx...what will you do without it?"

A mischievous light went on in Mikolen's eyes. He raised a brow. "I'll ride a hoshdel, that's what I'll do."

Unconvinced, Katera plunged ahead. "I miss my world so much-how will you not miss yours? In your world, you are one of the top scientists that ever lived. You won't be inventing anything like a time machine in Parallon, that's for certain."

Mikolen studied her quietly, then slipped an arm around her back, the other under her knees and lifted. He carried her into the living room where he sank into a SuspensionChair, allowing Katera to fall in his lap. She curled her legs up and laid her head on his chest. He picked up a strand of her hair, threaded it back over her head. She waited as a thoughtful silence grew between them. When Mikolen spoke, it was as if he were responding to something deep inside him.

"I don't care about inventing time machines." His voice was quiet and imbued with inflection, like a whispered song. "I've spent over ten years of my life designing and building them, and I don't need to ever make another one." He paused. "It's strange, but I miss Parallon more than I ever missed my own world. I mean, I tried my best to get back to 2275, but that was because I'd taken an oath. I had a mission to complete. It was pretty lousy being by myself in Parallon, but I still loved the place-those open meadows, the fresh air, cool mountaintops. I loved training and riding hoshdels-and, oh, God, I loved the hunt. It was always a challenge to find food, and the kiddiks kept me busy devising new methods and better weapons all the time. I adore kiddik stew; I loved making my own wine, and in a strange way all of this was more satisfying than devising theories and mathematical equations for countless hours inside stuffy labs." He stopped, and Katera lifted her head to look at him. "Except for the part that I was all alone, I loved it...and now, I'm not alone. I do miss Parallon. Strange as it may seem."

The knot in Katera's stomach dissolved inside a wave of relief. She sat up.

"Do you mean it? Are you sure, Mikolen?"

He held his palm against her cheek. "I do mean it, and I am sure. I find Parallon more satisfying than this place, but there is one thing."

Katera knitted her brow. "I knew it. What is it?"

"It's no biggie. Gryphon will be available to us, that's all-so why not use it? We can live in Parallon and visit this world, too. I mean, if our children need medical attention...Katera, why wouldn't we take advantage of that? How could we *not* keep Gryphon, if only for emergencies?"

Katera felt a stab of uncertainty. "If you're always traveling back to your world..."

"Not always. On rare occasions, and only when it's necessary."

"Even so. If you keep coming back here, you might decide you like it better at some point. So what if some day you don't return to Parallon? What's to keep you from staying here for the rest of your life? Why would you bother coming back?" She bit her lip and searched his face.

"Why?" he asked, forcefully. "Don't you get it? You've got me...completely. My heart is in your hands. If anyone had told me ten years ago that I'd be willing to leave everything in this world to stay with a woman from the distant past, I'd have called them crazy. I sure never meant to fall in love with you."

"Gee, thanks."

He ignored her comment. His eyes glittered, as if he was reliving the events. "But it happened. And during my last week in Parallon, too. After ten long years, I meet you in the final stretch. Amazing."

And then, he did something that almost made her heart stop. He picked up her hand and kissed each finger. Slowly, one at a time, he lingered on each digit. When he looked at her again, her Lan Ma Ke burst alive.

At last, she got it. She knew beyond a doubt that Mikolen loved her as much as life itself. Not just for the moment, but for always. He would stay with her in Parallon, because he wanted to be with her. She knew it. More than anything, she wanted to be with him. Her two greatest desires-to live in Parallon and be with her one true love-it was all coming true. Blinking back tears and unable to speak, she looped her arms around his neck and moved her lips to his.

Immediately, his tongue sought hers. The dreams she'd been having for two long weeks while he'd been away erupted in a blaze of heat. Silently, she thanked Lupana for this union, for the dance of love that she lately understood could complete a man and a woman...a dance that she now craved. She felt his hardness rise beneath her, pressing against the back of her thigh and stirring her loins awake. She took a deep breath, pulled her head away and climbed off his lap.

"Follow me," she said.

She threaded her fingers into his and led him into the living room, through the door and outside into the atrium. The light was dim and fading fast. The high windows in the east wall of the house glowed like mirrors in the reflection of the sinking sun.

Katera turned to face Mikolen. She held out one arm signaling him to stop, and with the other pulled the tab to release her dress. It dropped in a pile around her feet. She had not bothered to put on any undergarments, a habit left over from her Parallonian days. Unlike the first time, her nudity did not make her feel vulnerable. She relished the soft look of appreciation in his eyes as they swept over her body.

She stepped from the dress, scooped it up, and tossed it to one side.

"I won't be wearing that again," she said, as the cool evening air fanned her skin and stirred her nipples awake.

"Not unless you're packing it, I guess you won't." Mikolen's gaze settled on her eyes, but his hands were reaching for her breasts. "And I can't wait to see you in a spullera again. If only to see how fast I can get you out of it."

His eyes were glazed as she caught his hands, returned them to his side.

"Hm-mm," she said, shaking her head. "Not yet."

Pinning him with her eyes, she curled her fingers into the top of his pants and grabbed the tab there, yanking it up and back. His pants opened from his navel to his crotch. She searched and found the tab for his shorts and pulled. They, too, opened. She tore her eyes from his and glanced down.

With both hands, she grabbed his pants and shorts at his waist and lowered them, guiding them to his feet. As he leaned over to pull them over his shoes, her eyes returned, irresistibly drawn, to his hardened flesh. Mikolen straightened, and she stood up, allowing his tip to trail over the length of her body. He moaned and pulled his shirt over his head, wobbling on unsteady feet. He let the shirt fall, inside out, in a careless heap on the stone floor.

Katera laid one hand on his shoulder, and with the other explored his chest, his arms, his tummy, then gently stroked his erection. A longer moan escaped his lips. He reached for her again. She moved his hands back to his side and resumed her stroking.

He stood with his mouth open, breathing hard, watching her face. Then, as if he couldn't stand it any longer, he cried out and grabbed her, pressed his body to hers, flesh to flesh, pushing her across the atrium until her back hit the far wall. There, he lifted her bottom and commanded her to wrap her legs around him. He lowered her torso and shoved upward.

A guttural groan bubbled up from Katera's throat. He thrust again, and she groaned again. Unable to move with him, she sat pinned against the wall, suspended as he thrust within her. A hard ball of heat and desire grew inside her. The ball grew tighter, more intense, until it crested and spilled over. She called out his name. A series of convulsions rocked her as she abandoned herself to a flood of sensations. Her legs buckled around his midsection, and he jockeyed his hands under her bottom for more support. She allowed herself to fall into them, trusting, surrendering, until the last tremor played out. Finally, weak and spent, her legs dropped from his waist, trembling from the effort.

But Mikolen wasn't finished. He lowered her to the stone floor, pressed his body on top of hers, and drove into her. When a new round of throbs pulsed within her, she caught the rhythm and moved with it in stunned delight. As he pitched between her legs, his tongue found her breast and circled the peak. She threw her head back against the wall as her breathing quickened, deepened. This was the dance, their dance. She could feel nothing else, only the dance. She let her passion rise with his, and in a single expression of ecstasy, they let go together.

Panting and contented, she listened to the chirrup of the aviary on the opposite wall, savoring the weight of Mikolen over her. For the first time, she realized that darkness had settled all around them.

"I suppose we could spend the night here like this," she teased.

"Yeah, but then I'd forget about our date with the Gryphon." He smiled. "Nothing like a night under the

moon naked with you to forget the rest of the universe."

"Parallon will simply have to wait, then," she said, laughing.

But Mikolen didn't laugh. He was looking at her hungrily. She opened her mouth to say something, to suggest they move indoors, but his lips had moved over hers.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"It's an easy ride, Katera. You've done it before," Mike said, locking the Lynx into a slot at the KQES parking lot.

He turned to her and marveled at the lights dancing in her eyes, sparkling with an intensity that rivaled starlight.

"That doesn't count. I was unconscious in Silver Gate," she said, thrusting her chin in the air. "As far as I'm concerned, this is the first time."

"Well, if you can drive a LandCar, you can manage this ride. All you do is sit in a chair, anyway."

Mike hopped out of the Lynx, met Katera on the other side. She looked impossibly appealing in her spullera, beaded panna, and slippers- like an earthen goddess. She'd left her long hair loose, piling freely over her shoulders. A simple string of tiny flowers woven into several strands of hair echoed a style used by the women of her village.

"Yes, but what's the ride like?" she insisted, as Mike pressed his thumb into the ID panel of the Lynx to lock it. "And why aren't you locking the Lynx in the long-term lot? This lot is only good for a week. Then they tow it away."

He took her arm. "To answer your first question, you'll find out about the ride soon enough, if you think you'll be able to sit down in the Gryphon." He eyed her playfully. "As to the second question, when I return to 2275, it'll be within an hour or two, or a day at the most from the time we left. This is a time machine, remember? I can choose when I return, as long as..."

"As long as you don't come back before you left," Katera finished, poking a finger in the air.

"Correct, Maestra."

Mike laughed, delighted with her enthusiasm. She'd been bristling with energy since they woke up this morning. If she were any more excited, he'd have to weigh down her shoes to keep her feet on the ground, he thought, smiling. They turned the corner and reached the door. He pressed his thumb into another ID pad and the door opened. Katera raced into the large construction room ahead of him like a child, impatient with expectation.

"Where is it?" she called, twirling around, her hair flying in all directions.

Mike pulled up behind her.

"Gryphon's right there," he said, turning to a far corner.

Katera pivoted toward it and wrinkled her features. "Where? I don't see anything."

Gryphon was not in the corner. A column of apprehension shot up into Mike's throat. His heart pounding, he instructed Katera to stay put, and walked to the empty spot, forcing himself to appear calm.

Where was Gryphon? Did Felipa have it moved? If so, why didn't anyone tell him? As he neared the corner, he spotted a note tacked to the wall with a message scrawled on it in a shaky hand, as if the writer was horribly weak.

Felipa.

He snatched it off the wall and, with his back to Katera, read it.

Dear Mike,

I am so sorry I used you this way, but I am lost without my Greg. I must, MUST, find him again. I want, no, I NEED to see him one last time, if only for a few minutes. I want to see him, look into his eyes. I want to say goodbye, and I want to hold him again before we both die. I want to be with the real Greg, the living Greg, not grieve the dead one.

That means that I have to travel back to the time when the lab was abducted and had just landed in Parallon. You said Greg was injured and you dragged him into the supply closet. I am going to look for him there. I have set the stargate to arrive in the lab in another room. I cannot run into you there, because if you see me, you'll know, in the future, that I came back to the past and you might decide not to build Gryphon when I ask. That, in turn, would prevent me from returning to the past. The conflict, as you know, could create a parallel universe. I don't want that. I just want to be with the Greg from this universe. I have set Gryphon to arrive fifteen minutes after the lab landed. That's after you left Greg in the closet and, I think, after Askins chased you outside. That will give me the time I need with Greg before we are both killed, and I can be sure that you won't see me.

You can't come with me. You and Katera would meet yourselves in the past and that would create a new universe. Sorry, that just won't do. If I return with you and Katera to the time after Askins is killed and Parallon is free, I will only find the remains of my Greg. So, I will go back earlier, and I will find my Greg alive.

I am deeply sorry, but you do have the knowledge to build another stargate. I trust you'll find a way.

Felipa

Mike crumpled the note in his hand.

No, Felipa. I cannot build another stargate. It's impossible without the funds. You were the richest woman in the world, and it took nearly every penny you had to build this one. Teskali Lab is no more, and there will not be another lab designed to explore time travel for many generations. You have effectively grounded Katera and me in this day and age, probably for the rest of our lives .

Afraid to turn around, Mike stood helplessly, his back rigid, his shoulders hunched up. He heard Katera shuffling behind him. How? How could he break the news? Oh, God.

"Mikolen?" Katera called, softly. "What's the matter?"

Mike turned around. When he faced her, he could do little more than shake his head. A huge, paralyzing lump had stolen into his throat. Katera stared, then fell to her knees, her eyes and mouth wide open in disbelief. She drew her hands to her mouth, sat on her heels, leaned forward, and wept.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Felipa pulled the locking bar over her chair and waited. At first, nothing happened. She almost got up to check the control panel when she noticed through the opening above that the KQES ceiling was fading into a soft organic, fleshy-looking surface. With a jolt, Gryphon lifted, turned, and charged down a tunnel filled with the organic stuff, now a pinkish blur as Gryphon accelerated. She felt dizzy and closed her eyes. A wave of nausea rose from her stomach. Gryphon jerked from side to side and front to back as she struggled to keep the nausea down. She squeezed her eyes shut and gripped the bar. Minutes later, all movement ceased.

Felipa opened her eyes. Above her, she spied a ceiling different from the one she had left. This one looked like the ceiling of Tescali Lab. Yes! She'd made it. She was 6,000 years in the past.

As she lifted the bar over her lap, somewhere off in another room a large explosion rocked the building. She fell, stumbling back into the chair. Yes, this was the place, all right. That must be the obliteration of Star Gate One. Remembering that Greg had been injured in that blast, she hopped out of the chair, energized. She sneaked to the door and waited, wary of meeting Mike. She needed to give him time to run outside so they wouldn't meet. Mike would lure Askins outside, too, which would give her the opportunity to look for Greg without danger of getting caught. In another few minutes, it should be safe for her to venture out.

Desperate shouts and screams punctured the air. Shivers rattled her spine as she realized Askins was murdering the Tescali scientists. The silent and sleek Beamer with its deadly red laser did not describe the human wreckage that undoubtedly was filling the lab. Another shout, a crash, and then footsteps running past the door toward the outside. Mike? It had to be him. He was the only one that got away from Askins after hiding Greg in the closet. She waited breathlessly until she heard a second set of footsteps barreling down the hall after the first. That would be Askins in hot pursuit. In the next minute, all became quiet again.

Felipa opened the door and stuck her head out, peering in both directions. Clear. A strength that she hadn't felt in weeks seeped into her muscles, into the very fiber of her bones, and she bolted toward the large room that had housed Silver Gate and contained the supply closet where Greg lay injured. As she hustled down the hallway, she heard cries for help behind a locked door. She paused outside. Who? Oh, yes, the technicians. That must be where Askins had imprisoned them before forcing each to accept a VisiOrbj.

She moved her hand to the lock. If she freed them, they might overpower Askins, which would change history...no, no. That might cause a time warp, and she didn't want that. This universe had a destiny no matter what she did, and she was sticking with it. Quietly, she lifted her hand and stole the rest of the way down the hall. It led to a large room.

She stepped inside and slapped a hand over her mouth and nose. There were body parts scattered everywhere. Limbs, a disembodied head, and pieces of bloodied tissue were all over the room...on furniture, tables, shelves, even the walls. Then she spied large shards of metlon, the material used to build the stargate, embedded in the walls, the floor and ceiling. Silver Gate debris-yep, this was the room.

Frantically, she ran the length of the long wall looking for a door. There. There was one. She raced to it and pressed the icon to open it. It slid into a slot in the wall to reveal a supply of ullis, lanadiks, and other equipment stacked up on both sides in boxes with a narrow aisle down the middle. Wrong supply closet. She whirled around and scanned the periphery of the room. There had to be another door. As her heart pounded in her ears, a rush of pain stabbed her in the side, and she grabbed it with both hands, leaning over, pressing her fingers into it.

I'm dying...I may die before I find Greg .

Breathing deeply, she forced her head up, forced herself to continue searching-she had to find the other door. She spied a trail of blood on the floor and caught her breath. It was not splattered blood. It was a liquid red trail with footprints in it, and it led to-she followed the path with her eyes-a large chair against the wall...and a door. There was a door behind the chair. Of course, Mike would try to conceal the door where he'd hidden his friend.

In wild haste, she stumbled toward the chair, shoved it aside, and punched the icon to open the door. At first, she couldn't see into the dark. And then, a voice...oh. A voice that sent her heart into a flip-flop. A voice so pure, musical. His voice. He was here.

"Felipa? Is that you?"

"Greg! Oh, Greg."

"Oh, my God, Felipa. What are you doing here?"

Felipa pressed the icon to shut the door behind her and fumbled for the compact lanadik that she'd slipped into her pocket. She pulled it out and turned it on. A dim light filled the closet. Greg, crumpled into a corner, tried to sit up. His right thigh was a pulpy mess, and a sticky layer of blood covered the floor. Felipa glanced at his leg again. The blood was pulsing out from the wound in his leg. She rushed to him, knelt beside him. In another pocket, she drew out a RestorTech, the instrument used to restore damaged tissue. As she activated the icon, Greg grabbed the instrument.

"The wound is too big." His breathing was choppy, shallow.

"It can't make it worse, Greg. Let me try."

He threw up a hand in resignation, handed the RestorTech back to her with the other, and leaned against the wall. Concentrating on the wound, Felipa passed the activated instrument back and forth over the length of it. She watched in dismay as his tissue jiggled and vibrated, but it did not reconnect. The wound did not close.

"Felipa," he said, quietly. "Why did you come down to the lab today? You never come to the lab. Why today of all days?"

Felipa passed the RestorTech over the severed artery, hoping to at least stop the bleeding. The artery tightened like a wrinkled prune and sealed shut. Satisfied that she could do no more, she pocketed the Restortech and looked into Greg's face closely for the first time. When their eyes connected, he threw his head back with a sharp intake of breath.

"My God. What happened to you? You look...ill."

"Greg." Felipa scooted next to him, stretching her legs alongside his. "Greg," she said again, her voice a whisper. "I didn't come to the lab today. I mean, it's today for you, but not for me. For me, it's seven and a half months later." She paused, realizing they had precious little time together. She decided to lay out the rest, bluntly. "And I have cancer."

Greg dropped his jaw in amazement. She waited for the shock to settle, for him to absorb the full extent of what she was telling him.

"Seven months later? *Cancer*?" Those two tidbits would offer him enough information to piece it together with a little help. It would be best if he figured it out himself. "Then you came here in another time machine...but how?"

"Mike Leno built a new one. I arrived in it a few minutes ago."

"Mike? But that's impossible. Mike is with me here in the lab...he just pulled me into this closet. How could he have built another time machine for you if he's here in...wherever we are?"

"In Parallon. You're six thousand years in the past."

"Ah. So Askins returned to his former stomping grounds. But how did Mike get back to the future? I saw Askins destroy Star Gate One. That's how I got injured, when it blew up. There isn't a time machine for Mike to get home with."

"He built another one."

"What? Another stargate? Here? In the past?"

"Yes. He stole the materials he needed from the lab. It took him ten years, but he built another one in a cave. He called it Silver Gate. And he met a woman from Parallon before he left for the future. He brought her with him. Tescali wouldn't let him return to Parallon with her, and they dismantled his Silver Gate. That's when I approached him with the offer to finance the building of a new one."

Greg sat silent, soaking it up. Then he touched Felipa's face, and said, "Cancer, my love?"

Felipa pressed her hand over his. "I didn't see a doctor when the symptoms started. By the time I was diagnosed, it was too late. I thought the pain I'd been feeling was from my grief."

"Grief? Why? What happened?" Felipa shook her head, unable to tell him. "Ah," he said, tossing his chin up. His eyes glowed with a soft, inner light. "I see." He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "I don't make it, do I?" Felipa shook her head, squeezed her eyes shut. "So, you returned to say good-bye?"

Felipa nodded and burst into tears. "Greg, I missed you so much. I asked Mike to build the stargate so he could return to Parallon with the Parallon woman, but then...I took it...I stole it before they had a chance to leave. I'm so sorry, but I had to see you again." She leaned into him as the tears poured freely. He lifted his arm over her shoulders and pulled her close, rubbing her shoulder with his hand. When she looked back up, her eyes felt puffy. "This is worth every dime I spent on the stargate, just to see you now."

"I'm glad you came," he said, his voice low and even. "Though you shouldn't have misled Mike, especially after all his hard work. But you're here." He kissed the top of her head. "And it's great to see you after seven long months, though I could swear it was just this morning..."

Felipa smiled with relief. She couldn't have hoped for a better reception. Oh, if only it could last and last and last. But Greg was no longer looking at her. Already his eyes had focused on a distant spot. *That's my Greg*, she thought, *always thinking*.

"Felipa," he breathed, as if his strength were fading. Felipa leaned forward. "Tell me what happens...to you and me. Does Mike come back? How much time do we have?"

"He doesn't make it back in time. Already Askins has chased him outside and will fire a Beamer at him, but Mike escapes, of course."

"That's good, but you're avoiding my question."

Felipa lowered her head. "We don't make it out of this closet. And I don't know how much time we

have." She met his eyes. "Mike does return, but he's too late. He finds..."

Unable to finish, she turned away.

"He finds the pieces, does he? That's alright. Look at me." Felipa looked back at him, biting her lip to keep from crying. "You came back to be with me...to die with me. You wanted to say good-bye." Felipa nodded. "Then, my dearest dove, let us say good-bye to each other."

Dearest dove? At the mention of his pet name for her, Felipa erupted into tears again. She did not want to lose this moment.

"What is this?" he said, dabbing at a tear with his thumb. "Don't cry. No more crying."

"When you call me that..."

"Dearest dove?"

Felipa choked back a sob. "Yes. I feel so complete inside when I hear it from you. And it reminds me of a poem, too. The one written by that poetess from two hundred years ago...what's her name? She wrote about those two love birds."

"Oh, Marta Jimenez?"

"She's the one. The poem is called "Soul Mates." Do you remember it?"

Greg turned his head, concentrating, and then looked back at her, tucking his chin. Sweetly, musically, he recited the first stanza.

"A single shot rips the silent sky and
Two birds tumble arrested from flight
Onto sandy beach and wave-licked shore
To lay bleeding in the fading light"

Replicating his unhurried rhythm, Felipa picked up the next few stanzas.

"The female stumbles with trailing wing
Painting broad strokes in the sand
Meets him by his side and settles there
Good wing stretched and softly fanned
O'er his broken body shattered shape
She shrieks into his open beak
His eyes shoot open, pained yet clear
He strains and offers failing squeak
Before his eyes fall in forced retreat

She calls to him throughout the night

Until spent from unrelenting grief

She lay down her head in early light."

Greg lifted a finger to her lips, locked into her eyes, and finished the poem, speaking very slowly.

"And waits to meet her final sleep

To join her mate again and soar,

Under colored skies in other worlds

In tandem flight on distant shore."

For the first time in weeks, Felipa's body felt light, as if she'd been lifted with the clouds by a warm breeze, and was blowing over distant fields.

"Greg..."

"I love you, too," he whispered, and leaned into her, offering his lips.

Felipa took them, kissed him deeply, wrapped her arms around his neck. Warm rays radiated through her body, and in that moment, she felt completely well. She heard heavy footsteps on the other side of the door. She kept her lips sealed to Greg's, drinking in his essence. She did not look up when someone opened the door. She did not see the arm raise, the Beamer trained; nor did she feel the laser when it hit.

* * *

Already under Askins' spell with a new VisiOrb planted in his forehead, the former technician and future Kastak of Parallon, Tim Tonnely, set about disposing the human remains in the supply closet. He scooped them up with a large shovel into a portable disposable unit. He wondered about the woman-who she was. Obviously someone who cared about the scientist. That was some kiss. She didn't even look up when he'd opened the door. She was probably the scientist's girlfriend...what was his name, anyway? Oh, yeah. That famous one: Kurtz. Well, too bad for the woman, whoever she was. She'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Askins' orders were to kill everyone, and Askins was the boss now.

Tonnely fingered the spot on his forehead above his brow. His head still echoed with the memory of a screeching voice engineered from Askins' command center. The noise had ricocheted inside his skull like sharpened nails. Sickened by the mess before him, he turned to leave before he'd inspected the entire closet, missing the human fragments plastered in the corner in the back, including the recognizable half-face that would greet Mike when he returned to rescue his friend.

Tonnely closed the door, and with a big sigh, wheeled the disposable unit out of the room, down the hallway and through the exit into the new world, wherever the hell it was. He shoved the unit up a ridge and upturned it so the contents slid into a natural ditch. Turning away, he wheeled the unit around, now light and empty. Grimly, he headed back down the ridge toward the lab and the large room where most of the scientists had been murdered. He'd begin again, mopping up tissue and fragments until the mess was gone, as Askins had ordered.

* * *

The Tescali technician, Patrick O'Malley, lifted his head from a trunk in the back of a room in the lab where he'd been hiding. He edged toward the door, opened it and glanced around. Nobody in sight. He moved swiftly down the hall, racing for an exit. So far he'd escaped detection from Askins and his cursed Beamer, and no one knew he was in the lab, so if could just manage to...

Startled by a noise, he ducked into the first room on his left and shut the door behind him. Maybe he could hide again, wait for darkness, then slip out, but slip out to where? Where had that madman transported the lab? He'd be lost in unfamiliar terrain as soon as he stepped outside, but did he have a choice? He spun around to search for a hiding place, and gasped.

How could it be? He'd just seen Star Gate One destroyed...only fifteen minutes ago, but there it was again...impossible. No matter, an escape route. He must hurry.

Rushing through the stargate entrance, he pulled up in front of the control panel and stared at it. Man, he wished he'd paid attention in those orientation classes. He could sure use that info now. Well, it couldn't be that difficult. There, the icon labeled TimeSet. He fiddled with the dates, fumbled, and keyed in the wrong date. Before he could reenter the correct one, he heard another loud noise in the hallway.

Good God, someone's coming . Okay, good enough. He jammed his thumb on top of the GO icon on the control panel and prayed for a quick connection.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Two Months Later

He suffers because I suffer, Katera thought with a pang of guilt, and he goes to such trouble to please me. Like today, a trip to the home of the Goddess Lupana. What a treat! Mikolen had worked hard to secure permission from the World Union Council for this visit. Only twenty-five civilians a year were permitted to land on the moon's surface. Though she'd seen the Goddess up close while circling in an AeroCar-closer than any Parallonian could ever hope to see it-to actually set foot on that sacred ground! She had Mikolen to thank for this trip.

She turned to look at him as he guided the Lynx into the AeroDock, the launch pad for AeroCars in the city of Ocean Park. He looked so handsome in the half light of the morning, his face dissolving into shadows with a thin streak of light running the length his profile. She pulled a long breath into her lungs. Today was going to be different. Today she wanted him to enjoy himself and to feel her appreciation. His muscled arm tensed as he reached into the pocket behind his seat to grab a map.

"You're going to want to know exactly where you are as we approach it," he said, handing her the map.

"Not it, Mikolen, *her*. We are going to visit a goddess today. Show some respect," Katera teased, as she stuffed the map in her pocket.

Mikolen laughed. "If you're really interested in showing respect, then maybe we shouldn't walk all over her face today. Talk about no respect."

Katera tossed her head, smiling. "I had our shoes blessed, so it's okay. Even though they'll be inside our spacesuits, Lupana will be pleased. Every one of our steps will feel like a warm ray from the sun to her."

Mikolen shot her a sidelong glance. "You're kidding, right?"

"You know I don't kid about things like that. I had them blessed."

She looked at him hard, hopped out of the Lynx. He swung his legs out, hopped up, and locked the Lynx, shoving his thumb over the ID pad.

"I hate to tell you this, but whoever you found to administer your blessing was not a Lupanist priest. What did you do? Snag the first guy you saw wearing long robes?"

Katera met him behind the Lynx and punched him in the arm. "No, I did not use a Lupanist priest, nor did I use an *elder* ." She wagged her head on the last word. "Nobody calls them Lupanist priests, and if anyone asked for one in Parallon they'd look at you like you were crazy."

"They'd look at you like you were crazy if you asked for an elder in Ocean Park. So, who'd you find? Since you don't kid about stuff like that." He looked at her sideways again, a glint in his eye.

"I used a Catholic priest," she said, defensively.

"Oh, a Catholic priest. That makes sense. So, it was the robes, right?"

Katera smiled. *Probably so* , she thought. Though the elders of her village were not the kindest of people and had filled her with dread much of her life, they still reminded her of home and all things familiar, as did the long robes of the Catholic priest.

"Just be grateful that Lupana may receive you without insult." She lifted her chin.

Mikolen steered her by the elbow into the lobby of the Ocean Park AeroDock. "Insult? I'd think she'd feel flattered to receive us after everything we went through to get this far-half a dozen appearances before the World Union Council, reams of digital documentation, a six month waiting period..."

"That is proper preparation for an appearance before a goddess." Katera knew Mikolen expected humor from her, but too much of it did not support the importance of this visit. As a non-believer, she wanted to give him latitude, but enough was enough. "I'm glad your world takes such pains before granting permission. It's an incredible honor to go, as it should be. When I thought we were returning to Parallon, my biggest regret was that I was going to miss this trip."

Mikolen's voice turned soft. "I would have brought you back for it. We'd have had Gryphon, remember?"

"Oh, that's right. I forgot." She flinched, wishing the topic of Gryphon had not arisen. "That would have been nice."

A silence fell between them, and Katera knew he was mourning the loss of the stargate. Two months had passed since Felipa made off with it, and rarely a day passed without Mikolen cursing their luck, probably because she'd put off their wedding again. She cited the same old reasons, notably her discomfort living in this era. Although lately, she had to admit, she was enjoying herself more. Just yesterday, she'd found an excuse to run an errand just so she could take the Micro for a leisurely drive.

And then, she passed that little bistro overlooking the ocean, stopped in and ordered a hearty soup made with chunks of tender beef and fresh vegetables. It tasted surprisingly close to the kiddik stew that her mother made. Later, she strolled through the row of shops near the bistro, allowing the cool ocean breezes to part her hair at the nape and cool her neck. She turned into a shop with beautiful, shimmering Scaley dresses displayed in the front window. When she returned home with her purchases, shopping bags filled with clothes, Mikolen called her genetically empowered and a credit to her sex. She feigned innocence, blaming her Micro for heading to the shopping district, as if it had a mind of its own.

Funny, Ocean Park was feeling more like home. Even Mikolen's proposal to get married felt more

attractive and natural in the last few weeks, though she hadn't told him. She had to be sure-for his sake and hers-she wanted to know beyond a doubt that this choice was the right one for both of them and that she would make a good wife for him in his world. She wanted to be sure that she was ready to have a family in this age-that she could cope with children who would take the same miracles for granted that she gawked at on a daily basis. And most of all, she wanted to know if Lupana blessed the union.

Mikolen handed his check-in documentation in the form of a small chip to the official behind the counter, a stout middle-aged blond woman wearing a cobalt blue ulli who identified herself as Ingrid. She inserted the chip into a panel blinking with icons. A moving image of Mikolen and Katera appeared on the panel depicting their last interview with the World Union Council, the interview that had comprised the final step in their bid for approval to land on the moon.

"Okay," Ingrid said, pointing to a door on the right. "Go to that room, and you'll find your spacesuits. Put them on, except for the helmets. You'll carry those until you need them. You received all your instructions, right?"

Mikolen nodded. "I've been there several times before as an undergrad student at MIT. My whole geology class of ninety students went there for a field trip. That was before they slapped a limit on the numbers of people visiting the moon, of course."

Ingrid tossed him an indignant look. "Groups like that were the reason the World Union Council had to crack down. Crowds traipsing right over the footprints left by Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin. Wrecked 'em. They would have stayed in that pristine condition forever if those hooligans hadn't scrambled over the fences. A historic landmark wiped out for all time. There can never be another 'first' footprint on the moon."

Ingrid's mouth wrinkled up like a dried piece of fruit. Bet you wish you'd kept your mouth shut, Katera thought, glancing at Mikolen.

"Don't worry," she said, trying to distract Ingrid. "We're going to respect every inch of her while we're there."

The seriousness in Katera's tone calmed Ingrid, and she smiled at Katera. "Oh, that's right-your religion revolves around worship of the moon, doesn't it? Lupana? Is that what you call it? The moon?"

"*Her*," Katera said, softly. "That's what we call *her*."

* * *

Katera caught her breath as the small spaceship they'd chartered for the trip descended toward the surface of the moon. The desolate expanse of the Sea of Tranquility loomed larger and larger below, like a silver-gray mantle over the bosom of the goddess. Though neither she nor Mikolen spoke, her chest rumbled with the fire of her Lan Ma Ke, ignited by fierce emotion. She could not believe she was this close to the most sacred body in the universe. And very soon she'd be walking in this holy place, the home of Lupana.

Mikolen eased the ship onto the surface. It landed lightly as if it weighed nothing. He shut off the control panel and handed Katera her helmet. After adjusting it and checking their oxygen supply, he opened the first hatch. They climbed inside the chamber before he opened the hatch to the outside. With her heart pumping madly, Katera climbed down the stepladder and turned around to face the ultimate temple, the holiest place in the universe, Lupana's castle. Her eyes scanned the landscape. Acres of fine ashy dust stretched before her, pockmarked with rocks and small depressions.

For a moment, she couldn't move, and the only sound she heard came from her breath inside the helmet. So still and quiet...no wind, no birds, no clattering of human activity. Nothing...only, what was under her feet? Though nothing moved, she felt the sensation of dry heat rush into her toes and the soles of her feet, then blaze up her ankles and legs until it filled her torso, arms, neck, and head. A sense of peace glowed inside her. Even during her deepest trances praying on Earth while she gazed at the full moon, she had not experienced this power, this incredible current of wellbeing. Was this the life force of Lupana her mother had talked about?

"Are you okay?" Mikolen's voice reached her through a speaker in her helmet.

"Yes. Oh, yes, it's wonderful."

"I wasn't sure. You weren't moving."

"I think I might have forgotten how."

Mikolen's soft laugh filled the inside of her helmet, and Katera felt a deep connection pulsing within her—was it the life force of Lupana? She felt it jump from her chest across to Mikolen. A faint column of light flowed between them. Was the goddess communicating her intent? She looked at Mikolen in wonder, but he seemed not to notice.

"I know what you mean," he said. "It's incredible the first time. Any time actually." He held out a gloved hand. "C'mon. Let me show you the monuments. Over there, behind that ridge."

He pointed to a blunt hill in the distance with a bony ridge shaped like a dinosaur's vertebrae. Katera squinted.

"Looks like it might take a while to get over there...oh."

Mikolen leaped up, pulling her along so that she was following him in a great arc over the landscape. Up, up, over, over, and down they came landing softly in the powdery, gray surface. They were halfway to the ridge. Before she had a chance to protest, they were upward bound again, arcing and descending on top of the small ridge. When they landed, Mikolen pointed down.

Merely a moon-step away, a flag with red and white stripes and white stars on a blue background sat upright with no atmosphere to disturb it, frozen like a photograph. It was surrounded by a protek, a transparent barrier with glowing edges so no one would run into it. Something lay on the ground next to the flag, but she couldn't see what it was. In another moon hop, they were next to it. Ah, now she could see a small plaque. She bent over to read it, but Mikolen was reciting the words to her.

"Here men from planet Earth first set foot on the moon. July 1969 AD. We came in peace for all mankind."

"Yes, that's what it says," Katera said, peering into the protek.

"Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, the first two humans to set foot on the moon, left the flag and this plaque here. The plaque was stolen in 2252, but a witness in an AeroCar was able to ID the thieves with an in-car telescopic camera. The thieves were caught and the plaque returned. Since then, they've placed these impenetrable proteks around all the historical objects." He patted the protek, his hand hitting a solid, yet invisible material. "And they terminated the mining operations that were going on all over the surface, too."

Katera shuddered to think people had been digging through the delicate surface of Lupana.

"What were they mining?"

"The crust yields elements like hydrogen, oxygen, iron, and aluminum. Remember those from your periodic table?" Katera nodded. "Those elements are in abundance in these simple rocks." He reached over, plucked a small rock from the ground.

"What do they use the elements for?"

"They produce rocket fuel, for one thing. Want to know how?"

Katera shook her head. "Not now. It's too beautiful to be studying that stuff. I just want to take it in. Can we take a walk? Or, I guess, a jump." She laughed at the idea that walking felt more difficult than leaping on the moon. "C'mon."

She grabbed Mikolen's hand, lowered her body, and sprang twenty feet into space with Mikolen. They came down, pressed their knees into the surface, and shot upward again. They landed on the far side of another ridge, but Katera was laughing so hard, she forgot to spring off for the next one and tumbled like a rubber ball over the surface. When she finally stopped, she lay on her back, her arms and legs spread eagled as she caught her breath. Mikolen sat down beside her. His shoulders shook as he laughed.

"We should notify the World Council about the perfect place to hold the next Olympics."

"Yes," Katera answered. "Even we could compete."

He peered into her helmet with his sparkling eyes. "There's something else I'd like you to see." He pointed to a large crater twenty feet long, and fifty feet away. "It's in there."

He scrambled up, held out his thick space mitten for her to grasp. They bounded toward it, this time in small, measured leaps. Katera figured he didn't want to land at the bottom of it, though they could probably hop out if they had to. When she got to the edge, she looked down and gasped.

"Oh. It's so beautiful."

Below, on the floor and lining the sides, was the most exquisite display of grey stone flowers, intricately carved from the material in the crater bed. Flowers with delicate petals and leaves twisted and turned around each other as if growing in a wild, tangled garden. The detail and graceful curvature of stem and petal belied the stiff material. Like everything else on the moon, the whole garden looked like a three-dimensional photo, its movement forever arrested.

"Who?"

"A group of artists one hundred years ago did it. They called themselves Eco Sculptors. They traveled the world looking for ways to create art from the natural landscape. Then one of them got the bright idea to do it on the moon. Of course, that was back before..."

"Before everyone got kicked off," Katera finished. "Well, I'm glad they got to finish. It's gorgeous."

She reached down to touch a flower on the rim, but Mikolen caught her hand.

"Better not," he warned. "The rock is very soft and crumbles easily. The artists knew it would stay perfectly preserved as long as no one touched it."

Katera withdrew her hand. "Sorry. It looks like hard rock. What a lot of work to do this, and what a lovely tribute to Lupana...even if they didn't do it for her."

She took a step back to study the entire effect, and as she did, one foot slipped and flew forward like a missile. She fell and landed on her bottom at the edge of the crater, her legs poised over it. Afraid to move, she sat with her arms behind her, leaning into them. Before she had time to figure out how to get up, Mikolen had squatted, reached his arms under her torso, and lifted. He turned and walked away, cradling her like a small child.

"Can't take you anywhere, can I?" he said, with a soft chuckle.

"Maybe you'd better take out some insurance on me," she joked, and wrapped her arms around his neck.

She wanted to lay her head on his chest, but her helmet prevented it. She settled for leaning back into his arms and gazed up into his helmet. A soft light was swirling within. What was that? She looked closer.

Ma Lan Kena Lupana. Merciful Lupana. Something bright- a glow- emanated from inside his helmet. It danced around his head with an animated rhythm, as if it were alive. *Lupana. She blesses Mikolen.* She wanted to tell him what it was, because he seemed unaware, and then she remembered that those blessed often did not witness the light themselves. She strained her eyes to see it better, but it vanished.

She blinked. Had she imagined it? No. She had not. Though she'd never witnessed one before this, she'd heard her mother and grandmothers describe the lighted blessings of the goddess. *Li Lan* her people called it, or Living Light. Mikolen had received the Li Lan. It was more than she had hoped for in the way of a sign. Lupana's voice was loud and clear. What a great idea to come here and hear the goddess speak.

Mikolen carried her all the way back to the landing module without springing, taking his time. She felt grateful that she weighed so little on the moon, and he could carry her long distances. When they reached the module, Katera twisted reluctantly from his arms, hopped onto the ladder, and climbed up, followed by Mikolen. Once they removed their helmets and secured themselves in their seats, Katera turned to him.

"Yes," she said.

Mikolen tossed her a puzzled look. "Yes, you're ready to go home? Or yes, you're cooking dinner tonight? Yes, you'll marry me? C'mon...give me a clue."

Mikolen laughed, as if the joke was on her.

"Yes," she said, again. "To all three. Yes."

Mikolen slowly turned to face her. "Really? You mean it? I mean, are you sure?"

"I am sure. I am so very sure."

Mikolen let out a long breath, shook his head. Then, with his eyes misting over, he reached out and pulled her to him.

"In that case," he said, his voice cracking, "I'll have kiddik stew tonight."

She was laughing as he moved his lips over her face, smothering it with small kisses.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Two and a Half Months Later

Katera swept her hair on top of her head and pinned the back in place with a self-lit BeamPin. She wove the loose ends over the top of her head, twisting the strands in different directions and securing them, trying to imitate the current style among women in the West Divide of the World Union. When she finished, she stared at the hologram in front of her. It reflected her three dimensional image with intimate detail. She smoothed her tummy, flat under the lace panties, and readjusted the transparent straps of her bra. Not bad if you like compact, small, and curvy, she decided. Even so, she felt much prettier with her hair down, maybe with a strand of the fragrant red Lidala blossom woven through it, but this was July 23, 2276. It was Mikolen's wedding, too, and he did not need a bride walking down the aisle from the Stone Age.

Standing back from the hologram, she reached for the strapless white satin gown on the suspension bed and held it in front of her. The hologram stared back with an enchanted look. She flipped a section of the voluptuous skirt over an extended leg and studied the tiny bodice, glittering with an abundance of delicate crystals. She fingered the bustle in the back, let her hand slide along the long, cathedral train. Yes, it was beautiful and easily rivaled the most elaborate, embroidered gowns worn by the maidens of Parallon. Ironic though, Mikolen had called it an antique, but for her it was so...futuristic. Yet another crowning example of the incredible beauty this contemporary world had to offer. How she would love to show this to her family and friends!

Oh, Mama. Ne ano ya domo co ne...if only you could be here with me.

The shoulders on the hologram drooped and the voluminous hemline pooled onto the floor. Katera checked her posture, straightened her shoulders. Nothing would mar this day, the day of her wedding, and yes. The dress was perfect. She pressed an icon on her dresser, and the hologram rotated, revealing the back of her head, which looked okay. She fiddled with her BeamPin.

"No bride ever stole a groom's heart with a greater vision of loveliness. That dress is perfect."

Katera spun around. Mikolen stood in the doorway, his hand planted over his heart.

"Yeah?" she said, wiggling her shoulders. "You mean all I have to do is hold it in front of me? That would cause a stir. Especially if I trip on my own train."

"Maybe you don't need a dress, then." Mikolen laughed. "C'mon. Let's test you without it." Mikolen rubbed his hands together, lowered his head for a charge. Katera squealed and held up a hand.

"Don't you dare touch me. I've only three hours left to get ready."

"Only three hours? Guess you'll have to keep 'em waiting, then. Because this is going to take four."

Katera draped the dress over the bed and bolted for the door, but Mikolen caught her around the waist from behind and plucked her off the floor. Helpless in his gorilla grip, she allowed her muscles to go limp.

"Go ahead," she said, in her huskiest voice. "Have it your way, if you must. Just please don't tell my fiancé. He thinks he's the only one."

"Shh," Mikolen said, tasting the back of her neck. "He'll hear you."

He allowed her feet to slide to the floor and his hands, now free to roam, reached around to her front, sliding over the bumps and curves of her body. Heat filled Katera's lower abdomen, and she reached behind her to rub his hips. Maybe there was a little time.

A booming voice rang into the house from the front foyer.

"Helloooo!"

Katera jumped. Mikolen's hands froze.

"Who's there?"

"Mike, for Chrissake, where are you?"

The voice of the ex-CEO of Tescali Lab, Will Carlsen, bellowed ahead of him as he traipsed down the hallway. Why was this man charging through their house? He did not wait for anyone to answer the door, and now he was almost in their bedroom.

"Mike!" Will's voice sounded urgent.

Mikolen dropped his hands from Katera's waist and hurried to the door as Katera scrambled to get into her casual day dress. Mikolen moved into the hallway and Katera followed, securing her dress-tab before stepping into view. Will stood at the other end of the hallway.

"Here I am, Will. What is it? What's the matter?"

Will rushed down the length of the hall and grabbed Mikolen's shoulders. His eyes flashed with excitement.

"You'll never guess. I mean, you'll never, never guess."

"Then you'd better tell me." Mikolen sounded wary. "As long as it doesn't interfere with our wedding. And shouldn't you be getting dressed? The last time I checked, you were in the wedding party. You still are, aren't you?"

"Hey, champ. I don't think you're going to be irritated with me when you hear this."

"Tell us." Katera stepped out from behind Mikolen. Her Lan Ma Ke had blazed to life, and she knew it was good news. "Something happened-what is it?"

Will dropped his hands and looked from Mikolen to Katera and back again. "The Gryphon."

"What about it?" Mikolen stiffened next to Katera.

"It's back. The Gryphon came back."

"What? How? Did Felipa...?" Mikolen dropped his jaw.

"No, no. Felipa did not bring it back. You remember that list of technicians from the last board meeting? There was one that had never lived in Parallon."

"Yeah, Patrick O'Malley. He was missing from both worlds."

"Well, now we know why."

Mikolen paused, trying to think. "He must have stumbled upon Gryphon after Felipa arrived in the past," he said, amazed.

"That's what happened. And the World Union Council has asked the Tescali Board members to convene and interview O'Malley, but I already got a chance to talk to him because Gryphon came back to KQES, and their technicians brought it, with O'Malley, back to the admin building at Tescali. Several

other ex-board members and I were there, reallocating resources left over after the lab closed," Will waved his hands, talking rapidly, "and there it was. It's back."

"Christ," Mikolen breathed, unable to believe it. "But it does make sense. Felipa took Gryphon back to the time before Greg died, so she could be with him in his final moments. So that left one unclaimed working stargate in the lab for someone to discover."

"Exactly. And O'Malley was the lucky candidate. He keyed in the wrong year though, 2276, said he was nervous. That's why he came back one year after he left. He didn't change the prior setting for the month and day."

"The month and day that Felipa arrived in Parallon, the same day Greg died." Mikolen slapped his palms together. "So then O'Malley returns on *the* day we plan our wedding." He turned to Katera and grabbed both shoulders. "Do you realize what's happening? We planned our wedding exactly one year after we left Parallon to celebrate the anniversary, and it's the same date that O'Malley keyed into the TimeSet icon." Mike turned to Will. "Right after we're married, we can hop on over and look at Gryphon..."

"Whoa, wait a minute." Will raised a hand. "There's one catch. It's the reason I rushed over here."

Mikolen sighed. "Well, lay it on me before I get too excited."

"The World Union Council has instructed us to dismantle..."

"No." Mike interrupted, his voice turning sour. "Not this one. This one's mine. They can't have it."

"That's why I'm here, Mike. If you get there right away, before they cart it off..."

"Where is it?" Mikolen sounded intense, his gaze focused.

"In the field. They're coming for it in a few hours. They've got a couple guards watching it, but without any special instructions. You could get past them. Tell them I told you to check the cam for travel data. Then...well, you know what to do."

Mikolen held out his hand and Will grabbed it. The two men shook once, looking into each other's eyes.

"Thanks." Mike folded his free hand over Will's, sandwiching it between his own. "I can't thank you enough."

"Ah, you're welcome," Will said, softly. "You deserve it. I felt really bad when they dismantled Silver Gate; it should have been your ride."

Mikolen gave Will's hand another shake and turned to Katera. "Hey, sweetheart, I can't believe I'm asking for this, but do you think we could put off our wedding for a little while longer? There's a pretty good chance we can get a Lupanist priest...er, an elder, after all."

With the idea of returning home, Katera's chest heaved with fresh hope, even as a spear of guilt lanced through the center of it.

"What about all the guests for this wedding? The church, the reception at Poseidon's Palace in Suela del Mar...it's too late to cancel."

"They'll have a wonderful party. After all, everything's been paid," Mike assured her.

"I'll explain to everyone what happened," Will offered. "They'll think it's very romantic."

"Yeah," Mike said, laughing. "The runaway bride *and* groom. There's a first." He scooped Katera into his arms. "Can't wait to get there. I've missed that beautiful place more than I thought possible."

"Oh, me, too." Katera laughed. "But we can still come back and visit, right? I'm starting to like it here."

Mike threw his head back and laughed. "You are full of surprises. Sure, we can come back. We'll have to keep a low profile. You know, under the radar of the World Union Council. They're not going to be happy about our little move, even if it is none of their business." He kissed her lightly on the forehead. "We'll come back whenever we like. As long as..."

"Yeah, I know. As long as we don't displace ourselves."

"Hey, you two," Will interjected. "It's not like you have all the time in the world...although, you sort of do, don't you? I think you'd better get going, though. The opportunity is now."

"Right," Mike agreed, and reached for Katera.

"Wait!" Katera cried. "If we're going home, I need just a couple of things."

Before Mikolen could object, she raced into the bedroom and opened the chest at the end of the bed that held her spullera and panna. Swiftly, she climbed out of her dress and into her Parallonian outfit, wrapping the shipunta three times around her waist, and tucking the end under the finished band. Next, she bundled up her wedding dress, tossed it in a large bag and over her shoulder. She stepped into her slippers and out into the hallway.

"Okay, we can go now. I'm ready."

Mikolen rolled his eyes at Will, then grabbed Katera's arm.

"Thanks again, Will," he said, and whisked Katera out of the house and into the Lynx.

As they sped down the Landway through Ocean Park, Mikolen stared ahead, looking thoughtful.

"What is it?" she asked. "Tell me what you're thinking."

He glanced sideways at her. "Oh. I was just wondering. When do you want to return to Parallon? Same time as we planned? You know, we can come back right after we left, or we can return a year later after everything settles down."

"Well, that depends on whether you want to take part in the messy reconstruction of our village. It'll be awful you know. Village elders vying for positions...everyone arguing about what's needed. Fights will break out. And, yes, we could wait a year and arrive when things are calmer if you'd rather."

Mikolen gave a hearty laugh. "And miss all that action? Not on your life. I'm voting for messy and interesting. How 'bout you?"

Katera nodded as the tears filled her eyes. "I want to be a part of it. But we need to find an available elder right away. If we're not getting married today, then let's get married as soon as possible in Parallon. I don't want to wait any longer than we have to." She paused. "I can't wait for you to be part of my family."

Mikolen reached over, squeezed her hand. "Me, too," he said. "A family with you, me, Rorken, your parents...and anyone else who happens along."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Unlike her first ride, Katera's eyes were wide open as Gryphon careered through the wormhole faster than the speed of light. Mike seated her across from him, so he could watch her and savor her expressions, enjoy her astonishment. She did not disappoint. Her head, trained upward on the tunnel wall as it hurtled past them, bobbed in amazement while her jaw slackened and her lips quivered. He had an urge to reach out and pick up her hand, but didn't want to interrupt her reverie. A short time later, the tumultuous tumble of the stargate slowed as they reached their destination in Parallon. Finally, it stopped with a small jolt, and a ceiling studded with stalactites materialized over their heads.

"We're here. In the caves. We're home."

In her excitement Katera fumbled with her bar, unable to lift it. Mike laughed.

"Here, let me. Hold still."

Mike lifted the bar and opened the door for Katera, who sprinted toward the tunnel at the other end of the chamber. Keeping up as best he could, he loped after her, relieved to find the lanadiks still turned on from the day before. Egad. Was it only yesterday that he'd struggled with Morchison? He caught up with Katera in the cave antechamber where she was rummaging in the gear box filled with hoshdel equipment. Mike looked around, grateful to see that Tonelly's body had been removed. The villagers, of course.

Katera pulled out two sets of reins and handed one to Mike.

"Do you want to ride bareback?"

"Sounds like you don't want to waste time saddling," Mike said, accepting the bridle. "Sure, I'll take Grindon. He's a handful, but he's fast. You can ride Chilika."

Katera knitted her brow and hung her head. "Oh, I forgot that Adrella had brought her hoshdel here. Yes, I'll ride Chilika," she said, quietly. "We can come back for the other hoshdels later. Let 'em graze for now."

She led the way to the clearing outside where the hoshdels were munching tufts of grass in the mid-morning sun. The scent of conifer pine and rich loam floated on the crisp breeze. Mike inhaled. A large shadow passed over them, and he glanced up to spy a takatak gliding toward the summit of Kan Mountain. Yes. He was home.

Katera, too, seemed absorbed. She threaded the bridle and reins over Chilika's head and stood gazing at the animal, running her hand over Chilika's flanks as if she'd never touched a hoshdel before. Finally, she clambered over the animal's back and urged her forward onto the trail that led to the village. Mike hopped onto Grindon, who broke into an eager trot, promptly passing Chilika. Katera spurred the sleepy Chilika, and soon the hoshdels were abreast, snorting their greetings to each other.

Mike and Katera fell into a peaceful silence as they wove through the towering growth of Tikon Forest. The wide trail soon picked up the Kala River, winding lazily on a parallel route toward Kala Meadow and home. The river, full from the spring rains and recent snowmelt, leaped and roiled in the gully next to them. Mike stared at it, mesmerized by the froth that flowed like liquid lace over the waves and rocks. Somehow, a Parallonian river seemed cleaner, clearer, than the rivers in the future. The air smelled fresher, too. He sucked in another deep breath.

The hoshdels lowered their thick necks as they plodded in contentment next to each other. *This is rich*, Mike thought. So rich. He could not recall a single moment in the entire past year living in Ocean Park

when he felt so connected with the environment. He glanced at Katera. A look of satisfaction had settled over her features. She threw him an easy smile and pointed ahead to a break in the trees.

"There's the meadow," she said.

Kala Meadow cradled the village of Parallon. They reached a bank and the edge of the forest where the meadow spread out in a mixture of magnificent lime greens below them, thickly dotted with brilliant yellow and coral-colored wild flowers. Further on, groups of hostas huddled together in cozy security.

Spurring their hoshdels down the bank, they broke into a canter at the bottom, speeding toward the village. Mike noticed people running everywhere, but not in a panicked mode. They were laughing, running toward and around each other, waving their arms in the air. Several watched them as they passed, some waved. Katera waved back, smiling. At last, they neared a hosta with a wooden fence surrounding it. A toddler played in the doorway. When they approached, he stood up on pudgy legs and stared at Katera in surprise. Must be Rorken, Mike thought. Except for the brief encounter with Shamana on Kan Mountain, he'd missed meeting the little guy the first time around.

"Hello Rorken," Katera called, slipping off her hoshdel and handing the reins to Mike.

The boy's eyes grew wide. He laid down his wooden hammer and wobbled toward Katera. When he got close, he stopped and planted a thick finger on his lower lip.

"Mama?" he asked, uncertainly.

Katera shook her head. "Mama's not here," she said, without elaborating

Rorken considered this, then lowered his finger and smiled. Katera crouched and held out her arms. He dove into them as if she were his mother. At that moment, Moreesha appeared in the doorway and squealed.

"I knew Mikolen would bring you back." She rushed outside and threw her arms around both Katera and Rorken. "I knew it. I just knew it." She turned to Mike and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

Mike nodded and slid off his hoshdel, tied him to the front post.

"Where's Papa?" Katera asked, disentangling herself from Moreesha's arms.

"He left for the town meeting. They're going to draft some new rules that we can all live by. Would you like to join them? Everyone's invited."

"Yes," Katera said, handing Rorken to Moreesha. "When we get back, you and I can catch up."

Moreesha lifted a hand to her daughter's cheek. "Certainly, dear, but it's not like I didn't just see you." Mike and Katera erupted into laughter. A flash of confusion enveloped Moreesha before she joined in, though she didn't understand. "Maybe I do have some catching up to do," she added, when their laughter subsided.

"Oh, you do, Mama. You really do."

Moreesha watched as Mike and Katera strolled together down the path leading to the center of the village and the town meeting. Mike reached for Katera's hand, and she took it with an easy familiarity. Indeed. Moreesha felt a powerful energy connecting her daughter to this man from the future—it was as if they'd been in love for many months. As they walked away, she spied a soft light dancing around their heels. It sparkled like the light of a star. As she watched, it ascended in spirals around them to their

chests, their heads, growing in brilliance, until it swirled like a translucent veil over their bodies.

Ah. The Lan Li. Lupana blessed the union. Moreesha clasped both hands over her chest as her Lan Ma Ke flooded liquid heat into her chest. Yes, these two had a destiny together. Surely, both would lead the rest of Parallon in the years to come. Such happiness. And children, they would bring Moreesha more grandchildren. Rorken, bundled in her arms, pointed in the direction of Katera and Mikolen.

"Da Kah-Ah," he said, stumbling over his tongue.

"Yes, that's Katera."

"Kah-Ah Wowon mama."

"Yes, dear," Moreesha assured him. "Katera can be your new mama."

Rorken lay his head on Moreesha's chest as she strolled into the hosta to finish dipping a batch of candles. Yes, Katera could be Rorken's mama, and Mikolen... wouldn't he make a splendid Papa?

Epilogue

Mikolen, as everyone called him in Parallon, and Katera were married within a month. It would have been sooner, but Moreesha insisted on having a celebration with the entire village in attendance and several elders officiating. She sent scouts to locate and retrieve the most fragrant blossoms for her daughter's hair, which Katera wore with the incredible wedding dress from the future. Moreesha created a stunning spullera of the finest silk embroidered with the colors of Lupana, gold laced with a creamy green. Katera wore it after the ceremony. Moreesha paid seven chefs with twenty-one goats for a feast that lasted three days and nights. Guests tasted tender kiddik and goat roasted on a spit, herbal-flavored rice, minola-soaked peras arranged with other fruit and berries, and of course, beautifully aged red minola served in tall slender mugs. Between snacks, guests twirled and high-stepped through lively dances choreographed to the music of the flutes. The dancing spent itself a day after the food disappeared.

Mikolen worked with the villagers to create a fair government. They offered to invent a new position for him as head elder, but Mikolen insisted that an elected mayor and staff was needed to balance the power of the elders, who still held their traditional positions as judges. Mikolen asked the villagers to vote for a mayor, but they refused, insisting that he take the job. In the end, Mikolen gave in and appointed subordinates to assist him in his duties. He reasoned that as the end of his term as mayor approached, he would manage the first elections to replace himself and his staff. Perhaps Parallon's new government would evolve into a democratic one.

The elders tried the Kastaks in the new courthouse, who took input from the villagers. One by one, they convicted each Kastak and had them burned at the stake with the exception of an even dozen, who had never harmed any Parallonians. These, the elders assigned to assist them in the study of medicinal healing herbs, where the former Kastaks quickly became proficient. Shamana fell head over heels in love with one of them, and they were married the following year.

Kastak Morchison was the first former Kastak taken to the stake in the center of the village. Every villager turned out to watch him die. No one cheered as he disappeared into flames. Only sighs of relief marked the moment as the Parallonians turned to leave after the deed was done.

Mikolen and several men from the village exhumed the communal gravesite of the murdered scientists, including Greg and Felipa. They moved the remains to Tikesh Fields, where they were reburied and given headstones in the Parallonian cemetery. They placed a special marker in the family plot for Adrella, next

to a small headstone that read simply 'Baby'. Katera visited the site with her family once a month under the full moon for many years, asking for and accepting the blessings of Lupana.

Mikolen and Katera settled into a hosta of their own with Rorken. Nine months after their wedding, Katera birthed a set of twin baby girls, who they named Adrellina and Kata. Rorken proudly adopted the duties of older brother and followed them everywhere. Once in while, Mikolen and Katera stole into the future to avail themselves of the amenities there, which usually included a flight around the moon in an AeroCar.

As the years passed, their daughters grew into beautiful young women and Rorken, as a young adult, became a just and powerful leader of Parallon. Eventually, all of them accompanied their parents on excursions into the future with Gryphon. During one of these treks, Kata met and fell in love with a young man from 2295 AD. All was well until a war with a neighboring world interfered...but that's another story.

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