

WARPCORLD - EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

The sky was blue, he should have been prepared for that. All those years of preparation—simulation, training, reading, lectures, images—fell away as Seg lay on the moss at the transit point. The cool morning ground soothed his body while the roar of the nearby ocean quieted his thoughts.

Rolling onto his back, he blinked once more against the clear, unshielded sky. Unusual. For the first time in his life, Segkel Eraranat of the Cultural Theorist's Guild felt at peace with the world, even though this world was not his.

Squad Leader Kerbin squatted down next to him, facing the opposite direction. "Snap out of it, Bliss kid!" she hissed, and jabbed his shoulder with the butt of her rifle, "locals might have seen us come through." She stood upright and glared at the large trooper hovering over Seg. "Manatu, you were ordered to make sure he took his stim pack! Damn it, if we lose the Theorist we might as well set up camp here permanently. The Guild will sell our organs to the highest bidder."

Kid? Yes, Seg supposed that, to Kerbin, he was a kid. At twenty-one, he was just beginning. His first mission as a graduated Theorist, the final test. Succeed and fulfill his life's ambition to work in the field, succeed far beyond expectations and he could elbow out the rearward thinking fossils and take the seat of Selectee for Field Research. Fail and—no, that was not an option.

The beginning. Of his career, certainly. And, judging from the wonders that now surrounded him, perhaps even his life. He looked up and over at the squad leader. How old was Kerbin? Thirty? Thirty-five? Memory eluded him. Old enough to be angered by inexperience or whatever else had dug those lines over her brow and on either side of her mouth.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of this new air, so clear and fresh. He thought he had trained for the Bliss—the euphoria, the debilitating euphoria his People experienced when they traveled through the warps—but no drug could replicate this feeling.

"Vita." He inhaled again, and swore he could taste the substance in the air. Vita, undetectable to the human eye, was the energy imbued on anything of cultural or spiritual importance, and necessary fuel for the continued existence of his People. This was what they

had come for. And though he had studied vita, even visited the Central Well where it was fed to the ever-hungry Storm, at this moment he could actually *feel* it.

Seg lifted himself from the ground, sat upright, and watched as Kerbin gestured orders to the recon troops, fanning them out around her position. Had he really thought of her, during their prep sessions, as colorless and bland when he could now see her crisp efficiency and competence?

Her uniform, set to woodland camouflage, hid any evidence of gender but her almond eyes and high, sharp cheekbones betrayed Kerbin as distinctly female. Seg was at least a head taller than the troops, with the exception of Manatu, that were assigned to his mission, though not nearly as filled out. Despite the difference in size, Kerbin was formidable. She knew well what she was doing.

An avian flew across the sky in the distance; Seg stood as if to follow its direction. Manatu grabbed him by the collar and pulled him behind cover while, next to Seg, the signals operator began a broad-based passive sweep, his equipment sucking down any emissions the locals might be making.

Pre-transit, Manatu's only redeeming quality had been his imposing size but now Seg watched, with admiration, as his assigned bodyguard swept his weapon across the treeline. A stalwart and steadfast protector – who could not respect that?

"What society awaits us?" Seg wondered aloud, then moved his tongue around his mouth and lips to taste the salt-tinged air. Manatu gestured with a hand sliced across his throat to indicate an immediate need for silence. Seg realized his mistake and pressed his lips closed. But the Bliss overwhelmed him again, spinning his thoughts off into happy contemplation.

There were thousands of worlds out there, from high-tech wonders that dwarfed his people handily, to aboriginal primitives who had barely progressed past the use of flint. The basic human phenotype had, surprisingly, remained consistent from world to world, with only a handful of cases of extreme adaptation. Fortunate, as successful infiltration would be impossible otherwise.

Outers, that was the People's name for any humanoid species from other worlds, and Seg looked forward to seeing his first one. He wanted to see them in their environment, a race as yet untouched, naïve and pure. These were not processed caj, the slaves of his World. These were raw Outers in their natural state.

He pressed his hand to the tree Manatu had placed him behind, marveled at the ridges and knobs of the bark, and put his nose up to the surface for a long sniff. The scent was rich and earthy. His world had nothing like this.

If only his People could simply pick up and move, reestablish their society in a place such as this. An impossible but tantalizing dream, the fancy of first year cadets before their instructors slapped them with the unforgiving hand of simple math. All other sound reasons aside, to extrans 90 million People through the warp? Never mind equipment, supplies or caj. The amount of vita required to fuel that journey was laughably unattainable.

"Signals, what've you got for me?" Kerbin asked, her voice low but urgent as she crouched near the operator, occasionally casting angry glances in Seg's direction.

The troops had formed a perimeter in the forest, covering their sectors with the professionalism and wariness of veteran raiders. *Anything* could happen on a new world; Seg remembered that now.

“Getting high band traffic over here,” the signals operator replied. “VHF/UHF. Got some shortwave too. Nonrepeater, definitely comm signals. No signs of satellite comm.”

“You with us yet Theorist?” Kerbin snapped.

Seg bristled, the effects of traveling through the warp quickly draining from his body. He ignored the squad leader, adjusted his gear, and wiped away bits of moss and dirt. As he tugged at the edges of his coat to straighten it, he willed his head to clear.

How long had he laid there, Blissed out, endangering himself and the squad while Manatu had watched over him? Mistakes irritated him and his mistakes, however rare, most of all. Now that he was free of the fog, he re-evaluated the circumstances.

He recalled Kerbin’s earlier snide remark, and frowned. Who was this insolent bitch who dared address a Guild Theorist as if he were a common raider? To say nothing of the clumsy idiot they had assigned to guard him. *Manatu*, the name of an extinct, lumbering, land mammal from the World’s ancient past. Fitting name for one so dim.

His decision to forgo the pills designed to counteract the Bliss had been an error. Nevertheless, he shot the Squad Leader a withering stare. First or fifty-first, this was *his* mission, every responsibility and outcome—from collection of vita-related data to the selection of strike points—rested firmly upon his shoulders. Kerbin should know her place.

He screened the scenery with new eyes. It was lush here, vibrant and alive. Was this some residual Bliss informing his opinion or merely the strong contrast to home? Either way, it was that vibrancy they were here for.

As he slid his visor down, Seg was already contemplating what the standard cultural practices of residents of such environments would be. Systems of trade and transportation, myths and religion, mating rituals, all aspects of a society hinged on its surroundings.

“Any visual signals?” he asked the comm operator.

“Negative.”

According to the drone signal captures, the locals obviously had problems with the regulation of their signal traffic, with a messy clutter of bands often clashing into each other. “Sloppy organization,” Seg remarked to Kerbin. “Promising. Between the signal capture from the drone and this, we’ve got a start on language capture.”

She nodded. “We’ll review the plan, then make the initial move-and-acquire.”

The troops clustered around Kerbin as she went over the first stage of the mission with them. Seg listened but his eyes were fixed on something he could barely see through the thick foliage.

Water.

Initial drone penetration and its environmental readings of this world had shown a high ratio of water to land. An estimated 72% of the surface was covered by salt water, with countless island chains and six major land masses, the largest of which had been chosen for the transit site. Seg had known the geography going in—the drone was programmed to determine if a world were a viable vita source and to assist the recon squad with preparations—but now that he was here, the word had taken on a threatening tone.

Water.

Endless quantities of it rushed by, roiling uncontrolled and undirected. It lay within an easy walk of their location, a loud, flowing menace. The rational, educated part of his mind knew

full well that it wasn't likely to come flooding their way and wash them out of their hiding spot but the animal part felt both challenged and daunted by its presence.

There were worlds where Outers worked on water, even lived on it in various temporary and permanent structures. It was strange, reckless behavior, even for primitives.

"Okay, we're thirty out from the nearest piece of settled ground," Kerbin said to the gathered squad. "Eyes and ears open. There are Outers on this world just waiting to kill every kargin' one of us. Don't give them a shot. We're the hunters; they're the meat. Keep watch for dangerous bioforms. Plants, bugs, water, even the Storm-cursed dirt. We've lost troopers to every damn thing there is on a planet and there's always a new way to die out here. Don't be the idiot who finds it!"

Unlike the rest of the squad, Seg sat a slight distance away from the squad leader, watching the perimeter with his bodyguard. The danger curve for a fresh extrans through the warp spiked in the first hour, declined as the Bliss faded, then spiked again within the next eight hours as attention drifted and the first glimmers of familiarity led to the early dangers of relaxation. Kerbin knew those statistics as well as he did, and she worked to keep her veteran troopers sharp and alert. Her cadence and emphasis were born of training, practice, and experience, and served to command the attention of her people.

Well, at the very least, she had his attention. He had come to this place to facilitate conquest and capture, not to die in any of a million different barbaric ways such as pleased the local primitives.

"We stick to plan. What's the first objective after successful extrans?" Kerbin asked.

"We make a grab on an Outer and pull the language out of 'em," a small, wiry trooper replied. He was the squad's long-range weapon specialist. On the other side, he had a relaxed demeanor. Here, however, he was all business, head moving in a slow, continuous motion as he swept the area with his electronically enhanced senses.

"Okay," Kerbin said, pulling her visor back down, "let's go collect the Theorist a specimen."



Ama walked the fifty-foot length of the *Naida*, satisfied that the latest 'temporary' repair job to the skins was holding. There was a good wind blowing from the southwest; she gathered her loose, light blonde hair in her hand and twisted it back into a knot. It was the perfect day for a devotional cruise; her Damiar customers would get their money's worth. As she reached the set of stairs leading from the dock to the upper deck of the boat, one of the passengers called out to her.

"You there, girl. Help Lady Uval with her bags," the long-faced Lord ordered, waving his hand as if shooing away an insect.

"Captain," Ama answered, forcing a smile. "You may call me *Captain*...Your Lordship."

She grit her teeth, slung the heavy piece of luggage over her shoulder and made her way up the steps to the *Naida*. Why did these fat-assed Dammites think they needed so much fluffery for a flat-water day cruise?

"Captain Kalder!"

Constable Provert's voice, just what she didn't need to hear. Tossing Lady Uval's bag to the deck, she hopped back down to the dock, out of hearing range of her much needed, paying customers.

“Constable,” she said as she shifted her bandaged right hand behind her back and raised her left palm skyward, “blessings of the Shasir upon you and—”

“You are on notice.” He dropped a folded piece of paper into her hand. “Again.”

“Is that all?” she asked, passing the paper back.

“No,” the Constable replied, his pleasure obvious even beneath his flat expression as he thrust the paper back into Ama’s hand, “Judicia Corrus has reduced the term of your license. You have thirty days to be off the water, permanently.”

“What?” she stared down at the paper, mouth agape.

“Girl!” one of the Damiar passengers called from the deck of the boat, “How much longer?”

Ignoring the question, Ama unfurled the notice and read. Eyes skimming over the list of her current offenses, she stopped at the last two lines.

In light of these and past violations, we hereby give notice that Captain Amadahy Kalder, of the vessel Naida, is to cease commercial operations on the first day of the following month. Failure to adhere to this notice will result in seizure of property and a term of Correction.

“He can’t do this; I was promised three months!” she protested, but Constable Provert was already halfway down the dock, weaving through the crowd. As she crushed the paper in her grip, Ama took off after him.

“Girl!” the Damiar called again.

“Provert!” Ama yelled, shoving bodies out of her way, “Get back here and explain this, you coward!” She was almost on him when she felt a set of hands grab her around the waist.

She whipped around, fists raised.

“Ama, what are you doing? Calm down.”

“Fa, I...”

Focused on the cause of her anger, she hadn’t noticed her own father, Odrell, on the dock. She turned her head to see Constable Provert climb into a cartul and drive away, then lowered her raised hands and let out a cry of frustration.

“He shortened the term of my license. Bloody Corrus thinks he can—”

“Hush!” Her father stepped closer and lowered his voice, “You know better than to curse the Judicia in public.”

His eyes directed hers far down the length of the dock, to the very end, where the black and charred remains of a cargo boat jutted from the river like the ribcage of a skeleton. Ama’s mouth closed and she felt the usual swell of fear and anger that accompanied the sight of any of the Judicia’s warnings.

At least they had taken down the body of the vessel’s captain, who had been hung from the bow. Not before all the other captains and crew had gotten a good eyeful, though.

“Besides, you should know by now that getting angry isn’t going to help your case.” As he spoke, he lifted her right hand, his mouth slipping into a smile at the site of the blood-speckled bandage wrapped around her knuckles.

She shrugged, “Some Westie called my *Naida* a floating scrap pile.”

“Tadpole,” he sighed, “your brother is one moon away from ascension and you have offers of marriage, good offers. Why can’t you put this aside?” He gestured to the non-stop bustle of the Banks: boats docking, casting off, loading, unloading or being repaired.

Ama tugged her hand away, “You don’t understand.”

"No, I understand too well," her father said, placing his large hand on Ama's shoulder and brushing the leather *nove* she wore around her neck with his thumb.

All the Kenda wore some form of the traditional collar but only Odrell understood the significance of his daughter's decoration. The *nove*, well worn with use, had once graced the throat of Colwyn Kalder, his wife, Ama's mother, who had taken her own life when Ama was just a child.

"I have a cruise," Ama said, looking away, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"Go on then. I only came to make sure you're still coming for family meeting tonight."

"Gods beneath the waves," Ama cursed, "I forgot." Her mood sank even further. Thanks to the meeting, she would have to give up her planned paddle down the east fork of the Brahm.

"Language, Ama, language," he said, and tugged sharply on her ear.

"Ow! Sorry Fa."

"You'll be there?"

"Yes," she said, drawing out the word to two syllables.

"Blessings of our beloved Shasir'kia, for safe journey," he said, turned his palm upward, then pulled her into a hug and whispered in her ear, "Nen guide you, my daughter," in the secret language of the Kenda.

Her smile was bittersweet as she pulled away from her father and strode back to her anxious passengers. *Put this aside*. Yes, that is exactly what she had planned to do once she had made enough coin to refit the *Naida* and leave the Banks for good. How could she tell her family that, especially her father? The news would break his heart, which is why she had found too many excuses to postpone the telling of it. Not that it mattered now; Judicia Corrus would make sure she was trapped on shore forever.

"Girl! This is unacc—"

"My sincere apologies your Lordship. We'll be off in a drop," she called up to the Damiar pacing impatiently on deck, his many layers of robes flapping in the wind, like the plumage of an exotic bird.

Ama motioned to the dock runners to help her cast off the ropes, offering a quick whistle to the Captain of the neighboring cargo boat, by way of greeting.

"Another devotional cruise, sure you can handle that all by yourself, Kalder? I could send a man to help you." Captain Brant Tather took a moment from directing his crew, as they hoisted a load aboard the *Greehm*, to take a jab at the *Naida's* captain.

Ama smirked, "If you can find a real man on these docks, please, send him on over. I'm dying to meet one."

"Another love letter from the authorities?" Captain Tather pointed toward the piece of paper in Ama's hands.

"Yeah," she said, crumpling the notice into a ball and tossing it in the river, "they just can't stay away from me."

"Hmph," Tather snorted and moved closer, kicking aside a broken shell, the remnants of some gull's breakfast, "you and the rest of us." He looked left and right, then spoke just loud enough for Ama to hear, "Cargo levies were raised again and the fleet limit is now four boats. The Shasir won't be happy until every last Kenda is crawling on their hands and knees like a Welf." At the last word, he spit on the wood plank near his feet. "No disrespect to your brother," he added, then returned to his work.

Ama nodded. No one could disrespect her brother Stevan's esteemed place among the ranks of the Shasir holy men more than she already did but she was at least wise enough to keep her tongue stilled on that matter.

"Lords and Ladies," she called, rousing herself to act the part of cheerful guide, as she climbed aboard the *Naida*, "the Halif River awaits!"

Leaping to cast off the lines to the dock runners below, she paused briefly at the stern, made sure none of her passengers were watching, then leaned over, and knocked twice on the hull for safe journey. It was a silly old superstition but these days she could use all the help the ancient Kenda gods could offer.

Ama pointed to the treetops, "There's a blue hwetztel, they come to the Halif this time of year to feed on the spring fry." Above, a pair of sapphire blue wings circled over the water.

"How marvelous," one of the Damiar Ladies replied, allowing her eyes to flick upward for a second before turning back to her companion. She fanned herself briskly, "I'm sure I'll faint if we don't find some shade soon."

"Mm, I warned Flavert about these kinds of devotional tours," the Lady next to her commiserated. "We pay our dues at the Sky Ceremony and that is more than sufficient devotion if you ask me."

Not fifteen minutes earlier, Ama had listened to the same two women complain of the cold. Before that, it had been the seats (too hard), the drink (too bitter), the wind (too windy) and so on.

Only the stop at the Ymira Pavillion excited them as, swarmed by Welf servants, they were ushered off to be fed and waited upon under the shelter of canopies, overlooking the river.

Once they had gorged and drank themselves to their satisfaction, and had paused to leave a token offering at the temple, the passengers shuffled back aboard. Ama tossed a small bag of coin to the Pavilion's caretaker and pushed off for the return trip downriver.

Beneath the weight of their petticoats and dresses, their bellies full of roast game meat and benga bread, the Damiar Ladies and some of the older Lords drifted off to sleep, in the way of the privileged classes.

Boring. Stupefyingly boring these devotional cruises were, and yet the Shasir would take even this away from her. As she rested her hand on the wheel, Ama let her gaze roam, watching the familiar trees scroll by and the hunting hwetzels circle overhead.

Even with the time she had originally been allotted, she would barely have been able to make enough coin to refit and stock the *Naida* for the voyage she had planned. And now? In thirty days?

Closing her eyes for a moment, she imagined—as she always did on the long, silent stretches of the river—extending the skins and pointing the *Naida*'s bow west. One day she would leave the docks of the Banks for good.

"Any more grint, *Captain*?" a man's voice asked, too close to her ear.

Ama jumped out of her daydream. "Forgive me, Lord Uval...er, hold on, I'll fill your cup."

When she held out her hand for the Damiar's cup, he grabbed her by the wrist and licked his lips. "Such fine bones you have. However do you manage this beastly craft all by your lonesome?"

Ama yanked her hand away. “I grew up with five older brothers. I know how to handle myself, your Lordship.”

The man’s long, sallow face, split into a wet grin. “I bet you do.”

She snatched his cup away, held it under the wooden cask on the transom and opened the nozzle. A moment later, she smelled the sour stench of old wine as Lord Uval pressed his face against hers and whispered, “Interested in side coin, after the voyage?”

There was always one. Always. Why were men so rutting predictable?

With a practiced movement, Ama’s hand flew to her waist, unsheathed the blade secreted on her back, and brought it around until the point rested against Uval’s crotch.

“I am *interested*,” she said, quietly, between gritted teeth, “in getting you to shore in one piece, without any unnecessary displays that might attract the attention of your wife.”

Uval scowled and retreated a few steps. Ama passed him his cup of grint and tucked the blade back in its hiding spot. She watched him fumble his way back to his snoring wife, with a lack of grace typical of those who lived off the water.

No doubt he would be filing a complaint with the local authorities before departing the Banks, but what was that to her? They were already taking away her living and her freedom, how else could one lecherous Damiar possibly hurt her?



“Watch your step now. Hope you enjoyed the tour – tell your friends to ask for the *Naida*, everyone on the Banks knows me.” Ama might as well have been talking to herself.

On the dock, she watched an elderly Welf struggle to pick up a large bag. His legs shook beneath the weight and he teetered momentarily before dropping to one knee. Somehow, he managed to hold onto the load, but his leg was gashed open from the rough wood.

“Lazy klutz,” one of the Damiar Lords spat out, poking at the servant’s midsection with his walking stick, “get up or you’ll be swimming to Alisir.” The Damiar turned on his heels and strode away, pushing through the cluster of servants who were following their masters and mistresses.

Ama offered the old man her hand but he refused, righting himself with a series of low grunts before rejoining his fellow Welf.

Slaves. Ama shook her head, as she watched the servants trudging up the ramp.

She was ready to finish folding the skins before hurrying to her father’s house but then she saw Lord Uval turn from his wife and walk purposefully toward her. What now?

He held out his gloved hand, “Lady Uval insists we tip you for the lovely journey and charming banter.”

Coin was coin and now, with the term of her boat license reduced, she couldn’t afford to be fussy about its source. Ama held out her hand, ready to deliver the most sincere thanks she could muster but Uval flipped the coin into the air and it landed in the water, sinking into the dark green.

“And I insist you remember your place, Kenda whore.”

Fists clenched, she forced herself to turn away. By morning, he and the rest of his party would be sailing for Alisir, on to one of their many seasonal homes. It was best to let him go. Besides, it was one thing to brawl with her fellow mariners in the Port House, quite another to attack a Damiar Lord. The former earned her a set of scraped knuckles and a warning from the authorities – the latter could see her swinging from a rope.

From outside her father's cottage, Ama heard her brother's voices competing for attention. These family meetings, supposedly to decide important personal and business matters concerning the various members of the Kalder clan, more often than not ended as an excuse to drink too much praffa wine and boast of some recent misadventure.

She used to look forward to them.

Now she paused, her hand on the door, hearing Geras's voice above the rest, speaking her name. Nen's death, not another lecture from the oldest of her five brothers, not tonight. A too-familiar feeling gripped her insides.

"Cruise went late," she announced, as she pushed open the door. The room fell silent.

"We thought you might be hiding from us," Geras chided.

"Tadpole never hides. She's a fighter!" Thuy said, leapt out of his chair and ran across the room to tackle his younger, smaller sister.

The two tumbled to the floor, knocking aside the low table where their father's pipe and tins of leaf rested.

"You see, this is what I'm talking about, Fa," Geras said, his voice sharp. "We treat her as a man and wonder why she's turned out as she has, why she's always in trouble."

"Now, now," the elder Kalder said, both hands in the air in a placating gesture, "your sister may not behave like other women but she knows her duty to her family."

"Does she really?" Geras continued, his voice reaching the far side of the room, as Ama pulled herself away from Thuy. "Does she care how people talk about the wild Kalder girl, drinking and fighting and charging money for tours on that sad excuse for a lumber pile she calls a boat?"

"Does her gresher-brained brother know that the last person who insulted the *Naida* lost two of his teeth for it?" Ama asked, elbowed Thuy in the stomach and ran to the table to steal his seat.

"My apologies, sister. Are you quite finished your wrestling match?"

"Yes I am." Ama sat and poured herself a cup of wine, as she kicked Geras under the table. "Apology accepted. Aren't you supposed to be on your way to the land of cloud sniffers to hawk your wine?"

"I leave for T'ueve tomorrow."

"Give my regards to Stevan," Ama said, her face a parody of good cheer.

Geras gave her one of his trademark nods that meant he wouldn't expect any less from someone as uncultured as his sister. Visits to the domain of the gods were only considered for few very circumstances – blessings for births and marriage, prayers for the newly dead. It had been almost a year since anyone at the table had even set eyes on Stevan, and that had been at a Sky Ceremony, from a distance.

"And tell Brin he still owes me four coin for that game of Yoth he lost," Ama added.

"Your wagers with our cousin are your business." Geras turned to Odrell, "Gambling, another of her many virtues."

A weighty and uncomfortable silence stretched across the table.

Mirit, the smallest of the mighty Kalder brothers, looked at Ama with his eyebrows drawn closely together, "I'm sorry the *Judicia* reduced the term of your license."

Ama looked to her father but he shook his head, "I didn't tell them, Tadpole. You know how news spreads on the docks."

"Son of a whore!" She banged her cup on the table. "It's hard enough to attract passengers without this news to scare them off."

"Language, Ama!"

"It's not fair!" How could they all sit there so calmly? How many times had she heard Fa or one of her siblings complain about the authorities poking their nose into Kenda business? Some change had taken place over the last five months; their family meetings had grown progressively more conservative and, for the first time in her life, Ama felt as if she were standing outside her family.

"Stevan is very nearly a Shasir'threa; no Kenda has ever reached that level of ascension," her father cautioned.

"Hey, maybe there's some way we could change Geras into a Damiar," Ama said. "He has the right attitude."

"This is serious, Ama. It's very important how people see Stevan's family and that includes how we earn our living."

"So? Geras gets to sell his wine, Afon and Mirit can crew the cargo ships, and Thuy still works the charting runs. All of you can make your living how you want but I can't. Why is that?" Ama asked, looking each of her brothers in the eye, daring them to challenge her.

Geras was the first to answer, pointing an accusing finger at her, "Because, like it or not, you are a woman and an unmarried one at that. Kenda women do not earn their living as boat captains, especially not alone, out on the river with strange men."

"Oh please, you make it sound as if I'm doing something dirty."

"You might as well be from what they say about you," Geras snapped back.

She opened her mouth and stopped. From the way her brothers and her father lowered their eyes, she could tell Geras spoke the truth. She nodded, slowly, imagining the wagging tongues around the Banks. "I see."

"It's all dung, Tadpole. Don't let stupid rumors bother you," Thuy said, looking at Geras.

"No, it *should* bother her," Geras countered, his voice escalating in volume as he spoke. "It should bother you," he said, leaning across the table toward his sister, "that I have to listen to people talk about my sister as if she were a Welf whore."

"Geras, enough!" Odrell bellowed at his son. "Enough, all of you." He paused as his offspring settled – all but Ama and his eldest, who glared at each other. "Ama," he placed his hand on his daughter's shoulder, "we have always looked after each other, looked out for each other. If you are...wild, the fault is mine, I know it."

"Fa, that's not—"

"Let me finish, daughter. Your brother Stevan has spent his life studying the ways of the Shasir; his ascension will be an important moment for our family, for our people and an important step toward equality. Some things are bigger than you, bigger than all of us here. You must understand that. I know it won't be easy but you must behave as a respectable Kenda woman."

Odrell rose. The same shoulders that had carried his daughter easily as a child now sagged slightly with the weight of mere words. "I am telling you, as your father, that you must abide by the decision of Judicia Corrus. Furthermore, when your license expires, if you do not

choose to accept any of the offers of marriage put before you, then you will sell the *Naida*, return to this house and live under my roof as an obedient daughter. No more running to the rivers to paddle and swim, no more nights at the Port House, no more fighting, no more cursing. You will dress properly, you will attend the sky services, you will cook and associate with the other women, as you are meant to." When he sat, the air of the room swarmed with unspoken thoughts.

"And if I don't?" she asked, staring at her hands, both gripping the cup of wine.

Thuy cleared his throat and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Then," her father said, with a sigh, "you will be cast out. You will be dead to your brothers and me."

At this, she raised her head, eyes wide in disbelief. Looking from one face to the other, she knew they had decided this long before her arrival. No threat but this could have persuaded her to obey her family's wishes, and they knew it.

"Well, I see you've all figured out my future for me. How convenient."

"You know it's for the best," Geras said, leaning back in his chair.

Ama looked to Thuy, who was busy examining the grain of the wooden table. "Even you, Thuy? Would you shun me?"

"The choice is not mine," he grumbled.

"Don't be angry, Ama. Fa's right; this is bigger than us. Stevan has been chosen by the gods," Afon finally spoke up, his lips struggling to smile.

"Angry? Why should I be angry? I should thank you all for helping a stupid, wild girl learn her place."

"When you stop acting like a child, we'll stop treating you as one!" Geras said, jabbing his finger in Ama's direction once more.

She kicked out her chair and stood, face burning, "What do you know of it, Geras? What do any of you know of it? No one threatens to take away *your* freedom!"

"Gods beneath the waves! Your brother would offer a bridge between our people and the Shasir and all you can think of is your own petty desires," Geras said, standing as well.

"Why must our people bow to those spooks?" she asked, pointing her finger toward the sky.

"Ama! Watch your tongue. That's blasphemy," Odrell said, his voice sharp.

She lowered her voice but it lost none of its fire. Ama leaned in and looked at each of the men before her as she spoke, "Blasphemy? We still pray to Nen, we still speak our own language in whispers, we keep our ways in secret and teach our children the war songs. Fa taught every one of us here to use the seft – a forbidden weapon. We are all blasphemers and may we always be. Our family has a proud history of opposing the Shasir and their Damiar puppets but now we throw that away because having Stevan among their numbers makes us respectable? If this is what the Kalders are to become then you may as well shun me. I want no part of it."

"If I didn't know you were speaking from anger, I would order you out of this house," Odrell said.

"Fa, we should listen to Ama's words," Thuy said.

"Words spoken by the girl who earns her coin from Damiar. High talk of rebellion but only when it suits her. Selfish. Just like mother," Geras said, shaking his head.

Ama swept her cup of wine off the table and hurled it at the wall behind Geras's head. "Take that back!"

"Stop this!" Odrell yelled.

The room fell silent. Ama's chest heaved as she fought to contain her emotions. For a long moment, everyone just stared. "It isn't true," Ama muttered, then turned and ran.

"Ama!" Thuy cried after her but she was already to the door.

Half blind, she ran—her heart and chest tight and painful—back to the only friend she still had.



Below deck, by the light of a lantern, Ama tore off her clothes, hurling them in a pile on the bed in her sleeping berth, while she muttered curses. When she was down to her waterwear, she reached her hands behind her neck and tugged impatiently at the laces holding her nove in place. They were tight – how long had it been since she had last taken it off?

The wide piece of leather fell away and her dathe, the thin slits of skin halfway down her neck tingled as air tickled them.

Her dathe, a remnant from the ancient, water dwelling Kenda, allowed her to breathe underwater. Their tiny vibrations created pictures for her, outlined shapes of a world she could not see otherwise.

They were also one more mark of difference between her and the rest of her people – no one had dathe anymore, not for centuries. Since she could remember, her mother and father had warned her to keep them hidden, from everyone. No chances could be taken, not even her own kind could know. Were the Shasir to learn of her 'abomination', they would claim she was a demon, one of the O'scuri that dwelt below ground and feasted on souls. She would be sacrificed to the gods, along with the rest of her family. All of the Kenda would be suspect, all would suffer because of her.

She was careful to hang the concealing nove on the hook next to the likeness of her mother. Her fingers drifted over the age-stained paper that prevented her mother from leaving her completely.

Tall and slender, with eyes that changed colour with her surroundings, Colwyn Kalder stared down at her daughter. She had golden hair tied in a knot because, like Ama, she could never be bothered to fuss with it. She wore a smile that hid her dissatisfaction with the life she had been herded into. Here, aboard the *Naida*, Colwyn Kalder was alive and well in her daughter.

"I won't let them," Ama whispered, her fingers moving from the paper to the worn wood of the *Naida's* hull. "I won't let them separate us."

There was only a sliver of a moon, the docks were empty, nothing could be heard but creaking wood and lapping water. As she hurried above deck, Ama kept a watchful eye. It was dangerous, exposing herself as she was. One never knew where Shasir spies might be hiding, but tonight she needed release. More than that, she needed to forget.

In a motion as familiar as breathing, she sprung up onto the bow and dove into the black water with barely a splash. Her second eyelids—the thin, filmy layer that protected Kenda eyes from salt and cold—were up before she hit. On her neck, the freshly exposed dathe went to work pulling oxygen from the water and sounding the area so that Ama could 'see' the world below the surface.

She dove deep, letting the current sweep her toward the Big Water. She would not go that far, though she could, and without raising her head above water once.

Praise you, Nen, Water Father, she thought, shocked at the depth of the gratitude she felt.

But why shouldn't she be grateful for her gift? An onom turtle swam by, she could tell from the shape of its shell and flippers. A lucky sign. Onoms were rare, hunted nearly to extinction by the Damiar. In the water, they were almost impossible to catch but on land, where they nested, they were slow and awkward. An entire colony could be taken in a single day and so they had been. For all she knew, this one could be the last of its kind. Just like her.

She pumped her legs harder and caught up with a spinner; the two of them rolled and twisted around each other. Eternally playful, spinners frequented the rivers, though they preferred white water and waves, anything to surf or leap out of.

If she were to encounter a person down here—one of the Nen-tribu, *tribes of Nen*, that lived beyond the Rift, the long ago home of the Kenda—what would she do? She knew the history, knew about the civil war between the Kenda-tribu and the Vakua-tribu that had driven her people across the Rift and onto the land; her kind had good reason to be wary. Even though the nove—the collars they had worn to hide their dathe after their exodus from the deep, countless generations past—was now merely decoration, the old fear persisted. The Kenda's ancient rivals no longer hunted them. Good for her people. Only, on nights like these, she wished she didn't have to be like the onom turtle. Alone.

According to Kenda prophesy, their exile from the water would not be permanent. One day their savior, the Kiera-Nen, *Nen's chosen one*, would appear and lead an army against their enemies. Would lead them home. That story had been enough for her to cling to as a child, but now that promise was beginning to sound as empty as any of the Shasir's.

As it slowed, the spinner dipped beneath Ama and let her wrap her arms around its neck. With long, languorous pumps of its tail, the animal turned and carried his passenger back in the direction of the *Naida*.

Praise you my brother, Ama thought, stroking the slick fur of the spinner's belly, a long-absent sense of calm returning. She would swim for hours tonight, to wash away the day.



"I have the target," the lead trooper called. Moonlight washed over the valley, the water gurgling as if issuing threats, or so Seg imagined, though the others were more used to it and did not seem perturbed. "Do I acquire?"

"Hold," Kerbin ordered, her voice terse. "Flankers, clear?"

The flankers chorused that their areas were clear, there were no witnesses lurking around to reveal the existence of the recon squad once they made their move. Seg glanced at Manatu, who sat immobile, eyes flickering constantly in a state of ready vigilance. He glanced at Kerbin; her stillness mirrored Manatu's.

First acquisition was rife with peril. Aside from the potential for their presence being revealed early and compromising the mission, there was the tremendous uncertainty as to what they were really facing. All the troopers sat as still as stone pillars. Vigilant.

Kerbin's head jerked in a slight nod. "Acquire."

"Moving."

CHAPTER TWO

Seg stared at the film overlay in his palm, cupped toward his chest so the faint light didn't give away his position. The thermal readout indicated the relative positions of the trooper and his prey. The stunner the trooper carried required him to move within an arm's reach of the target; a heavy dose of voltage would handle the rest. Through the audio pickup, Seg could hear the trooper's regulated breathing, the water, and a faint splashing as the trooper's target moved through it. He sucked in a breath, wondering if the trooper would have to enter the water and risk exposure to whatever hostile fauna lurked within.

His stomach clenched, muscles locking in a small spasm that made him shudder. Time was crawling. Couldn't the trooper move any faster?

On screen, the trooper's icon moved in on the target. The audio pickup caught the sound of the stunner discharging. There was a loud splash, a muttered curse, then the sound of sloshing water.

The trooper had entered the water; Seg's stomach tightened further at the thought.

"Acquisition made," the trooper reported. A long pause followed and then, "Going to need some help hauling him back. He's a heavy bastard."



Ama paused only to squeeze the water from her hair before she finished climbing the rope ladder dangling from the stern of the *Naida*.

"Enjoy your swim?"

She gasped; the disembodied voice came from somewhere midship. She shook her hair forward and smoothed it to cover her dathe as she squinted into the dark.

The outline of a man stepped to the portside, his walk casual, his posture relaxed.

"Whoever you are, get off my boat before I throw you off!" Ama's voice faltered slightly. In her anger and hurry, she had left her knife, over-clothes, and nove below deck, in her quarters. The forbidden seft, hidden in the transom, could have her sent to Correction and therefore was for only the direst of emergencies.

"I think you are mistaking me for a threat, Captain Kalder. This is a friendly visit."

Now she recognized the voice. She took a step back as the man stepped forward, hands raised to show his innocent intentions.

"Judicia Corrus," she said, her voice higher than normal. Had Uval complained to the local Damiar enforcement after all? "Blessings of the Shasir upon you." She looked over each shoulder. If Corrus were here then his Head Constable, Dagga, would be too. "Your notice said I had thirty days, I—"

"You have your thirty days, Amadahy. Have no fears there."

His tone was obviously meant to be reassuring but Ama felt no such thing, as Dagga finally appeared from out of the hatch that led below deck. Moonlight reflected off his bald head, which sat on his neck like a block of stone and was thatched with thin scars. He didn't speak, didn't even acknowledge Ama's presence as he clomped his way to her side, where his body eclipsed hers.

"Should I have fears somewhere else?" Ama's eyes flicked down to the large blade sheathed on Dagga's hip.

“Witty, I like that,” Corrus said, and stepped forward again. Now the moonlight caught his face, casting his soft features in harsh shadow. To Ama, Judicia Corrus had always seemed like a shard of glass – smooth and clean, but so sharp it could cut you almost by looking at it. Even now, the shine of his black and silver hair threatened to draw blood. Most on the docks feared Dagga, but it was Corrus who had always sent ice through Ama’s veins.

“I came to talk to you about the notice, actually. As a friend,” he continued.

“A friend?” Ama ducked her chin to keep her hair forward, over her dathe, and inched sideways, away from Dagga.

“Is that so strange?” Corrus raised his palms; his eyebrows also rose. “Ama, I have no grudge against you, I don’t draw up notices and fines because I enjoy making your life unpleasant. As a representative of the Shasir, among the people, I have a duty to enforce the laws and ensure order. I am the hand of the gods, a responsibility I take seriously. And you have to admit,” he smiled, his white teeth gleamed, “you can be boisterous, disruptive, even a little wild, from time to time.”

He waited for her reply.

“I guess so,” Ama said after a pause. Her bare thigh was pressed against the transom. If Corrus or his pet monster made a move, she could always dive overboard.

Corrus tossed his head back and laughed, “Look at you! So nervous. Come now, I’ve heard tales of your Port House antics. Timidity doesn’t suit you.”

“What do you want?”

The laugh stopped. “The better question is: what do *you* want?”

“To keep my license. To keep sailing and earning coin, as I was promised I could.”

“And I want that for you as well.” Corrus smiled at her tilted head. “I want everyone to do their jobs, make an honest living, stay in line with the laws. I want peace, Ama. But,” he sighed dramatically, “there are those who want to keep all of us from getting what we want. Traitors in our midst. Kenda who defy the will of the gods and jeopardize the well being of their own kind. Remnants from a less civilized past who would undo the unity our beloved Shasir’kia brought to the land. And I would search them out, expose them and see that they were properly corrected, if I could. But, as you know, your kind can be...secretive.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think you do. Don’t you, Constable Dagga?” Corrus asked.

“Buncha filthy, sneaky water rats,” Dagga said.

“I’m not a traitor or a heretic; my brother is a Shasir’dua. I attend the—”

“I know all about your brother. He’s a fine example for all of us. No,” Corrus placed his hand on the wheel, “I’m not accusing you, I’m asking for your help. You’re a devout believer, obviously, but among those you associate with, well, I’m sure you hear things, see things. All I’m asking is for you to keep listening, keep watching, and then come to me, as a friend, and share what you know.”

He tightened his grip on the wheel and inhaled deeply.

“Gods above it must be invigorating, being out on the water all day. The freedom,” he sighed again, a lock of hair slipped out of place, “how I envy you! But, I’m getting carried away. You watch and listen, tell me what you see and hear, and I,” he knocked on the wheel, “will make sure that you stay free and sailing.”

"You want me to spy for you?" Ama's eyes were dark, she fought to keep her fists unclenched. "You want me to spy on my own people?"

"I want you to help your people. I want you to protect them from those who would force me to use less civilized measures to keep order."

"Like burning boats?" She regretted the words the moment they slipped out.

"Yes. Like that," he replied, the friendly tone seeping out of his voice.

"No."

"Think about this Amadahy."

"I have." She kept one eye on Dagga, "I said no. You're not my friend and I'm not yours. I'll follow your rules but that's all you can make me do."

"Sure about that?" Dagga muttered.

Judicia Corrus tipped his head to one side then the other, "Well, I had to try, but I can't say I'm surprised. Stubborn." He lunged forward without warning, until his nose was almost touching hers. "Just like your mother."

Ama gasped, which elicited another gleaming smile, this one predatory.

"You..." Ama's heartbeat sped up. She tried to move but Dagga's hand clamped on her elbow and held her in place.

"Stubborn, proud, secretive, yes, you're just like her." Corrus said, then smoothed the undisciplined lock of hair back into place. "But perhaps you have slightly more concern for your family than she did, hm? Why don't you take some time to think about my offer?"

"Get off my boat," Ama said, her voice barely restrained.

"Your boat, yes, she's a beauty," Corrus said, then turned to Dagga. "Let's leave our friend to consider her future. Oh, and Amadahy, if news of this friendly chat should reach any other ears, then those ears would find themselves at the mercy of my Head Constable. Understood?"

Ama's heart felt as if it had stopped beating. She nodded, unable to speak.

"Good!" Corrus strolled away as casually as if he were in his own home.

Dagga released Ama's elbow with a shove, pulled a match from his shirt pocket and struck it on the cask of grint. He held the flame in front of Ama's face, she leaned away from the light to keep her face hidden. Dagga let the match burn right down to the end, to the tips of his finger and thumb, without flinching. When the flame died, he placed the blackened stick on the helm, worked up a mouthful of spit and hacked it on the deck.

"Thirty days, Amadahy," Corrus called out from the stairs, without looking back. "Thirty days."

She watched the men leave until the night swallowed them. Then she hurried below deck, to her quarters, where she re-fastened her *nove* with trembling fingers.

"Rutting Judicia," she cursed.

She thought of Dagga, pawing through the insides of her beloved *Naida*, and was filled with an urge to dive overboard again and scrub herself clean.

Had they been watching her? What if Dagga had shown up while she was still onboard? She grabbed her knife off the small table in the corner and clutched the hilt.

Thirty days.

She couldn't tell Fa or her brothers about Corrus's threat, or she would put them all in danger.

Overhead, the lantern painted the small berth a dismal orange. Ama sighed, as she looked around at her home. What were her choices? Whether she married or not, it would mean giving up the *Naida* and everything she lived for, with no way to ensure Corrus would leave her alone. If she could make enough coin, if she could only do that, then she could run, take herself and the *Naida* out of Corrus's reach. Beyond the Rift Tribu, if it came to that.

Thirty days.

Or she could betray her own people.

She stared at her mother's likeness; Corrus's words filled her head. No one in the family talked much about the suicide but Ama remembered, vividly, the last day she had seen her mother. She was five; it was her first day at the Lesson House. It would also be her last. She was folding her lesson sheet into a paper boat and gazing out the window, dreaming of distant lands, when her mother appeared, the seed winds whipping her hair in a frenzy. Her mother's smile was sad. She touched her hand to her heart, then her forehead, the Kenda gesture for love that transcends words, then knelt down next to a large stone, removed her *nove*, and left it there.

"Amadahy!" The Lesson Master's sharp voice called her to attention, and she looked away from the window.

When she looked back, her mother was gone. Ama never saw her again.

Jumped, off the bluffs, downriver from the docks, witnesses said. Swept away forever by the river below. People said it was no surprise, Colwyn Kalder had never been happy.

Was it true? Or was there more to the story, as Corrus had intimated.

"I won't let him," Ama whispered, determination edging back into her voice. She closed off the lantern and lay down on her bed. She didn't know how, yet, but this was her home and no one would take that away from her.



Lugging the Outer to shore had been a chore for the troopers. Once he had regained consciousness, the real work had begun, and that was proving even more difficult.

"Talk, damn you!" a trooper growled, prodding at the native.

Their first acquisition was a short, stubby man of indeterminate age, who murmured fearfully but who spoke only in unintelligible bursts, no matter how roughly he was handled.

Samples of live conversation were necessary to help tune the implanted translators, known informally as *chatterers*, which they all wore. No matter how fitfully the native gasped and rasped, though, it was obvious he had no language and the best he could manage was disconnected sounds. One of the troopers raised a rifle butt and Seg, finally deciphering the clues, raised his hands to stop him.

He motioned for the man to open his mouth wide and when the prisoner complied he looked inside with a knowing nod.

"He can't speak properly, you halfwits." He gestured to the Outer's mangled tongue. Whether it was a birth defect or the result of some form of primitive punishment was impossible to say. "You've abducted a partial mute."

This was not the most promising omen for his first venture across the warps. So far the operation had been short and simple. They had gathered a great deal of radio chatter, almost entirely communications based. The inhabitants of this world obviously didn't go in for transmission entertainment – a notable point, which Seg had filed away. The gathered data

revealed that the technology level on this world was generally low, speaking to either a technocratic upper class, or a pattern of cultural divisions between nation states, some possessing more modern accouterments than their primitive neighbors. However, it was still too early to say.

Accurate tuning of the chatterers was impossible from broadcast communications alone. Or perhaps it was possible but his people would never know how to achieve it – such were the failings of stolen technology. Nevertheless, the data from the chatterer had suggested a complex, nuanced language that seemed adjective-heavy, indicating an artistic or religious bent.

Perfect. Seg felt there was a rich mine to be plumbed here, and he was as eager as the recon squad to start digging into it.

“So what do we do, boss?” a trooper asked Kerbin.

“De-pop,” she answered, tapping the butt of her rifle against the sheathed knife on her hip.

“Wait,” Seg said, holding up a hand. He looked at the native cowering on the ground, making noises that were obviously pleas for mercy. It wasn't pity that drove him to stop the execution, he assured himself, merely calculation of the odds. Each abduction of a native involved the risk of exposure, and if the squad had a resource at hand they needed to make full use of it. “Even with the defect, I can work with this. Get your cretins away from him, Kerbin. Signalman, I'll need your assistance.”

Seg crouched down in front of the native and switched the chatterer on. He could tweak it based on the responses he was getting, he was sure. It would take a while longer to extract language this way, but he was nothing if not patient, especially in the face of potential wealth.

“I need you to work the modulation,” he explained to the comm operator. “We'll be using verbal and non-verbal, and I will provide missing elements of sound where possible. It will give us a rough working approximation of his language.”

“Whatever,” the comm operator said, grabbing up his equipment while casting a sideways glance to his fellow troopers. Seg didn't miss the look that broadcasted the comm operator's feelings about Theorists and their penchant for what so many of his ilk considered esoteric nonsense.

After three hours of patient exchanges between himself and the Outer, Seg managed to establish a rapport.

Welf, that's what they called themselves. Surreptitious observation combined with the modulated chatterer allowed the troops to pick up a rudimentary understanding of the local language. He wasn't sure if *Welf* was a species term, tribal/national term, or a caste term, but it was a start.

Seg conceded that he had gained as much information from the native as was possible under the circumstances. A trooper motioned for him to stand back, raised a combat blade and dispatched the Outer with a flick of steel. With his boot, he pushed the body aside, then buried it in the shallow grave that had been prepared, covered the grave with greenery, and rejoined the rest of the squad. By the time the body might be discovered, the squad would be a safe distance away.

The Outer was of no further use to the mission and was too feeble and simple to make any sort of useful caj on their World – but the death bothered Seg in a way that he couldn't quite

define. The universe was harsh and unforgiving, and his World, the apex world across all dimensions, survived on the basis of capture and sacrifice. It was the nature of things, though wasteful. He had seen death before, in the arenas, from a distance, but he had never seen a man bleed out right in front of him, with all the associated sights, sounds and smells. The body had still been twitching as he had walked away from it.

Such was the nature of this work, though, and Seg reminded himself that the ensuing raid, once he gathered the necessary information, would be far from bloodless.

"We have to make track," Kerbin said, interrupting Seg's thoughts. "If the local primitives haven't noticed your pet mute went missing yet, they will soon enough." She tapped a button on her wrist; a holographic display sprung up and floated between them. "It's your show, but I recommend we cut north and track along this river."

"Why?" Seg asked, studying the map.

"Because," she said, in a voice that reminded Seg of someone trying to explain why the shielded sky was copper to a small child, "Outers like this run to the rivers. We can move down, acquire one that actually talks, and then get on with our business."

"No." Seg's eyes remained on the map.

"No?" she asked, shaking her head.

He had no time for interdepartmental prejudices. "No, not north, scroll northeast," he said, pointing to the display. "How far did your survey drone go?"

"It dropped at 70 kilometers to recharge. Give it twelve minutes and it'll be back up again."

"We have a developing mountain range here."

"So? Mountains mean a tough trail." Kerbin wiped her forehead; they were all sporting glistening skin, unused to air so moist.

Seg watched as the display scrolled. "Primitive Outers tend to place value on mountains and caves. Our radio frequency signals are coming from northeast, 20 kilometers out and increasing. We move this way, examine the base of the range for artifact sites, then cut back to follow the river track. It's not just the Outers we're here for." He slipped into a lecturing tone, "We're here to scout out their vita sources, and following the primitives along the river won't take us there."

He could feel her glare on his back as he turned away and reviewed the feeds from the visual monitoring.

Another self-referential was emerging from the collected comm data:
Shasir. Fascinating.



The squad was only an hour into the hike up the mountain when a trooper's scream violated the air.

"Damp that!" Kerbin ordered.

Manatu rushed forward and clamped a hand over the man's mouth. The trooper flailed wildly as the rest of the squad moved up and grabbed his arms to help restrain him. Even Manatu's bulk could not contain the trooper's frenzy.

Herma, his name is Herma, Seg thought as he pulled his pack down and reached in for his auto-med. On Kerbin's nod, he wrapped the sleeve around Herma's forearm. Herma struggled to pull his arm loose but the other troopers held him firm as Seg initiated the auto-med

by pressing a large green button. It was a simple machine, designed for ease of use under trying circumstances – a design Seg could now appreciate in more than theory. The cuff clamped down as the machine gathered vital information.

Kerbin snatched the control box from Seg's hand to study the readings. Her grim expression betrayed the trooper's prognosis as she jabbed the touch-sensitive screen and chose the option the machine gave her.

"Poison," she said. "Likely vector was at the calf. Possibly insect-based. Clear back and let him go."

Herma was already going slack, the drugs pumping into his system relaxing him. That or the poison was finishing him off, only Kerbin knew at this point. She stepped back, eyes flickering between the victim and the auto-med. Herma shuddered, all color drained from his face.

"Get out there and set the perimeter," she ordered the troopers. "And don't let any kargin' bugs get on you."

The troopers dispersed, moving into position. It would be a perimeter smaller by one man now, Seg noted silently. He gestured at Herma. "Is he...?"

Kerbin nodded, her face harder than he had seen it before. "Yeah, he's done for. The machine's already got antivenom formulated, but the venom got into his heart tissue. Too late for him," she said, as she jabbed another button, "but we'll be protected."

He couldn't help noticing she didn't seem comforted by that fact. Seg crouched down next to Herma, stared at him a moment, then grasped his shoulder. "Sleep," he said quietly, as Herma's eyes fluttered.

Kerbin swore softly behind him. Seg glanced back and addressed her in a low tone, "Anything can kill when you're extrans."

"I know that damn well better than you do," she said. "I'm not the first-timer."

"We need to keep moving. Let's get him cleared and buried." He reached for Herma's pack and began pulling it off.

"You could wait until he's dead!"

Seg looked back at her, briefly, then resumed his work. "He can't feel it now anyway."



The sunlight filtering in through the trees was coming in at an angle now, but even after four hours it had lost none of its intensity.

"We need a Shasir," Seg said to Kerbin, as they waited for two of the squad to cut a path through a wall of fallen trees and thick brush. "That seems to be a position of some importance to the Welf primitives. We must acquire a Shasir or someone closely connected to them."

"Better to grab assistants," she said. "When the big figures go missing, there's usually a stir." She swatted a flying insect away from her face.

"We don't know how big a figure the Shasir represents just yet. If they're a broad-spectrum religious caste, then losing a minor functionary is less likely to draw attention."

Kerbin cleared her throat, "That sounds dangerously close to an assumption, Theorist."

"Missions turn on inference," he answered. Leaning closer, he looked her in the eye, "Risk is factored into the mission."

“You don’t have to remind me about that,” she said, pointing to the men clearing a section of woodland debris from their path. “We’re already off the safest path. Listen, this is your first extran. It’s my thirteenth, for recon alone.”

“But only your second as squad leader,” he pointed out. “You’ve lost one of your troopers. You’re showing signs of shying.”

Kerbin’s dark eyes narrowed but she didn’t reply.

“This is my mission,” he said. “The choice of path was mine and the responsibility mine.”

“You’re going to push for catching one of these Shasir regardless of protocol. Unortho.”

He leaned back, wiping the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his uniform. The same word always came up for him. *Unortho*. The label had pursued him throughout his training, and of course it would arise on his mission. “Protocol is a guideline, not a control graft. We will continue to assess the situation, and if taking a Shasir, which appears to constitute the best information source, presents itself as an opportunity, we’ll move on it. It will entail risk. We accepted risk when we walked through the warp gate.”

Kerbin was irking him more and more with every exchange. He didn’t need to put up with balking now that they were out in the field.

“Perimeter clear, lead,” a trooper reported, his chest heaving from the strain of the work.

“Let’s move,” Kerbin answered, swatting the air around her face again. “At this pace, all we’ll have to send back through the next warp is bugs anyway.”

Challenging had turned out to be a gross understatement to describe the terrain. Once again, years of training proved to be a pale imitation of the real thing. Layers of decomposing vegetation made the ground wet and soft. Walking on it was like walking through a field of wet sponge. It also hid possible hazards, a fact that made all the troopers skittish, especially on the heels of Herma’s death.

Seg knew of trees from his studies but he had never conceived they could function so perfectly as obstacles. The thick, green canopy overhead let in only the thinnest beams of natural light, the trunks and branches limited the field of vision, roots hid beneath foliage to trip unwary feet and the trees size and spacing often dictated sweeping detours. Formidable, these structures.

Between the constant buzz of insects, the slow travel and the humidity, Seg was beginning to question his decision to move inland until a voice in his ear announced that the lead trooper had spotted a target.

“There’s a lot of ’em,” the lead trooper called out, as the rest of the squad halted. “Visual and scan puts it at over five hundred.”

Everyone waited while the information came through. Kerbin glanced back at Seg, who nodded. She cued her transmitter.

“Observation positions and coverage everyone. The Theorist and I will go into primary observation position.”

At the words, the troopers fanned out, and Kerbin led Seg up to a small outcropping on the side of the mountain. In the distance, in a wide valley, hundreds of dots moved like a slow whirlpool. When Seg lowered his visor, and tapped his wrist controls to zoom in, the dots became flesh. Another few taps and he could make out individual features – leather and rough

fiber clothing, dark hair and eyes, the lean, protruding muscles of a working class, females wide at the hips with generous breasts, indicating healthy breeding stock.

“Trooper,” Seg said to the man hovering behind him, “bring me a recharge cell.”

The man nodded once and hurried away.

“We have names, you know,” Kerbin said to him.

“I’m well aware. I know them all. I know your service histories, familial affiliations, service sectors, and full backgrounds. Probably better than you do,” Seg said, observing the unfolding scene.

“Really,” she said. Seg couldn’t see her face, but her tone was one of disbelief and, if he was not mistaken, tinged with fear.

“Really,” he answered, not moving his gaze from the spectacle below. “Tell me, what do you know of me?”

“You’re a Theorist and an obnoxious, self-congratulatory prick, and you’ll be even worse now that you’ve actually gone and found something. But we need you on this, and hey, you know what? You need us too.”

He considered that as he watched the solemn procession chanting and droning. It wasn’t a particularly colorful display, given the nature of the environment. He would have expected more primary colors, more body paint. The Welf were entreating the Shasir, from what he could gather of the rough translations.

“You’re correct, Kerbin, I do need you and your troops,” he said, focusing on the primitive gathering. “Somebody has to carry the equipment.”

She snorted at that and he felt her face move closer to his. “Y’know, Theorists aren’t soft—the Guild trains you hard—but most of ’em I’ve had to shepherd on jobs like this, they wouldn’t have looked to march straight into the weeds like you did. They’re usually fine with taking the easier path. You didn’t cry about it, just grabbed your gear and moved. Much as I hate to admit it, I’m impressed.” She stared into his eyes, her own dilating as she waited for his response.

Kerbin’s proximity and tone of voice were unwelcome. He had been prepared for this eventuality; extrans missions often inspired sentimental notions of bonding, which escalated with stress and danger. “I’m not interested in you,” he said.

He watched the features of her face widen in disbelief, then narrow in anger. A predictable reaction.

“Go play with yourself, you self-absorbed little shit,” she said, pulling away.

Seg resumed his observation, satisfied that the relationship was back in proper working order.

“I think things are about to get interesting,” he said, pointing. Kerbin’s eyes followed his finger to the airship in the distance. Now that, *that* had some color going. It was a crude thing, by the standards of his World, but functional. The ship drifted along sedately as the chanting picked up.

As the airship neared the gathering, a burst of brilliant light exploded from the bottom, showering down in streams. The mass of Outers leapt into a frenzy, raising their hands skyward and cheering.

“Loud noises and bright lights are primal human triggers,” Seg said. “The more advanced the society, the more ostentatious the displays tend to be. And we can assume, from

the pyrotechnics display, these Shasir have familiarity with black powder and weapons of that nature.”

Kerbin rocked onto one elbow, “Primitive weapons.”

“As Squad Leader, you should know better than to underestimate the damage such weapons are capable of,” Seg said. Kerbin was silent but he could feel her resentment. “How long until warp window?” he asked, after a moment. Once they had acquired a prisoner for proper interrogation, they would have to hold the Outer until such time as they could send it back to the World. All the while evading contact and pursuit.

“Seventeen hours,” Kerbin answered.

“If I’m correct, one or more of the Shasir will be aboard that airship.”

“You’re still set on getting one?” she shook her head.

“At least one.” He tapped a button on his wrist to switch his visor to photo-capture mode.

A few more taps and he could make out a young Outer woman, swaying to the chanting, winding her way up a set of stairs toward a large tent erected beside what was obviously the landing pad for the airship. Tapping another button, he captured the image and transmitted it over to Kerbin.

“There, that structure. That’s where your troops will find a Shasir.”

“You want the girl too? Ever had one? This could be your first?” Kerbin asked, one corner of her mouth tugging upward.

The insult was an obvious attempt to gain ground over him. “I’ve had partners.” He looked Kerbin up and down, “Though I prefer girls that aren’t built like boys.”

She bared her teeth at him, then pulled her visor down with a snap.

“Just the Shasir,” Seg said.

Kerbin turned and issued orders to the squad without another word to him.



Ama lifted the empty cask off the transom, dropped it to the deck and rolled it toward the bow. More grint. More expense. She was barely scraping any profit from these tours but they were all she had. Without a crew, she couldn’t run cargo and the *Naida* was too small and unappealing to the Damiar for Big Water transport. And she was sure Judicia Corrus was well aware of these facts.

“Miss Kalder?” a man’s voice called out from the dock below.

“*Captain* Kalder,” she raised her head and stopped the cask mid-roll, “are you looking for a tour?”

A face came into view. Ama frowned as Wirch Jorret—the least palatable of the men who had burdened her with an offer of marriage—stepped aboard, carrying a handful of cut flowers. She resumed her chore.

“You’re looking...healthy, Miss Kalder.”

“It’s bad manners to come aboard without asking the captain’s permission, you know,” she said, without looking at him. She had had enough of uninvited visitors.

“This is an urgent matter,” Wirch said, following her at a trot. “Your brother Geras informed me of the latest change in your circumstances.”

Ama rolled her eyes. Leave it to Geras to make a bad situation worse. He had to be blind not to see that Wirch’s only interest in her was her family name.

“My circumstances are none of your business. I told you last time I wasn’t interested in your offer Mr. Jorret.” Tipping the cask on end, she stood and faced him, hands on her hips. Over Wirch’s shoulder, she could see Captain Tather on the bow of the *Greehm*, watching her. Having a good laugh too, she was sure. “I think I was even polite about it. Now if you’ll excuse me,” she strode past Wirch, “I have another cruise tomorrow and I have to—”

“I have an addition to my offer, something that will make us both happy,” Wirch called, jogging after Ama again. “I understand the *Judicia* is taking away your license?”

Ama spun around, “And?”

“And I have a solution!” Wirch’s smile was practically swallowed by his cheeks. “If you agree to my offer of marriage—an offer, I should add, that most women of your age would be pleased to receive—you can sign this vessel over to me. With my position, I’ll have no trouble securing a commercial license in my name. You can keep this as a side business, for pocket coin. You see how perfect my plan is?”

Ama crossed her arms in front of her chest and leaned back, taking in Wirch’s self-satisfied expression with no small measure of skepticism. “You won’t have a problem with your wife working as a boat captain?”

“Work? On this boat?” Wirch let out a high-pitched laugh, “Oh goodness, no, no, whatever gave you that idea? I think you mean to tease me, Miss Kalder, but I’m not so easily fooled. Of course you couldn’t remain doing...this,” he swept his hand to indicate the whole of the *Naida*, his mouth puckering as if he had bitten into the bitter sac of a jinje fruit. “It wouldn’t be proper. No, we’ll hire a captain to run these quaint little tours, someone qualified. But I assure you,” he reached out with his free hand and touched Ama’s elbow, “all of the profits would be yours to spend as you wish.”

Ama looked down at the hand on her elbow, not as large or forceful as Dagga’s but every bit as unwelcome. “So, if I marry you, give you my boat and quit my work, you’ll let me keep a few coins?”

“For whatever you fancy,” Wirch said, nodding his head eagerly. “Geras mentioned that you are strong willed but you can see I am no tyrant.”

Geras was going to get an earful, or worse, when he returned from T’ueve. “Thank you,” Ama said, pulling the flowers from Wirch’s hand, “for your *generous* proposal.”

“Is that a yes?” he asked, following behind her as she walked to the port gunwale.

“What do you think?” she asked, dropped the flowers overboard and brushed the debris from her hands. When she looked back at Wirch, his mouth hung open, making his loose flesh droop even more. “Now,” her face hot, she stepped forward, forcing Wirch to step back, “get off my boat. This is still *my* boat, Mr. Jorret. Mine. Remember that.”

“Well, this is...I never...you...” Wirch blathered as he retreated, nearly falling as he reached the steps to disembark. “You’ll receive no further offers from me, no matter how high your brother may ascend, I can tell you that!”

If only that were true.

Wirch half marched, half wobbled off the dock, accompanied by the sound of Captain Tather’s laughter.

“Always happy to amuse you, Tather,” Ama said, flipping an unmistakable hand gesture toward the bow of the *Greehm* before turning away and walking to the bow of her own boat.

“Don’t ever marry, Kalder. I’d hate to lose my entertainment!” he called back.

Hands gripped on the rail, Ama stared off to the horizon. A Shasir skyship was floating inland, probably to the Ymira valley and the Welf village there. Soon, Stevan might be up there among the robed spooks, bringing the blessings of the gods, the Shasir'kia, to the poor and downtrodden. For a price, of course. Always for a price.

Wasn't that the way? The less you had, the more you were expected to give up.

Wirch's flowers drifted by below. Ama shivered. There would be more offers, from him and others. As distasteful as her occupation was, she would soon be the sister of a Shasir'threa, and at the 'old' age of twenty, men would assume she was anxious to be wed.

Everyone wanted something from her and they didn't care what they took from her to get it.

Well, there was always one option, something no one could take away from her. Her eyes moved past the flowers and stared into the dark water as her thumbs rubbed the leather of her nove. Disappearing was as easy as removing her collar, diving into that other world, and leaving everything behind. The question was, how far was she prepared to go?



The troopers, still riding the adrenalin leftover from their infiltration of the Welf gathering, busied themselves setting up the field warpgen, which converted stored vita to power the warp gate, as Seg examined their primary acquisition.

There was a loud *ahhh-kreee* from some nocturnal animal above them, probably avian, which made the anxious troopers even jumpier.

The Shasir Outer was unconscious. He was a scrawny thing, withered and aged. Seg wondered how he managed to carry all his ceremonial bric-a-brac, but lifting the robe he realized it was fairly lightweight. Most of the shiny parts were hollow and light, designed to awe and impress and not function for anything. He shook his head at the artifice and at the gullibility of the Outers who fell for it. Worshiping these people as conduits to a higher power? The natives were idiots. "This is the control unit," he said, pulled off a star-shaped box, the one functional device in the collection of shiny junk, and passed it to Kerbin, who was holding a hand over her earpiece.

"We've got maybe thirty-five minutes until they sweep our way," she said. "When that happens, we'd best be gone, unless you want a hundred dead Outers and a lot of trouble down the road."

"Warp window in four and a half minutes," Seg said, feeling much calmer now that the objective had been achieved.

From the observation point, he had watched the raid. The troopers had moved with honed precision, waiting until the right moment to isolate the target. That part had gone smoothly. On the other hand...

He looked at the whimpering girl, bound hand and foot and gagged.

"I didn't request that one," he said.

Kerbin smirked, the troopers tried to mute their snickers but it was clear they found the scene amusing. "She was in with the ugly Outer. Finding the holy or something like."

"Yeah, found it on her knees, under his robes," a trooper added, sparking another round of quiet laughter.

"Troops figured they'd get you your first caj," Kerbin said.

"What?" Seg raised his hands in frustration.

"First mission. Your trophy."

Seg looked from Kerbin to the girl. The first mission trophy was a Theorist tradition that went back centuries. And while it was true every Theorist still took a trophy caj on their first field mission, there were few that bothered 'hunting' their own anymore. Generally, the Theorist was given first pick of any caj brought back after the raid, keeping their trophy long enough to parade around at the Victory Commemoration. This had been Seg's plan; he had no intention of taking caj for himself.

"This is not the time to be marking and collecting yet. We have work to do," he said.

"Oh Storm, if you don't want her, we'll just keep her then. Have some fun after recon's done," Kerbin said. Her words were met with enthusiastic murmurs from the troopers. She pushed the Outer over with her boot, exposing her heaving bosom to the sky. "They're all just the same anyway."

"No," Seg said. He looked down at the fear-stricken face and imagined a heavy metallic graft being implanted on the back of the Outer's skull and neck. "No. That is sloppy thinking, squad leader. She moves as mine, but the transit comes out of your portion."

"You can't do that!" Kerbin pulled her helmet off to get close, stared up at him and impaled his eyes with hers.

"I most certainly can. You disobeyed my orders," he said, his tone icy, maintaining his calm demeanor even as he fought down the impulse to reach for his sidearm. "It's in your contract. Read carefully next time." They glared at each other for a long moment. "But I will give you and your lot a chance to make it up to me."

"Two minutes, boss!" one of the troopers called out.

They stared at each other a moment longer, before Kerbin broke away. She grabbed the Outer by the hair, hoisted her to her feet and shoved her toward the warp gate. The girl squealed through the gag and tumbled forward, landing on her face, then tried to squirm away. Kerbin planted a boot in the middle of her back, pinning her in place.

"Oh and mark her: *Do not process*," Seg added.

"Would you like to hold its hand as it goes through, as well?" Kerbin asked as she pulled a band from her pack, scribbled Seg's instructions on it and clipped it around the girl's neck.

Behind her, Seg didn't bother with a reply but he relaxed his shoulders a fraction.

He watched as the warp gate opened and the Outers were thrust through. The priest was due for a bad end. He would be processed. The Guild would empty his brain for a quick culture dump, then shoot the information back to Seg so he could begin the next step in the process. The husk that was left would be shipped off to the huchack ponds, the mines or the recyclers to haul metal and toil until the body followed the dead spirit.

Such was life.

As for the Outer female, he would deal with her when he got back. There had to be a better fate for her than being used and discarded by raiders.

Kerbin tugged her helmet back on. "Pack the warp gate, we move. NOW!" she ordered her troops. She didn't speak to Seg at all, obviously willing to leave him to the mercy of the local search parties if he didn't follow.



The squad had backtracked down the mountainside. The natural contours of the mountain offered them a strategic camp site for the night, though no one was letting down their guard just yet.

Morning passed slowly as they waited for the next warp window and the interrogation data that would determine the course of their mission. When it came through, Seg spent the better part of the afternoon speed-reading, as he had been trained to do for work in the field, with Manatu parked annoyingly close by his side.

The reading wasn't a full digestion, not at this rate, but it was a hearty skim that would give him a wealth of details. The Shasir was a perfect snatch, full of information. There was a good deal of caste bias to weed out but it was enough to put them onto the major vita sources of this world.

He split the display, again, opening the global map with the suggested hotspots the analysts back at the World had put together for him. Grudgingly, he could admit that they had done a good job. But then, this was about as easy an analysis as one could do. This world was rich, rich, rich. Loaded. Perhaps the best strike in over a hundred years or more. Almost enough to justify return visits, but that policy was sacrosanct. One in, one out.

However, he had an idea he had nourished since their arrival and now he was confident that the risk was worthy. He stood and headed straight for where Kerbin sat, back resting against her pack. Manatu followed in his wake.

"We're going to split up," he told her.

"What?" she asked, nearly choking on the ration bar she was chewing.

"You know, where you and your team go one way, and I and...he," he pointed at his bodyguard, "go another."

"Out of the question. Completely unortho," she said, standing. "Don't you people have rules about that kind of thing?"

Exactly the response he had anticipated.

"Rules that can be modified in-field if necessity arises." Among other things, the necessity to get this exceedingly dangerous woman away from his back before she could follow through on her strong impulse to shoot him.

His mind raced, sequences and prospects competing for his attention. What he was contemplating was not done anymore, as it resulted in disaster more often than reward. The last few attempts had been confined to the work of veteran Theorists, and a string of failures had resulted in the deaths of dozens, and on one occasion—the infamous Lannit raid—several hundred had died. People, that was, not Outers. However, the successes had been the greatest bounties of any raids. It was the ultimate in risk/reward, and his best chance to impress the Guild.

"We're going for a multi-strike," he told Kerbin. "For that, we need to each scout a half dozen sites over the course of the next twenty-one days. We need to set up a remote comm—"

"You're kargin' joking with me!" Kerbin hurled the ration bar at Seg's feet.

"Do I make many jokes, squad leader?" Seg asked, his tone even. "Remember when I said you'd get the opportunity to make up for that trophy caj fiasco? Here it is. In any event, I trust your operator to set us up with a long-range signal system that will evade local detection. You'll guide to the targets I vector you on, make the local sampling required, then we'll meet and intrans back to the world."

“No, we will not,” Kerbin said, jabbing her finger into Seg’s chest.

The troopers, who had grown used to their squad leader’s spats with him, were perking up and taking notice. For their benefit, he kept his temper. When it came time for the Question, the formal Guild inquiry at the end of the mission, he would not have witnesses accusing him of emotional outbursts. Unorthodox but logical, that is what they must say.

“This is what we’re doing. I have operational control here. Every order you give,” he stepped closer to her and lowered his voice, “is an order I allow you to give. But consider this: if it works, all of you will make enough to retire on. Off one mission.”

Behind her dark eyes, Seg could see the wheels turning. Nothing motivated troopers like money. Nevertheless, Kerbin was career military; it would take more than greed to win her.

“Consider this, as well,” he pulled up the holographic map overlaid with the Guild’s suggested vita hot spots, “on foot, as we are now, we are limited to the following sites.” He pointed to six, glowing red dots. “But by water we could feasibly survey at least twice that, maybe more, including the biggest two, here and here.”

“By water? How in the name of the Storm are we going to arrange that miracle?” Kerbin dug out a piece of ration bar that was stuck between her teeth, then sucked it off her finger.

“Not we, squad leader...me. You and your troops possess no cultural training beyond minimal survival skills. I will take only my bodyguard and charter a vessel—”

“You’ll what?” Kerbin let out two loud barks that were her equivalent of laughter. “Cultural penetration without us to cover you? You’re insane, Theorist. First mission and already cracked.”

Seg continued, unfazed by her disrespect. “When we are finished here, I will send a comm to the world with a list of the necessary cover elements. We’ll travel over land together, as far as here,” he pointed to the map again, “where we’ll wait for the next warp window. Once I have the necessary equipment, we’ll part ways – you and the squad will head to this inland site first,” he indicated a red dot, “and Manatu and I will take appropriate cover roles and travel to this river port settlement to secure transport.”

“Too dangerous,” she said, shaking her head, all traces of merriment gone. “I don’t care if you *are* the Guild’s wonder boy; our job is to stick close to you when you infiltrate and be ready to pull you out if things get ugly. What you’re proposing—transit with Outers on a waterborne vessel, with a single trooper—is beyond unorthodox. Without a full squad to cover you, you could blow this mission for all of us and get yourself killed in the process. Not to mention, if anything happens to you, it’ll be my guts on the table.”

“Regardless, this *is* what we’re going to do.” He gave her a long, thoughtful appraisal. Her apprehension was small-minded but not unreasonable. Theorists were trained to blend with Outers of all descriptions but even the best sometimes found themselves compromised. “I will make sure to note your concerns and your formal *disapproval* of my decision, Squad Leader.”

That seemed to appease her but her jaw remained set. “I want a worst-case scenario back up plan,” she said, after a moment’s contemplation. “If we lose comm, I am not risking my squad by traipsing all over this insect-infested water hole looking for you.”

A reasonable precaution, and one he had not considered. Seg performed a quick calculation of distance and time, then zoomed in the holographic map to an area on the other side of the mountain range they were camped against. “We’ll set up a rendezvous point. In the unlikely event that something should run afoul, we’ll meet here,” he pressed a button to mark a

spot on the map, the coordinates jumping to the foreground as he did so, “in 21 days—the mission deadline.”

“I won’t wait a minute longer. You don’t show before sundown, we leave your tender ass behind. And I want all this on record.”

“I assure you, I’ve made note of *everything* we’ve discussed.”

Kerbin’s face twitched slightly at that. She sized him up for a moment – Seg knew she was assessing the threat implied in his statement.

“Fair enough,” she said, after chewing on the offer. “It’s still insane. Totally unortho. But I’m sure you’ve already thought of that.” She stepped closer, her voice low and prodding, “I don’t have to tell you that if you karg this up, changing the rules as you go, making things up as it suits you, you’ll be the joke of the Guild, the laughing stock of the World. Lannit made a mess but he was an experienced field Theorist, his risk was based on a career’s worth of successful missions. The People still speak his name with a grain of respect. You? First time extrans?” A low, menacing chuckle. “They’ll invent a new word for *disgrace* to describe the depth of that kind of failure. You make it back alive after that and you’ll wish you didn’t. They won’t just strip you of your title and hold you up for the World to see just what happens when People turn their back on orthodoxy, they’ll also make sure you live a long, long time in the worst misery possible and that every day will be a humiliation, that every day you will be reminded of your mistake.” She broke away, her tone shifting back to a more casual air, “But, like I said, you already know that, don’t you?”

Seg stared through Kerbin before speaking.

“My last teacher said I’d either make a large impact or be the victim of one.” His face was immovable but he wondered if Kerbin could see through the facade.

Her words were true, entirely true. His plan was insanely ambitious. Injury or death, those possibilities were vastly preferable to the fate that awaited him should he fail and live to tell of it.

There was also the terrifying prospect of traveling on water. Something he refused to dwell on.

But it was all right in front of him, and he couldn’t let a world and an opportunity this rich go to waste. Maybe he was overstepping his bounds here, and maybe he was getting too ambitious for a barely-released Theorist.

Segkel Eraranat, Selectee for Field Research, youngest Theorist to ever hold the position, he imagined the newsfeed would say one day. Youngest and boldest. Fear and thrill wrestled in his stomach. Thrill won easily.

“Get to work on the communications,” he ordered.



With the squad settled in for the evening, except for two troopers standing watch, Seg finally had the opportunity to review the data from the Shasir priest without being disturbed. Always the same stories, world after world – the conquerors and the conquered. Though the story of this world was no different from a hundred others he had studied during his time training at the Guild, this time the details mattered, not simply for good grades but for survival.

Coming from the brain of the Shasir, the facts would be slanted in the direction of his kind but that’s where training came in.

A hagiocracy, a society governed by holy men, with three races and four classes. From top to bottom: Shasir, Damiar, Kenda and Welf. Easy enough, though there were a legion of sub-classes within each, to be sure.

The Shasir's home territory was on the opposite side of the planet; they were old hands at the game of world conquest. In areas such as this, inhabited by primitives, they simply announced themselves as gods upon arrival, then smothered any resistance with their vastly superior weapons and technology, which they passed off as 'magic'. Food, labor, natural resources, all were easily extracted and exploited once the population was suitably awed.

The Damiar were a sub-set of the Shasir, a class of nobles set up to act as liaisons to the holy men and gods. Bestowed with power and privilege, they looked after the practical, hands-on business of running an empire.

According to the data from the priest's brain, this technique had worked well elsewhere but when they had arrived here they ran into an obstacle: the Kenda.

The Welf were largely peaceful, uneducated and agrarian. They were naturally inclined toward belief and superstition, and had been subdued and seduced easily by these new gods and their magic. But even with a Welf army, the Shasir made little or no progress against the independent and seafaring Kenda, who had the clear advantage of geography and experience. Shasir boats, designed for ocean crossings, were large and slow, unsuited for the many inlets, rivers and tight channels their foes had spent generations navigating, and the Welf, who had their own unpleasant history with the Kenda, maintained an unshakable fear of the open water. The conquest was a near disaster.

Until the airships had been constructed and launched.

Shasir technology, from everything Seg had read and observed, was rudimentary compared to that of the People, but on this world, against enemies who were unprepared to defend against even a simple air assault, it was more than sufficient. The Kenda fell and the gods reigned.

"Clever," Seg muttered, as he read on about the Shasir's unification process.

Kenda who accepted the Shasir'kia as their gods and agreed to live under Shasir rule, were allowed to keep their boats and engage in trade and commerce on the water, according to Shasir law, which was enforced by the Damiar Judiciary. A ploy to make the high-spirited rebels believe they maintained their freedom, which, for the most part, was successful. Those who refused the Shasir's offer, or broke their laws, were executed publicly, as their boats burned before their eyes.

Unification included everything from religion, to language, to currency, and law. *S'orasa* was the Shasir name for this planet and *S'ora* the official language, to be spoken by all. Another piece of good fortune, as no further language sampling would be required. (Though, should he encounter other languages, Seg would be sure to collect samples for study.)

Likewise, all four classes were humanoid with no extreme genetic mutations. The Guild had spent decades perfecting cultural infiltration. On worlds where they could not physically blend with any Outer groups, Theorists would return home for a session of surgical body modification, then return to the recon. An extra expense, but direct contact with Outers was invaluable. Only rarely were all Outers so physically different that infiltration was unfeasible, in which case recon was conducted from a distance.

On this world, he could easily pass for one of the Shasir or Damiar, who were of the same race, (or mix of races, more accurately), and those castes had access to any of the prime vita hotspots.

As rigorous as the Shasir had been about cultural unification, they protected the secrets of their technology through even more extreme means. Lengthy torture, death and a promised eternity of suffering in the afterlife, had served well to keep their magic out of the hands of those they ruled. A necessary precaution, since even primitives could eventually figure out the mechanics of things such as steam engines, lift gas (such as hydrogen) or advanced metallurgical methods, given enough time and exposure.

A reasonably formidable band of Outers, these Shasir, Seg had to concede. Though, in their position, they would have been better served doing away with the Kenda completely. Once a rebel, always a rebel – history taught that lesson well.

He rubbed his eyes from the strain of reading the small screen. He knew he should take a som tab to help him sleep but what he was attempting was beyond unortho, it was dangerous; he needed to be prepared. His mind drifted back to training, as he considered the history of these Outers.

“Despite typically professing a desire for peace, every culture thus discovered has maintained some capacity for violence. Given our notions of evolutionary adaptation, it follows that the pressures of competition, internal and external, ensure that no humanoid population of sufficient size will ever achieve any modicum of perpetual peace.”

Jarin. His mentor was brilliant, unquestionably so, but Seg did not expect he would approve of his plan any more than the thickheaded Kerbin. House Haffset, the raid’s sponsor, would offer resistance, as well, at least until Seg could show Haffset how much wealth was to be gained. He suspected he would have only detractors until that time. Prodigy or not, no one on the World would count on a Theorist to bring in much above quota—if that—on his first mission. He would simply have to prove them wrong.

In order to do that, though, he would have to lay the groundwork on this world. Tapping a button on the screen, he reviewed the list of items he had requested from home. Clothing to disguise Manatu and himself—the Damiar were the class most suitable to imitate for this venture—local currency and an assortment of the nonsensical items these self-imagined nobility were so fond of. Large quantities of everything, in keeping with the Damiar custom of excess for the sake of excess. All could be manufactured, (ironically, by the caj of other worlds the People had conquered), well enough to fool the Outers.

Thanks to wide geographical and cultural differences, he could use his own name and Manatu’s as part of their cover, which gave him one less detail to remember.

The list of weapons was restricted to those that could be easily hidden. Two micro-chacks, two pistols - the former were more powerful and the best choice for a primary weapon, latter were smaller and could fit inside a pocket or boot, a perfect back-up defense. However, both weapons were reliable and near silent, firing toxic huchack spines that easily sliced through flesh and poisoned the blood. There were also a selection of micro grenades on the list, (smoke, concussive and fragment); eight chack cartridges and two forearm straps to conceal the weapons; six blades; another pair of stunners; a chack for Manatu and some remote micro-dets. They weren’t going to war, and if they had to use any of their arsenal then things would

have gone drastically wrong by that point and the weapons would most likely be useless anyway.

The Signals Operator had incorporated a means of text-based communication, via Seg's digipad, to keep him in covert contact with the squad, and he had also put together a larger audio/visual comm unit, which in an emergency would allow him to communicate with the World. As per protocol, he kept a set of digifilms to record the details of the mission – information that was the property of the sponsor House. He had also requested another warpgen and warp gate. That would raise some questions and it would be bulky, but if he needed to get back home in a hurry he couldn't depend on rendezvousing with the rest of the troops.

He had already stashed an auto-med in his kit as well as the standard selection of medication; field rations; map disc; and VIU - Vita Indicator Unit, for scanning vita sources.

He was ready for any eventuality. One more day of travel, one more night of study and he and Manatu would be on their own. Tapping his digipad, the new world returned to darkness.

Seg laid his head on his pack and looked up at the night sky. Stars were visible to the naked eye. Strange. Could a Person get used to such a thing? Closing his eyes, he reviewed the list in his head. Yes, it was complete; there was nothing to add.

He was ready for anything.

CHAPTER 3

The Central Well dominated the landscape more than any other structure on the World. Towering over seventy stories high, it transmitted a continuous, translucent stream of vita into a shimmering aperture projected over its height.

Efectuary Jul Akbas always found the sight a testament to the will of the People and their superiority over the greatest force of nature in existence. The Well was power, a flag of defiance against the Storm – the force that had threatened to consume their World for over a millennium.

No one knew when the Storm had first appeared, those records—as was the case with so much of the People’s history—had been lost. What they did know was that the black, howling monstrosity had once ravaged the land, destroying cities with its insatiable hunger for vita, and the People had fled, hidden or been consumed in its path. Billions of People had perished, entire continents had been rendered uninhabitable. Then the Well had been constructed; at last the Storm could be fed, directed, controlled.

Of course, as a natural phenomenon, the Storm could not be completely contained, but shield technology had eventually been developed to cover all the inhabited areas of the World. The people had triumphed.

And who had led this triumph? Who processed, disbursed and controlled the collected vita of the World? The Central Well Authority, of which Jul Akbas had been a member since her graduation from Orhalze Scholastic Academy, sixteen years ago.

The CWA administrative facility included an observation deck, where high-level management could take in a meal and look out upon the main instrument of their power and position in the World. As of today, that senior administration included Jul Akbas.

She shifted her focus and examined her reflection in the thick wall of glass, to ensure everything was in its place, organized. Like the Well, she stood tall, polished, productive. She looked back out at the Well and felt the pride of her personal achievement mirrored in that iconic edifice.

The observation deck was sparsely populated at the off-hour. Light, repetitive tones of music droned in the background, while well-trained serving caj padded silently on bare feet to refill drinks or deliver meals.

She held the rail with one hand as she looked back toward the entrance. The man who entered was lanky, taller than most, with neatly-trimmed grey hair and a sculpted beard. Supervisory Gran Fi Restis smiled as he approached.

Until thirty minutes ago, Gran Fi Restis had been her superior.

“Efectuary Akbas,” Gran said, stressing the title. “Congratulations. Taking in the view for the last time?”

She nodded and slipped away from the rail toward one of the secluded booths. As with so many products on the World, the booth and cushions were blended from extruded huchack fibers, and bleached free of the toxins the creatures left on everything they touched. However, for the upper echelons of the CWA, the material had also been laboriously softened – an expensive process few could afford. Draped over the plain seats were shimmering fabrics, the spoils of some raid.

Jul sat first, according to protocol, a reflection of her new rank and superiority to the man who slid in across from her.

“Supervisory Fi Restis, thank you for coming. We will be able to do great things in Orhalze,” Jul said.

The center of the table lit up as they sat, revealing a selection of glowing icons. Gran waited while Jul pressed an icon for her drink order before he made his own choice.

“Well, the visit isn’t all pleasure,” he said, then passed his digipad across the table to her. “One last impression, then your duties here are complete. Standard forms, code transfer approval and the like.”

Jul knew he expected her to press her thumb to the document without so much as a cursory glance. That was why Gran Fi Restis, ten years her senior, would forever remain a Supervisory. She read through the entire document, gave her impression, and slid the digipad back without a word.

“When do you meet Director Fi Costk?” Gran asked.

“In twenty minutes,” Jul answered, the mixture of pride, excitement and fear barely detectable in her tone.

Adirante Fi Costk, Director of External Affairs, was perhaps the most powerful of the five CWA Directors, power accrued over the course of decades. A hard and challenging man who did not tolerate failure – admirable qualities.

The drinks arrived and Gran lifted his glass to Jul.

“We will be discussing the latest acquisition cycle,” she said, after a small sip.

“Have you made your assessments of current raids?” Gran asked.

“There are four recon missions in progress. Two are led by veteran Theorists known for making safe, conservative assessments that lead to minimal expenditure and minimal gains. Both noted for breaking even.” As she spoke, her hand flexed around her glass. “The third is a corporate-sponsored raid. A possible option, but we are prioritizing the Houses.”

There were two entities on the World who sponsored raids: Corporations and Houses. In the actual process, there was no difference between the two. They both bid for the right to sponsor a raid; both hired Theorists and recon squads to survey the targeted world and determine the best sources of vita; both designed their raids according to information provided by the Theorist; both sold the recovered vita to the CWA, technology to the Guild or the CWA, and auctioned caj and materials on the open market.

The difference lay in the structure. Corporations had multiple owners, strict contracts and complex ties that made them resistant to takeovers. Houses were familial, hereditary units, with a hierarchical system that left even the strongest vulnerable. Both entities would take all measures to avoid a takeover but, under the right circumstances, Houses were the easier prey.

“And the fourth recon is House sponsored?” Gran asked.

“Yes, and led by a young Theorist on his first mission – one of several promising factors. First, this Theorist, Segkel Eraranat, is a former student of Senior Theorist Svestil, known radical and risk-taker. Second, the sponsoring House, Haffset, hopes to leverage a successful raid for elevation to Major House status. Finally, junior Theorists will take more chances, to prove themselves.”

“And if they fail...” Gran led.

“We move in,” she said, with a sharp smile. “However, we are also prepared to disrupt a raid at the planning cycle, before forces are committed. Properly handled, we will demonstrate that the Guild is less functional in vita assessments than we are, and that our own services can be more profitably substituted for theirs.”

Gran chuckled. “Theorist Jarin Svestil. I met him once. Radical, yes, but hard. There was some scandal that the Guild concealed, I understand.” His smile faded. “You know, if we dislodge the Guild from their position, the financial fallout of that failure would likely leave many of their senior members exposed to reclamation. I would actually visit the huchack ponds, just to see those ‘intellectual elites’ mucking around, collecting the fibers.”

“Visit the ponds?” Jul’s nose wrinkled. “We are above that. Certainly the ponds have vid feeds, to monitor the caj? If not, we would insist on their installation.”

Fi Restis laughed quietly, then sobered. “I have every confidence in your success, Efectuary, but bear this in mind when you deliver your briefing to Director Fi Costk today: he knows the cycles well. He will want you to show sufficient mastery of detail to demonstrate that you understand the finer points of this operation, down to all the names of the Theorists involved, House Masters, and so forth. However, he will also correct you for being over-explanatory at some point, to demonstrate the value of his time. Fi Costk operates on the principle of keeping everyone in his sphere off-balance and uncertain.”

Jul nodded as she finished her drink, then dabbed the corners of her mouth with a cloth napkin. “Thank you for your concern, Supervisory Fi Restis”

They rose together. His smile was warm, genuine and too familiar.

“It has been a pleasure working with you, Jul. You should be proud. You’re climbing the final layer, and the position you’re in gives you a clear path to the Directorate.”

Jul’s smile tightened as her eyes narrowed. “Certainly closer than you ever reached, Gran.” She soaked in the wounded confusion in his eyes before she added, “A productive day to you, Supervisory Fi Restis.”

Jul felt his eyes on her back until she boarded the lift to take her to the topmost level of the administration facility.

Whisked silently upward, Jul contemplated that the majority of People on the World would never stand at this height in their entire lives, and now she would be working here. The air felt different somehow, cleaner and more sterile.

She exited the lift and stepped into the security cordon. Sharply-dressed security staff scanned her and checked her credentials, then a caj stepped away from the wall to guide her to the scheduled meeting. She stared at the golden metal graft implanted in the back of the creature’s head. Such fine quality!

After passing through a series of doors, she arrived at Director Fi Costk’s temporary office. He sat at his desk, a bulky man with a shaven head, who radiated authority. He glanced up as she entered and gestured absently toward a chair.

The office was a study in simplicity, dominated by a single large window that encompassed the entire rear wall. She had heard that his regular office, in Orhalze, had a special projector system built into it that made the floor appear invisible, as if the office hovered over the city, so that all who entered walked on air. Adirante Fi Costk liked to loom over those he ruled.

As she thought that, he rose to his feet and looked down at her. “Efectuary Jul Akbas,” he said gruffly, “impress me.”



As they neared the bustling center of the river city, Manatu slowed and Seg ordered his bodyguard forward. Unlike Kerbin, Manatu was unimaginative and simply responded to authority. He was brainless enough to be caj, but that made him useful for such things as carrying bags full of gear and absorbing rocks and arrows and whatever else the natives might decide to hurl Seg’s way.

Seg understood Manatu’s discomfort, though. Dressed in their impractical Outer attire, they stood at the threshold of a dock that sprawled for at least two kilometers along the bank of a wide river. Attached to sturdy, wood pilings, the structure was stable—as evidenced by the number of Outers traversing it with carts full of goods—but that didn’t make its location, over the water, any less intimidating.

There was also the crush of Outers. Observing the group of Welf Outers from a distance had felt not much different than classroom study but being here, among the throng, it was immediate and real. Although the port city was primarily populated by the Kenda—tall, robust stock, golden haired and skinned, faces weathered early by ocean travel—there were a good share of Welf in the mix. By contrast, the Welf looked as if they sprang from the very soil they farmed, with dusky skin, dark brown hair and eyes. They attended their Damiar masters as porters or guards, or saw to the menial tasks of the docks, tasks traditionally reserved for the lowest classes.

Damiar were scattered throughout the crowd, as well, Seg was relieved to see, since his goal was to blend in as fully as possible. From passing observation, he could tell that the Damiar here were either travelers passing through on one of the many vessels, merchants, or what constituted the upper ranks of the local legal authority. Welf, being expendable, were used for general enforcement – Seg couldn’t help a slight smirk as he passed a uniformed constable, the dim expression and hulking frame were so similar to Manatu’s.

Seg’s senses had never been so engaged. Savory wafts of frying breakfast meat intermingled with the musky smell of the animals pulling carts and the tang of the salty air. Bells rang, sails snapped, boots clomped, hammers pounded, birds cried, mariners shouted and whistled to each other from vessel to vessel. The sky was a painful shade of blue and the sun—the sun, what a novelty—brought all the colors of the river city flashing garishly to life.

How does any culture evolve amid such confusion? The thought skipped over Seg’s consciousness as he continued his walk, thankful the social status his wardrobe signified forced the lower orders to move aside as he passed.

Soon they arrived at one of the walkways leading down to the dock.

Just as Manatu was about to step forward, as ordered, Seg stopped him by placing a hand in front of his chest. “Remember, you’re mute. You don’t talk. *At all*. Understand? Nod if you understand.” Manatu nodded, frowning. “Good man,” Seg said, in what passed for an encouraging tone for him, and raised his hand to let Manatu pass.

Taking his first steps onto the gently sloping ramp that led to the dock below, Seg kept his focus on the vessels. He had vague familiarity with waterborne craft, having studied them in training. Of course, studying images and reading about watercraft was entirely different than

actually approaching one. Bobbing in the water, they were at once cryptic and confusing. How to assess the quality of each craft?

Seg pondered the question as he ignored the creak of his footsteps on the wooden planks and the spaces between the planks that showed the water, clearly, beneath him. It occurred to him that the best means of judging a vessel was to judge the commander of the vessel. What was true when navigating the skies had to be true here as well.

Water. It was daunting. Worse, by far, than trees. The World's seas were now no more than large lakes, their rivers reduced to trickles, dead things, used only for shipping by the lower classes until even that had no longer been feasible. He had never known them as alive and rich, such as what he saw before him.



From the top of the mast, Ama hooked her leg over one of the thin-but-durable lengths of bonewood that made up the 'bones' of her sail, then lowered her upper body until she was hanging upside down. With one hand, she maneuvered a wide patch, slathered in epoxy, into place on the thin membrane, made from garzine skin. The tear had re-opened, yet again, on the return trip the previous evening. More trouble and expense she didn't need. It was bad enough that today's tour consisted of only three passengers and she had nothing else booked for nearly a week but now, with a gaping hole in the main skin, there was no way she could make it upriver if the wind died off.

"Told you it was time to replace that skin," Captain Tather called up to her, from the bow of the *Greehm*.

"Skin's fine," Ama lied, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. "Just routine maintenance."

"Routine maintenance my hairy hindquarters!" Tather laughed. "That crate's more patch than boat. You should start taking those marriage offers more seriously."

"I'll do that," Ama called back, "when you start bathing."

She righted herself, then scurried to the top of the mast, pushed off and dove head first into the water. Underneath, she examined the hull of the *Naida* as she swam. Satisfied, she kicked to the surface, sucked in a lungful of air and climbed the ladder to the dock, where Tather's men were hooting at her jibe. She raised her arms over her head in victory, "Captain Kalder wins again!"

She soon realized she now had a slightly bigger audience. Two foreign looking men were staring at her.

"Can I help you, good sirs?" she asked, wringing the water from her hair.

The men, two Damiar, one young, one somewhat older, possibly from the South judging by the style of their dress, said nothing.

The tall, thin man, his limbs slightly overlong, stood closest to her. His hair was a light brown and silver color that reminded her of the winter coat of a volp; hair that was thinning already to leave a distinct widow's peak. He had an angular face with strong, pronounced cheekbones and his eyes, which were much the same colour as his hair, remained fixed on Ama as if she were an apparition and he was waiting to see if she would suddenly vanish.

His companion, a monolith of a man, was older and more wary. His eyes shifted from Ama to the surrounding boats and back.

She found the thin man's gaze unsettling – he lacked the social consciousness of most normal people who would maintain a mutual gaze for a few moments before a subconscious mental impulse would direct their eyes elsewhere. For a Damiar, especially, to pay so much attention to a Kenda woman in public, even one so underdressed and sopping wet, was unusual. His mouth hung slightly agape. Ama could sense that in some fundamental way, she had shocked him.

"I, ah, that is—" he said, before shaking his head and composing himself visibly. "Yes, we require a private charter of your vessel."

"When, where and for how many hours?" she asked, sizing up the amount of luggage the larger man was toting. Excessive for a day trip, even for Damiars.

"We would depart immediately," the thin man began.

Ama cursed silently. "Ah, that's too bad, I already have—"

"I want to travel for about twenty days in total," he continued.

Twenty days? A twenty-day charter? Ama's heart leapt inside her chest.

"Why don't you gentlemen go aboard and I'll consult my itinerary to see if I can fit you in," Ama said, offering the two men a warm smile as she ushered them toward the stairs to the *Naida*. "I'll return in a drop," she called, then jogged to Captain Tather's boat.

"Finally come to ask for help?" Captain Tather teased as Ama climbed aboard the *Greehm*, still dripping from her swim. "Wouldn't blame you, that big cloud sniffer looks like he could tip your floating crate to one side – make sure he stays midship in rough water." He gestured toward the men who were waiting for Ama aboard her boat.

"Look Tather, I'd rather spend a month on shore polishing the *Judicia's* boots than ask you this but..." she looked down to her feet, then back up at him, crossed her arms in front of her chest and squinted with one eye.

"Don't worry, I'll tell your scheduled passengers you had an emergency and point them down the dock to one of the other, more reputable, charters." Before she could ask how he had known what she wanted, he continued, "Whatever those Dammies are looking for, you'd better haul back on that enthusiasm before you wrestle them for a price. Too obvious."

"Twenty days, private charter," Ama said, as she toned down her visible excitement.

Tather let out a long, low whistle, "Not bad, especially considering what you have to work with." He tilted his head in the *Naida's* direction.

"You're lucky you're doing me a favour," Ama said as she put her hands on her hips, the scrapes on her knuckles still visible.

"Hmpf," Tather snorted, then crossed his arms and stared once more at the men on the *Naida's* deck. "Strange looking pair. I'd say they're Southies, if I had to guess. Don't get many of them up our way. And that one," he indicated the taller man with his chin, "I didn't realize they grew Dammies that tall. Awfully young for a cloud sniffer to be on his own so far from home. Half coin says the big one is a guard Mommy and Daddy sent with him. Not a terrible looking fellow, the thin one, kind of regal. You be careful not to be dazzled by his good looks when you negotiate."

Ama rolled her eyes, "The day I fall for a cloud sniffer is the day you can burn my boat." She turned to leave, then called over her shoulder. "Thanks Tather, as much as it kills me, I owe you."

“Just fall madly in love, that’s all I ask, and I’ll keep some fosfol and matches handy.”

As she climbed back aboard her own boat, Ama gestured to the seats, “Make yourselves comfortable, please.” She hurried to the stern, towed off and slipped into a dry shirt and trousers.

Neither sat. The older man was silent and sour looking. Unlike his partner, his eyes roamed everywhere, taking in everything. His companion, the tall one with the hard face, was watching his feet and holding one of the side rails.

Tather was correct, they were dressed like Southies, and the accent fit, but something was off about them.

“You, sirs, are very lucky,” Ama said, as she returned to finish the deal, “I did have a devotional cruise booked for today but the clients are regulars of mine and entirely forgiving of schedule changes.” It was a blatant lie but hopefully Tather would keep his word. In any case, she would deal with the consequences later. “And it looks like the Shasir have blessed us with a perfect day for travel,” she touched her forehead and looked upward, in a display of respect for the lords of the sky.

“Indeed they have,” the thin man returned the gesture.

“So, where are we going on this finest of days?”

“I am a negotiator,” he said, after a lengthy pause, “representing the financial concerns among the Damiar of my home. We have an interest in some mercantile arrangements along the northern seaboard, as far as Malvid, and up certain rivers. Our itinerary will require a large degree of discretion on your part, Captain, as well as a tight schedule to make all our pre-arranged meetings. The payoff will be quite handsome, and, as I mentioned, the retainer will extend to twenty days of travel. Can you take us where we need to go?”

Ama heard one word: discretion.

When customers wanted discretion, they usually didn’t goff about paying for it. This could be good. Better than good. If she played this right, she might make enough to pay for the refit of the *Naida* – to the depths with Judicia Corrus and his threats. She could set sail in time for the seed winds and get herself beyond the reach of the authorities.

Of course, discretion often meant trouble, as well. Trouble she could ill afford. It was a matter, she decided, of setting the price high enough to justify the risk.

Don’t murk this one, Ama, she thought, as she pretended to contemplate the offer.

“Well...it would mean canceling future bookings with some of my regular clients. And I’d have to miss the Shasir Sky Ceremony, which I look forward to every year.” That she attended the annual Sky Ceremony against her will, only for the sake of Stevan and family peace, was a detail Ama chose to leave out. “But I’d hate to leave you sirs at the mercy of some of these shady types on the Banks,” she jerked her thumb in Captain Tather’s direction. “Speed and discretion *are* my specialty. This girl may not look like much,” she patted the *Naida*’s handrail, “but she’s got triple-cured skins and a shallow draft; she nearly outruns the luxe cruisers on a good day.” Sucking on her lips for a moment, she pretended to calculate figures in her head. “A thousand coin and the *Naida* and I are all yours.”

The thin man opened his mouth to speak but she cut in, “Oh, and of course I would need half of that up front. Just in the most freak happenstance that you and your friend decide to make wake at some port down the way and leave me out of pocket.”

“Actually,” he said, with a trace of cheerfulness, “one of our planned meetings just so happens to be set for the Sky Ceremony. So you won't be missing that. And I'm thinking that being able to tend to our devotions would make six hundred coin a reasonable offer, with a one-third advance. Given that you're charging near to double rate for this special charter, it wouldn't exactly hurt your finances to lose us at the first stop, now would it?”

Ama looked to the horizon, pursing her lips. Not bad. Could be he didn't know much about boats but he did know negotiating. Six hundred was good coin but she could do better.

“I do tend to charge a bit more for *discretion*. You sirs spin a fine tale but for all I know there could be some shadier business on your schedule – not likely you'd tell me about it ahead of time, now is it? If I'm to risk my boat, I want a fair shake.”

The men grimaced. And Ama caught something else. At the mention of 'shadier business', a twitch of the mouth—not from the thin man, he was blank slate—from the big man.

This was no merchant run, she would bet her life on it.

“But since you're not depriving me of the Sky Service...” damn her ancestors, now she would have to sit through three hours of chanting and gesticulating, “I guess I can come down to eight hundred. Do we have a deal?”

“I think seven-thirty and bump the advance to forty percent, and we'll both feel somewhat taken advantage of, yes?” he countered.

He raised his hand in front of his stomach, back of his hand facing her, pinky curled in, other fingers splayed out. Ama's breath stopped for a moment. The hand gesture was one of mutual assent...and pure Shasir. Though not technically incorrect, certainly not a gesture that was used on the docks or for negotiations as casual as these. Her instincts hadn't failed her; there was something more sinister going on here. Even as she smiled and returned the gesture, her brain was churning. Who, exactly, was he and why was he here, on her boat?

He was too young to be put in charge of complicated trade negotiations. Could he be a Shasir spy? Fa had warned her to be cautious and certainly she and the rest of the Kalders would be monitored for the slightest hint of dissent now that Stevan was preparing for ascension.

Perhaps he was in league with Judicia Corrus?

Her free hand drifted to the small of her back and rested on the blade hiding there. She would watch these men closely and watch her step.

“Soon as I have my coin, we can push off. Just tell me which way to point the bow. The head's below deck and there's some sleeping quarters in the bow and the stern, nothing fancy but warm and dry. Oh, and there's grint in that cask at the stern and another cask below deck. I won't always be free to serve it up, so help yourselves. I've got a few supplies but depending where we're headed I can always load up on foodstuffs at the next port. Anything valuable you want to store, let me know and I'll lock it up for you. Doubtful that pirates will bother with a vessel as small as this but I've got a few hiding spots for special trinkets, just in case. There's no crew so you might have to pitch in now and then. That's about it.”

As she waited for the man to offer up the promised deposit, Ama noted every move and stored it in her memory. She glanced at the bigger man and deadpanned, “And I'm sorry but you are just going to have to keep him quiet.”

It took a few beats. The thin man with the hard face gave her a twitchy smile that was as false as his cover story.

“Anyway, I’m Captain Ama Kalder. And you sirs would be...?”

“I am Lord Segkel Eraranat,” he answered, bowing graciously.

“That’s a mouthful.”

“You may call me Seg, for the sake of expediency on this voyage,” he said, with an attempt at a smile. “This is my companion and bodyguard Manatu Dibeld. And you may call him very, very quiet because he’s mute. Right Manatu?”

Manatu nodded and pointed to his mouth, opening it and making no sound.

He produced a cash-purse, counted out the agreed-upon deposit and displayed plenty more available. “And now,” the purse closed with a *snap* and he fixed his stare on her again, “you and your ship belong to me.”

Ama’s jaw muscles tensed briefly but the moment passed like a thunderclap and Seg the Damiar resumed his previous attempt at cheer.

“Manatu will see to our luggage.”

Ama bowed slightly. “And I’ll see to extending the sk—”

“Water rat!”

Ama’s head whipped around, at the sound of Dagga’s voice. As he climbed the stairs to the *Naida*, Dagga cleaned the dirt from under his nails with his knife. She turned her right palm skyward. “Constable Dagga, blessings of the Sh—”

“Pushing off?” Dagga pointed his knife toward the large bags on the dock below.

“I have a charter, yes,” she replied, her tone respectful.

“Where? How long?”

“Twenty days,” Ama answered, “I don’t know every stop yet, since you interrupted my dealings, but as far as Malvid. Anything else I can help you with before you leave, Head Constable?”

“Got business in Malvid?” Dagga asked, pointing the knife toward Seg, an eye on Manatu.

Seg’s hand slid back and touched Manatu’s arm, as if to stop him. “You may point that elsewhere before I officially notice it,” he said, indicating the knife with his chin. With that, he looked back out at the water, the constable once more in his peripheral.

“May I?” Dagga grinned, then flipped the knife, until it was pointing away from Seg. “Now, as I was asking...”

Seg looked back, as if seeing Dagga for the first time. “Oh, yes. Who are you and why are you holding up my charter?”

Ama turned away to hide the smile that rose to her lips.

“Manatu, go collect our things,” Seg continued.

Manatu stepped forward but Dagga blocked the stairs. A miniature war waged in the eyes of the two men and Ama held her breath.

Dagga finally stepped aside with a false display of courtesy and turned his eyes to Seg. “I’m Head Constable Dagga,” he offered, “here on orders of Judicia Corrus.”

“Ah,” Seg said. “If the woman is a problem, I can have my man restrain her for you. Is she in trouble?”

Dagga’s smile looked as if it had been wrung out of him. “This one?” he pointed the knife at Ama now. “She’s always in trouble.”

Ama straightened and shifted her weight to one side. “Constable,” she said, her tone placating but with an edge beneath it, “let me consult with my passenger and then I’ll give you our full itinerary.”

Manatu pushed past Dagga with four bags. At the same moment, Ama crossed toward the stern and beckoned Seg to follow.

She transcribed the list of destinations as Seg recited them to her. When he finished, he pulled a watch from his coat pocket and frowned. “Should we anticipate issues of law at each stop?”

“No,” she flashed a glare at Dagga, her animosity unveiled. “And my apologies about the delay.”

She strode quickly back to the constable and passed him the folded piece of paper, which he took his time reading. “Is that satisfactory? I’d like to push off before dark.”

Dagga tucked the paper inside his shirt pocket, and offered Seg a conspiratorial look, “Can’t be too careful with the water rats.” He rubbed a hand over his head, then redirected his attention to Ama, “I better see this hunk of sticks tied here before your time’s up. You got any notions of running, I’ll be having a chat with your father. Savvy?”

Ama’s reply was a forced smile.

“Course, that’s assuming this junk heap doesn’t come apart the minute it hits the Big Water.” His laugh was half growl. “Pleasant voyage your Lordship.”

“And a pleasant...whatever it is you do,” Seg said, turning his back on Dagga. “When do we leave?” he asked Ama.

“Now,” she said, her voice and face hard, her eyes monitoring Dagga’s departure. “If Manatu is finished with your bags, I’ll cast off the ropes.”

“He’s finished. Carry on, Captain Kalder,” Seg said, then looked downriver, to the horizon.

Ama moved swiftly to extend the skins and summon the dock runners to help her cast off the ropes. That monster, Dagga, had nearly ruined her opportunity; the sooner she got out of port the better.

As she winched the wide, wing-shaped skin fully open, she caught a glimpse of the Damiar, Seg, watching her, his mute companion hovering nearby. No, not just his companion, his bodyguard. Tather’s guess had been correct.

At the thought of Tather, she locked off the winch, ran to the stern, whistled and called out his name. His head appeared at the bow of his boat and Ama took a deep breath. She was already one favor in debt with him but this was different, this was far more important. “Tell my family to keep their eyes on the horizon for my return,” she shouted.

There was a significant pause, then Tather nodded.

“You’ll have their eyes, Kalder,” he answered. She waved her thanks, then knocked twice on the outside of the hull. Sometimes you can’t have too much protection.



Out on the open sea, the *Naida* rode effortlessly on a warm, west wind that blew steadily at about ten knots. Nen was feeling generous today. Ama worked hard to repress a smile as she watched Seg standing at midship, fingers clutched to the back of a wooden seat. Since

leaving port in the morning, he had made a valiant effort to appear at ease, though she wondered why he bothered – Damiar didn't care what people like her thought of them.

There were a great many things she wondered about this Damiar, not the least of which was that he had given her leave to address him so informally. *You may call me Seg*. Not Lord or even Segkel, but 'Seg', as if he were a crew member or family. Well, that could be his age speaking, or perhaps manners in the south were different.

That he was traveling without servants and that his lone companion was mute could be due to the secretive nature of his supposed business, though her suspicions about that remained in place. If his business was so important, why wouldn't he have scheduled a proper charter, on a proper cruiser? The *Naida* was seaworthy, for short passages, but hardly the type of vessel any self-respecting Damiar would lower himself to travel on for more than a few hours.

He hadn't balked about the cramped berth, (her berth), in the bow, though he had cleared his throat, several times, as she had gathered her scattered belongings and attempted to give the space some sort of order. When she had shown him the small bunk in the stern, (which she had been using to store tools and charts), for Manatu, he had been equally unperturbed and even his guard had seemed untroubled by the rustic conditions.

Of course, they would likely find their own lodgings whenever they were in port, she didn't expect a Damiar to sleep on a boat like the *Naida* by choice.

He had even inquired as to where she would sleep. His reaction, when she explained she had a hammock she would string up above deck, was a long, silent stare – a response she was growing accustomed to.

Above all, what bothered her most about Seg, the so-called Damiar, was the way he looked at her. Ama was used to men staring at her, as the only female captain around it was to be expected, but this man was different. There was no lust, no malice, no disgust, not even plain, old curiosity in his gaze. His eyes didn't look *at* her, they penetrated her. For any Damiar that would be unusual, for one who couldn't be much older than her it was both unusual and vaguely threatening.

His age was also a question. Physically, he was in the prime of youth, beardless, lean and strong. And, as Tather had said, he wasn't terrible looking. He lacked the ruggedness and brawn of a Kenda man but there was indeed a regal quality to his features. However, his mannerisms, tone, carriage and attitude belonged to someone much older and wiser, someone who was comfortable with great power and responsibility. The contrast was mysterious.

He had insisted on following on her heels as she made preparations to push off. It was as if he was studying her, and each time she felt those eyes on her she grew more unnerved by them.

And each time she thought of speaking up about it, she remembered that purse full of coin. He was her ticket to freedom; he could stare if he wanted to.

"How is Manatu?" she called out against the wind.

Seg looked back at her and shook his head. He took a long stride toward the helm, tugging down at the edges of his coat, but he was far from acquiring his sea legs and stumbled sideways. On his next attempt, he grasped any available handhold and after a slow progression he stood next to Ama. "Not well," he said, nodding in the direction of his guard's body, which was slumped into one of the seats.

"If I'd known he got wave sick, I would have given him some dried genga root before leaving port. Unfortunately, it's too late now. Just keep him above deck, unless you want to clean up his mess," she said.

"Is it usually so...chaotic out here?" he asked.

"This?" Ama looked out to the seas around them. "This is calm. We couldn't ask for better conditions." Seg's brow furrowed slightly. "You've never sailed before, have you?" she dared to ask.

Again, the silent stare.

"I've been on the water since, well, since I was born. My father was a chartsman, he taught my brothers and me how to sail when we were small. You see how the skins are billowed out full like that? That's perfect, it means we're getting just enough wind and it's a westerly, which means it's coming at us like this," she lifted one hand from the wheel and placed it at a ninety-degree angle to the boat. "Garzine skin is tough but flexible; this sail," she pointed forward and above them, "is kind of like a giant binta wing. I can extend it if the wind is light or retract it if the wind is strong, just as the binta's do. Think of it as flying on water. Here, why don't you take the wheel for a moment while I trim the skins?"

For a moment it seemed as if Seg would refuse but then his features brightened faintly, as if someone had lit tiny fires behind his eyes, and he let Ama guide his hands into position.

"Just hold her steady, like that. Perfect." She offered him an encouraging smile to counteract the stony look of determination etched on his face. "Since I have no crew, I had to set the *Naida* up to be sailed solo." She reached for the winch on the port side and told Seg to keep his eyes on the main sail. "I've got two skins, but I only use the secondary for traveling upriver, and they're both set up on a winch system, so I can extend or retract them right from the helm." She gave the winch a quarter turn and the far ends of the skin lowered, "See that? The way the folds at the tips are flapping? That's too much; we've lost surface area and power, which means we lose speed." She flicked a lever and winched in the opposite direction until the skin tips stretched back into place.

He was watching her, as his hands held the wheel, and though he didn't speak Ama could tell Seg was beginning to relax. Helming the boat returned to him the element of control she guessed he was accustomed to.

Seg was surprised at the sensation of steering the vessel. It was almost as if he were directing and controlling a living creature. There was more to this sailing business than simply raising the sails and steering the craft. It was science – primitive science but science nonetheless.

She was talkative, this Outer, though he had to admit that learning about the operation of the boat was vastly preferable to the choice of either staring out at the churning water or watching Manatu turn a deeper shade of green. The simpleton had forgotten to take his anti-nausea meds or they had failed him. In either case, there was nothing to be done now.

It would be appropriate for him to now offer something in the way of conversation. She had spoken of her family more than once, had even made a point of calling to one of her cohorts to pass on a message to her kin before they had left the port, so obviously that was a desirable topic.

Family. He barely knew his. After qualifying for the Guild basic at the age of ten, he had moved into the dorms with the other students. As to his siblings, he had no idea what became of them. His parents, he had barely known. His father had been an overseer at a recycling facility his entire life, driving caj on endless shifts to keep their output of material flowing in usable form. His mother had died when he was very young, lost in an autotrans accident.

He didn't really understand the concept of family unity. The competition between all of his siblings had been ferocious and he had learned to play them off against each other. Even as the middle brother, he competed with his older sister for dominance of the clan, and got his way more often than not.

The brutal inter-family wars had sharpened him and prepared him well for his eventual immersion with the other brilliant students of the Guild. He had learned early on that even those who seemed most intelligent, most promising, were all still creatures of human desire. Jealousy, pettiness, lust, anger and greed could drive them to stupidity.

He liked to think he had transcended that. His goals were clear and any emotions that did not serve them were ignored or discarded. A philosophy that had served him well enough to bring him here.

He watched the girl as she fiddled with the winch again. The data from the Shasir, he was discovering, lacked much detail about the Kenda. For example, she had very deliberately and discreetly knocked twice on the outside of the craft before they had departed. There was no reference to the knocking in the data from the Shasir they had captured and drained. Local superstition? Personal belief? He resolved to study it further. If she had a favorite spot to knock, it would leave a small, faint but discernible vita trace. If it was something more widespread among the mariners, it could well represent a seagoer tradition. Probably nothing that would amount to anything worth harvesting but he liked having all the data he could lay his hands on. He was notorious for chasing every lead, back in training, to the point of exhaustion. He had been called over-thorough.

Well, he had graduated. Now it was time to see if there was such a thing as over-thorough. He didn't believe it.

"Your father taught you to sail?" he asked, after some time had passed.

"He taught me everything," Ama answered.

"You are close to your family, then?"

She looked off to the undulating horizon. Her yes came out only after a significant pause and her seemingly perpetual smile wavered. The subject, one he assumed she would be happy to discuss, had driven her to silence. His impulse was to push the matter, but he refrained.

"We're making excellent time; you'll be in Alisir by tomorrow, right on schedule," she said, changing the topic as she took the wheel again.

Alisir, his first target.

CHAPTER 4

Inside the shelter of a cove along the coast, Ama dropped anchor. They were ahead of schedule and could enjoy some rest, particularly Manatu who was too sick to move from the upper deck. She had left him up there, with Seg, while she ducked down to the galley.

The stove had ample fuel. Good. It would be a simple supper—smoked fish, fried vegetables and some leftover bread—all she could do with so little warning. Not that she could have prepared a feast even if she had had the warning.

Grabbing a knife, she peeled and chopped potato and blemflower into large, uneven chunks.

What was it about the Damiar, Seg, that suggested a sense of superiority beyond title or physicality? He had driven away Dagga, but he had also started asking questions about her family, which no Damiar ever did. Unless they had plans for such information.

She brought the knife down on the block with a heavy thud, sending the two halves of the potato tumbling to the deck. *Damn!* Ama gathered them up and wiped them off on her trousers.

It's like swimming with a drexla. At the thought, the scar on her calf throbbed and her mind drifted to a summer day off the island of Lind.

She and her brothers had gone for a long swim, riding the waves to shore with their bodies. As usual, she had needed to outdo them all, kicking her way out further and further until she was past the break. And alone. That's when she spotted the drexla.

With her dathe covered by her nove, there was no way to sound the surrounding water, she could only keep swimming and keep her eyes open. Every now and then she would catch a glimpse of a dark shape—a long, thick body ending in a winding tail with spines running the length of it—but then it would disappear. Shore was far in the distance, as were her brothers. Showing off had left her at the mercy of a predator. At least she had been wise enough to strap her blade to her calf but, as she clutched it in her hand, she realized how useless her tiny weapon was going to be against all those teeth and the poisonous spines. No matter how vigilant, how prepared or brave she might be it was only a matter of time until the drexla attacked.

More frightening, though, was how her heart raced, how a dormant part of her came burning to life in the moments before she felt those teeth, and how much she enjoyed the thrill, the danger.

The drexla had taken her blade in its eye and Ama had escaped with only a gouge on her calf, from its teeth, and a good scare. She had been lucky, the teeth had caught her but she had avoided the poisonous spines along the tail. Even a scratch from those meant death.

Now, that same sensation was rising in her again, that feeling of being circled, hunted.

A gull cried as it flew by the open porthole to the galley, startling Ama back to her chore. The knife, she noticed, was clutched so tightly in her hand that her knuckles were white.

Closing her eyes, she whispered, "You don't scare me, drexla."

Seg descended the stairs to the lower deck. He could see the girl was hard at work butchering some sort of vegetable and hadn't heard him approach. He paused to watch her. This was a new and pleasant situation for him, observing an Outer in its natural environment.

The only Outers he had dealt with were caj that had already been captured, processed and fitted with control grafts. Caj that functioned as servants and pleasure-caj for the Guild were trained at the finest academy, at Hebreck.

They were also broken. Boring, vacant and beyond shame because they knew that in their station literally nothing was beneath them. They were simply soulless husks who obeyed because they knew their owners could end their existence at the touch of a button.

He continued watching the girl in silence as she chopped the vegetables.

From the moment he had seen her dive into the water, he had been seized with some undefinable emotion. She swam. Swam. Not under threats or orders, not out of necessity, but for pleasure. Even now, watching her, he could scarcely believe he had witnessed such a thing. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had left him speechless, as this Outer had.

She was different. A challenge.

And, with every exchange, he was gathering clues about her. Her spirit was sumptuous.

The food, on the other hand, smelled abysmal.

He saw her start at a bird's passage, and heard her whisper. Something about a *drexel*? He couldn't think of any food rituals or deity invocations involving that name, and wondered what it meant.

"That smells adequate," he announced. She jumped, startled once more.

"I'd be more careful sneaking up on someone when they have a knife," she said, with a slight laugh he was learning to read as discomfort.

His cue to move closer. But not too close. She chopped faster and with less accuracy. A piece of vegetable dropped to the deck and this time, knowing he was watching, she didn't just wipe it off, she tossed it aside.

"I heard you talking to someone," he said.

The knife slipped, slicing open a small cut on her finger. She stuck the finger in her mouth and fumbled around for a cloth.

"No," she said, holding a rag to her wound to stop the bleeding, "just talking to myself. I'm used to being alone."

The kitchen was small, the ceiling low; he was not ignorant of how his tall frame loomed over her, how she might perceive herself as penned or cornered. A theory confirmed by the subtle shifts she made to distance herself from him.

"Can I assist you with anything?" he asked, keeping his tone deliberately light, non-threatening, as he inched forward another step.

"Uh...no, thank you." She wiped the knife clean, then made a show of lighting the stove and moving some pots and pans around on the stovetop.

He waited another few beats before speaking again, "Well then, I shall retire to my quarters and let you finish."

It had been a pleasing bit of indulgence, studying the girl, but there was work to consider. He wasn't here to sightsee or frolic with the locals; Kerbin's warning echoed in the corners of his mind. He could not fail.

The Outer had provided him with detailed maps of Alisir and there was time, before the wretched looking meal was served, to study them.



After a night of tossing and turning, Ama had woken before the sun. The winds were perfect and she pulled anchor.

You didn't battle the Big Water, Fa had taught her that. People tire, water never does. If you want to ride Nen's back, you learn to read his moods. When he is sweet, you can relax, catch your rest. When he is ornery, you stay vigilant and respectful, you let him direct you. He was being sweet now but Ama knew she would have a hard time convincing poor Manatu of that.

The wind had picked up slightly since the previous day, blowing at about 15 knots and gusting higher. They would make good time to Alisir. Unfortunately for the sick flatlander, bigger wind also brought bigger waves and since the rollers were running north-south and the waves were hitting them from the west, the *Naida* was dipping and rolling as she cut through the blue water. Manatu's stomach was obviously doing much the same, as he clung to the rails, heaving up nothing but air and foam until exhaustion claimed victory and he sunk down into a giant heap of flesh.

Seg, to Ama's surprise, was making a decent showing of himself, even taking on some of the minor tasks she had demonstrated for him. Not bad for a flatlander. Nevertheless, water legs took more than a day to develop and his discomfort appeared in brief flashes that were quickly and consciously subdued. He was at the mercy of her world now and that obviously didn't suit him.

Her world. Ama licked the salt spray from her lips as she gripped the wheel and concentrated on keeping them on course.

Seg stared down at Manatu, who was sprawled out on the deck, half dead and useless. Some bodyguard.

The menial work the Outer had shown him was far more suited for Manatu's ideal combination of strong back, weak mind, and agreeable servility. For that matter, Manatu might as well be caj himself.

The notion actually surprised Seg, who had been raised on the sharp class distinction. There were People and there were caj. To believe otherwise was to betray the People; to speak such a belief aloud would be treason.

Admittedly, some of the work Ama had asked him to do was not unpleasant. He especially enjoyed manning the wheel, and learning the basics of the geometries of the skins gave him a whole new respect for her learning capacity.

In truth, he was finding it difficult *not* to think about her and this new world she was showing him. The only daydreams he had ever allowed himself revolved around his career and tangible, achievable objectives. And yet he had caught himself, the previous evening, wondering how far this vessel could travel and then entertained visions of directing Ama and her boat on a course of exploration beyond the boundaries of the mission.

These imaginings had offered a pleasant two-minute contemplation before he had finally gained hold of his senses again and resumed calculating potential vita loads from the preliminary data Kerbin had transmitted through the digipad. Using the comm, in such tight quarters, was too risky but from the text of her dispatches he could tell she was flogging the squad hard, covering tremendous amounts of ground on foot. Lacking his direct supervision, they avoided making any public appearances; they had made their first read at a distance. This

was not as reliable as the sort of close-in readings he would be taking, but it would give him a rough picture.

House Haffset had a limited resource base but excellent credit accounts. His plan would take some convincing but, if they were willing to gamble boldly, they could strike at least a half-dozen choice targets in a single go. It was up to him to winnow out the richest sources.

He grasped the handrail and left Manatu to his misery as he returned to the rear of the boat – the *stern*, as it was referred to.

“Getting close,” Ama said, as Seg arrived at her side, then pointed to a large, rocky outcropping in the distance. “There’s the Killing Cliff.”

A small wave blew sideways across the stern, soaking them both. Ama’s second eyelids were up before it hit. Seg ducked away from the spray.

“Sorry about the ride,” she said, glad for her Kenda eyes, so well adapted to water, “Price you pay for speed.”

“Never mind the ride. Comfort is secondary to getting business done. Tell me more about this Killing Cliff.”

The Killing Cliff, Ama knew two versions of that story – the accepted one everyone spoke out loud and the darker one, whispered among her people.

“Before the Unification, before the Shasir brought us together in peace, some of the Welf tribes around Alisir used to practice human sacrifice. Usually it was a single infant and no one really knows why, since the Welf have no written history. The story says that the Welf believed their gods required servants, so they would ‘send’ one of their children to live with the gods and serve them. That cliff was a holy place to the Welf, a meeting of mountain, water and sky; that was where they would...”

She stopped, assuming Seg could fill in the missing detail.

“In their legends, in return for the sacrifice of a child, the Welf would have a season of healthy crops and protection from plagues and storms. When the Shasir came to our land, they put an end to that kind of barbarism.” Ama lifted her palm skyward, hating the gesture but determined to put on a good show, “Praise to the Shasir’kia.”

After the previous evening, she was even more convinced that her passenger, if not a spy for Corrus, had some equally threatening Shasir alliance.

“Your first stop, the Temple of Shasir’Pei, in Alisir, was constructed shortly after the arrival of the Shasir. So now, instead of murdering babies, the Welf sacrifice food, gifts and whatever pitiful amount of coin they manage to put away during the year.” Damn it, why couldn’t she ever keep her tongue under control? That last part was unnecessary. No wonder her family worried about her. That kind of blasphemy could get her sent to Correction.

But she couldn’t pretend she didn’t know the other half of the legend. Yes, the Welf, brutes that they were in the black times, had sacrificed an infant every year and the Shasir had stopped that practice but that had not put an end to the murder at the Killing Cliff. The Shasir used Welf labor to construct their temples, their skyships and devices for their magic, but they forbid anyone outside of the Shasir to know their secrets. Any workers privy to Shasir magic, when they were no longer useful, were herded off the Killing Cliff, their disappearances explained as magical ascensions to the Cloud Temple in the realm of the Above – one of the

reasons many Welf made the yearly pilgrimage to Alisir, in hopes of their own magical ascension.

Ama had no proof of this, no one did, but the Kenda had strong memories and their own secret history.

“Good fishing in front of that cliff, too,” she added, to lighten the mood. “Maybe there’s some magic there, after all. Alisir has a large Welf village, so I’ll be able to get some decent food for us. There should be lots of kembleberries still on the vine. I’ll make sure to get more genga root for Manatu, though I don’t think it’s helping him much.”

And maybe I’ll have some free time to paddle the Gwai tributaries, she thought with no small degree of anticipation. Her paddleboat was strapped to the stern. The water level wouldn’t be as high as she would like but tackling some whitewater would be just the diversion she needed to shake the tension her latest passenger stirred within her, and the Gwai’s secondary rivers had more than enough monster waves to do the job.

“You study history, do you?” she asked, now curious, against her better judgment, to decipher Seg’s intentions.

“I enjoy local lore,” he said noncommittally. “Folk tales, legends and myths. A hobby of mine.” He waved a dismissive hand, but there had been a gap, a hiccup in his response, large enough to suggest his interest was more than a hobby. “So, you feel that perhaps the Welf would be better-served by being allowed to keep more of the coin they earn?”

Now she was having a hiccup of her own. Her honest answer to his question was one she would never share with a stranger, especially a non-Kenda stranger.

“I feel...” she considered her words carefully, if this man was a Shasir spy the wrong words could mean Correction, “I feel that all people would do well to improve themselves and sometimes that takes coin.” Treading dangerous water. “However, spirituality *is* the core of life, the Shasir’kia are powerful gods, and the Welf seem happy with their lives, so perhaps it’s best they place more value on worship than on material goods. And they’ll be well rewarded in the Cloud Temple, when their days are over.”

What a pile of dung.

The invasive stare; he was making her twitchy again. That and the wind was picking up even more. They were coming down some of the rollers too fast for her liking. If the *Naida’s* nose dipped under she could drive them underwater and that would put an abrupt end to this cultural tour of Seg’s.

Damn, maybe she should have given up some of the coin and taken on a deckhand for this charter. At the thought, a sudden push of wind prompted her to turn her head to the stern. A wall of black was bearing down on them, one of the late spring squalls that drop out of the sky with no warning.

“We’ve got weather coming in,” she told Seg, her tone firm but not panicked. “Take the wheel for a drop,” she ordered, dashing to the stern locker as soon as his hands were in place. She pulled out three oilskin coats and pressed two into Seg’s hands as she repositioned herself at the wheel.

“We need to lock down the secondary skin and close the hatches. Do you think you can do that on your own? I need to keep us pointed into it.” Manatu was still crumpled in a heap at the rail. “Move Manatu back to midship, put the extra oilskin over him, and lash him to something solid so he doesn’t get washed overboard.”

Seg nodded but paused. He laid his hand on her arm, opened his mouth as if to speak, then just as suddenly he closed it again. His body stiffened and he hurried away.

Ama stared at the spot where Seg had grasped her arm, as if there might be a mark there, an imprint of his hand. Where had that come from? Like a jealous lover, the Big Water demanded her attention, though, and she slipped into her oilskin and pulled her eyes to the horizon once more.

She shivered, but not from the wind.

As he slid into one of the coats, Seg berated himself for the impulsive act. He had stopped himself just before speaking, thankfully, but had he not, he would have offered her some kind of reassurance. When he had asked her about the Welf, she had quite obviously censored herself for his benefit, believing him—well, not *him* but his current incarnation—some kind of threat and he had been moved to assuage her fear.

A ridiculous impulse; in reality he comprised a much worse threat than any she might imagine him to impose. The timing couldn't have been less appropriate.

The pitch of the boat was frightening and yet exhilarating in a way he had never felt before, and he was torn between a self-interrogation over his impulsive move and the realization that they were perhaps getting into something dangerous and therefore exciting.

He secured the open hatches and turned to make his still-clumsy way back to Manatu. It would serve the parentless wretch to let him drown, but in addition to their gear, there was a load of superfluous junk tacked on for their cover that Seg had no intention of lugging around himself.

"Hold still, you lackwit," he muttered as Manatu twitched and expelled more bile onto the deck. Hands hooked under the large man's armpits, he dragged him toward the center of the boat. At least he had managed to maintain his cover of being mute thus far. Be thankful for the small favors.

Ama gripped the wheel; the squall was almost on them and things were about to get tricky. Likely it wouldn't last more than an hour but it would be a fitful hour. The secondary skin was locked off and the main was almost fully retracted – it wasn't about speed anymore, it was about control.

Seg was sealing the last hatch. He was no mariner but he was a quick learner, and a willing one – an anomaly among the privileged classes. His hard face fired up with the storm, as if he were a man meant for challenge. Ama knew how that felt, to only come alive when life was at risk. She bit her lip and again felt his absent hand on her arm.

The rollers grew steeper and tighter as if the Big Water was folding in on them. The *Naida* fought her way up each face, then slid off the back side and plunged toward the dark grey of the next wave, as if she would punch through it. Wind blew the tops off the waves and soaked the upper deck. Ama's second eyelids flicked up and she gripped the wheel even tighter.

"Seg!" she yelled, her voice all but swallowed by the squall. He looked her way, one hand clinging to the mast and one hand covering his eyes to shield them from the stinging salt water. She waved him over to her, urgently, and he stumbled his way back, grasping onto whatever his hands could find.

Even side-by-side, she had to shout. “Stay back here now, the stern’s the safest place. Hang on!” The *Naida* shot over a wave, screaming her way through the water, which was almost black now in the shadow of the clouds. “Yeee-aaa!” Ama yelled, as if she were at a raucous party and not in the middle of a tempest. “We’re ripping now!”

Her smile was savage; she was riding the beast. She whipped her head around to face Seg, her wet hair plastered to the side, eyes wide and bright silver, “Isn’t this great?”

He was grinning from ear to ear. The smile didn’t look in any way appropriate on his face, as if he had never done it before. His hair was plastered to his head also, water dripped down from his forehead to his chin, and as he looked at her one corner of his mouth quirked up even further.

For a moment, his face frozen in an expression of feral rapture, he held her gaze, real desire and passion rolling off him, uncontrolled, before he turned away to stare into the belly of the beast, and another wave broke over the bow.



For over an hour, Ama guessed, (though time stretches inside a squall), she and Seg had held on at the stern, while, at midship, wave after wave washed over Manatu. Then, in the way of spring storms, the clouds broke, the wind died and the *Naida* was gliding peacefully over long sets of low rollers. Ama, her two passengers and every inch of the upper deck were drenched but the sun, burning against a pure blue canvas, would sort things out soon enough.

Some unspoken connection had evolved between Ama and Seg during the squall, and now, in the calm, she felt awkward and self-conscious. And exhausted. Prying her fingers from the wooden wheel, she asked Seg if he could take over the helm for a moment. Thankfully he obliged, though he was obviously spent.

“I’ll just check to make sure everything’s in one piece,” she said, flexing her cramped arms and fingers, making her way, first, to Manatu.

What a mess. He was still breathing, thankfully, but he was waterlogged, white as the clouds and shaking with cold. “I’m going to get some blankets to warm him up,” she called to Seg, as she made her way to the hatch and ducked below deck.

Quick as her aching joints would allow, she grabbed two thick, praffa-cloth blankets from storage and scurried back up to the ailing man. She sat Manatu upright, untied the rope from around his waist, wiped his face dry, removed the oilskin coat Seg had covered him with and wrung as much water as she could from his clothing. He weighed a solid ton and maneuvering him around was like moving a dead whale, but she was used to doing things alone and so she managed. Once she had a blanket beneath him, she laid Manatu back down, then covered him with the second blanket, tucking in the edges to keep it secured. Smoothing the wet hair from his face, she rubbed his cheeks with her hands to warm them up.

His eyes blinked slowly open. “Hey big fellow,” Ama said, “almost there. You’ll be on dry, flat land soon, sure as I can whistle.” She pursed her lips and blew, making a wet, *whooshing* noise. “Maybe that was a bad example.”

A weak smile came to his lips.

Wrapping part of the blanket around his head, she rubbed his shoulder, stood up, and prepared to leave. Then he spoke.

“Hhhnk oouugh.”

“Manatu?” she asked, but his eyes had closed and he was asleep. Had he spoken or was she hearing things? There had definitely been a noise. She was sure of it.

Puzzled, Ama set about putting back in place anything the squall had knocked loose. *I'm just tired. I'm imagining things*, she thought. But she had doubts. Now that the skies were clear and the sea was calm, she extended both the skins. Finally, she coiled up the last bit of loose rope and returned to the helm, where she took Seg's place.

“We'll be at the mouth of the Gwai River in less than an hour, and in Alisir shortly after that, I expect. You might as well get some rest. Your friend is asleep and...” *I heard him speak*, “...he's fine, just fine. Thanks for your help.”

She was tired and confused and babbling. This had been a strange crossing.

Having surreptitiously popped a stim tab, for energy, while Ama was busy, Seg felt lively. He would pay for the chemical assistance later, with a period of sleepless shakes, but for now he was bright and alert.

He wondered how she would react to the Storm of home. The Storm was the only remaining item of deification left to his people, and it was a monster, flesh-stripping howling madness that plunged the World into darkness. None ventured into the Storm and survived, at least not without protective Storm-cells, but he had always had that urge. He wanted to face the darkness, to challenge and master it.

Much as he had mastered this. He was feeling ten feet tall and invincible, and for that matter powerfully aroused. He turned to stare at her, casually stepping back from the wheel, sensing her weariness. Her scent was that of strong exertion, overlaid with a rinse of salt tang, her hair tousled and crusting with brine. She was a mess, but that was exactly what appealed to him. He sensed a need from her, too; there was something lurking underneath the strength and determination.

Enough idle fantasy. He shook his head. There was work to be done, and no room for distractions. And yet he brought his hands together and forward, in a low clap, then nodded at her and sauntered away.

For such an old soul, in that moment, he felt so very young.



Ama had not visited the Alisir docks this season and had forgotten how busy and animated they were. As they approached port, she ran up the yellow flag with the red stripe, to alert the Port Captain of her need for a slip, as well as to indicate the size of her vessel. When they had finally gotten close enough to make out individuals, it took her a good five minutes to spot the runner on shore, as he was lost in a sea of bodies, cargo, livestock and vendors. At last she picked out the small, stringy Welf, who waved an identical flag to hers, frantically attempting to get her attention. He ran down the crowded dock and guided the *Naida* to an empty slip, where a crowd of dockhands waited.

Manatu had perked up noticeably once their journey had made the transition from the Big Water to the flat calm of the wide river, though he was seriously dehydrated and physically wrung out. From her position at the helm, she had watched Seg talking to him and wondered what he was saying. From the way the big man sluffed off the blankets she had given him, and struggled to sit upright, she imagined it was some kind of hard-assed pep talk.

Right at this moment, she sympathized with Manatu. The squall had drained her and she had taken no more than one brief break since it had passed. She still had to collect some supplies before sunset, make sure they were properly registered with the Port Captain, pay the heaps of fees charged by the local governing bodies, and prepare dinner for her passengers before she could pour herself a mug of praafa wine and collapse into her hammock.

Safely secured in the slip, Ama hopped down to the dock, double-checked the lines the dockhands had tied, (which were never done as well as she liked), and helped position a moveable set of stairs for her passengers.

Every now and then she glanced up at Seg, who was drinking in the scene at the docks as if he had just been freed from a life in prison.

“Can I trouble you to run my creds to the Port Captain and sign on my behalf?” she asked the runner, an aimable old Welf who went by the name of Jibri. “Quarter coin,” she added, though she guessed Jibri might do it for free. “Half coin if you can send someone to help me with provisions.”

Jibri fell into paroxysms of delight as she handed him the leather folder with the *Naida's* legal documents in it. “Fast as I can run, yup!” he answered, showering her with a series of symbolic hand gestures before tearing off down the docks. *Maybe I'll toss him another half coin if he can find someone to cook for me as well.*

“Soon as the runner returns, I'll fetch us fresh provisions for dinner,” she told Seg, as she dashed up the stairs and back on deck. “In the meantime, you and your friend are free to do as you like.”

He seemed anxious to get on shore; Ama couldn't wait to see it.

“And please let me know if you require anything else of me,” she added, sincerely hoping, through the fog of her exhaustion, that he did not.

“Finish taking care of the boat,” he said, “and then get rested. Manatu and I will take our refreshment in town.” He turned to Manatu, “Come on you, we've got work to do.”

Manatu, pale and visibly miserable, followed along.

When he stepped onto the solid pier, Seg staggered sideways and nearly wiped out in spectacular fashion before he grasped a post and hung on the brink of going over into the water. Manatu, already weakened and disoriented, staggered forward a few steps and fell to his knees, shaking his head.

From the deck of the *Naida*, Ama watched Seg and Manatu making their way on land like a couple of drunks and ducked her head so they wouldn't notice her spying and smirking. Flatlanders don't realize how their bodies adapt to the constant movement on water, and how that affects their transition back to land. She could have warned them, she guessed, but then she wouldn't have had the satisfaction of watching the man who had made her so uneasy in her own galley, with his innate sense of power and entitlement, experience a bit of unsteadiness himself.

Between the comic display and his assistance during the squall, perhaps Ama could consider the score settled. The rest of the journey could proceed in peace.

Perhaps.

If only the nagging voice in her head would be quiet. She set about her chores as the voice continued to harass her.

Why are they so unused to water travel? If they really were from the south, they would have made at least one or two passages to get to the Banks.

As she locked off the skins, she caught herself gritting her teeth. And what of this odd itinerary? The Shasir'Pei Temple? A Shasir temple, yes, but one that was almost exclusively the domain of the Welf. What trade would they find there? Few of the stops on their route were of any great importance for trade. She tugged hard on the tie for the skin, knotting it more tightly than usual. Also, there was the matter of Manatu's muteness, though she now had her doubts about that. Was she making too much of this? Pulling her hammock from the stern locker, she thought of Seg. An odd man. Difficult. And yet...

Her fingers drifted over the mesh of her 'bed'. *He notices me.* That was what she couldn't understand. The agenda of men was never difficult to fathom. They wanted her body, her boat or her family name and those were the only attributes they paid attention to. But Seg, with that penetrating stare, he seemed to be only interested in the workings of her innermost self.

On first meeting Seg, she had seen an old man in a boy's body. But during the squall the mask of restraint and studious contemplation had fallen away, revealing a spirit as wild and youthful as her own. Wherever he came from, she guessed this part of Seg was not allowed to show itself, at all. She understood how that felt, too well.

Worst of all, he made her want to know more about him. In fact, he made her want things she had never considered before.

"Captain Kalder!" Jibri called her thoughts back to the business at hand. "Papers, I have them! Assistant, too, yup." The runner waved her leather folder and pointed to a tall boy, who pushed an empty, wooden cart.

Ama dropped the hammock and made her way to the dock. Both men lowered their eyes when she stepped in front of them. "You can look me in the eyes. I rarely bite." The Welf did so, smiling nervously.

"This be Tev," Jibri said, patting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "He'll take care of all you need, well and true."

She paid out the promised coin, plus a bit extra – an act of kindness to exorcise her bad thoughts and suspicions. To the boy, she gave a rough list of required provisions, as well as license to pick out a few extra treats if he thought them worth the coin.



Lord Flavert Uval pressed his lips together in a smile only his wife would fail to recognize as disingenuous, as she held up yet another bracelet for his approval. Was there no end to his wife's hunger for trinkets?

"I simply cannot decide. Let's see them all again," he heard her say, as he turned from the merchant booth and pushed his way through the crowd of walking human refuse, two of his guards and a servant on his heels.

How he hated this stinking Welf port. If Hertia's father had not graced them with the use of the summer estate at Alisir, he would be content to never set foot among this rabble again. When the old tyrant died, he had every intention of selling it off and relocating to T'ueve or Malvid.

To one side of him, he could hear a couple of Welf jabbering away at each other excitedly. Was there anything that didn't excite them? One of the dirt lickers had been given a

tip from some boat captain and you would think from his retelling of the event that he had been named Judicia instead of being tossed a meager half coin.

“Put it right in my hand, even asked my name, she did, yup!” the Welf repeated for the third time – enough to ignite the headache that had threatened Uval all afternoon.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he turned to leave. Unfortunately, the obnoxious Welf had decided to sprint off at the same moment and crashed into him, knocking Uval sideways. He turned to glare at the man who had been so negligent. The Welf bowed repeatedly and apologized, raising a palm skyward as he begged forgiveness. “So sorry, my Lord. My fault, all my fault. Wasn’t watching my step. So sorry.”

Uval scowled. Greedy, nattering vermin. “Clear my sight,” he ordered, waving his hand impatiently.

The Welf nodded two or three times then backed away.

“Wait!” Uval said, stopping the man in his tracks. Could it be? In his annoyance, he had almost missed an important detail of the dirt licker’s otherwise inane story. The *she*.

“My Lord?” the Welf cowered, obviously expecting a thrashing.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your good news. Which Captain gave you the extra coin?”

“Captain Kalder,” he answered, tightening the hand that held his payment.

Uval smothered a grin. “Really? My dear acquaintance, Captain Ama Kalder, here in Alisir? And where would she be, pray tell?”

Relieved to escape a beating, the Welf pointed, “Down there, next to the scrap hauler. Just got into port.”

Next to the scrap hauler. *How appropriate.*

“And does Captain Kalder have passengers?” Uval asked, feigning a benign interest he most certainly did not feel.

“Two,” the Welf, answered. Uval couldn’t help a slight frown. Passengers would complicate matters. “Fine Damiar gentlemen, such as yourself. But they both got off, gone now, yup. She’s all alone if you wants to visit her.”

Of course they had left, probably at a run. The men had obviously been in some desperate straights to travel so far on that wreck of a boat to begin with, but no Damiar would lower himself to actually sleep on the thing while in port. Even a dirt pile such as Alisir had lodgings vastly more suitable for men of his class. Which meant they would be gone at least until sunrise. Good.

“Oh, I do want to visit her, and thank you so much for your kind assistance...” Uval gestured for the Welf to supply a name.

“Jibri, I be, my Lord. Jibri Bel.”

“My thanks to you, Jibri.” Uval reached a gloved hand into his breast pocket, pulled out a half coin and held it out toward the Welf. “But don’t tell anyone, if you please. I would prefer to surprise her.”

“Swear to the Sky Fathers, not a word to no one, no, no!”

Uval grinned as he dropped the coin into the man’s outstretched palm. Parting with the coin didn’t bother him; he would send one of his men behind the Welf, to slit his throat at the first opportunity. Silence is priceless.

The Welf bowed and thanked and blessed his way away from Uval, who was already whispering instructions in the ear of his guard.

He wound his way through the bodies, to the railing overlooking the pier. There it was, that claptrap of a boat, on which the water rat had threatened him. Him. A Damiar Lord. And with a weapon no less.

What good fortune. What lovely happenstance. He still couldn't believe his luck, to have the Kenda whore right here in Alisir.

Uval stood next to a piling, licking his lips. He would have to keep Hertia from spotting the slut she had found so 'charming'. He couldn't very well slit *her* throat, now could he?

Ama. *Captain* Ama...lest he forget. All alone. Yes, the self-righteous bitch was alone, but not for long.