

## **EXCERPT FROM 'SAVING PALUDIS'**

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Pas-Elno stared with dark green eyes at the walls of the human's office. The emphasis of the decor puzzled him. There appeared to be no ancestral records of any kind, and certainly there were no religious artefacts. Instead, the walls were covered with numbers and lines, with occasional colour photographs of bizarre alien animals. There were also a few strangely-shaped solid objects on one wall, which had resisted his probing fingers when he had tried to move them.

They had brought him straight to Kentucky, a day's journey by express hovercar along West Paludis's wide, flat roads. It was the fastest he had ever travelled, and he had sat in wondrous silence as the scenery flashed by. Rolling green hills, large shiny buildings, other road users – especially the large transporters – cane-grass plantations, expanses of inland water with white edges, weird animals in fields surrounded by high wire fences: all caught his imagination as the journey progressed.

Pas-Elno recollected his recent meeting with the Muskan grand elders. He had given them a difficult choice – either he would never cease trying to escape the peninsula in a quest to find his father, or they could arrange his official transfer to the human agent, Lattanzis. There had been a third alternative, of course, that being to imprison him indefinitely beneath the temple, but that particular course of action would have been untenable to the Muskan populace. His mother, Brel-Elno, had suffered enough as it was.

With a promise to regularly communicate, and to return within a Muskan year, Pas-Elno had thus departed the peninsula for the first time in his life. Brel-Elno, like many mothers of the universe before her, had been left by her males to fend for herself.

However, there had been pride in her face when she had bidden her son farewell, showing as a spasmodic flaring of the nasal cavities as they touched lips. Hundreds of Muskans had stood around them, observing in silence as Pas-Elno walked through the portal into the barrier wall. Brel-Elno had stood to face her brethren and raised her arms to the sky, feeling their strength enter her body. She was soon to be a Muskan of some stature.

The humans had given Pas-Elno a blue robe to hide his alien body. He wore it with some reluctance, for he had not yet the audacity nor cynicism of his father. Underneath he still wore his loincloth but, having left his ancestral staff with his mother, he still felt somewhat naked.

The door suddenly buzzed open and Stefan Lattanzis entered the room, all arms and legs, like a human tornado. Pas-Elno leapt to his feet and offered his hand in the human tradition. Stefan smiled briefly and shook it. The door slid shut behind him and they both sat down.

"How in the hell did you manage this?" The agent's voice, despite the words, was not angry.

Pas-Elno stared at him in apparent disbelief. "If your father was missing would you

not wish to find him?”

Stefan sighed. “You realize that you can’t just walk freely among us. You’d be abused, beaten up, perhaps worse. Not by all, you understand, but by a small minority.”

“I see that as a human defect.” Pas-Elno looked defiant. “*You* do not wish to harm me.” It was a statement, not a question.

Stefan smiled and shook his head. “How do you think you can help me?”

“I know the Muskan ways, what my people do in certain circumstances. If you show me where my father was, the people he was with ...”

Stefan nodded. “The university. I’ll take you to Tanberg. You’ll be away from the main population there, and,” he added unnecessarily, “they’re familiar with your kind.”

“That is good,” Pas-Elno responded. “There is one favour I would ask you now.” Lattanzis raised his eyebrows. “I wish to have some human clothes. I am not happy in the robe, and I cannot wear the normal Muskan garb among you. Is it possible?”

Stefan held up his hands. “That would make some people angry. They would not want a Muskan native masquerading as a human.” He saw the look of disgust shade Pas-Elno’s face. “Maybe we can come up with a compromise. Short cloak and trousers, perhaps. Leave it to me.”

Silence enveloped the room, then Pas-Elno asked, “When can I go to the university?”

“No time like the present,” Stefan replied. “Let me make a call.”