**Riser’s Revenge**

**Glenn Jackson**

By Glenn Jackson

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**Glenn Jackson**

**Riser’s Revenge**

A Novel

*Riser’s Revenge,* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Glenn Jackson

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**Dedication**

To my lovely wife, Kristina, whose support, love, and passion

give me the greatest joy a man could ever hope to find.

**Riser’s Revenge**

Chapter 1

Echoes

214.016.14

As it had always been, it was on this day. Getting in to see a head of state or even the leader of a town was difficult. In one way, this maintained the illusion of the uniqueness and separateness of the leader in question. It also created a class of people who held sway, as they controlled who could or could not see the leader quickly.

Such was the case with the Imperial Government. However, when you were a powerful and important figure, such as the Fleet Admiral of the Imperial Star Fleet, you tended to get straight in. Or the Lord Chancellor. Or the Lord Chamberlain. But having all three approach the emperor together, well, that meant immediate access.

On this morning that occurred. The aide holding control of who would see the emperor tapped on the door and entered into his presence, saying, “Your Majesty, Fleet Admiral Yugoravich, the Lord Chancellor, and Lord Chamberlain are here to see you.”

Emperor Deltron II looked up from his desk, and said, “Very well, send them in.”

The three high ranking individuals entered the private office of the emperor and walked to stand in front of his desk. Fleet Admiral Yugoravich stood at attention and saluted smartly, saying, “Your Majesty, we come with an urgent request.”

Emperor Deltron II did a quick, but very poor imitation of the salute he had been given, and said, “Very well. Please take your seats. Now, tell me, what brings you three together to see me this afternoon?”

The Chancellor, Lord Neilson, began. “Your Majesty, our concern is the state of affairs on the planet Hayku.”

“Hayku? I’ve never heard of it.”

“No, you wouldn’t, Your Majesty. Hayku is an insignificant planet in a star system close to the end of a spiral arm.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

The Lord Chamberlain, Lord Fong, said, “Your Majesty, the planet does not comply with any orders of notice we send.”

Lord Neilson added, “They refuse to pay their dues to the Imperial Bank.”

Admiral Yugoyavich said, “And, Your Majesty, they have effectively refused to allow Star Fleet to visit for required inspections. We feel they are going rogue.”

“Do all three of you believe this to be the case?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, we do.”

Lord Fong added, “And if a planet can refuse paying their dues without repercussions, others will follow, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, yes. Alright, I’ll see what I can about this before we must use force. Let me think a moment.”

The emperor thought about it for a while, then had an idea. He would see what his friend the Imperial Ambassador thought about it.

“I think I’ll see what the Imperial Ambassador thinks of this situation. All of you, be prepared for his visit, as he may want your background information. Is that all?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” They all rose, the Admiral saluted, and they departed.

Emperor Deltron II sat at his desk for a few minutes, then called his aide and had him schedule the Imperial Ambassador for a meeting. Of all the reasons for those three to come see him, the only business was a single planet far away. Oh well, he knew he couldn’t not act.

Chapter 2

Imperial Ambassador

214.018.10

Ambassador Jacobsen arrived early for his meeting with the emperor. It was very seldom he received this type of unexpected invite, and he was very curious to find out what could be so urgent. He usually saw the emperor officially at their bi-monthly meetings, and occasionally at state dinners and such, but at nine-thirty this morning he was in the waiting room, pending the meeting.

At precisely nine fifty-eight, an aide came out to get him and escorted him back to the emperor’s office. He knocked and opened the door, allowing the Ambassador to enter, saying, “Your Majesty, Imperial Ambassador Jacobsen.”

He continued into the office and the emperor rose from his chair and came around the desk to shake his hand. “Thomas, it’s so good to see you. How are you? How’s Lorraine?”

He said, “We are both wonderful, Your Majesty. And I must say, you and Empress Lily looked marvelous last night at the reception.”

The emperor smiled, saying, “Thank you, old friend. Would you like a cup of mestava?”

“Yes, please.”

He ordered their drinks and after they arrived, he said, “Please let’s sit.”

Once they were seated, he said, “I called you because of an apparent situation on a planet at the end of a spiral arm, the planet Hayku. Admiral Yugoyavich, Byron, and Fong all stopped by two days ago, together, no doubt, expressing their belief that this Hayku is going rogue. Apparently, they have refused Star Fleet efforts to inspect and have stopped paying their dues.”

“Really?”

He chuckled, and said, “Yes, really.”

“Goodness, Your Majesty, I haven’t heard of a planet taking that route for years and years. What must they be thinking?”

“That’s exactly what I thought, which is why I summoned you. I know there is no one who can either find the concern or find a solution better than you. It’s one of the main reasons I appointed you as Imperial Ambassador.”

“Thank you.”

“No, I mean it. Ever since we were kids and through university together, you have always been the one who saw the problem and discovered the solution. I am confident that you can solve this, so we don’t have to use force, even though that is always an option.”

“I certainly hope so. It would be a shame to have to revert back to the ways of Emperor Alexander I. While he dealt with a few critical planetary issues, it did hurt the Empire for a time.”

“Yes, I agree. However, we cannot allow a planet to not pay dues or be inspected. If others see someone can do that and have no consequences, well, we could have a rebellion on our hands, and I don’t want to be the emperor known for failing to keep order.”

“I understand, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, of that I am certain. Thomas, why don’t you bring Lorraine for dinner before you set out on your journey. I know Lily would love to see both of you.”

“We would be honored, Your Majesty.”

“Very well, I will have my aide put a date together and let you know. See you soon.”

He bowed, saying, “Your Majesty,” as he left the room.

Chapter 3

Joy

214.022.21

Ambassador Jacobsen had spent four days and countless hours in the Imperial Library, looking for any and all things related to the Hayku. To his surprise, there wasn’t very much. He had also ventured into Star Fleet’s files, including the restricted files, yet still, not much to go on. He had much better luck in his own Imperial Ambassador’s Office private files.

He discovered that the Hayku were made up of men. Their women and children lived on a separate planet, Tharzite. Their history was also quite interesting, as they were descended from a group of immigrants from old Earth about the time the Empire was founded.

Upon further digging, he discovered buried in the eyes-only section of the Imperial Ambassador’s files, a report that clearly caused him to sit down and re-read it. ‘So,’ he thought, ‘That explains a lot.’

A week later he and his wife joined the Emperor and Empress for dinner. They arrived at seventeen, expecting to be taken to a large state dinner, a table with numerous guests. He understood the need, as there were so many people for the emperor to visit with, and so little time on the calendar.

But instead, and much to their surprise, the aide who met them took them back deep into the palace to their private apartments. He opened the door, and said, “Your Majesty’s, the Imperial Ambassador and Lady Jacobsen.”

“Come in, come in. Surprised?”

Lorraine curtsied and Thomas bowed, then they hugged both Antonio and Lily.

“Yes, this is certainly a surprise. I fully expected a night at a dinner party, not a private meal.”

Lily said, “Yes, and that is what you would have gotten until I heard about it. No, our two dearest friends, we just wanted a quiet time so we could catch up.”

Lorraine added, “Thank you, Lily. I’m so glad you did. You know that we know the correct protocol to be around the Emperor and Empress, and we both deeply respect both of you, but it is nice just to relax and enjoy each other’s company as friends.”

Lily turned to Antonio, and said, “You, see? I told you this was the better idea.”

He smiled, saying, “Yes, dear. Now, would anyone like a drink?”

They made their way into the lounge to visit for a while, until the chef informed them that dinner was served. The meal was exquisite, accompanied by a divine Cabernet. It was a wonderful evening of laughter, talking about their children and grandchildren, and memories of their youth and college days.

Eventually, Antonio said, “Lily, why don’t you show Lorraine that new masterpiece you had installed in our private museum?”

Lily said, “I think that is his way of saying they need to do some man talk.”

They all chuckled, and she kissed him, as did Lorraine with Thomas, then the ladies retired to other conversation.

“So, what have you learned about the Hayku situation? The three protagonists are constantly asking me for an update.”

“Yes. Well, it seems that these Hayku are descended from the Servants of Riser.”

“Who is that?”

“The Servants of Riser were at first thought to be a small insignificant group of radicals on Old Earth. This goes all the way back to the days of Jeffrey Wilson.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I was surprised by that as well. Anyway, they tried to sabotage and prevent his first major project, the pods that left Earth traveling at sub-lightspeed to other stars. They believed this was an act that defied God. But their plot was discovered, they were either killed or killed themselves, and nothing was ever heard of them again. But it seems they did survive by out migrating.”

“My goodness. So, these people have hated for how long, a few hundred years?”

“It seems that way.”

“When are you going out to see them?”

“I leave tomorrow, should be there by three five.”

“Alright, but take some marines with you. The last thing I need is something happening to you.”

Thomas laughed, and said, “Well, that makes two of us!”

After their conversation they rounded up their wives and Thomas and Lorraine departed. The next morning, he boarded a shuttle to the Imperial Star Ship (ISS) Escartas, a troop ship, and his transport to and from Hayku.

Chapter 4

Revenge

214.030.18

The power watched events unfold from afar, not wanting to interfere. This was a key moment in his plan, and he couldn’t let the watchers know of his involvement. At least, not yet. But if all went as he hoped, this act would bring his people to a level of anger and hatred so deep, that they would one day be able to carry out his greatest project, the destruction of this Empire.

He smiled to himself, ‘Yes,’ he thought, ‘I will let them destroy you, my faithful servants, so one day you will be ready to destroy them.’

Far away, Mudu and Dhakini watched the power closely.

“I wonder what he is up to?”

Mudu replied, “I am not sure, but it’s surely not good.”

“He is sitting there not doing anything, not watching anything; that in itself is very unusual for him.”

“Yes. I think he thinks that if he is not doing anything we will not see what he is doing.”

“Do you still think it has to do with the Empire defeating the Kaldect from Andromeda?”

“I’m not sure. And, to top it off, our Lord has not called us to act, so we have no true knowledge.”

“Yes. So, we do what he is doing. We wait.”

“Yes, but we watch. He is up to something.”

They cast their sight in many directions, looked for places where it appeared he was active, but they saw nothing. It appeared that he was not involved in anything at the time. But they both knew better than that.

Chapter 5

Hayku

214.035.14

The ISS Escartas arrived in orbit over Hayku in the evening of zero three four. The next day, the Imperial Ambassador took a shuttle down to the planet, going to their main government building. He had informed the baron that he was on a mission to Hayku on Meladeran before he left, and hoped to meet with some higher ranking Hayku to have a conversation.

Since he had informed the baron of the trip, he assumed there would be someone to greet him. However, when he arrived at the government building, he was not met by anyone, so went inside to find the receptionist, who rudely said, “No one is available to see you.”

He said, “Surely your baron notified someone that the Imperial Ambassador would be arriving?”

“Let me check.” He left the desk and went into another room. Soon, he returned, saying, “Yes, there is someone who will meet with you. Come this way.”

He led him down a long hall inside the building that led to an inner compound. At the door to enter the compound, the receptionist said, “Knock, and someone will be with you.” He left.

He knocked, and waited. After some time, the door opened, and he was led into a dim room. There were about fifty men standing around in the room, with one old man sitting on a chair on what looked like a small stage.

He walked into the room to stand in front of the old man, and said, “Good afternoon! I am Imperial Ambassador Jacobsen, sent here by Emperor Deltron II to discuss your relationship with the Empire.”

“I know who you are. I know why you’re here.”

“Excellent, then we can cut to the chase.”

“Yes, the chase. Here’s the answer to your unasked questions. No, we will not allow your Star Fleet to inspect our planetary defenses.” He stood, saying, “No, we will not pay taxes to your Empire.”

Thomas was taken aback at this sudden hostility. He said, “But it is the Empire, not mine, and Star Fleet is the Imperial Star Fleet tasked with the responsibility to inspect individual planet’s defensive systems, to make sure they are sufficient.”

He paused for a moment, and added, “Forgive me if I misunderstood something. You see, my job is to gain an understanding of the situation and help facilitate a solution. But I think I have completely misunderstood you and your people. I did not expect hostility. What am I missing, sir?”

The old man smiled, but walked down to stand right in front of him. “You are missing our history. You are missing the anger we have held inside for generations at the way we are treated.”

“What is your history? I have no knowledge of this.”

“Our history is one of being crushed by an Imperial attitude that destroys our lives.”

“I don’t understand.”

The old man turned around and walked back to his chair, and sitting down, said, “I need not speak to you, nor hear any more from you. Leave me, and do not return.”

“But we haven’t even discussed any ideas to find any potential solutions to help you and the Empire work together.”

“And we won’t. Trilstad, remove this person from my presence.”

Six crimson robed men approached and grabbed his arms and escorted him out of the compound. As they shoved him outside, Trilstad said, “Remember, don’t come back.”

Thomas was shocked at this treatment. Never in the fourteen years he had been the Imperial Ambassador had he been treated in such a way, and by way of him, the emperor himself! He found his shuttle and departed.

He returned to the ship and found Captain Fitzgerald.

“Captain, do you have any marines on planet?”

“Yes, Sir. We have a small detachment of fifty in a barracks in their capital city.”

“May I borrow a few of them to escort me back to see the old man?”

“You need marines?”

“Yes. It seems he doesn’t want to talk with me and literally threw me out of his chambers, but I have a need to speak with him in order to try and prevent a military operation here.”

“How many do you think you’ll need, maybe five, or do you want more?”

“No, I think that five will be sufficient. I don’t want to push him too hard, but he must understand he cannot refuse to negotiate with the Empire.”

“Do you think we should put the detachment on alert?”

“Oh, no, I am certain that too many marines would raise his anger. I see no other reason for your marines to be prepared. I only want these few, so he doesn’t throw me out before I have a chance to speak what needs to be spoken.”

“Very well, I will have someone escort you to the barracks, and will also have a small away team ready.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

He returned to the government building and through it to the compound where the old man was located. This time, when he knocked on the door, he had five fully armed marines with him. Trilstad, the one who had thrown him out, opened the door.

“Yes?”

“I have returned and need to speak with your leader.”

“You were told not to come back.”

“Yes, but my work is not finished.”

He shook his head, and said, “Very well.”

He walked into the room, with the marines behind him. He approached the old man, still sitting in the chair.

“I thought I told you to leave.”

“Yes, you did. However, we need to complete our business before I can depart. I am on a mission to help find a solution to this impasse, and cannot leave until we at least try.”

“And you bring marines? What type of negotiations do you plan to use, force?”

“No, of course not. But the last time we spoke, you physically threw me out, and I decided to make sure you wouldn’t do that this time.”

The old man smiled. “You are right, I apologize. I was rash and acting poorly. I should not have thrown you out.”

Thomas and the marines relaxed, sensing a change in mood.

The old man made a small hand signal, one that signaled action, and suddenly, from the balconies that were above and around the room, weapons fired, killing the Ambassador and marines.

The old man said, “No, I should not have thrown you out. I should have killed you the first time.” He paused, then said, “Did the other assault go as planned?”

“Yes, Master. All the marines are dead.”

“Good. Take the bodies away, but take their weapons. Burn and bury the bodies. Oh, and send a message to their ship that all are dead, which is what will happen to anyone else who steps foot on our planet.”

He looked around the room. “Prepare yourselves for a fight. They will send more.”

Captain Fitzgerald, Commander of the troop ship ISS Escartas, saw the massacre of the marines in the barracks occur. They were in their barracks, relaxed, preparing for the evening meal. There were quite a few cleaners and repairmen in the barracks at the time, and on queue, they all pulled weapons and executed the marines, forty-five of them! He was shocked, but knew he couldn’t immediately respond.

At the same time, he received a message from the Hayku stating that they had executed the Imperial Ambassador and five marines with him. He sent an urgent flash notice to Star Fleet.

Chapter 6

Anger & Pain

214.035.18

“Colonel, a flash message from the Escartas.”

“On screen. This is Colonel Standich, Watch Officer, third shift, Star Fleet Command, who am I speaking with?”

“Captain Fitzgerald, sir, ISS Escartas, on a peaceful mission to Hayku with the Imperial Ambassador.”

“So, Captain, what is so urgent?”

“Sir, it appears the Hayku have taken drastic and unexpected action against the Empire. We received word that they have executed the Ambassador, and the five marines that were his escort. I observed, in real-time, the execution of the remaining forty-five marines who were in their barracks preparing for their evening meal.”

“What?”

“Yes, sir, it was a complete surprise. We had no operational intelligence that this would occur. I had spoken with the Imperial Ambassador this afternoon myself, and he gave no indication that this type of action could be expected.”

“What action have you taken?”

“The remaining marines, nearly three thousand, are onboard the ship on full alert.”

“Good. Depart low orbit and settle far enough away that their surface weapons cannot harm you. Notify any other fleet assets to do likewise. I will get back to you.”

The colonel notified Lieutenant Doltrove, Fleet Admiral Jacobsen’s aide, of the information, to be passed to him immediately.

The admiral was attending a state dinner in honor of the magnificent work of the Imperial Library, in providing resources across the galaxy for education and research. Admiral Jacobsen was seated only five chairs to the left of Emperor Deltron II.

His aide entered the magnificent room and made his way to stand directly behind the admiral, then bent over to whisper in his ear and hand him a note. You could see the admiral’s face harden as he read the message, but then he eased backwards, and stood, giving a curt nod to the emperor, who was watching, and then departed briskly.

As he entered the Command Center, his presence was announced. “Fleet Admiral on the bridge!”

He walked up to Colonel Doltrove, and said, “What’s happened?”

The Colonel said, “Apparently the Hayku have gone rogue, Sir. They took some dramatic and harsh steps today.”

“Who’s in charge out there?”

“Captain Fitzgerald, Commander of the ISS Escartas, a Marine Expeditionary Force troop ship, sir.”

“Bring up Captain Fitzgerald on screen.”

“Aye, sir.”

A short moment later, on screen, was the captain. “Captain Fitzgerald here.”

“Captain, Admiral Jacobsen, report.”

The captain provided him with all the information he had available.

“Damn. Thank you, Captain.” The screen went blank.

Turning to the Colonel, he said, “Okay, who is available to deploy? Marines first.”

“Sir, the current go teams are the 793rd, 26th, 47th, 12th and 96th Marine Expeditionary Forces. Others are available with a week’s notice.”

“Very well, send all of them to Hayku.”

“Yes, sir. They can all be on Hayku in two weeks.”

“Very well, which fleet is prepared and close?”

“Sir, the 19th and the 10th Fleets are equally close and prepared.”

“Very well, send them too. Current operational orders, all ships to meet at a point away from Hayku until further notice, but within a day’s strike.”

“Yes, sir.”

Admiral Jacobsen knew the emperor would both want to know this news immediately, and would be devastated by it. Still, he had no choice.

He said to Colonel Doltrove, “Have twenty marines join me in notifying the emperor.”

“Yes, sir.”

As he made his way back to the dinner, he was joined by the marines. Once they arrived, he said, “Secure this hallway, no one in or out.”

Then he made his way back into the state dinner and walked over to the emperor’s chair, and leaned in and whispered in his ear.

He said, “Your Majesty, an event of a consequential magnitude has occurred that requires your immediate attention.”

The emperor immediately stood to depart, catching everyone unawares. He said, “Please, remain seated and continue the meal.” He then turned and departed the room.

Once outside in the hallway, he first noticed the marines guarding them, and said, “Now what is so urgent, admiral?”

Looking around and making sure no one could hear them, he said, quietly, “Your Majesty, the Hayku have executed the Imperial Ambassador and fifty marines on their planet.”

“What?”

“Yes, I was as shocked as you.”

“Damn them to hell! What happened?”

The admiral provided a full briefing, including the steps he had taken to send forces close by.

The emperor was furious. He stood staring into space for a moment, then said, “Very well, admiral. Provide me with your battle plan first thing in the morning. I want that planet tamed.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The emperor returned to the dining room, but this time, all could tell a change in his demeanor. He said, “As much joy as we have had this evening, I am afraid it must end. I need my lovely wife to accompany me on an urgent task. The dinner is concluded.” He held out his hand and Lily rose and accompanied him out of the room.

As they entered their private rooms and were alone, she said, “Okay, dear. What’s going on?”

He looked into her eyes, and said, “Thomas is dead.” He started to cry, and she pulled him to her and held him, while they both cried.

After some time, she said, “We have to tell Lorraine.”

“I know.”

“She is staying in the Wilson Villa. We had planned to spend the day together tomorrow.”

“I know. Come, we should let her know. You might want to plan on spending the night with her.”

They walked through the palace until they finally came to a small, thirty-bedroom villa, located in the Imperial Gardens. They made their way to the door and knocked. A servant opened the door and bowed deeply as they entered. They waited in the living area while Lorraine was summoned. She entered the room and was surprised to see them, but she saw, instantly, that something was wrong. “What’s happened?”

Lily said, “Thomas has been killed on Hayku.”

“NOOOO!!!!”

They walked over to her and held her in their arms while she cried and cried. Eventually the emperor returned to their residence, but Lily did stay the night.

Chapter 7

Goal

214.036.08

The emperor got up very early in the morning from a fitful night’s sleep, and ordered his guard to fetch Baron Harold of Hayku. He went to the Great Hall and sat upon his throne and waited. He had no idea what he would say, but he was certain it would be harsh. It wasn’t long before the baron was led in to see him.

“Your Majesty, what is the meaning of this? I am fetched like a dog on a leash?”

The emperor said, “Explain the actions of your people yesterday.”

“What do you mean?”

“Explain to me why your people, on your planet, which is your responsibility, killed my Imperial Ambassador?”

“Your Majesty, this is the first…”

“Not true. You received a flash call last night regarding the actions of your council. Now you choose to lie?”

He realized the uselessness of playing innocent. “Well, it looks like someone with balls finally stood up to the empire.”

“You are not smart, you know. Take him to solitary and hold him, alive, until I have a chance to think about what to do with him.” Looking at him, he said, “My first thought is to skin you alive, and then put your fingers and toes, one by one, in bubbling oil, slowly, but alas, I’m sure we can come up with something better.”

The guards took him away. The emperor was still furious. He went to his office and found Admiral Jacobsen waiting for him.

“Your Majesty.”

“Come in.” To his secretary, “Cancel all appointments for today.”

Once they were in the office seated, he said, “What’s the plan?”

“Your Majesty, we intend to launch a full-scale attack on their planetary defenses, knocking them out. Next, we will land two full Marine Expeditionary Forces, approximately sixty thousand men, and occupy their capital city. In addition, we will land three more forces at strategic locations around the planet.”

“The goal is to destroy any military weapons, capture the ones who ordered and carried out the execution, and subjugate the people on the planet. We will force them all to live within their cities. Then we plan to use the entire planet as a place for war games, to always have a vast number of forces there, demonstrating our capability.”

The emperor said, “Very good. But you make damn sure the one who ordered this is found, bound, and brought to me, alive. Understand?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 8

Star Fleet

214.042.09

Admiral Jacobsen walked from his private office to the meeting room next to it. On screen were the two admirals and five generals commanding the units responding to the situation on Hayku.

He began. “Good morning. I am certain you are wondering exactly why you were given flash instructions to move all your forces to Hayku, a minor planet far from any center of activity in the galaxy.”

“Well, the answer is simple. A week ago, on two one four point zero three five, the inhabitants of Hayku executed the Imperial Ambassador and fifty marines.”

He watched their facial expressions change.

“That action alone infuriated me. But on top of that, the Ambassador was a life-long friend to the emperor. He and his wife, as well as the Ambassador and his wife, have been friends since childhood. To say the emperor is angry vastly understates his feeling. But be assured, he is not just angry at the fact his friend, the Imperial Ambassador was killed, he is furious that someone would execute fifty marines without cause.”

“He understands, as we all do, that when fighting, there is a chance someone will die. But to be executed while preparing to eat a meal by people who are supposedly trusted; it defies anything I’ve ever heard. I am certain, looking at your faces, that you share the emperor’s anger and mine, and will make sure our forces know who we are dealing with.”

“There are no women and children on Hayku. They are kept on a separate planet. Hayku is only for men of fighting age, so it is a warrior planet. So, when you are building your rules of engagement, remember that. I would rather blow up a building than send marines inside to clear it, and I’m certain that the enemy would recognize our methods and anger and begin to comply expeditiously with that type of force. Use what you need.”

“In the words of the emperor, he wants that planet, “tamed.” He wants them to be fully subjugated to the empire. We will move everyone into their cities and establish huge areas for weapons training, war games, and any other activity that clearly demonstrates our superiority. We will build a fort for two full Marine Expeditionary Forces to remain in place at all times.”

“Now, this is going to be a complex operation. I expect we begin the attack in the very early hours on Hayku, taking advantage of darkness as our fleet destroys any and all surface weapons that could be used to attack our ships or our landing marines. We plan on landing a full Marine Expeditionary Force north of their capital, and one south of their capital, with the other three landed at three strategic locations around the planet.”

“As to the timing, details, etc., I leave it to you. Admiral Sophia Rangsnar, you are the ranking commander, and as such you are tasked with establishing and leading a joint operational command, and working with the other commanders to finalize a solid plan. I want to see it two days before you arrive at Hayku.”

He paused for a moment, then said, “This is important. We owe it to our fallen comrades to both get revenge on this enemy, and to do it in a choreographed manner that would make them proud. That is all.”

Chapter 9

Battle

214.058.01

At precisely two one four point zero five eight point zero one, fifty battleships, five hundred heavy cruisers, and three thousand light cruisers appeared overhead and fired upon all identified surface weapon systems of the Hayku. The assault was devastating. They also targeted every weapon and armament production and storage facility. The sky was lit up with weapons firing and exploding in multiple locations throughout the planet. The bombardment continued for three hours.

At precisely two one four point zero five eight point zero four, twenty-five thousand starfighters deployed to escort five fully armed Marine Expeditionary Forces to the surface and provide close air support as needed. No weapons were fired on the marine units as they made their way to the surface.

The marines entered each city following the same process. When they took weapons fire from a structure, they stopped and summoned a starfighter for support. The starfighter would destroy the structure with plasma weapons, and then the marines would move forward. It didn’t take too many days of this before the Hayku fighters realized they were expendable, and dropped their weapons.

On the third day, marines entered the central compound within the largest government facility, knowing this is where the Ambassador and five marines were executed. They blew the door onto the ground. As they watched the opening, just before beginning to enter the compound, they saw an old man.

He slowly approached, but stopped at the broken door, and said, “Yes?”

“Come out with your hands where we can see them.”

As he walked out of the door, marines flooded through, not knowing what they would find, but it was empty.

“I am alone here. I sent the others away. I alone am responsible for the death of your Imperial Ambassador and the marines. I alone will bear the burden of punishment.”

He was bound and gagged and transported to the Battleship ISS Triumphant, for transportation to Meladeran.

In the coming weeks, the entire planet was searched for weapons and cleared. The population was driven into the larger cities, and only those necessary for food and energy production were allowed to leave them.

Star Fleet built a fort, Fort Jacobsen, named in honor of the Imperial Ambassador, with inscriptions and name plates for all the marines killed on that fateful day. It was home to sixty thousand marines. In addition, weapons training areas, bombardment areas, and large maneuvering areas for both surface games and airborne games were built, enabling Hayku to be the premier war game location in the galaxy.

Chapter 10

Sentence

214.072.13

Emperor Deltron II sat upon his throne in the great hall and watched as Baron Harold and the old man, both fully shackled, were brought into the room. They were stopped and forced to sit until another ceremony was completed.

The emperor rose, and everyone in the hall stood. Baron Harold and the old man were lifted up, being forced to stand.

The emperor walked down to the bottom step, and said, “Ronaldo Estelphi, come forward.” Turning to his aide, he said, “My ceremonial sword.”

The aide quickly provided the sword, and the emperor said, “Kneel. I dub the Baron Ronaldo Estelphi of Hayku. Rise.”

He handed the sword to his aide, and said, “Baron, you are charged with maintaining order on Hayku. Until these people learn that you do not kill emissaries, hold your foot on their throat. Your expenses will be covered by the Imperial Crown.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” He turned and walked to his seat, looking at and sneering at his sworn enemy, the Hayku, in shackles.

The emperor returned to his seat. There, he said, “Bring forward the prisoners for judgement.”

The baron and old man were brought to the base of the steps. Neither bowed.

“Any last words in your defense?”

They stood there, staring at him defiantly. But neither said a word.

“Very well, you are both sentenced to life on the Imperial Prison Planet Dornathion. There, you will live or die depending on your own wits. No medical support, food support, nothing. It is whatever you find to survive. Take them away.”

Once the prisoners had departed, the emperor turned to an aide, and said, “Now, please inform Empress Lily we are ready.”

It only took a few minutes, but soon the Empress entered with Lady Jacobsen at her side. The emperor stood, as did everyone else in the hall. As they approached the base of the stairs, the emperor walked down the stairs, where they had stopped, waiting.

The emperor turned to his aide, and said, “My ceremonial sword.”

Once he had it, he said the Lorraine, “Please kneel.”

She knelt, not knowing what was happening.

He said, “I dub the Grand Duchess Lorraine Jacobsen of the Inner Realm. You may rise.”

When she stood, he leaned in and whispered, “I was going to give you and Thomas this honor before I stepped down, but it is only fitting you should carry it now for both of you.”

She cried again, and Empress Lily held her. After a moment, the emperor returned to his throne, and the Empress led the Grand Duchess from the hall.

Chapter 11

Interlude

405.072.13

Many things occurred in the years between these events on Hayku and the present. Most were truly not things anyone would really notice, just small steps, small changes taken over time. However, they, along with other changes in the Empire, eventually had a tremendous impact. As a slow dripping faucet can flood a basement, small things can have a tremendous impact over time.

In the year two two zero, Emperor Deltron II was replaced with Empress Alexandra II.

In the year two two five, ten years after the incident on Hayku, Star Fleet determined that there had not been any incidents, and with the concurrence of the new Empress, closed the fort and terminated using Hayku as a war games planet. They also ended the blockade.

In the year two four zero, Emperor Barnabas I took the throne.

In the year two four two, a native of Hayku was finally made baron.

In the year two five three, all seemed normal and all files about the incident on Hayku were placed into the Star Fleet archived restricted area files.

In the year two six zero, Emperor Gunther took the throne.

In the year two eight zero, Emperor Alexander II took the throne.

In the year three zero zero, Empress Felicia II took the throne.

In the year three two zero, Emperor Leon I took the throne.

In the year three four zero, Empress Alexandra III took the throne. During her reign the first uprising since the Hayku revolt occurred. However, she dealt with it effectively, before it could become a larger issue, returning the empire to its smooth trajectory.

In the years since the rebellion against the Empire under Empress Alexandra III, the Empire was very quiet. That was a nearly sixty-five-year period of time with relative calm, which led to increased trade and planetary growth.

However, it also led to a more relaxed way of doing business. Star Fleet funding was slowly reduced, as there were no apparent reasons to maintain a formidable force. Training was reduced, resulting in a poorer performing fleet. And not just Star Fleet.

Everywhere, on almost every planet, people relaxed. This led to a more lackadaisical culture throughout the Empire, affecting government operations, education, and quality of workmanship. In short, it was a wonderful time to be alive, but suffered some negative consequences.

In the year three six zero, Emperor Phillip II took the throne.

In the year three eight zero, Emperor Alexander III took the throne.

In the year four zero zero, Empress Penelope took the throne.

The Empire had been moving forward in a state of coziness on autopilot. One could almost say that the Empire seemed to be nearly asleep. But not everyone had been asleep.

Unknown to anyone, even the watchers, someone was very awake.

There were new old men on Hayku who wielded ultimate power. They were often visited by their Master, Riser, in secret, who gave them this advice: “Relax, be quiet, be patient. These Imperial decrees and this control will end. When it does, build in secret. Train, hone your skills, build a fleet of vessels that even Star Fleet cannot stop. For one day your descendants will achieve a level of revenge even you cannot imagine.”

Chapter 12

The Dream

415.017.04

It had taken years. Years of heartache, anger, and pain. But finally, today, the battle was set, the positions taken, revenge was at hand.

Three travelers, each wearing their trademark dark crimson hooded robes, walked through the long, narrow, dusty, dark canyon, towards their destination. The canyon they walked was a very narrow trail, nearly two miles deep, but only ten feet wide. Their path snaked a long way through this deep gorge to a single protected door.

The canyon walls were warm. They hid the largest energy system ever created, as powerful as the sun. This energy supply provided the power to generate the planetary shield of this huge and well-known planet.

As they approached the door, one raised his hand and spoke into the embedded communication link, saying, “We are in place.”

“Thirty seconds to initiation, mark.”

They stood, waiting. At precisely the twenty-five second point, they ran with all their strength and speed directly at the door, knowing there was a strong energy shield protecting it. Simultaneously, the fleet entered space above the planet and opened fire on its defenses, causing a momentary and nearly undetectable shift of power to those defensive shield systems.

Each of the three threw a bag containing tools and devices towards the door and saw them pass through where the shield covered them and land in front of the door as they jumped through the space where the barrier was normally in place. The first two made it, the third one was caught in the shift of power systems, as energy was channeled back to respond to the shifting needs. He was instantly dematerialized. The other two continued forward and reached the security door.

The door was huge, made of the hardest substances known to man. They were supported by three enormous hinges, each one the size of a transport motive. The two took their tools and began to melt the hinges. They finished the bottom one and the middle one, leaving the top hinge.

One of them, the leader, climbed to the top of the door and began melting the hinge, while the other stood at the base of the door, waiting. The hinge broke early in the process, taking them both by surprise. It broke so quickly, the one waiting below, who was looking down the canyon and not at the door, didn’t have time to move, and was crushed standing and waiting.

The last one went forward into the structure. He walked through multiple hallways until he came to the room he was looking for, a specific control room. He entered the room and searched until he found the panel he was after, lifted a cover and pressed a red button.

He spoke into his comm unit, and said, “It is open.”

Immediately, hundreds of guided torpedoes were launched and got through a small window opened in the shield.

“Thank you, brother.”

The fleet then vanished back into hyperspace before even a single Imperial Starship intervened.

The Empress, standing in the throne room, saw what had happened, and said, “It is over.”

The torpedoes hit the power station and the explosions destroyed it, but the force of the explosion was so large, it destroyed the entire planet.

“The Empire is dead.”

Leopold was jarred awake by this terrible nightmare! He thought, ‘Oh my god! It felt so real!’ He saw a group of rebels destroy Meladeran! He couldn’t go back to sleep! It was so real, like he was there. He got up and walked into his kitchen and made himself a cup of mestava.

‘My God,’ he thought, ‘that was so real. Were they rebels or demons? After all, they were dressed in dark crimson and slaughtered billions of people.’

He thought about it and soon realized he’d never seen anyone identified as a group who dressed in those particular colors. He didn’t know why, but he felt it to be symbolic. The more he thought about it, the more he concluded that he couldn’t understand why. He went into his study, brought up his research systems, and searched.

Nothing.

‘It was just so real,’ he thought. ‘Wow, well, a heck of a dream.’

He looked at his timekeeper, and realized it was time to arise for the day, so he left his study and took care of his personal business, and then departed for his day at the university.

Chapter 13

Old Man

415.021.15

The old man entered the great hall in a place on old Earth. He kept his head down, as he felt the power of the evil that seemed focused on him. Yet, he knew this power was for him, not against him. Still, he felt deep trepidation.

The power was sitting in a golden chair, filled with fire and smoldering anger. As the old man approached, his anger built even higher, but he did not lash out. He waited until the old man stood before him.

“Finally, you come.”

“Yes, master. I only received your summons yesterday.”

“Yes. Why are you here?”

“To do your bidding, master.”

“Yes, to do my bidding. Do you know from whence I come?”

The old man wasn’t sure why these questions were being asked, but responded, “No, master.”

“You are here because it is time. It is time to enact the revenge your ancestors have been plotting for hundreds of years. Do you have any idea how long I have planned this?”

“No, master.”

“No, you don’t. I have plotted and planned this revenge for thousands of years. Before your people were a people. Before all that you know was even thought of. But today, you are the final weapon. Your actions will complete this journey.”

He stood and walked towards the old man, saying, “You will be handsomely rewarded for this. You and your people will be so rich, you will not know what to do. You can buy the best planets, live in the greatest luxury, have slaves to do your bidding. You will live like Kings.”

“Master, what of the anger of the Empire and the Imperial Star Fleet? Won’t they seek us out and destroy us?”

He stopped and stared into his eyes. “Do not fear this Star Fleet. After we destroy their capital planet they will be in disarray, and I will destroy them. You chop off the head, and I will destroy the body. Your fleet will then be the largest single center of power in the galaxy!”

The old man fell to the floor, saying, “Thank you, Master! We will not fail you!”

“I know. But I will send watchers to make sure you do my bidding. Do as they say.”

“Yes, Master!”

The power vanished.

Chapter 14

Imperial Founders Day Dinner

415.031.15

Leopold was the leading historian of his time, regarding the early Empire, and a professor at the Imperial University. He only taught a few classes, randomly at best. But his favorite was his class on the early Empire, especially the first leader of the Empire, Empress Stephanie. He had studied her life from the many writings that survived at the Imperial Library, and was convinced that she was the best possible choice for that role at that particular time in the creation of the Empire.

He had even completed his dissertation for his Doctorate of Galactic History about her life, making him the pre-eminent scholar of her life. He believed her standards and values still permeated the Empire, much to the benefit of everyone within it, even if they didn’t know anything about it.

Still, he had plenty of time to conduct other research, and since he just couldn’t let go of the dream he’d had a couple of weeks earlier, he spent some of his time researching for any clues that he could. Nevertheless, with everything he tried, he found nothing. So, he decided it must have been exactly what it was, a terrible but very real dream.

His communicator rang, “Yes?”

“Leopold, I just wanted to remind you about the Imperial Founders Day Dinner tonight.”

“Oh, yes, father, I remember.”

“So, you will join me?”

“Of course. I will meet you there.”

“Very well.”

At nineteen, he made his way to the Imperial Palace. Guests were arriving from everywhere in the two galaxies for this event. The first Imperial Founders Day Dinner. He made his way up and inside the palace, eventually finding his father at a table not too far from the head table of the Empress, along with his Aunt Serena.

“Leopold! It’s so good to see you. I see you’ve been eating well!”

He laughed. He loved his aunt, but sometimes her comments could cut in several directions. “Hi, Aunt Serena, and yes, I have been eating well. Also exercising so as to stay in good shape.”

She hugged him, and whispered, “I can see that too. I love you.”

“I love you.”

His father then walked to the table, and said, “Good evening, Leopold.”

“Good evening, father.”

“It should be a wonderful event, don’t you think?”

“Well, by the looks of it, everyone who is anyone made sure they would be here.”

“Yes. Dressed to the nines, as they say.”

“Maybe too much for a founding memorial.”

“Nonsense, people need to be out and be seen. Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention a small matter to you. The Empress wanted me to ask you to make a few comments this evening. Think you can manage that?”

“What? About what, who, I need time to think and plan something.”

“I know, sorry. As to the subject, well, what we are here to celebrate, the founding of the Empire. No one knows as much about that as you do.”

He sat down and began to think. What in the galaxy could he possibly say that would make sense on such short notice?

Just then, the Royal Herald announced the Imperial Party. Empress Penelope arrived, accompanied by the highest levels of the Royal Court. Everyone stood and waited until they were at their places, then the Empress picked up her glass and raised it for a toast, saying, “Good evening one and all. A toast, to the health and longevity of our Empire, as we celebrate its beginning.”

After everyone cheered, she sat, so everyone else could as well. After a few moments, she stood, waving to everyone to remain seated, while saying, “Please, remain seated.”

Again, “Please remain seated.”

Once it quieted down, she continued, “Thank you all for attending this Imperial celebration of our joint heritage. Tonight, we will feast and tomorrow night we will dance. I hope that you will all be able to attend the ball, as it should be an even more wonderful night than tonight.”

She looked down at Leopold, and speaking to the group said, “Tonight, we celebrate the founding of our Empire. For this event, we are fortunate to have the most informed member of the Imperial University, and a former warrior of the Empire, here with us, to say a few words about our earliest days. Please welcome Professor Doctor Leopold Falstock, Knight of the Empire, and the most knowledgeable person on our Imperial beginning.”

People applauded as Leopold made his way around and up to the head table and the podium there. He stopped and bowed to the Empress, then walked up. He had no idea what he would say.

“Thank You, Your Imperial Majesty, for the opportunity to say a few words about our Empire’s early days. And good evening to all of you, very distinguished guests from all parts of this expansive and wondrous Empire.”

He paused, looking around the room, saw Alexandria seated a few tables away and smiled, all while actively thinking how to say something meaningful. “On this auspicious occasion, Imperial Founders Day, we celebrate the very beginning of our Empire.”

“It’s an intriguing thought when you realize there was a time, not that long ago, when there was no Empire, when people lived with uncertainty, fear, excitement and passion, but with a certain amount of lawlessness and chaos.”

“It’s interesting to me, that as large as we are today, complex, a well matured civilization, that we did not begin with a bang, but with a slow, planned, methodical challenge to the status quo. Each step in our early development followed each, with thought, passion, and hard work.”

“Our Empire was established by Empress Stephanie. But she herself was not from the Empire, because before her, there was no Empire, just planets, small federations, and a memory of what had once been an Empire a thousand years before.”

“She herself was shaped by her life on a remote planet circling a star far from the galactic center, a place called Earth. She was first a warrior, then a chief of security, then a member of a family, then a Vice Admiral of the very first federations fleet, before the final steps to Empire.”

“In truth, her role began with a family, the Wilsons. This is where she learned and grew so many of her key qualities: honor, leadership, passion, commitment. She demonstrated her strengths and qualities and was made the President of the first Galactic Federation. As the federation grew, she was established as Empress Stephanie of our current Empire here, on Meladeran.”

“That first visit here was well documented. This palace was run down after centuries of neglect, but she repaired it. The Empire began growing at a very rapid pace, creating its own set of challenges, but she provided stability and presided over it. Finally, there was a challenge from invaders out of the Andromeda Galaxy; yet she maintained her composure and her leadership to bring us through those initial tests and established our Empire in two galaxies.”

“Were I to say what we truly celebrate today; I would say it was her strength of hope and tenacity. She remained true to herself, her values, her beliefs. She established our Empire based upon those core principles, and they are what still binds us together to this day.”

“We are now two hundred and ninety-eight years into this Imperial Age. I believe it is good for us to stop and remember that our founding was not easy, but it was well laid out, which has enabled our people to live their lives in the greatest freedom, safety, and economic stability in the history of our species.”

He turned and looked over at the Empress, and said, “So, Your Imperial Majesty, I look forward to many more years of your reign, as you continue to lead us into a safe and peaceful future, and I thank you for bringing focus onto the most important age of our development, the founding. Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words.” Turning back to the audience, he added, “Thank you all very much, and have a wonderful evening.”

The Empress stood and clapped, so everyone else did as well. Leopold made his way back to his seat and sat down, as the Empress waved everyone to sit, and said, “Thank you, Leopold, for those inspiring words. I couldn’t agree more that our Empire has provided such wonderful and positive elements for all of our people. Now, let the feast begin!”

Leopold looked at his father to say a few words, when his father said, “Well done, Leopold! That was excellent.”

“You could have given me more time.”

“Nonsense. You couldn’t have done any better if you would’ve had over a months’ time to prepare. Those off the cuff remarks were absolutely spot on. Very well done, son.”

“Yes, Leopold, you were marvelous!”

“Thank you both. But please, if ever a something like this happens in the future, I prefer time to think before having to speak.”

The meal was impeccable. How the kitchen prepared a feast for over ten thousand people at one time reflected magnificently upon their dedication and expertise.

Each person was served a soup and a salad, with various flavors of dressings provided on each table. Also, all the tables were served several bread options, again, with options for toppings or spreads.

Then, a delectable appetizer was served. It consisted of a Trelstalit sea scurrie, a delectable and rare dish, cooked to a finesse of exquisite perfection and tenderness. The butter and brandy sauce made it just beautiful.

Next, the main course. Tonight, it consisted of a Haldstod shank, a type of beef grown from very select herds over hundreds of years on the planet Haldstod. These magnificent beasts provided the most delectable beef imaginable. Each was a cut of such divine tenderness, marbled exquisitely, seared only on one side, covered with a creamy sauce of scalldarts from Kronfeld, and served with luscious deep green parryon and butter filled Red fascort. Just divine!

Lastly, each person was served a towering swirl cake, that contained various colors and flavors, surrounding a center of pudding above ice cream. Simply delightful!

Everyone was perfectly stuffed by the time the evening was complete.

“My goodness. I believe the kitchen outdid themselves tonight.”

“I’d say. I hope the Empress provides them with a reward for this performance. Amazing!”

“I’m sure she will. So, will you be joining us at home for a night cap?”

“Not tonight. I have to get up early to prep for the day. However, I will see you tomorrow evening at the Royal Ball. Good night!”

“Good night!”

Chapter 15

Connection

415.032.13

They arrived with specific instructions and information they were to provide to these people. However, they were told to only speak with their leader, an old man. Once they arrived and established contact, he invited them to join him in their central hall. He had no way of telling they were female; due to the clothing they wore.

Once they joined him there, the old man spoke with them for a few minutes before the meeting began. No one else was in the hall, just him and these two.

He said, “My Master said you would come and to listen to you. What do you have to say?”

One of the two said, “That your task is at hand.”

The other said, “Should you fail, the consequences for you and both your planets will be horrific.”

The first one added, “You must stay true and on course.”

He said, “Yes, that is all true. And yes, we will. Now, I will bring in my members, so you can observe our dedication and commitment to seeing this through.”

“Very well. We will stand over there in the shadows, but we will listen and observe, and we will report anything that seems out of the plan.”

The two of them walked over and stood in a dark corner, dressed in black, quietly watching and listening as the beginning of the end unfolded.

The old man walked over to the door and opened it, letting his men inside. Soon they were all inside, and the door was closed.

“Welcome, brothers. Today is an historic day. Today we begin the final push of our master’s plan for revenge. We will be the ones who get the privilege to carry out his wishes, after so many before us could only work in hope this day would come.”

He stood, looking out over the assembled men, and said, “Do any of you believe we are not ready?”

One of them said, “I believe we are ready, but a different question. Who is it that watches us from the shadow?”

“These are watchers sent by our master. Their word is his word. They watch and report how we prepare.”

There was only slight mumbling from the group, but they were mostly silent.

The conversation lasted only a few minutes. But once it was complete, the old man said, “We are united, then.”

From the group in front of him, “Yes.”

The old man looked around at the assembly, and said, “Never before have all fifteen been united in a common cause. This is an auspicious occasion. We will do well, brothers. Our Lord shines upon us.”

One of the leaders said, “Tell us, what do we do next?”

“We finish what we started many years ago. Our fleet is built, our warriors are ready, our purpose is clear. On the anniversary of the beginning of our suffering, we begin the final stage, culminating in the destruction of the Empire on the day our Lord sees fit.”

Slowly, everyone held their hands outstretched towards him. He led the chant.

“For our brother’s past,

Who suffered before us,

To avenge their ashes,

We turn the Empire to dust.”

One of the two said to the other, “I am not sure if our leader will approve of how they speak.”

“Me either. It seems as if these people think their road will be easy, with no thought for what will likely be the result.”

“At least our people are safe, traveling to a new home across the void. Our leader knows how foolish it would be to remain behind once this is done.”

“Yes, and that is ‘if’ they found out our role in the attack. But what concerns me is that these people don’t even seem to grasp that destroying one planet, even the home planet of the Empire, won’t end the Empire, it will just destroy their administrative head, decapitating it, for a while.”

“Yes, what remains will be even more dangerous, if their Star Fleet breaks up and individual kingdoms are established within the galaxy.”

“True, but remember, this Empire is made of two galaxies. The Queen of the Andromeda Galaxy will become the next Empress, and using Star Fleet, will reconstitute the Empire quickly, destroying enemies ruthlessly as they go.”

“Yes, starting with these people. Do they not grasp that their entire planet and all their people will be vaporized?”

“Apparently not. Which is why our leader will not like what we have heard them say.”

“Yes. Let’s go and report.”

Chapter 16

Imperial Founders Day Ball

415.032.17

The First Annual Imperial Founders Day Ball was, by design, a reflection of the past, celebrating the grandeur of the memory of the grand old days gone by. To that end, the dress was extravagant. Ladies dressed in their most lavish costumes, with makeup and hair coiffured as it was in the days of old. Men dressed per their titles, with varying levels of awards, colors, lace, etc. It was a glorious display by all.

Leopold chose brilliant blue attire, with heavy emphasis on gold lace and belts, his ceremonial sword replaced with a real one he had purchased only two years ago that had a true trilbinium core, giving it the strongest, sharpest, and most energy targeted blade possible. It was designed as a blade from the Knights Templar age on old Earth, with a thirty-six-inch blade and a marvelously decorated and designed grip. It was both deadly and beautiful.

He met his father at a table not far from the long high table of the Imperial Court.

“Welcome Leopold.”

“Good evening, father. Will Aunt Serena be joining you tonight?”

“Yes, she’s on the way. It’s quite a sight here tonight, isn’t it?”

As he sat, he looked around at the banners of the noble houses mounted and all gently moving with a small breeze, all around the walls and on the large pillars supporting the ceiling, the mosaic floors of many colors, the images, and stone of the walls.

He said, “Yes, it is wonderful.”

“You sound melancholy. Is something bothering you?”

“No, nothing really. It’s just, everything seems to be too perfect. I feel we are missing something in our complacent acceptance of the status quo.”

His father said, “That sounds rather demeaning of our appreciation of our achievements, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know, father. Let me tell you about a dream I had a few weeks ago. I’m only telling you, because for some inexplicable reason, it just keeps nagging at me. This dream was very vivid, as real as you are as I look at you right now.”

“It showed some deep crimson robed people breaking in and turning off the planetary shield on Meladeran, and then some ships fired torpedoes and blew the power system up, which caused the planet to explode.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. The problem is that this dream was so vivid. I mean, it was crystal clear in what felt like real time. It woke me up and I couldn’t go back to sleep. I got up and started doing some research, but didn’t discover anything.”

“So, you still feel a sense of urgency in finding answers to this?”

“Yes, I do. The dream was just so vividly real, father. I can’t ever remember having a dream that was just as real as this conversation we are having now. It was vividly real.”

His father leaned over and quietly said, “You’re not suggesting that these unknown people from your dream are somehow real and that they are actually out to destroy the Empire, are you?”

He hesitated, then said, “Well, no. But honestly, that’s a tentative no.”

“Well, stranger things have happened in the Empire. Personally, I believe anything this unusual, but well defined, should be discussed. Let me see what I can find out, and I will let you know.”

“Thanks, father, I appreciate it.”

His aunt was just walking up as he finished his story.

“No problem.” His father smiled, and said, “Now, are you going to put some of these young women out of their misery and dance with them?”

Leopold looked around and saw countless beautiful young ladies his age waiting for someone to dance with them.

He also smiled, and said, “Well, I suppose a true Knight of the Empire must do something.” He stood and gave his father and aunt a quick short bow, and said, “Then I am off. Good night if I don’t see you again tonight.”

“Good night, Leopold.”

He walked over to Lady Alexandria DeCampo, the daughter of a long-time friend of his family, Count Reginald DeCampo. She was dressed in the most magnificent deep emerald-green gown, with emeralds, rubies, diamonds, and many other stones adorning both her gown and her lovely neck. The dress was off her shoulders, giving her neck a lovely creamy brown canvas where the jewelry sparkled.

He had always loved her eyes and her laugh. Her eyes sparkled in a beautifully deep brown, sparkled with gold flecks, while her laughter was of such beauty it cut through his core.

He walked over to her, bowed, and said, “Lady Alexandria, may I have the honor of this dance?”

She smiled and curtsied, and his own heart melted. “Of course. How could I resist the attention of a true Knight of the Empire?”

He took her hand, and they walked out onto the glorious dance floor where they began to dance together, moving in unison as a well-rehearsed couple.

“So, tell me, Leopold, have you decided on your future role?”

“No, I haven’t. Right now, I’m completing the third and, I hope, final book on the beginning of our Empire, focusing mostly on Empress Stephanie. After that, well, it’s either a full-time professorship or something completely different.”

“Interesting. An Imperial hero, a professor, and maybe something different. I think you are unsettled, Leo.”

“You’re telling me.” He chuckled. “I think it’s why I haven’t been able to commit to our relationship. I just don’t seem to be settled within myself enough to honestly believe I can give you the something positive that you deserve.”

“While I can sympathize with you, I cannot believe that is true. You know my feelings for you, and they won’t change, regardless of your calling.”

He looked into her eyes, and said, “Dearest Alex, you hold my heart. But I need you to hold it a little longer. I only hope you can wait for me, while I fight to find my way into the future.”

She smiled and laughed, and he felt like a puddle in her arms. She said, “Dear Leo, of all the things in life one can be certain of, me waiting for you is the one you can be the most certain of. I love you.”

“I love you.”

They continued dancing away the evening until late in the night, when they made their way home, separately.

His father, the Marquis Falcron Falstock of Cartathonia, thought the evening was a complete success. He also knew his son, and he knew he would never talk about something like this dream unless he was truly worried. He decided to sleep on it and then decide if he could do anything with the information.

But for now, he was exhausted, having danced quite a few dances himself.

Chapter 17

Second Fleet

415.034.13

The power did not have all his eggs in one basket. He had seen what happened to a power when he counted on one solution. No, while he was working diligently to destroy Meladeran and the Empire with one group, he was simultaneously working to prepare another group. Should one fail, he would be ready with the next.

Today he was working on his first back-up, his new fleet. He was building a fleet that could challenge the Imperial Star Fleet as it was currently organized. They were so spread out that you never had to worry about that many ships at a time. His fleet would crush them.

Admiral Waskig bowed low to his master. “You summoned me, Master.”

“Yes, Admiral Waskig, status report.”

“My Lord, we have two hundred and seventy-five battleships ready, and twenty-five additional ships ready in six months. Our ships are far larger and superior in strength than the Empire’s, thanks to your guidance. Our heavy cruisers and regular cruisers are ready. We have ten thousand starfighters.”

“Are your men ready to fight?”

“Yes, master. We drill daily.”

“Very well, General. Your orders to deploy will come suddenly. When you receive them, you must be underway within twelve hours. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Master. Our crews live on their ships, no time groundside. When you give the order, we will respond on time, and ready to fight.”

“Good.” He vanished.

Chapter 18

Compromised

415.036.09

Falcron was sitting in his study, thinking about his life, when an old colleague stopped by for a conversation.

“Manfred, welcome, come in.”

“Thank you, Falcron. I appreciate your letting me come see you on such short notice.”

“No problem. Please, have a seat. Can I get you a glass of wine or some other drink?”

“Nothing for me, thank you.”

“Okay, then tell me, what is the urgency you spoke of?”

“It is simply this. I know you are in financial straits. No, no, I have knowledge about this, and we both know it is true. Plus, you don’t see a way out.”

“It bothers me that you know all this, but it is true.”

“Yes, but I have something you need. I have a way for you to get your finances in order, all for doing some very minor activities.”

“What minor activities?”

“Simply watching and reporting on certain things.”

“What kind of things?”

“My client wishes to know the coming and going of certain people, that’s all. For that information, my client is willing to provide you enough jhetas to clear all your debts, and give you an additional amount equal to the value of your entire estate.”

“Simply to watch some people come and go? What people?”

“Before I say, I need to know if you are in or out. If you are out, it’s better you don’t know which people. If you are in, I will tell you, and also caution you, that informing anyone about this transaction could result in your untimely death. So, before we go further, are you in or out?”

Falcron was shocked. “What? Untimely death? Are you threatening me?”

“Not at all. I am offering you an opportunity, but one that comes with a catch that I wanted you to fully grasp before you made your decision. So, in or out?”

“If I say out, you will leave and there will be nothing said about it?”

“Yes. Only if you tell someone I even offered you this opportunity would you potentially experience any repercussions. Otherwise, it is finished.”

“And if I say in, then there is no backing out at all?”

“No. And remember Falcron, it’s a very simple task. And it’s one that pays you handsomely. I would hate for you to suddenly be in disrepute at the palace if you must foreclose on your estate. That would even embarrass the Empress, I’m sure.”

Falcron felt trapped, yet knew that this financial reward could certainly save his estate. After arguing with himself on the pros and cons, he finally decided. “Okay, I’m in.”

“Very good. Here is your payment up front.” He handed Falcron a very thick envelope. “You’re to observe and report on the movements of your son, Leopold, and the Empress. In the envelope is contact information for you to call, every twelve hours, and report what you know. That’s it.”

“My own son? What is this madness? Who wants to know about my son?”

“Sorry, I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter, you accepted the deal. Your first report is due on one hour, and every twelve hours as a minimum, after that. Good day, Falcron. And good luck.”

Chapter 19

Dreams

415.036.17

Later that same day, several days since Leopold had told him his story, Falcron finally decided he had no choice but to visit his friend and discuss the dream of his son. He wouldn’t inform his new spymasters on this matter, but he felt he needed to tell the Empress. He called and they agreed he would stop by at nine in the evening, for a late-night chat.

“Your Imperial Majesty, the Marquis Falcron Falstock of Cartathonia.”

He entered the private quarters and bowed to Empress Penelope, saying, “Your Imperial Majesty.”

Once the herald and others had departed, the Empress walked over and hugged him.

“It’s so good to see you, Falcron! Please come, let’s have a toast to old friends and many years to come.”

They went into a private room, a small fifty by one-hundred-foot greeting room, and took seats. Once they were served, she said, “So, tell me, old friend, what is the urgent nature of your request to speak with me?”

“Your Majesty, I have a feeling, like the hair raising on the back of your neck, that there is something taking place that is hidden.”

“Interesting. Well, let’s hear it.”

“Let me tell you a story that my son, Leopold, told me.” He then discussed, in some detail, all that Leopold had told him. “So, you see why it bothers me. This just seems to odd, even by our galactic standards.”

“Interesting. Is Leopold available this evening?”

“I would assume so.”

“Then how about if you contact him and ask him to stop over. I would like to speak with him personally.”

“Of course. Please give me a moment.” He then called Leopold and told him what was happening, and asked him to come urgently to the Imperial Palace. After about thirty minutes, he arrived.

“Ah, Leopold, it’s good to see you.”

“Your Majesty, it’s good to see you as well. I believe it has been some time since we last met.”

“Yes, it has. First, I wanted to thank you again for your service to the Empire, and your good words at the Founders Days Dinner a few nights back, you performed admirably.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Now, the reason I asked you to come here tonight, is that your father has told me about this dream of yours. Do you truly believe it is based on reality?”

“I’m just not sure, Your Majesty. But I am equally not sure that it is not. It’s been a strange time. I just can’t grasp that I would have this very vivid dream, feel the emotions of it that still persist, for it not to have any meaning at all. There must be a purpose in this somewhere.”

“Yes, I can see that. I tell you what. I’m going to discuss this with Star Fleet and some other trusted advisors and see if there is anything to it.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Since you are here, aside from this interruption with this dream, what are you currently researching?”

“Well, Your Majesty, I have begun the third volume of my research into the founding Empress, Empress Stephanie, and I’m going back to the very beginning, to her days working within the Wilson Family, to see where her earliest influences came from. I have been thinking about the idea of traveling to Earth to visit their home and see if I can grasp any additional clues that helped shape her life, but haven’t yet decided if that is worth the trip, with so much information available here.”

“Of course. But if I may advise, sometimes even a single piece of data can change the perspective. I would ask you to continue to study this, and perhaps visiting her home world would help. In any event, once you are ready to publish your research, come see me, I’d like to take a look at what you find.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Now, I believe you have work to do, while your father and I have a need to catch up and gossip about old friends. Good night, Leopold.”

“Good night, Your Majesty. Good night, father.”

After Leopold departed, the Empress said, “Interesting story, Falcron. It seems you do truly believe him.”

“Well, Your Majesty, Leopold has never been one to make things up. He’s more down to earth, you might say.”

“Yes, he does sound believable. Well, I’ll have some inquiries made and let you know what we find.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

They continued to chat about it for a little while, then Falcron departed for the night. He only reported that the Empress was in the palace, nothing more.

Chapter 20

Second Dream

415.045.08

Nearly two weeks later, Leopold had the same dream again, but with a new twist. He called his father first thing in the morning.

“Father, I had that dream again last night, just as vivid as the first, and identical to it, except for one addition.”

“What addition?”

“After the Empress says it is finished, I saw a large room with thousands of crimson robed people, all male, and they cheered their happiness to their success.”

“I don’t understand this, Leopold, because the Empress has assured me that she talked with everyone concerned and there is no threat from anyone to our Imperial defenses.”

“Yes, I would think they would say that. I believe any good plan, a plan such as the one I have dreamed, must be so secret that no one in the regular world would see it. Otherwise, there would be no point. No, whoever this would be, they are committed to each other and the plan with a force we have never seen.”

“So, what do we do? After all, this is a dream, and I can’t take it back to the Empress with nothing more than that. You have to find something in the real world if you want help from Imperial power.”

“Yes, I agree with you. After all, this is only a dream. Okay, I think I’ll add this to my research schedule and see if anything pops up. Maybe I’ll find something, or at least realize that there’s nothing there.”

“That sounds good, Leopold.”

“Okay, good day, father.”

“Good day, son.”

Falcron picked up the communication device he had been given, and said, “Leopold will be working at the university today, as normal.”

“Very good.”

Leopold spent the day at the university, and decided to stay late to do more research. He thought about all that had happened, and realized he needed to go find a new perspective. He had searched every database he could find, but he just couldn’t find a reference to anything from his dream. He was quite baffled. Then the most surprising thing happened.

As he was walking down a rather darkened narrow side street taking a short cut from the University back to his apartments, he was confronted by three men dressed in deep crimson robes. They appeared out of nowhere. He stopped and looked at them, when one of them spoke.

“You are Professor Doctor Leopold Falstock, Knight of the Empire, former Senior Master Chief of Armor, Imperial Command, Androl Sector.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“I have a message for you. You are sentenced to death.”

Leo wasn’t sure what this was, but pulled his sword and said, “If you think you are able to achieve my death, bring it on.”

The one who appeared to be their leader said, “Very well.” He drew his sword, as did the other two. They spread out, surrounding Leopold. At first, they stood motionless, then, with a speed he had never witnessed, they each simultaneously attacked.

They cut him along each arm and leg, across his torso, and made deeper incisions in his abdomen. He was bleeding from so many cuts, he knew he could not survive for long. He fell to the ground, in pain and bleeding.

The three looked at him, and one said, “He will die soon. We cut him enough he cannot stop the bleeding before death.”

“Yes, a slow painful death, better than a quick end.”

Then they turned their backs on him and walked away, knowing he would be dead very quickly. They turned a corner, and disappeared from sight.

He lay there, bleeding out very slowly. He slowly managed to reach his communicator and called for help. After a few minutes, medical personnel arrived and loaded him up and carried him to the Imperial College Infirmary, one of the largest and most modern medical facilities on the planet.

“What happened?”

“I was attacked.”

The doctor said, “By whom?”

“I don’t know.”

“Very well, what is your name?”

“Leopold Falstock, son of the Marquis of Cartathonia.”

“Very well, we will contact him. Now relax. You are safe here and you will be okay.”

It took about thirty minutes before his father arrived, but once he did, things moved quickly. Once the medical surgeons were complete, he was transported to his father’s house and was placed in his old bed, with a team of personnel to monitor him around the clock.

“Leopold, what happened?”

“Father, it was the dark crimson robe people. They stopped me and told me that I was sentenced to death. I drew my sword, and fought them. But they were so fast, I never had a chance. Whatever is happening, my dream seems to be based on some kind of reality.”

“Okay, you relax, I’ll take it from here.”

Falcron was furious at this turn of events. Yet, he didn’t risk making a call. He knew that someone had access to secrets, so he was determined to do this personally. He also knew it was very early, only five in the morning, but he also knew he had no choice, so he went directly to the palace. After some time, he was admitted to the private chambers of the Empress.

“Lord Falcron, what a surprise, and so early. How may I help you?”

He bowed, saying, “Your Majesty, the dreams of my son are real.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, three crimson robed people nearly killed him last evening.”

“What?”

“Yes. He was attacked and told he was sentenced to death. He drew his sword and challenged them, and they nearly killed him. He said that they moved with such speed, a speed he had never seen before, and before he struck a single blow, he was on the ground, near death.”

The Empress was shocked. “You mean then, that there is an enemy of the Empire we know nothing about, that moves freely among us?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

She stood still for a few minutes, then said, “Thank you, Falcron. I’ll take it from here. Please let me know how Leopold heals. I would like to thank him personally, once he is well. Good morning.”

He bowed, “Good morning, Your Majesty,” turned, and departed.

Empress Penelope reached for her personal communicator and dialed a number she had never called before. It was only because she had been reading the notes of Empress Alexandra III, notes about the terrible events of the murders of young women in the palace, that she even knew about him. ‘I pray he can solve this in time.’

Chapter 21

SS Lazy B

415.046.06

Lizzy was just finishing getting dressed when her communicator sounded.

“Yes?”

“Samuel?”

“No, this is Lizzy.”

“Lizzy, yes, you are married to Samuel, correct?”

“Who are you again?”

She chuckled, “Sorry, but of course, you don’t know me. I am Empress Penelope. I was reading old notes left by Empress Alexandra III when I came across the information about the wonderful job you and Samuel completed during the terrible events of the palace murders.”

“Yes, those were some interesting times, but how can we assist you today, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, there has been an event that I cannot understand or solve. I am hoping the two of you can again, assist in a case.”

“Your Majesty, we would be honored.”

“Good. I need you and Samuel to come to see me immediately. It’s of the utmost importance.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, we’ll be there as soon as possible. You do know we aren’t on Meladeran, so it will take a few days?”

“Dammit. Where are you?”

“We are at home, Your Majesty.”

“And that is located where?”

“On the planet Tuton, Your Majesty.”

“Very well, a shuttle will pick you up momentarily. I will see you soon.” The line went dead.

She thought, ‘Oh shit.’ She said, “Sam? We have a problem!”

Sam came walking into the bedroom drying his hair. “What’s up?”

“We are being summoned by Empress Penelope. She sounded pretty spun up, said a shuttle would be here soon to pick us up.”

“Huh. Well, I guess we should pack for an adventure.”

It only took forty minutes before an Imperial shuttle landed outside their house. They boarded, and the shuttle launched skyward at maximum drive, destination, the Imperial Star Ship (ISS) Zebulon, a Klathelium Class Cruiser. Once on board, the starship entered hyperspace at maximum speed. After two days, they came out of hyperspace and waited. Suddenly, the Imperial Battleship Excelsior arrived, and they were whisked by shuttle to that ship.

When they arrived, a Captain met them and escorted them to the bridge level, then to the right and back to the Imperial Chambers, the private chambers of the Empress.

“Your Majesty.”

“Ah, you must be Samuel, or as Alex called you, the sleuth. Hi Lizzy. Please, rise, come have a seat.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She smiled, saying, “Now, it’s good to see you both. I trust your time over these many years have been spent wisely?”

Lizzy smiled, saying, “Yes, Your Majesty, I believe it has.”

Sam also smiled, and said, “It has, and I must say you look refreshed; but I can also see that something troubles you. Please, how can we help?”

“Ah, Samuel, Alex noted that you were almost always directly to the point. Very well. A very old family friend, Marquis Falcron of Cartathonia, came to me yesterday. His son, Leopold, had been attacked and barely survived. But what is more interesting is what Leopold had said before the attack. Let me explain all that I know.”

She went on to talk about Leopold’s dream, and the attack by the dark crimson robed three that nearly killed him. Once she was done, she sat silently and waited.

Sam stood up and walked over to a painting and stood there, ignoring all, but thinking deeply about what he had heard. Lizzy waited, knowing that whatever they did, it was Sam’s call.

After a few minutes, he turned and said, “So, you believe the dream is real?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” she paused, then finally said, “but yes, I fear this dream is a revelation of an act that may be unfolding in ways we cannot see, and in a timeline that we don’t know, by people we know nothing about. For all we know, this could happen tomorrow.”

“Hm, yes. Okay, usual fees plus expenses. I would suggest you evacuate the planet, but I know you cannot, for many reasons. However, you should take Leopold and his family into the palace immediately, for their protection. Whoever these people are, they will find out he is alive and will want to finish the work. Also, on our last palace adventure we were hobbled by not being able to get around easily, so we need a starship this time, not reliance on passenger liners.”

Penelope smiled, and said, “You are correct, I cannot abandon Meladeran. As to your fees, you will receive much more than regular fees when you solve this. Saving the Empire, now that’s a title no one has ever held, except Empress Stephanie. As to a starship, please follow me.”

She led them through the passageways with people bowing and scurrying out of her way. They entered the elevator and arrived in the main hangar deck. She turned right and walked down another passageway until they arrived at a door, which opened into a smaller section of the main hangar. Sitting there was a rather plain looking starship.

She said, “You may not know this, but in her writing, Empress Alexandra III noted that she always wanted to do something special for you. Based on this, I decided to give you a gift for your service to the Empire. This is the gift. It is the SS Lazy B. It doesn’t look like much purposefully, in order for it to be transportation for a sleuth, but it’s one of the most luxurious, yet most capable and fastest starships ever built. It was built by a friend of mine, so I know it was built right. I was going to present this to you in an informal ceremony we hadn’t even scheduled yet, but thought now would be even better. Take it and do what needs to be done.”

Lizzy turned to her and reached out, giving her a hug, and whispered, “Thank you.”

The Empress whispered back, “You’re welcome, Lizzy.”

Sam bowed slightly, then said, “Thank you, Your Majesty. We’ll accept this as a wedding present from you.”

“You got married?”

Lizzy smiled, and Sam said, “Oh yes. I couldn’t let this one get away. And had kids, who have all grown up, so we’re alone again and looking forward to an adventure.”

Penelope reached out and hugged them both, saying, “Oh my, congratulations!”

Sam laughed. “Thank you. We kept our marriage quiet, because I’m sure Empress Alexandra III would have made a big deal of it, which is why we decided to marry quietly. A royal ball or some such wouldn’t help us be secretive.”

“No, I’m sure not. But I am so happy for you both.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. And now, once again, we have a mission to complete for the Empire.”

He and Lizzy bowed one last time, turned and walked over to the starship.

“Sleuth, Samuel, Lizzy, you know this is important. Please, let me know what you find.”

“We will be in touch, Your Majesty.”

They made their way inside and to the bridge. Lizzy looked around, and said, “Dear, this is gonna be fun! Hang on.”

They strapped in and she took the controls, and they pushed out of the hangar and launched in the direction of their home. They had so many things to acquire for this job. While on the trip home, they took a look at their new surroundings.

“My God, Sam, look at these facilities. I mean, it has a full gymnasium, awesome galley, wonderful staterooms, even a shuttle so we don’t have to take the ship to the surface! It’s huge, modern, and ours!”

He laughed, “Yes, and did you check out the armory? It’s fully loaded, and the ship has a lot of capability as well.”

“I think the Empress likes us.”

“Yes, well, I think she likes results. Which brings me to this case. We don’t…”

Lizzy cut him off with a finger to his lips, and smiled in her very most girlish smile. “Shhhh. No, not yet. I know we have to work, but right now, I just want to play for a little while. After all, this is a wedding present.”

Sam laughed, then pulled her to him and kissed her on the lips, whispering, “Of course you do, you naughty little minx.”

They quickly went from standing in the passageway fully dressed to being naked in their bed. Lizzy kissed him while her hair fell down into his face, whispering, “I love you so much, Sam,” as she moved her body with his.

Sam ran his fingers through her hair, enjoying the passion of his gorgeous wife. “I love you, Lizzy.”

They made love for as long as their strengths and talents allowed, then collapsed together. After a while, they got up and showered. Once they were back on the bridge, Lizzy said he could talk work.

Sam chuckled, “Oh, so that’s how it’s gonna be, eh? You get your way and then we work. Well, if you insist.”

They grabbed a bite to eat and sat down.

“Okay, from what I can see, we have no clues. Our only clue lies in what Leopold has said. We need to go to him. I need to know exactly where he was when he was attacked. Then we systematically review every video surveillance system outward from that point until we find something. But that’s our first stop after we pick up what we need from home.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Lizzy, you know all about flying and fighting, so I’m gonna leave all of that to you. You tell me what to do.”

“Agreed, Sam. And you know all about sniffing things out, so whatever you need, tell me.”

“Perfect. Let’s do this.”

Chapter 22

Protection

415.048.21

The Empress was exceedingly worried. Sam had said some things that gave her pause, but one thing he said she could do. She didn’t wait to return home to get things moving. She placed an urgent call to Admiral Johansen, Fleet Admiral of Star Fleet.

“Your Majesty.”

“Admiral Johansen, bring the Marquis of Cartathonia and his family into the Imperial Palace at once – speed is urgent! They are in danger. Take them to my personal palace and enhance security. I’ll explain when I return tomorrow.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Falcron was in his home when he heard loud noises outside. He opened the door to find hundreds of Imperial Marines surrounding his home.

One of them stepped forward. “Sir, I’m Colonel Williamson. We’ve been ordered by Her Imperial Majesty to bring you and your family into the Imperial Palace immediately.”

“Of course. Please come in.”

The Colonel brought some marines with him, and they brought some movers. The family packed what they would need for a lengthy stay.

“Colonel, my son is recovering from a fierce attack. He is in bed with nurses supporting him. We will need a medical transport team for him.”

“Of course.”

Soon a full medical team arrived, and they transported Leopold and the family to their new quarters, a set of rooms within the Empress’ personal palace.

Leopold unexpectedly awoke during all the shuffling and movement. “Father, do you know why we are being moved?”

“No, Leopold, I do not. But apparently the Empress believes we are in danger, so moved us to safer quarters.”

“I suppose this is a direct result of the attack on me then.”

“Yes, I would agree. In any event, we are now official residents of the Imperial Palace, so we should relax and enjoy it. Now close your eyes and rest, I believe we are safe now.”

“I’m not sure what safety is. I thought I was safe before those crimson robed people actually appeared real and nearly killed me. No, even here in this palace, I will never feel safe, until this is settled.” He closed his eyes and didn’t wake up for days.

Falcron looked at his son, and for the first time, realized he was more like his mother, a fairly weak person. He saw that his son might talk a good talk, but he lacked something, a fierceness, a strength. He should be strong and angry, but he was meek and afraid. He realized consciously, for the first time in his life, that he really didn’t like his son, just like he didn’t like his son’s mother. He turned and walked out of the room. He had a call to make.

Chapter 23

Report

415.053.18

Trendar and Tentrace entered the council. The Leader, Trinthea, was standing looking into the cauldron which filled the center of the chamber. The walls were dark red and crimson, with flowing colors of orange shifting as the cauldron shifted its smoldering embers. There were many others standing around the walls, counselors, and fellow witches, like them.

As Trinthea turned towards them, she said, “What did you find?”

They bowed, then Trendar said, “All appears in order, Leader. They are steadily making plans to execute your directive at the correct time.”

“Certainty? I sense a doubt.”

Tentrace said, “It is not a doubt in your plan, Leader. It is a doubt in their truthfulness. They will be destroyed by the Empire after this event. Yet, they behave as if they will face no repercussions from this event. Will they finally see that danger and still commit this act, or will they cave as the time draws near?”

Trinthea said, “Thoughts?”

From around the room, different witches spoke.

“A valid concern.”

“Should we postpone pending more knowledge?”

“What assurance do we have they will not stop?”

There were many comments. Finally, Trinthea said, “Good points all. No, we will not stop, all is in order.”

Turning back to the two of them, she added, “Go back to him and watch closely for any signs he may be changing his mind. If you see any, summon me and I will read his mind and see the truth of him.” She paused, and added, “Does that please the council?”

They all agreed this was the best course. She turned back to the two, and said, “Go now. Return and watch closely. Report regularly.”

They bowed and departed.

Chapter 24

Visitation

415.055.09

A few days after the Empress returned to her personal palace within the Imperial Palace, she met the Marquis.

“Your Majesty, we are moved in, but can you tell me why we are here?”

“Ah, Falcron, yes. You are here because someone I trust said Leopold is still in danger, and if he is in danger, so is his family. Hence the urgent move.”

“Who was it that informed you of this?”

“In this I shall keep my personal council. Suffice to say, we are in danger and now is the time to act.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Now, where is Leopold? I would like to speak with him.”

“Right this way, please.”

Falcron led her through a few hallways until they came to a door, which he opened. The Empress entered to find Alexandria holding his hands, while he lay in bed with his eyes closed.

Alexandria rose and walked to her, then curtsied, saying, “Your Majesty.”

“Alexandria, I’m so sorry. How is he?”

“He’s as well as can be expected, considering the wounds he received.”

“He will live?”

“Yes, the doctors all say it. It’s just not knowing how he will be that worries me.”

“Of course.”

Her personal aide took a quiet call, then said, “Excuse me, Your Majesty, a word?”

“Yes?”

Her aide, Adeline, said, “It’s a message for you.”

The Empress read it, then said, “I’m afraid all of you will need to leave for now.”

Falcron replied, “But why?”

“I cannot say, but please depart. Don’t fear, you will be allowed back in very soon.”

Once everyone, including her aide, had departed, she pulled out her personal communicator and called.

“Yes?”

“The room is empty.”

“Very good.”

A moment later the door on the far side of the room opened and Sam and Lizzy entered. They walked over to Leopold.

“He looks healthy, good skin color.”

“Yes, the doctors say he will be fine, just needs some rest. He only received wounds designed to cause him to bleed slowly. It’s as if they wanted him to die slowly. But it’s only because he managed to call for help that he survived. No major organs or nerves were damaged. Also, he hasn’t spoken since he’s been here, except once while they were moving him.”

Sam pulled out a small needle and injected Leopold.

“What are you doing?”

“No fear. Leopold, wake up.”

Leopold opened his eyes and was shocked he was surrounded by unfamiliar faces, until he saw the Empress.

“Your Majesty.”

“Hello Leopold. Now I want you to relax, you are safe. My friends want to ask you a few questions. Is that alright?”

“Yes.”

“Very well.”

Sam said, “Leopold, I truly only have one very big question. It is this. Can you point me to the exact spot where you were attacked?”

“Yes.”

Sam pulled up a holographic map, saying, “Where?”

Leopold moved the marker to a spot in a back street. “I was moving north on this street when they surrounded me. It was here, just short of this corner, where they attacked me.”

“Very good. Now, is there anything you can remember, anything you haven’t told anyone else, that you can tell me about these attackers or the incident itself?”

“No. I only had a dream, then they attacked me. I don’t have anything more, except… except they moved so quickly I couldn’t even fend off one of them.”

“Were you researching anything that could have caught their attention?”

“Yes. I was searching the Imperial Library for clues as to the identity of people, groups, or sects that wear crimson robes. I threw a vast net, then began whittling it down to a narrower search.”

“Had you found anything useful?”

“No, nothing. That’s why I was so surprised by their appearance and attack.”

“Very good. Now, rest.”

Leo closed his eyes, and was sleeping within seconds.

Turning to the Empress, he said, “There is much for us to do. We’ll begin our search here, then go where leads take us. I’ll try and update you as regularly as possible, but it might be a while. However, the more I’ve thought about it, the more I believe you need to take this threat very seriously and review your security precautions to prevent just such an attack as this dream detailed. You may also want to consider traveling to another location until this is resolved. In the meantime, we must be off.”

“Thanks, we are already reviewing everything. As to leaving the planet; I can’t do that, not in good conscience. But good luck in your search. I need you to solve this one, as quickly as possible.”

They bowed, “Your Majesty.”

They left and went back to their ship.

Leo awoke after they had left. He said, “Your Majesty, who was that?”

“No one you need to know about, Leo. Now you rest, and forget all that happened here today.”

Leopold fell back to sleep, and the gentle mind numbing after effect of the injection he had received assured that he would not remember anything about the entire conversation.

On board their ship, Sam began searching every video record of that day, thirty minutes before the attack until thirty minutes after the attack. He began with a one-mile circumference. Soon he shifted to two, then three, then five, then finally ten. After searching for two days, he had nothing.

“I don’t get it.”

“Get what, Sam?”

“These people were never recorded anywhere, yet we know they were there.”

“What did you find?”

“Not much, really. There were some people, small groups, individuals; but no one that looked like they would fit the description of someone who had just attacked and nearly killed someone.”

“Magic trick?”

“No, but maybe they already deleted images?”

“Or maybe they simply don’t wear those robes until it’s the last second before need, or they are very good at controlling their emotions, travel separately; it could be a number of things.”

“You may be onto something there. But looking for someone when you don’t even know what they look like, well, that can’t be done.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“Let’s go home. Maybe we’ll think of something on the way.”

Chapter 25

Mudu

415.058.17

The next night, Sam walked into their stateroom and felt a pulling towards the bathroom. It felt like a gentle compelling tug, but one that he was unable to resist. He tried for a moment, but the torture he felt while trying to resist was harsh, so he gave in and walked into the room.

When he entered, he noticed his mirror was clear, not reflecting. He looked at it and he could see a space behind it, or inside it, it made no sense. He took a step towards it and the pull continued to grow stronger.

He managed to stop, with his nose almost exactly where the glass should have been. He could see inside, and saw a harsh landscape. It flashed through his mind that story he had read about when Stephanie and Heather fell through the wall on Xena. He nearly panicked, but his training kicked in and he calmed himself, took a deep breath, and stepped through.

What he found was not what he had observed. He walked through the mirror and walked onto the floor of the most magnificent palace he had ever seen. The floors, walls, everything, was gorgeous. The marble, gold, doors made of single gemstones, such vibrant colors, art, sculpture; it was so beautiful he nearly cried from delight. He had never seen anything like it.

After a few moments, he noticed that he didn’t see or hear anyone. Strange. He looked to his right, left, ahead and behind, and they were all long corridors stretching as far as he could see. But no one was there. He thought, ‘Where is everyone?’

He had no idea of what direction he should go, so he started walking straight ahead. It seemed so odd. Here he was in this fabulous palace, alone. Where was everyone? Why was this here? Why had he come here? He had tons of questions, and no answers. He walked.

After what he felt was over an hour, he stopped. That’s when he saw the small wooden door in the corner of the room that he was in. If felt completely out of place, which was different. In this case, he felt different was good, so, even though he felt strange, he went to it and opened it.

He stepped inside into another glorious room, but the door vanished around him. He took a step and the furniture and walls seemed to instantly age. Another and the floors were wood. Another three steps and he was standing in an old cabin, a one-room cabin, with a small bed, pot-bellied stove, table, chairs, and a fireplace. But no one was here, either.

He walked over to the door and opened it and stepped out onto a porch that looked out over a lake. He looked around and still there was no one. He walked to the edge of the porch, looking out over the lake. It was beautiful here.

He was beginning to be exasperated with this process, so said out loud, “Why am I here?”

“Because it’s where you went.”

He was startled, and spun around to see a very old woman sitting in a chair on the porch. He was sure she hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“Who are you? Where am I? What’s happening?”

She smiled, saying, “Ah, yes, questions and information. Well, I am who I have always been, you are here, and we are talking.”

“That doesn’t help. I was on a starship, I ended up in a glorious palace with no people except me, I stepped through a door and ended up here. Why?”

She smiled again, and tossing a few strands of her oily long hair aside, said, “Perhaps for you to learn.”

“Learn what?”

“One does not learn simply because someone answers their questions. One learns by experience and searching for truth. You appear in need of both.”

“For what purpose?”

“Oh, nothing important. Maybe saving the Empire, maybe not. All depends on you.”

“I believe I was visited by Dhakini when I was on my last case to save the Empire.”

Suddenly Dhakini appeared.

“Hello, Samuel.”

He was shocked at her beauty and sudden appearance. He said, “Hello. Can you tell me what is happening right now?”

She smiled, and glanced at the old woman and back to him, saying, “This is my oldest friend. She has many names, but most know her as Mudu. She is a teacher. She taught me on my quest. Listen to her. Learn. Now goodbye, I must be off.”

She vanished.

Sam looked at Mudu and said, “Very well, if she thinks it’s a good idea, then I’m ready to learn.”

“Good. First things first. Return to your ship and go to the coordinates in your mind.”

He was standing in the bathroom, looking at himself, and reading the coordinates rolling across his eyes. He quickly wrote them down, and went to find Lizzy.

Chapter 26

Deceived

415.059.11

The three who stabbed Leopold returned to their order. Since they had drawn blood, they had to inform the Master of the incident.

“Speak your truth.”

“Master, the vassal is removed.”

“You are certain?”

“Yes. We each pierced his body with our swords, he could not have survived.”

The old man stood and walked up to him. He reached out and held his head in his hands, and looking deeply into his eyes, said, “You bring me deceit, but not truth. You bring your lies here and expect reward.”

He released his head and walked back to sit. “He lives. Your task was a simple one, to eliminate him. Our Master demanded it! Now, you must learn.”

Turning, he looked at the tall one to his right, and said, “Our youth do not know our ways. Teach them, even unto death.”

The tall one said, “Yes, Master.”

He looked at the three standing before them and said, “Come.”

He walked to the side of the cavern and out a door, with the three following him. When they reached the end of the tunnel, he opened a door, and said, “Enter before me.”

The three, not knowing what else to do, entered the room. The tall one entered and closed the door behind him. He stopped inside the door as they looked around. It was a small fifty-foot round cave, with no exit. As they stood there, they noticed the door behind the tall one melted into a stone wall, matching all the walls around them. There was no way out!

The tall one said, “You did not verify the outsider’s death, but assumed it. Then you reported his death as fact to the Master. You lied. The outsider still lives. The punishment for lying, is death. Yet, you are young. You may yet be useful. But, to prove your usefulness, you must accomplish a single task. That task, leave this room alive.”

The tall one drew his sword. “To leave this room you must do two things. First, you must find the door. But before you can find the door, you must get past me.”

The three drew their swords and spread out to attempt to surround the tall one, but he remained close to the wall, so they couldn’t get around behind him. As they were trying to figure out how to begin, the tall one attacked.

He feigned to the left, but instantly shifted right and cut the one there across the chest, causing him to pull back in pain. The he shifted left, but checked himself and moved center, turned, and shoved his sword behind him into the belly of the one he had cut, dropping him to the ground.

The two remaining now knew this game was serious, so divided and attacked together. They stabbed, swung in arcs, parried, used every maneuver they knew; but they could not get past the vicious sword of their attacker.

The fight lasted for some time, until the one on the left made an error, when the tall one lunged and shoved his sword into his heart, quickly pulling it out to fend off the one in the middle. Now, it was one on one.

They fought, ruthlessly striking each other causing multiple small cuts, scrapes, and some bloodier injuries. Slowly, the one in the middle began to weaken and slow. Finally, he could not meet the sword of the tall one. The tall one swiftly used his sword and removed his head.

Standing there looking at their fallen bodies, he said, “You were not Hayku.”

Chapter 27

Orjazay

415.072.13

After stopping at home to gather what they thought they would need, Sam and Lizzy departed for a planet located far away from the central galaxy. The coordinates Mudu had given Sam identified a planet that it took nearly two weeks to get to, even in their new very fast starship. But eventually they arrived at Orjazay.

“It’s nothing but sand; a desert planet.”

“I know. It’s beautiful, and the data shows it will be very hot and dry.”

“Sure, but look how the different types of sand blend so many colors. It’s lovely.”

“It almost looks like rivers of sand.”

As they orbited the planet, they discovered that it held only a few large oases where people lived. Otherwise, it was mostly desert, no mountains, just sand. There was no spaceport, so they took their shuttle and landed on a flat surface where some other shuttles were parked, beside the largest oasis.

As they got closer in their shuttle, they realized that this wasn’t a typical oasis. The water source here was a large lake, maybe a mile wide, not a small spring of water. The lake was surrounded on three sides by tents of all sizes and colors.

“This place must hold close to two hundred thousand people.”

“I know. Much larger than it appeared on approach.”

They landed outside of a large tent-city area and walked across the sand to a path through the tents. As they walked, they heard many sounds and smelled incredible deliciousness. Children’s singing and giggling could be heard, as well as the rhythmic chanting of those in prayer.

“Listen, can you hear the laughter and joy here?”

“Yes, and the smells! My god this is wonderful!”

They continued walking through the tents, and after about half an hour, came to the edge of the lake. As the tents were only on three sides of the lake, when they approached the lake, they could see the open desert on the eastern side of the lake. Looking, they saw people riding what looked like sailboats, but on the sand, not the water!

“Oh, my goodness! How do they do that?”

“I don’t know, what about the friction?”

“I know. That’s incredible.”

An older bystander overheard them, and said, “It’s a beautiful sight, yes? And you are not from here if you have never seen the sand sailors flying across the open desert.”

Sam said, “Hi, no, we aren’t from here, and no, we’ve never seen this.”

The old man smiled, with stained brown teeth, and said, “We race, we trade, we have leisure sails. Our way of life depends on our ability to use the sand as if it were a sea.”

“How did you overcome the friction on the hull of the boats?”

“Simple, we developed a symbiotic relationship between the hull and the sand, using a special chemical only produced here. It lets the hull and the sand each feel the contact, but without the roughness that generates friction and heat.”

“Incredible. Can we purchase some of this chemical?”

“No, it’s not for sale, trade, or export.”

“I understand. We are not traders and don’t seek it for a market, but to study it. This is a wonderful discovery. I’d love to be able to take the time to research it and understand it better.”

“Perhaps. But not today.”

Lizzy said, “Of course, sir. We understand.”

He smiled, saying, “A man may count himself fortunate indeed, to have an associate of such beauty walking beside him.”

Sam bowed slightly, saying, “And I do. Thank you.”

Lizzy asked, “Oh, by the way, have you seen any crimson robed people here lately?”

“Of course, they pass through often, buying and selling various wares. They stay in the Celestria, which is the last tent on the western end of our small town.”

“Small town? This seems to hold at least a couple of hundred thousand people.”

“Yes, it does. But our cities are much bigger.”

“Cities? We didn’t see anything larger than this oasis while in orbit.”

The stranger smiled, and said, “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Thank you for your help.”

“A word of warning to you. These crimson robed people have been known to be violent when confronted. We always send a delegation to speak with them, as one or two is never enough.”

“Thanks again, we’ll be careful.”

As they walked to the end of town, Sam said, “I wonder what other secrets this planet holds?”

“I know. He said this is small compared to their cities, and implied that we couldn’t see them on purpose. I wonder what technology they truly possess here, if they can hide cities from our instruments in space.”

“I know. And, to our quest, the crimson robe people are here, and they come here regularly, and are known to be dangerous. I think that’s the most we’ve heard about them since we started this investigation.”

“I know. It makes me wonder; what is truly behind all of this, Sam? I mean, so far nothing adds up.”

“I know. I think that’s what worries me the most. Usually, I would have some idea of what was happening, who was likely behind the plot, that sort of thing. But this is far more difficult to grasp than the case of the palace murders we solved. Oh, look, that must be their tent.”

“It’s gorgeous!”

In front of them was a beautiful tent, made with material of such vivid colors it shown in the sun like a palace. It was heavily based on crimson, but there was bright lapis, gold, silver, emerald, sky blues; it was a rainbow of colors gently flowing like rivers of color in the breeze.

As they were taking a moment to look at the tent, they caught a glimpse of a three. The three turned and looked in their direction, so they started running to catch up with them. But before they could, the three simply vanished.

“What the hell?”

“Exactly, where did they go?”

“It makes no sense, Sam. They were right in front of us.”

“I know. It seems that this is going to take a while. We probably need to get some food and water if we are going to stay down here very long and figure this out. How about if you go find what we need, and I will keep looking around. Let’s meet at the central lake in thirty minutes.”

“Okay.”

Lizzy set off looking for supplies. As she was exiting one of the larger tents, one used for replenishing supplies, she was suddenly surrounded and grabbed by two sets of three crimson robed people. They wasted no time in rushing her and overcoming her resistance.

“What do you want?”

One of the kidnappers said, “From you? Nothing. But we will use you to teach others a lesson about interfering in our affairs.”

They took her through the tents to the outside of the village. People who saw them simply went back inside their tents. No one wanted to interfere with six of them.

They took her to a sliding ship and set course into the desert. It took a while, but eventually they arrived at a group of stone pillars deep in the desert. They tied her to the pillars, one hand tied to a chain from each, so she was pulled into a standing, arms spread position.

Joachim, the leader of these robed ones, then said, “You will be our sacrifice, to ensure the success of our mission.”

He looked at the five, and said, “Remove her clothes.”

The five tore and ripped her clothes off, leaving her standing naked in the heat.

Joachim then used an old-fashioned whip and whipped her, cutting her in multiple places on her sides, her back, breasts, buttocks, stomach, and legs. But she never cried out.

“You are tough, but the sun will finish you. Come, we leave her.”

They got back on their sand ship and left her.

Lizzy stood there, bleeding, hurting, and now burning in the sun. She knew she wouldn’t last long like this.

Sam arrived at the central lake and didn’t see Lizzy, so began searching. It wasn’t long before a little girl approached him.

“Sir, are you looking for the woman with long brunette hair?”

“Yes. Have you seen her?”

“Yes. She was here, but she was taken by the crimson people. They went west into the desert.”

“Thank you.”

Sam found a slider, and headed west. He didn’t know where to go. There was nothing out here but sand, no trail to follow or clues as to where they had traveled. He had tears in his eyes, fearing the worst. Just as he was ready to give up, he saw the rocks on the horizon and went there, and found Lizzy.

She was unconscious by the time he reached her. He cut her down, dressed her wounds as best he could, and loaded her onto the slider. He went as fast as possible to their shuttle, and then on to their ship.

He took her to their sick bay and laid her inside the scanner, setting it to heal all her cuts. He watched as it went up and down the length of her body, and watched as each cut was completely healed. Then he connected an intravenous feed to give her water, antibiotics, and energy. He left her sleeping, although he knew she would awaken very soon. He went to find out what had happened.

He took a look at the telemetry he had been recording from the ship. He saw the slider leave and go to the rocks; he saw it leave. It went southwest of where the rocks were located, and stopped in a smaller oasis.

‘Okay,’ he thought, ‘at least I know where you are.’

At that time, Lizzy walked into the control room.

“Lizzy! You should be resting.”

He held her gently; she rested her forehead in the crook of his neck. She whispered, “Tell me you know where these bastards are, so we can go even the score.”

He chuckled, saying, “I see nothing is wrong with your mind or spirit.”

She smiled.

“In answer to your question, yes, I have tracked them to a smaller oasis, and yes, I believe we need to pay them a visit. But we can’t kill all of them, we need information as well.”

“Fine. But I want the leader. He’s the one that whipped me.”

“Very well.”

They loaded up with various pieces of weaponry and headed to the oasis, landing quietly behind a dune. They took their time, but eventually were inside the oasis. They found three threes by the water, bowing, and praying.

Lizzy fired into the air, and all of them jumped up and started grabbing weapons to fight, except one three, which ran away behind them and entered a shuttle, which quickly departed.

Not waiting for a fair fight, Lizzy unloaded a full magazine into them, killing four of them outright.

One she shot in the leg and arm, incapacitating him.

The last she simply drew her sword and walked toward.

He pulled his sword, and smiling, attacked her.

Lizzy deftly spun and swung, cutting his arms off at the wrist. He was shocked. She pushed him into the sand and stabbed him in the heart.

She then turned to the one she shot, and said, “Now, you tell me who the hell you are before I peel you like some fruit.”

He screamed and tried to run, but she tripped him, and he fell, ending on his back looking at her.

“I will never tell you anything.”

“Where are you from?”

Silence.

“Why do you fight?”

Silence.

Sam walked over, looked at him and said, “Last chance, who are you?”

Silence.

Sam shot him between the eyes.

They ransacked all their belongings and discovered one single item, a piece of paper with the word Riser on it. Nothing more.

“None of this makes any sense.”

“No. I think we are seeing odd pieces of a puzzle without any context where they fit. Come on, let’s get home.”

Chapter 28

Lesson

415.072.23

Sam was walking into their stateroom when he felt pulled again towards the bathroom. He didn’t resist at all and walked right through the mirror and fell flat on the floor of the cabin. He got up and walked over, opened the door, and walked onto the porch.

“So, what did you learn?”

He thought, then said, “Nothing useful.”

Mudu shook her head, and said, “You who are the observer do not observe yourself. Tell me, why did you separate from Lizzy after you had been spotted by a three?”

“To prepare for the next step.”

“You were so quick to decide and go your separate ways that you failed to see the threat.”

“What threat.”

“Think.”

Sam closed his eyes and went back to the scene. There, the three seemed to vanish. He didn’t see anyone, so they decided to split. Just as he was turning to go his way, he saw it. Over between two tents beyond the current row of tents, a crimson robed figure watching. How had he missed that before?

“I missed that they were watching us.”

“Yes. You failed to observe, and because of this, Lizzy nearly died.”

“How do I improve my ability to observe?”

“By observing better. There is no secret. Look. If you are not sure, look again. Always know there is something that you may be missing. Look for the shadow behind the figure, the figure behind the trees. Never take anything at face value or give a cursory glance and think you have truly seen everything.”

“So, work at it.”

“Yes, work at it. Tell me, what was the difference between the two sailing vessels on the sand?”

He thought, and said, “The one closest to the tents was nearly toughing the sand, where the one further out was elevated above it with only three outstretched poles with skis touching the sand.”

“Which means?”

“They are even more advanced than I thought. They could fly in the sky if they wanted.”

“They could, but they love the sand too much. What else did you observe today?”

“The old man hinted at larger cities, but his words and voice were overly boastful. It was more like he was trying to brag about himself or perhaps create fear within us as to their advanced technology.”

“Did any of this cross your mind as you journeyed today?”

“Sadly, no. I was too caught up in the doing, not the observing.”

“Yes. When you learn to balance them both, you will be ready.”

Instantly, he was standing in their bathroom, looking into the mirror. He thought, ‘I have much to learn.’

Chapter 29

Relax

415.073.17

They were relaxing for a time between visits.

“It won’t be long until we get our revenge.”

“Yes, and then we will build a new empire based on power, not the stupid feel-good attitude of this Empress.”

“And won’t it be great to get out of these disgusting clothes and wear our true garbs?”

“Yes. You should go to the spa for rejuvenation. Your spirit needs it.”

She bowed and left.

When she arrived at the spa, she decided to complete a whole routine. First, a shower, then she laid on a table while six masseuses massaged her body, head to toe, front and back. Once complete, she rinsed, then went into a sauna for ten minutes, then into a steam room for twenty.

Next, she went into a warm bath, then after about ten minutes, moved into a larger pool, still warm. She went from pool to pool, the water getting slightly cooler in each one, until she came to the last one. It was a small pool you walked down into, filled with ice water.

When she walked back up, she was met by two helpers who wrapped and dried her in thick, warm, fluffy towels, and escorted her into a large solarium, where she laid down and was wrapped into a cocoon, left alone to relax for thirty minutes. By the time she was finished, she felt renewed and whole again.

Once she rejoined her companion, they departed to return to their assignment. Once they were there, they made their way to see these people they were tasked to monitor. They were escorted into the large room and made their way to where the old man sat in his chair. No one else was in the room, just the three of them.

Her companion said, “You appear to be keeping your word, but my leader fears you are careless, and could fail to deliver as you promised.”

“What do you mean, careless? We are patiently working each step and are nearly ready for the finale.”

“Yes, so you say. But if my leader has doubts, doubt exists.”

The old man was irritated at these words, but dared not challenge the one in front of him, knowing the power she possessed, and that they were sent by his master.

“As you say, but we will not disappoint you. It is in our interest, as well as yours, to finish this completely.”

“Yes, in more ways than you know.” She turned and they left.

The old man sat for a while, then called in his own generals and admirals to talk of the battle ahead and need for secrecy as they positioned and gathered their fleet for this final battle.

What was he missing that they had seen if they saw doubt? He couldn’t find anything, and eventually decided it was only a tool they used to get him to work even harder. He would.

Chapter 30

Love?

415.076.09

Alexandria went to visit Leo. That was not unusual, as they were closer than very good friends. Still, she had not yet truly gotten into his mind, much less had a chance to take advantage of his body. This was personal for her, and it was frustrating. She knew she was gorgeous. Everyone, even Leo, said so. So, what was the problem?

Leo answered the door to his apartment, “Alex, welcome. What an unexpected surprise. Please, come in.”

She kissed his cheek as she entered his apartment, and walked straight into the living area. She turned, and said, “Leo, when are you ever truly going to kiss me?”

He laughed, saying, “Alex, Alex. How many times must I say, that…”

She interrupted him, saying, “That you aren’t ready to commit or settle down. Yes, yes; I’ve heard that hundreds of times. But what does that have to do with a really passionate kiss?”

He was smiling. “Well, I believe that type of kiss is the first step towards a commitment, and, you know that until I am ready, we will not take that step. Sorry.”

She pouted. “If I didn’t truly love you, I would yell at you and storm out of your life. But because I do,” she said, as she walked over and put her arms around his neck, getting very close, holding her body against his, and looking deeply into his eyes, “I will remain patient.” She leaned in and kissed him on both cheeks, then dropped her arms and walked over to sit down.

“So, what are you up to today?”

He sat across from her, and said, “Oh, you know, still trying to find those crimson dressed people who nearly killed me.”

“Really? I would have thought you’d have given that chase up already.”

“No, the whole idea still haunts me, for some reason. No, I have to find a way to get this out of my system or I fear I’ll never be able to think properly again.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

He smiled, and said, “Not really. Except. You can continue to love me, even while I am trying to figure out all of these issues and get to a place where I can feel that I might not be losing my sanity.”

He chuckled, and added, “And just, well, keep looking sexy, and being there for me, well, that helps as well.”

She smiled, and said, “I can do all those things. One day, when you are ready, we will do so much more than look sexy together.”

They chatted a little longer, then she had to leave, so said farewell, giving him yet another kiss on the cheek.

Chapter 31

Passion

415.076.18

She was sexually frustrated with Leo, and would normally seek her relief elsewhere, but this evening she was conducting business for her new paymaster, a must do. The added benefit, which turned her on as well, was the target.

She put on her most revealing negligée, with no panties or bra underneath it. Then she put on a light overcoat, and went to see him.

When he opened the door, she said, “Good evening, My Lord. May I come in?”

“Yes, of course. How are you, Alexandria? What an unexpected visit. I haven’t seen you in a while.”

They went inside, and he said, “May I take your coat?”

She smiled, and said, “Please.”

As he took the coat from her shoulders and saw how she was dressed, he said, “What is the meaning of this?”

She turned to look at him and let him look her up and down, then said, “You see, Falcron,” as she leaned in and kissed him gently, “I am very horny and in need of a man, and for some reason, I couldn’t get you out of my mind.”

She began unbuttoning his shirt and running her fingers across his chest, then lower, until she had him naked, standing in the foyer. As she sank down to her knees, she whispered, “I see why I was thinking of you.”

In a little while, she stood up and removed her negligée, and took him by the hand and led him back into his house to his bedroom, where she completed her seduction of the Marquis.

Afterwards, he said, “My dear, why?”

She laughed, and said, “The old man instructed it. He wanted you seduced to make sure you don’t change your mind on providing information.”

“You work for them?”

“Yes, same as you. I do as I’m told, I get paid. It’s business. But, Lord Falstock, I must say, doing business with you is such a pleasure.”

He laughed. “Well, my dear, that goes double for me. Maybe we can have an arrangement where we continue to satisfy each other’s needs?”

She smiled, saying, “Now that would be just lovely.”

“What about Leo?”

She laughed, and said, “As much as I have tried, he just doesn’t respond to me sexually.”

Falcron chuckled, and said, “Honestly, I don’t understand that boy. Not be sexually turned on by you? He must be a eunuch and just hasn’t told anyone.”

She smiled, saying, “I think we should try this again and see if we can do it better this time.”

He smiled and simply reached for her, and they made love passionately, yet again.

Chapter 32

Conversation

415.080.19

Empress Penelope was seriously stressed by not having received any word from her sleuth. She paced the floor in her personal study, but finally couldn’t stand just waiting, so decided to talk with Leo, who was still healing from his wounds. She didn’t call him, but walked to the suite he was using to recover, and for his own research.

When she entered the room, unannounced, he was shocked. “Your Majesty, I’m sorry…)”

She cut him off. “Leo, stop. I just needed to talk with someone. I haven’t heard anything for some time regarding this entire situation, and I just need a conversation to help clear my head.”

“Of course, Your Maj…)”

“Leo,” again cutting him off. “Please, we’ve known each other for many years, so when we are alone, call me Penelope.”

He looked at her for a moment, then relaxed, smiled, and said, “Of course, Penelope. I would also prefer informality between us when we are alone. May I offer you a glass of wine? It’s vintage 325 cabernet from the vineyards on Xena.”

“A 325? Of course, I’d love to have one. Wherever did you find it?”

He laughed, saying, “Believe it or not, I went to Xena for some research, and they have a store that sells wine.”

“That’s funny. I will have to tell my sommelier about it.”

He poured them both a glass of wine and then sat down beside her. She tasted it, and said, “Mmm…, that’s good. So, tell me, what are you working on?”

“Well, I’m trying to understand these various pieces of information regarding crimson robed people.”

“Oh, you’ve found something?”

“Well, not really. But I have found some cross-connections I didn’t see before.”

“Is it something we can use operationally?”

“No, Penelope, at this stage it’s just information, but not actionable.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t be disappointed. You have to have a direction before you can find a clue that leads to something tangible that enables action. I’m at the very beginning, trying to understand this so we can develop suspects. Then we can talk about operational intelligence.”

She laughed, “Yes, I know. Oh well, you can’t blame me for asking. It’s such a stressful time, not knowing if this is real and if it will happen. I wake up in the night thinking it is happening while I sleep.”

He reached over and held her hand, saying, “Don’t worry, Penelope. We’ll figure this out.”

She looked into his eyes and smiled, and setting her glass down she raised her other hand, and touched his face. “I know, Leo. I just hope we are in time to prevent disaster.”

He leaned over and held her in his arms, and they sat quietly together, feeling something that neither of them had been looking for.

Chapter 33

Venochoo

415.084.13

Sam and Lizzy were on their way home when Sam was notified from within his network that a three had been seen on the planet Venochoo. He verified, and learned that they were there now. They set maximum speed to get there.

Once they arrived, he met his contact.

“Larkin, good to see you.”

“You, as well, Sam.”

“So, any word on the target?”

“Yes, they are here, in the Temple of Sakluman.”

“Why a temple?”

“I don’t know, but this temple is not a good one. It’s devoted to curses and spells of the worst kind.”

“Why is it allowed to exist?”

He chuckled, saying, “Because no one here is willing to go there and even talk with them, much less do something about it. Everyone is afraid of them.”

“Ok. Well, we have no choice. Thank you for the information.”

“Be safe, my friend.” He then turned and walked around a building and out of sight.

Lizzy said, “So, what’s the plan?”

“Well, I see no other choice than to try and get into that temple and find those crimson robed people and learn what’s going on.”

“Alright. Let’s go have a look at this temple.”

They walked to where they could see it, and managed to circle the temple looking for access points. Finally, Lizzy said, “Okay, I have a plan, but we need some specific armaments. Let’s go.”

They went back to their ship and found what was needed, and returned to the temple.

“Okay, see that smaller door to the left of the main entrance? That’s where we’re heading.”

“Okay, you’re the boss.”

They managed to get to the door unseen, and she used a tool to quietly open the door, which they entered. Inside it was dark. There were only some small lanterns and candles providing light. They stood silent for some time, both to get accustomed to the light and to make sure no one heard them enter. They could hear chanting; quiet, rhythmic, and gently paced, coming from behind the curtains ahead of them. Lizzy stealthily went to a pillar where the curtains waved, and peered inside.

She returned to Sam, and whispered, “There are only three, kneeling and praying before the alter.”

“Plan?”

“We enter together, in case there are some I missed.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

As they opened the curtain, Sam accidentally hit a small table, from which fell a stone.

The three turned to them, having heard the sound.

One of the three said, “What do you want?”

Lizzy responded, “We want answers.”

“What questions?”

“Who are you?”

“That we cannot answer.”

“Why not?”

“Because to tell you would mean we must kill you, and we hold no animosity towards you.”

“Eight of your dead friends tried to kill me. Now do you have animosity?”

Sam said, “But before you respond, you should know that we will find out who you are and where you come from, and when we do, we will destroy you.”

The three moved, in unison without saying a word, and pulled swords, and stood, waiting.

Lizzy and Sam waited, then they too, pulled swords and waited.

Instantly the three moved, the two on the left attacking Sam, whom they assumed was the best warrior, while the one on the right moved to attack Lizzy.

Lizzy shifted her right foot enough for the one on the right to pause and alter his attack, but what she really did was shift her weight left, spinning, and fell on her back to slide in front of Sam and pierce the middle one in his belly, up through his heart.

Sam feigned left, but actually shifted his weight right, stepping past Lizzy and blocking the one on the right, spinning him to bring his back towards Lizzy.

Lizzy leapt from the floor and slashed behind her, stabbing him, then pulled and swung left, blocking that one.

Sam provided the death blow to the right one, then moved past Lizzy to hold his sword to the throat of the one remaining, while Lizzy sliced him in the abdomen and kicked his sword from his hand.

Instantly, he was on his back, a sword to his throat and a foot on his arm, with another sword held above him.

Lizzy said, “Now, you bastard, you will tell us what we want to know.”

“You may cut me and kill me, but I will never tell you anything.”

“Right.”

Sam put his sword away and got him on his feet. He pulled ropes from his pouch and found a place to throw it over a rafter. He brought it over and tied it to the arms of the captured warrior, and pulled hard, lifting him just an inch off the ground.

“Ok. You won’t talk. So, I guess I’ll talk. We know you plan to destroy Meladeran and thereby, you believe, the Empire. What we don’t know, is why.”

“Why? Look no further than the injustice of your Empire. Look no further than the pain they inflict when they destroy a people. They don’t deserve to live. Their destruction will be the greatest gift ever given to a people – revenge!”

“Revenge for what?”

“I will not say more. Kill me if you must.”

“No, we don’t kill anyone except those who are trying to kill us.”

“Then give me my sword and let me die killing you!”

Sam cut the rope and handed him his sword.

Lizzy held her sword and the warrior leapt at her and fought fiercely, but he was no match for her and soon died with his friends.

“So, the empire is destroying people. I wonder what people that could be?”

“Well, it’s the first clue we’ve found.”

“Yes, but a clue to what?”

“I’m not sure. We know of the crimson robe people, we know the word, riser, we know of a thirst for revenge against the Empire for something that may have happened who knows when. Still not a lot to go on.”

“Maybe Leo has found something more.”

“Let’s go find out.”

Chapter 34

Panic

415.087.13

Leopold was having a panic attack. He felt an overwhelming desperation to get out of the palace as fast as he could! He felt he was in danger. He knew he was healed, but he felt trapped.

He decided to make a run for it. He sneaked out of his room and exited into the main hallway of the palace. He kept walking, but suddenly he looked into an open door of a room he’d never seen before. Inside were spinning arcs and magical levitated flying machines.

A man dressed in a scientist’s suit asked, “Do you like this?”

“Yes, its magical.”

“No, not magic, just applied physics using some interesting things we’ve discovered in the Andromeda galaxy.”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, well, I could ask you the same. It’s not usual for someone to show up in pajamas.”

Leopold looked down and realized his dilemma.

Just then the Empress entered the room, with her entourage in tow.

The scientist said, “Your Majesty.”

Leopold was stunned and couldn’t even say that.

The Empress smiled, and said, “Everyone leave us, except this gentleman in his best dress pajamas.”

Once they were alone, she said, “Leopold, are you okay?”

He was nearly shaking, at first. “I…, I…, Yes, I believe I am, Your Majesty. Please forgive me, I was running away when I found this room.”

“Running away? From what? You are safe here.”

“Yes, here, no, you see, I was running away from Alexandria and my father. I have dreamed they want to kill me.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. A dream as vivid as my dreams about the crimson robe people. Penelope, you, and I, we went to school together, we’ve known each other for years and years. I honestly feel unsafe here now.”

“Leo, what do you think is making you feel that way?”

“I’m not sure. But something, there is something that is causing this upset. I can’t put my finger on it, I just have this feeling.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Help me. Please just help me get away from them.”

“Okay, if you insist. Come with me.”

They exited the room and her entourage quickly fell into place, but this time she went back to her personal quarters. Once there, she contacted Fleet Admiral Johansen.

“Admiral, I need you to take Leopold Falstock to the planet Norctel, for his own safety. Maintain a guard and be prepared for an attack upon him.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I am having a number of your marines take him directly to you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I will personally see to it.”

“Thank you.”

She waved for the marines guarding her palace to come over and gave them instructions, then turned to Leo, and said, “Leo, go now, I will come see you soon, but you are safe.”

“Thank you, Penelope.”

It took a few days, but eventually he arrived on the planet Norctel, the premier spiritual relief and understanding healing center of the Empire. When he arrived, he was met by Siiabella, who worked with him to determine what he needed, then walked him through their healing process for several weeks.

Once Leopold was on his way to Admiral Johansen, and based upon his behavior, the Empress reached out to Sam and Lizzy.

“Your Majesty, we were just talking about you. How can we be of service?”

“Sam, Leopold is having some significant issues. He believes Alexandria and his father want him dead. He ran through the hallways of the palace. I found him, still in his pajamas.”

“What did you do?”

“I sent him to the planet Norctel for treatment.”

“Okay, good.”

“Any news?”

“Yes, we have movement, but it’s still far too soon to tell where it leads. One thing though, these people are very real and very dedicated. I would be amiss if I didn’t tell you that the dream Leopold had still haunts me as well. Please take all precautions.”

“We will, anything I can do to help?”

“No, not right now. We will be in touch when we have news. Oh, I almost forgot. We do want to talk with Leopold.”

“Okay, why don’t you make your way to Norctel, I will try and get there in a few days as well.”

“Excellent, we’ll see you there.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

“Your Majesty.”

Chapter 35

Missing

415.087.16

Since Leo had departed, the Empress had maintained an increased guard of her person as well. She wasn’t sure, but she also kept watch on the comings and goings of Alexandria and Falcron. She was not surprised when they both appeared, apparently in desperation, that Leo was missing from the palace.

“Your Majesty, the Lady Alexandria and Marquis Falstock request an urgent meeting with you.”

“Very well. But Captain, please remain at my side and be on your guard. There is something about these two that I do not quite trust.”

“Your Majesty.”

They entered her office, in a seeming rush.

“Your Majesty! Leopold is missing!”

“Calm down, Alexandria. What do you mean, he is missing?”

“I mean, he was in his room and now he’s not, and we cannot find him anywhere.”

“Interesting.”

Falcron said, “Your Majesty, how can we have lost Leopold in the palace?”

“I’m not sure, Falcron; but that sounds like what has happened, from what Alexandria was saying.”

“Yes, and if he is not to be found, I don’t believe there is reason for us to remain hidden within the walls of the palace any longer.”

“Very well, if you must depart, make it so. We will continue to search for Leopold.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

As they left her office, she thought, ‘That sounds like someone who wanted to leave the palace and is using Leo as an excuse. Interesting. Maybe there was more truth in Leo’s ranting than not.’

After they departed the palace, Falcron said to Alexandria, “Well, darling, it’s about time we got out of that palace. I thought we’d be trapped in there forever.”

Alexandria looked around and pulled him over to a small park into a grove of trees and kissed him, deeply and hard. “Oh, my goodness, I’ve wanted you so badly for so long. Take me here, now.”

They made love passionately in the quiet grove of trees. Afterwards, they left, going to his residence for a shower together.

“And what do we do when we find Leopold?”

He thought a moment, then said, “In light of the circumstances, I suppose we’ll have to kill him and report it to the overlords.”

She looked pained for a moment, then said, “Yes, I believe you are correct. Are you alright with that?”

He sighed, then said, “I have no choice now. For some reason Leopold was given a dream of a truth, and I, thinking it would be a good laugh at the palace, shared it with the Empress. Once I realized no one was laughing, I also realized he was expendable. After all, it was only a failure to see it through that prevented that first three from killing him.”

“Yes, it would have been better if they would have been successful. But alas, we are where we are.”

“And you? Any regrets?”

She smiled, and said, “Oh, no, my lord. None at all. It won’t be long now until we rule our own planet and perhaps even more. No, I’ve no regrets. Just dreams and desires.”

Chapter 36

Norctel

415.095.10

As they were on their final approach to Norctel, Lizzy asked Sam, “Why is it again that you feel a need to talk with Leopold?”

“Because he’s a historian, one of the best, and maybe he’ll have some useful information, even if he doesn’t know it. Sometimes, it depends on the question asked to spur a thought. Maybe I haven’t asked the right questions.”

They arrived at Norctel and discovered an Imperial Battleship, along with a much larger armada, in space around it. However, apparently their registration was known because they were cleared through quickly. They landed the ship instead of taking the shuttle, so they could update their supplies.

Once Lizzy finished talking with the port authorities, they left for the clinic.

The word clinic is a misleading term, as this entire planet was a clinic. But they found their way to the central administrative offices and began their inquiries to find Leopold.

“Why are you looking for this individual?”

“I want to talk with him.”

“Why?”

“Not your concern.”

“All our patients are my concern. Who are you?”

“Look, never mind.”

They walked outside and Sam called the Empress.

“Yes?”

“Your Majesty, we are on Norctel trying to see Leopold and are having a little problem getting through the administrative wall. Can you help?”

She laughed, “Yes, I can help. Where are you exactly?”

“We are outside central admissions.”

“Wait there.”

About five minutes later a doctor, along with several others, approached them. “Are you Sam?”

“Yes.”

“Please, come this way, we’ll get you to see Doctor Leopold.”

As they walked, Lizzy said, “There is way too much security for a few sick people in a hospital.”

“Agreed.”

It took about forty-five minutes, riding in a fast human transport, but soon they entered a station and got out. They walked a short distance and turned left into a hallway and walked for a while. Then they turned right and stopped. Several serious looking marines occupied this hallway. The doctor informed them that these were expected and approved guests. The Marine knocked and then opened the door. Someone inside said, “Yes?”

“The guests the Empress called for.”

From inside Leo opened the door wider and waved Sam and Lizzy into the room, then closed the door.

“There you are. Welcome, Lizzy, Sam.” Leopold gave each of them a hug. “Thank you for saving my life.”

“Honestly, we haven’t done anything, yet.”

Sam saw someone else in the room, and said, “Your Majesty, may I ask why you are here?”

She smiled, “Yes, but it is private. Now, the more urgent question is why you are here.”

“I need to pick a historians brain.”

“What about?”

“Leopold, does the name ‘Riser’ mean anything to you? Anything that could be associated with a group or a cult, anything? Also, revenge against the Empire for some level of hurt that its destruction would feel justified?”

“Riser, riser, riser.” He walked around the room, mumbling to himself, stopping, and closing his eyes, still with his lips moving, but no sound. After about ten minutes, he said, “The only reference, in any meaningful way, that I can place the word Riser, is with a group that tried to stop Jeffrey Wilson from sending pods out from old Earth. That was during the years before lightspeed travel on Earth, over three hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Who was this, Riser?”

“Oh, he was a cult leader. His followers were killed and so was he. It was well documented. That ended back then. There was no mention of these people in any of the histories I’ve read since then. The only reason I know the name is that Empress Stephanie was a security chief for Jeffrey, and she did a very daring assault on the ones at the pods. Remarkable story of a remarkable lady.”

“Okay, thanks. I just wanted to know.”

“What news then?”

“None, Your Majesty. We are at a standstill. No idea what we will do next.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What do we do?”

“Stay alert. Well, we should depart. Hope to see you again soon, Your Majesty.”

Once they were outside and away from prying ears, Lizzy said, “Okay, Sam, what’s the plan?”

“We go to the beginning. We find out who these people were and see if any connection still remains.”

“Where are we going?”

“Old home Earth.”

Chapter 37

End of the Line

415.096.12

The crimson robed man entered the room and walked with confidence. He stopped in front of the old man.

“Speak, brother.”

“Master, the spy and his mistress deceived us. The one we sought to kill is not just alive, but he is well and protected by the Empress. These two know it and have deceived us in their reports.”

“Bring them to me.”

He turned and left the room. He traveled with four threes. They took one of their own ships, one that was known and recognizable to the Empire. The time was not yet to fight them.

They arrived on Meladeran in the early evening, and went to their destination, Falcron’s villa. They burst down the door and found the two of them, entwined body to body.

Falcron pushed her away, stood, and said, “What is the meaning of this?”

The leader hit him hard, knocking him over onto the floor. They grabbed both of them and took them to their ship and departed to see the master.

When they arrived, they were brought in, shackled, before the old man. They were brought to him in a large room that appeared old and run down. The old man sat on a regular chair, while many stood around the walls, watching, and waiting.

Standing in the shadows to the side and behind the old man were two people dressed all in black, almost unseen.

The old man said, “So, you lie.”

Falcron was the first to speak. “No, you’ve got it wrong. We are still searching for him, he’s gone. Please, I’ve done all you ask.”

“You plead? Remember, spy, you agreed to work for me. You later agreed to kill your son in exchange for the ownership of a planet, after the war. You said the problem had been solved. You lied.”

Turning to the woman, he said, “What is your story?”

“You know it; keep him close until the time he is no longer useful, then eliminate him and move to the next task.”

“Why do you keep your eyes closed?”

“Because, no woman is allowed within these walls, so I dare not open my eyes to see that which I am forbidden.”

The old man then said, “I give you this boon. You may open your eyes on one condition.”

“Yes?”

“He is no longer useful. You need your eyes to do your task and prove yourself valuable still.”

She opened her eyes. “What do you prefer, knife, blaster, or hands?”

“Knife. Give her a blade.”

They removed her shackles and gave her a blade. She took the offered blade and turned to Falcron, who was standing. She kicked him hard in the balls, bringing him to his knees, and walked around behind him. Then she grabbed his hair and pulled his head back, revealing his open throat, then she reached around and sliced deeply across his throat, severing the arteries. He grabbed his throat and fell to the ground, and soon was dead. She held out the blade handle first, and closed her eyes.

“Well done, sister. Your honor is maintained. Now go, I will send you a new target soon.” He looked at the one who had brought her, saying, “Take her arm and guide her out of this room, then return her to whence she came. Treat her well, she is worth more than many of us in this room.”

“What should we do with the body?”

“Dump it on the Imperial Palace steps. That’ll give them something new to think about.”

Chapter 38

Weakness

415.102.14

“Honestly, tell me, Admiral, do we have a weakness someone could exploit?”

“Your Majesty, the dream you told me about, there are literally tens of thousands of doors down thousands of miles of deep trench cooling channels within that generating system. Could one be a weak link? Of course. But we have checked every one of them, and we don’t see a weakness.”

“What of the hinges and metal?”

“We don’t know of any substance that can melt through one of those doors’ hinges, Your Majesty. If there were such a thing, well, we would have to start at square one. But there is no substance with those characteristics in our known universe.”

“So, you are telling me you believe we are safe here?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. And even if we decided to move everyone off planet, it would take years. Then you would need to find a place to reconstitute government. It would be such a nightmare and an impossible task.”

“Yes, I know that. But still, if there is even a hint of a threat, we must counter each one. Think of something, Admiral. I don’t think we are out of the woods on this one yet.”

He bowed slightly, and said, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Alexandria was miffed. She hadn’t seen or heard from Leopold for days and days. Where could he be? She still needed to kill him, and the empress. She decided she needed to get the attention of someone high up in the palace. She set her eyes on the Royal Lord Chamberlain. She knew nothing really happened on this planet without the Lord Chamberlains knowledge.

She set out to seduce him. She found out where he liked to go, who he spent time with, what he liked to do. She researched him and finally pinned him down at being at a party for the Lord Chancellor. She knew the Lord Chancellor through her parents, so found it easy to get an invitation to the party.

She dressed in the most revealing dress she could find. It sparkled red, crimson, gold; it was nearly see-through, the front cut down below her belly button, the sides were open from the ground up to her hips. She had plenty of bare skin in this game.

She arrived early and found a good seat, where she could see everyone that arrived. She watched as the Lord Chamberlain was met by the Lord Chancellor, and escorted to a table with a stunning view of the city. She also noticed that the Lord Chamberlain was alone.

She got up and walked over to the table and ‘accidentally’ bumped into the Lord Chancellor.

“Oh, please excuse me, I was watching the skyline and didn’t see you.”

“That’s ok, my dear. Please, I’d like to introduce the Lord Chamberlain. Thomas, meet Lady Alexandria DeCampo, the daughter of an old friend.”

“I am honored to meet you,” Alexandria said.

Thomas stood, and took her hand, giving it a peck with his lips, saying, “The honor is mine. Please, My Lady, would you care to join me this evening?”

She blushed, and said, “Of course, My Lord.”

Chapter 39

Death on the Steps

415.103.06

Empress Penelope was in the gym, working out. She had changed her lifestyle and began something new, a direct result of having spent time watching Lizzy. She loved how Lizzy seemed almost cat-like in her movements, like each step had strength and purpose. She wanted to have that type of core strength.

“Your Imperial Majesty, the Guard Captain of the Imperial Palace Guard, Colonel Drangle, wishes a word with you. He says it is quite urgent.”

She was on a walker, but stopped it and grabbed a towel to wipe sweat from her neck and face, saying, “Very well, send him in.”

The aide bowed and exited, soon bringing in the colonel.

“Your Majesty,” he bowed.

“Yes, Colonel Drangle, how can I help you today?”

“Your Majesty, Marquis Falcon Falstock of Cartathonia has been murdered.”

She was shocked! “What? When? How? Where?”

“Your Majesty, his body was discovered a short time ago in the shrubs beside the palace gate. He has been dead for at least a few days, maybe a week.”

“Who would do such a thing? How was he killed?”

“Your Majesty, I do not know who could have done this. However, he was killed by the use of a knife across the throat.”

“Damn. Very well, Colonel, that will be all.”

He bowed, saying, “Your Majesty,” and turned and departed.

She walked over and picked up her communicator and called Admiral Johansen.

“Your Majesty.”

“Admiral, Marquis Falstock was murdered, and his body dropped at the palace gates. Double your security of Leopold Falstock, no one gets in to see him without my specific approval, and I do mean not a soul. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Also, this simply makes it even clearer that something is taking place we are unaware of. I need you to gather all Star Fleet forces and prepare for this fight. I don’t know where the enemy will strike from, but we must be fully prepared with battle plans in place.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I have a bad feeling, Admiral. There just seems to be too many things happening that are potentially connected, yet outside of our ability to understand.”

“Your Majesty, there are many things happening in the Empire. Many of them are connected and many are not. I am not sure all of these are, but one thing I do know; your Star Fleet is ready for any contingency.”

“I am expecting that.”

She next called her sleuth. But she couldn’t get through. She tried all the means at her disposal, but couldn’t get through.

“Damn,” she said.

Chapter 40

Earth

415.114.11

They entered normal space half a parsec out from Earth. It was still small, but even from this distance you could see blue. As they got closer and entered into orbit around the planet, they saw a majestic sight.

“Look at how blue, green, and white it is, Sam. It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, far nicer than Meladeran or our own planet, for that matter.”

“Why would anyone want to leave this?”

“I don’t know. But from what I’ve read, once upon a time there were more than ten billion people, high pollution, warring sides with weapons of mass destruction threatening each other, stress; I mean, once upon a time it was brutal here.”

“Wow. Take away a lot of people and get rid of that stress and the planet thrives.”

“And the people, I bet.”

“Well, were about to find out. Any idea where you want us to land?”

“Well, I think we should take the shuttle and leave the Lazy B here.”

“Okay. Where to start?”

“I think we should go to the main spaceport in Omaha. That seems to be where everything started. Maybe they have a museum or some such we could use to research.”

“Omaha it is.”

Once they landed, they went to the main terminal and found a lot of references to Empress Stephanie, and the Wilson Family.

“Interesting. I never really associated all those people with Earth. Let’s take a look and see what we can find out about those early years, in particular those years of the pods.”

They found a small museum in the spaceport, and talking with one of the employees, were directed to a much larger facility outside the spaceport, in Omaha, in one of the old original buildings of JW Enterprises. It was fascinating.

“Sam, come here, I think I found something.”

“What is it?”

“Well, it says that the leader of the group was called Riser, and his followers were The Servants of Riser.”

“What else?”

“Not much, really. Actually, nothing. But at least it confirms the original story Leopold told us.”

“Damn. I know he knew that story, but I don’t think he had a chance or reason to truly investigate it. I wonder if the original documents from the era are archived?”

“Not sure, but it doesn’t hurt to ask.”

They found the curator and asked him lots of questions, and in the end, he directed them to the central Wilson Family Archives, located in the main museum downtown in Omaha. They went there and found documents, but with limited time, didn’t truly find anything useful. However, Sam copied a lot of old documents from the original for later perusal.

They left the museum, but couldn’t decide where to go. Lizzy said, “There are a lot of references to a place called Destin, so maybe we should go check that out.”

“Sounds good to me. I believe it has a beach.”

They made reservations and departed via their shuttle, arriving in the late afternoon. Their accommodation was the Emerald Grande, a hotel mentioned often in the Wilson Family history. It was still spectacular, and maintained as it was during their time. There were photos of the Wilson Family everywhere in the hotel, it was quite interesting.

They decided to take a few days out of their busy schedule and just enjoy some relaxation. After all, nothing made a person feel better than a few days of fun in the sun. They rode jet skis on the blue/green crystal-clear water, ate at some fabulous restaurants, laid on the beach, went to a spa, and generally had a great mini vacation.

On one outing they went to the private beach of the resort. It was a quiet morning on the channel, with only a few people there. They walked through fluffy white sand to get to their chairs, and enjoyed the deep blue sky and clear blue water. They sat in their chairs under an umbrella and listened to the gentle lapping of the water on the shore. They went swimming to cool off, and the water was refreshing on this warm day, but not cold, with a very weak current. As they watched, they saw a few fishing boats, and some tourist boats, passing back and forth through the wide channel. It was just lovely.

But then one evening Sam found a single sentence in a report that said the survivors of the original servants were eventually tracked down to a place called Page, Arizona.

“Lizzy, I think I’ve found something.”

He explained what he had found, and they began a search. They reviewed its location and size, and eventually decided to take their shuttle to Page and see what they could see.

Their first impression was shock. They walked into the terminal and saw several crimson robes.

“What the hell? Are they hiding in plain sight?”

“I don’t know Lizzy, but this is very interesting. A cult that was deemed dead for hundreds of years is suddenly not only about to change the future of the Empire, but is operating in the open upon the very planet where they started. How is it no one knows this? How could Leopold not have found this? Doesn’t Star Fleet patrol this sector?”

“I don’t know, but we have to follow them.”

“I agree. Let’s get transportation.”

Their ground transport followed the vehicles the crimson robed people were in, a route that took them south of town. But when the vehicles turned off the main road, their driver refused to follow.

“People don’t go out there. Too many people have never come back.”

They returned and decided that since Page was a small town, they would not be un-noticed, so they took their shuttle and went to Flagstaff, a larger city, and reconnoitered Page from the south.

What they found was beautiful. It was sand all the way, but of many colors and ribbons of color, from red dirt to white, black, mixtures of colors, oranges, it was just beautiful. It was a desert made of buttes, canyons, valleys; it was a gorgeous country. They drove a ground transport along the highway and decided to stop and see Horseshoe Bend, a magnificent view of the Colorado River.

“You know Sam, I don’t think I’ve seen too many things as beautiful as this place.”

“I know. It’s gorgeous.”

They explored. They had an off-road vehicle and took it to get deeper into the area. Having followed the vehicles out, they had some rough idea of where they were heading. But there were more canyons and lost spaces than they realized. It was tough going for two days.

Finally, they parked their vehicle and set out on foot. It took another day before they arrived at an overlook of where they thought the crimson robes should be, an isolated set of buildings about fifteen miles south of Page, through a dry canyon up onto a small butte. Private, no doubt.

Lizzy pulled out her snoopers and discovered that they had a fairly sophisticated perimeter defense system, inclusive of trip wires, infrared, and motion detectors, and what looked like defensive weaponry mounted at intervals around the compound.

Sam noticed they had some serious communication equipment mounted on a hill nearby. Whoever was here, they were intent on not being disturbed, but being in contact.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think that it will be difficult to get inside, and once we do, it might be even more difficult to get out.”

“I agree, but if we don’t go in, we will never learn what we need to know.”

“Your call.”

“Okay, let’s go in, but be careful with it.”

They got through the security perimeter and managed to get up beside a wall. They thought they were sneaking in, when they were suddenly surrounded by twelve crimson robed people, each holding a blaster pointed at them. They were given a choice, to die or surrender. They surrendered and were taken into separate buildings.

Sam was brought into a room, a large room, where about fifty people were assembled. All males, no females seen. He was brought up to see an old man sitting in a chair and told to sit, so he sat in a chair directly in front of the old man.

The old man finally looked at him and said, “Why do you seek us?”

He said, “I am not certain you are who I seek, yet I do seek those who dress in deep crimson robes.”

“Why?”

“I believe they are descended from the original Servants of Riser, and am interested to see if that is true.”

“You still have not answered the question.”

“Yes, well, someone I deeply respect asked if I could try and find out who it was that hurt her friend, Leopold. They were three men dressed in deep crimson robes. Hence my quest. Are you the ones who would have hurt my friend’s friend?”

“I know of what you speak about. The three who hurt your friends’ friend acted out of arrogance, they are no longer a concern.”

“Meaning?”

“Their actions were discovered by us, and we dealt with them in the harshest manner. They are no longer with us.”

“Very good, then I no longer have a need to search for you.”

“Yet you did find us. Now the question is, what do we do with you?”

“Might I suggest you let me, and my friend, go? As we no longer need to search for you, as you have informed me the one’s I sought are no longer able to harm my friend’s friend further, it would seem we are at an impasse where we should each go our own way.”

The old man merely looked at him, and said, “Perhaps.”

He motioned with his hand and one of the ones in the room left. A moment later they brought Lizzy in, her head covered in a bag so she could not see, and sat her down in a chair beside Sam.

“Relax, Lizzy. We are discussing the future.”

The old man said, “Yes, the future. What is yours to be? That is the key question.” He paused, then said, “What assurances can we get from you that you will not continue to follow or harass us?”

“I am not sure. While I can assure you that we were not trying to do more than find the ones who hurt my friend’s friend, I am not sure I can give you a guarantee of sufficient depth or meaning that you would believe, except to say this. We will not pursue you unless we are harmed or another of my friend’s friends are harmed. If we are left in peace, so shall we leave you.”

The old man smiled, and said, “Very well. We will leave you in peace, even if momentarily restrained pending our departure. Good day.”

Several men approached from behind, and they covered Sam’s head with a bag as well, then hauled them both off to a transport, a bumpy ride, until they eventually stopped. They were pulled over and forced to lay on their backs on the rocks and dirt. Their arms were tied to stakes in the ground. Lastly, their head coverings were removed as the men moved away. As it was dark, they couldn’t see where they went, but soon heard their transport start and move away into the distance.

They lay there, tied to the ground in the dark.

“We won’t survive like this in the sun. It’ll dehydrate us and we’ll die.”

“Yes, I know. Now, to get free.”

After a little while, Lizzy said, “I can’t figure this out and the stakes don’t budge.”

“Yes, I agree. Let me think.”

Suddenly, Mudu appeared.

“Well, a predicament, for sure.”

“Who are you?”

“Ah, Lizzy. I see you are in this together. That gives me hope.”

“Yes, but, well, untie us then!”

“Ah, that would be the easy road, for sure. But what is ever learned on the easy road now, eh? No, this is going to be difficult. Neither of you may get through.”

“I don’t understand!”

“Relax. This is a moment where observation and logic prevail. There is a path, but can you set aside your fear of death to find it? That is the lesson.” She disappeared.

“What the hell was that?”

“Calm down, Lizzy. Remember, I told you about my dream? Well, that was her, Mudu, the old woman. Now give me a moment, I have to think.”

Slowly, the sun began to rise. First, there was the glow of the possibility of light, the deep reds, and crimson colors of early dawn. These were slowly replaced with orange colors before shifting to yellow. By now, they could see around them.

Sam was searching desperately, and suddenly, he saw it.

“Lizzy, be still. Now, with your right hand, gently feel the surface, that’s right, a little to the left, slowly; there is a stone there. Feel it and gently pick it up.”

Lizzy was very careful but did as she was told.

“Good. Now, as the sun rises, I want you to hold that between your thumb and index finger and hold it up. Perfect, now don’t drop it.”

Slowly the sun topped the horizon and the stone she held was a gemstone that harvested the sun’s rays and bent them towards a single point. Sam held his left arm up and managed to get his rope into that light. Slowly, it began to steam. Then it began to let off a little smoke. He held his rope steady as long as he could, but eventually the sun rose too high, and it was lost.

Once the sun was up, he pulled hard on his rope, but it didn’t break.

Lizzy said, “Sam, stop. Now I want you to slowly breathe, in and out, gently. Now, breathe heavier, take in a lot, and blow it out, again, again! Now, when I say, I want you to yell out with all your strength and pull like you have never pulled in your life. Ready? NOW!”

Sam yelled, “Argh!!!!!” He pulled with all his might, and just before he was ready to collapse, the rope snapped!

He used his free arm to free his other hand and then his legs, then he freed Lizzy. They lay there in the dirt, kissing, and holding each other.

Finally, Lizzy said, “I don’t know what you want to do, but I want to find those people and kick their butts!”

Sam laughed, saying, “No doubt. But this is a little bigger than our hatred. Come on, we have work to do.”

They found their vehicle and headed back to Flagstaff to their shuttle. They departed north and activated their scanners and found the compound, but it was vacant. They landed and searched, just to see if any clues were left, but didn’t find anything. As they were getting ready to depart, Lizzy saw a cemetery.

“Sam, look. Let’s go check it out. After all, it is history.”

They walked over to the cemetery and discovered on one headstone, the words:

“Thus ends the life of a warrior, a leader, a true Hayku. Ancestors are delighted!”

“What’s a Hayku?”

“I don’t know. But it’s the only thing we’ve seen that might have some kind of meaning. Let’s get out of here.”

Chapter 41

Plans

415.115.09

Star Fleet was highly concerned about the potential for an attack against Meladeran. The senior council, made up of leaders from throughout the Empire, regularly met to discuss a wide range of issues. But today, they convened with only one topic on the agenda, the defense of Meladeran.

The first to speak was Fleet Admiral Johansen.

“Welcome all. Most of you are apprised of the situation we are facing. As a quick summary, here are the known facts.”

He laid out everything from the initial dream of Dr. Falstock, through the attack by crimson robed people on him, through to the murder of Marquis Falstock, Dr. Falstock’s father.

“We have researched the energy generation sector on Meladeran, and it appears there may very well be a potential for someone to breach it. The problem is that there are thousands of miles of narrow canyons and tens of thousands of doors. We can’t place guards at all of them 24/7; not in the long run.”

“The second concern is simple: where are the ships identified in the dream, from? We’ve scanned and searched throughout the Empire, but have not found any evidence of a fleet gathered anywhere within striking distance of Meladeran, or anywhere else, for that matter.”

He discussed a few other minor issues, then said, “Thoughts?”

Admiral Nachella spoke. “Admiral, before we speak of possible enemies, what about our own weaknesses? Where are we vulnerable? If there is someone planning this operation, they must have observed us for many years in order to have confidence their plans would work.”

“Good point. We have conducted some brain-storming sessions here and determined that there are weaknesses. We know we are weakest at detecting short-range threats. We have spent most of our limited resources researching and implementing long range detection systems to warn us of an outside threat, but we have neglected a short-range detection system.”

“So, you’re saying there may be a way for someone to organize quickly, at the last moment, within striking distance, and that we may not be able to detect them until they actually move on Meladeran?”

“That would appear to be the case, yes.”

There was a noticeable rumble in the meeting.

He raised his hand, and it quieted down. “I understand your concern, I felt the same way when we discovered this gap.”

“Can we reassign some outward facing detectors, at least temporarily, to help detect any growing threat closer to Meladeran?”

“Yes, and that is what we are doing. But that brings its own concerns. I am placing Admiral Malekovich in charge of that project. But, and here’s the key concern, we need to make sure turning some observance inward doesn’t allow a sneak from without. It’s well and good we have this concern, but we must remember, it is based on a dream, not any known facts.”

“Admiral, couldn’t we establish a random rotation that doesn’t give anyone the opportunity to sneak in?”

“That will be an issue for Admiral Malekovich to work on, and I hope to see his plan in a few days. But your question raises other concerns. How much force do we bring in from our dispersed fleet, to keep within striking distance of Meladeran, in order to respond should we detect an attack? Most of our fleet is dispersed and not centrally located.”

“I would assume this is too quick a need to build our way out of it.”

“Correct. It especially bothers me when you realize we have trimmed our fleet down in recent decades. We simply do not have the resources now to provide a significant barrier around Meladeran.”

“Perhaps reassigning some of our battleships from Andromeda to here?”

“Possibly, but if this is a near term threat, they wouldn’t get here in time.”

“Perhaps we need to conduct a better screening of ships, see if we can find these crimson robed people in transit?”

“Good idea, let’s put together an operational order for that.”

“What about assigning guard duties for the power system to the Marines?”

“That’s possible; but to cover all the entrances would take several regiments. That’s a lot of capacity for one action, and for how long?”

“I assume we must assume that whoever intends to attack the grid has assets in place on Meladeran, so a blockade would be pointless.”

“Correct. I believe that to be the case, and the Empress does not want us to seem panicked, as that would generate unnecessary panic.”

“Are there any other words from the Empress?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Empress is highly concerned. She is conducting a more focused investigation of the events surrounding Dr. Leo Falstock, the one who had the original dream. But I think the murder of her good friend the Marquis, Leo’s father, in what appears to me to be a clear warning to her, has shaken her. But not her resolve.”

“She directed we hold this meeting, even though she did not know it was one that we already had scheduled, because she knows we in this room are the best hope for defending and, if need be, saving the Empire. I don’t propose that we let her down.”

The conversation continued for some time, and several operational orders were sent out as a result. The goal: detect, if possible, but be prepared for anything.

Chapter 42

Betrayal

415.132.13

Alexandria learned from the Lord Chamberlain where Leopold had been hiding, inside the personal palace of Empress Penelope. While this irritated her, she knew she only had this one chance to win her future. So, she went to the palace, ostensibly to visit Leopold, but in reality, to kill him.

When she arrived, there was great confusion as to her access to see him. She was, after all, one of his most trusted friends, almost his fiancée. Still, there were the orders from the Empress.

While she was held waiting, Sam and Lizzy arrived at the palace because they wanted to talk with the Empress and Leo. They were met by a personal aide to the Empress and, bypassing security, were escorted directly to see the Empress in a way to avoid being seen by anyone, especially Alexandria.

“Your Majesty!”

“Sam, Lizzy, I’m so glad to see you both. I am so troubled as to the situation, but there is news.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, well, Leopold’s father, the Marquis, was murdered. Someone cut his throat and dropped his body off at the palace steps.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Sam, really. I don’t understand the need for his death. He was an old family friend of mine, so this just seems so senseless.”

“I would agree,” Sam added, “if we weren’t dealing with the circumstances that we are. At least Leopold is safe?”

“Yes. Tell me, have you solved this?”

“Not yet. We have used all of our resources, but still can’t find a reference to the Hayku anywhere, which is why we need to speak with Leo. But we keep moving forward.”

Before he could continue further, an aide knocked on the door for the Empress.

“Your Majesty, the Lady Alexandria is demanding to see Leopold.”

“She demands, eh? Bring her here, but tell the marines outside to inform me before they let her in.”

The aide bowed and departed. The Empress turned to Sam and Lizzy, and said, “The reason Leo is here, he’s in the next room, actually, is because he had a dream, as real as the one about the crimson robed people, that Alexandria and his father wanted him dead. His father has been murdered, and now comes the Lady Alexandria, to a place where she could not know about, so someone is maneuvering in the background. Do I let her in?”

Sam said, “Of course, but bring Leo into the room first.”

The Empress went to the door and opened it, asking Leopold to join them.

“Sam, Lizzy, so good to see you.”

“You as well. We need to talk, but first, we must confront the Lady Alexandria.”

“She is here?”

“Yes, Leo, she is on her way here. But don’t worry, you are safe.” Turning to Lizzy, he simply nodded his head and she moved to stand where no one was between her and the door.

It was only a moment until the marine knocked, informing the Empress that Lady Alexandria had arrived.

“Sam, would you open the door?”

“Of course, and if you wouldn’t mind, Your Majesty, standing a few feet behind and to the right of Lizzy? There, perfect. Ready?”

He opened the door and Lady Alexandria entered quickly. She took notice of those in the room, but was intent on Leopold. “Leopold,” she said excitedly, as she walked towards him, but her right hand slid behind her back grasping a hidden blade. She was three steps away from Leopold and pulling out the knife, when Lizzy intervened with a hard fist to her cheek.

Lizzy then pulled Leopold behind her and instantly was in hand-to-hand combat with Alexandria. Sam drew his sword and moved to shield the Empress and Leopold from the fight, but before anyone could yell for the marines outside the door, Lizzy had dropped her to the floor and tied her arms behind her, incapacitating her and making her unable to move.

Sam said, “Raise her up.”

Lizzy picked her up. She stood there looking at Sam with a bloodied face.

“Now, tell me why you wanted to kill Leopold, and I suspect, the Empress as well.”

She spit at him, saying, “Never.”

He turned and looked at the Empress, and said, “Your Majesty, I have developed a means to make people talk, but it is unpleasant. You may want to leave the room.”

“Proceed, sleuth.”

He turned to her and quickly pulled out a needle and injected her with a drug of his own making.

“Now, Alexandria, let me tell you that I hold in my hand another needle with an antidote to the first one. But, until you answer my questions, I will not give it to you, no matter how much you beg me, even unto a very painful, lingering death. All I want, is for you to tell me why you tried to kill Leopold.”

He could see her first reaction to the drug, but still she said, “Never.”

“Very well, we will wait.” Turning to the Empress, he said, “Your Majesty, truly, you might not want to see this.”

“If it helps us understand what is going on, I can stand it.”

“Very well.”

They waited and she began shaking and then having convulsions. Soon, she dropped to her knees and wet herself.

Sam said, “Just answer my questions.”

You could barely hear her voice, but she managed to whisper, “No.”

They waited, and finally, after about twenty minutes, she whispered, in a stuttering voice through the internal agony she felt, “His father was a spy for the Hayku. I killed him for them because he failed to kill Leo, so they wouldn’t kill me. I was told to kill Leo and the Empress too. I don’t know why. Please.”

“Who are the Hayku?”

“I don’t know. I only receive words from them, but don’t know their motives. Please.”

Sam walked over and gave her the antidote, a shot that would eliminate the distress and knock her out for a few days. He walked over and opened the door, bringing in the marines, who were informed to lock her in the highest security possible, pending further orders of life and death from the Empress.

After she was removed from the room, they departed to an adjacent room so this one could be cleaned, and continued the conversation.

Lizzy said, “So, we hear the word, Hayku, again.”

“What do you mean again?”

Sam responded, “Well, Leopold, we found, on a tombstone in a small cemetery at the original site of the Servants of Riser on Earth, who still appear to exist, by the way, a word about the deceased being a good Hayku. We were coming here to ask you about it.”

Lizzy added, “Hayku. Now the same word from Alexandria. So, these Hayku are descended from the original servants of Riser, and are now the Hayku, a group that wants to destroy the Empire, and wears crimson robes.”

Sam added, “Yep, that about sums it up. But where are they?”

Lizzy chuckled, and said, “Well, it might be pointless, but I just had an idea. Where did the original servants of riser immigrate too? Maybe we should check there?”

Sam laughed “A real idea so obvious we couldn’t even see it. Leopold, can you track that down?”

It didn’t take him long until he had it.

“They immigrated to the planet Tharzite.”

“Okay, then Lizzy and I are off to Tharzite. Hopefully we can gather the final piece to this puzzle.”

“What should we do?”

“Well, I believe you are safe from inside attackers, but you are still not safe from the ones Leopold dreamed of. All I can recommend, stay on high alert and be ready to bounce off of this planet at a moment’s notice, should bad come to worse.”

“You know I cannot do that. But we will be vigilant. Please find a way to prevent this, Sam.”

He bowed, “Your Majesty.”

He and Lizzy hurried out of the room and quickly found their transport. Once on their ship they set in coordinates for Tharzite and launched at maximum speed to get there.

Chapter 43

Interruptions

415.135.19

Pursuant to the agreed operational order, Star Fleet began stopping every trader, general transport, and unregistered ship, searching for anyone wearing a dark crimson robe. They wouldn’t tell anyone what they were looking for, but they were thorough.

It wasn’t too long before word filtered through the Empire and certain efforts were made by some groups to put an end to it. Eventually it reached the Empress.

Empress Penelope maintained a regular schedule, as she didn’t want anyone to know of the deep fear that she had regarding the possibility of an attack on Meladeran. Today she was presiding over her regular hearing of grievances.

“The Baron of Strailit.”

“Your Majesty,” he began, “I come before you today to request you put a stop to these ridiculous actions of Star Fleet, stopping our traders and commercial starships for no reason, and searching for something they won’t even tell us about.”

“Thank you, Baron, for your advice. Next.”

“But, Your Majesty,” he said, and she cut him off.

“You are dismissed. Don’t make it personal. Next.”

He bowed and wandered off, and the next one was also a Baron. Same results. After the fourth complaint, the Empress knew she had to say something.

“Well, apparently there is a murmur here today regarding Star Fleet operations. Baron Strailit, please come forward.”

He walked up and bowed, saying “Your Majesty.”

“Can you apprise me of what you know, thus far, regarding these Star Fleet operations?”

“Your Majesty, they are causing a significant increase in time lost, which causes a burdensome increase in our costs. The time sitting for an inspection is bad for business, much less the mistrust and anger it generates. It seems pointless and designed to simply show who has the power. Absent a reason, people are afraid it’s an intimidation tactic, but for what reason, no one knows.”

“Thank you, Baron. Let me clear this up for you, and for all of you. Star Fleet is following my orders. I directed them to stop all vessels and search for a certain thing; of which I am not going to reveal at this time. However, rest assured that this is not an intimidation tactic nor a waste of time, nor an attempt to prove who has power. It is simply Star Fleet following orders doing something that needs to be done. It will end very soon, I assure you. But for now, they are following my command. Any further questions?”

The Baron bowed, saying, “No, Your Majesty. We will await the end of this process, as you say.”

“Thank you. Rest assured; I would not have implemented this if it weren’t absolutely necessary. Now, on to other things.”

Chapter 44

Tharzite

415.136.13

Sam and Lizzy arrived at Tharzite and quickly landed their ship. Once they were past customs, they strolled through the terminal and out into the town. They were surprised at what they found.

Tharzite was poor, by any standards. The streets, if you called them that, were choppy with a lot of holes and deep ruts cut into them. The buildings were worn, unkempt, and falling apart. The stench was severe, from the lack of adequate plumbing.

As they walked through the town, they also noticed the people were beaten down. They didn’t stand up, but were all bent, heads bowed, looking at the ground. They tried to stop people, to ask them questions, but no one would respond to them.

Lizzy said to Sam, “Have you noticed that aside from the women and girls, there are only young boys and old men here? All of the ones of fighting age are missing.”

“Yes, it’s interesting.”

They kept asking, but no one would talk with them. Eventually, they decided to get a room and settle in for the evening, hoping the next day would be better. They ate in the restaurant, watching to make sure their food was cooked properly and their water was from an unopened bottle.

The next day the results were the same. However, after a while, it appeared that the locals were even beginning to turn on them. They noticed that late in the afternoon, the same group of people began following and hounding them. They made their way back to their room, and decided the search was in vain.

“Well, it seems no one here is willing to speak up.”

“Yeah, I suppose we should head out in the morning.”

But in the middle of the night, there was a knock on their door. Lizzy was very alert and heard the sound of footsteps approaching even before the knock, and had her weapons ready. Sam motioned his readiness and opened the door.

“Yes?”

A whisper. “Please sir, can I come in? I dare not be seen talking with you.”

Sam let her into the room, and she said, “I know what you seek.”

“And what is that?”

“The answer to the riddle. The Hayku stole my husband and my oldest son and took them to their planet to be initiated into their cult. I know I will never see them again, except for the purpose of planting a seed inside of me in order to raise another child. I am pregnant now because my husband returned and was with me for one cycle of our moon. Then he departed, brainwashed and eager to leave.”

Lizzy said, “Hayku? Who are they?”

“The Hayku are a radical sect seeking revenge against the empire for a past hurt that centered around actions taken by the Empire against our people when we first migrated to this planet, a very, very long time ago. So, the story goes, we felt the harshness of the Empire, and were threatened with extinction.”

“None of us here on Tharzite know or care about this, but the Hayku and the fighting age men do. I only learned of this history because my husband told me on one of his visits. He, like all the others, are adamant that we must get revenge, at any cost.”

“When will these Hayku try and strike out against the Empire?”

“I do not know about that.”

“How many are there, how many ships do they have?”

“Please, I don’t know any of that. I’ve already said too much, I have to go.” They had no choice but to let her leave.

“Well, now we know there is a planet called Hayku. Let’s see if the Empress has better luck getting data out of the Imperial files than we do.”

Chapter 45

Grand Master

415.145.17

The old man needed to know their fighting status, so made his way down the long hallway to the room where his warriors were assembled and planning the fight to come. As he approached their door, his aide’s opened it for him.

“Grand Master, the Warrior Council welcomes you.”

“Thank you, Master Warrior.”

Once the Grand Master, the old man, was seated, the Master Warrior continued, “The purpose of this council is to discuss and evaluate the current and proposed operational positioning of our fleet, in order to carry out the desired victory over the Empire. As you know, we have secretly built a fairly large fleet. We have twenty battleships, one hundred frigates, three hundred cruisers, several hundred miscellaneous ships, troop carriers – which will not be used in this attack – and a thousand starfighters.”

“Impressive. Where are these assets located?”

“In order to maintain secrecy and remain undetected from the Imperial Star Fleet, we have kept most of the fleet either on the ground, deployed to several very remote stars on the outer edge of the galaxy, or here, on our war planet, Hayku.”

“How will they be used?”

“At the correct time, all ships will launch and quickly enter hyperspace, to remain undetected. They will all appear at the same time above Meladeran, and take steps to achieve victory, then re-enter hyperspace and travel here, to defend our new home world, should it be necessary.”

“Very well. So, you report that all is ready?”

“Yes, Grand Master, we are ready.”

“Good. The time is short. Very soon we will begin this glorious and dangerous step to destroy those who destroyed our ancestors and placed us in bondage. Very soon, your warriors will gain the revenge we have dreamed of for hundreds of years!”

A roar of approval from the assembled council.

He raised his hand for silence, then said, “We thank our Lord Riser for guidance and support. He has shown us the path, and will reward us immensely when we win this victory for him. Soon. Now, be ever ready and await my signal. Maintain your secrecy, it is the key to our success.”

“Yes, Grand Master.”

“It will be a marvelous day when we can use the troop carriers to transport all of our families here, so we can finally live a life of peace. Ultimately, that is what we are fighting to achieve, a place and time when our revenge is met, where we can finally enjoy the fruits of our own labor, in our own homes.”

“That day cannot arrive as long as the Empire keeps their foot on our neck and a sword to our throat. This step, this show of force and determination, will free us from that foot and that sword, and let the universe know, don’t hurt us, because we bite back!”

Again, the council roared with approval, as the Grand Master departed the room.

Chapter 46

Journey to Hayku

415.153.09

Lizzy contacted the Empress. “Your Majesty, we are departing the planet Tharzite and have been told the Hayku are on a planet of the same name. We would ask that you find out from Star Fleet the coordinates of that planet.”

“Of course, I’ll be in touch.”

The Empress contacted Admiral Johansen, and said, “Admiral, I need the coordinates of the planet Hayku, now. I’ll wait.”

“Yes, Your majesty.” He turned to his staff and instructed them to find these coordinates. After several minutes, the Empress said, “Admiral, surely it doesn’t take Star Fleet this long to find a planet?”

“No, Your Majesty, it shouldn’t. Oh, here it is. It was in the restricted area.” He read off the coordinates.

“Very well, thank you.”

She called Lizzy, and said, “It was in their restricted data. Lord only knows what they actually have in there.”

“Thank you, Your majesty. We’ll let you know what we find.”

They plugged in the coordinates and traveled at maximum speed to the planet. When they arrived, Lizzy noticed several ships positioned in such a way as to make them seem to be only one ship to a long-range scanner. She also noticed quite a few ships moored on the ground, some of which seemed to be battleships in nature.

“They have a large fleet here.”

“How many?”

“I’m not sure, but even with a passing glance they have some battleships and other fighting ships. This is unexpected. No other people in the Empire are allowed to have these types of warships.”

Once they landed, they were met by several crimson robed individuals.

“What is your purpose, coming here?”

Sam replied, “We come in peace. We wish to speak with your leader, of whatever title he possesses.”

“That would be our Grand Master. Are you expected?”

“Not officially. But if I know your leader, possibly so.”

“I will send word and we will wait here.”

It took a few hours, but finally word was received, and they were led to a large central administrative building and escorted deep inside. They came to a door, and one of them said, “No women are allowed inside.”

Sam nodded, and Lizzy stepped back into a waiting position. They led Sam into the chamber. He wasn’t surprised when he met the old man again.

“Why have you followed us?”

“I did not know that I was following you. However, I did search diligently. But the reason for my search has changed. While it is not because of any harm you may have caused to any of my friends, it is that, since I am a sleuth, I am curious. Having only recently learned of your existence, my curiosity took hold of me and has grown even higher. I came here to see if there were any additional clues I could find, about who you may be, what you believe, and such.”

“Why?”

He paused, but then said, “To prevent war.”

The old man looked at him and said, “But war was brought upon us. We are only responding to it.”

“Is there no chance then for peace?”

“Peace? Can there be peace when an Empire has its foot on your throat, when it holds a sword to your neck, when it breathes down its venom upon you?”

“Is your grievance based on today's reality, or a past hurt?”

The old man looked at him, and said, “Is there a difference?”

“I honestly don’t know; I’ve never held a revenge wish.”

The old man signed, saying, “That is the difference between you and our people. We have been forced to hold this through no fault of our own.”

He stood and walked down the steps to Sam, and looking directly into his eyes, said, “I hold no ill will towards you, stranger, or the lady who travels with you. You know, I let you live once, and, against my better judgement, I will let you live again. Consider it a last act of goodwill.”

He turned and walked back to his chair, sat down, and said, “So, leave now, and go in peace. But a final warning this time. If we meet again, I will order your death. Also, should you continue any more curiosity actions and be perceived as a threat to my people, I will order your death. So, leave now, without another word, and go in peace.”

Sam thought better about saying anything, and simply nodded his head slightly, and turned to go. He was led outside the chamber where he met Lizzy and they were escorted back to the landing field, where they boarded their ship and departed.

As soon as they left the room, the old man turned to his council, and said, “We have been waiting for a time, a moment, a sign brothers. Today, we received one. But now, we are forced into action before our original planned time. This is because this individual, knowing who and where we are, provides clear evidence that the Empire is getting closer to knowledge of us as well. I won’t be long before an Imperial Star Fleet ship is sent to investigate, and that would give them time to prepare. We cannot take a chance on that. Our secrecy is our biggest asset.”

He turned to the Master Warrior, and said, “Therefore, Master Warrior, I order the attack to commence immediately.”

“Yes, Grand Master.” He hurriedly departed the council to initiate orders for the attack to begin. He thought, ‘It is good we brought all the expanded fleet here, or we couldn’t have had all of our ships assembled as one for this battle.’

The two watchers were shocked at this swift and unexpected change. They hurriedly departed and contacted Trinthea with the news, and were instantly brought home.

Sam and Lizzy returned to their ship and departed at maximum speed. They put in an urgent call to the Empress.

“Yes, Sam?”

“Your Majesty, I believe the attack on Meladeran will occur almost immediately, if not within a week or two.”

“What?”

“Yes, you heard me correctly. It appears an attack is imminent. We are just departing Hayku, and I spoke with their Grand Master. He allowed us to live. I believe he did that because he believes we would run to you on Meladeran, and be killed by the attack that is coming. I am certain they believe their plan is foolproof and they will succeed.”

“From Hayku? With what? We’ve seen no warships.”

“Your Majesty, they have a large fleet of warships. Lizzy counted some of them and can be more specific.”

“Very well. Please hurry, I must contact Star Fleet. I am certain they will want to hear your reconnaissance, Lizzy. Travel quickly!”

She hung up and contacted Admiral Johansen’s and they began their preparations.

Chapter 47

Meladeran

415.164.09

After Sam and Lizzy had contacted the Empress while enroute to Meladeran, Star Fleet had in turn reached out to them for any information they could provide. Based on the information Lizzy provided, the Imperial Star Fleet had begun preparations to fight this adversary with the resources they had previously brought closer to Meladeran.

When they arrived, Lizzy landed the ship in a large open field on the palace grounds to drop Sam off, so he could get to the Empress quickly. She then went and landed the ship at the spaceport.

Sam went to join the Empress, who was in a central control room within her palace. He arrived and waited, along with everyone else, to see what would happen next.

“Is there any news, Your Majesty?”

“No, not yet Sam. At least we are prepared and watching, which is something I am certain these people never expected.”

Lizzy was walking towards the exit of the Lazy B, when suddenly, Mudu appeared.

“Lizzy, take the shuttle and go to the location in your mind, now.” She vanished.

Lizzy instantly knew where she needed to go and ran to get into the shuttle and departed. She flew at maximum speed, knowing this was critical and urgent.

They walked through a long, narrow, dusty, dark canyon. Three travelers, each wearing a dark crimson hooded robe. It was a very narrow trail, two miles deep, but only ten feet wide. The canyon snaked a long slow path through a deep gorge to a single protected door.

The canyon walls were warm, and hid the largest energy system ever created, as powerful as a sun. This energy supply provided the power to generate the planetary shield of this huge and well-known planet.

As they approached the door, they entered the pass code into the keypad and the energy shield opened. They went inside and did the same thing at the door. The massive door opened slowly, but finally, they were inside.

They went forward into the structure. They walked through multiple hallways until they came to the room they were looking for, a control room. The leader raised his hand to his mouth, and said, “In position.”

“Thirty seconds starting now.”

They continued into the room where he found the panel he was after, lifted the cover, and waited to press the red button.

Suddenly, the two behind him yelled in pain and as he turned, he saw that each had been hewn down from behind by a wild looking woman. She was already airborne towards him, and kicked him in the chest. He fell to the ground, only to raise up and see that it was that wild woman who had been following them across the galaxy.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance on Orjazay.”

“Yes, you should have, because now you will die and not fulfill your mission.”

He smiled, drawing his sword, saying, “We’ll see about that.”

Lizzy held her sword, already covered in Hayku blood, and closed the panel over the button, so he couldn’t hit it accidentally. He yelled and attacked.

The enemy fleet entered normal space above Meladeran, expecting the shield to have a spot for their missiles. But none was there. They waited for word of the open window, but it was taking too long.

“What’s happening? They reported they were through!”

“I don’t know, but we cannot wait much longer.”

“Admiral, I believe it is time for the Imperial Star Fleet to win a war.”

Admiral Johansen’s, said, “Attack!”

Suddenly a massive presence of Star Fleet ships appeared, and the fight was on. Battleships launched starfighters, everyone was launching torpedoes, missiles, photon cannons and other tools of the trade in war. To the casual observer, it was simply mayhem.

The Hayku didn’t have time to run away, so they fought back.

It was simultaneously chaos and organized movement, blended together into a ballet of incredible proportions. Ships exploded, rammed into one another, and generally participated in acts of heroism and panic. It was incredible.

As Sam and the Empress stood and watched, an officer said to the Empress, “Your Majesty, there is also a fight in one of the control rooms of the power station.”

“On screen”

It was Lizzy, fighting with a Hayku. They were both bloodied, but both were giving all they had in a fight for their lives. They watched the two warrior’s fight; one to destroy the enemy, one to save the Empire. It was brutal.

The Hayku warrior pulled a knife and used it as a means to cut and parry her blade, while she only had her blade to snip and pick his arms and side. He would move towards the button; she would repulse his movement. She would move in to get a clear blade at him; he would shift behind equipment bays.

She surprised him and managed to hit him in the face, but he jerked and cut her arm. He swung with both blades, she shifted and cut him across his side. It seemed the fight would go on forever.

After only twenty minutes, the enemy ships that remained functional, only a few, departed, being followed by battleships of the Empire to complete their destruction. An additional armada, planned for an event such as this, along with hundreds of thousands of Imperial Marines, appeared above Hayku, and destroyed all that was there, taking no prisoners.

After a few more minutes, the monitor of the fight Lizzy was in went black.

Sam yelled, “Where is she?”

“Sector Delta forty-eight, stairwell nine hundred and thirty-two, level 325.”

“Someone, take me out there, now!”

He was quickly taken to a transport and fifteen marines joined them. They sped to the coordinates and arrived at the top of the power station, when Lizzy opened the door and staggered out, covered in blood. She fell to her knees, and Sam grabbed her. She whispered to Sam, “Tell Mudu, it is done. He is dead.” Then she fell over, unconscious.

Sam helped load her into the shuttle to transport her to the palace.

“Your Majesty, we need the best medical response ready when we land, she’s in bad shape.”

“It will be so.”

The Empress directed her staff to prepare for Lizzy’s arrival and as soon as they arrived, they put her into their scan and heal system. Sam watched as the scanner went from her head to toe and back, repeatedly. They gave her drugs and energy through intravenous connections.

A doctor told Sam, “It’s okay, sir. You brought her here in time, she will be fine. But she’s going to need a while to fully heal.”

Meanwhile, the marines who went to the control room found the Hayku dead, headless, lying on the ground in front of the button he could never reach.

Chapter 48

Finished?

415.175.09

In the days following the attack, many decisions were made. One was to minimize the role Sam and Lizzy played, instead, emphasizing the courage and strength of the Imperial Star Fleet. This was just fine with Sam, as he didn’t want them to get any publicity for their actions.

One day, about two weeks after the fight, Sam and Lizzy were walking down a hallway in the palace. He was holding her, helping her to gain strength and complete her recovery, although she was by now strong enough to do anything she needed and was feeling very strong. But she enjoyed his attention, so didn’t complain.

After a few minutes, Lizzy said, “Okay, Sam. Out with it. What’s wrong?”

He chuckled, but said, “I would expect only you to pick up on it. It’s, well, it’s not right, Lizzy.”

“What do you mean?”

They stopped walking, and he turned to her, and said, “I’m not sure yet what I mean. But it’s just not right.”

Lizzy said, “Well then, come on, let’s leave this place and get back into the real world. Maybe it’ll help you clear your head.”

“Great idea.”

They returned to their room and packed their belongings, sending them to their starship at the spaceport. Then they stopped by and thanked the Empress for her wonderful courtesy in helping them, and the rewards she provided for their service. But afterwards, they departed in their ship. Sam set course for Earth.

“Why Earth?”

“I’m not really sure, just a hunch.”

They continued working on building Lizzy’s strength, and by the time they arrived she felt fully functional again.

Eventually, they arrived at Horseshoe Canyon. They just stood and looked at the majesty of it, the colors, texture, sky, and water. It was too awe-inspiring for words, just someplace you had to see for yourself.

Lizzy knew something had been troubling him since she recovered after they ‘saved the Empire’ from destruction, but she still waited patiently while he thought, until finally, he said, “It’s been too easy, Lizzy.”

Lizzy laughed, saying, “Really? You call all we’ve been through easy?”

He smiled, and said, “Yes. The clues were too obvious and too easy to follow. I know that I’m pretty good; but I’m not that good. No, we’ve been deceived. There’s something we’ve missed.”

“Like?”

“Like, everyone focused on this dream of Leo’s, but was it a real dream, or a conspiracy? Does he know the difference? Can someone be given such a strong hypnotic command they cannot believe anything else?”

He paused, then said, “It’s been too easy Lizzy. The clues were too easy to find. There’s something that we’re missing.”

Instantly he vanished.

“Sam!” Lizzy screamed.

Mudu suddenly appeared. “He is safe, Lizzy.”

Lizzy cried out, “Safe? Where is he? What’s happening?”

Mudu said, “Sam has been pulled to a different place, a place even I cannot follow. But a safe place. Now, go home, and when the time comes, you will know it,” and she vanished as well.

Lizzy stood and shook her head, and said to no one in particular, “I don’t know what is happening. But I will be ready for whatever comes next.”

With grim determination, she departed to return home, but along the way she stopped to see Gerald, and had the ships incredibly powerful weapons modified to be even stronger. She also improved her weapons inventory. She would be ready for whatever happened next. ‘But rest assured,’ she thought, ‘I will find Sam.’

Chapter 49

Labyrinth

415.175.10

Sam didn’t move. It was strange, but he felt as though he was standing in the same spot, but that the universe around him had dramatically changed. Where once there was a river and beautiful canyons with multi-colored sandstone walls, there was now only a gray, flat landscape, not a blemish. The gray was everywhere, as far as the eye could see, in all directions. The sky was also gray, but a very slightly different shade, providing a horizon line of a slight variation in color.

As he looked, he began to see what he believed to be a black dot. He waited. Eventually, the dot got bigger, very slowly, and he could now tell it was someone walking towards him. He waited, as he had nowhere to run anyway.

The person continued towards him, and he could see clearly now that the figure was dressed in flowing black robes. Soon, he could tell he walked like a man, and had black hair, black skin, and black eyes. He stopped about ten feet in front of Sam and waited.

Sam finally said, “Where am I?”

He responded, “In a space between reality and perception, a world you normally cannot see.”

“Why can I not see it now? I am here.”

“What do you see?”

“Gray.”

“Then you still cannot see it. Nor do you see the world you left. You are in the place of the void.”

“What do I do?”

Smiling, the figure said, “Do you believe in magic?”

Suddenly, they were on a hill, looking down on a black stone castle. Even from this distance, he could see bones of many sizes littering the ground on the fields outside the castle walls. It was a place of death.

The figure said, “Visit the castle, you should find it to be interesting,” and he vanished.

Sam stood looking down at the castle, but finally decided he had no other option, so he started walking down the hill towards it. It was a rough descent, as the rocks and crags were sharp and the ground uneven. But he finally made it down onto the valley floor.

As he neared the walls, he could see horrible figures sculptured at the tops of the walls. Evil looking creatures, far worse than the many gargoyles he had seen before. They didn’t smile, but seemed to be alive and their eyes gave the impression of watching him with every step, as if they would suddenly attack him.

When he rounded the corner of the walls, he saw that the gate was open. He walked through the huge open doors and suddenly, he saw someone he had never expected to see again, but especially not in a place like this. Seated on a bench under a gray umbrella was Isabella Sigonella, his old college friend, and the only thing that wasn’t gray.

“Isabella,” he cried!

“Oh, Samuel!” She dropped her book on the bench and ran to him, nearly jumping into his arms.

Once they stepped back slightly, he said, “How are you? Why are you here?”

“Oh, Samuel, it’s such a long story, but short too. I was working at an archeological dig on Prebble. We were searching for the earliest human remains, and while we were digging, I discovered a very interesting artifact, an object that looked like a book.”

“I took it into the clean room and slowly began to remove the dirt and grime that held it. I cleaned the front first, and it seemed to be a book of magical spells. I thought that was rather odd, but anyway, I kept at it. Finally, I had it free of all that held it and could open the cover.”

“I am certain my first observation was correct, because when I opened it, I was immediately transported to that bench, and have been here ever since, although I don’t know where here is, or how long it has been. I feel like I have been here for at least six months, but I’m not sure, Sam. It’s just been horrible.”

She reached out and held him, hugging him as if he was the only life she had felt in a long time. Then she added, while still holding on to him, “But after some time had passed, I opened the book and read a few pages, and confirmed that it is magic.”

She stepped back, and said, “Watch this.” She opened her hand and spoke some odd words, and a rose grew from her palm.

“Oh wow!”

“Yes, it is a wow. But it’s lonely here, Samuel. I’ve walked up and down many of the castle’s streets, and I think I’m the only one here. Why are you here?”

“Well, that’s a question without a good answer. I have no idea. I was standing outside Page, Arizona, on old home Earth, looking at the beauty of Horseshoe Bend, when suddenly I was standing on a hill overlooking the castle. I still have no idea why.”

“That is strange. Well, you are here now, and you have to see this. Come, let me show you the book where I found this spell, it’s over on the bench. It’s really old.”

She took him to the book, and he saw that the cover and pages were, indeed, very old. He gently opened it and began to read. He began learning from the book.

It was strange being there. It never got dark, and they didn’t sleep or eat, and for some reason, no matter how much time passed, they were neither hungry nor thirsty. They simply sat together on the bench, chatted at times, and he read regularly for what he thought was five weeks. He realized that within those five weeks he had learned all she had learned in six months.

“It’s interesting that it only has ten pages. It feels heavier than that.”

“I know,” she said. “To me it feels as heavy as a whole encyclopedia.”

“How many pages have you read?”

She said, “I’ve only read the first five pages.”

“Why haven’t you read all ten?”

She shivered slightly, then said, “I don’t know, really. But while the first five pages feel good, something tells me the last five pages would be evil, and I just can’t turn the page.”

He nodded, but then turned his attention back to the book. He learned that the words in the book could be rearranged to form different spells, but he didn’t tell her that. Finally, he looked at every page, and because he had photographic memory, now knew all of the book. Each page centered on a different type of spell and discussed them in detail, but this book contained what were, essentially, the master spells of each category. They were:

1 Create.

2 Heal.

3 Move.

4 Open.

5 Reveal.

6 Conceal.

7 Close.

8 Remove.

9 Damage.

10 Kill.

He thought they were an odd assortment of categories, but thought he’d wait until later to think more deeply about it. He was restless, though, and felt that he couldn’t just sit here.

“Have you ever climbed to the high towers of the castle?”

“Oh, no. I’m terrified of this place. Except for walking some of the streets, I’ve only sat right here, hoping that one day I would be returned home.”

“Okay. Well, then you stay right here, but I’m going to try and find a way inside, because I want to climb to the top and see what I can see. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

“Be safe, Sam!”

“I will.”

He left her and walked deeper into the castle. He discovered that all the doors were stone bricks. After finding no way in, he finally stood in front of one of the doors, and putting together words from page four that caused things to open, he said, “OPENDUM BAREM,” and the stones melted away to wooden doors, which slowly opened. After he entered the room, the doors closed behind him.

He found himself in a very long hallway. It seemed to go on forever in both directions. He thought, ‘What in the world is this place?’ He couldn’t believe the size of it.

He turned right and walked down the hallway for a while. He was amazed at all the artifacts, most of which he didn’t recognize, lining the hallway. He continued walking until he found a doorway where he saw a set of steps going upwards. Not knowing what was up there, he nevertheless entered the stairwell and began to climb. He climbed for a long time.

After what seemed like an eternity climbing, he came to a level space where another door was located. The stairs continued around the curve, but he was curious. This door was covered with mystic runes and symbols from all of the pages in the book. ‘There must be something valuable behind a door so marked,’ he thought, so he reached to open the door, but it was locked. He used the same words as before and it began to open.

Before it opened, he pulled all of his energy within himself, trying to create a black spot. He didn’t know why, but this felt like the right thing to do.

He entered the room and found a single stand, about three feet tall. The top of it was illuminated by a single shaft of light from an unseen source. On the stand was a ring of gold with a ruby stone set within it. An inscription in front of it said, JIRE BRETSHOP OVENCM AL. He read the words, but wasn’t sure what they meant. But it didn’t stop him. He picked up the ring and placed it on his right-hand middle finger, and spoke words of concealment around it, so it vanished.

He released the energy hold he had on himself and continued to the top of the stairs. This was an open walkway to the parapet above the tallest towers walls. He looked out over the valley, to see what he could see.

Suddenly, the one he met on the gray field appeared.

“How did you get here?”

“It’s elementary; I learned all the words in the book the woman brought with her.”

The one looked at his hand, as if looking for the ring, and possibly seeing it, Sam couldn’t tell.

“You cannot leave without paying a price.”

He thought for a moment, then said, “Very well. The payment will be for you to take the book and put it in a safe place for another ten thousand years.”

“Agreed.”

“Also, please remove all knowledge of the book’s existence and all other information about this place and our meeting from the woman’s mind, and then, please return her home.”

The one looked at him, and nodded his head in agreement.

Instantly, he was standing at the same place by Horseshoe Bend where he and Lizzy had stood before he had this strange experience. He thought, ‘This is spooky.’

As he stood there, he thought about the ring he had found, which was the only thing that was different now from when he had been here before. He thought about what he wanted, and realized the only thing he wanted was to be with Lizzy. He spoke words of movement from the book, and he was standing in the hallway of their home.

Chapter 50

Riddle

415.186.09

“Lizzy?”

She heard him and turned around and saw him. “Sam!” She rushed into his arms and held him, and they stood there for some time, just holding each other.

Sam said, “How long have I been gone?”

“Well, it took me two weeks to get home, and I’ve been here for two days.”

But she could sense that something was different.

“What happened to you?”

“It was odd. I found myself in a barren place, and found a castle and an old college friend.”

“What?”

“Yes, do you remember Isabella Sigonella?”

“Yes, you saw her at college one day, an old friend from your home planet.”

“Yes. Well, she was there, and she had a book of magic. It was strange. The book was only ten pages long, but it felt like a thousand. Anyway, I read all ten pages, then went into the castle and found a long hallway. It had to be miles long, I couldn’t see the end in either direction. Then I climbed up to the top of the castle and found a ring. Anyway, I suddenly found myself standing at Horseshoe Bend, I spoke words of movement to see you, and was instantly here.”

“Instantly here? What do you mean?”

“I mean, instantly. I traveled from Horseshoe Bend to this hallway instantaneously.”

“Wow, that sounds truly weird. I’m just glad you made it safely home. What else can you do?”

“I’m not sure. The book gives powerful spells in ten areas, and each is unique, but you can mix and match words and create spells. I believe, but don’t yet have the knowledge, that these spells are powerful and dangerous. I have no idea why they came to me. And the ring, well, it must be a ring of some kind of power, if it brought me here instantly.”

“That’s frightening and wonderful.”

“Yes, I feel the same. But there is something else. We have been deceived. There is much more happening than the few things we have known. I now believe time is of the essence. So, quickly, let’s go to the ship. Hold my hand.”

She took his hand and they instantly arrived on the ship.

“Set ships course for Meladeran, with instructions to orbit the planet locked, not allowing any to enter. Then gather what you need for a few days, and protection.”

Once she had done that, he took her hand and they vanished, only to arrive on Hayku in the building where he had been interrogated by the old man.

Lizzy drew a weapon, just to be sure.

He walked over and stood where he had been seated during the meeting, and looked back and reviewed his memory, searching for a clue. There. Standing in the shadows behind and far to the right of the old man were two people, no, they were different. He looked at his memory with the highest intensity and realized they might be human, but they were very different. Interesting.

He turned to Lizzy, and said, “There were two beings here, when we were here, that might be human, but were very different.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure. But it would explain why I felt there was something bigger going on. We have to find out who they are.”

“Where to?”

“We need to get into Star Fleet’s records.”

“I’m sure the Empress will get you in.”

“No, she will ask too many questions. We need to do this without her knowledge.”

“I can round up my old team and see if we can bust in again?”

“No, this needs to be secretive.”

“Well, the only other thing I can think of is to go to Thestal and get into the archives.”

“On Thestal?”

“Yes. Not many people know about it. I only discovered it by accident while I was recovering and roamed the hallways listening.”

“Okay, take my hand, let’s get our ship.”

Once they were on board and underway, Lizzy asked what else happened while he was gone.

“Well, I read the book of spells Isabella brought with her when she was transported to the castle. I now have spells for many occasions in my mind.”

“But Sam, how do you have the ability to actually cast a spell? I mean, that’s magic. You’ve never had a magical tendency before.”

“I know. It’s odd, but somehow, just being in that place seemed to awaken something different inside. One day I’ll take you there. But first, we have a riddle to solve.”

Chapter 51

Penelope

415.187.11

Leo was sitting in his apartment on a sofa reading a book, when the door to his suite suddenly opened. He stood quickly as he was momentarily startled; no one simply opened a door or barged into a private suite without knocking. Then he saw who it was.

“Your Majesty!” be bowed, “and for what do I owe the honor of this unexpected visit?”

She smiled, and said, “Leo, I’m so sorry to bother you, but have you heard from or seen Sam or Lizzy since they departed after the battle?”

“No, Your Majesty, I have not.”

“Interesting, as I haven’t either. I was hoping to talk with them about a few things, but they have simply disappeared.”

“Well, Your…”

“Leo, please. When we are alone, I will always just be Penelope to you.”

“Thank you, my dear. I was going to say that Lizzy was recovering from her injury, so perhaps they went someplace a little less noisy and formal where she could recover without anyone knowing who they were? Or, maybe they just went home.”

“Yes, you’re probably right.”

“Probably. In any case, since Meladeran is saved, we need not live in fear anymore.”

He walked over to her and gently took her hands. “I think we are safe now, and I’m sure Sam and Lizzy are safe as well.”

She smiled, and leaned into his arms and rested her cheek on his chest. After a few moments, she lifted her head and they shared a soft, gentle kiss.

She pulled back and spoke quietly, looking into his eyes, saying, “I know that for the first time in a very long time, I do feel safe.”

He held her, saying, “Both of us do.”

They stood together and kissed again, gently, holding each other and feeling a connection growing that neither had sought.

After a while, she said, “Sadly, I have meetings to attend. Would you care to join me for dinner tonight?”

“I would be delighted.”

“Very well, my place at nineteen.”

They shared a final long kiss, and then she turned and walked out the door.

Leo simply stood and smiled, feeling over the top with joy and happiness.

Chapter 52

Crelean

415.197.19

In a spaceship, far away, traveling at a speed much faster than that of mere light, a conversation.

“Your word.”

“Leader, our warriors have proven that your leadership is sound. All you have seen has come to pass.”

“What else?”

He looked fearful of her, and spoke his words carefully. “Leader, there is something new we have not seen before. We ask your guidance.”

She turned towards him with a hiss. “New? What is new?”

“Leader, Trinthea, a disturbance was felt by Warrior Spleknob at the last intersession.”

“Bring him.”

He bowed very low and backed out very quickly. He left and walked the halls of the ship back to the warrior side, finding relief as he went. Once there, he summoned Spleknob and told him to report to Trinthea.

Trinthea was furious that anything new could be happening. This plot, this revenge, had been a priority of her people for hundreds of years, and she would see it through.

Spleknob entered the dark room in the correct supplication body language, and said, “You sent for me, Leader?”

She did not speak, but turned from the cauldron where she stood and walked, heels sparking fire as she went. She walked directly to him and reached out, taking his head in her hands.

She bypassed his fear and went to where the news resided. Ah, there. A slight wiggle in time. From old Earth.

She released him and he dropped to the floor.

“Tell the Master Warrior to prepare the weapon for the destruction of Earth with all speed, now.”

“Yes, Leader.” He ran.

She stood motionless for a moment, then turned and returned to the cauldron, where she stood, staring into the burning embers within.

Her mind was racing. She knew that to find a ring of power someone would need to enter the gray castle. But she also knew that to do this was to be invited. One could not simply walk into the castle. It didn’t exist in this reality, so to get there, you had to be taken there.

But who, why? Her mind was troubled. She said to her supporting team of witches, “I fear these Hayku did us no favor. They were too weak, they faltered under pressure. Now we may not have enough time to finish the job as expected. But even more, someone has found a ring of power on old Earth.”

“Evade?”

“Alter plans?”

“Terminate the mission?”

“Postpone for a more favorable time?”

“Resolve the new power ring before continuing?”

She listened, then said, “No, all is in order, and with the Empire celebrating their great victory and the saving of their central planet, they should still be distracted. But we only have a narrow window for success. We move forward.”

After a moment, she said, “Contact Threalia. Make certain all is well and for her to initiate the next phase. We will take advantage of their weak security as they relax believing they have won.”

“Yes, Leader.”

Chapter 53

Thestal

415.197.20

Sam and Lizzy arrived in orbit above Thestal, a fairly barren planet, but not a terrible one. However, the biggest structures on the planet, visible even from space, were the Star Fleet archives.

“I’ve never seen anything that big.”

“Yep, and it goes deep. Underground is probably ten times the size of what you can see.”

“How should we proceed?”

“Well Sam, there aren’t usually too many people within the archives, as it’s mostly an automated system. But there will be some guards and maintenance technicians. What we need to do is get into the central archive. That’s where the brain is located and where we can do the best, quickest research.”

“Okay, well, let’s try this. You hold my hand and think about where you want us to go.”

Lizzy thought about the office where she had worked for a while, and instantly, they were there.

“Perfect. Follow me.”

She led him down a hallway to a side door, down four flights of stairs, out and left, then they stood outside a door marked, “Director Only.”

“This is where they have access to truly find information in the archives.”

Sam said “OPENDUS BAREM,” and the door opened.

“I like this new power of yours, saves me breaking down doors.”

They entered the office and found various computer stations, and both started searching for anything related to Hayku, looking for a clue for anything about a different people behind them, something, anything.

They searched for hours, but to no avail. Sam did download several hundred folders that looked interesting, but he didn’t have time to open them and see what was there.

“Well, I learned a lot of things, but nothing about the Hayku we didn’t already know. Certainly nothing about anyone who could be behind them.”

“Yep, nothing here either. I guess we struck out. Now what?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m more surprised that we didn’t find anything. I mean, someone, somewhere must have some records of these people. Surely, a group of people with their history is not uncharted. Anyway, come on, let’s get back to the ship and we can talk about it while we decide next steps.”

Back on ship, Sam decided to use the reveal spell just to see if anything popped up. Much to his surprise, instantly, an image appeared in his mind.

“Quick, take my hand!”

They instantly arrived on Meladeran, inside the palace, inside the Empress’ personal chambers, inside her most private office.

“Sleuth! Lizzy! How did you get in here?”

“Your Majesty, you are well?”

“Of course, and why shouldn’t I be?”

He only said, “Lizzy, protect her. Excuse me,” and vanished, leaving Lizzy.

“What’s going on, Lizzy?”

“I don’t know, Your Majesty. He only told me to stay and protect you, as danger was very near.”

“Should we alert the Palace Police?”

“No, Your Majesty. I think we should stay right here and wait. Whatever or whoever he is moving towards, he is between us and them, and we are safer right here.” However, she drew her sword, just in case.

“Very well. Where have you been?”

“Several planets.”

“But you only left a few weeks ago.”

“Yes, I know. It seems your sleuth has learned a few things.”

Sam appeared. “The enemy is moving. Hold my hands, both of you.”

They arrived at their home on Tuton.

“Your Majesty, what I do and how I do it must remain the highest secret possible. In the meantime, Lizzy, initiate stage five security, I will return as soon as I can.” He vanished.

“What does he mean, stage five security?”

“It means he knows of a very credible threat against your life, and I am going to initiate multiple layers of protection for us, and we are going deep. Come on.”

Lizzy led her down a set of stairs into a room under them. Once inside with the door closed, she opened a secret door that led to a set of stairs down. The door closed behind them, and light illuminated their way.

“How long did it take to build this?”

“Oh, we got started right after the events of the Palace Murders, knowing we would become targets for someone. This is now a very secure environment.”

She led her to another door. They entered and turned right, and walked nearly two hundred feet to another door, then walk, left turn door, walk, left turn door, walk, right turn door, but this door was very heavy.

Once inside the lights illuminated and various systems initialized, giving Lizzy a full view of everything from half a mile from the house, all the stairs and hallways, to the door they were behind.

“Now what?”

“We wait. Through that door is a kitchen, bedrooms, bathrooms, full gym, it’s pretty well stocked for a very long siege, so make yourself comfortable. Oh, there’s also a range, if you want to learn how to shoot.”

“Lizzy, do you have anything more comfortable than this ridiculous dress I am wearing?”

“Of course, Your…”

“No. I am Penelope. Apparently, we are in danger, so the less you think of me or call me Your Majesty the better.”

“Okay, Penelope. Here, put these on, and you might want to let your hair down and just tie it in a bun, and probably take off all that makeup.”

It only took about ten minutes, but they looked like a couple of women on a mission. They put her discarded royal clothing in a bag, so it would be easier to transport.

“You know, Lizzy, I have been working out for some time. Ever since I watched how you walk. You always seem to be smooth, yet ready for anything, powerful. I want to learn how to be like that.”

Lizzy chuckled. “Well, thank you. But if you want to be like me, you’re gonna have to really work for it. Fancy a workout?”

“Yes. I feel so stressed I need something to do.”

“Come on.”

Lizzy led her into their gym. It was small by many standards, but very well equipped.

“Okay, do what I do, but we’ll adjust your weights to a better one that fits your strength. Let’s see what kind of shape you’re in.”

They started with arms, then legs, torso, etc. They did weights, resistance, then some running on their treadmill. By the time they were finished, Penelope was sweaty and tired.

“My goodness, I never work out like that.”

Lizzy laughed, and said, “Well, if you want to look or feel powerful, you have to be powerful. There’s no substitute.”

“I think I have my work cut out for me.”

They used the showers and dressed, and sat down for a glass of water laced with minerals and vitamins. Lizzy made them a quick meal and they sat down and ate.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“What’s it actually like to be the Empress of the known universe?”

Penelope chuckled, but said, “You may find this amusing or not, but most of my time is spent reading about the government or attending meetings about it. I feel it’s nearly overwhelming, and sometimes, I wish I could run away from it. But I don’t, I can’t. I must finish the course.”

She smiled, then added, “But it does have a lot of perks, like a Star Fleet, palaces, the finest food, and wine. And truly, it gives me the chance to try and make life better for billions and billions of people. So, no, I wouldn’t walk away. But even so, I will be glad when my time is over, and I can pass this burden and joy off to someone else.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, Sam and I think you do an awesome job.”

“Thank you, Lizzy.”

Chapter 54

Threat

415.198.01

Sam returned to the palace and began a systematic search for his target. He knew the individual would be hard to find, especially if his new insight was correct. He entered a security office and waved his hand, sending everyone to sleep. He stood, looking at a wall covered with monitors, and waited.

‘There,’ he thought, and vanished.

He arrived in a hallway, but no one was there. He looked left and right, but nothing, just a bare hallway. He sensed there was more. He spoke words to open, and heard a gentle click to his left. He saw a bare hairline crack in the wall, revealing a door.

He gently pushed on the stone, and it opened slowly. As he stepped inside, he heard, in the distance, a conversation.

“Yes, Leader, I am here.”

“Speak, status.”

“Changing. The Empress is missing, I may be unable to complete the mission, not certain what that means for success.”

He edged closer, and could see the back of the one in the room. Whatever this was, it was human, and dressed in solid black, like the figures he remembered on Hayku.

There was fire in the voice that responded. “What do you mean, missing? Have you not tracked her all this time?”

“Yes, Leader, I have. That is why this is so unusual. Something has occurred and a change has entered the quantum. I need your guidance now, as I am helpless.”

It only took a few moments, then the leader said, “Continue the search. You must find and eliminate her.”

“Yes, Leader.”

She then turned, and as if she saw Sam, she vanished.

Sam was intrigued, but cautious. He looked around the room and knew she wasn’t there, so he went back to the control room and waited again, looking at the monitors.

‘There,’ he thought, and vanished. This time he was not going to be so quiet. He entered the room where the other was located, and she turned and saw him.

“Who are you?”

“Someone you do not want to meet.” She vanished again.

He returned again to the monitors, and eventually saw her, going to where she was. This time, she was talking into the air.

She was looking directly at him, when she said, “I am being followed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean someone is following where I go. I will not be able to carry out this mission.”

“Very well, return now, we will speak in person. DOR SCLAETEM!” She vanished.

Sam stood and thought about this change in reality. He realized that this person, obviously a female human dressed in all black, was definitely a type like the one he had seen. It didn’t make sense.

He thought about all that was happening and realized there was far more to this than he originally thought. Interesting that it had all started with Leo. ‘Leo,’ he thought, ‘perhaps I should pay a quick visit to him.’

Sam walked the hallways deep in thought until he arrived in the hallway outside Leo’s suite and knocked on the door.

It was one o’clock in the morning and Leo was groggy, but he woke up and opened the door, “Yes?”

“Leo, Sam. May I come in? I know its late, but there are things to discuss.”

“Of course, of course. Let me turn on a pot of mestava.”

Leo went into his kitchen and started a pot, with Sam following.

“Leo, what can you remember about your original dream?”

“What do I remember? Well, honestly, I can remember everything. I mean, unexpectedly, it remains as vivid today as it did in the beginning.”

“Isn’t that unusual?”

“Yes, I believe so. All the research I’ve read is quite clear on how dreams fade over time, or shift and become different. This one hasn’t done that, but then again, I’ve never had such a vivid dream.”

“Hm. Do you mind if I do a quick brain scan on you? Nothing painful, no damage, just a scan.”

Leo thought, then said, “Well, okay, if you think it will help.”

“I do. Now, just sit down and be still and close your eyes.”

Sam spoke words of reveal and concentrated on Leo’s mind. There, an intrusion, right in front of that dream. He delved deeper and saw that the memory was an embedded one designed to replay whenever thought of, with exact and precise recollection. It wasn’t a memory; it was an implant. Someone had placed this here, but who? Not the Hayku, not the ones behind them. Not anyone in the Empires service. No, this was of a much deeper ability and far more aware than people were here. This was a dilemma.

“Okay, Leo, you can open your eyes.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Yes. Your dream is an implant. It’s embedded in your mind and replays exactly the same each time.”

“What? Who could do something like that?”

“That is exactly the correct question. My next question for you is this, do you want me to remove it?”

“Will it hurt?”

“I don’t believe it will.”

“Okay then, get this out of my head.”

“Alright, sit still and close your eyes.” He looked and found it again, but this time he disconnected the implant and brought it out of Leo and discarded it into the air.

“How does that feel?”

“You know, I feel as if a burden has been lifted, a doom, as it were.”

“Excellent. I hope it stays that way. Now, I do need your help. What can you tell me about the Hayku, specifically their motivation for the attack on Meladeran?”

“Hang on a minute, Sam. Let me wake up first.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry about that; it’s just that I’m very wired right now.”

Sam sat down at his kitchen table and waited.

Leo said, “I can’t tell. Well, honestly, I’ve been thinking about that very question for some time, and haven’t yet reached a conclusion.”

“Okay, but what are your general thoughts, hunches?”

The pot squawked, so Leo got up and poured them both a cup and sat back down, then said, “In all the documents I have seen, in all the letters I have read and the conversations I have had, I have not found anything that would lead me to believe that the Hayku had any desire to attack the Empire. Hatred for it? Yes. But to take on the Empire in a fight alone? No, not really.”

“Okay, then why did they do it? What was their motivation?”

“I’ve been batting around an idea for a while now, and I have an inclination that all of this has something to do with the planet Earth. I can’t tell you why I think that, and it might not specifically be the planet, or people who were from there, but it just seems that way, like a gut instinct, but I have no data to support it.”

“Earth, eh? Are you sure it was about Earth? Or could it be some other power behind them?”

Leo looked at him, and said, “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s true. I’ve seen them with my own eyes. The question is, who are those people who held so much power over the Hayku that they could motivate or direct the Hayku to commit an act that could only lead to their self-destruction?”

“Do you have anything besides what you saw that I could take a look at?”

“Yes. I’ll bring it to you when I return. For now, please see if you can find anything that you believe could be of use in figuring out what could have happened in the past few hundred years that could have caused anyone to not just desire to destroy the Empire, but actually take steps to do it.”

“I will.”

“Okay, good. I’m off then, see you soon.”

“Where are you off to?”

Sam smiled, “Places far and near.” He turned and walked out the door, and as he closed it, he vanished.

Chapter 55

Data

415.198.05

Sam appeared at home, startling the Empress.

“Where did you come from? How did you get in here?”

“I apologize, Your Majesty, I should have told you sooner. Let me tell you the tale of the changes that have occurred. After the fight on Meladeran, after Lizzy was nearly healed, we decided to leave and go find some rest, hence our departure, which you recall. However, I had an inkling that something wasn’t right. So, instead of coming home, we went to Earth. I don’t know why, but it felt like the right thing to do.”

“While there, I was transported into a different reality, and I discovered a ring in a hidden place at the top of a tower. It appears this ring gives me the ability to travel great distances at the speed of thought. I also believe it gives me other capabilities, but I have not yet managed to have time to explore them.”

“Really? That’s hard to believe.”

Lizzy had walked over to him and gave him a quick kiss, whispering, “Welcome home, dear.”

Continuing to speak with the Empress, Sam said, “Yes, it is. I had a hard time believing it myself.”

“Trust me, it blew me away as well.”

“As for right now, I believe the immediate threat to you is diminished, but it hasn’t gone away. When I return you to the palace, you will need to inform Admiral Jacobsen to assign a much higher level of security for you. Should I detect the threat I saw earlier moving in your direction, I will come and get you. But I don’t think that will happen. On a more positive note, and shifting course, I just left Leo, and he also feels the Earth is somehow entwined in this situation.”

“How is Leo?”

“He’s fine. As a matter of fact, let me gather a few items, and then if you will take my hand, I’ll take you to him.”

He found the data sticks he needed, and they stood together. The Empress took a few minutes to dress in her proper clothes and fix her hair and add some makeup. Then she took his right hand and Lizzy his left arm, and they vanished, only to appear outside Leo’s room.

“Now, please, Your Majesty, tell no one of this ability of mine. It must remain a secret between the three of us.”

“Of course.”

They knocked on the door and were soon in Leopold’s rooms.

The Empress and Leo hugged a greeting, and they were soon sitting around in his parlor talking.

“Leo, let me tell you about what we have discovered regarding the feeling you have about Earth. Also, here are the data sticks with the information we retrieved that discusses the Hayku.”

“First, Earth does have a part in this, but not as a specific power source behind the Hayku. Rather, the Earth is still a player because of something else, a hidden power that we can’t even fathom yet.” He went on and told him the story of his experience in the gray zone.

“So, there are things about the Earth that are part of this. Also, the Hayku, or Servants of Riser, operated there until very recently. I don't think they knew of this power we discovered, but they were located very close to it.”

Leo got up and paced the floor as Sam talked. He stopped and said, “You mean to tell me the Servants of Riser did survive the early years?”

“Yes. They survived and even migrated, as you know, to Tharzite. But they became more over time. They became the Hayku. I think this was after the intervention of whoever this power is that we seek. I think they saw an opportunity to take an outcast people and bend them to their desire, which was revenge. But who and why? That’s the information we don’t have.”

“I’ll be damned. I suspected so much, but had no information.”

The Empress added, “Yes, and that’s why I encouraged you to go to Earth to follow up on Empress Stephanie, to see if getting away from the Imperial Library and out into the field would yield you a better, or at least a different, perspective.”

“Yes, you did say that. I just got lost in the material here. I believe I need to travel to Earth to find out more about that age.”

Lizzy said, “Yes, you do. They have gobs of information; several museums; and you can actually see where she worked and played. I found it quite refreshing.”

“Alright then. That will be my next journey.”

Sam said, “In the meantime, we still have to figure out who was behind the Hayku attack, and determine if they are still seeking out a means to gain revenge against the Empire in some other fashion.”

“Well, sleuth, I labeled you the Savior of the Empire for preventing the Hayku from destroying Meladeran. I trust that was not premature. However, it looks like I need you to solve this one with as much urgency as you showed for the first one.”

Sam smiled, saying, “Standard rate plus expenses?”

The Empress laughed, and said, “Yes, Sam. But again, you’ll get more than that.”

“Well then, we must be off.”

They bowed and departed. Once outside the door Lizzy held his right hand and they vanished.

Chapter 56

Trinthea

415.198.08

Trinthea was furious. It now appeared that someone with a ring of power had interfered in her quest to kill the Empress. This was her first inkling that anyone else knew about these rings, although she had had an earlier exposure from Spleknob that this may have happened. She didn’t take it too seriously at the time, and now regretted that decision.

Her first reaction was that she should go find this adversary. But then, she thought about it and wondered if this new variable was stronger than her. She needed more power to defeat this new threat; just in case they did have a ring of power. She knew the ship was on course, so all would be well.

“Tranthar, I must leave for some time. Continue as planned.”

“Yes, Leader.”

Then she vanished enroute to Earth. She had to search for the secret she had missed, the key to all power and knowledge.

She arrived on Earth at the outpost of the Servants of Riser, trembling with anger at them for their stupidity. All those years of effort to get them prepared for just one task, and they failed. She went to the main building and burst down the door, expelling her anger through physical violence.

She looked around, broke some chairs, then decided there was nothing here she needed. She left and walked towards the secret door to the Labyrinth. She could transport herself directly there, but still needed to burn some energy. The walk would help.

She was so very angry at the audacity of these Earthlings - they built the Labyrinth as if they were the central point of origin for all of the human species in the galaxy, when she had been given a ring of power that had been handed down since time immemorial in her people’s care. She was conflicted. On the one hand the labyrinth showed so much of their past, but on the other it was built on the home of the one who defeated her people in battle.

She was so irritated that she didn’t notice she was being followed until she was almost at the canyon. When she noticed them, she immediately ran down the canyon to the door, then inside.

“So, you return?”

She was inside looking at the creature dressed in all black, in the world of grey.

“Yes.”

“What do you seek this time?”

“Answers.”

“Answers, or power?”

“Are they not the same?”

“Hm. Perhaps.” He vanished, and she traveled instantly to the door leading into the castle.

As she opened the door, she was again met by the one dressed in black.

“You carry anger. Why?”

She thought about this for a moment, then said, “These Earth people did not know that our civilization was older than all the rest. We had honed our people into weapons. We sacrificed.”

“Then to have the young upstart Earthlings suddenly arrive and defeat us in battle; no one can know how humiliating that was. Stupid warriors. If only they would not have tried to destroy this planet. That galvanized these people and honed their anger into a war fighting machine we could not match. Otherwise, we would have subjugated them without much effort.”

“So, you are angry because they defeated you.”

She glared at him, but only said, “Yes.”

“Interesting.” He vanished.

She entered the castle and walked through the courtyard towards the long halls of the library museum. She knew which door she needed to open, and walked with sparks flying from her heels as she made her way towards it.

Chapter 57

Labyrinth

415.198.09

Sam held Lizzy’s hand and they traveled to Earth, arriving on the hill overlooking the original compound where they had been staked to the ground.

Looking through her snoopers, Lizzy said, “This is interesting. It looks like someone broke down some walls.”

“Well, let’s go see.”

Once they arrived, they noticed that the compound definitely had been disturbed, as if someone had been there and broken down some walls. They went into the compound to the large room, and it was confirmed. Someone had been here, and there were broken chairs scattered around.

“It’s like someone was in a rage.”

“Yes, interesting.”

They went back outside, and Sam saw a single dark figure far in the distance. He grabbed Lizzy’s hand, and transported with her to that spot, only to discover someone they had never seen before, a human dressed in all black, with black hair. But she saw them before they could get to her and ran down into the Antelope Canyon. They followed, but couldn’t find her. They followed her footsteps in the sand, but they vanished on the stone of the canyon floor and walls.

Sam stopped and waited, listening. He then spoke words of opening, and a small portal opened in the wall to their left. They stepped through together.

As the portal closed behind them, they looked around and discovered they were in the gray world Sam had visited before, the place of nullification.

The one he had met before appeared and said, “So, you return, and you bring another.”

“Yes. There was one before us.”

“She is already in the castle.”

“What does she seek?”

“The same as you, answers.”

“Where should we look?”

“In the place where answers are given.” He vanished.

Sam took Lizzy’s hand and said words of taking them to knowledge.

They arrived at a door. It was very old and massive, solid hardwood, carved with runes. Sam reached out and opened it, and they stepped inside.

The room seemed large, but it was dark, only a little dim light in their area from a nearby lamp on the wall above a small table. Everything was dusty, you could tell no one had been there for a very, very long time.

Sam saw a sword laying on the table, so picked it up, dusted it off, and read the symbols on the blade. He said a few words of revelation and it glistened with a bright blue glow, nearly sparkling along the edge of the blade. He handed the sword to Lizzy, with the sheath and belt that were with it, saying, “This is yours to use to protect us. It is far more powerful than any weapon you have ever held before. It is the sword of the first Master Armorer, who was also the first Master Swordsman. It is filled with his strength.”

“Why is it here?”

“I don’t know.”

“And Sam, who were the first?”

Sam thought a moment, then said, “I’m not sure. That’s something I hope to discover in this place.”

Lizzy took the sword, and said, “Sam, I can feel an energy spreading throughout my body, like I have never felt before.”

“Yes,” he said, “You are now the Master Armorer and Master Swordsman. Be careful not to allow your confidence to outpace your ability and no one can ever defeat you.”

He looked at the wall lamp and reached out to it, and it brightened. He paused as they looked out into the depth of the darkness and quickly raised his hands to the height of the lamp, saying words of revelation.

Suddenly, all of the lamps in the room illuminated, revealing a room that was virtually endless, containing bookshelves that were filled with very old volumes along the walls, plus old maps, statuary, weapons, and things they didn’t recognize.

“Oh my. I don’t know who built this, but this is a vast museum of knowledge.”

“It’s huge!”

“Yes. I wonder how big it is, and invisible to detection by any means we know of.”

They began to explore, read, and learn about this place. Sam discovered a book, laid open under a glow lamp, with words etched in gold using the runes he had learned, that gave a short synopsis of the people who built this labyrinth.

He read, “If you are reading this book, welcome to what we have learned. We are the Artengiean people. We have existed for three cycles of the birth of this, our universe. However, even with our knowledge, we do not know how the universe began. We suspect it was created by an unfathomable power, God, at some point. But a universal cycle leaves no trace of the past. This cyclic process could have been ongoing for eternity, and could continue for just as long.”

“We arrived on this planet when the first prototypes of humans began to form. We locked all of our knowledge inside these books, some rings, amulets, and other items, then set spells to hide everything. Once we completed this, we departed Earth and traveled, settling other planets in this galaxy and the Andromeda Galaxy.”

“One day we returned to this Earth, only to discover the ones we had left behind had regressed into ignorance and mated with those half humans living in the savannah. So, we added everything we knew to the knowledge base, and moved the entire library museum from its original location to this one. This time we sealed it and left a guardian to watch over it. Once we had hid everything, we departed the Earth for other galaxies, with no desire ever to return.”

“What we have left for you is the culmination of our existence. We built this library museum as a temple of knowledge. All of our knowledge, articles of power, and personal histories are included here. Our hope is that you will read and understand us, and begin a new means to extend life through the next cycle.”

“We have, after so much time, realized we must move on and experience death, in order to discover what lies beyond. We have become bored with this eternal life we live, which forever entraps us in this one, physical universe.”

“You are gifted and guided, having found this book. We wish good luck to you, and may the God who created all be with you.”

Sam looked up at Lizzy, saying, “Wow.”

“That’s incredible! I mean, it changes everything we thought we knew about our species, history, physics; everything.”

“I know.” He paused, then said, “You know, for the first time, I think I’m speechless.”

She laughed, saying, “No, the first time was when you woke up in bed with me!”

He also laughed. “Okay, you’re right. But this. Wow.”

“I think we’re going to stay here for a while, Sam. We should probably find some food and set up a camp.”

“Yes, how about if we go get what we need and set up a tent out by that fountain?”

“Perfect.” She reached out her hand, and said, “Let’s do this.”

Chapter 58

Uprooted Civilization

415.199.07

Leo spent all of his time, except when he wasn’t with the Empress, studying and researching all the information Sam had left him. He believed that some of these documents should be in the Imperial Library, not locked up in a secure Star Fleet vault. He was just reading the most interesting document when his door buzzed. He got up and opened it only to find Empress Penelope.

“Good morning, Your Majesty.”

“Good morning, Leopold. I know it’s early, but would you mind if I come in?”

“Oh goodness, of course not. Please, can I get you a cup of mestava?”

“Please. I’ve had several, but one more can’t hurt.”

Once the door was shut, she gave him a quick kiss and walked over to the table where he had piles of papers.

“Looks like you’ve been busy.”

“Yes, those documents Sam left – I must say, they are a veritable treasure trove of information. Which reminds me, I was going to tell you that a lot of this should be in the Imperial Library, not locked away by Star Fleet.”

She accepted the cup of mestava, and said, “Thank you. What do you mean? What have you found?”

“Well, I think I’ve hit gold in the data Sam provided. I’m certain he didn’t have time to review these, because if he did, his whole perspective would change. Here, read this first.”

He handed her a page and she quickly scanned it. Looking up, she said, “Really?”

“Yes, really. But that isn’t the best part. It states here, let’s see, this is star date one four two point two four five point one four, that the Creleans held a blood oath to destroy all that Empress Stephanie had created, as revenge for their defeat in the first galactic war. That’s over two hundred years ago. But the truly interesting thing about this is that the leader of the Creleans, when they were defeated, is none other than their current leader, Trinthea.”

“Interesting. You don’t think the Creleans, this Trinthea, still have this desire for revenge, do you?”

“I don’t know. We don’t have any further information to confirm or deny it.”

“Yes, but I’ve met her several times. She has always been very respectful, if not a little dangerous looking. But to still desire this? I don’t know, Leo, I find it hard to fathom.”

“I would agree about one thing, we need more information. If the Creleans were the power and inspiration behind the Hayku, then they could still be a danger. So, it seems to me that it might be a good idea to see what Star Fleet can tell you about the current state of Crelean activity.”

“I think I will be asking more than that. Very well, but first, have you given any thought to my proposal?”

He held her in his arms, kissed her deeply, then said, “Yes.”

She laughed, saying, “Yes, as in you have given it thought, or yes, as in yes.”

He smiled back at her, and said, “Let me be very clear. Yes, as in yes, wholeheartedly without reservation. I love you.”

“I love you!”

They stayed together for some time before the Empress left to have a conversation with Star Fleet. When she left Leo, Empress Penelope went to her office and spoke with Admiral Johansen via her secure communicator. It took only a few hours, but soon her page knocked and entered. “Your Majesty, Admiral Johansen, Star Fleet Supreme Commander, is here at your request.”

“Send him in.”

The page bowed and stepped back, waving the admiral into the room. He walked up to the desk and saluted. “Your Majesty, Admiral Johansen reporting.”

She looked up at him and nodded, saying, “Have a seat admiral, and tell me what you found.”

Once he was seated, he said, “Your Majesty, a huge Crelean flotilla departed the galaxy headed towards the Messier 95 Galaxy, which is about thirty-three million light years away, over a year ago.”

“How large of a flotilla?”

“It appears they all left, Your Majesty, the entire civilization.”

“But that would be millions of people.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. The last survey reported the Crelean population as one billion, three hundred and fifty million. So, it’s a lot of people. From information we’ve received, it does appear that all Crelean planets are empty.”

“My God.”

“Yes, and it will take them at least twenty years to cross the barrier to get too Messier 95. That’s a very long time for a people to be isolated in their ships.”

She got up, waved him to sit, and walked around to sit in a chair beside him. “Do you know of any reason why they would do this?”

“No, Your Majesty. We have no information on a motivation for this.”

“Perhaps I can fill you in, Admiral. It seems Star Fleet had information in its archives about the Creleans that provided a possible motive. Here, read these documents.”

She handed him documents Leopold had given her. As he read, his eyes got bigger.

“This is incredible. You say it was hidden in our archives?”

“Yes. And a highly respected historian, you know him, Dr. Leopold Falstock, reviewed this and other files and recommended they be placed in the Imperial Library’s restricted section, not in the Star Fleet archives.”

“Your Majesty, if these were in the archives, how did Dr. Falstock get them?”

She laughed. “Admiral, we are not here to discuss or accuse anyone of wrongdoing. Let’s just say he had some help. In any event, I am directing you to take all the information you hold in your archives and place it into the restricted section of the library. That way properly cleared historians can have access to it for research purposes.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, right away.”

“Good.” She rose and walked back around her desk and sat again. “However, it seems, to me, that the Creleans were behind the Hayku attack on Meladeran. My fear is that since that attack failed, the Creleans will still try and find a way to elicit pain on the Empire, so as to get their piece of flesh for actions taken hundreds of years ago. Thoughts?”

“None, at this time, Your Majesty. We have no further intelligence about any activities being planned or conducted by the Creleans, as they are reported to be far into their journey to another galaxy.”

“Yes, that’s what bothers me. They went through a lot of trouble to get this done. They must have been planning this for hundreds of years, building mega-transports and hiding them; I can’t even imagine what it took for them to complete all this, in secret. But it would surprise me much more than not if they didn’t have a back-up plan in place. We need to find out what that plan is and stop it. I don’t know how we can do that, but we must try. I need Star Fleet to be on maximum surveillance for anything that could be a step towards that action.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. We will not fail.”

“Thank you, Admiral. Good day.”

He stood, saluted, and left.

Empress Penelope sat for a while longer thinking about the scenario. She thought, ‘I wonder what Sam and Lizzy are up to?”

Chapter 59

Power Transfer

415.199.22

Trinthea thought about it, and the more she thought, the more she realized that the Earth was not the home of Stephanie anymore, Xena was. She stopped in her tracks at this realization, and returned to the ship to discuss it.

When she arrived, her council was there.

“Our Leader, what of your quest?”

“I have discovered three things. One, we do not need to destroy the Earth to get revenge on Stephanie, two, we are not the only ones with a ring of power, and three, my time as leader is ending.”

“Tranthar asked, “What do you mean, Trinthea?”

“I mean that Stephanie no longer lives on Earth. Even before she departed for the Triangulum Galaxy, she had left Earth, saying she would never return there again. No, her home, here in this galaxy, was Xena. Destroy that planet and we harm her far more than anything else we could do.”

“Next, when Threalia returned from Meladeran she told me a tale I had a hard time believing, that she was followed on her quest to find the Empress. But I, too, was followed on Earth. That could only mean someone else has a ring of power, or at least a ring of travel, so we are not alone in our knowledge.”

“Lastly, the destruction of Xena and the completion of the revenge against Stephanie for humiliating our people will be my final act as Leader. It is time.”

She turned to Tanthal, and said, “Tanthal, go bring the Master Warrior to me.”

Turning to Tranthar, Trinthea says, “It is time for my reign to end and yours to begin.”

“Why me, Leader?”

“Because you were selected before time to lead our people into the new civilization in Messier 95. You were the choice of Leader to follow me I knew on the day I was selected. You will know who will follow you, once our knowledge transfer is complete. My time ends here, with the final solution of revenge for the mistakes I made in the past.”

At that time, the Master Warrior was brought into the room.

“Klintroc, Master Warrior. Today I transfer power to Tranthar, who will be your new Leader. The only task I have to give you before power is transferred, is for your warriors to take the Earth weapon and place it on Xena, the true home of our enemy, Stephanie.”

“Yes, Leader. It shall be done.”

Turning to Tranthar, she grasped her head in both hands and leaned into her until their foreheads touched. They stood there, motionless, for some time.

Slowly, a glimmering ball of energy surrounded them and began to glow. It expanded and everyone in the chamber knelt. The glimmering turned to a bright orange flame, burning brightly and further expanded above them and around the room; but not burning the others in the room. Finally, Trinthea dropped her hands and the flames vanished. She looked at Tranthar and they hugged. lastly, they stepped back from each other.

Tranthar said, “I agree with your actions to destroy Xena instead of Earth. It satisfies our need for revenge, and it saves a vast source of potential knowledge and power. I also agree you should keep the rings of travel and of power, until you complete your task. You are directed to fulfill your oath, destroy Xena, or die trying. However, when you succeed, which I am certain you will do, you will join us on the crossing, and enjoy a peaceful rest. We will now turn this craft and join our people in the great void.”

Trinthea bowed, and vanished.

She used the travel ring and returned to the labyrinth to seek another ring of power, if there were any, and the great ring, if there truly was one. This was now her only task, aside from destroying Xena. The warriors would tell her when it was ready. She would not fail.

Chapter 60

Rooms

415.200.08

Sam and Lizzy had no idea how many days they had spent exploring and learning inside the Great Labyrinth. They were learning more and more about who had built it, and all that they had learned.

Today was another journey. They approached a door, and the sign on the door read, “The Room of Possibilities. You may enter only once.”

“What do you think is inside, Sam?”

“I don’t know. It’s a fairly innocent, yet intimidating sign. Possibilities of what? Maybe of the future of the universe? I don’t know. But clear your mind, and let’s go see. It’s too intriguing to pass by.”

As they entered the room, the door closed behind them and a voice said, “Any of these may happen, but a few actually will happen.”

The room was dark. Slowly, from a small ball floating in the center of the room, light began to emerge. It grew larger and larger, until the light filled the room. It wasn’t just light, it was a phantasm of motion, light, shifting images, sounds, holograms, shadows, and projections, all around them.

Supernova, grass, oceans, forests, fires, wars, births, vineyards, planets exploding; images of peace, hate, love. It overwhelmed them. Lizzy had to leave, there were too many images blinking inside her mind for her to stand it. Sam remained, and in his analytical mind, he tried to understand what he saw. He managed to stay for a while, but then he, too, exited the room.

They stood outside the door, in the hallway, staring into space. Finally, Lizzy said, “What did you see, Sam?”

“I’m not sure yet. There were so many things, possibilities, threads. It was, it was as if we were inside someone’s mind glimpsing threads of imagination and reality, intertwined, intersecting, moving, bouncing. Yet, it was almost logical and coherent.”

“Wow. All I saw was utter chaos. It was hard to see anything because everything was moving, blurred, crystal clear, changing. I think that’s one of the hardest places I’ve been.”

“Yes, it was certainly different. The question is, what did we actually see and how does that help us moving forward?”

“I don’t know.”

“Me either, yet. But I’m gonna think about it and hopefully something will pop out. Okay, let’s keep going.”

As they were walking down the long hallway, a woman appeared in front of them, dressed in black, with red fiery eyes, and a bright red edged sword in her hand.

Lizzy quickly drew her sword, as Sam said, “We mean you no harm. Who are you?”

Trinthea, who they didn't yet know of, said, “You truly don’t know?”

“No, we don’t.”

She laughed, then said, “I am the one who ends it.”

“Ends what?”

“The stain.”

“What stain?”

“You are only here because those we sent failed, but I shall not.” She vanished.

Lizzy said, “Who was that?”

“I'm not sure, but I think we met the power behind the Hayku.”

“Will she try and destroy Meladeran again?”

“So, it seems.”

“Then quick, we have to leave and warn the Empress.”

Sam stood thinking for a minute, then said, “That’s what we would be expected to do, and for some reason, my gut is telling me that that is what she wants us to do. No, we stay and continue to search for the secrets of this labyrinth. One thing is certain, there is more than one ring for fast travel. I wonder what else there is?”

They continued walking down the darkened hallway, lit now only by the occasional lamp. They thought they saw a door open and close in the distance.

“I think we may be following her.”

Lizzy drew her sword, saying, “Well if she wants a fight, I'm ready for one.”

They continued, and came to where they thought the door was. The sign on the door said, “The Door of Endless Misery. Enter at Your Peril.”

“That doesn't sound good.”

“No,” Sam replied, “But I think we have no choice.”

As they entered, a voice said, “You may only enter one door.” Inside, they found a hallway with infinitely more doors. As they began looking at the names of the rooms, they discovered a curious thing. They were doors to everything. “The Door to Unquenchable Desire,” “The Door to Unfathomable Power,” “The Door to Supreme Knowledge,” and on and on. Doors of love, hope, joy, purity, lust, greed, skills; There were doors to the ultimate of any subject. They looked and could not see the end of the hallway. They could not decide which door to enter.

Sam noticed that there were quite a few skeletons in the hallway, interspersed. He said, “I think I understand. The misery of this room is that you can only choose one door, but because of this, you thereby miss out on so much!”

He felt himself beginning to experience a rising tension, but then he controlled himself. He turned to Lizzy. She was wild-eyed looking at the doors. He sensed that she was nearly losing herself. He went to her and forced her to look into his eyes.

“Lizzy, look into my eyes, its Sam.”

“LOOK AT ME!”

He held her shoulders and looked into her eyes, and yelled again, “LOOK AT ME!!”

She seemed to focus and looked at him, and he said, “Look into my eyes, know who I am.”

Soon she cried out and reached to hug him, her eyes now closed. “Oh, my God, Sam, this place is terrible!”

“I know. Now, listen to me. I am going to find the knowledge I seek. I want you to go find the greatest power you can find. If we can gather these two, we may be able to figure out what is happening and prevent it.”

“Very well, Sam. I agree.”

“Okay. But I want you to go first, so you don't get lost before you begin. Let's meet at the fountain where we set of camp.”

“Okay. I love you! Be safe!”

“I love you. Take care, be on guard.”

Lizzy entered the room labeled, “The Door to Unfathomable Power.” It seemed empty.

Sam entered “The Door to Supreme Knowledge.” It wasn't empty at all. It was the largest library he had ever seen. It surpassed the Imperial Library by a thousandfold, and that was only the part he could see. It was even larger than that!

He stood looking at the collected books, and decided to walk a while. He walked up and down through several rows, then saw a spiral staircase in the far distance. He went there and climbed the stairs, and found that the walkway led to a door. The door said, “The Door to the Key.” He wasn't sure if he should enter, but when he looked back, the walkway and the entire library were gone.

He opened the door and went inside. Inside was a book, resting on a pedestal under a lamp. As he approached, the room went dark. He was standing under the only light, the lamp on the pedestal. He reached out and touched the cover of the book, and it opened.

He started reading, and as he read, the room became alive with the visualizations and sounds of the times and ages he spoke. He saw volcanoes, planets colliding, suns exploding, black holes devouring star systems. He saw all of existence in the universe pulled inexorably toward a central point. It was a view that saw all of matter swallowed into a central point, only to be suddenly exploded in all directions!

He saw galaxies form, stars, planets, he saw them move in different directions over time. Then he saw a man and a woman. He saw them standing on a planet, under a tree. They were waving to others who boarded a craft and departed. He saw this repeated several hundred, then thousands of times.

Suddenly, the individual making the recording turned and looked at the camera, and said…”

Lizzy was in the empty room and watched as forms began to appear. They were regal and royal, and seated around an arena. She discovered that she was in the arena. Slowly, a warrior materialized in the arena with her. He said, “Choose your weapon.” Several weapons, of various types, appeared before her. As she reached for a sword the others vanished. The warrior also had a sword. The fight began.

Trinthea had also entered the Door of Misery, and had also chosen a door. But the door she chose was “The Door to Unyielding Amulets.” When she arrived, there were shelves and shelves of amulets. She searched and searched, until she found what she desired, the Amulet of Total Power. She snapped it onto her arm, then quickly exited the room and found her way out of the labyrinth. Then she instantly traveled back to the ship. Her ultimate destination now was Xena.

“My name is Arclendam. I am the leader of our people. This is our way and all that we know. Relax, and learn.”

Sam felt his mind expanding. Soon, he felt his feet rise from the ground. He was entranced in the learning. Finally, after how long, he didn't know, his feet were firmly on the ground and a staff appeared in front of him. He took it and found himself sitting by the fountain where he and Lizzy had sat discussing their adventure, before walking and finding the doors. He smiled, and waited.

Lizzy fought using multiple weapons against multiple warriors. Each time she fought, she realized she was taught and learned the mastery of it. She was master of hand to hand, knife, sword, spear, archery, and a host of modern weapons and many she had never seen before. But her knowledge and skill were unequalled.

As the last warrior vanished, so did everyone that was observing the arena, except one. She stood and approached her, and waved her hand and a sword of such magnificence appeared in the air before her. She looked at the giver and nodded. The giver smiled. As her hand touched the handle the giver also vanished. She held the sword and realized that around her waist was the sheath, tied and ready. She sheathed the sword and turned around, and found she was standing looking towards Sam, who was sitting by the fountain.

Sam stood and they walked to each other and stood, hugging each other in silence, for a very long time.

Finally, Lizzy said, “I am different but the same.”

Sam agreed, saying, “I too am different but the same. But I suspect we are now both, far more than we were. Our key, is staying focused on our love for each other.”

Lizzy kissed him, and said, “Always, my husband.”

They walked out of the labyrinth and were met by the guardian. He said, “I see you have what you sought.”

“Yes. The other?”

He smiled a rueful smile, saying, “She found what she thought she wanted.”

Sam looked at him for a moment, then said, “Fair enough. Until we meet again.” They vanished.

They stood in their house, in the kitchen. “I’m actually hungry,” Sam said.

Lizzy chuckled, “Well, I guess this is the right place.”

They kissed a few moments, then prepared a quick meal. They took their seats at the table.

Sam said, “It feels like we have been away in the Labyrinth for a very long time.”

“Yes, but looking at the time, it’s only been moments.”

“What did you find, Lizzy?”

She thought a moment, then said, “I found out how to use everything from the bare human body, up through weapons we have not yet invented, and was taught mastery of each.”

“That makes you a formidable weapon and a master of power.”

“Yes, I think it does. You?”

“I learned what we must do to survive the next cycle of universal collapse and expansion, and how using the spells I am learning, work.”

“How do we live that long, Sam?”

He smiled, and said, “We already will. Our exposure to the inner Labyrinth gave us longevity beyond our reckoning. We will live as long as we desire, Lizzy.”

“Wow. Now that’s something to try and get your head around.”

“Yes, it is.”

They sat together, then finished cleaning up and sat together on their couch, just holding each other, and thinking about all that was.

Chapter 61

Lord of Time

415.211.08

Dhakini and Mudu had spent a lot of time observing, and at times, interacting with, Sam, Lizzy, and Trinthea. They had watched each of them grow in power, and realized that between them they had the power to cause serious damage to the reality that existed beyond their knowledge.

“It worries me, this power they are being given. They have no guidance, no focus.”

“Yes,” agreed Mudu, “they are a potentiality we did not expect.”

“If we didn’t expect it, then is it something we should be concerned about, or that we should tell someone about?”

“I don’t know. But I agree we have to do something.”

“I have an idea. How about if we talk with Arclendam? He is the one mostly responsible for the powers they are gathering.”

“Good idea. I think we should do that quickly.”

Dhakini said, “Yes. Take my hand.”

They were instantly in his presence.

Mudu began, “Arclendam, Dhakini and I need your guidance.”

“About?”

“The three individuals we are watching, Sam and Lizzy, and the Crelean Trinthea.”

“In what regard?”

Dhakini said, “We are concerned that the power they have discovered within the labyrinth, when combined with their fighting between each other, could cause an unexpected rift in time, and alter all that has been planned.”

“Hm. They do represent power beyond their own knowledge. But is that sufficient for an intervention?”

“We don’t know.”

“Nor do I. It would seem that they face the same dilemma we faced before we decided our time was over. It came down to a chasm between goals and directions. I can see that these are also divided; yet they were never united.”

“No, they weren’t.”

Mudu added, “But they still wield power enough to tear the curtain. Should it be allowed, or should we intervene?”

The three stopped talking for a time, then Dhakini said, “If we three cannot speak with a united agreement, perhaps we should take our concern to Starmia, Lord of Time, beyond the Veil of the Blessed Heart, if he will see us.”

“I agree with Dhakini, we should seek guidance.”

“As I cannot find a reason to disagree with you, I will defer to you.”

He held out his hand and the other two did likewise. He said, “Lord Starmia, hear our call.”

It wasn’t long before they were transported up and through the veil. When they arrived, to a level none of them had ever been to before, they were amazed.

The feeling they felt of such love and compassion drove them to tears. They looked around, but only saw a few people, all wearing the purest of white. The walls, floors, everything, had white light life.

They stood and looked around until someone approached them that they could only think of as an angel. The angel said, “Come.”

They followed the angel, and he led them into a place of unimaginable size, and on into its depth. They walked for an incalculable amount of time. Finally, the angel stopped before a door that was adorned with such blessings of love that they all fell to their knees and wept.

The angel said, “Rise, and enter.”

The door opened, and they walked inside. There, sitting on a dais, was the Lord of Time, Lord Starmia. They all bowed to him.

He said, “I know of your quest and your concern. Know this; the fight to come will not tear the fabric, nor harm time. It may cause much disruption, but our Lord never does anything without a purpose. Sometimes, it is hard, even for those of us who are enlightened, to understand.”

He arose from his chair and walked down the steps to where they were standing, reached out and gently touched each one on the cheek. They felt an instant peace within.

He said, “Now, travel home, each of you, and fear not. Much is yet to come before our Lord will intervene. May His Blessings go with you.”

Chapter 62

Spa

415.211.10

Trinthea returned to the command ship, now enroute for the outer edge of the galaxy to join their civilizations great armada and set course to cross the void enroute to their new home in Messier 95.

When she returned, Tranthar met her. “Trinthea, how goes your task?”

Trinthea bowed to Tranthar, and said, “It goes well Leader. I found these amulets, which I believe hold the power needed to destroy the one with the power ring. He followed me to the Labyrinth. I saw him and one other approaching when I was nearing the door, so hurried inside.”

“I met him inside and let him know that the quest to destroy the empire was still on. I believed he would then depart the Labyrinth for Meladeran, to warn them and prepare for an unexpected attack.”

“Did the ruse work?”

“I don’t know, Tranthar. I never saw him or the other again within the Labyrinth, but it is a massive facility, and they could have remained.”

“What next then?”

“Before I find and defeat him, I want to destroy Xena. That is my first priority. Then I will defeat him and get his ring, and then return to you and help cross the void.”

“Very well, let’s hope these amulets do as you expect. The ship with the weapon has departed Earth and is enroute to Xena. It will take several days. You should take this time to immerse yourself in cleansing your soul for your task.”

Trinthea bowed again, saying, “Yes, Leader.”

She left the council room and walked to the area they called The House of Rejuvenation. As she entered, the workers knew her and cleared a pathway to her senses. She immersed herself in the luxury of relaxation, something she had not done in dozens of years.

‘Ah,’ she thought. ‘I so needed this. Now, all I have to do is go to Xena and set up the weapon and our revenge will be complete. All that Stephanie built will be destroyed. All that Jeffrey Wilson created will be demolished. Yes, destroying Xena is a much better statement than destroying the Earth.’

‘Then, find and defeat this man with the ring. I wonder if it truly was a ring of power or a ring of travel. No matter. My amulets will defeat him.’

She emptied her mind of worries and laid back and immersed herself into the care of the workers of the house.

Chapter 63

A Visit

415.211.11

Sam and Lizzy appeared outside the palace, in the private area of a park. Their clothing had changed in the Labyrinth. Sam now wore the clothing of a wise wizard, with a staff and robes to match. Lizzy wore the golden attire of the Master Warrior. They walked slowly, arm in arm, at an easy gait, towards the entrance of the palace. As they strolled, people seemed to sense that there was something different about them, and bowed as they moved out of the way. The guards saluted and stood aside as they walked up the steps into the main entrance.

Word was sent to the Empress about them, and she made her way to the throne in the main hall. Sam, with his staff, and Lizzy, wearing her sword, walked through the people gathered in the great hall, and they all stepped aside. As they approached the throne, even the Empress felt what everyone else had sensed and wanted to bow as well. But she did not. Sam and Lizzy both bowed.

“Your Majesty, we return at a crucial hour.”

“I was not aware of a crisis. What is crucial at this hour? Have we not stopped the enemy?”

“For a time, Your Majesty, but we have news. May we continue in private?”

“Of course, come with me.”

Empress Penelope led them to her office. Everyone moved out of their way as they moved, and bowed to them all.

Once inside her private office, the Empress said, “I don’t know who you have become, but even I feel I should bow to you. What has happened?”

Sam said, “We have found a place where we learned things, gained energies, and changed.”

“That sounds like a very simplistic statement, coming from you, Sam.”

Lizzy smiled, and said, “Yes, Your Majesty, it is. But the truth is so unbelievable, that it is perhaps best for us not to try and explain it, at this time.”

“Hm. Well, if you say so.” At that time there was a knock, and her personal assistant entered the room.

“Your Majesty, an officer from Star Fleet has arrived with a response to your enquiries.”

“Very well, show him in.”

The officer entered and bowed. “Your Majesty, Star Fleet detected a Crelean vessel departing the Earth. It is currently enroute for Xena. We need your guidance, Your Majesty.”

“Very well. Wait outside and I will provide you a response.” Once he had left, the Empress turned to Lizzy and asked, “What do you think?”

She said, “Your Majesty, I am the weapon, Sam is the knower. He will know when it is time to act. I am the one who acts.”

The Empress was surprised by the answer, so Sam explained.

“Your Majesty, we each learned different things at this place we found. Lizzy is now the Master Armorer and Master Swordsman within this reality. Those two make her the Master Warrior for any and all situations requiring a weapon or physical response. I learned knowledge, so am the knower. As to this current situation, please let their ship continue on its mission. We will take care of it.”

He then reached out and Lizzy took his hand. He bowed, saying, “We must leave now, Your Majesty.” They vanished.

They reappeared at home.

“Well, it should take at least five days for them to be in place. I suggest we gain strength and go there to observe their landing, so we know where the Crelean will be.”

“You’re sure it is a Crelean?”

“Yes. Even her name, Trinthea, the leader of their civilization. She it is that we met. She it is who must complete the revenge act.”

“What about afterwards, Sam? I mean, once we defeat her, how do we prevent this revenge oath from being repeated?”

Sam smiled, “I have a plan for that. But for now, rest, strength, then fight.”

Chapter 64

Xena

415.224.10

The Crelean warship landed in a very private, very secluded, hidden location on Xena. It was probably the farthest you could get from any human settlement. They had taken great care not to be observed, but they were.

They took their time, preparing the stand and loading the weapon onto the rack. The weapon was very big, and required a large structure to hold it. Once they had it attached, they tilted it until the bore pointed towards the ground. They then activated the bore, and it dug down into the soil. When all but the very end of the rocket above the weapon was in the ground, they attached activation systems and departed.

Sam and Lizzy had observed this process and moved to be very close. They stood unseen behind some shrubs as another shuttle landed, and Trinthea walked out, sword in hand, ready to initiate the destruction phase.

Sam and Lizzy walked out from behind the shrubs and approached her.

“What do you want?”

“Trinthea, we are here to prevent your act of violence.”

She laughed. “You two? You couldn’t stop me, even if you were one hundred.”

Lizzy drew her sword, and said, “I will take those odds.”

Trinthea raised her arms and brought her amulets on her forearms together, and they exploded with fire. She said, “You? You have no weapon that can get past my arm.”

Lizzy walked forward.

Sam held his staff and began speaking words, holding his right hand out.

Trinthea walked towards Lizzy and raised her sword to deal a mighty blow. As she swung the sword, she realized Lizzy was no longer there, but behind her.

Lizzy only stung her on the back.

But Trinthea was fast. She whirled and brought her sword around in a mighty swing. Lizzy raised her sword to meet it and, “BOOOMMM!!!”

They both fell over onto their backs, dropping their swords.

A huge bolt of lightning had been created when their swords struck! It was now buried into Sam’s hand, as he held out his arm and gathered this energy into himself. He stood there, glowing, then he raised his staff and stabbed it into the ground and, “BOOOMMM!!!”

He fell over as well.

After a few minutes, the three of them stood up and looked at each other.

Trinthea said, “What happened?”

Lizzy responded, “I don’t know. Such power.”

Sam was the last to stand, but he said, “The two of you represent all that is powerful in the Earth and sky. When your swords collided, it sent a bolt of energy to me. I caught it and channeled it into my staff.”

Trinthea said, “I don’t understand. Why?”

Sam replied, “It would seem our powers complement each other.”

Lizzy said, “But why would they, Sam? We’ve been trying to kill each other.”

“I know. But I refer to the powers themselves, not our application. I do have a thought though. But before we get there, I believe introductions are in order. I am Sam, and this is my wife, Lizzy. We are sleuths, attempting to understand the plot for revenge against Meladeran, of which we believe you are part.”

She smiled, and said, “I am Trinthea. Until recently I was the leader of the Crelean nation. But now, I am only a warrior trying to complete the revenge against Empress Stephanie and Jeffrey Wilson.”

“Okay, Trinthea, can I ask you a question?”

“Certainly.”

“Did you participate in, order, or know who put the dream imagery into Leopold Falstock’s mind about the destruction of Meladeran.?”

“No, I knew nothing about it until it became a stumbling block for the Hayku to accomplish their task on time.”

“Then we are all being played by someone else. The question is, who?”

Lizzy added, “But who else is there, Sam? As far as everything we have seen and learned, the only people involved were the Hayku, being controlled by the Creleans. Who else could it be?”

“I’m not sure. But one thing that is clear to me is this; we have no reason or need to fight each other.”

Trinthea spoke, nearly shouting, “But I need to complete my revenge!”

“Why?”

She almost couldn’t speak. She had so much emotion bubbling up. Finally, she said, “Because I have always needed to exact revenge since our people were embarrassed and defeated by these young upstarts!”

“So, tell me, does anyone else share this passion? Or is it mostly you?”

She thought for a moment, then replied, “I believe others share this goal. However, I think I am the only one with the drive and passion to see it through.”

“But if it was so important to your people, shouldn’t others feel as passionate as you?”

“Yes, I would think so.”

“Trinthea, we don’t know each other. Nevertheless, I am going to ask you to trust me. You see, when we investigated the dream Leopold had, we discovered that someone, in a way we could not replicate with our knowledge, planted that memory, and it re-played exactly the same way whenever Leopold talked about it.”

“I was able to identify this memory, and we were able to remove it. The reason I am saying this is that I suspect you may have had the same type of tampering, planting this hard drive to complete revenge within your sub-conscious mind. I ask for your trust because I would like to look and see. But I cannot do that unless you allow it.”

Trinthea was taken aback. “Seriously? You expect me to trust you? Someone I am trying to kill so I can exact my revenge?”

Sam replied calmly, “Yes, Trinthea. I am asking you exactly that. I suspect that beyond your awareness, you have been tampered with. If not, well, then it goes on. But if so, then we have a far greater conspiracy to figure out than a mere bad dream.”

Lizzy said, “Trinthea, you don’t know me either, but Sam here, he’s a good one. He only means the best. I knew Leo before and I’ve met him since Sam removed the dream, and he was not harmed in any way. If anything, he is happy the dream is out of his head. So, I’m saying, he didn’t harm Leo in any way. You are safe with him.”

“But why should I trust you?”

Sam replied, “Because we three are apparently in this together, and we need to know what it is we are up against.”

She thought about it for a while, then finally said, “It is only because of what happened a moment ago that I even pause for this test. Rest assured, once this is over, our fight will likely continue.”

Sam said, “Agreed.”

“Very well. What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing, just stand still. Now, I am only going to place my open palms against your temples. Feel that? Okay, now, this may feel a little odd when I enter your mind. Reach out and hold Lizzy so she can steady you. Good. Okay, here goes.”

Chapter 65

Dream

415.224.11

He knew their biology was the same, but the spiritual side and morals appeared to be a little bit apart. He looked, then said “Trinthea, think of the initial desire to seek revenge.”

As she thought about it, he could clearly see it. He moved closer and saw that it was, indeed, an artificial implant. He said, “Trinthea, I have found it, and it is a planted dream. Do you want me to remove it?”

Trinthea, eyes still closed as if in a trance, said, “Yes.”

He used his mind to reach into and surround the dream, and decoupled it from her synapses. Instantly, she felt it.

He removed his hands and said, “Open your eyes.”

She opened her eyes, and said, “Oh my God. The stress, it’s gone!”

She stood there, “I can’t believe it. It’s like a weight lifted!”

Sam and Lizzy chuckled, and he said, “So, I guess it’s fair to say that you feel different now?”

“Yes! Oh my. Here, let me deactivate and disassemble this weapon. I have absolutely no desire for revenge! It's amazing!”

She went to the device and not only deactivated it, but set a self-destruct mechanism in place so it would self-destruct and never be a threat again. Once she was complete, she returned to them, and said, “There, it is fixed. It’ll melt into nothingness and evaporate into thin air within two hours.”

Lizzy said, “Okay. Now, the big question. Who would have given you this implant, and why?”

Trinthea added, “Yes, especially if this was planted within my brain over two hundred years ago.”

Sam had sat down on a log. He said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of, course.”

“Okay, why are your people leaving the galaxy?”

“I felt we were called to leave.”

“Yes, but why?”

“I don’t really know. It just seems that it is the right thing to do, with trying to destroy the Empire.”

“Yes, that makes sense, but fleeing? Would you mind if I look at that particular thought in your mind and see if it is genuine or an implant?”

“Okay, but I am beginning to feel like someone else’s toy.”

Again, Sam leaned forward and took her head in his hands. He said, “Think of the thought.”

There. He looked at it and it was definitely an implant. This time he didn’t ask first, but removed it.

Trinthea visibly relaxed, saying, “You took it out.”

“Yes, it was another implant. Someone has been using you.”

He sat back down, and said, “Let’s see what we know. First, someone wanted the Creleans to seek revenge against Empress Stephanie and Jeffrey Wilson. Second, someone wanted to warn us that an attack was imminent, which means they knew of the planning taking place. These two taken together, within the confines of our current society, make no sense.”

Both Lizzy and Trinthea said, “But?”

They chuckled together, then Sam added, “Not but, but so. So, we have to look for explanations or identification of whoever is behind this as outside of our current society.”

Lizzy said, “But Sam, there is no one outside of our current society. There are a lot of planets and people who hate, but I can’t think of anyone I would consider outside of society.”

“Maybe you’re right. I think we need to go to Meladeran. I need to speak with Leopold, and we need to brief the Empress.”

Trinthea said, “I’m certain that Empress Penelope doesn’t want to see me, since I was behind the attempt to destroy Meladeran.”

Sam said, “Trinthea, you are not to blame. You were under someone else’s influence. Now I know you can travel without a starship, and you know we can as well. This time, I will lead, so take my arm and let’s go.”

Lizzy said, “Wait, Sam. It makes no sense! I mean, are we saying that someone set up this process hundreds of years ago, using Trinthea to use the Hayku, all in an effort to get revenge for something that happened hundreds of years ago? That sounds as crazy as the spinning images in that first room we went into at the labyrinth. What was that called? Oh yes, The Room of Possibilities?”

Sam stood still, and said, “That's it! When we were in the room, you left before me. I saw many things, but one was very intriguing. It was a battle of shapes. It seemed odd, it didn't have meaning. Now I see that it does. But now, I need to understand it better. We have to go there first. I have a question to ask and a library to explore.”

Trinthea said, “What did you see, Sam?”

He paused, and said, “The room was filled with movement, images, stories, words, and shapes, but two of the shapes seemed to be dominant in the images I observed. I thought they were just random shapes moving in a dance, but now I see that one of the shapes was a vision of power and religious zealotry, with colors of crimson and red, always moving and striking out towards the other shape. The other shape was brightly colored, with power at its core, but growing larger than the dark shape. It was one of the power of people and a growing strength.”

“What do you think that means?”

“That is why I need to go back and find an answer.”

“Let's do it, then.”

They held hands and all three were suddenly standing on the ridge above the castle to the labyrinth. The guardian soon appeared.

“What brings you this time?”

Sam said, “Truth.”

He nodded his head, saying, “Enter and find truth.”

They made their way to the long room, and Lizzy asked, “What are we looking for?”

“The Door of Truth.”

They split up and searched and it seemed like forever, but they found the door. Sam stepped up to the door with the other two behind, when a voice said, “Only one may enter.”

He turned to them and said, “I'll return as soon as I can, but I don't know how long that will be. Rather than have you wait, return to our home and I will come to you there.”

He turned back to the door and opened it, entered and closed the door behind him. A voice said, “You may ask only one question.”

He walked further into the room and noticed a small lectern to his right. Otherwise, the room was empty and without form.

He walked over to the lectern and said: “Are powers of good and evil real, and are they fighting now in the universe?”

The room seemed to breathe, but slowly forms began to take shape. He watched as the forms divided into two distinct forms. These were the ones he had seen in the Room of Possibilities, but with much greater detail. On the right, what must be good, while on the left, evil. Looking at the detail, he could see the evil was in Andromeda, their temple to Maximus I. On the right, the growing Empire and Empress Penelope at the center. It all made sense now.

Suddenly, from between the two shifting shapes, a cloaked figure appeared. The figure was moving slowly towards him, and said, “Is this all you wish to know?”

“No, it's not, but I was only allotted one question.”

“If you had another, what would it be?”

“How do you fight a power?”

The figure was quite close now, and reached and pulled the hood away so she was revealed. “If you want to know, you must come with me.” She held out her hand to him.

“Dhakini!”

“Yes, Sam. Now come on, there is much to say, and not much time to say it.”

He reached out and took her hand and they were suddenly standing on a high place, observing the universe.

“So, how do you fight powers and principalities? What are your thoughts?”

“I don't know. Everything seems to point its finger to faith, yet I don't truly even know what that means. I mean, one day, according to science, everything will be pulled back into a singularity and destroyed, before exploding and filling the void again. So where would powers even come from. It makes no sense to me.”

“If you assume there is only one reality and all is within it, that would be true. But your basic premise is the fault in your logic. You see, your spirit is not a physical property of your body. When you die your spirit shifts into the realm of the spirit. In that respect, when the universe contracts to a singularity, the spiritual world is not affected. Nor when it explodes again to fill the natural void. From the spirit realm we observe this, but are not affected by it.”

“But what about those people and the labyrinth. They seem to think that they can survive and return, even implying they have done this for several cycles.”

“Yes, there are those chosen who are allowed to take their knowledge and power and keep it safe, to return to populate the planets and galaxies. But they were selected, they didn't find a way around it, they just don't know that, so that’s the flaw in their logic. But their work is needed. The ones you speak of were responsible for three galaxies, The Milky Way, Andromeda, and a third that has become one of turmoil.”

“Incredible. Okay, which brings us back to the problem. Someone in the temple of Maximus I, being a power, set in motion actions that are today still on a collision course with the Empire, another power, apparently desiring the destruction of the Empire. How do we stop power?”

“You must go to Kaldect and find who is today the true power behind the scenes. It will be dangerous, but it can be done. Once you find that power, you must deal with it.”

“Why is there no power fighting for the Empire?”

“Interesting question coming from you, sleuth. If you truly are as good as I know you to be, the answer is self-explanatory. Goodbye, Sam.” She vanished, and he was standing in the hallway outside the door to the Room of Truth.

Chapter 66

Mission

415.224.19

Sam returned home, and found them sitting in the kitchen, talking.

“Sam!”

“Hi, Lizzy.”

She rushed into his arms and gave him a big hug and kiss. Trinthea waited until they broke their embrace, then said, “So, you must have learned something.”

“Yes,” he said, “I learned many things. But the most important thing is that I learned where we must go next.”

Lizzy said, “Where, Sam?”

“Kaldect, to their Temple to Maximus I.”

“A temple?”

“Yes, Trinthea, a temple. Everything that has happened is inter-related and part of a singular movement, including the implant in your mind, not just of certain people, but a power or principality, that is not of this reality.”

“How do we fight against a power, Sam? We’re just humans.”

“Alone, none of us could defeat this power. But together, we three are very strong.”

“So, it wasn’t just me leading my people astray?”

“No, Trinthea, it was a great power using you and other humans in a way to be more powerful. If he could weaken the Empire, his own forces could expand and devour this galaxy. Then it would be the dark ages.”

“That sounds far more ominous than I suspected.”

“Yes, Lizzy, it is. We are all in a much larger game than we could ever have imagined. This game, between the powers and principalities that exists in a spiritual realm, is far larger and more deadly than the Empire or any civilization could be.”

“But you said the Empire stands in the way?”

“Yes. Because while these are spiritual powers, they must function in this reality where we live. In that way, they use humans as pawns and tools. So, as long as the Empire remains strong, there is a physical power in this world it cannot defeat. Hence the true battle is to weaken the Empire and expand.”

“Shouldn’t we warn the Empress and Star Fleet?”

“Of what, something they cannot see or fight? No, we must do this first.”

“And if we fail?”

“Then even your civilization, traveling across the void, will not be immune to the devastation that will follow.”

They all three looked at each other, until Sam said, “Let’s eat and rest tonight. In the morning, gather what you need for the battle to come, and after breakfast, we will depart.”

They nodded and set about preparing their meal, each quietly thinking about this new mission.

Chapter 67

Changes

415.225.09

The next morning after they finished breakfast, they gathered all that they believed they would need for this mission. They weren’t sure what they would need, but each was armed with all the weapons they had gained in The Labyrinth.

“Are we ready?”

“Yes,” said Trinthea.

“Yes,” said Lizzy.

“Then let’s go see what this is all about.”

As they each reached out to hold hands, Lizzy vanished. Almost at the same time, Mudu appeared.

“Don’t be alarmed. She is safe, and will return when the time is right. Then you may proceed with your mission.” She vanished.

Sam said, “I have no idea where she went or how long she will be gone, but I need to go to Meladeran and speak with someone. I will return as soon as I am able.” He vanished.

Trinthea thought, ‘Well, I too have someone I need to speak with.” She too, vanished.

Interlude Lizzy I

Lizzy was standing on a mountain top. Spread out in front of her, in the distance, were more mountains. In the plain below she could see a few villages and fields, but no large cities; it was an idyllic scene. She turned and looked in the direction behind her, and saw that it was a beautiful valley with a waterfall and forests. In the distance were fields and what seemed to be only one dwelling. It held trees, fields, and an open range beyond that for as far as she could see. It was beautiful.

As she was looking at this, a voice said, “Welcome to my home.”

She turned to her left and saw looking at her, a woman about her build, but with a shining aura around her. She wasn’t sure if she was an angel.

“Who are you?”

“I am Dhakini.”

“The Imperial Counselor?”

She smiled, and said, “Yes, that’s a title I’ve held.”

“I have so many questions, but truly; what’s going on?”

“Come.”

She reached out and took Lizzy’s arm and they immediately traveled to her home. They were standing by the large pool that was fed by the water from the waterfall.

“This is my home. We are on the planet Nazneen. This is the Pool of Serenity, my favorite place to relax and think. Come, let’s walk.”

As they walked, Dhakini pointed out the various features of her home, which was a very large structure. It contained baths, kitchens, over fifty bedrooms, stables, museums; it was simply massive and beautiful, all marble and thick wood of maple, oak, and cedar, with carpets of many colors in the rooms and hallways, beautiful art, and random sculptures; it was wonderful.

As they entered the next room, Dhakini said, “This is the gymnasium. It is here that I can answer your question about what is going on. You see, I brought you here for a purpose.”

“What purpose would that be?”

“To train you.”

Lizzy smiled, and said, “I don’t think you can teach me anything about fighting.”

Dhakini smiled, and said, “Very well. Let us choose a weapon, you choose what type of weapon we will use, and fight. If you win, I will return you home. But if I win, you will listen to what I have to say. Fair?”

“Fair. Swords.”

Lizzy pulled out her sword, which glowed from its internal power. Dhakini walked over and picked up two practice swords and brought them over.

“Here, we will use these. No reason to cut each other up on the first match.”

Lizzy sheathed her sword and removed it and all the other weapons she had, then took the offered practice sword and they began.

Lizzy soon found herself flat on her back with a practice sword only inches from her throat.

“How did you do that? I’m the Master Swordsman.”

Dhakini reached her hand and helped her up, saying, “You hold the title Master Swordsman, but you aren’t yet. Come here, I want to show you something.”

They walked over to a large mirror. Dhakini removed her outer tunic, wearing only her private coverings, and said, “Take off your clothes and look at our bodies. Compare what you see.”

Lizzy did so and stood beside her looking in the mirror. What she saw was telling.

“You have strength and tone, good muscle mass but not too much, perfect balance between speed and strength.”

“And you?”

“I have too much muscle mass, no true depth of tone, unbalanced, more for strength than speed.”

“Yes. Lizzy, I have fought powers that you are going to face. I won, although I am certain the Lord helped me. But you who claim to be the Master Warrior; well, you are not ready.”

“What do I do?”

“You train. I will work you hard, for as long as it takes, to get you ready. All that I ask, is that you commit yourself to doing the hard work you need to do in order to get you where you need to be.”

“Yes. I will do whatever you say.”

Dhakini smiled, saying, “Good. Of that I have no doubt. Your background as a marine served you well to learn discipline and self-control. Also, through here is the armory, a large store of many different weapons. You may leave your weapons here if you like. They will be safe, as no one is allowed here but me.”

Lizzy was in awe of the armory. “Oh, my goodness, you have such a wide variety of weapons. This is wonderful.”

Dhakini laughed, “Yes, everything is here, except large weaponry. But if I need a battleship, I simply call one and it appears.”

As they were leaving the gymnasium, she said, “We will begin training after lunch. For now, let me show you where you will sleep and the kitchen I use regularly. In your room are clothes that match the weather here. Please, use what you like. But remember, we do chores, so we wash our own clothes. Also, do you like to ride horses?”

“I have ridden, but I can’t say that I particularly enjoyed it.”

Dhakini laughed, “Well, it does require some getting used to. Come on, I think you will enjoy a ride in the open. You can ride Dreamer.”

“Dreamer?”

“Yes. I call her that because she always seems to have this faraway look in her eyes. But she is gentle, so don’t be afraid. She won’t let you fall off.”

After they dropped her things off in her room, and she had a chance to change clothes to more traditional Greco-Roman attire, they went to the stables.

They found their horses, Star for Dhakini, Dreamer for Lizzy.

“Where are the saddles and bridles?”

Dhakini smiled, “We never use those on these animals, we ride bareback.” With that she simply jumped up onto Stars back and waited. Lizzy took a deep breath and jumped up onto Dreamer.

“There, that wasn’t so bad. We’ll go the meadows, it’s a smoother ride.”

Star turned and started walking in that direction, with Dreamer beside him.

“Dhakini, this place is very big, but no one is here. What happened?”

Dhakini was silent for a while, then said, “This place was filled with many people, many lives, and much love. But in the end, some of them decided they would rather live one fulfilled life, than extend it into an uncertain future, so did not choose rejuvenation. Some few died from accidents. Some left and went to other places to raise their children so they could experience a life greater than the tranquil life here, and became enmeshed in their lives there and didn’t return. But because of those choices, no one remained here except me.”

As they continued to ride, she added, “I, on the other hand, have an indefinite life expectancy.”

“How old are you?”

“I was born in star date thirty, and today we are in three hundred and fifty-one, so that would mean I am three hundred and twenty-one years old. But no fear, my best friend is over a thousand.”

“What did you do as you watched everyone age?”

“I hid my age. They knew I had powers, but I never told them I would live indefinitely. I used magic mostly, but some makeup as well. I aged as they aged, and when the time was right, I passed away. Once I had passed, I watched them all from the veil, a place they could not see, until they had all passed on as well.”

“I still occasionally look in on my descendants, as I am a grandmother many times removed now. But mostly, I live alone and with friends who also live indefinite lives in the service of our Lord.”

“I also convinced them to leave the animals here, roaming free. The horses are under a spell to give them long life, so they have been my companions for many years.” She paused, then added, “My calling keeps me busy, as The Lord’s work is never complete.”

“Am I a project for you?”

Dhakini smiled, and said, “Yes and no. Yes, I was nudged to do this, but no, I was not tasked with it. This is my way of helping, not to achieve victory, but to make it an even fight.”

They soon arrived back at the house and had lunch. They took a break for the bathroom and a few minutes’ rest before they began. But soon, they walked through to the gymnasium.

“We will start with physical conditioning. You see the track around the inside of this gymnasium? Your first task is to run around the track faster than me. Come let’s run, and remember, always do your best and work as hard as you can. Ready?”

Lizzy nodded her head yes.

“Okay, one, two, three, GO!”

They started off at a fast run, but immediately Dhakini left her behind. By the time Lizzy was turning turn number three, Dhakini crossed the finish line. Lizzy kept running as hard as she could until she crossed the line, then turned to Dhakini, and while breathing heavily, said, “How did you run so fast?”

“A long time ago I trained with fifty warrior women, The Valkyrie, right here in this gymnasium. They were the best warriors in the galaxy. We trained together, honed our skills together, and made sure we were all in the best condition possible for fighting. That is what you and I are doing. Again.”

“Ready? One, two, three, GO!”

They ran, and ran, and ran. After several hours of this, Dhakini said, “We will shift now. Come over here. We will do pull-ups. You take that bar; I’ll take this one. Go as long as you can, and count your completions. Ready? GO!”

They started out even. Lizzy was strong and could do a lot of pull-ups. But after fifty, she began slowing down. At seventy-five, she dropped to the ground. Dhakini was still going strong, passing one hundred, but stopped and dropped.

“How do you feel?”

“Like a kid in basic training. I thought I was in prime condition.”

“You are, for your normal life. But you are never going to have a normal life again. Oh, you’ll likely have children again and live that life to the fullest, but behind the scenes you will be much, much more. Because of that, you must train hard and long. Again. Ready? GO!”

This time she lasted to sixty. Then forty. Lastly thirty.

“Okay, enough for today. Let’s go to the spa for some relaxation, then we’ll have dinner and go off to sleep. We will start in the morning at daybreak.”

“How long will this take?”

“As long as it takes.”

Chapter 68

Conversations

415.225.10

Sam had left their house and gone to Meladeran. He appeared inside the safe house that they maintained there, and took time to think about all that had happened and the task ahead. He was still not really convinced that the only enemy to fight was located in Kaldect, but would go there anyway.

For now, he needed some information. He vanished and arrived outside Leo’s apartments. There was still something about Leo that bothered him. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but knew he needed to work on it. He rang the announcer.

The door opened quickly, and a servant said, “Yes, may I help you?”

“Yes. Is Lord Falstock available?”

“May I say who calls?”

“No, you may not. Inform him that he needs to see the person at the door.”

The servant was caught in a peculiar predicament; however, he felt something bigger than expected was happening, so he said, “Please come in, My Lord, and I will notify Lord Falstock immediately of your arrival.”

Sam entered and waited.

Soon Leo entered the hallway, and seeing Sam, said, “Sam! Come in, come in. How are you?”

“I am well, and you?”

“I as well. Please, let’s go into my study.”

As they entered, Sam heard him say, “Not much time left for friends to be together.”

“What?”

“Oh, sorry, I meant to say, there’s no time like the present to visit with an old friend.”

Sam knew something was amiss. They were not old friends, and the original statement carried the weight of truth. What was going on?

Sam said, “So, have you discovered anything new about the events we are tracking?”

“No, nothing new. I am still planning a trip to Earth, though. I think I need a firsthand look at the artifacts there.”

“It would be well worth your time. Have you seen the Empress lately?”

Leo smiled, and while most would have seen a joyful smile, Sam saw something else. He saw a glint in his eyes that caused him to step back and rethink this whole thing.

Leo said, “Oh yes, we are seeing quite a lot of each other now. It won’t be long until we are together always.”

Again, that look.

“That sounds good. Well, Leo, if you have found nothing new, I do have some other people to visit, so I will bid you goodbye.”

“Goodbye, old friend. We’ll have to get together soon over dinner, and bring your lovely wife!”

“That sounds like a great idea. Until later then.”

Sam made his way out the door and down the hall. After turning the corner, he vanished, only to appear in the Empress’ private office.

She was alone, which he knew, and wasn’t even surprised when he appeared.

“Hi, Sam, glad to see you.”

“He bowed slightly, saying, “Your Majesty.”

He walked over and sat down, while she got up and walked around her desk and sat beside him.

“So, tell me, what news? And where’s Lizzy?”

“Your Maj…”

She cut him off. “Sam, when we are alone, I’m Penelope. No formality.”

He smiled, “Okay, Your… Penelope. Well, the news is that the true enemy appears to be in the Andromeda Galaxy.”

“What?”

“Yes, there is something going on there that has been festering and planning for a very long time. We intend to go there as soon as Lizzy returns.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t really know.”

She was surprised. “Really? I find that hard to believe.”

He chuckled, saying, “Well, it’s true. Your sleuth doesn’t know where his wife is. But I do know that she is safe and will return when whatever she is going through is complete.”

“How do you know that?”

“Someone I met awhile back appeared in front of me as soon as she vanished, and told me.”

“You live in a strange world, Sam. Instant travel, weapons of incredible power, sight to see things others cannot see; you’ve changed a lot since we first met.”

“Yes, I believe that is true. Change of subject. Tell me, has Leo been acting strange lately?”

She became defensive. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason, it’s just that, well, I met with him this morning and he seemed different.”

She laughed, saying, “Oh that. Yes, ever since we fell in love, he has been different. I would attribute what you saw as him just being giddy about our romance.”

Sam thought, ‘No, that’s not it. I know what giddy both feels like and looks like.’ He said, “Ah, that would explain it. Congratulations! I’m glad the two of you finally saw what Lizzy and I saw a while back.”

“Thank you, Sam. I believe this is my first lifetime relationship.”

“Excellent. Penelope, I need to tell you about something. You know about Leo’s dream, how it was an implant given to him without his knowledge. Well, there was another who had implanted dreams, Trinthea.”

“You mean, Trinthea, the Leader of the Crelean nation?”

“Yes, that very one. The enemy used her to create the fleet of ships and fan the flames of anger that created the Hayku threat. You could say, she is the one who attacked the Empire, then wanted to destroy the Earth and ultimately, Xena. But it was all driven by implanted dreams that were so powerful, they caused her actions over the past hundreds of years.”

“I’m shocked at this. Is that why they are leaving to go to another galaxy?”

“Yes. She is afraid to come see you, fearing you will hate her. But trust me, she is changed, and is now an equal with Lizzy and I in the fight against this enemy.”

“You must inform her that I desire to meet with her. We have much to say, but not angry words. That is how much I trust you, Sam. I believe your words.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Another question, how is the Empire? I mean, is there anything concerning you? Any hotspots? Anything Star Fleet is worried about?”

She said, “No. It’s a short answer, but everything is quiet. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not. Without anything to focus on, everyone seems lackadaisical, which can only lead to reduced capability, mistakes, and ultimately, failure. I spend a lot of time thinking about that.”

He stood up and paced.

The Empress smiled, knowing that when he was pacing, he was thinking.

Finally, he turned to her, and said, “I won’t kid you. There is a war coming. A battle between powers. I cannot say who will win, and if the other side wins, the battle will become open and fully against you.”

“The Empire must be prepared. Only a strong Star Fleet can hold this enemy at bay, if only for a time. But it is critical that you be wide-eyed and watchful for any signs. Laziness is an enemy. Fight it. Challenge your Barons to get their home forces trained and sharp. Challenge Star Fleet to do the same. Increase recruitment and for God’s sake, increase the size of the fleet.”

She stood and walked to him. She reached out and held both his hands in front of them, and said, “What have you seen, Sam? What causes you to give this advice?”

He whispered, “I cannot tell you; I can only warn you. If we are successful, perhaps all your preparations will be in vain. But if we fail, you are on your own.”

“Godspeed.” He vanished.

He returned home, and sat in his study, waiting.

Trinthea only waited a short time after Sam had left before she, too, departed. She arrived onboard the command vessel, outside of the council. She opened the door and entered.

Tranthar stood in front of the cauldron, with the council witches around the room, as usual. She said, without turning around, “Welcome, Trinthea.”

Trinthea bowed, and said, “Thank you, Leader.”

“Why are you here?”

“To speak with you.”

“About what?”

“The enemy.”

“Explain.”

“Private?”

“Come.”

Trinthea walked to her, and Tranthar held her head and they both leaned to touch, forehead to forehead. Now they could speak telepathically, without speaking out loud.

“Speak.”

“The enemy is not in this galaxy, but in the Andromeda Galaxy.”

“How do you know this?”

“See my thoughts as justification. I met the ones following me. We fought on Xena as I was preparing to fire the weapon.”

A pause, then Tranthar said, “I see this, I do not understand it.”

“Nor did I until we three went to The Labyrinth together. There, Sam entered The Room of Truth. When we met him afterwards, he revealed much, including that our next task was to fight the enemy at the Temple of Maximus I in Kaldect.”

“So, why are you here? Shouldn’t you be there fighting?”

“The Master Warrior, Lizzy, vanished before we traveled.”

“I see that.”

“We await her return, but do not know when she will return.”

“This is all good information, but why are you telling me this?”

“Look at this; Sam found these two dreams inside my brain that caused us so much harm and pain over time.”

A pause. “Your dreams were implants?”

“Yes, by the true enemy, who resides in the Andromeda Galaxy. To my shame, much that I have done, including uprooting our entire civilization and running away, was because of the implants someone from Kaldect put inside my brain. Now, I know my choices were wrong, but I cannot do anything to change it. You can.”

“What would you ask of me?”

Trinthea talked with her for a time, then they released the bond.

Tranthar said, “Trinthea will go before us to fight the true enemy. Go, we will do what we can.”

Trinthea bowed, and vanished.

Interlude Lizzy II

Morning came early. Lizzy awoke and felt her muscles burn as she moved them. But she knew that movement would help, so forced herself to get up, shower and prepare for the day. As she entered the kitchen, Dhakini was already there.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“How is your body today?”

Lizzy chuckled, saying, “Like it was run over by a transporter.”

Dhakini smiled, and only said, “Good. Now eat. This should give you energy. We will start today with core muscles.”

In the gymnasium, she said, “First today, abdomen. We will do sit-ups and crunches, then switch to torso lifts to work the back as well. We will begin here. Your task, as always, is to do as much as you can, but do more than me.”

They sat on the floor and laid on their mats.

“Ready? GO!”

They began doing sit-ups. Lizzy knew this was a strength for her. She managed two hundred when she had to stop. Dhakini was still going at two hundred and fifty, so stopped.

“Again. GO!”

Lizzy made one hundred and twenty-five. The next time, one hundred and five. The last time, seventy-three.

“How do you do it?”

“Practice. Crunches. Ready? GO!”

Lizzy was worn out at only seventy-five.

Dhakini stopped at one hundred.

They got up and went to the machines where they could lay on their stomachs with their feet under a bar and rest their hips on top of a bar, and start bending down and up, working their backs.

“Ready? GO!”

They went for quite a while, but again, Lizzy couldn’t keep up with Dhakini.

At lunch, Lizzy said, “I am never going to be as fit as you.”

Dhakini smiled, saying, “Yes, you will. But we are going to change up. I am going to depart from here, as there is something I must do. While I am gone, your task is to work out every day, as much as you can, all of your body, build stamina, strength, and speed. We will see how much you have changed when I return.”

Lizzy smiled. “Okay, I like that. Maybe just working out will be better than always being in a competition you know you will lose before you start.”

They both chuckled. “Alright. Do what you need to do, you know where everything is. I will return when I am able. Don’t worry, if something happens to me, Mudu knows you are here and will take you home. After all, you still have a fight ahead of you.”

“Thanks. Good luck at whatever you are doing.”

Dhakini vanished, only to appear on the third veil beside Mudu.

“Will it work?”

“It must. She has the attitude, aptitude, and courage to be the Master Warrior we need. She just needs to bring her body up to that same level.”

Mudu said, “Our Lord is wise.”

“Yes.”

Lizzy worked hard. She only rested on Sunday’s, but otherwise, she worked on her body for fourteen hours a day. She had no idea how long she had been here, but it seemed like months already. One morning she was sitting having a cup of mestava before beginning her workout, when suddenly, Dhakini appeared.

“Hello, Lizzy.”

“Hello, Dhakini. Mestava?”

“Yes, please.”

“You’ve been gone quite a long time.”

“Time, yes, it’s an interesting concept. But I am back now. Are you ready for a competition?”

“I think so, but I know you will still beat me.”

Dhakini thought for a moment, then said, “Perhaps what you need is a trainer. Come, let’s go do this together.”

They went to the gymnasium and Dhakini said, “We will not compete. Instead, I will learn your routine, and if there is something I think we may need to add or change, I will tell you.”

“Sounds good. This morning was running.”

“Let’s run then.”

They set out on a run and Dhakini was surprised at how fast Lizzy had become. Not only was she fast, but her stamina had also improved. As they ran, she ran past Lizzy, but to her surprise, Lizzy sped up, so they were running side by side at Dhakini’s fastest speed. As they entered the home stretch she tried to speed up, but couldn’t. Lizzy, however, did! She crossed the finish three steps ahead of Dhakini!

They were both out of breath momentarily when she said, “Wow! Lizzy, that was awesome! You beat me! I was giving it everything I had! Well done!”

Lizzy smiled, saying, “Thank you. I have been working hard to improve.”

“I can’t wait to see how you do at all the remaining exercises. Let’s get started.”

Lizzy crushed her in sit-ups, crunches, back lifts, weightlifting, and every other exercise they completed.

At the end of the day, Dhakini said, “Well done, Lizzy. Now, get a good rest tonight, because tomorrow we start weapons and combat training.”

“I’m looking forward to that. My body feels like it can do great things, but I need to see if it can still move properly in hand-to-hand combat and the use of weapons.”

“We will test you, then see where we may need to make improvements. For now, rest.”

The next morning, they entered the gymnasium and Dhakini said, “First, hand-to-hand, then knives, then swords, then spears, archery, modern weapons. Are you ready?”

Lizzy set her stance, and said, “Yes.”

“Very well. We begin.”

Dhakini made the first move, a flying kick to Lizzy’s chest. But Lizzy shifted her weight and avoided the kick, moving into attack mode as Dhakini landed. She planned a brutal fist into her side, but suddenly no one was there. Instead, her blow went into thin air, and she felt a kick into her side, causing her to collapse.

She quickly got back to her feet and into a defensive position. She said, “I never saw you move; you were so fast.”

Dhakini said, “Time out.” She walked over to Lizzy and said, “Are you okay? I did kick you fairly hard.”

Lizzy smiled, saying, “I’ve felt worse, but it was a very good kick.”

“Well, there is a lesson here. My old friend and companion, Gloriandel, was the Master Swordsman of the Valkyrie fighters. She told me that it was critical to use your mind before your sword, or any other weapon. She told me, ‘You must see four moves ahead, but be able to adapt to change quickly, if needed.’”

“In our first combat, I expected you to avoid the kick. But it was how you avoided it that my next move was determined. As I kicked and you moved, I started movement to avoid your obvious follow-up punch and set the stage for my kick. It is in the mind that fights are won. Now, let’s try again.”

They fought. Same result.

“Again.”

“Again.”

“Again.”

It took quite a while, but slowly, Lizzy began to make the matches last longer. After they left the gymnasium, she went to the spa to relax. She thought, ‘This training is far harder than anything I have ever done before. But I must learn.’

The next day she expected they would move on to something else, but Dhakini said, “Before we move on to knives, you must defeat me in hand-to-hand combat. Let’s begin.”

They fought, and Lizzy did better.

“Again.”

“Again.”

This time, Lizzy felt something inside her stir. She sensed she could feel time and see clearly. She watched as Dhakini maneuvered for a sidekick, but saw clearly what she should do. She twisted her body to miss the kick, but in such a way as to give her a powerful fist into Dhakini’s side.

Dhakini fell to the ground. She said, “How did you do that?”

Lizzy said, “I saw a path and moved to take it.”

Dhakini stood and slightly bowed. “You pass. Now, knives.”

They followed this routine for weeks, until they finally finished advanced weaponry.

“Now, Lizzy, a final test. This will require you to utilize all that you are. You will be dropped into a situation that is unknown to you. You must simply get out with your life. Should you do that, you will be the Master Warrior. But should you fail, you will not.”

“What do you mean, get out alive?”

Dhakini smiled, saying, “Oh, I think you will know when you get there. Ready? GO!”

Interlude Lizzy III

Lizzy was standing in an arena. It was burning hot on her skin, sand was blowing, clogging her nose, and burning her eyes. There were crowds in the wooden stands all around, yelling for her death. She looked around and saw a huge warrior moving towards her. She quickly did an assessment and realized she had no weapon!

She knew the only option she had was to take a weapon from him and use it against him. She watched as he approached. When he raised his spear high to stab her, she saw her pathway. She would wait for his forward movement, then rush inside his guard and take the knife from his belt, then as he turned, likely to the right, as that is the side with the knife where she would go, she would rush back under his guard, and use the knife to cut the sword free from his left side, then get away from him and wait for his next move.

As soon as he committed his spear attack, she rushed him. Her movements were so well timed and carefully completed, that before he could figure out what had happened, she stood in front of him with his sword.

The crowd went wild, still yelling “Death to Delphi!”

He yelled in anger, “I will kill you!!”

In his anger he raised his spear, and she did not pause, but moved quickly and expertly and stabbed him in the heart. She pulled back and watched as he collapsed onto the arena dirt.

The crowd was silent, then began a chant, “Delphi, Delphi, Delphi!”

A side door opened, and five armed soldiers entered and surrounded her. “Drop your weapon.”

She dropped the sword, which was too large for her anyway.

“Follow me.”

The leader of the squad walked into the tunnel under the stands, and she followed, with four guards behind her. They walked through where other criminals and slaves were held waiting for their turn in the arena.

She was taken to a cage in the rear, isolated from all the others, and pushed inside. They closed the door and locked it. The leader said, “You were supposed to die. Now you will have to face the Spector.”

She didn’t know what that could be, but sat down and calmed herself, waiting and saving strength for the test to come.

It wasn’t too long before she was called again. This time, she was taken to the door that entered the arena, and given a sword, a knife, and a shield. There were four guards, all with their spears pointed towards her, assuring she didn’t turn on them, but go through the door. Soon, the door opened.

As she stepped inside the arena, the crowd yelled for her death. “Death to Delphi!” The chant went on and on. She walked a short distance into the arena and stood still, waiting, calming herself.

When the door at the other end of the arena began to open, the crowd went wild! “Spector! Spector! Spector!” They chanted loudly and continuously. Slowly, the figure emerged. She was surprised at what she saw.

Spector had three legs and four arms. He (she?) was eight feet tall and seemed to weigh at least three hundred and fifty pounds. He was massive. In each hand he held a sword. No shield, no knives. He wore a helmet that covered his face, and armor across his chest. He walked out a short distance and stopped.

Soon the chants died down and the King entered and took his seat, along with his court. Once all was prepared, he stood, and said, “Welcome all!”

The crowd cheered!

He raised his hand and they quieted. “Today is a special day. Originally, we thought the murderer Delphi would be killed by the giant. But alas, it did not happen. Now, she faces our strongest warrior, Spector, who has never been beaten!”

The crowd again started chanting, “Spector! Spector! Spector!” You could almost taste their blood lust.

The king again raised his hand and all quieted down. “Spector, as an extra incentive for you, destroy this mad woman and you will be free! Let the fight begin!”

Spector moved with superb speed, using his legs in such a way as to move deftly across the arena. He kept two swords down in a defensive position, while the top two prepared to strike.

Lizzy analyzed what she saw. She had to adjust her entire way of viewing motion based on this change. But in her mind, she saw him as two people fighting in unison. Because of this, he was actually hampered by having three legs, but what if he only had two? If it were natural it would free up movement, but if she took a leg out of commission, he would be unstable.

She moved forward towards him, he towards her. She made a feint to the left, then shifted right and dove low beneath his defensive swords onto the ground and drove her sword deep into the tissue of his far-left leg. She rolled out behind him and swung to get a quick cut in and moved away.

Spector howled with pain and anger! He turned in her direction and she could see his leg was now a hindrance to him. But he may be acting, so she couldn’t believe that yet.

He moved towards her with all four swords in attack mode, swinging them in unison to create the perfect symmetry of a grinder. Anything in that area would be sliced and diced. She moved to her right, watching his movement, then ran around him to the left forcing him to turn around completely to keep her in his sight.

‘Yes, his leg is a hindrance,’ she thought.

Suddenly he jumped towards her, and she was almost in his blades! She used her sword to defend herself, but even so, she was cut on both shoulders and across her face before she could get away.

The crowd loved it! They could see her blood now, and knew it was only a matter of time until Spector crushed her.

She realized this tactic was not going to work. She studied his armor, and realized his chest armor was not a single plate, but tied together down the middle. There, right over the heart, was a small opening. Without hesitation she dropped her sword and pulled her knife, threw her shield into his swords to open him up enough, and hurled the knife.

He stopped in his tracks and looked down. There, sticking out of his chest, the hilt of a knife. The blade had pierced his heart, and he dropped to his knees, then fell forward onto his face, dead.

Immediately, guards began entering the arena from both ends. She quickly grabbed her sword and moved to one side, to prevent them from surrounding her. She waited, as they lined up in a semi-circle. There were nine of them, each of the soldiers had a spear pointing towards her, while the guard captain in the center, had a sword.

The King was standing as the crowd yelled for her death. He held up his hand and turned his hand with a thumbs down signal. The soldiers all advanced and the king smiled and sat back down to drink his wine.

She watched. The soldiers to the left seemed focused on her, but the ones on the right were perhaps newer, so were shifting their gaze from her to their captain and back, as if waiting for a signal. She feinted to the left, and the ones there did not lose their gaze, but seemed ready for an attack, while the ones on the right shifted the level of their spears.

‘Yes,’ she thought, ‘they are inexperienced.’

She feinted right and they all moved back while she shifted in a counter-feint left, but then she moved rapidly right, grasping the spear of the one closest to the wall and moving it aside to get behind it, while thrusting her sword into the one next to him, then quickly beheading the one in front of her.

She didn’t waste time allowing them to re-group, but immediately advanced on the next two, who were busy trying to swing their spears towards her. They died quickly. The captain had his sword out and the experienced soldiers were advancing with purpose and coordination.

She backed away and moved to the center of the arena, so they would have to spread out to surround her, which they did. As she watched, they dropped their spears and drew swords. She smiled.

She feinted towards the one ahead and to her right, while observing the captain and one to the left. She quickly shifted and turned to attack the one behind her right side, as she saw the others were not moving forward, but waiting.

Now there were four. The crowd went silent, as the fight had taken a serious turn towards the unexpected.

The captain advanced with the one to his right and left. She feinted an advance towards them, causing them to pause, but giving her enough time to quickly hurl herself to her left rear and defeat that soldier.

Now there were three.

She waited. The three seemed nervous now, and slowly separated. Suddenly, the captain charged! He came at her with his sword high, swinging it downwards in a movement designed to smite her across her head or shoulders.

She watched as he moved, and saw that the other two were not ready for this maneuver, so hesitated before they moved. She quickly countered his sword, swinging her sword in a way to deflect his sword and then quickly cut his hands off. She grabbed his sword and shoved it into his heart, and advanced quickly to defeat the remaining two.

In a last act of defiance, she grabbed one of the spears and hurled it at and into the heart of the king, as he was just beginning to stand. It impaled him onto his chair.

Lizzy was standing in the gymnasium.

Dhakini said, “Well done. Come, there is something you need.”

They walked out to the stable and Dreamer and Star were waiting.

“Let’s take a ride.”

They mounted the horses, but this time they went in the direction of the mountains, a much more difficult path than the meadow.

As they rode, Dhakini said, “You are on a path, Lizzy. Just as you see a path now when you fight, so you, too, are on a path. It is one that The Lord sees, just as He sees my path. Where it will take you, I do not know. But I do know that once you return to Sam, the two of you are going to accomplish much more than you imagine.”

They stopped at the pool at the base of the falls.

“I think you need to jump in the water.”

Lizzy laughed, and said, “Why?”

Dhakini smiled, and replied, “To wash the sand and the arena out of your body.”

Lizzy took off her clothes, still the dirty rags from the arena, and jumped into the pool.

“Oh my God! It’s freezing!”

“Yes, it is quite chilly. But swim for a moment and it will feel warmer.”

Lizzy did that, and was surprised at how well she could swim, how fast she was. And yes, she warmed up. She eventually climbed out of the pool and was instantly dry and wearing fresh Greco-Roman clothing.

She smiled, saying, “You were right. I do feel better now.”

“Good, now there is just one more thing I need to give you.”

They rode back to the stables and walked back to the gymnasium. Lizzy followed her into the armory, and Dhakini walked over to the sword she had placed there on her first day. She turned to Lizzy, dropped to one knee, and holding out the sword, said, “I think this belongs to you, Master Warrior.”

Lizzy took the hilt of the sword in her hand, and it began to glow. Subtly at first, then brightly. Soon, her entire body glowed with a brightness she had never known before. Inside she felt a new power. Her old clothes melted away to be replaced with fighting armor of gold! The wounds she had received healed, leaving only scars, evidence of her battle.

Dhakini stood and said, “Now, Lizzy, you are ready. You are the Master Warrior ready to help on your next mission. Come, it’s evening. Let’s get you home.”

Chapter 69

Home

415.225.19

She held out her arm and Lizzy took it, and they instantly arrived home. Dhakini bid her farewell, and she walked into the study where Sam was sitting.

“Lizzy!” “Sam!” They rushed into each other’s arms for a hug and kiss, then Sam stepped back and looked at her. “You have changed.”

At that time Trinthea, who had heard the commotion, entered the study, and said, “Lizzy, you are different.”

Lizzy smiled and said, “Yes, the past year has been hard, but now I am the Master Warrior.”

“What do you mean, year? You only left this morning.”

Lizzy smiled, and remembered Dhakini’s comment about time. “Well, let’s just say it seemed a lot longer than that to me.”

“What happened, where did you go?”

“I will tell you some time, but right now, we have a mission. What is the plan?”

Sam said, “We leave in the morning for Kaldect, to see who or what is behind this entire event.”

“Very well. I need rest, but first, food and drink.”

“I was just starting a meal in the kitchen.”

“Let me put away my sword and armor and I’ll join you.”

They gathered in the kitchen to prepare the meal. They ate and chatted for a while, but then it was time for some much-needed rest. The morning would come soon enough.

Chapter 70

The Mission

415.226.07

The next morning, after they had eaten and prepared for their mission, they stood together, and Sam said, “Are we ready?”

“Yes,” said Lizzy.

“Me as well.”

“Very well. Now when we get there, we need to quickly enter the door to the shop to our right and gather priests’ robes to cover our attire.”

Trinthea wore the black outfit of an executioner, with a sword and knife at her side, amulets on her arms. Lizzy wore the clothing and armament of the Master Warrior. Sam really didn’t need to wear a new robe, as he already had on robes and carried his wizard staff. However, he saw the need to match the other priests.

They nodded, and he reached out and they grasped hands and appeared outside the Temple. Sam turned and led them into the room he had found in his research, a room where priests came to change into and out of their attire for transition into and out of the temple. They found exactly what they needed to cover their clothing and armor.

Outside, they stopped and took a few moments to look at the temple.

Lizzy said, “My god, I’ve never seen anything this big.”

Sam added, “Yes, it’s even larger than the Imperial Archives.”

Trinthea just stood and looked, speechless for a moment, then said, “The images and descriptions don’t do this place justice. Wow.”

“I agree. Okay, I think we should split up so we can both cover more ground and be less suspicious than when traveling together. Here’s a map of the Temple. It has nine chambers. I’m going to go through the Chamber of Hope, then the Chamber of Healing. Lizzy, I want you to go through the Chamber of Supplication and Chamber of Meaning. Trinthea, I want you to go through the Chamber of Regret, Chamber of Loss, and Chamber of Feeling.”

“Let’s plan to meet at eighteen in the Chamber of Redemption. Here, look at this diagram. Let’s meet right here in this space outside these buildings by the fountain.”

Trinthea said, “That sounds fine to me. I can cover that much ground and still listen and observe.”

“Excellent. Then let’s go.”

They each departed and made their way to the chambers they were assigned. Much to Sam’s relief, their passage through the chambers was not noticed by anyone.

At eighteen, Sam and Lizzy saw Trinthea walk towards the fountain. Sam motioned for her to follow them. He led them into an eatery, of sorts, but one that provided superb soundproofing so priests could converse without being overheard by others. They went through the line and served themselves the food and drink they needed, then found a quiet small cubicle in the far back of the establishment.

Sam began, “So, Trinthea, what did you learn?”

“That there is indeed an undertone of darkness to this temple, but that it is not observable to the untrained eye. Most people are legitimately seeking some form of spiritual enlightenment, but there are a few, scattered randomly, who carry a different attitude. I overheard three different priests discussing things that would be considered “dark,” in any normal circumstance.”

Lizzy added, “Yes, I too sensed that, and you are right, it wasn’t obvious. But, if you listened, occasionally, you heard some priests talking about a dark power. I couldn’t tell if they believe it lives here now, but it seemed real to them. But I don’t know if they worshipped it or feared it, they just seemed to know of it.”

Sam had listened to them both, and added, “So, we all observed the same. There is a power here, and it is a dark power. However, I did find an interesting piece of information. It’s an interesting story.”

“As I traveled through the Chamber of Healing, I came across the ruins of what appeared to be a small chapel. It seemed odd to be there, but since I didn’t see anything in writing around it to explain it, I turned to move on.”

Just as he began turning, a voice behind him said, “It’s a shame really.”

Sam turned to find a very old priest standing there.

“What do you mean, a shame?”

The old priest said, “So, you are new and don’t know the story?”

“Yes, I am new, and no, I haven’t heard of this before.”

“Then let me tell you. There once was a small chapel that belonged to the Brothers of Mental Restoration. It was a cult, a sub-group as it were, established in the year one three seven by Our Lord Riser and used to implant memories. These memories were disguised as dreams, and were implanted into people to control their decisions.”

“One of the first to have an implant, a powerful one too, was the Leader of the Crelean civilization. Lord Riser knew she and her warrior people had been humiliated after being defeated by the newly spaced Earthlings, so used her. Her dream was to get her to want revenge on the Empire and Empress Stephanie in particular, hence the Crelean attitude towards them.”

“However, the Brothers saw his true plan. He intended to destroy Meladeran and the billions of people there just for power, and they believed he knew that the Empire would find out the Creleans had a lot to do with it, and that they would destroy them.”

“Some of the Brothers felt guilty and so implanted a new dream in Trinthea to take her people and flee. They also wanted to warn the Empire, so planted a dream in someone close to the Empress, I believe his name was Leopold. This would at least warn the empress and Empire. However, Lord Riser found out and had them all killed, and the chapel destroyed.”

“When was the chapel destroyed?”

“Only three months ago. Such a shame, they were helping so many people live better lives.”

Sam looked at the two of them, and said, “Then I made my way through the chamber to get here. That’s all I know. But it seems we found the link from Kaldect to your dreams, Trinthea.”

“Yes, and Leo’s dream.”

Yes, that too. I don’t think we can solve anything else tonight, so I propose we get rooms and stay here for the night. Maybe after a night of reflecting and pondering what we have seen and heard, we’ll remember something that will give us insight. For now, after walking all day, I need a rest.”

They chuckled quietly, knowing he was right. Lizzy also knew the two of them could keep going a lot longer than Sam, but they agreed and went to get rooms. As they were all priests traveling together, they were given only one room, so had to share. The room they were given was a suite, with a bathroom, small kitchen, and prayer room, plus four separate beds. It would suffice.

The power they sought was not asleep. He had been watching them all day. He sensed their presence and knew that something had changed about them, but he wasn’t quite sure what. He felt they held more power than they should, but not how much or how real their threat was. He decided he needed more information. He was, in fact, only a moderate power. His master had been much stronger, but he had been defeated by humans unexpectedly. He dared not take any action until he knew more. He decided he would interrogate them himself in the morning, and then decide a course of action.

Interlude Trinthea I

415.227.03

Trinthea was awakened by an unusual sound - complete silence. She noticed it was completely pitch black. She got up, feeling her way towards where the door should be, found it, and opened it.

“Good morning.”

Standing there was an old woman she had never seen, with long greasy hair, bent over, she didn’t know what to say.

“Ahem. Good morning.”

“Oh, good morning. Who are you?”

“Not important. Come.”

She turned to walk away, and Trinthea said, “Wait! Why should I follow you?”

She turned, and said, “Do you want to live?”

Trinthea was startled by this comment, but said, “Yes.”

“Then you follow.”

The old woman turned and walked away, and Trinthea walked behind her, unarmed, and only partially dressed. She looked around and noticed the walls of the hallway were melting away and being replaced with a forest! She had no idea what was happening, and didn’t even know if she was dreaming.

“Am I dreaming?”

The old woman stopped and turned to look at her, and said, “Dreams or reality; is there a difference?” She turned and continued walking.

The path continued for some distance, until finally they came to the edge of what appeared to be a large garden. The old woman stopped walking at the gate, an old wooden fence that looked like it could fall off its hinges at any moment. She turned to look at Trinthea.

“You seek power, yet you do not know what power is.”

Trinthea stumbled to try and answer, but the old woman interrupted her.

“That was not a question. You seek power. I know. I have watched you for many years. What you do not seek is purpose. Power without purpose only leads to destruction. Power with purpose leads to accomplishment and goodness. You must choose what you will be when filled with power.”

The old woman opened the gate, saying, “In here, you will learn of power and what its purpose is.”

Trinthea walked into the garden and the gate closed behind her. The old woman vanished. She stood there, unsure of what was happening. As she stood there, she saw the plants were growing larger and larger! As she looked around, she felt truly small for the first time in her life.

To her left was a tomato larger than a house. To her right was a cucumber bigger than a ship! She could see above the leaves, but all that was there were skyscrapers of corn, going up to the sky!

“Where am I?” She shouted more than once, when suddenly, the old woman reappeared.

“You are in the place of choice.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Mudu, a teacher.”

“What are you teaching me, frustration?”

“No, child, I am teaching you choice. Think about your life and the power you have wielded and sought. What do you see?”

She thought for a moment, then said, “I wanted power to control and rule.”

“Yes, to control and rule. You have destroyed people because they stood in your path to power. Yet, what is the result? Your people are uprooted and dispersed. Your Empire is nearly defeated. Your friends are without the power they need to win a war. I brought you here to teach you about power. Tell me, what is the power of your rings?”

Trinthea momentarily became defensive, but Mudu held out her hand and her rings left her and went to Mudu.

“What? How?”

“These rings and the amulets you wear give you a certain power. Yet you don’t even know what they are. This ring is a place ring, that allows you to move quickly from place to place instantly, across any distance.” She held out her hand and the ring traveled back to Trinthea and went onto her finger.

“This ring is one of the Rings of Power. It is the Ring of Fire. How many rings are there?”

As she answered, the ring came back to her and went onto a finger.

“I do not know.”

“There are five rings. The Ring of Fire, which you possess, the Ring of Air, Ring of Water, Ring of Earth, and lastly, the Ring of Aether. Your task, is to find these other rings.”

“Where?”

“Where the path takes you, but you begin here, in this garden. But be warned, the knowledge and power you gain comes with a price.” She vanished.

Trinthea was unsure, but said to herself, ‘Okay, if they are here, I must find them.’

Interlude Trinthea II

415.227.04

She started walking through the garden. As she was approaching the end of the cucumber, a giant ant (giant to her,) turned the corner. She didn’t wait, but turned and ran!

The ant followed her, and she managed to get to the other end of the cucumber and turned before it caught up. She used her ring to open a hole in the cucumber’s end and ran inside, waiting.

The ant stopped and seemed to be sniffing the air. She waited, and the ant moved on. Slowly, she climbed out of the cucumber, only to see some very small bugs begin making their way to the hole she made, where the juice was running out.

She thought, ‘Where would these powers be hidden in a garden?’ As she looked around, she thought, ‘The ant has stamina and goes until it dies.’

She started running to follow the ant.

She slowly gained on it, and the ant seemed oblivious to her presence. She watched its leg movements, then ran up and jumped on a leg and climbed up. The ant didn’t change pace. She noticed how powerful the ant was, with tremendous strength in its legs. She held on and watched as the ant joined other ants and soon entered a hole and continued down into the nest.

The ant went all the way down to the area where the Queen lived. She was amazed at how these thousands of ants never got in each other’s way. It just seemed like choreography. Soon, the ant stopped in front of the Queen.

The Queen said, “Welcome Trinthea. Please, come here.”

She climbed down from the ant she was hanging onto, and it moved away. She stood there, alone in a sea of ants, looking at the amazing sight of the Queen Ant! It was incredible! The Queen was different than the others, much bigger, but also a different color. She was almost translucent and had a glow about her. She was simply beautiful.

“How are you speaking to me?”

“It is purposeful. You seek power, but need purpose. Look at me, I have ultimate power in my nest. I can order any one of these subjects to do anything I desire. Yet, if I do, it will upset the balance needed to provide for the growth and sustainment of the nest.”

“I find then that my purpose is more important than my power. My purpose is to grow and defend the nest. I use all my power to do this.”

Trinthea said, “I understand that. I was more abusive of my own subjects when I had power. Protect them? Yes. But I wasn’t selfless in my way of doing it.”

“Yes, I see that. You must always think of the needs of others first, so they may see you are fair and learn to love and respect you. That is the first rule of power. It is for their protection, not your personal use.”

The Queen raised up and said, “Come, take this.”

Trinthea approached and reached underneath her and found an amulet. She took it and stepped back.

“This is the Amulet of Stamina. It gives personal power to stay the course and keep at it. Take it and go in peace. My ants will not bother you.”

The Queen then dropped down and turned away, getting back to her normal business. Trinthea bowed, then turned and began walking. The ant she had ridden stopped in front of her and lowered itself in front of her, as if to say, climb aboard. She did, and the ant carried her back up above ground, where she jumped off.

She began walking, when she heard a buzzing sound and looked up to see a swarm of bees! They were all over a flower in the garden. On impulse, she began climbing the stalk. Soon, she was high up on the flower. Just as she reached the top of the flower, a shadow covered everything, and a giant claw reached and grabbed her!

The claw belonged to a huge bird, an eagle. The eagle began climbing, using its massive wings to gain elevation and speed. Soon, they were soaring high above the fields and valleys, flying at the same height as the mountain tops. It was exhilarating!

It took a while, but eventually they arrived at a huge level space at the top of a mountain. The eagle landed, and released her. She took a few steps and looked around. She was on a very high ledge far above the valley floor. She could see for miles and miles from here. There were several other eagles standing up here, all watching her.

Trinthea bowed, and said, “Good day to you. Can someone tell me why I am here?”

At that moment the cry of the eagles began, and soon, a larger eagle, one with bright gold and white feathers, landed. All the eagles bowed to this one.

The eagle said, “I am Dealapid, King of the Eagles. You, Trinthea, were sent here to learn of air, as you seek the Ring of Air to gain its power. My soldier, Aredolopid, brought you here. Tell me, what do you know of the power of air?”

“Only that it is what we breathe.”

“Yes, it gives life, but it also destroys life. Come, climb on my back, I will show you a thing.”

She walked over to where he had stretched out his wing so she could climb onboard, and once she was settled in the center of his back, he launched himself off the cliff. He opened his wings, and they soared far above the world.

He said, “Air is not just a thing, but a force. It swirls in chimneys and creates updrafts to pull warm air higher, it pulls cool air lower, it becomes turbulent to make things rough. The wind churns moisture and helps create clouds in the air to rain the world, or snow, when it is colder. It spreads moisture around."

"The high winds move weather around to prevent one place from having all the rain or all the dryness. It blows hard in storms and can destroy nature and human built structures.”

He suddenly dove towards a large storm. They had been above it, but now flew into it. He said, “Hold on tightly, feel the buffeting from the wind!”

Soon they flew beneath the clouds and there, in front of them, was a tornado. He said, “Watch as the funnel cloud, a band of high-speed wind made of air, destroys whatever it touches.”

He flew them out of the storm, and they climbed again, but this time, he flew towards a huge storm system, a hurricane.

“These storms are hundreds or thousands of miles across. The one distinguishing factor is the constant wind. It blows and blows, sometimes very strong, and is joined by water to crush whatever is in its path. But it also nurtures, by providing needed moisture.”

“Even the gentle breeze is helpful, as it cools and dry’s things off. Air is an item but also a force. When focused and targeted, nothing can withstand it; but when used gently, everything needs it.”

He flew further up and turned out over the sea. He said, “Climb down to my left claw. Have no fear, I will not let you fall.”

She gently managed to climb down onto his leg and then to his claw. He reached over with his right claw and grasped her. She was now riding inside his right foot claws.

He said, “Reach out to my left claw, the rear claw. Do you see the ring on its tip? Take it.”

She looked and saw the ring and reached out and took the ring, placing it on a finger.

They were approaching a large island, and Dealapid said, “I will set you down on the top of this island. Good luck on your quest, and remember, use power wisely, and only with purpose.”

He set her down on what was the edge of an active volcano. He flew away and she stood, looking down into a large lake of bubbling lava! As she was looking into the lava, she saw a form emerge. It looked like a human form, but it was pure lava!

The form walked up the inside of the cone and reached her, and said, “Ah, Trinthea, I was expecting you.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Ceriform, Lord of Lava.”

“Why am I here?”

“You seek the Ring of Earth, as you seek power. I am Earth. The earth is many things, but always powerful. You feel the earth under your feet and center yourself upon it, because it doesn’t shift, it is solid. But when it does move, nothing can withstand it, and the effect is unsettling to all who feel it.”

As he said this, the ground shifted under their feet and the section of the cone wall beside them fell away, allowing the lava to escape and begin to make its way down the side of the mountain. The shifting land made her lose her footing, but she quickly stood back up.

“I will show you something. Come, take my hand.”

She hesitated for a moment, and he laughed, saying, “You will not be harmed.”

She took a deep breath and reached out and took his hand. He immediately jumped off the path and pulled her with him and they dropped straight down into the lake of lava!

She was momentarily terrified, but suddenly realized she was fine.

He said, “Lava is the building block of the earth. The entire core of a planet is liquid lava, magma. It is under immense pressure, boiling the elements together to form those needed for life.”

He pulled her through the lava, deeper and deeper into the earth. She saw the levels of it, the central core, the swirling levels of elements. Finally, they began swimming towards the surface.

“It is when lava spews forth from the depth of its creation that land is formed, creating the possibility of new life.”

At that moment they came to the top of the lake. He held out his hand and a golden ring was in his palm.

“Take this, the Ring of Earth. Remember, the Earth is very powerful, but provides sustenance for those who take care of it. This is the purpose of it, doing what is right with strength.”

She reached out and took the ring, placing it on a finger.

“Now, stand up on the surface and ride this surfboard down the mountain to the sea. Good luck on your quest.”

She stood up on the surface and a surfboard appeared under her feet. It moved slowly to the edge and then tilted over, and she was surfing down the lava stream to the ocean below!

As she approached the water, she saw the huge billowing clouds of steam the hot lava and water created. She had no choice so rode the surfboard into the clouds, and was still moving when she came out of the clouds on the other side, and a relatively smooth surface of water. Soon she slowed down and decided to sit down on the board, only to see it begin to dissolve under her feet!

As she began to drop into the water, two dolphins suddenly were under her feet and she began riding them, staying above water! They turned slowly and swam around the island from where the lava stream was, and there met a larger group of dolphins, and with these as escorts, began heading out to sea.

They traveled far enough that she could no longer see any land. Suddenly, there was a very small island, no more than ten feet across, with a stone pier sticking out into the sea. The dolphins slowed and swam right up beside it, and she stepped off onto it. All the dolphins then swam out and formed a circle around the island.

As soon as they were in place, a beautiful silver dolphin appeared. She looked up at her, and said, “Trinthea, welcome. You seek the Ring of Water.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. Dealapid told you about water in conjunction with wind and how it can be both destructive and nurturing. But water can be so much more. This time, you will ride with me, but we will travel underwater. Come, you will be fine.”

Trinthea stepped down into the water and realized it was not wet to her. Interesting.

“Tell me, what is your name?”

“I am Glarindell, Queen of the Sea. Now, follow me.”

She dove, with Trinthea following. They traveled for many miles. Finally, they surfaced. In front of them were giant sheets of ice.

“Water is different from other elements when it freezes. Most things contract, but water only contracts to the point of freezing, then expands. Come.”

She took her deep beneath the ice. “The water under the ice is protected by the ice above, so aquatic life can survive while there are freezing temperatures above. Were it to be like other elements, it would freeze all the way to the bottom and squeeze the life out of the marine life that lives within it.”

They came back up and she said, “When water freezes and expands, it is far stronger than many elements. It gets into the smallest of places and cracks things open. Look at the large rocks split apart by ice. It is a strength not many can withstand.”

“Water takes away air, which we need to breathe. Water provides sustenance by enabling plants to grow. Without it, all dies. Water is very powerful.”

As they swam, she stopped and said, “Do you see the ring on the string around my tail? Take it.”

Trinthea reached over and took the ring off the string and placed it on a finger.

“Always use your power in the right way. Good luck.” She dove and two dolphins were under her feet and taking her towards a bleak shore.

They carried her to the shore, and departed. She stood there looking around, and saw nothing. Not sure what she should do, she sat down to think about her journey so far.

Interlude Trinthea III

415.227.05

As she was thinking, she suddenly felt hot breath on her neck. She was startled, but then turned around and realized she was face to face with the biggest pure white bear she had ever seen! She jumped up and backwards, and the bear just watched her.

“How did you get so close to me?”

The bear didn’t open its mouth, but she heard in her mind, “You were mentally wandering and not observing.”

“How are you in my mind?”

“Ah, well, Trinthea, you seek the Rings of Power. You already possess four of them, Fire, Air, Water and Earth. The last ring you seek is Aether. Aether is spirit, so naturally, it is inside of you.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. How can a spirit inside of me be a power?”

“Climb on my back, so we can walk while we talk.”

Trinthea climbed up using the outstretched leg of the bear. Once in place, they started walking down the beach.

“What do you see?”

“Water, earth, sky; nothing more.”

“You miss so much. The water is not just water, it is an ecosystem. It interacts with the shore, both depositing food and waste and gaining minerals for consumption. The shore is teeming with life. There are small crabs, micro-organisms, food for birds; this scene where you only see water and earth is alive and rich.”

“You must reach out and feel the life of this place.” The bear stopped walking, and said, “Be calm and try.”

Trinthea closed her eyes and tried to “feel.” She wasn’t sure how to do that, but as she concentrated, she began to feel an energy she had never felt before. She focused on that, and discovered it wasn’t from a singular source, but it was like the totality of the background noise encapsulated into a single note.

As she listened, or felt it, she could begin to sense the life beneath their feet.

She thought, “I can feel it.”

“Yes, you are sensing the energy or the Aether of the life around you. It cannot be seen, it can only be sensed and felt by those who are attuned with it. This is where the power of the Ring of Aether originates.”

As they continued walking, the bear said, “Keep your eyes closed and tell me when you feel a difference.”

She held onto his back, and tried to reach out to feel. Soon she felt the tone had shifted. It was now a more dynamic feeling, much more intense.

“I feel it is different.”

“Open your eyes.”

She was surprised to see they were in the same place, having only walked around in a large circle.

She laughed! “But I felt a difference!”

“Yes, you did, because you allowed yourself to fully reach out to feel the Aether around you. It doesn’t matter if you are alone or in a crowded space, Aether is always the same. It gives energy to the one who knows how to reach out for it. With Aether at your disposal, your power is unstoppable.”

She said, “Which makes it dangerous to have without a purpose for its use.”

“Yes.”

The bear turned and began walking towards what she at first thought were small dunes, but what were actually mountains in the distance. It was incredible how fast the bear covered the distance, because soon they were walking through a valley filled with trees.

As they walked, she noticed the bear changed colors, from a pure white to a beautiful deep brown. Soon, the bear walked out into an open glade. There was a large lake, and beyond it, a small cottage.

“Look at my right ear and take the ring you find there.”

She looked and saw a beautiful ring, took it, and placed it on her finger.

“This is where I leave you.”

He stopped as she climbed down, and said, “Now you hold all the rings of power. Remember, feel the Aether, pull its power inside; but always and only use its power for a noble purpose.”

“Thank you.”

The bear turned and walked back into the forest. She walked into the glade, over to the cottage she could see on the other side of the lake. It was a beautiful setting. As she approached the cottage, she noticed someone was sitting on the front porch.

As she climbed the steps to the porch, Mudu, sitting on the porch, said, “Ah, you made it. So, tell me, what have you learned?”

She sat down in a rocking chair, and said, “I have learned that purpose is more important than power. Yes, power is useful, but power used without purpose is destructive.”

“Yes, child, you are correct. Do you think you are ready for your next test?”

“I hope so.”

Mudu smiled, and said, “I hope so as well.”

She woke up, and realized it was not yet daybreak. She wondered for a moment if it had been real, but then touched her fingers and felt the rings there, and smiled, knowing she had just learned the greatest lesson.

Chapter 71

First Fight

415.227.10

They arose early in order to prepare for the day. However, both Sam and Lizzy noticed a significant change in Trinthea.

“You are different this morning.”

Trinthea said, “Yes, the past few days have been different. But now I possess the Five Rings of Power, and can better support our mission to defend the Empire.”

Lizzy walked to her and hugged her, saying, “Welcome back, Trinthea. I’m glad you are with us.”

“Thank you, Lizzy.”

“I am glad as well, and I would love to be able to take the time to listen to you tell us about your journey, but for now, we have to move. Is that okay?”

She nodded her head, and he said, “Okay, let’s go.”

They went down to have breakfast before the long day ahead. As they left the hostel, they sensed something had changed. Sam stopped them as they approached the fountain.

“I sense a change in the air.”

Trinthea said, “I have no skill, yet, at these things, but you are correct. There is a change. Everyone is walking a little bit faster than yesterday.”

“Could it be normal for the morning, and we are just thinking it is something else?”

“No,” Sam said. “There is a tangible difference.”

He cast a quiet spell and looked around, but he couldn’t see anything unusual. He didn’t know that his ability did not extend to those who lived inside the veil, only to non-chosen and non-powerful people.

“Come, we have no choice but to continue.”

They made their way through the supplicants and priests towards the central chamber, the Chamber of Salvation. It was inside of this chamber that the very inner temple of Maximus I was located.

As they walked, they overheard a priest saying something about their master having very nearly completed the final solution. Sam looked at the two of them and made a motion indicating action. They continued to follow this priest from a short distance, looking for an opportunity.

The priest was walking with another, when suddenly, the other priest left his side to go in a new direction. After a short walk, they maneuvered alongside the target priest, and gently led him into a small room, a rest area along the way.

Sam closed the door and turned to him, saying, “What do you mean by your master having nearly completed the final solution?”

“Who are you?” The priest was angry and afraid.

“We are your worst nightmare unless you tell us the truth.”

Suddenly, as if someone knew what they were doing in advance, there was a loud banging on the door. “James Nine Forty-Two! We know you’re in there. Come out!”

He yelled, “I Can’t.”

Lizzy quickly covered his mouth and raised a knife to his throat, saying, “Hush and be nice, or you die.”

“Open this door or we will blow it up!”

Sam said, “Be ready.”

He gently opened the door and peered out, saying, “We are having a quiet conversation at the moment. Can’t this wait?”

“And who are you?”

“I am Janus Seven Sixty-Three, here to discuss our master’s work. And you are?”

He laughed, and his voice changed to that of the power, “I am the Master! Take them!”

Suddenly there were hundreds of armed warriors approaching from several directions. Sam threw open the door and the three of them walked out, removing their robes.

“Ah, you are no priests.”

“No, and you are no God!”

“Ah, Trinthea, I didn’t recognize you before. Have you completed the revenge you so dearly sought?”

She stared at him, and said, “Not yet, but you’re still alive, so there’s time.”

He laughed. “Oh, my dear, I have time, but not you. Kill them!”

Lizzy took center point, with Trinthea to her left and Sam to her right. The enemy advanced, some with swords, some with blasters. The leader of the group, the one who said he was the Master, pulled his sword. But almost as he did so, the power left his body and for a moment, he was unsteady, trying to grasp what was going on. Lizzy struck him in that moment, and he lost his head.

The others rallied with a cry of revenge. Lizzy held her ground, deflecting blaster shots back into the soldiers, killing several, before someone shouted, “Use swords!” This suited her, as she waded into the enemy, cutting, stabbing, slicing, and devastating them. She had taken steps far beyond what Gloriandel had taught Dhakini. She now saw hundreds of possibilities, not just four. Her mind raced at an incredible speed, using her sword as the exclamation point of each thought.

Trinthea had also deflected a few blaster shots, but was now deep into the fight. She did not wade into them as Lizzy had, she did not have that skill, but she held her ground and defeated every soldier who approached her, and lent her strength to Sam and Lizzy.

Sam conjured a spell that protected him from blasters, and used his staff to smite soldiers to the ground. His staff was deadly, as each time he hit one, lightning sprang from the staff, killing that soldier.

The three of them stood their ground, or attacked, in Lizzy’s case, and defeated all of the soldiers sent to harm them. Trinthea had defeated twenty-five soldiers, and Sam had defeated another twenty-five. But Lizzy had defeated over two hundred!

They looked around, but there was no sign of the power.

Trinthea said, “My culture, all my history and memory handed down for thousands of years, are of our people as fighters. It is our air to breathe, it is the food we eat. We train to fight every day to be the best. Yet, watching you, Lizzy, I am in awe of your strength and ability. You truly are The Master Warrior.”

Lizzy stood, wiping the blood off of her body, clothes, and sword. She said, “Coming from you, Trinthea, that means something. Thank you.”

When it was over, they rested for a moment, then regrouped, and continued inside the temple.

Chapter 72

The Temple

415.227.13

As they approached the inner temple, the Temple of Maximus I, soldiers began appearing, but with swords sheathed. As they passed, the soldiers began following, closing their escape route. It was a “no-way-out” scenario.

Sam said, “Well, one way of another, I think we are in for a fight.”

Lizzy said, “Let’s hope so.”

Trinthea laughed at her.

They continued until they entered the temple, passing through a narrow tunnel, and further into it to the central altar. There, sitting on a golden throne, was the power. He was a dark energy, shaped like a man, but with fire burning in his eyes, and sparks glistening off his fingers.

He said, “Welcome to your death!”

Sam said, “Not today. What should we call you?”

He laughed, saying, “You don't know? After all the searching you have done, all the traveling and investigating, you still don’t know? Ha! Let’s start with this: you are surrounded by the Servants of Riser. I am Riser!”

“From old Earth?”

“Yes. I was weaker than my master, but then he was defeated by The Imperial Counselor, Dhakini, and I became the most powerful. I have been waiting for thousands of years to achieve revenge on the Empire, both the previous one and this one. My master’s master was defeated during the old empire, and my master was defeated by this one. Destroying the empire will be the perfect achievement and bring glory to the dark powers in the universe.

Lizzy said, “But first, you have to get past us.”

He laughed an evil laugh, and said, “My pleasure. Attack!”

The soldiers unsheathed their swords, having been told not to use blasters as they didn’t work on these three. They charged from all directions.

Lizzy couldn’t take point, as they stood in a triangle, with their backs to each other. But she cleared the first wave faster than the other two and helped them.

The soldiers saw how well they fought and hesitated, but Riser touched their hearts and gave them such fear if they didn’t fight, that they all charged as one!

Lizzy was devastating the enemy! Her sword cut, stabbed, deflected, shifted to different angles; she even swapped hands so neither arm got too tired. Still, even with the death she wielded, the enemy attacked.

Trinthea brought fire and the storm upon them. They couldn’t fight her as they were ripped limb from limb by forces that they couldn’t see.

Sam fought with his staff and spells, holding his own.

Slowly, the pile of bodies became more than they could bear, and Riser began to see that his soldiers would be defeated. He yelled an angry cry and leapt into the fray himself, wielding his massive sword. He chose to fight Lizzy first, and they fought for a while, but her swordsmanship was even better than his, so he moved on to Trinthea. The power in her amulets and rings gave her enough strength to survive his attacks, so he moved on to Sam.

Sam stood still as Riser turned to him. When Riser raised his sword to strike him, he said a few words and lifted his staff, and a ball of pure white energy reached out and shattered his sword. Realizing he could not defeat these three, he vanished.

Chapter 73

Tuton

415.227.21

They continued to fight. The soldiers continued to press the attack. At one point, the three of them managed to break through their lines and move into a more open area, but still, the soldiers attacked. Their assault was relentless. They did manage to cut all three of them, but not so bad as to take any of them out of the fight.

Finally, they achieved victory over the soldiers. They stood there, exhausted but alive. Each was wounded, some wounds more severe than others, but they were alive.

Sam said, “Come grasp my hand.” They did so, and suddenly they were in a hospital on Tuton. The hospital staff were very surprised at these sudden arrivals in their emergency department, but they responded quickly when they saw the injuries they carried.

Once the medical staff had bandaged up everyone, Sam again took them and they vanished, only to arrive in their own home. There, Sam finished the medical needs with some spells of healing, leaving the three of them fully healed and energized, but with a few scars to show they did fight.

Sam said, “I believe we need some time to think about what we went through the past two days, to see if there is anything else we can find that would be useful.”

Lizzy said, “I’m not sure about that, but I’m starving.” She got up and headed for the kitchen, Trinthea and Sam in tow.

Trinthea said, “I wasn’t hungry until you said it, but now I’m famished!”

They grabbed all the bread, cheeses, cooked meats; anything that could be eaten now, and put it on the table and ate. No words, just eating.

After a while, Sam said, “I also realized that while I am not tired, I am exhausted. I think a good night’s sleep will also be in order tonight.”

Trinthea laughed, saying, “Aren’t we a fine group. Defeat an army of ten thousand, then stuff ourselves and go to sleep!”

They all laughed. Finally, Lizzy said, “I pity those who end up with a tyrant king. Or far worse, an evil spirit king that throws them away like trash. We didn’t need to kill all of them, but they wouldn’t stop attacking because of their fear of their evil master. It makes me angry.”

“Yes, me too. Once he left, they could have run away; but they continued. We had no choice, Lizzy, but to do what we had to do.”

“I know, Trinthea, but still, it is so sad.”

Sam added, “Which is exactly why we have to defeat him. He could not defeat us today. He tried. If we could have all been attacking him simultaneously, I think we could have defeated him. But because of the attacking soldiers, we could not. He is weak.”

Trinthea added, “Which makes him even more dangerous. We cannot underestimate him. Just because we saw a weakness, doesn’t mean he will remain that way. I believe he was as surprised at our strength as we were at his weakness. No, next time, he will be better prepared.”

Lizzy said, “I agree. And there will be a next time, I am certain of that.”

They sat still, thinking, for some time. Then Sam said, “Okay, off to bed. We will rise early tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

Chapter 74

Power

415.227.22

The fleet Riser built was the strongest single fleet of warships ever conceived or built outside of the Imperial Star Fleet. It was not a large fleet number wise, nothing like the number of ships in Star Fleet, but it was built of individually powerful ships, far superior to similar Star Fleets ships. The fleet was built by dedicated followers of Riser, and the leader of the fleet was a true believer as well.

General Waskig ran a tight organization. He ran drills regularly and had the entire fleet up to a very high standard of preparedness. On this day, he was in the middle of his daily update.

“How many battleships are ready?”

“All three hundred, General.”

“Cruisers?”

“General, the fleet is complete per the specifications we were given.”

“Very well done, Admiral Nestril.”

As he turned his attention to operational readiness, Lord Riser appeared on the deck beside him. He, and all the others gathered, fell to their knees, knowing this was the actual presence of their Master.

“Rise, General Waskig. Tell me, is the fleet prepared?”

Rising, he said, “Yes, My Lord. All ships are complete per your instructions, and the crews are fully trained and prepared to fight.”

“How long will it take for you to reach Meladeran?”

“Five days, Master.”

“Very well. Launch the fleet. There are other things I must do, but I will be with you on the final assault.”

“Yes, Master.”

Riser vanished, only to appear in the old buildings of his original servants, on old Earth. He stood on the stage where the old man used to sit.

He stood and raised his hands, generating a ring of fire through which he said, “Come to me, my brethren.”

It didn’t take long before other demons began to appear. They were smaller than he, but there were many. He waited until they had all gathered. This was the first gathering of the warrior demons in many years.

Once they were assembled, he said, “Welcome brothers. As you know, our master’s master did not have the strength to defeat the old Empire. We saw him falter and fall. Our master did not have the strength to defeat the Imperial Counselor of the current Empire, Dhakini. We all watched as he was defeated.”

“You watched me when I did not have the strength to defeat the three that came for me. But I will not make the same mistake as our masters made. If they would have taken only a small portion of our strength into themselves, they would have been victorious.”

“I go to fight the Empire in five days. I will face the three again. I need more strength. To that end, I require ten percent of each of your personal strengths, to increase my power, and allow for victory in the coming fight. Once I win, you will all be rewarded, as my power will grow dramatically. But if you refuse, and I will take all of your strength from you.”

None of the assembled demons were strong enough to challenge him. There were a few that were stronger than others, and one in particular stronger than the rest, but they knew they could not resist his request. So, they all gave him what he required. After he gained ten percent from each of them, his own power increased by fifty percent.

As he stood there, he grew in size and intensity. His fire burned hotter; his eyes looked deeper. He was bigger and much more powerful than he had been before.

He raised his arms, and yelled, “I am ready!”

Chapter 75

Quiet Before the Storm

415.228.08

Sam held hands with Lizzy and Trinthea, and departed Tuton for Meladeran. As usual, they appeared in the Empress' private office.

“Well, good morning, Sam, Lizzy, and Trinthea, I believe.”

“Good morning, Your Majesty.”

“What news?”

Sam said, “Your Majesty, we fought the enemy in the Temple of Maximus I, but we could not defeat him. We believe he will now attack you here, on Meladeran. We believe he means to make this personal and come after you, specifically.”

“Why me? What is truly happening, Sam?”

“Your Majesty, this is a battle between two great powers. On the one side, the power of good, which is you and the Empire; while on the other side, the power of evil, as represented, this time, by Riser.”

“Who is Riser?”

“Riser is an old demon. He was the one who was the foundation of the Servants of Riser, which was the precursor to the Hayku. It is he who planted the dreams in Leo and Trinthea, the seeds of the story we have been investigating for you. What we do not know is what form or fashion his next attack will take. Hence, our presence here, to defend you.”

The Empress seemed shocked at this news, and walked over to peer into a painting of the garden she seldom made it to. Then she seemed to sigh and straighten her back and square her shoulders, and turned to face them.

“Very well. We will begin a watchful vigilance.” She paused for a moment, then said, “Would all of you depart from my office, except Trinthea? Thank you.”

Sam and Lizzy made their way outside her office and sat in chairs waiting for Trinthea to come out.

Trinthea was nervous, not knowing what to expect.

The Empress began, “First of all, I want you to know that Sam has briefed me on your connection with the attack on Meladeran, and your planned attacks on Earth and Xena.”

Trinthea lowered her head.

The Empress continued, “But he also briefed me on the responsibility of the implanted dreams being the cause, and that it was not you personally. He also informed me that you are his and Lizzy’s equal and trusted friend and companion in this fight.”

Trinthea raised her head and looked at the Empress.

“For this reason, I want you to know that I hold no animosity towards you, and certainly not the Crelean people. I was hurt that your people departed this galaxy, without even an opportunity to fix whatever was wrong. You are, and have always been, a friend to the Empire.”

Trinthea said, “Thank you, Your Majesty. You have no idea how much your words mean to me, and to our people. I am so very sorry this entire situation occurred, and still feel a level of guilt because of it. But Sam is right, these dreams and the resulting actions were driven by an evil power that we must now all join together to fight. Once he is defeated, I will feel whole again.”

“You are welcome. So, tell me, how long will it take for your people to cross the void on their new journey?”

Trinthea smiled, saying, “Not as long as some would think. The future is always changing. But the Crelean nation will always fight for what is right.”

As they walked towards the door, the Empress said, “Will you be here long after we defeat this enemy?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, I think so.”

“Good, I look forward to seeing you and getting to know you better.”

“Thank you.”

Once they were all back together, Sam said, “I have an errand to run, be back soon.” He vanished.

Trinthea needed to visit with Tranthar, so said, “I as well have an errand I need to make,” and vanished.

Lizzy said, “Well, Your Majesty, it looks like it’s just you and me. I can’t flitter off like those two, so I will remain here and guard you.”

Empress Penelope smiled, saying, “You know, Lizzy, I believe I am safer with you defending me than anywhere else I could be. Would you like some tea?”

“I’d love some.”

“Then come with me. Let’s go into the gardens while we can, and relax with a nice cup and visit for a while.”

“That sounds divine, Your Majesty.”

The Empress laughed, saying, “As I told Sam, when we are alone, please, call me Penelope.”

“Yes, Your... I mean, Penelope.”

Chapter 76

The Shield

415.229.17

They did not simply stand around waiting for an attack to occur. They also exercised and worked to maintain their fitness. Trinthea and Lizzy had many fighting skills in common, and today Lizzy was teaching Trinthea a thing or two on items she thought she had already mastered.

“I simply do not know how you manage to always be one step ahead of me.”

Lizzy responded, “It’s something my teacher helped me understand. When fighting, you are always looking ahead, not simply responding. I mean, it is responding, but in a proactive manner.”

Trinthea chuckled, and said, “I don’t think I will ever understand that.”

At that moment, Lizzy had a vision. She stopped what she was doing, and said, “I need to go to the labyrinth, now.”

Sam was doing some exercises, but nothing intense, he made no secret that he was the thinker, not the warrior. However, he heard Lizzy and turned towards her.

Trinthea said, “Sam.”

Sam got up and walked over and said to Lizzy, “Are you sure?”

“Yes. We need to go to the labyrinth, now.”

“Why?”

“We need to go to the labyrinth, now.”

“Very well.”

She took Sam's arm, but Trinthea said, “Go. I must go one more place before we begin this fight.” She vanished.

Sam said, “Ready?”

“Yes.”

He transported them to the labyrinth. Once again, they were met by the dark robed one.

He said, “What do you seek this time?”

Lizzy replied, “The Shield of Protection from All Harm.”

“Very well, you may enter.” He vanished.

She turned to Sam, and said, “I need to go to the long hall of doors.”

Instantly, they were standing in the hallway. Lizzy said, “We need to find the door marked, The Door of Safety.”

They searched for what seemed like hours, but finally Sam found it.

“It’s down here!”

As they reached to open the door, a voice said, “Only one may enter.”

“I was called, I should enter.”

“Agreed.”

Lizzy opened the door and entered. The room was, as usual, dark. She thought, ‘There’s something about the way these are all presented, start in the dark and build up to a crescendo.’

Slowly, a form emerged in the center of the room. It was a vision of a beautiful lady, adorned with jewels and a crown. She was glamorous and waved and smiled at those around her. Suddenly, a spear hit her from behind, and she dropped to her knees, bleeding uncontrollably from the chest. Lizzy wanted to go help, but she knew this was a vision, not a real person.

Lizzy thought, ‘Why?’

The image faded, to be replaced with the image of a child riding a horse. He was a great horseman, and seemed in complete control of his horse. But suddenly, the horse reared up, throwing the child off, where he hit his head and cracked his skull, dying instantly.

Lizzy felt the pain and loss of the boy. “No!” she cried. But there was no reply.

The image faded, to be replaced with another, then another, and another. Lizzy stood there, watching so many people die through accident or purpose. Then it went dark.

She thought, ‘What can all of this mean, that people die?’

After some time, the image of the first lady reappeared. But this time, she held a shield. The spear missed.

Next, the child had the shield on his back, the horse reared, but he held onto the mane and didn’t fall off. Each scenario was repeated with the shield being the one item of difference. Each person survived. It went dark again.

After some time, a light shone from what appeared to be above, shining on a shield that was resting on a stand in the center of the room. She walked towards it and the light remained. She looked at it. It was a golden shield, made with various shades of gold. It was circular, with a strap on the back of it. There were runes of many words etched into it.

Then, out of nowhere, a voice said, “The one who holds this shield will not come to harm. Take it, Master Warrior, and may it shield you from all harm.”

She lifted the shield from the stand and the room was fully lit, and the stand vanished. She strapped the shield across her shoulder and left.

Outside, Sam said, “Did you get what you needed?”

“Yes, now quickly, back to the Empress.”

Chapter 77

It Begins

415.232.11

Trinthea returned to Meladeran, arriving at the same time as Sam and Lizzy. They arrived in the waiting area outside of the Empress’ private office.

“Did you find what you sought?”

“Yes.” Lizzy showed her the shield, saying, “This is the Shield of Protection from All Harm. I thought it might come in handy fighting Riser.”

“I like it.”

At that moment, Star Fleet’s Supreme Commander, Fleet Admiral Johansen, entered the waiting area and walked up to the aide at the door, saying, “It is imperative I see the Empress immediately.”

The aide entered the office, and Sam said, “Admiral, you have news?”

“Yes. And not good news.”

At that moment the aide opened the door, and said, “Please come in.”

Sam, Lizzy and Trinthea followed the Admiral into the room.

“Good morning, Admiral Johansen. I trust this is urgent news?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. We have detected a very large fleet of unknown origin approaching Meladeran at a speed no one has seen before.”

The three stood together with the Empress watching. Leo was there as well, as he and Penelope had become very close and seemed prepared to share their life together.

“How long until they arrive?”

“We estimate only ten hours. We have recalled all available ships to Meladeran. We need a stronger force than what we have here now.”

“How many ships will we have when the enemy arrives?”

“We expect at least one hundred battleships, and several hundreds of heavy and light cruisers, plus their accompanying starfighters.”

“Can we tell by telemetry any information at all on the composition of this unknown fleet?”

“No, Your Majesty. We can only detect the movement and size of the total object. But, if our calculations are correct, based on the size of the overall object, they bring several hundred battleships and thousands of cruisers. It is a very large force. You should consider evacuation, Your Majesty.”

Empress Penelope responded, “I will never abandon my home or our people. No, you must find a way, Admiral, to fight these intruders away.”

The Admiral saluted smartly, saying, “Yes, Your Majesty. I will keep you informed if anything changes.” With that he quickly departed to go make the best plans he could.

Lizzy said, “So, it comes to it.”

Sam responded, “Yes. Not unexpected, but still, it will be a difficult time.”

Trinthea added, “Never give up hope. We will win this fight.”

Empress Penelope added, “Yes, we will win; although, many will not see tomorrow.”

Lizzy said, “That is always reality, Your Majesty. Our job is to make sure more of them don’t see tomorrow, than us.”

Chapter 78

Perspective

415.232.15

Far away, yet very close by, Dhakini and Mudu talked. They were observing the events as they unfolded around Meladeran from the third veil. From here, they could see many things.

Dhakini said, “I have looked everywhere, but I have not been able to find Riser anywhere.”

“No, he has grown in power and can now fully conceal himself. He is much stronger than the power you defeated in single combat.”

“But how much stronger?”

“I know what you are really asking, will the three of them be strong enough to defeat him, and I cannot say either way.”

They stood silently for a while.

Finally, Mudu, who had changed back into the young girl she was, said, “But, one thing is certain.”

“What’s that?”

“Whatever happens it is the will of our Lord. In that thought I take great comfort.”

Dhakini smiled, and said, “Yes, there is much power and hope in that statement.”

They watched as the enemy fleet approached, and they also saw another fleet approaching. But they didn’t see Riser.

“Well, we have not been called to intervene, therefore we are not to be concerned.”

“No, we can be concerned, but as we are not called, we must believe all will be as it should be.”

At that moment Dhakini heard, “Triangulum Galaxy, Xena II.”

Mudu said, “You were called.”

“Yes, to the Triangulum Galaxy, but with a stop for knowledge first.”

Mudu said, “I was called as well. Lead the way, I will follow.”

“That galaxy is not our Lord’s, is it?”

“Apparently, it is now. Maybe that is what we will learn at this first stop. I sense that we have some time yet before we need to actually travel to the galaxy.”

“Yes, I as well. Come then, let’s go.”

They both took a long last look at the events on Meladeran, and Mudu took her arm and they vanished.

Chapter 79

The Fight

415.232.20

One hour before the enemy fleet was estimated to arrive, Empress Penelope and the others returned to Star Fleet Command to observe the upcoming battle. As they were walking across the bridge to Star Fleet, Lizzy took Penelope aside.

“Your Majesty, you need to keep this shield with you.”

“Why? That’s such a cumbersome looking device.”

“Your Majesty, Penelope! This is important. It’s necessary. You must do this. Your very life depends on it.”

“You are certain of this?”

“Yes, I am. This shield will protect you from all harm, both from those who purposefully want to harm you, and from accidental harm. But you have to have it on. Here, do you see this strap? It can fit across your chest easily, with the shield across your back. And strangely, it isn’t heavy.”

As Lizzy fitted the shield on her back, she said, “You’re right, it’s very light. I thought it would be cumbersome, but it isn’t. Okay, I will wear this during the battle.”

“Thank you.”

As they entered the control central, the Empress walked up to Admiral Johansen, and asked, “How many in your fleet, Admiral?”

“Sadly, Your Majesty, not enough. We have only managed to get seventy battleships and a few hundred heavy cruisers in place. Others are enroute, but will not arrive before the enemy.”

“It’s my fault, Admiral. I, and my predecessors, didn’t see a threat that would require a larger fleet.”

“No, Your Majesty, it’s all our fault. Star Fleet is just as culpable as any, because we didn’t raise any concerns with our funding, or the size of the fleet, we just got comfortable.”

A Sergeant at a console said, “Admiral, they are entering normal space.”

As the enemy entered normal space, a better picture of their fleet became visible.

“Oh my god, their fleet is enormous.”

“Yes sir. It appears they have three hundred ships that are bigger than one of our battleships, hundreds of heavy cruisers, thousands of smaller cruisers, and we can’t yet tell how many starfighters.”

“Bring all of our ships directly between Meladeran and that fleet.”

Empress Penelope asked, “How long do we have, Admiral?”

“Maybe thirty minutes until our two fleets begin battle.”

As they were discussing these details, suddenly, a voice filled the room, and the face of the demon Riser filled the monitor. “Ah, Empress Penelope the last, I see you at least didn’t run away and hide. That’s good. Now you can die with all the rest of your brood of vipers.”

“What do you want, Riser?”

“Everything. You have only one option. Surrender, now, or die. You have five minutes to decide.”

Penelope said, “I don’t need five minutes. We will never surrender. Not now, not in five minutes. Do your worst.”

He smiled, and said, “I had hoped you would say that. Attack!”

The fight was on.

It started slowly, almost in slow motion, as the ships moved slowly closer to begin to engage. Star Fleet centered their battleships in a double line and surrounded them with heavy cruisers.

The enemy drove forward with their battleships, in a true attack formation. They intended to break through Star Fleets battleships and destroy them as they went, leaving no resistance behind.

It wasn’t long before the ships were close enough to begin firing at each other. Then the enemy launched swarms of starfighters from their battleships, tens of thousands of them! Correspondingly, Star Fleet launched all they had.

From the beginning, ground-based weapon stations fired heavy cannons into the enemy fleet, striking a few at a time, but it wasn’t nearly enough to slow them down.

Ships fired their weapons towards each other, but the weapons of the enemy were superior. Star Fleets phasers and torpedoes couldn’t get past their stronger shielding. But theirs could. It was an uneven fight from the start.

At first, Star Fleet seemed to be holding them off, their line seemed to hold. But slowly, their line began to waiver and the enemy started to get through. The Star Fleet battleships were being taken apart and destroyed like melted butter. Star Fleet considered withdrawal, because the fight was so uneven and there was no sense in having their own people slaughtered in this way.

“Admiral, we cannot win this battle!”

He looked glum and turned to the Empress to say something, as it seemed the battle was hopelessly lost, when a new voice was heard.

“Star Fleet, this is Tranthar, Leader of the Crelean Nation. Do you need help?”

Admiral Johansen quickly said, “YES, everything you’ve got!”

Immediately, the entire Crelean fleet appeared. They had five hundred battleships of their own design, which were more powerful than even the enemy’s biggest ships. They brought three thousand heavy cruisers and thousands of light cruisers and even more types of ships. Plus, they possessed fifty thousand starfighters. They waded into the enemy and began slicing them up. The battle quickly turned back to Star Fleet winning.

As this unfolded, Sam said, “They’re losing. Be ready. This should be when we see Riser at his most dangerous.”

Suddenly Leo started laughing. It was a dark, sinister laugh, not like Leo’s normal laugh.

Sam said, “I've heard that sound before.”

He turned towards Leo, with his staff out front to block a move. But Riser was faster than all of them, and pulled a bright crimson fire sword out and swung it at the Empress! But the shield Lizzy had given her provided an energy shield the sword just bounced off of.

This further outraged Riser! He stood tall, and Leo’s body fell away to the side.

Lizzy quickly drew her sword and moved between him and the Empress.

Trinthea moved to stand beside Lizzy, to help protect the Empress.

Riser had, indeed, grown stronger and more powerful. He swung his sword at Lizzy, and she managed to block it, swinging with a counter strike at him, which he blocked. He then stabbed at Trinthea, causing her to flip backwards to avoid the blade.

They engaged him and Lizzy yelled, “SAM, get the Empress to safety!”

Sam grabbed the Empress and pulled her out of the command center.

Riser swung his sword at Trinthea and simultaneously pulled his knife out and stabbed at Lizzy. They both managed to evade his attack, but it threw them off-balance, allowing him to easily get past them, in pursuit of the Empress.

Sam and the Empress ran across the bridge that separated the palace and star fleet.

“What can we do Sam?”

“I don’t know what else we can do, but just standing there watching them fight was not it!”

Riser had seen Sam grab her and go, and after he easily got past the weak women, he burst the walls down in pursuit. He was determined to destroy the Empress.

He yelled, “You cannot run from me!”

Lizzy and Trinthea quickly regrouped and ran after him, trying to catch up.

As Riser approached the far side of the bridge, Sam threw a blast of white energy towards him. But to everyone’s surprise, he merely laughed at it and continued towards them.

Lizzy pulled her knife and threw it with all her strength. It hit Riser in the back, causing him extreme agony.

“OW! You will pay for that!”

As he writhed in pain and struggled to remove the knife from his back, they rushed past him.

Lizzy said, “I think we can only defeat him if we work together. He can defeat any one of us, maybe two. But if we three stand side by side against him together, we can defeat him.”

He yelled and hurled her knife back at her, but since it was her knife, she held out her hand and it landed in her hand, hilt first. She sheathed it.

He yelled louder and ran at them sword raised. Lizzy took center point, Trinthea to her left, and Sam to her right. Riser got within striking distance and swung his sword directly at Lizzy. She masterfully countered it, while Trinthea threw a solid ice dagger into his right leg. At the same time, Sam again sent lightning, but this time, into his stomach.

He swirled around bringing his sword in a powerful arc around him. They each ducked, but after his sword passed overhead, before his return swing, they launched an attack into his torso. Trinthea used her rings to unsettle the ground beneath his feet, getting him off-balance, while Lizzy stung him with her sword. Sam again shot lightning into his stomach.

As he swung the blade back, they did the same again.

Riser realized that even with his greater strength, he was beginning to lose the fight. Somehow, they had managed to weaken him, and he knew he could not survive much more of this.

As he stepped backwards, saying, “We will finish this later,” Lizzy, seeing so far ahead in a fight, had realized what he was doing before he did, and had already sent her sword flying towards his heart, which stabbed him before he could depart. He gasped, looking down at the golden sword sticking into him, and then fell over backwards onto the ground.

Lizzy said, “No, we will finish this now.” She walked over to him and pulled her sword from his chest, and with a strong swing of it, removed his head. Riser was dead, and his fleet was completely destroyed, no quarter given.

Chapter 80

Awards

415.241.09

A little over a week later, the time arrived to formally say thank you and present awards for service. The main hall was packed with thousands of people. All the royalty, leaders of Star Fleet, leaders of the Imperial household; everyone was there. This time, Sam and Lizzy wouldn't be able to hide, because they were front and center.

Once all were assembled, the Empress entered the great hall and walked through the crowds’ loud cheers to the stage. She walked up the steps and sat upon the Emerald Throne of the Empire. After some time, she stood, and waved for silence. Once it quieted down, she walked down the steps, stopping on the bottom step, and called for her ceremonial sword.

Then she said, “Today, we recognize those who worked so hard to ensure our Empire survived the recent war. Sam, Lizzy and Trinthea, come before me.”

Once the three were standing in front of her, she said, “Kneel.”

They knelt.

“Samuel Bartinella, I dub thee Archduke Bartinella, Protector of The Empire.”

She stepped right, and said, “Lizzy Bartinella, I dub thee Archduchess Bartinella, Protector of The Empire.”

She stepped right again, and said, “Trinthea Torrinthea, I dub thee Archduchess Torrinthea, Protector of the Empire.”

She looked at the three of them, and added, “Your service to the Empire is unheralded. You now are second only to me in rank within the Empire. Rise now, as Protectors of the Empire, and stand beside my throne as a reflection of your higher status within the Empire.”

They rose and bowed, then walked up the steps and stood beside the throne, no longer able to hide in anonymity.

“Tranthar Tranthorious, please come forward.”

Tranthar walked to stand in front of the Empress.

“As a special honor, I name the Crelean nation as the Guardians of the Empire. They will provide us a special unit that will work with Star Fleet to ensure the Empire never again faces such evil.”

Tranthar bowed and was turning to leave when the Empress said, “Tranthar, please remain here, and turn around to face the people.”

Then she said, “Everyone, please, be seated.” She waited for a minute until everyone had sat, then said, “What we have recently undergone did not start recently. It started hundreds of years ago, and built up over time. However, our choices over the past sixty years did not help our cause.”

“We allowed ourselves to relax. We allowed ourselves to lower our guard. We did this because we didn’t see any threats to the Empire. We believed that we were secure. We believed that we were safe, and we believed that we were big enough to take care of any threat. We were wrong.”

“Without our friends, the Crelean nation, arriving when they did, with firepower superior to that of the enemy, we would have lost the fight. We cannot afford to repeat this again.”

“For this reason, we are increasing the funding for Star Fleet, and placing Tranthar, the Leader of the Crelean nation, in charge of building us a Star Fleet that cannot be matched anywhere.”

As people applauded, she said, “Tranthar, please turn back to me and kneel.”

Tranthar faced her and knelt, and she said, “I dub thee Duchess Tranthorious of the Inner Realm. Your service to our survival is glorious and we cannot thank you enough. Rise.”

Everyone cheered for her as she knelt and walked to her place in the front.

The Empress continued, “But more is needed. We all must toughen up. We need to make sure we raise our standards of workmanship, use education for what it is meant to be – a means to learn and grow in ways that can be applied in the real world – not as a pastime to fill a checkmark on an application form.”

“We had a wakeup call ladies and gentlemen. I am now fully awake. I trust you are as well. Never again will we be caught this unprepared.”

She then smiled, and added, “Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not thank the Marquis Leopold Falstock of Cartathonia for his strength, support, encouragement, and intellect. And yes, Leopold and I are engaged.”

Loud cheers were heard from everyone at this very good news!

As she turned and walked back up the stairs, everyone stood and cheered for the passion, vision, and leadership of their Empress.

When the ceremony ended, certain guests, including Sam, Lizzy, Trinthea and Tranthar, made their way back into the palace gardens for a celebration.

Tranthar pulled Trinthea aside, saying, “Trinthea, or should I say, Archduchess Trinthia?”

Trinthea laughed, and said, “Well, Duchess, it will take me some time to get used to this, but I will always just be Trinthea to you. No titles.”

“Good, and for me. But it would seem you have found a new path forward.”

Trinthea said, “Yes, and mostly because you believed in me and made the decisions that brought you here to save the day. You are the true hero of this day.”

“While I thank you for that, I believe you underestimate your involvement. In any event, we are also moving in a new direction, as builders of the new fleet and Guardians of the Galaxy. Also, we have re-occupied our planets and our people are now back home, safe. But one thing has changed. We will never be isolated again.”

“I believe that is the best thing that has ever happened to our people. Thank you, Tranthar.”

Chapter 81

Home

415.275.17

Trinthea, Lizzy and Sam were sitting in their home on Tuton, when Dhakini appeared.

She said, “Good evening.”

Sam said, “Hello, Dhakini.”

She responded, “I’m certain you are wondering why I’m here. Well, it’s to offer you a new home. Lizzy has been there and knows it is functional, as well as big, and I would enjoy your company.”

Lizzy stood up and walked over to her and gave her a hug. “We spent a while together at her home, and it is wonderful with great facilities. I’m in favor of trying it out.”

Trinthea said, “Well, if you think it’s a good move, I’m in favor.”

Sam chuckled, saying, “Well, don’t let me get in the way of progress. But I do think a change of scenery would do us all good.”

Dhakini said, “Take my hands.”

As soon as they did, they immediately arrived at her home, the beautiful rambling Greco/Roman style home Lizzy had been at before. Dhakini gave the two newcomers the same tour she had given Lizzy, and they all eventually made their way to the gymnasium.

“Here is where I honed my skills, with Dhakini’s help. It was a grueling several months that only lasted a few hours. Or a few hours that lasted several months. Either way, this is a wonderful place. Thank you, Dhakini, for inviting us here.”

“You are welcome, Lizzy. All of you are welcome. I will be called away from time to time, as will you. But this is a wonderful place to rejuvenate and prepare.”

“And keep physically fit!”

She laughed, “Yes, that’s true.”

“Can you still run as fast as you could last time?”

“Let’s see. GO!” Dhakini took off and Lizzy was right behind her. Trinthea and Sam laughed as they watched them run. They were very fast. It looked like a close call, even a tie at the end.

Dhakini said, “You are still fast. I think you outran me, since I cheated and ran first, but you paced me all the way.”

Lizzy laughed, saying, “That’s ok, we’ll call it a draw.”

“For now, I must leave. Mudu and I are called to the Triangulum Galaxy.”

Suddenly a young blonde woman appeared. “Hello everyone.”

Dhakini laughed, watching their faces. “Everyone, this is Mudu in her natural form.”

Sam said, “But you were so old.”

Trinthea and Lizzy both agreed.

“Yes, I appear old, because if I appeared as I am people would not take me so seriously. But as an old woman,” she changed into the old woman, “People listen.” She changed back.

Turning to Dhakini, she said, “We are prepared, it is time to go.”

“Yes. We will return when we can. You may be called, if needed. In the meantime, enjoy.”

They both vanished.

“Well, it looks like we have a new home. Come on, I want to show you something.”

Lizzy took them to the stables and found horses there. The three of them mounted their horses, Lizzy rode Dreamer. Sam rode Moonbeam and Trinthea rode Sleepy, while Star escorted them all.

Lizzy took them into the meadows and up to the waterfall. When they returned home, they went into the kitchen to prepare a meal. As they sat around the table, they all agreed that this was a perfect place to live. Over the next few days, they all traveled to their former homes and brought those things they wanted to have, just to make their own personal spaces feel like their own.

Chapter 82

Training

415.335.12

Then one day, as they were in the gymnasium exercising, a figure appeared, then another. They were dressed in golden robes with golden hair and bright blue eyes. They seemed to glow.

Sam said, “Hello to you.”

The male figure said, “And to you.”

The female said, “We are certain you are curious as to who we are.”

“Yes, we are.”

She smiled and the sun seemed to shine a little brighter.

“I am Isabella, this is my husband, Issac. We were sent here to teach you.”

Lizzy asked, “Teach us what?”

Issac replied, “To teach you how to use your power in unison, so that you three can achieve the level of power you need for your future journey. Today, you are each very powerful. And yes, you did manage to defeat the one power acting in unison. However, your abilities are minimal. We are to teach you how to maximize your united power.”

Lizzy spoke quickly, saying, “We welcome your guidance. Please teach us how to be stronger together.”

Isabella said, “First, we want to know what you know about your individual strengths. We will start with Sam. Sam, tell us about your abilities.”

“Well, I’m not sure, exactly. I know how to use some of the spells, but not all; and I still am not sure how I can change the words to change the focus of the spells. I know my staff holds power, but am not sure how to focus it, using it more as a blast effect.”

“So, you truly hold access to immense power, but only utilize a small part.”

“Yes, I think that sums it up.”

Issac then said, “Trinthea, tell us about your power.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure about it. I mean, I can look, focus, and think about doing something and it seems to happen, especially if I’m stressed, like when we fought Riser. But otherwise, I truly don’t understand how to use these rings of power.”

Isabella then said, “Lizzy, tell us about yours.”

She smiled, saying, “I feel as though I am fully engaged and use my sword and fighting skill to the maximum extent possible. If there is more, I am not aware of it.”

Issac said, “I hope you see how your powers are unknown to you. It should tell you how strong you could be, when you realize that with even rudimentary knowledge and skill, you still defeated a power.”

Isabella added, “What we intend to do is teach you to a higher level. Let’s begin.”

They placed a target at the end of the gymnasium, and said, “Trinthea, what would you need to do to knock that target over?”

She thought, then said, “I would try to throw a burst of wind at it.”

“Okay, do it.”

Trinthea thought, held out her arm and sent a burst of wind. It didn’t topple it over, but did cause it to move.

Issac said, “Now, what I want you to do is several things. First, send the wind. But in addition, send an earthquake to unsettle the ground and a spear of ice directly into it.”

“All three at once?”

“Yes.”

She tried, but couldn’t get them to work together. She hit a wall with some ice, shook the ground where they stood, and caused wind to stir the dust up at the end of the gymnasium.

Isabella said, “Come with me, let’s work on this together.” Trinthea took her arm, and they vanished.

Issac said, “Sam, I am taking you to Arclendam. He is the one who created and developed the spells you have access to. He can teach you all the spells he made. Lizzy, I will be right back.” He took Sam’s arm and they vanished.

Training – Lizzy

He immediately returned.

“Now, Lizzy, you believe you have achieved mastery of your power. Let me show you that you have not. Please, pull your sword and attack me with all your ability.”

She pulled her sword and began a series of attacks on him, but never got close. His speed was nearly unseeable. It was as if he vanished, but not quite.

Finally, she stopped. “Okay, what am I missing?”

“Dhakini taught you about speed, strength, and skill. It was through her training that you became the Master Warrior. However, you possess more. You have limited yourself to a single visualization of your own ability that traps your potential in the normal expected movement of ordinary people. But you are no longer ordinary. You have so much more capacity, as yet untapped. We are going to work on that.”

He picked up a rock and held it in the palm of his hand. He said, “I want you to take a moment and visualize reaching out and taking this rock from my hand. But I want you to visualize the entire motion, prepping to reach, the reach, the capture, and the pull back as a single thought. When you are ready, take the rock from my hand before I can close my hand.”

Lizzy stood and looked at the rock. She thought about the steps to get it and return, and she tried to imagine everything happening at the same time, but it was confusing and jumbled in her mind. But she reached to get the rock only to find his hand closed around it.

“Tell me what you thought.”

“I visualized it, but the processes got confusing and sporadic in my mind. It wasn’t smooth.”

“Correct, it wasn’t smooth. What you must learn is that the thought is one thought, not a series of thoughts tied together. You are creating a single thought that includes multiple steps. If you see it other than that, you fail. Again.”

They spent hours working on this single task. Eventually they took a break.

“I know this is difficult, Lizzy; but you can do it. That is the key. You are capable of this, you just have to do it once, in a simple act of taking a rock, to know you can do it and learn larger more complex thoughts. We will rest tonight and start again tomorrow.”

The next day it was the same. And the next. Then on the fourth day, she had her hand on the rock when he closed his hand.

“Ah, very good. You improved. Did you feel it?”

“Yes! It felt like a single movement.”

“Exactly. Now, again, and improve.”

She took the rock out of his hand before he could close it.

“Perfect. Now, we will move up. You see that tree in the distance?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I want you to run to it, touch it, and run back here, before I can move from where I stand, to that spot over there. Start when you are ready.”

Lizzy focused on the movement involved, distance, and steps. She thought she was ready and began. He was standing at the new spot before she returned.

“Remember, it is a single movement, not a series of movements. Again.”

She felt she improved, but it took all day before she managed to beat him.

“Wonderful, Lizzy. Now, tomorrow we will add swordplay into the process. For tonight, rest.”

The next day he said, “This will be the hardest movement. Your task is to run back to the tree, cut the tree with your sword, and return here before my arrow hits the tree.”

“That’s almost instantly.”

“Yes, it is. Begin when you are ready.”

It was the attempt after the thirteenth arrow landed in the tree that made the difference. She was furious with herself for not being able to do this, and the added energy boost from within charged her up and she not only made it back, but she even grabbed the arrow just as he released it from his bow, and stood there, grinning.

Isaac laughed. “Well then, it looks like you are indeed as fast as you could be. I think you are ready for the test.”

Training – Trinthea

Isabella took Trinthea to a mountain top at night. Looking out, all you could see were the stars in the sky and the lights flickering in the valley below of the houses of those who lived here.

“What are you aware of?”

Lizzy thought a moment, then said, “Strong earth, animals, forests, energy, wind, power.”

“Yes.”

She waved her hand and they were in daylight. They stood in a valley, a field really, with grass but no trees, except one at the end of the field.

“Now, in the distance is a tree. Your task is to both freeze it and blow it down.”

“At the same time?”

“Yes, at the same time. Start when you are ready.”

Trinthea stood for a few minutes and then raised her arms and in the distance, it snowed in a breeze.

She lowered her arms, saying, “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t think about two things at once with full concentration. It’s confusing.”

“Yes, it would be. Trinthea, you possess rings of power. Individually, they are strong. But when used in unison, they are devastating.”

She walked over to a bench and sat down, and said, “Tell me, which of your rings is the most powerful?”

Trinthea thought, and said, “I don’t know. They all are, in their own way.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, the ring of fire creates fire; water creates floods and ice; wind creates storms; and earth creates earthquakes and lava.”

“What about Aether?”

“Oh, Aether is the least impactful.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes. All it does is provide some energy, but not much.”

Isabel chuckled, and said, “Trinthea, you have misunderstood the powers you hold. Let me explain. You see, each of the four powers you mentioned are finite in nature. They only perform one type of function. Fire is a heat source, water for water, earth for earth, and wind for wind. But Aether, now that one is the most powerful because it affects all the others.”

“Aether is the power generator that causes the other four to roar with strength. It is the energy of the universe, pulled into a stream and channeled into the rings of power. You are the conduit of this power.”

“When you learn to channel Aether into the other rings, you will see what I am talking about. So, for now, we need to work on your ability to channel Aether.”

She stood, and said, “Reach out and throw water on that tree.”

Trinthea stood, and reached out, and it rained on it.

“Now, close your eyes and feel the Aether all around you, beneath and above you, within you. Remember the lesson of the bear who gave you the ring. Feel it, taste it, let it consume you with its strength.”

She waited, while Trinthea stood still, eyes, closed.

After a few moments, she said, “Now, when you are ready, throw water at the tree.”

Trinthea opened her eyes and looked at the tree and it was as if a dam broke. It flooded the tree, washing it away completely.

“Wow!”

“Yes, wow. That is the power of Aether. Now, your true goal is to learn to combine more than one of the powers you hold in your rings together, so your action is unstoppable. Remember, Aether provides the energy, so you must always be connected to it. Now, as you can see, I raised a new tree. I want you to surround it with a storm of fire and ice, then, when your storm is at its height, open the ground and swallow it.”

Trinthea stood for a moment, then looked, raised her arms, and a storm of immense proportions surrounded the tree. Water, ice, fire, wind; it was incredible, then the ground opened up and it vanished.

Isabella said, “I think you are ready for the test.”

Training – Sam

Issac took Sam to Arclendam. They were standing in a large room. Sam recognized him from the images in the labyrinth.

Arclendam said, “Welcome, Sam. I see you possess the wizard’s staff I gave you in the labyrinth. How has it worked for you?”

“I’m not really sure. It seems it does what I need, but that is very limited to my ability to cast spells. I have no previous experience, and it is confusing.”

“Yes, it would be. Very well, let’s start at the beginning. First, you were selected to receive these gifts because you are the right person. Let that sink in for a moment. You did not receive these by chance, but were guided to them by purpose. Our Lord works in mysterious ways. Never doubt, have faith.”

He held out his hand and the old book Sam had read suddenly appeared in his hand.

“The foundation of the spells are the pages of the text you read. You read the ten major spells. However, you did not read the rest of the text, which explained their purpose and use, because they were hidden from you. Until now. Take the book, sit under the tree,” (which magically appeared from nowhere, along with a bench underneath it,) “and read it all. I will wait.”

Sam took the book and sat down. With his photographic memory he only had to scan each page, but didn’t rush it. Still, it only took him a little over an hour.

“What did you learn?”

Sam thought, then said, “That the spells only channel the intent enclosed within the desire of the doer, which is automatically transferred and acted upon by the staff.”

“Very good. Now, your true task, is to focus on your true intent and surround it with desire. These two are different, yet when combined create a powerful force. Using the spells give focus on the intent and desire, helping channel the power needed to actualize the result through the staff, or, when no staff is available, through your hands.”

“I want you to look at that tree in the distance,” (which suddenly appeared,) “and break it in half.”

Sam took a moment, then held his staff high and said some words. A limb on the left side of the tree snapped, but that was all.

“What happened?”

“I knew what I wanted to do, assembled the words, and reached out for it.”

“Yes, but you forgot your desire. I believe you did not give it that necessary energy. Remember, your desire is not what you believe the right thing to do is, instead it is doing what must be done. I would not want to break the tree in half, but if it is a task I must do, then I must wrap it in my desire to accomplish the act. Try again.”

Sam stood still, gathering himself, then held his staff and said words, and the tree shattered.

“Very good, Sam. Now, put it back together.”

He thought, then held his staff and said words, and the pieces of the tree swirled back together and solidified into a solid tree.

“Remember, your desire must surround your intention to do what must be done. I think you are ready for the test.”

Training – Together

Each of them finished their training in separate places and were then brought back together into the gymnasium.

Isabella said, “Now, let’s observe. Trinthea, topple the statue at the end of the arena.”

Trinthea raised her right arm and instantly the statue shook, and was hit by a force of wind, ice, and fire. It exploded.

Issac said, “Sam, repair the statue.”

Sam raised his staff, and quietly said some words, and the various parts and pieces of the statue rose up in the air and assembled themselves together. He held them and surrounded them with a pressure orb and heat, forming the statue back into a solid form.

Issac then said, “Lizzy, destroy the statue with your sword.”

Lizzy drew her sword, then moved at speeds none had even seen and beheaded the statue. She seemed to vanish and reappear. She returned and sheathed her sword before the head had fallen two inches.

Isabella said, “Now a test.”

“What kind of test?”

“A test to see if you have learned enough to operate as a single unit.”

Issac said, “You will be dropped into a scenario. Your task, as Lizzy knows well, is to live. Survive and defeat the enemy and you survive. Fail to do so, and we will see.”

“Now, prepare yourselves.”

Chapter 83

Test

415.355.12

They were standing in an open field. There were no trees or rocks as far as they could see, just a plain open field.

Suddenly, they heard noises in all directions. A large army approached. From one direction, medieval warriors. From another, archers, and swordsman on elephants. From another, warriors with advanced weaponry. There were many more variations, but essentially, they were encircled by everything from bows and arrows to plasma blasters. There were also wizards with spells. It was a formidable force.

All of a sudden, the advancing forces stopped, and it was deathly quiet. A lone rider approached.

He stopped short of them, and said, “You have been sentenced to death by every civilization known to exist within this galaxy. Above us orbits Emperor Sedrick III in his own battleship. Should we fail to destroy you, he will finish the job.”

Sam said, “What is our crime?”

He laughed, saying, “Your very existence is a crime. Your superiority is a crime. Your differences are a crime. Nothing about you is acceptable in a normal universe. You will die and we will be glad. I do not ask you for last words, because it doesn’t matter what you say, the sentence will be carried out.”

With that, he turned and rode back to the formation, turned, drew his sword, and yelled, “Attack!”

Without a conversation, Lizzy said, “Sam, take out the wizards; Trinthea, protect us from weapons while I attack the plasma weapons. Now.”

Immediately Sam began creating spells and using his staff’s energy to ward off attacks by the collected wizardry, while attacking and breaking their staffs. Trinthea created a massive wind and hailstorm that defeated all weapons except plasma weapons. Lizzy vanished and decimated the plasma weaponry and the bearers of those weapons.

When she reappeared beside them, she said, “Full assault ahead on the central third of them, full defense behind. Now.”

The three shifted their assaults to the warriors ahead of them, taking the fight directly to a third of them. At the same time, Sam and Trinthea also maintained a protective shield of spells, fire, wind, and storms behind and to the side of them, preventing those others from attacking them.

They kept at it until they had defeated all the warriors. Lizzy said, “Take us to their battleship. Now.”

They held hands and vanished, only to appear on the bridge of the battleship. The emperor was there and was shocked at their appearance.

“How did you defeat my armies?”

Lizzy said, “Like this,” and instantly approached and beheaded him. She moved with fantastic speed and killed everyone on the bridge.

“What next?”

“Trinthea, pull the ship out of orbit to crash on the planet. Sam, prepare to take us home.”

Trinthea said, “It is done. The ship will collide with the planet in ten minutes.”

Sam said, “I am ready.”

Lizzy said, “Then let’s go, now.”

They held hands and appeared in front of Isabella and Issac.

She said, “Well done. Now, tell us, what did you learn during this test?”

Trinthea said, “That while we are all three powerful, together we are even stronger than separate.”

Sam added, “Yes, and that our natural leader is the Master Warrior, Lizzy.”

Issac said, “Lizzy, what did you learn?”

“I learned that I am able to evaluate, analyze, and decide an effective course of action instantly.”

“Yes. All three of you, acting in unison, with speed, strength, and unity, are now a power unto yourself.”

Isabella added, “You are ready. Be prepared at all times. Our Lord will call upon you when you least expect it.”

They were suddenly standing in the gymnasium.

Trinthea said, “Did that just happen?”

Sam said, “Yes, I believe so.”

Lizzy laughed. “Yes, it happened. And now, I am famished, let’s go find some food!”

Chapter 84

Adventure

416.001.08

They continued to exercise, train and practice together, creating even more synergy between them. Then one morning, as they were in the kitchen having breakfast, a voice was heard in their heads, “Xena II.”

Almost at the same time, Dhakini appeared, disheveled.

She said, “There is trouble in the Triangulum Galaxy, I need your help. Come.”

They gathered their weapons and held her arm and vanished into a new adventure.