**The Winds of Change**

**Written By Marie Daley**

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This is a work of fiction. All the events and characters portrayed in this book are fictional and any resemblance to any real people or incidents is purely coincidental. And if you do find Tayna, please invite me along to visit it with you.

**Dedication**

To My Mom and Dad: Tom and Hilda Daley.

To Barb, Kirsten and Kyleen, whose love and support I cherish!

And To the Rest of My Wonderful Family!

Love and Chaos Abounds!

Sometimes we just call it Family!

**The Adventures of Ryes and Garth**

Tayna’s Dawn

Winterhaven

Winds of Change

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**Prelude**

**A Hasty Retreat**

“All secure with the regular cargo containers. The specimens are packed in; safe and cozy in their suspension tubes, Dr. Cruthers.” Bethany MacKenzie walked with accustomed ease through the narrow aisles of tied-down stacks of crates and equipment. It seemed they barely arrived and established their research base on this lush, green world when the military barged in and hustled them off into space once again. Suddenly they’d become a part of the front of a new war zone; forced to leave their new base and most of everything behind because of a faceless, murdering alien people. Most of the research would have to be started over again, hopefully at some point in the near future. She sighed, appearing thoughtful as she approached her mentor and superior.

 “Did comp confirm the mass distribution?” Dr. Ethan Cruthers asked, barely glancing up to see his slim assistant nod her head in response. He bobbed his head in return, and turned his attention back to the large, supine figure before him.

 “Do you need any help?” she inquired, as she slipped her comp into her thigh shipsuit pocket. She knew better than to intrude when he was busy; if he wanted her help, he’d let her know. His years were catching up with him, but he was determined to hold them off by keeping as active as possible. Even if they’d been out for decades, he felt that too many of the rejuv drugs and treatments were still in the experimental stage, so opted for the old tried-and-true efforts like regular exercise and a good, balanced diet. Bethany did her best to be ready when he was feeling tired, like today, with the hasty evacuation and all the extra work it encompassed for them both.

 “If everything else is finished, a little help would be most welcome indeed,” Dr. Cruthers replied, as he finished giving his subject an injection and set the hypodermic aside. His hands were beginning to shake with fatigue. He wouldn’t tolerate any mistakes made when it came to the care of their charges human, or otherwise. Bethany stepped up as he reached for the sensor pad array and began to help him untangle the slender leads. They both worked as quickly as they could, with skill that comes of much practice.

 “There Bethy, finished at last,” he said in relief as he straightened back up to his full six foot-four height. He patted his shipsuit and lab coat pockets, absentmindedly searching for his pipe, momentarily forgetting the shipboard ban against smoking. A sad smile dawned upon his jovial, suntanned face as he remembered the restriction and that Bethany had packed them away to keep him out of trouble. Readjusting to ship life was going to be a trying experience after over two years on such a lovely planet. He’d grown quite fond of relaxing after the day’s work with a fresh cup of coffee and his pipe while watching the bright colors the orange-red sun painted across the evening sky as it set.

 “We’re even fifteen minutes ahead of the time the First allowed us,” he commented, as he returned to the here and now, noting the clock overhead. Bethany politely didn’t comment upon his lapse and search. She knew he’d get through it again. She helped him carefully push the sliding slab into the waiting gray-metal box. He attached the sensor plug into the receptacle inside then pushed the activation button on the readout panel. The box brought up the metal front plate and sealed itself, beginning to cycle the artificial hibernation. These were their strongest and best chambers; even better than their own.

 “She was always so much easier to handle than him,” she commented as she checked the sensor readings as the final stages of hibernation began. The female she spoke of lay already encased in a similar box above his. Bethany checked her readouts for the hundredth time.

She worried about her pregnancy and having to be put into suspension so suddenly. Would the child survive? It was risky, but they had little choice. Due to company policy, they would’ve had to euthanize them to prevent possible epidemics in the native population from any microbes they might’ve been exposed to at their research facility. Not wanting to see such a thing happen with this couple, they chose to take them, along with some others, to be with them on the starship. They had stored as many of the better behaved natives, who were a part of their own studies, that they could, putting them in every extra stasis tube or box they could grab on the ship. Off-hand slaughter had never been a part of their department policy. But this couple had become very special to them both, so were stored here in the main lab compartment, so they could keep a better eye upon them. Bethany remembered the way they tried to take care of each other even in the stress of their captivity. It bespoke of a deep commitment to each other and their relationship had sparked more than a scientific curiosity in both researchers.

 “Now, now,” he scolded with a twinkle in his eyes, “You wouldn’t be too friendly either, if a pack of strange-looking creatures took you captive and began to poke and prod you in places you didn’t know could feel pain. The little lady was gentler because you kept Dr. Ortiz and his crew of internists away from her, yourself.” She smiled guiltily, nodding her head in agreement.

 “All right, he does have cause, and he was better once he could trust us,” Bethany replied as she looked down with endless fascination at the distinctly feline features, which carried a hauntingly human cast, on the chamber’s vid display. The surprises their DNA strands had revealed were still being debated by the different science teams both on the base and on Earth.

 He looked golden-furred, but it was actually a thick body hair and a full head of hair like a human. He was a bipedal humanoid with two arms, legs, ears and round-pupiled eyes, but was not human. His spine and hips were fused – exactly like theirs – instead of a cat’s far more flexible spine. He had retractable claws instead of fingernails, and large tufted-round ears which were fixed in place, again like a human. He had a slightly flattened nose and a split upper lip like a cat. He looked like a cross between a human and a lion. His face was human in shape and range of expressions, with exposed skin on his face, hands and feet. His teeth were omnivorous rather than a cat’s tearing teeth. He stood man high and was solidly muscled from the hard, primitive life he’d led. But he was highly civilized, too. He wore sturdy, colorful clothing, sandals and had a well-made steel belt knife. He’d also worn a pendant which was delicately hand-tooled in gold and set with small, blue gemstones. Even the spear he used to defend himself with was made with apparent skill and craftsmanship.

 “I wish we had more time,” Bethany said wistfully. She was thinking again of the brilliant moons dancing over the ruins of a once great city on a special night she spent with a certain young man.

 “Give them a few months and this so-called war will have passed this entire sector. Then we can come back and study these people `till our hearts’ content,” Dr. Cruthers reassured her, as he put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief hug to his side. “Don’t worry. Those ruins will still be there when we return. They stood as a city for over a thousand years before their destruction; a few months won’t change them much. Now, let’s get to our own suspension chambers before that Lieutenant Dawe of yours comes looking for us,” he teased.

She knew he’d seen how close they’d become in the time they spent together on their off-duty hours. It looked like it did his heart good to know she’d finally found love and with the slow courtship, it seemed to give him some relief. She was aware he wanted her settled and happy before his coming retirement and required return to Earth for discharge. She imagined her parents would be shocked with the thought of their daughter marrying a military man, but felt it was what was best for her and Jim which was more important.

 She’d seen Dr. Cruthers had a second fledgling to worry about with the addition of Dorthea Burnes to his staff. He’d never allow her to be abused again, as he found was happening from the recordings she’d made for him at his direction. He still struggled with what he’d seen on the recordings. Dotti was already in her suspension tube, since they could handle the natives by themselves. What was he going to do for Dotti to ensure she found some happiness in life once again, she wondered? Ethan let her go and headed out of the lab compartment, still smiling.

 Bethany blushed as she smiled and followed him. As she safely sealed the hatch, she wondered how much he did know about her personal life? He was a good friend of her parents and tended to look after her with a father’s zeal, even if he’d never had children of his own. But when a certain young officer began to take an interest in her, Dr. Cruthers at first stayed near, then backed off and would leave them alone to chat. She never knew how to handle such attention, being raised at various installations on a score of worlds. She rarely had people her own age around as she grew up. Still she couldn’t deny that she was falling for Jim hard. She rushed to catch up to Dr. Cruthers, when suddenly the lights overhead shifted from a neutral white to an alert red. She froze in a moment of panic, as she looked to her mentor for guidance.

 “We weren’t quite quick enough,” he commented in a low voice, as the alarms started their whine and a prerecorded message instructed everyone to report to their assigned stations. He grabbed her arm and hauled her down the corridor to the hibernation tubes designated for the passengers.

“In you go, young lady. This may be our only chance for survival!” He quickly shoved her within and activated her tube before she could voice any protests. Lt. Dawe rushed around the corner and saw her chamber sealed and cycling. A look of relief flooded his face as he saw Bethany was safely encased. He looked up to Dr. Cruthers with a smile, which was quickly replaced with astonishment as the good doctor pinned his arms to his sides and pushed him into his own chamber. His shout was cut off as the hibernation tube was activated and sealed.

Dr. Cruthers smiled to himself as he again patted his pockets for his pipe, and then turned towards the Star Quest’s bridge. He wanted to find out more about this mysterious alien people, who wanted to eradicate all humans wherever they found them. Why? Several thriving colonies had been found decimated with very few to no survivors, per the reports he’d just read earlier today. The stories they told and recordings made were horrific dark tales filled with violence. The Dark Ones, as they were now called, attacked from their ships then landed and either killed every human found, or took them captive and used them for food. No one was intentionally left alive in their wake. There was no mercy in their hearts. It seemed very much like they had a hive mind and were swarming through the habitable worlds.

 There was tension running free on the bridge when he arrived and snagged an observer’s seat. The First, Dan Hagg, saw him, but was too busy trying to keep the situation in hand to bother. Captain Bill Bice had his eyes glued to the large projected display of the action outside in front of them.

 “We’re not heading directly home?” Dr. Cruthers questioned after several long minutes, noting their course. Bill turned to look back and saw him, his lips twisting into a grimace.

 “We can’t risk leading them back to Earth or any of the surviving colonies, Ethan. So, we’re taking a long roundabout route to an isolated battle station. There’s a signature of something unknown approaching. The Siberian’s trying to intercept it, to let us get free and clear,” he told him, indicating the display. Ethan stood and approached his chair, getting a good look at the deadly dance, which was moving in slow motion.

 “Sir, we have a report of several crewmembers that are unaccounted for,” Mr. Hagg reported as a frown crossed his brow. “Their PT’s aren’t registering at all. It’s like they’ve vanished.”

 “They’re probably in tubes in one of the dead zones,” Bill answered, waving him off. “We have more important concerns right now, Mister.” He indicated the Siberian Bear, which appeared to be under attack. The enemy ship easily dwarfed the brave cruiser, which stood in its way.

 “Can we make it?” Ethan pressed as he inwardly prayed for the brave ship’s crew.

 “It’s going to be tight. The problem is there’s too much of the neighboring systems around us, which are unknown. We don’t want to jump right into a system full of Dark Ones.” Suddenly they saw the cruiser blossoming into a bright ball of fire.

 “That was way too fast,” the navigator breathed out, breaking the silence on the bridge. “Did anyone survive that?”

 “Evasive maneuvers,” the Captain crisply ordered, bringing them back to their own dilemma, “get us out of here! See if you can put that planet between us and them.” Ethan saw they were fast approaching a colorful world with three moons and a ring of rocky debris. The great enemy ship moved far more quickly than the Star Quest and began its attack before they could even make the shelter of one of the moons.

 “It’s a Hunter!” Mr. Hagg identified the signature of the ship. “Concentrate shields up axis,” he ordered, “and keep a close eye on them.”

 “Aye, Sir,” the defense board officer replied. “Launch the fighters?” he asked.

 “To die? They can’t buy us enough time,” Commander Hagg returned, trying to think of a solution.

 “I see it,” the Captain replied, calming as he wracked his brain for answers. “I wish I had their drive system,” he commented in a low voice. “And Dan, get our guest to his stasis tube!” he demanded, looking to his First. Dan signaled security, knowing the doctor might prove difficult.

 “But I may be able to help,” Ethan protested, “I’ve lived a long life and deserved some adventure now.” He had the most important parts of the future already safely encased in their hibernation tubes; if there was any safely left aboard this ship.

 “Ethan, I don’t tell you how to run your labs, so don’t worry about the Quest. Stay safe, Old Friend,” Bill urged, giving him a brief smile and a nod of his head in farewell.

 “Wow! Look at that!” the communications officer shouted out. There were missiles being fired up at the enemy ship from the planet, as they passed close to it. These missiles were getting through the enemy ship’s shields and scoring, at least. The Hunter altered course, heading further away.

 “Who could it be? We don’t have any bases out here!” another crewman voiced, astonished.

 “Who cares? They’re doing the job!” one of the women declared.

 “Angels of Mercy,” another answered him, too, as she smiled.

 “Maybe this is where our city builders fled?” Ethan breathed out, wondering.

 “Let’s take advantage of the help. Can you maneuver us so we can bring them back in line with that fire-base? Tease them in closer?” Captain Bice questioned, appearing to appreciate the help, even if it might mean putting themselves at risk from the same missiles, too. They all knew it couldn’t be anyone from Earth, or they’d have known about the base well before now. Who could it be, Ethan wondered?

 “We’ll take a pounding doing it,” his First warned, not liking the idea, but seeing it as their only hope to escape. "I want to shake those people’s hands, if they have any,” he added. The security men gestured for Dr. Cruthers to leave with them. He balked, wanting to see more of this deadly dance, so they each took one of his arms and gently urged him towards the exit. They had their orders to clear him from the bridge.

 “Sir, please?” the one pleaded in a low voice.

 “Just as it’s getting good?” he questioned with a huff of a laugh.

Bill turned his head, giving them a nod to proceed. Their chances were still slim at best. Yet now they could hope. If only they could take advantage of it, without getting hit, themselves.

The men hauled Dr. Cruthers out with little struggling, heading quickly for his assigned chamber. Finding it occupied; they pushed him into the next available one, as the ship was rocking. They were taking fire from the enemy ship.

“Please, I’m old. Let me watch the action, just once?” he pleaded one last time, knowing it was a thin chance.

“Sorry Sir, we have our orders,” one of the men told him. Ethan suddenly felt a chill up his back and knew he’d never see these two men alive again. Was it their lives he feared for or his continued own? He wondered. He’d seen and done many things in his time and was about ready to call it quits. Life was a burden, offering him few chances at a promising future. The city’s ruins had been his last, great chance.

“Good luck,” he wished them, then the door sealed and it began its cycle. His last thought was of his precious wife Shelley, who had already crossed over from this life ahead of him.

**Now and Then**

 "What're you making?" Maren asked, as he trailed Ryes into the kitchen. They had a quick talk, away from the others, and both felt better for it. Raya was already in there, pulling things out to get ready for dinner. She smiled at the two of them. They were more like brother and sister than Maren and Tennan, who actually were siblings.

Raya mused for a moment on the last few months. On their journey away from the ruins of Hailys, she, who originally came from the Moondance plains tribe, followed them for a day and felt they were her only chance for survival. Garth led the small band of adventurers out of Matlowe Village, which lay far to the south and east of Hailys. She finally revealed herself that evening, as the lure of food overcame her fears; not to steal, but to beg. Ryes practically befriended her on sight. During their journey southwest along the pathway they found, she melded in with these former villagers, as if she’d begun the journey with them from the start. Before they found their home, she’d discovered her life’s love in Kovin. Moving into Winterhaven, which was an abandoned underground human place, had merely been finding the home she felt she’d always belonged. Even if Ryes and Maren knew little of the plains tribes, they were her true family.

"Lenoon soup, which I made for lunch," Ryes told him. "I hate having to pluck all those tiny feathers from those little birds, so I started it yesterday. I wanted Garth and Sabin to have some to take with them. The computer told me it was going to rain today and I knew it'd make them feel better if they had something hot to drink for lunch. I packed a large thermos full for them."

"Ugh, lenoon soup," he commented, making a face. She made a face back and then offered up a taste for him.

"Oh come on cubling, try it," she cajoled him, smiling. He sighed, knowing it didn't smell anything like what his mother made, then took a sip. He smiled as he closed his eyes, savoring the flavor.

"It's not lenoon soup! It's wonderful," he told her. "Can I get a bowl now?" he begged, looking hopeful. She laughed at him, shaking her head no.

"It's for lunch," she asserted. "You'll just have to wait like everyone else." He sighed in surrender.

"It's my turn for watch, but you'd better make sure I get a big bowl of that soup!" he warned, grinning as he pulled one of her braids. She shooed him out, smiling as she shook her head. He snagged some bubblenuts on his way out, to snack on until then.

"I wish I had a cousin like Maren," Raya sighed with a smile. Ryes shook her head as she chuckled at this.

"I wish I'd gotten to know him better, years ago!" she told her. "Rowan and I lived apart from everyone and I'm only now getting comfortable with the people here," she admitted. Raya looked surprised to hear this; they all seemed to get along so well.

"You're going to tell me all about it, but first, I need to see if we have any fresh eggs available. I'll be right back," she promised as she set down her recipe parchment. She grabbed a basket walking out the door, just as Rein was coming in. She gave her a smile.

"What is that heavenly smell?" Rein asked as she saw Ryes still in the kitchen, mixing some ingredients in a bowl. She smiled at Torr's mother in greeting.

"I made some lenoon soup for lunch," Ryes explained to her. "I packed some for Garth and Sabin to take with them this morning."

"Lenoon soup?" she asked, the smell tugging at her mind. "May I have a taste?" Ryes gave a nod of her head, as she dipped a small amount into a tasting bowl, then went back to work. Rein sipped it, and looked at Ryes in shock.

"It was YOU!" she stated, surprised. Ryes looked up from her mixing to meet Rein's eyes, shock in her own.

"I…" she suddenly stammered, her heart hammering, as the color left her face. She set down the bowl, before she dropped it.

"Sit down," she ordered, pointing to a chair. She hadn't meant to frighten the cub, but wanted some answers. Ryes sat upon one of the stools, as she took another. "How old were you, then?" she demanded.

"Wait," Ardis cautioned in a low voice, hearing Rein and Ryes talking in the kitchen. Their voices sounded strange to her ears. They met Raya in the hall outside, as she was leaving and they were headed into the kitchen to help. Seena held back as did Raya. They listened in, hearing what Ryes was telling her. Then Raya decided to tap in on Ryes, her way, grasping their hands so they could “hear” her too, dropping her basket.

"I was all of twelve years old," she replied, blushing darkly, knowing she had to tell her the whole story, now. It was so long ago! "I was out watching the stars and moons by the Yuri, when I noticed you and Tobin had come out to watch them, too. You both looked so happy. I saw you were pregnant with Rand and was going to go home, when I caught a whiff of Old Korman. He scared me, having tossed me through the air like I was a toy, when I got in his way accidentally, once. So, I froze not knowing what to do. As I sat still, I heard him issue a challenge cry. I couldn't believe it! How could he challenge Tobin, when you were already carrying his child? You were well past your season!" she told her, looking up to meet her eyes, seeing an intensity there she'd never seen before. She truly didn't know the woman, but understood she had to own up to her own actions - no matter how long ago it'd been.

"Go on. I recall it all too clearly," Rein urged; her voice now husky with deep emotions.

"I saw him attack Tobin and kill him, cutting him up with his beltknife, to make sure he was dead. I wanted to run back for Rowan, but was so afraid Korman would kill him, too. And I didn't have anyone, but Rowan, in all the world," she said; her eyes tearing at the memories. "I saw Korman beat and claw you up; like as if he wanted you to lose the cub Tobin fathered. He took you, as if you were in season, and then left you crying and bleeding on the bank of the Yuri. By the time I found the courage to approach, you’d passed out from shock. I carried you home, but no one was there. I didn't know where to even look for Torr, not even knowing his name back then. I had no idea where to turn for help at that time of night. So, I washed out your scratches and bandaged them, then prayed for your tiny one to survive. I cleaned you up and put you into your bed."

"I went back for Tobin's body, but left it in your great room. I'd made some lenoon soup earlier that evening and some sweet muffins, so went and got them for you. I was starting to sew up Tobin's shroud, when you started crying out in pain. I finally decided to risk my Aunt Tanns, so went and got her. She was so mad at me; you would've thought I'd been the one to hurt you. She ordered me to leave and gather the herbs she needed. By the time I returned, half the Village was there, so I left them and ran home. I think I was afraid of being blamed, because I didn't get Rowan to break things up. I just couldn't… I was so afraid of losing him and having no one left to love me. I'm sorry, it was so selfish of me," she whispered the last, looking down as she cried. Rein jumped off her stool and wrapped her arms about Ryes, hugging her tightly.

"There, there, cubling. You probably saved both Rand and I that night," she comforted her, understanding many things now. "It was a lot of responsibility for a twelve year old to take on. It's all right, believe me," she assured her. Ryes wiped at her eyes, and sniffed back her tears, as best she could.

"I didn't know what else to do," she told her, looking up to see the tears and smile upon Rein's face.

"You did just fine," she assured her in a soft voice. "And you make the best lenoon soup I've ever tasted," she teased as she chuckled. She finally got a real smile out of the cub, again.

"My gosh," Ardis breathed softly. Raya had looked inside of Ryes' head, using her Talent and because they were all touching her, they saw it as Ryes recalled that night. She'd been terrified of her Aunt Tanns and what the villagers would do to her for not getting help sooner. And just as terrified of losing Rowan to Korman's claws.

"Why would she be treated so?" Raya whispered, wondering as she dropped the linkage, feeling drained.

"Because she was an outcast for too many years," Seena replied, seeing how wrong they'd been, for far too long. "She didn't have a mother, nor siblings… only Rowan to care for her from the time she was an infant," she told her, sighing as she thought of all the things they'd said, or did to her through the years, heartlessly.

“I’d better go get those eggs,” Raya said as she scooped up the basket and headed outside, reviewing it all again, wondering about these people she now felt were her family, too. At least they regretted their previous behaviors.

"Computer, we've heard enough," Maren told the machine, having heard the whole story, as Ryes told it to Rein. He looked over at Torr and Shadd as they sat in shock, too. He had it play them the conversation, as he saw them sit down to talk. Something about Rein's behavior had alerted him and he wanted to be ready, in case Ryes needed his help, or backing.

"Affirmative," it replied as it cut out the audio reception in the control room from the kitchen sensors. It continued to monitor and record everything the natives said, or did, for any of its authorized, human personnel to review, when they returned.

"It's like Garth said before, we all owe her so much. Do you think her Healing Talent might've awakened then?" Torr asked, looking to Maren. It was like reopening a stab wound, as he recalled his father and that horrible night.

"What do you mean?" Maren asked, and then suddenly understood. “When a person prays for an unborn cub, they put their hands upon the mother's stomach, as they offered up their prayers,” he said.

"She was at the right age for it and probably too scared to note the change within herself," Shadd added, thinking on it. “She saved Rand and probably Rein, herself."

After a wonderful lunch, Ryes jumped out of her chair in the control room and sat down far back from the console, across the room to the wall. The one time she went Time Walking from the chair when it was before the console, she appeared within the body of one of the computer operators, Neil Jarrett. It was a very strange experience, which left her with chills for days. Since that time, she made sure she was across the room when she traveled back into time. It was very rare anyone would be against this wall.

She closed her eyes, relaxed and began to cast herself back into time, again. She was now making these short trips about three or four times a week. As she learned more, she found there was still so much more to learn. And she gained a better understanding as she followed Neil’s lessons for her on the computer. She found herself in the room alone, which was very unusual for this place. She instantly willed herself to be unseen, then stood and waited to see who was on duty. She was learning the temporal differences between the two times from the past to her present, but knew Neil didn't believe her. Still, she wanted to make sure she kept to linear time in his life here for her visits. Monty suddenly appeared and took his seat, and then she understood. He was young and a little reckless, and took short breaks; thinking the computer could handle things while he was gone, instead of getting someone to relieve him.

Chuckling, Ryes went to see if Neil was in his room, so headed down the stairs and the lower main corridor, toward the crew's quarters. He wasn't there and she decided to look elsewhere when his door opened and Brenda looked in. She didn't see anyone, so she slipped in the rest of the way, closed it and began to undress, throwing her clothes over the back of his desk chair. She slipped into his bed, turned the light to a lower setting, and lay waiting. Ryes shook her head at this. Neil told her Brenda was pregnant and "safe" to play with, since it wasn't his baby. She wondered at this. Why would she have another man impregnate her, but spend every chance she got with Neil? It didn't make sense! Suddenly, the door opened and Neil walked in, closing it behind him.

"Ah, my two favorite ladies," he declared merrily, smiling a huge smile. Ryes giggled as she shook her head in denial.

"Oh no! You're not going to start in with that native ghost girl, again!" Brenda demanded, looking disgusted.

"I was just leaving. I'll see you later," Ryes promised. Neil was the only human she allowed to actually see her. They were friends and she considered him her mentor.

"Come on, Ryes. Let Brenda see you. This is impeding my love life," he pleaded. He was smiling, but there was something in his eyes which told her he truly wanted her presence verified. She sighed. Garth had never forbid it… and wasn't here to do so, now.

"Alright," she gave in, then willed Brenda to see her too. She smiled at her as she waved her hand. "Hello, Brenda. My name's Ryes and I want you to know that I'm not a ghost. I'm Time Walking from the future. In other words, you're in my past… sort of…" She never was quite sure how to explain it to a human. They didn't have Talents and it took a lot to convince Neil, alone!

"Oh my God!" Brenda gasped out, clutching the thin sheet to herself as she sat up, surprise written upon her face. "What are you?" she asked, astounded. There was a native girl dressed in one of their loose T-shirts and sweatpants, with sandals upon her feet.

"My physical body is in my own time. I've only cast my spirit back in time, to your time, to get to know you better," she explained as Neil laughed, happy to have finally won. She denied him this for almost two months, now.

“Yes!” he declared, shaking a fist at the ceiling as he laughed.

"Are you a subject in one of our studies?" she asked, frowning. This native spoke English very well, even if she spoke it a little slow, as if considering each word she uttered, first.

"No. In my time, you humans have been gone for years. We needed a place to stay for the winter, so your computer has let us live here. We're very careful about messying?" she questioned, not sure of the word she was using, looking to Neil. He laughed as he sat down in his chair, calming down again.

"Messing," he corrected her. “You’re getting better at your English, now.” She smiled and gave him a nod.

"We're careful about messing with things, so as not to bother what you don't want touched. Even if the large metal doors are open, we keep the labs and offices locked up. We don't want the cubs to accidently wander into them and either get hurt, or damage something. When I told Garth about the bombs in storage, the only thing he wanted to know was if they could go off by themselves. He's relieved that no one in our time can get to them. We saw the sizes of the craters at Hailys and we don't need such things in our world. I forgot to thank you for showing me how to check the safeguards, to make sure they're still active," she told Neil with a smile.

"What's Hailees?" she questioned, wondering. It was a lot to swallow and her mind was in a whirl. She had a million questions to ask.

"The ruins of the city of our ancestors. Its proper name is Hailys. We know the dust down inside is still deadly, but need to recover our own technology, instead of having to rely upon yours. We've collected all the memory rods we can find, but now need to find a way to extract the information they hold. It's supposed to be done with light, but not regular sunlight," she explained, knowing this was the next project Garth had slated for her and Mitt to tackle. Why they should be stuck with this, was beyond her? She felt she had enough with trying to learn to operate the computer and take care of the Winterhaven villagers.

“Sounds like a laser reader of some sort,” he said aloud, thinking about it.

"You're from the future, but need our help from the past," Brenda stated, shaking her head at this. She laughed. "This is just so incredible, Neil!" she told him, smiling.

"I told you, but you never believed me before," he affirmed.

"How is it that I see you now, Rye?" she queried.

"Ryes. Because I willed you to see and hear me," she explained. "It looks like you two wanted to spend some time alone. I'll come back another time," she offered, smiling.

"You look like you're pregnant. Are you pregnant?" she suddenly asked, wanting to know more about her, personally.

"Yes, I am. I should have my cubs by the end of the winter. I'm expecting four, so I'll probably be too busy when they're born to Time Walk. I'm trying to get as much out of the time I have before then. There's so much to still get done here in Winterhaven!"

"Where's this Garth you were talking about? Shouldn't he be helping, too?"

"He's my husband. He and Sabin had to go return a bad man to his own chief, out among the plains tribes, and make sure they understand where we established our own boundaries. We don't need murderers and worse, as Toron is, attacking us at will. Raya's from his tribe and she told us their chief Dyan was a fair man. We'll see," she replied. "So, it leaves me in charge of things, for now. I have the watches established and we're preparing for the winter. We have plenty of food set aside and are having fun learning some of your games."

"Deck of cards and a tower cam; what more do you need?" Neil put in, chuckling. "So you're not from the plains. Where do you come from?" he asked, his eyes looked intense.

"From a village called Matlowe," she told him, smiling. "It's a fair distance to travel overland, but not by helicopter." She was suddenly unwilling to point it out on a map for him. What if he did something, which caused her not to be born? Time was complicated with many puzzling twists.

"Where is it?" he pressed.

"No. Humans were totally unknown to us, so you must not find it. I don't want you to change my past and possibly make it so I'm not born," she explained. This surprised him, as he sat back and thought upon it. Brenda laughed at this, nodding her head in agreement.

"She's got you there," she assured him, "Paradoxes."

"Okay, I'll leave your village alone. So, what do you plan on doing with Winterhaven?" he asked. She smiled at this.

"We want to build Tayna anew. We know it'll take many lifetimes to accomplish, but with the technology we're learning at Winterhaven, it's a start. And if you humans ever return, we'll be there to greet you back with joy. What we really want to find out is what happened to our world of origin, Kahmarr? Why did they abandon Tayna, when it was attacked and Hailys destroyed? Tayna was a small outer world, a game preserve, but they should've sent someone… at some time," Ryes trailed off, not understanding why no one from Kahmarr came to see what happened to Tayna?

"Maybe they were too busy fighting the same enemy who destroyed Hailys?" Neil questioned. The thought that these weren't natives surprised them both. They were merely thought of as a civilization recovering from a devastating planetary war, not that they were attacked from off-world and originating from another one, all together!

"Do you know who attacked Hailys?" Brenda asked, becoming concerned. “There’s a battle raging a few sectors away, with an enemy we don't know, nor understand why they’re doing what they’re doing to us.”

"No. They attacked without warning, coming out of the dark of the stars. There was great thunder, fire and terror, and those who would know how to find out, were killed. People fled and through time established new, smaller cities and villages. The plains people fled all technology, believing it'd be the only way to be safe from another attack. We've lost more through the years as the old surviving equipment's broken down long ago and is no longer usable, and we've forgotten how to repair things. No one's tried to recreate our technology, and the old ways of living without it aren't always the best. Simple things like waste chairs… toilets not only make life easier, but are better for our health. The elders have turned their backs; refusing to listen. So, we're trying. We're not many, but we hope. We're learning how to maintain your rovers, helicopters and other pieces of equipment. Someday, we'll learn how to rebuild our own."

"Remake your world and hope the beasts who beat you down the first time, won't find you again," Brenda commented, understanding more than she thought possible. Being able to directly communicate with the natives made a big difference! She'd have to revise her papers and rethink her studies! “It’s incredible!”

"We are the Star People and someday we'll regain the stars. If they're still out there, then we'll have to learn to deal with them," Ryes assured her. "It's almost time," she told them, seeing she was fading. "I only have so much energy to work with, now."

"Next time, then," Neil told her, smiling as he waved his hand farewell. She waved back, then pulled herself back to when she belonged.

"Now that was a lot to swallow," Brenda commented as she leaned back against the wall behind Neil's bunk. "How long have you been seeing her?" she asked, trying to recall when he started talking about his little, native ghost girl. He smiled guiltily.

"Almost three months. She spoke very little English when she started coming to me for computer lessons. I knew she said they were the Star People before, but never understood why she referred to themselves in such a way. In her own tongue it's more like `anei manis,'" he told her. "I said it in passing once to the woman native we have captive and I thought she was going to either faint, or swallow her tongue. Bethy gave me such a tongue lashing over it, you wouldn't have believed it!" He chuckled to himself about it, still. “I know she understood me!”

"Why is it she only let you see her, before?" she questioned, puzzled.

"She said it was because I was like Torr. I laugh and smile a lot and she felt comfortable with me as her mentor," He laughed at this. "She asks the craziest things, sometimes." He stood up and started to loosen his shirt, pulling off his tie.

"How often does she come visiting? I want more opportunities to talk with her,” she asked.

"About three times a week, sometimes less, sometimes more. Usually, it's in the evening. The first time she appeared, she was in the same spot I was sitting. It was the strangest sensation! Since then, she tries to pick other, more out of the way spots."

"Why the computer?" she asked, worried about this sort of beginning.

"Because it's the task Garth set her to learn. They need to be able to operate the equipment safely and you know the computer controls over eighty percent of it, here. She's accessing the tutorials and is even learning programming. Her English is almost up to our level. She's bright and quick. I'm going to love seeing where she's at, in another couple of years."

"I thought you're due up for transfer in another year?" she pressed, her eyebrows raised in question.

"I might stay right here, after all. It's like helping a kid sister. I just can't desert her," he said. Then quickly undressed and got under the sheets with Brenda. He rubbed her growing stomach, feeling the baby moving, now. "And we have a little one to raise. It'll be better for her if I'm here with the two of you, too." She sighed as she snuggled down with him, thinking. She wasn't due up for transfer for another four years.

"If you're sure you can handle all three of us," she teased, when he suddenly turned and kissed her. As she returned the kiss, his grew more passionate, leaving her practically breathless.

"I love you Brenda, and no matter what, I'm not leaving your side," he assured her. "Will you marry me?" he suddenly asked, feeling it was too important to put off any more. If what Ryes told him earlier about the emergency evacuation and subsequent desertion of the installation was true, then he wanted to make sure they had as much time together as possible. Why hadn't they returned to this this world? Were they caught up in that war? He wanted her for his wife, no matter how much time they may, or may not have left. He couldn't believe their lives would be extinguished so tragically.

"Do I get to think on this?" she teased, then saw the look in his blue eyes. Neil was dead serious. "Yes, I will marry you, Neil," she finally breathed, “After all, why not? It was about time we settled down with our little one due soon.” Neil was everything she found she wanted in a lifelong companion.

"Dr. Turner, so kind of you to come on such short notice. This will only be an informal briefing," Dr. Ethan Cruthers said as he gestured for the head internist to sit down. Ted gave him a nod of his head. There was no mistake in his mind as to why he was summoned to the office of the Director of Research; he thought he'd glimpsed Bethy in their lab observation room earlier tonight.

"It's no problem, Doctor," he assured the elderly man as he took the indicated chair. Bethany left, closing the door quietly behind her. In his hand he had printed copies of his last several reports, which Dr. Ortiz had rejected. He said they required further tests, before he'd sign off on them.

"I want you to know that as of now I have officially transferred the male native back to my own department. No more physical explorations will be performed upon his person, without my personal, written consent. Nor are we seeking any new candidates for your team’s studies at this time, either."

"Yes, sir," Ted replied, giving him a nod. "Here're the rough drafts of my reports. I thought you might want to review them, since he's been returned to your care. They detail what's been done to date, with the tentative results tabulated, so far." He knew he was damning himself and Ortiz with these papers, but felt he could no longer stand by. Tonight had been the worse. "Dr. Ortiz has yet to review, edit and sign off on this work."

"Dr. Ortiz was placed under house arrest. His access to the laboratories and personnel are now severed. I'm appointing you to act as department head, until Amitell can send out a more suitable replacement," Dr. Cruthers stated, taking the reports and glancing through the top one. This was no rough draft! It was a completed research paper ready for publication! It was as he suspected for quite some months. He looked up to see the surprise in Turner's eyes as he digested what he'd been told. Ethan smiled to himself, glad to see there were no obvious signs of protest immediately voiced.

"May I ask upon what evidence?" he quietly questioned, wondering.

"Several pieces, including computer data, video and audio scans. I've already transmitted my report in, it's been acknowledged and the go ahead given for the actions proposed. I want to inform you that Dotti will also be transferred to my department. She's excellent in computer modelling; a skill Bethany sadly lacks. I hope this shortage will not cause any problems?" he asked. Ted sighed in relief. There was hope and sanity here, after all, he thought.

"No Sir. We'll find a way to manage," he assured him with a slight nod of his head.

"Very well, you're dismissed. We'll hold a more formal review of these drafts of yours, later this week. Please pass down the information I've given you, with all due discretion, to the others in your department only at this time. The circumstances of Dr. Ortiz' removal will not be up for discussion within this facility. If there are any matters which require more immediate attention, please let Bethy know and she'll make sure they are handled as quickly, as possible," he informed him. Dr. Turner gave him a nod of his head in understanding, and then stood up.

"Thank you, sir. We won't let you down," he promised with a smile as Dr. Cruthers stood and took Ted's hand, giving him a warm handshake and smile in return.

"I know you won't," he agreed, then watched as the young medical doctor turned for the door and left quickly. He had yet to do his review of the rest of the department personnel, to determine if further reprimands needed to be issued. He hoped lopping off the head had killed this snake.

**Return**

They rode, tracking those who'd been part of Toron's raiding party, as they returned home. There were some signs of the riders trying to hide their trail, but as they neared their home territory, there were no further attempts. This was the first time they realized all Ryes had taught them about tracking, so they never lost their tracks. Once they were in Moondance Tribal territory, they removed the blindfold and left their prisoner blinking against the bright sunlight.

"I'm an important man in my tribe!" Toron warned them, shouting. He saw he was tied down to a sled they had tied behind one of their windracers. He strained against the ropes but found these colorful ones made of some strange fiber didn’t give at his flexing his arms. They didn’t stretch out, either. And they tied down his whole arms and legs, not just his ankles and wrists. It was frustrating.

"So important they're all out looking for him and just happened to miss us, out in the open, heading their way," Sabin commented loudly, as he snickered to Garth. Garth smiled, giving him a nod of his head in agreement.

"After what we saw, I'd almost rather have Korman hanging around, than him," he agreed. “I know I have my days when I'd rather tear and shred the frustrating machines the humans kindly left behind for us, but then, I have Ryes to cajole me into letting go of my frustrations and approaching the problems from another angle. I know I’ll never sink to the level of this Toron.” He missed her terribly already and they'd only been gone a few days. The lenoon soup she packed for them had been such a blessing with the chill from the rain their first day out, but then, Ryes always looked out for him. He wanted this chore done as quickly, as possible. They had cubs on the way and he vowed to himself to be there for their birth, no matter what Maren said he and Ryes saw. He and Sabin could be out hunting, after all.

"I don't know. Korman can be brutal to the women, if the mood's on him, and has killed several good men," Sabin commented, "I'd rather they both party in hell together, locked up behind the seventh gate away from all decent people." Garth chuckled at this, giving him a nod of his head in agreement, breaking free of his inner contemplations.

"Let's check the map," he suggested later, since they decided to take a lunch break and let their mounts rest in the shade of an old, gnarled tree. They had a copy of one of the human aerial reconnaissance maps of the area they were travelling. They’d overlaid their own markings, so they had a more complete picture of what lay around them. Before they left, they made sure Ryes, Torr and Mitt knew their route, so they’d keep a watch for their return. He made sure his sister didn't try to follow them in the flyer. He didn't want it to be an accepted sight. He'd rather use it as the women had, to help add fright to any who chose to oppose them. The plains tribes were still an unknown element. If they couldn't reach an agreeable understanding, they might need every minute advantage they had within reach of their claws.

"I'm hungry, too!" Toron complained.

"After we eat, then we'll feed you," Sabin reminded him patiently, as he'd done so for the last few days. If he didn't get this small reassurance, he'd keep up the yelling until either they answered him, or stuffed a rag into his mouth. He was tired of the man and hoped to find his encampment soon. Garth studied the map, checking the compass, to make sure they were still headed in the right direction. It should be either later today or maybe by tomorrow morning, by Raya's estimation of where the tribe camped this time of year. They'd be setting up for the great hunt of the large plains animals called the korom, which they used for food, and getting ready for the winter months. Menna, the harvest moon, would soon be in the right setting for their semiannual, Great Gathering, so they had to get there, before they left the area entirely for the event.

After they’d all eaten and the windracers had gotten their fill of fresh water and grass, they filled their waterskins, then stripped down Toron and bathed him, as well as themselves in the cold, swift-moving stream. Toron protested loudly, so Garth shoved him underwater for a few moments, to remind him who was truly in control. He pulled him back up, chuckling to see the panic in his eyes, as he was coughing and choking.

"This is dangerous and unhealthy!" Toron asserted, sputtering and gasping for air. He was indignant with being made to bathe. “It’s not spring, yet!”

"The stench coming off your hide's unhealthy," Garth told him. They brought out soap and scrubbed him down thoroughly, then got busy with themselves. They washed their clothes and blankets, then set everything out for the warmth of the afternoon sun to dry. Both Garth and Sabin felt much better, now that they were clean. Toron sat and glared at them, glad there weren't any breezes to give him a chill. At least his lunch was still warm. He noted that while they had brought their hunting weapons, they didn't use them, anymore. Raya, or Gleds, must've warned them about hunting upon Moondance Tribal lands, without the head elder's permission.

"Where did you get that Badge of Passage?" he finally demanded, wanting to know this, at least. “They’re not given out often, and this one’s from Dara, the Great Chief Elder of all the plains tribes, making it being handed out extremely rare!”

"If you must know, it belongs to my wife," Garth said, as he fingered the very distinctive badge he wore upon his left shoulder. "She's held in some esteem," he told him smiling, seeing it made him nervous to see him wearing it. Ryes gave it to him, telling him it was for free passage through the plains tribes' territory. It was given to her by Darman, in case she should ever decide to leave Matlowe for the wider world. The only one who could deny her leave was the head elder of all the plainsmen, Dara, and he was a close friend of Darman's. He carried letters from both Darman and Ryes. Darman's was to remind Dara and of the value he placed in the person he'd given this token to, and Ryes' letter explained as to why her husband carried the Badge in her stead.

"How could she know Dara?" he challenged. Garth and Sabin merely laughed at this, as they started packing their now, dry clothing and supplies away.

"Ryes knows much of the world. More than any of the three of us," Sabin said, giving Garth a nod of his head at this. Their challenge with her had been more than enough proof for his purposes.

"Get back on the litter," Garth ordered. Toron hesitated, knowing that if he tried to run off, they'd merely ride him down. He stepped over reluctantly, hating this more than anything else. They tied him down again, and then mounted up to continue their journey.

"I only see two of them," Sabin breathed to Garth as they set upon their windracers again.

"That's all I saw. Perhaps they'll come out and give us an escort in soon?" Garth cast his eyes upon the horizon, back from where they'd come. He knew if he called for help, Ryes and Mitt would be out very quickly in the flyer, but he refused to take that step until absolutely necessary. He kept the computer's gift of the emergency transmitter, safely in his coat pocket, only letting it charge in the sun where Toron had no chance to spy it.

"It shouldn't be too much longer, now," Sabin returned. "Let's see how far they intend to let us go." With this, he kicked Spur into motion, mischief in his eyes as he glanced back.

"Not fair!" Garth protested, as he nudged Pacer in the ribs, urging him to catch up. It wasn't fun for Toron, tied to the litter as he was, when the two of them got playful, but Garth suspected Sabin did this to get back at him for being the way he was, too. They galloped for a few minutes, and then slowed to a walk once more. The mare pulling the litter caught up to them, Toron yelling at them for their recklessness. They laughed at this, paying him no attention at all. Their two escorts, at a distance, had become four.

As they topped a gentle rise, they saw a party of swift riders coming toward them at a fast gallop. They stopped their mounts, waiting for them. None had their spears leveled in their direction, which Garth thought was a good sign. About a dozen riders broke into a circuit of their small knoll, riding around them in a circle, as two of their leaders came forward to speak with them, directly. Sabin noted they saw the Badge upon Garth's shoulder and noted their attitude was one of respect. The riders stopped, facing them.

"What do you seek in the territory of the Moondance Tribe Traveler?" the older one asked Garth.

"To speak with the elder known as Dyan," he replied. "We have messages to deliver to him from Gleds and Raya."

He didn't mention Toron's presence. He didn't need to. He saw none of the tribesmen tried to approach to cut him loose, nor even to talk with him. Curiously, Toron was quiet for a change, not even demanding his release. The other riders stopped their mounts, facing them from all sides. They held their spears pointed straight upwards, butts grounded within the carriers made for them, upon their saddles.

"Come, guest Travelers," the spokesman invited, then turned and led them forward, toward the camp. It was as reported. One bearing a Badge of Passage looked to be seeking them out with Toron as a prisoner. “This promises to be an interesting evening.”

"Ryes, you'd better get in here," Shadd's voice spoke up over the loudspeaker overhead. Ryes, who was helping to paint a mural they decided to put up in the dining hall, put down her brush with a frown upon her brow.

"On my way," she assured her, standing up, and then looked to Seena with apologies in her eyes. It was her fairly detailed sketch of Hailys they were trying to paint, after all.

"Go on. We'll figure it out. You've given us quite an insight into what our ancestors lived like, with just living here," she told her with a smile. This got chuckles from the others as she smiled with an embarrassed nod, then trotted for the door.

"I think she and Garth mean to build our civilization anew, using both what the humans have left us and what they can recover from our ancestors," Minn commented.

"Yes, to make a stronger city, which would stand up to sudden attacks from the stars," Ardis added, smiling. It was what she and Sabin wanted to see, too. It was a future she wanted for her cubs. To be able to play in a field of flowers with no worries, nor concerns.

"I only hope we're up to the task," Tennan teased with a laugh. She looked lovingly down at her sleeping daughter, Tian, named for Rowan's grandmother, and hoped for her sake. It was a grand vision, after all and Maren had gotten her to share it, too.

"As I understand it, they expect this venture to take several lifetimes. They want to find out what happened to both the humans and Kahmarr, itself. So, if we can leave our cubs the knowledge of what was, and give them the dream of what can be," Sana said, first pointing to the wall they were painting, then to the one which stood ready, whitewashed and full of promise. "All they'll need will be the strength to continue with our work."

"Ahhhh, a hope of a future, instead of an existence only in the here and now," Marla sighed as she sat back upon her heels, to survey their work. It was very colorful and inspiring! "I never realized how depressing Matlowe truly was until Garth brought us here." Garvin chuckled as he stopped to give his wife a loving hug.

"You're absolutely right," he agreed, smiling merrily.

"I can't believe how beautiful this city was," Gleds commented, still enraptured by the metropolis, as it unfolded before him with all its shapes and colors. He wished he could've seen it, as was when it was alive and full of people!

"Neither can I," Raya agreed with him. She saw it, as Ryes had seen it, from her trips Time Walking into the past. It was even more spectacular than their painting suggested. She sighed wistfully, “I wish I could Time Walk, too.”

"Show it to me!" Gleds requested, suddenly recalling what Raya could do, now. "Please?" This got surprise out of the others as they realized it, too.

"I could try," she offered, "but I'm afraid I could accidently hurt you. I'm still learning how to use my Mind Voice Talent," she warned, still unsure. Ryes told her it was an ancient Talent and that's what it was so named upon Kahmarr.

"You didn't hurt any of us last week," Seena scolded. "Please show us what Ryes has seen?" she begged, wanting this very much. Raya gave in with a small smile. She got a nod from Kovin, who granted her his support in this venture.

“You won’t ever hurt us with your Talent,” he assured her. He realized he'd fallen in love with his wife. “And it’s good practice.”

"Alright, form a circle and join hands. I don't know how well this will work, with so many," she advised, feeling nervous. Then she remembered the time Ryes took them on that adventure within where they explored the lives of the nearby animals and even met Tayna, herself. And Ryes is new to her Talents, too. It lent her courage. She could DO this!

She sat down in the middle and calmed herself, as well as she could. She closed her eyes and centered herself, as Ryes, Maren and Sabin all showed her how to do, then extended her hands to opposite sides of the circle. The excited people also closed their eyes, as Kovin and Ardis reached for Raya's hands. She reached out to their eager minds, taking control when their small eddies of thought tried to distract her, unintentionally. Then, she began to unfold the memories she got from Ryes from her three views of Hailys. The views from her first, accidental trip into the past, then her second one, and finally the one of its destruction, which Tyra gave to her in a horrible nightmare. Each memory they went over again, to explore their ancient city and marvel at it anew; taking it as slow as possible.

"What's the problem?" Ryes asked, as she entered the control room. Shadd indicated the large monitor, which displayed a view from the tower cam. She already had it zoomed in and Ryes immediately recognized it. "It's Kort's van!" she declared happily. “It’s a little early for them to be headed back for Matlowe, but then, they’re all alone. Caravaners never traveled alone - unless there’s a good reason for it!” She watched it for a few more moments, thinking upon the matter.

"It just appeared a few minutes before I called for you. I haven't seen any others and it's just barely within our range," Shadd told her, noting her look of concentration.

"They could be in trouble of some kind. Where's Maren and Mitt?" she asked, looking to meet Shadd's eyes.

"Maren's at one of the workstations in the classroom, taking an English lesson. He's been working so hard, you'd think he was being driven," she commented with a smile. Ryes returned the smile, knowing what did drive him. It was knowing his blonde, human woman actually existed somewhere. "Mitt's out doing maintenance on the flyer. She has Mason with her and I think they're doing a little more than just maintenance," she told her, pointing to one of the smaller screens. Ryes smiled, shaking her head.

"Well, Garth's not going to be happy with her hooking up with Mason. He doesn't trust him for some reason. Do you think you could ask Torr about it? Maybe there's something the men haven't told us about him, yet?" Ryes requested. She still knew so little about the villagers, still in so many ways. Shadd laughed lightly at this, snickering.

"Mason's one of Korman's sons, a half-brother to Maren, and he's very opportunistic with the women. Anyone who'll give him the slightest chance. It may be that Garth's more worried about him trying to go Korman's way, than trying to fit in with the rest of us. The best we can do is reinforce Mitt's decision, if she ever decides she'd rather someone else, later," Shadd explained. "Don't worry; we'll all keep an eye on things, there. Mitt was too young back in Matlowe and Garth kept a watch out for her, so he probably knew better than to go near her, before."

"Some of life's lessons are too hard, at times. I'll have a little talk with Mitt later, too." Ryes sighed out. "Maren and I'll go out in a shuttle and check this out. You keep an eye on things and we'll report back if there's anything to be worried about."

"Won't the shuttle scare them?" she wondered aloud.

"Of course it will!" Ryes agreed, smiling mischievously. "But, Garth would give me such a spanking, if I even thought of using Honey," she related, giving her a wink. "He's afraid my riding a windracer might hurt the cubs." She put her hand on the side of her stomach, feeling the squirming within. "It feels like they're playing a game of field ball!"

"Well, you have half a team in there," Shadd agreed with a laugh. "You make me glad to only be having one," she admitted.

"And the work doesn't truly begin until they're born," she agreed with a laugh. "Now, I wish I were only having one! I'll be back, soon," she assured her, as she turned for the door.

"All right," she replied, then turned back to the console. She was trying to read a very interesting story about a human boy named Tom Sawyer, which had been translated to Dolbith by the computer. She was picking up the language as she compared the Dolbith page with the English one, side-by-side. It was odd that they viewed their own people so different for small things like a different coloring of their skin. It didn’t matter among starmen on the color of their skin! She was still puzzling it all out while learning the language; glad Ryes had finally given it some understanding of Dolbith.

"Come on big guy," Dotti urged the native, helping him to stand up. She'd taken him to the back area where the staff showers were, to scrub him down. No one was here this time of night. She usually gave him sponge baths, but since Dr. Cruthers ordered he be returned to his department tonight, she thought she'd better get him cleaned up properly. He was usually pretty weak after a battery of tests, so she knew he'd need her help. She changed quickly into one of her old swimsuits, before trying to remove him from the trolley. She tossed her dye-stained sanitary napkin, relieved the ruse had worked!

"What is this place?" Alda questioned, seeing she was now wearing a skintight, skimpy tunic, which left little to the imagination. Did she need his services, he wondered?

"I promise to take the time to get to know your language better real soon, but for now, let's get you cleaned up for your pretty lady," she suggested. She smiled as she got him propped up against a wall of one of the stalls, then turned on the shower. She made sure it was the proper temperature, then urged him under the falling water. He smiled a genuine smile as he willing let her pull him under it. He spread his arms in thankfulness for this gift. Dotti chuckled merrily as she grabbed a bottle of soap and washcloth. He was truly enjoying this!

"Ah, to be clean once more!" he told her, delighted. He saw she was happy to see his reaction and saw her pour some sweet-smelling liquid upon a cloth. She gently washed his body all over, trying to clean away the stench, the accumulated dead skin and dried blood. She was chuckling as she worked, being careful of his freshly sealed wounds. He felt bad, being so weak and helpless that he actually needed her help with this!

"You sound so happy. I should've done this long before now!" she said, as she worked quickly, making sure she was doing the job thoroughly and well. She knew Bethy was fussy about matters like the cleanliness of her study subjects, and didn't want her best friend upset over the condition the native had been allowed to deteriorate to, while under Ortiz in his labs! She hoped she got the evidence she needed to keep him out of Ortiz's hands for good!

"Let me wash there," he asked, gesturing for the washcloth. Dotti looked up into his eyes, seeing his need to wash his own genitals and probably to check if everything still functioned, after what he'd been put through for the last several weeks. She smiled as she turned the cloth over to him, letting him finish washing his front. She took up another cloth, soaped it up and started on his back. She noted he was sighing in pure pleasure. She didn't know if it was from the shower, itself, or being able to take some care of himself once more.

"Now big guy, I'm going to need to wash your hair," she told him, as he was rinsing himself off. She took his cloth and her own, throwing them onto the trolley. She grabbed her bottle of shampoo and opened it up. Suddenly, he took her into his arms and hugged her tightly against his body. Her heart was hammering as she froze in fright. But, he started talking to her in a low voice as he stroked her wet hair. She realized he was trying to comfort her, in spite of his obvious erection. She suddenly threw an arm around his waist and they stood under the warm, flowing water for several long minutes as she started crying again. His gentle voice soothing her inner wounds. In this moment, she didn't care if he wasn't human. He was a gentle man, who seemed to care. It was far better than she received from any of the men here… ever…

"I'm okay, now," Dotti assured him, as she finally looked up to his face, which seemed so very human to her eyes. She wiped at the tears in her eyes as he suddenly bent to kiss her. Her heart was hammering once more as she found herself returning the kiss. It was almost right.

"No, I can't," she told him, as she finally pulled away. "We have someone who's missed you and needs you far more than I do," she told him. Alda saw her regret, but there looked like some kind of promise in her eyes. So, he released her and let her finish her ministrations.

"Perhaps I'm not your type," he teased her, smiling. She returned the smile as she urged him to help her rinse out his hair. He realized he was starting to feel free and alive once more, as she washed it a second time to be sure. Then rinsed it again.

"I wish you were him," she suddenly sighed out as she turned off the shower and activated the blowers to dry them off. "There's this sweet, golden-brown eyed, native man, who's been with me in my dreams for months, now. He holds me in his arms and talks to me in a warm, rich voice and I think I'm in love with him. You're just not the right one, but I do appreciate the comfort you gave me," she said, looking up into his golden eyes. "Now, let's get you dressed."

She handed him a pair of skivvies, then had to support him as he dressed. This impressed him and there was a definite sense of self about him, again. Next, she helped him into some sweat pants, then a T-shirt. Once he was dressed, she pulled over a wheelchair and urged him to sit down. She changed back into her own clothes, in front of him, then gathered her soaps and swimsuit. She handed her things to him and he held up her swimsuit to examine it, looking puzzled as she blushed and urged him to put it back down onto his lap.

She pushed him out; noting the hallways were empty, in relief. She made a beeline for her own room per her instructions from Dr. Cruthers, feeling great to have had a hand in freeing him from Robert Ortiz! She opened her door and pushed him inside. She helped him up onto her bed, grabbed a box of her things, and placed it onto the seat of the wheelchair in his place. Dotti rolled it back out into the corridor, and rushed back in to assure the puzzled look in his eyes.

"I'll be right back with someone you've missed a whole lot," she assured him, as she brushed his hair with her own brush, trying to make it look neat. She held her hands up in front of him as he tried to grab for her again, ready to kiss her, but she managed to pull away. Dotti laughed, feeling wonderful. This was going to be some surprise! She went back out into the hall, secured her door, put the wheelchair in a nearby closet, picked up her box of things, and rushed to Bethy's quarters. She hit the call button and waited. Her friend opened the door, still dressed and looking wide awake.

"Well?" Dotti asked, "Did Dr. Cruthers get him transferred?"

"Yes, and you're now working in our department, too," she told her, not wanting to discuss such things out in the public hallways. "Come on in," she invited, seeing the box in her hands.

"You're getting a roommate for a few days," she teased, grinning. “I’m transferred too? It’s beyond a miracle! But we need to fetch your lady friend. I know a certain gentleman who can't wait to see her." Bethy looked surprised at this, and then nodded her head in agreement.

“The native woman just started her mating cycle this morning. Perfect! Get your stuff in here and come on," she ordered, as Dotti moved to do just that. They hurried down to her lab section and to the small room behind her desk. She keyed it open and saw they awoke the native with their light and noise.

"Come," she urged in her own language. She hoped this was what she was saying. They still had so much ground to cover, yet! The woman looked puzzled, but got up and came to the door and the two waiting women. She suddenly caught Alda's scent from the blonde woman's clothing. She grabbed her white coat collar and breathed it in, in longing.

"Alda," Ptan sighed, missing him so very much!

"Their sense of smell is far beyond ours and I think she knows what our surprise is all about. I believe Alda is his name," Bethany told Dotti, chuckling as she noted the longing and smile upon Pattan's face. "Let's go." They led her out into the corridor and down several others, until they came to Dotti's own. Dotti keyed in her lock code and the door opened. He was sitting upon the bed waiting, looking around the plain room, curiously. His eyes flew to the door as it opened and he saw his beloved mate. As she ran to him, he jumped to his feet and wrapped his arms about her, as if he never intended to let her go, again. Dotti sighed happily, to see them so joyous to be together.

"Now that makes me feel good," she told her friend.

"Are you sure the drugs are cleaned out?" Bethy asked, wanting to make sure any children he fathered would have a good chance of being as healthy as possible, circumstances being the way they were.

"I ran the tests right before that last battery of tests tonight. His blood was clean, sperm count was up and they looked very healthy. So, the only thing affecting them will be whatever they put into him tonight. And when I was showering him, he was making sure everything was working, so I think the chances are good," she assured her as they watched them from the door. Bethy sighed, relieved. If nothing else, she knew Dotti was excellent in patient care.

"Great. You keep an eye on them, while I go make a few quick entries and get the things we'll need," Bethany ordered, giving her a smile in assurance. "Until we get the remote cameras installed and recording, you're just going to have to play Peeping Tom." Dotti chuckled at this, nodding her head.

"The things we do in the name of research," she replied, smiling. "I can manage them," she assured her.

She and Alda had their friendship well established, as she'd been the one to care for him practically since they were captured. She trusted him and hoped he'd intervene if the woman tried anything. But, as a backup, she always carried her stunner ready in her pocket whenever she handled him. Bethy gave her smile as she left. Dotti sighed as she leaned against the doorframe. They were passionately kissing and talking in low voices. Alda turned around and saw her standing in the door, a puzzled look upon his face.

"Sorry Alda, I have to maintain our observations and guard duty," she explained, trying to appear as if she had no choice. He gave her a nod and sat upon her bed, still looking spent, pulling the woman down next to him. Dotti cast her eyes out into the corridor, seeing no one else was out and about at this early morning hour, in relief. When she looked back she saw they were talking to each other as he held her in his arms. They were soon kissing again. She smiled. They looked so sweet, young and in love.

"What's going on here?" A too-familiar voice demanded from behind her. Dotti turned around quickly to see Ortiz approaching her door. She went to hit the touch-plate to seal them inside away from him, but he pounced and brutally grabbed her wrist, pulling her hand away from the lock. "Suddenly, I'm sealed out of my own office," he growled with menace. "And I can well bet you're behind all this! I'll get things straightened out, and then make sure you understand what happens to anyone who tries to get in my way." He shoved her back, and looked into her quarters. She quickly blocked him with her own body, gripping the doorframe, her anger finally rising.

"He's no longer yours! Dr. Cruthers transferred him back to his department to complete his studies," she warned him. "And along with him, he transferred me, as he's familiar with me and I can handle him." She knew Bethany wouldn't lie about something like that to her. She only hoped it was already in the computer!

"So you can pimp him out? He's going back to his holding pen, right now!" Ortiz ordered. But she didn't move, nor tried to comply with his order. He swung back his hand to slap her for her insolence, when his arm was roughly grabbed from behind.

"Enough of that!" Dr. Cruthers ordered. Lt. Dawe held Ortiz by his arm, having pulled him away from Dotti and around to face the Director. "Lt. Dawe, place Dr. Ortiz under arrest. Considering the obvious lack of professionalism displayed, please place him in a suspension tube until he's transferred back to Earth," he ordered.

"You can't do this to me!" Robert shouted, his face now turning a bright red.

"You're endangering my staff and experiments," he told him. "And from the review of the computer files, there will be quite a few charges leveled against you. I've already received authorization from Amitell and the authorities back on Earth. Lieutenant, do your duty," he ordered, knowing Jim Dawe would have matters well in hand. Ortiz shouted his counter threats as the lieutenant took him to the suspension chambers in the main medical section.

"Now, now, my dear," Dr. Cruthers spoke up, stepping closer to examine Dorothy's face. It was turning a dark color from the earlier battering she received at Ortiz's hands. "You were very brave, but next time, go for help," he gently scolded. She lowered her eyes, nodded and blushed. "How are our two native friends doing? Did they miss each other?" he asked, peering in over her shoulder. The male was right behind Dotti, looking as if he intended to intervene, if any further violence happened. He smiled at this and chuckled. "Bethany?" he called.

"Yes, doctor?" she asked, stepping forward. She had a small, wheeled cart loaded with the equipment needed, ready.

"It looks as if he's feeling better and ready to defend his ladies," he commented. "Please help Dorothea set up our observation equipment," he requested, unwilling to step into a room the male looked to consider as his own territory. Bethany gave him a nod of her head, as Dotti shifted and smiled back to Alda, trying to reassure him it was fine, now. He saw the surprise and relief in her face and smiled in return. He extended his hand to this tall human elder, hoping his trust wouldn't be betrayed. Dr. Cruthers chuckled as he lay his hand across the native's palm, guessing what his gesture implied. There was far more warmth in his smile as he gave him a nod of his head and stepped back from the doorway.

"Far more civilized than I suspected. Perhaps they were the builders of that city, after all?" Ethan commented, as he stepped back out of the way, so the women could get the equipment set up. The male returned to sit upon the bed with his woman, relief in his eyes. He held her in his arms as they watched the humans. Once everything was set up, they took them to the bathroom, to let them perform any necessary functions, brought them each a tray of food and water to drink, then closed the door, sealing it to give them a sense of privacy. Lt. Dawe had returned and was talking to Dr. Cruthers in a low voice, by the time the women were finished.

"All ready," Bethany told them, smiling happily at Jim; glad he happened by earlier.

"Very well," Ethan replied as he stepped over and input a special code into the door lock for Dotti's quarters. "Now, only you two ladies and I can open it. Let's let them rest and we'll get some sleep, too. The real work starts tomorrow," he teased, warning them with a smile.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you," Dotti replied, relieved it was truly over! She couldn't believe they were truly free of Ortiz! Now if only she could find her dream man. He had to be SOMEWHERE on this planet!

**Travelers**

They rode into the camp. It was in a large clearing and was composed of a few simply-built, temporary wood and sod structures, which were surrounded by a small sea of tents and animal pens. This was one of their main campsites, and according to Raya, was sheltered from the worse of the fall winds and rain storms by the high cliffs around them. The only permanent structures they had were at their winter camp, which was further northwest. The rest of the year they followed the herds and lived in tents. There was a plentiful supply of water here, provided by the small river which ran nearby. The river also supplied them with fish, which helped when their other supplies ran low. There were lots of trees around them, which concealed the camp, until you were upon it. The nearby cliffs gave their lookouts an advantage of sight over anyone below. Sabin observed it was a well-thought camp placement.

"My younger brother, Sook, who is son of Dania, will care for your windracers with full honor," Shins, the escort leader told Garth, as they dismounted. A teener stepped forward, taking their reins appearing proud to be given such a responsibility.

"Thank you," he replied, with a nod of his head in respect and gratitude. Then, they went to untie Toron from the litter; still they left the binder on his hands. It was a symbol of his continued rank as their prisoner. They hauled him to his feet and each noted the look of pure hatred he had in his eyes for them, even if he didn’t voice his anger anymore. After seeing what this man's mind and heart held, it didn't surprise them at all.

"We're ready, if Dyan's ready to see us," Sabin informed their escort with a smile.

"He's expecting you," Shins replied, then led them to Old Dyan's lodge. He’d seen the hatred Toron had for these travelers; giving him a chill up his back. The rest of the camp was out and gathered around them, watching quietly. Toron was casting some of the plainsmen looks of pure malice, too.

 The entrance had a small wall of sod blocking the doorway about two paces inside, to keep out any gusts of wind and rain. A heavy, painted hide covered the actual opening, at an angle to it. Shins held the hide aside to let them in. There was a wide sheltered space within with a vent built for the fire pit in the middle. On one side was a scattered gathering of at least two dozen tribesmen and women. On the other side were ten elders with one seeming more prominent than the others, sitting in the center. Their seating was built up a little higher than everyone else, so they could see the room clearly. A line of younger and older warriors sat before the elders, as if ready at their call. There were mats upon the dirt floor and the elders sat upon well-cured hides. Food was being passed around, as well as mugs of simple mead. None of the elders were women, Garth and Sabin noted. The firepit had a low-level fire that provided light for the building as well as candles around the room to supplement it. Wax dripped down the holders freely, creating frozen waterfalls of wax that were very colorful.

"Welcome Travelers, welcome," an elder greeted them, as they entered the lodge and paused to let their eyes adjust to the lower light. "Please take a seat and warm yourselves by the fire." They did as they were bid, making Toron sit upon the mat-covered floor beside them. He glared hate at them, but didn’t speak one word. His glare and their indifference was noted by all in the room.

"We thank you for your welcome," Garth returned, a smile upon his lips. After seeing what these old men let Toron get away with for years, he didn't trust any of them very much. Young women brought them leather mugs of sour mead and a clay plate with a roasted bird upon it. The bird looked burned in places and the mead was a far cry from what they used to make, themselves, when they lived back in Matlowe! Not sure if he was being deliberately insulted, he deiced to opt for better manners in return. Sabin watched for his reaction.

"Good," Garth lied, lifting up the mug in indication. He knew he needed their goodwill and cooperation.

"I'm told you have something for me?" Dyan asked, seeing his visitors looked uncomfortable in his lodge. He truly didn’t want them here, but had little choice now.

"Yes, we have messages from Gleds and Raya," Garth told him, as he removed them from his belt pouch and passed them to Sabin who stood up, extending them to their escort. The man gave him a nod of his head in approval of this sign of respect, then took them and passed them to Dyan's hand. Sabin sat back down. The elder nodded and smiled as he unrolled each message and read them carefully by his candlelight. Everyone in the lodge was quiet as he slowly read the messages.

"So, they've each chosen to live with your people. What makes you so better?" he demanded as he passed the parchments to another tribal elder, who sat upon his right. There was anger flashing in his eyes at this, Garth noted. He stood, signaling Sabin to remain sitting.

"We have a vision of what the future can be and they’ve each chosen to become a part of it and help to build a better world. In Raya's case, we encountered her upon the road on the way to our new home, which we now call Winterhaven. She was starving, so we took her in as a part of our group and she stayed. Later she mated to one of our bachelors and even when she knew where the Moondance Tribe's lands lay and could easily return home, she chose to stay with us," he told him, meeting his eyes calmly. "She felt she was given more choices to live her life as she willed in Winterhaven. As for Gleds…" he paused with a sigh, but the elder signaled for him to continue.

"We were out with a small hunting party, well within our own lands, when eight riders from the Moondance Tribe rode down upon us with their spears leveled against us. We stood our ground, showing them no fear, so they stopped to talk with us, first. Toron became incensed with the idea that Raya would reject his claim of ownership, and charged us with his spear leveled at us. Our women used two of our machines to drive away most of the raiders. Toron was thrown from his windracer, but Gleds had cast his spear at the machine which held my own wife. I shot him with an arrow, bringing him down. Our Healer took care of Gleds, returning him to health. When we took them back to Winterhaven to question them about the attack, Gleds related that he knew they were well outside the Moondance hunting markers, and had only thrown his spear at the machine, not realizing my wife was within it, until too late. She was unharmed and he apologized to her. He later decided he wanted to stay with us. Like Raya, he was free to leave if he wished to return home. Since neither wanted to do so, I asked them to write what was in their hearts to their own people, and that we'd deliver the messages to you."

At the end of his story, voices all over the lodge rose as everyone was discussing it among themselves. Even the elders were conferring with each other, appearing greatly agitated. They finally came to a decision and returned to their own places. One of the elders finally called for order in the rest of the lodge and plainsmen then subsided. Toron just appeared sullen and defiant.

"How do you know where the Moondance markers lie?" one of the other elders demanded, having read the two notes, already.

"Raya showed us and later, Gleds verified them," Garth explained. "We wanted to know, so as to not encroach upon your tribal lands, but we also have come here to make it clear that we won't tolerate encroachment upon our hunting lands, either. If there's extreme need, you may approach us for permission to hunt upon our lands and then we can discuss it. We're not cold-hearted and can well understand with the hunts being so poor these last two years."

"Where do you originally come from?" Dyan asked, thinking upon what this young hunter was asking of him. He stood straight and tall with a strong bearing of command for one so young. It caught at him as he wished his own sons carried themselves this way.

"Matlowe Village," he replied, steadily holding his eyes.

"You're a far way out of Matlowe," he commented. "And what of this one?" he demanded, indicating Toron as if seeing him for the first time in their company.

"He meant to murder us all, if he could. We brought him back to you, to do with as you see fit. If he's ever seen in our territory again, his life will be forfeit. It was clear, if nothing else, that he was freely leading his hunting party well outside of the Moondance Tribal markers to take whatever he could. He has a dark, evil heart."

“I’ll take him back. Release him,” Dyan said, looking unhappy, but gave Garth a nod of his head, as he accepted responsibility for this burden. Sabin had out the cutter tool and cut the binding cord from his wrists, freeing Toron at last. He cast them a wicked grin as he rubbed his arms to return the circulation.

"Now you'll get to see how we do things here in my tribe," he gloated as he got to his feet. He started to step over to Dyan's side when Shins stepped between them.

"Lawbreaker, you're not fit to sit near the Great Elder," he stated, then signaled for his removal from the lodge. The shock on Toron's face gave Sabin's heart a small lift. Apparently, he expected to be rewarded, not taken away for a punishment, yet to be determined. He struggled wildly and it took six men to take him captive. He yelled his curses down upon them all, until he was knocked unconscious and dragged from the lodge.

"May I know your names?" Dyan asked, as if Toron's outburst never happened.

"I am Garth and this is Sabin," he introduced them.

"You come from the place of the flashing lights?" he pressed, curious. Garth smiled and gave him a nod of his head at this.

"Yes and the computer machine refuses to turn them off. So, we live with the lights, whether or not we wish to," he agreed.

"What is that?" an elder asked appearing puzzled, not knowing the words used.

"A machine which controls other machines," he explained. “They interact with us as well as with each other. It’s something like the great machines of old, before the thunder and destruction.” This seemed to upset all the tribesmen again and they needed to be called to order, once more.

"How do you defend yourselves, if you don't carry any spears?" one of the other elders cut into the quiet, appearing to wonder about their strange ways. “For you to brave men mounted with spears.”

"We used our hunting bows," Sabin told him, smiling. “They work well and are a lot lighter to carry around, but can be just as deadly.”

"Show us these hunting bows," Dyan urged, his eyes bright to know all their secrets. He wondered how much he could get out of Toron about them and their winter haven?

"Not in here; outside," Garth suggested, wanting to get out of the stuffy lodge. He could now appreciate the air movement they had back in Winterhaven, much more. Sabin gave him a nod of his head in agreement at this, feeling much the same. He had enough of this closed-in place! And the tribe members in here seemed more hostile than welcoming.

"We'll go outside to see these hunting bows and how well they work," Dyan declared, standing up. His son had his coat ready, as his grandson, Shins, now stood between him and these strangers.

They all went outside and the entire tribe gathered around the area the elders designated for the demonstration. This crowd seemed far happier and looking forward to see something new and exciting for them. Garth explained the basic design of the bows, leaving many small points out. There was a lot of doubt expressed of them even being able to work, among the plains dwellers. There were cheers and jeers as Garth and Sabin loosed their first arrows at the designated target, both hitting it squarely. In this way they also demonstrated the accuracy of their arrows. Garth and Sabin were proud of their skills, but didn’t want the plainsmen to learn the new weapons too quickly.

Dyan was delighted with their display of the new weapons, so pressed them to accompany them on a hunt the following morning. He wanted to see them used on the herd animals, to see if they worked well there, too. He assured Garth that once they brought in enough meat for the winter, he'd sit down with them and together they'd work out a peace treaty. The Winterhaveners weren’t too happy with the delay, but couldn’t protest it at this time.

Then, they were shown to a small empty lodge, for the night. It had sleeping furs and good hides upon the mat-covered floor to sit upon. There was an attached pen and their own windracers were already set up there in apparent comfort with plenty of food and water. Shins had admired the brand they sported on their hindquarters, which seemed to delight to two men, too. But finally they were left with food and drink for the evening to enjoy in peace.

There was no chance for a mix-up with their windracers bearing a "brand" Gleds insisted they burn into the hide of all of their animals, as a mark of ownership. It was a symbol of a bird made of fire rising into the air out of a great fire, which Ryes found in one of the computer files. They decided it was perfect for their use, since such a bird didn't exist upon Tayna and it symbolized a new life out of the ashes of the old. So, the Phoenix became the symbol of the people of Winterhaven.

"I wonder if this might've either been Gleds’, or Raya's?" Sabin conjectured as they cozied down for the night, having already brought in their things. It was almost a homey feeling.

"I wouldn't doubt it," Garth agreed. "I think I'll call and let everyone back home know what's happening," he decided, taking out the transmitter.

"That's a good idea," Sabin concurred, "Just as long as I get to speak with Ardis."

"Of course," Garth chuckled, understanding him too well. He longed for Ryes' voice, himself. He activated the non-emergency contact switch.

"Maren?" Ryes asked, as she stepped into the classroom. There were smaller computers in here, mounted to the desks. There were other desks to the one side, which didn't have any computers, so they used these to give the cubs their lessons. She went back in time and saw the humans writing upon the white panels, mounted upon the walls, with pens of light, but had yet to take the time to figure those out. Maybe when the snows hit and she'd have too much time? It wasn’t important for the time being.

"Here," he replied in English, raising his hand so she could spot him behind his monitor panel. "What's up?" he asked, grinning.

"There's a lone caravaner’s van moving down the road west of us, toward Matlowe. It's too early, so I suspect there may be trouble of some kind. Want to drive me out there to check it out? I figure the shuttle might not frighten them as much as the flyer," she explained, also in English.

"Okay, now say that in Dolbith. I don't think I got any of it," he admitted with a laugh. She now spouted the human tongue, as if she spoke it all her life! She came closer laughing, then did as he requested, repeating herself in their own language.

"What kind of trouble?" he questioned, concerned.

"It could be anything from a family disagreement, to a punishment doled out by Darman, to a death in the family, or even some kind of sickness. It could even be that they did so well with this year's trading that they decided to come in early, because they didn't need to work the last few towns and villages, before the winter. Although, that'd be extremely rare," she assured him. "I just feel better knowing for sure, since neither I, nor Rowan, will be in Matlowe to help if it's real trouble."

"And heaven would only know what mood my mother would be in, if they needed her help with anything," he agreed. He returned his attention to the console and exited his program, shutting it down properly, as was now automatic for him. The human machines had to be handled in such precise ways! "Give me a few minutes to change into something warmer," he suggested, then noted Ryes was only wearing her thin T-shirt, shorts and sandals. "Looks like you need to change, too," he scolded. She smiled and gave him a nod.

"Meet you outside. Let's take good old number seven. We don't use it as often as the other two," she decided. He gave her a nod in agreement as they headed for their separate quarters.

"Mitt?" Ryes queried, stepping into the open, flyer hangar. There was no obvious sign of her, but she wanted to let her know what was happening. Suddenly a window opened in the back of one of the flyers and her head poked out. Her hair was disheveled and she didn't look as if she were wearing a tunic, nor T-shirt.

"Yes?" she asked, and then caught the sly smile Ryes threw her way. "I was just checking a few things out," she explained.

"Maren and I are going out in one of the shuttles. You might want to leave your radio on, in case we need any aerial backup. There's a lone caravan wagon heading toward Matlowe and we want to check it out," she explained. Mitt's eyes widened, as she suddenly became more businesslike about the situation.

"I will," she promised. "And, if there's a chance tonight, could we have a little talk, later?" she requested, her eyes full of conflicting emotions. Ryes stepped closer, the smile melting from her face.

"That's never a problem, Mitt. You should know that by now. We can talk as soon as I get back, if you want. If things aren't totally out of hand," she teased, the smile returning. Mitt gave her a nod of her head.

"Thanks, Sis," she breathed, then ducked back inside her flyer. Ryes smiled to herself as she turned for the shuttle garage entrance, which she saw was just opening. Maren was inside at the controls for the door. He signaled to Ryes and she went over to the passenger door of number seven, opened it and settled herself within, securing her seat straps. Maren jumped in and did his quick check, then buckled in, too. He activated the machine, bringing up the reception of the main screen from the computer control room, so he knew what Shadd was looking at.

"How should we approach them?" he asked, wanting her opinion, since she'd been around the caravaners since she was a cub. She smiled as she considered it.

"Go ahead with full speed, until we're close. It's fairly open land, so there's no chance of hiding ourselves. When we get close, slow to whatever speed their windracers are doing and I'll open the window and try to assure them it's only me."

"Then we'll just cross our fingers that it isn't something we can't handle," he returned, as he pulled up the ramp and away from their tower building. She sighed, giving a nod in response.

"I forgot to ask, why you picked that room you're using?" Ryes questioned, recalling she meant to ask him about it before. It was away from the rest of the ones they used and she was curious. After years of her living as an outcast, it hurt her to see her cousin distancing himself from them.

"Actually, it's HER ROOM," he admitted with a wry smile. "Her scent still lingers very faintly and even if I've never met her before, I'd know it anywhere. I just feel closer to her, when I go to sleep at night," he explained. She smiled warmly at this. He knew her scent only from dreams? It was amazing!

"I think I'm starting to agree with the others. You'll see her someday, and I hope she's worth it all. The humans seem a strange people at times, and I'd rather not see them treat you callously, or hurt you," she admitted her own fears for him.

"I'm old enough and tough enough to handle it," he told her, appearing touched. "Alright, not as tough as you, Sabin and Garth, but tough enough," he teased. She smiled and gave her head a small shake at this.

"I'm not as tough as Garth and Sabin," she admitted with a small laugh.

"From what I heard from them, they think it's the other way around. The three of you never told us what you did to them to get them to drop that challenge - cold. That was a feat in itself!" He looked over to see her blushing at this.

"How about, after Mitt and I have our little talk later today, I'll show you what I did. It's hard to explain, otherwise," she suggested.

"I thought you were planning on Time Walking, today," he returned. "I'd rather go with you into the past, than show me what you did that day. If you don't mind some company?" he requested.

"So you can see your lady fair?" she teased, chuckling. He was smitten, for sure! He blushed at this, and gave her a nod of his head.

"Sure, why not? I miss her terribly. I wonder sometimes, if maybe in another life we were of the same people and true-mates? It's like she a part of me and I won't be whole again, until we're together." He finally voiced aloud what he thought he found in his heart. Ryes felt her heart constrict in panic for him. It wasn't beyond probability of actually happening, but it had to be so extremely rare! Did he actually risk his soul, believing such a thing, she wondered?

"We'll seek her out. I know about something which happened to her, which you should be aware of, anyway," she told him. "It's not that I kept it from you to hurt you, but to keep you from hurting over something where you have no power to intervene." She knew she was making this harder for him by not outright saying what it was…

"What?" he demanded, suddenly worried about everything again.

"It's better if I just show you," she pressed. "I think they see us," she commented, seeing the van's windracers picking up their pace. "It'll be all right, Maren. Remember Alda said they'd be rescued. I think I know how," she assured him, clasping his shoulder. He relaxed somewhat, after he recalled what Alda told them, too.

"Better get your window down and be ready," he advised, “It might be better to catch up to them first, then slow down to match their pace, so they'd know they’re outmatched from the start and not run their animals to death.” Ryes quickly lowered her window and stuck her head and shoulders out, so she'd be recognized quickly, she hoped.

"KORT!" she shouted as they drew up beside the wagon. "KORT!" she repeated. He finally looked over and saw her wave to him from inside this strange, metal monster. "Slow down. We just want to know what's wrong," she shouted. He began to rein back, slowing their wild dash down the treacherous road, still surprised it was her riding in the thing.

"What in the seven hells are you doing in such a machine?" he returned, worried as he got his team slowed to their normal walk.

"Rowan and I are living in a place the humans built. This is one of the machines they left behind. My cousin, Maren, is driving it for me today, so I could let you know it was only me. What's wrong Kort? You're never in Matlowe this early!"

"Nils is sick with a fever. We fear for his life. We were coming ahead to see your Aunt Tanns, to see if she could do anything for him," he told her, pulling his team to a full stop. Maren braked the vehicle, set it to standby, then jumped out his door.

"Let me see him," he urged, coming to stand next to Ryes, who jumped out her door, too. The van's door popped open and Nahees was there, her stricken, young son in her arms.

"Oh, Ryes," she sighed out, happy to see her out in the middle of nowhere. "If you have some twisted eon root, it might help," she begged.

"Maren's my cousin and a Healer. Let him try first, Nahees," she suggested. She looked doubtful, but was distraught. She just came off her third season and was now carrying Kort's second child. She didn't want to lose his first one is such a way! She saw the truth in Ryes' eyes and knew she never lied. Tara would've never tolerated it! So, she extended her precious cub to this cousin of hers and prayed in her heart. Kort jumped down, putting his arm about her shoulders in comfort.

"Let me see you, young Nils," Maren crooned as he saw the cub distressed to be handed over to his care. It must be hard for them to trust strangers, being surrounded by them wherever they went, he thought. He sat down upon the ground, right where he was and reached within himself to find his center. He then reached outwards to the child, to do what he could for him. He was still a very long time, it seemed. The parents were anxious as they stood nearby, waiting.

"Don't move," Ryes cautioned Nils, seeing his eyes brighten and it looked as if he'd never been sick. "Wait until Maren says it's all right," she stressed, knowing if his eyes were still closed, there was still work which needed to be finished. Maren opened his eyes at last, smiling down at the cub in his arms.

"There you go," he told him, helping him up to his feet. "Now I want to check your parents, to make sure they're all right," he stated, standing up and brushing his jeans off.

"NILS!" Nahees shouted, happy to see her son as healthy as he if he'd never had the fever at all. Kort gave Maren a nod as he stepped closer, extending his hand palm up, claws retracted.

"If ever you need anything," he vowed, meeting his eyes. Maren smiled at this, crossing his palm with his own.

"First, I want to check the two of you, to make sure you're all right, too," he told him. "Then we should clean out your wagon, to make sure you don't carry this fever to others upon your travels," he suggested, feeling this was too important a matter. The more he learned from the humans, the more he understood the way things worked in the world. Diseases could be spread too easily through carelessness and he intended to stop this one from going further.

"Ryes!" Shadd's voice came over the shuttle's radio. "Is everything all right?" she demanded, concerned. They had stopped, but it was hard to see what was happening. Ryes smiled to the caravaners, then ran back for her open door. She reached across and grabbed the mic.

"Maren's services were required. A child had a bad fever. We're checking everyone before returning. Tell Mitt to go ahead and stand down," she reported.

"Okay," she replied. Ryes chuckled, as she hung the mic back up on the dashboard.

"What's so funny?" Maren asked, hearing her chuckle.

"It's just that we've all picked up some of the human words, like `okay.' I wonder what they'd think of that?" she speculated, as she turned back to the others, seeing Nahees' younger sister, Nalin, and older daughter, Aravan, looking out at them from inside. "Is there anything you want me to do while you're busy here?" she asked, wanting to help, too.

"Use your Talents to see if you can see anything inside, or around the van, which might be the cause of this fever, or still hold its root? Your own Healing Talent should find it and be able to kill it," he instructed, hoping she could do it. This time Maren settled upon a nearby rock, then motioned for Nahees to come closer. She was obviously just pregnant and he wanted to check on both her and her cubs.

"If you insist, cousin of Ryes," she told him, as she stepped over to him.

“Maren,” he replied with a smile and nod. He then closed his eyes, as she offered up her hands. He lightly grasped them, as he reached out to her from within.

"Tara's little Wild Child has finally grown up," Kort chuckled. "When are your cubs due?" he asked. She blushed darkly at this, lowering her eyes shyly, as the others gathered around them now. They knew her as a part of their larger family and were comfortable being near her.

"We think by the end of the winter. So, several months off still. I just started feeling them move not too long ago and now they keep me up half the night. I'm going to have my hands full when they're born," she admitted.

"Where's the father?" he asked, then suddenly recalled Korman and his menace. She laughed at this and shaking her head, as if guessing his thoughts.

"His name’s Garth and he's out trying to make a treaty with the plains tribes. We had one of their hunting parties try to attack one of our own. Luckily, we women keep a good look-out and chased most of them away with our shuttle here and our flyer. We hope to get things settled with them before winter. It'd be nice to be able to plant our spring crops without having to constantly chase them away," she explained.

"You're family," Kort told her. "If your husband can't get them to listen to reason, Darman will enforce the peace." He looked her in the eyes, meaning it. She suddenly understood why few ever attacked the Caravans. If they did, they were shunned until they had made proper reparations to the parties involved. The caravaners wielded their own power, after a fashion. She did not doubt him.

"We'll see where things go," she told him, glad they had other options available. "But, for the moment, I'd better see about doing what I'm supposed to," she assured him, with a warm smile. Kort gave her a nod of his head, as she moved to stand before their van.

He recalled Tara once telling Darman that it was a good thing Ryes was such a giving, gentle child, because once her Talent awoke, she was sure it'd be very powerful. As they stood and watched her stretch out with her Talent, there was a feeling of great power in the air. It tantalized the senses at a level which was hard to describe. In his heart he thanked the gods that even if the villagers had shunned this beautiful child, they always treated her as family. The power, which almost hummed in the air, was frightening and amazing!

 Once done, they all returned to Winterhaven. Rowan was there to greet the caravaners, happy to see all were now well. Nahees wrapped her arms about him for a hug, happy to see him looking better than he had in years. He returned it warmly.

 “Rowan, seeing you gives my heart joy,” she told him, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I thought Nils was going to die, but thanks to your grandson, he lives and is healthy again!” Rowan beamed at this, laughing and nodding his head, as she let him go.

 “He’s been one of our best blessings, ever,” he replied, his pride clearly seen in his face. “I have to talk to you and Kort, when you both get a little time,” he added, looking more sober again.

 “What’s wrong?” Kort asked, as Nahees appeared surprised at the seriousness in his manner.

 “There was a great fire in Riverward at the end of winter and people who were burned out of their homes have been turning up in Matlowe Village,” he began.

 “We heard of the horrors being done to the ones who survived,” Kort said, looking unhappy as he seemed to guess where Rowan’s concern might be indicating.

 “Metta, being Metta has generously allowed the ones allowed to stay to settle out near the river. I showed them the houses they were allowed to use and which ones were clearly Marked with The Seal, but since I’m now here, I can’t keep them out of your homes,” he related, appearing worried.

 “I believe our coming back early is a sign that we were needed here,” Nahees stated while Kort appeared thoughtful.

 “We taught some of them how to care for the water gathering and waste elimination equipment, and Gann and a few of the hunters are living out there and helping to keep an eye on things, but still I worry,” he admitted.

 “I want to rest my team a couple of days and give Nils some time to fully recover, first, then we’ll head back to our winter home and see that our boundaries are respected,” Kort assured them. “Thank you, for telling us right away, Rowan.”

 “They survived incredible horrors committed by both criminals in the area, as well as being ignored or abused by the city guard and the city elders. I only hope they don’t bring those horrors to Matlowe. It’s a quiet village and while most people seems set in their ways, they don’t deserve it visited upon them, too,” he replied.

 “Korman is bad enough, all by himself,” Maren commented as he and Ryes joined the others after parking the shuttle back inside. This got nods and laughter from the other Winterhaveners who came out to meet them, too.

 “Let’s get the windracers settled in the pen outside and then everyone all washed up,” Ryes suggested after several rounds of introductions and happy greetings exchanged. It was little like an early Winterfest celebration and made her a little homesick for her old home near the river. “We’re having a simple dinner tonight, but maybe we’ll have something more special for tomorrow?” she suggested. This got a chorus of approvals from the others gathered near.

 “I can help,” Jons declared, practically dancing on her toes.

 “You surely can,” Ryes agreed, leaning down to give her a light kiss atop her head. “You’re one of my best helpers.”

 “Me too, me too!” the other young children chorused gathering around Ryes, laughing merrily. She knelt down to be among them as she laughed with them, giving them all individual attention by turn. The adults were surprised by this; but some recalled she did this with the children in the Village at times. Nils joined in the fun, too. Aravan and Nalin held back, but joined the others in their laughter.

 “I think we’ve found the best home possible, here,” Rowan told Kort, as they were grinning to see Ryes and the cubs having fun.

 “I believe Ryes has made it so,” he replied. “No one seems to be mad at anyone else, nor yelling at each other, as happened all the time in Matlowe. Her love has bonded them into a bigger, happier family, I think.” Rowan appeared surprised at this, but nodded his agreement.

 “You could be right,” Ardis commented, having heard their conversation. “But we’re all a part of things here and have made it our home, too.” She smiled as she turned back for the inside, planning on where to put their guests for the next few days, or longer.