**Striding Forth**

**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 Dearest Friends without whom I would find my life lacking! You are My Family from My Heart! You know who you are, both before and after FB: Jux, Bob and Jeanine, Dan and Heather, Seth and Evon, TJ and Barry, Tammie and Bruce, Jim T, Ron B, Michael and Kelly, Timar, Kat and AJ, James C, Paul, Wendy and Tim, Yvonne and David, Cat and Mick, Chuck U, John and Beth, Lilia and Glenn, Lorell, Desi and Mike, Diane S, Gwen, Rim, Katrina, Marc, Clay, Dennis, Sean S, Mike T, Tom L, Lou and Elisa, Marna and Tom, Crystal S, Monica, Katherine, Jennifer F, Lisa S, Rose Mary, Andrea D, Charlene, Michele C, Greg, Ken L, Susan G, Caroline and Doug, Andrew M, Jewel L, Kathy R, Ken B, Mary L, Cristi P, Christi B, Susan H, Heather S, Patty, Tamara S, Stephen, Mark, Erika S, and Kiva the Spectacular.

**Special Thanks to:**

Tiffany for her assist from her warm heart.

**The Adventures of Ryes and Garth**

Tayna’s Dawn

Winterhaven

Winds of Change

Striding Forth

.**Table of Contents**

[**Messenger 7**](#_Toc531579)

[**Spring! 10**](#_Toc531580)

[**New Possibilities 23**](#_Toc531581)

[**Village Visit 36**](#_Toc531582)

[**Standing Firm 47**](#_Toc531583)

[**The Past Revisited 59**](#_Toc531584)

[**Legacy 71**](#_Toc531585)

[**Measured Revenge 82**](#_Toc531586)

[**Chances, Changes 92**](#_Toc531587)

[**Plans Afoot 103**](#_Toc531588)

[**The Huntress 117**](#_Toc531589)

[**Return to Base 128**](#_Toc531590)

[**Messages 141**](#_Toc531591)

[**Gone Fishin’ 154**](#_Toc531592)

[**On the Road 167**](#_Toc531593)

[**Arrival 179**](#_Toc531594)

[**Enlightening 191**](#_Toc531595)

[**Viewings 203**](#_Toc531596)

[**Healing Lessons 216**](#_Toc531597)

[**On the Wings of an Empath 227**](#_Toc531598)

[**New Talents 239**](#_Toc531599)

[**Consequences 252**](#_Toc531600)

[**Home 270**](#_Toc531601)

[**Two Hearts Under the Stars 281**](#_Toc531602)

**Korman’s Punishment original artwork by KM Morgan**

Prelude

**Messenger**

*"What is that?" the watch commander demanded of the lowly man, working the scanner board. He fidgeted nervously, not liking such direct attention, especially for something as insignificant as this situation.*

*"Sir, it's nothing more than a very old piece of their probing equipment, returning to their homeworld. It's moving slowly and probably just bringing them the news of our presence from one of their colony worlds," Kreln replied, sitting back upon his haunches and earnestly meeting the officer's eyes, stalk-to-stalk. "In the briefing last month, it was recommended these be ignored, for they seem to add further confusion to the entrenched enemy, as they sometimes believe that they must launch small rescue missions, which are then considered target practice for our fighters. This then adds to their demoralization," he explained, hoping he wouldn't be demoted for speaking to an officer in such a manner. It was his duty to remind a duty officer of the standing orders in various situations, but sometimes the watch officers took such things as an affront to their rank.*

*"Very well, monitor it to see that it follows the path it's supposed to. If there are any deviations, let me know. Be sure to pass the situation down, so we can keep a watch for the rescue mission." He then returned to his own post, sitting down upon the dark, carpeted square and digging in with his claws. At least this situation promised more sport later. He made his log entry, feeling very satisfied.*

"Sir, there it is," the ensign pointed out the trace upon his screen to the watch commander, as it finally appeared once more. The lieutenant stood at his side to confirm it, too.

"Humph. Okay, dispatch a patrol to check it out and bring it in, if it's something we should take note of," he ordered his lieutenant, then turned to handle more important matters.

"Yes Sir," Lieutenant Patton replied to his back, smiling to himself, relieved. At least it wasn't another wave of enemy fighters making a pass at their defenses. The Darkens, as they were generally called now, were getting more clever with their feints and it was rumored they might break through before much longer. What was left of the Earth fleet was a sorry sight. There was some hope in the newer prototypes being built now; that they could find a way to drive them away from the Sol system for all time. But who knew how long it would be until they'd be ready for combat?

"Ensign Feldman, have it brought in immediately," he ordered, knowing it’d be done with alacrity. Funny the way this thing slipped by their outer patrols… and the Darken patrols, too. He'd have to see to it, personally.

"It really is," a crewman informed him as he stood waiting for scanner confirmations. "An old TX-127 Stinger. It may be almost a hundred years old, but it does have a primitive tesseract unit."

“Did the scans detect any lifeforms, anything dangerous aboard it?” the lieutenant asked.

“No, Sir, it’s clean. Almost factory clean,” he got in response. He smiled, relieved.

"Is the data cartridge intact?" Lieutenant Patton questioned, looking down at the display, to see it for himself.

"Yes Sir. And from what I can determine from the date stamps, this was only launched three months ago. There's no coordinate information, just locational names and identifications. Looks like someone might be wary of the Darkens, too," the scan tech commented. Patton looked down at him and gave him a nod of his head; it sure looked that way to him, too.

"Consult history files about the proper procedures for data retrieval from this unit, and have it piped directly to my queue," he ordered, then turned to leave.

"Sir?" the crewman stood up, calling out to his back. Patton turned back with a look of tolerance in his eyes.

"Yes?" he asked. The tech looked calm and accepting of his attitude.

"What do we do with the Stinger, itself, Sir?"

"Stow it. We might use it to send a reply back to the colony it came from," he decided.

"Yes Sir." The crewman gave him a salute in response. He returned the salute, and then left for his office. He wanted to see what mysteries this ancient message drone held. He hoped it wasn't merely some colonists whining about their lack of supplies, or weapons. Most of the colonies got the idea real quick that if they cut off all long distance communications and interstellar travel, they were left alone by the Darkens. There was a rumor that some of the stronger, more remote colonies were planning upon striking at the Darkens from their flank, as they sat holding Sol system in siege. He smiled to himself at this, knowing there weren't ANY strong colonies left out there. Earth and her handful of inner colonies were alone, by themselves in this war. But perhaps someone will divert their attention for a short while and grant them some relief.

"Sir, it's a report from one of those old Amitell research stations. It says that they were recently retrieved from orbit and revived by some members of the indigenous population and are the known lone survivors of The Star Quest. I verified all given information and Dr. Cruthers' identification; everything checks out."

"Amitell doesn't exist anymore. Are there any next of kin of the survivors to pass on the information to? Does it contain any information of interest for us?" Captain French asked.

"Your uncle is one of those listed; a Lieutenant Paul Everett French. He was a member of the military support group for the site, Sir," Lieutenant Patton informed him. There was shock in his eyes as he sat back in his chair at this news. "But, at this time he's now younger than you, Sir, since they were in suspension tubes for about eighty years, Earth time."

"Eighty years," he breathed. "He was my dad's youngest brother. Are there any vid shots of the survivors?" The lieutenant anticipated this and immediately handed over a chip. The Captain activated it and studied the image intently. The family resemblance was remarkable. "Copy me all the files and reports. I'll review it and kick this up to Fleet. Thank you, lieutenant, your efforts are appreciated. Dismissed," he ordered, returning the young officer's salute, before he left his office. He turned to his comp unit. He had a few calls to make back home.

*Kreln saw the exact same, ancient probe unit returning along the exact same course. He scratched his ear, puzzled. The scans reported no sign of armament, nor anything to grant it any note at all. Since he'd already been reprimanded on this shift for disturbing the watch officer on another trifling matter, he decided to tag it as a piece of space junk to be ignored by the patrols. It was better than have to explain why it was let to pass through their patrols, earlier. He didn't think he would survive another reprimand!*

**Spring!**

Early last spring, seven Matlowe villagers set out for the great ruins of Hailys because Sabin was banished for six months for killing a cub-killer; it gave the elders time to collect evidence of the man’s guilt – one way or the other. It also allowed them to escape Maren’s father, Korman, who’d been known to kill others in challenges; Garth wasn’t going to ever let him get his claws on Ryes and she didn’t want him to get his claws on Garth! During their journey they found the Temple of Doran and her evil plans, but Ryes bested her in a Talent battle. They discovered Hailys and the treasures that could be gleaned from their past. Garth beat Korman in a challenge in Hailys, when he followed them there. After leaving Hailys, they found a deserted human research facility which they named Winterhaven. Later, while Garth and Sabin were away to settle a peace treaty, Ryes called down a derelict, human, colony transport ship, the Star Quest, and she and Maren saved what few humans remained onboard in suspension tubes. Since then the two peoples, both starmen and humans, discovered they could meld; being of one heart in truth. Now they wanted to build a secure future for them all!

"The frost's finally off the ground!" Mitt declared to Garth, as they sat to breakfast in the dining hall. He smiled as he lifted his mug of the human's favorite beverage, coffee, to his lips and took a sip. He found, the last few weeks, he liked it, himself. Wynne grew some of the plants in a special section of her underground garden, for which he was especially grateful. Still, it wasn’t a plentiful supply.

"I know, but the wind’s still chilly. We were just talking with Darman last night about the plans for his people. It's going to be hard to see most of them leave, if only until late in the fall," he told her. Ryes smiled at this as she put Shaysa back into her tabletop carrier, atop the table they added in next to theirs. It formed a T-shape, but was their best way for her to enjoy some time with the rest of the community at mealtimes.

"This morning we're putting up the frames for the walls of the first apartment building. Weren't you and Axel planning a quick aerial survey? When you finish with that, you can come see where we are in the project," Ryes offered, knowing that with the arrival of spring, they were all going to be busy with the projects they planned out during the long winter months. There were lots of things in the works, and it didn't seem as if they had enough hours in the day to get it all done!

"When's Darman leaving?" Mitt demanded in return, as a frown flitted across her brow. “I forgot the departure of the caravaners was imminent!” She and Minn had finally settled down together, but her adopted son, Sernn, had formed some solid friendships with two of the caravaner cubs and he'd be lonely and probably difficult for a while, with their departure.

"In two days’ time," Darman told her, chuckling as he joined them with his breakfast tray in hand. He sat down across from Ryes. "But, the spring gather's not too far off and we'll see you there, as well as the Great Spring Gather. You could get there quickly! You and your flying machines, Mitt! There're times when I envy you," he admitted with a sigh. Rinna laughed and nodded her agreement, having gotten a few chances to fly with her, too. Mitt blushed, not quite comfortable with teasing an elder in return, much less the chief of all the caravaners!

"Well, next year you'll be the envy of all the other peoples when you roll into the towns and villages with your new vehicles," she finally dared. There was laughter and nods of agreement from the others near her.

"Which is why your survey is so important this morning," he returned. "You have to help us find the correct kind of metals in Hailys, for us to salvage for making those fine new rovers. That's why we're not leaving for two more days. I want to be assured that a large enough reservoir exists for all our purposes."

"I'll do the best I can," she promised as Minn and Sernn joined her at the table.

"What're you plotting, now?" he questioned; a warm smile in his eyes. He'd become thoroughly attached to this young woman, whom he now called his wife, in spite of their not formally mating, yet. She wasn't due for her first season until sometime toward the end of the summer - according to Maren. They couldn't wait, even if they already had an idea of what raising cubs was like with the presence of Sernn.

"Plotting? Me plotting?" she volleyed merrily in return, grinning. “You know me too well! Right now the only thing I've got planned is to finish my breakfast and git." Using Mind Voice she reached out to Minn to share her love from within directly, as he shared his in return. Then she included Sernn in their union, once again enjoying the closeness they cherished, then gently let go. “Best way to start the day,” she murmured.

"We're going to get those new foundations finished this week," Sabin told Garth, as he paused beside their table. "The computer's unhappy with having the main tower relocated, but we can't box it in with our new construction. It'll ruin our view and defensive capabilities." Garth nodded his head at this.

"Neil's already got it as settled about the project, as much as possible. That's the problem when a system like that gets as complex as it has. It wants to get its plans aired, too," he returned with a chuckle. "Weren't we just setting out from Matlowe about this time, last year?" he questioned. "We haven't even planned on any kind of spring hunt, yet. We're all too busy now to be hunters." This shocked the rest of the starmen around him as they realized he was right! When had they gone from simple villagers to planners and builders of a new city of their own? It wasn't that hunting wasn't important anymore, just that it could safely wait with what they still had stored in the freezers and in dry goods. The spring planting was going to be starting this morning, too, which had Wynne, Shadd, Brenda and Teris all excited.

"No time for hunting? When did that happen?" Sabin returned with a laugh.

"We'll have to make time in a few weeks. Our stores can hold out for a while, but it's always best to have some fresh foods available too," Ryes told him. "I'll look at the schedules and send out some possible dates. We may even get some of the humans to join us. After all, they can't be any worse than the lot of you, when I took you out with me the first time last year," she teased, smiling impishly. This got surprised laughter out of the rest of the former villagers.

"Hey we weren't THAT bad!" Garth protested, looking at her in surprise. The others voiced their agreement with him too.

"You should've heard the way she complained about all the noise the rest of you were making," Rowan put in, as he sat down next to Darman, who was enjoying their banter.

"You never told us," Mitt protested, grinning.

"I didn't know anyone well enough to just speak up. I tried my best to compensate for the racket, instead," she admitted, a merry look in her eyes. "There was a lot of improvement, by the time we found Winterhaven."

"Then maybe we ought to just equip you with recording devices and let you show us how you really go out on a hunt?" Garth challenged his wife, followed by a laugh. She looked surprised at this, then frowned, wondering.

“It'd give you a view and maybe an idea, but I haven't been on a hunt since last year!” she protested. She and Wynne planned an outing to gather some plants tomorrow. Maybe she should get back into the practice a little more, at the same time?

“It’s a great idea, even so,” Mitt added in support. “Your pupils await your wisdom,” she teased outright.

"It won't be the same," she told them, "but, I'll give it a try later this week, after our trip to Matlowe. I'm only happy you decided to let me come along for this one," she told Garth, nudging him in the ribs. He grinned, but Mitt saw a look in his eyes which said he was still very unhappy with the idea. Sabin noted it, too, but since Ardis and Katas had appeared, he gave him a nod of his head and sat down at his table, next to theirs, on the other side of the T. His two small cubs were back to back with Ryes and Garth's, in their carriers, also. Rinna, Sayer and Raby sat down on Darman's other side, grinning.

"I just wish we could come along to help with the cubs," Sayer spoke up, still hoping. Ryes smiled as she shook her head.

"My gosh, you two are around them far more than you need to be. Not that I don't appreciate it, but you should be learning new things and having some fun every now and then, too," she said. "How about if you come out with me on a hunt, after the Matlowe trip and we'll leave Garth with the cubs to mind, for a change."

"Wait a minute, I have to coordinate and run this whole place now. And you want me to baby-sit, too?" he questioned, a smile of mischief in his eyes.

"I seem to recall warning you about this, some time ago," she returned merrily, knowing he was being ornery. "And I think I'm due a sanity break more than ever, with the duties you've handed down to me too." Rinna nodded her head in accord, glad she'd never had to deal with so many little ones at one time, herself.

"That you are, my dear," Dr. Ethan Cruthers spoke up in agreement; sitting down on Rowan's other side. "Why don't the both of you take a break together, later this week?" he suggested. His jovial smile lighting up as he thought they both could truly use one.

The last few weeks had been intense with the work progressing on the repair of the shuttles, preparations for the spring planting, final agreement upon the construction schedule, the continued stripping of the Star Quest, the organization of the investigative teams for both Hailys and Matlowe, the readiness for the departure of the caravaners and the base personnel and equipment which would be accompanying them this year, and the thousand other, normal problems which occurred in an operation this large, and growing. The many young children born by now were a delightful addition to see, in Ethan’s mind. His own assistant's pregnancy had him feeling like a grandfather, for the first time in his life. He was so excited and found he could hardly wait for her son to be born!

"Good morning, Doctor," Ryes greeted him, smiling. "I think you're right. Garth and I should go out on the hunt together. Sabin, Torr and Neil can handle things around here for a day. But, we're also taking Sayer and Raby along. So, first I'll have to hunt up some baby-sitters." Rowan chuckled at this.

"Five is more than I can handle all by myself," he admitted.

"I've got to go!" Mitt declared, standing up. Minn pulled her back down, gave her a kiss and let her loose. She leaned down again and gave him a more passionate kiss, teasing him, then winked as she took her tray and headed for the belt to receive it. She was quickly out the door with a sigh. She knew she should volunteer to help with the cubs, but had too many other things to get finished this week. Maybe next time? She hurried to the pad and her waiting chopper. She saw Axel's out and ready too, but he and Kerry hadn't been to breakfast yet. She shrugged to herself, already having her flight plan set, so boarded her machine and began her preflight check. They liked to sleep in some mornings, for which she couldn't blame them.

"I'll let you handle this one," Maren told Tennan, then returned to his studies. He felt, since he was serving as the Chief Medical Officer for Winterhaven, he'd better understand anatomy more as the humans understood it. He found such knowledge actually helped him focus more, when he was applying his Healing Talent.

Tennan stood in the doorway to her brother's office for several long seconds, seeing he was thoroughly immersed in his studies. She blamed the humans for this sudden, in-depth fascination he had for their bodies and the way they worked within. He had an extremely strong Healing Talent, yet thought he should now know medicine and healing as the humans practiced it. What a waste! She finally turned and strode down the corridor to the treatment room where Teris sat awaiting mending.

"Hi Tennan, sorry to bother you today. I can't believe on our first day of planting, I had to go and drop that heavy drum and tear up my leg and foot," he explained, realizing he was nervous and mindlessly chattering like a bird.

Ted had just left the room, telling him Maren said she'd be taking care of him today. It had to be Tennan, of all people. He almost preferred the humans! Medical care was now divided into three levels of treatment. Small matters, like scratches and stomach aches were handled by the human staff. In between things were taken care of by Tennan. And traumas, or deeper concerns, were seen by Maren, who was assisted by his humans. The system worked well, while affording the humans plenty of time and exposure to the starmen, so they could complete their studies of their physiology.

"Sorry to keep you waiting so long," she apologized. "Let me wash my hands, then get a look at that leg of yours." His shoes were off, pants leg cut up to his knee, and the wound areas cleaned with his leg resting atop a sterile pad, awaiting treatment. She stepped over to the sink, still feeling silly about this strict requirement Maren put upon her now. Other than the strange pictures he showed her, she still had no idea what bacteria were, or why she had to do such things to stop their spreading to others. It seemed so childish. She was a Talent, after all!

"Not a problem," he assured her, watching her closely. He knew her, as he felt no one else ever could. He tried to start conversations with her before, but found himself frozen within, in utter fright. He knew Korman held no power here, but his menacing voice still whispered in his nightmares, late into the night. Tennan quickly washed her hands, then dried them on the disposable towel, tossing it into the waste chute.

"Let's see now," she said smiling, as she stepped over and gently placed her hands upon his leg. She closed her eyes, centering herself within, extended her healing abilities, mending the deep gashes and shattered bone. Still, it took longer than she thought it should, as something tugged at the corners of her mind, demanding attention. When she finally finished, she stood for a few moments, using her Talent to take full measure of her patient's health condition, then withdrew. She opened her eyes, realizing she stood practically nose to nose with Teris, as he sat upon the treatment table. Then, it hit her… HE WAS THE ONE! His scent was unmistakable; she'd know it anywhere! She gasped, as she suddenly stood frozen to the spot in utter shock.

"I…" Teris started, not sure what to say. The look in her eyes said it all, already. She knew!

"Did he truly give you any choice in the matter, at all?" she asked in a low voice, her eyes glued to his as her heart was hammering in her chest.

"No, he didn't. I guessed it was you, but he told me he'd rip my guts out and let me die slowly if I ever breathed a word about it to anyone - especially you! I've wanted to tell you for such a long time," he admitted. Somehow, voicing the threat aloud seemed to melt its power and he felt free for the first time in a very long time. He smiled for her at last.

"How could I ever thank you for fathering such a beautiful daughter?" she teased in return, tears in her eyes. "I know what my father's like and could well understand why you never spoke up before." Suddenly, she threw her arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder. He put an arm around her, then turned upon the table so he could hold her more properly. She wept quietly as he held her, crooning to her in a soothing tone.

"Do you mind if I see Tian, sometime?" he asked, as her crying seemed to abate somewhat, after several long minutes. She pulled back, looking up to him with a happy smile and wiping at her eyes.

"Of course you can," she assured him. "She's in my office right now, taking a nap. Come on," she urged. Teris looked surprised, then jumped down off the examination table, grabbed his shoes and followed her out the room. She held onto his hand, as if she'd never let him go. He smiled to himself at this, hoping. She was his mate after all, and the only woman he wanted to be with.

They went into her office and she closed the door to afford them more privacy. She stepped over to the crib and gently pulled down the light blanket, so he could see her all he wanted. Teris leaned down, gently nuzzling his own daughter for the first time, tears coming to his eyes. The only scents he caught from her were hers and Maren's. He craved to hold her, but didn't want to wake her yet. He had so much to talk with Tennan about first.

"Maren tried to restore my body to its proper rhythm. Apparently, our mother had accelerated my development, so I came into my first season far too soon. Now I'm due for my next one in a few months. He thinks my third should be more on track, once more. So, since we already mated once - not by choice for either of us - I was wondering if you wanted to try it again freely? I'll understand if you don't want the `honor,' once more. I can only imagine that you don't hate me for what my father did to you the last time." She practically held her breath. She'd been trying to decide whom to approach, but hadn't settled upon anyone yet. Here, at least, they'd been together before, even if it was blindfolded. He was someone familiar.

"Your father terrified me the last time," he admitted, meeting her eyes. She suddenly looked crestfallen. He stepped closer to her, taking her into his arms, smiling. Tennan looked up to him, surprised. "I'd love to mate you again. You were my first and I don't see any reason to take up with anyone else," he assured her. A bright smile instantly swept across her face, as she threw her arms about him and stretched up to kiss him. Teris returned the kiss passionately. His heart was beating wildly, wanting so much more. She seemed to catch on, as she nodded toward the small couch across the room.

"Let's take a few minutes to make sure everything's working well. I wouldn't want you to have to go back to the fields, without a thorough check," she teased. He chuckled as he nodded his head in agreement, following her lead. Perhaps this "accident" had been fated today? He surely felt it was his lucky day, after all.

“This city was immense,” Mitt commented over her radio to Kovin and Phil, as they communicated with her in the new control room. It was expanded with a separate area for computer operations, the regular tower watch station, the regular communications station and now two auxiliary monitoring stations for special projects like theirs. They were looking at the readings the instrumentation on the chopper Mitt was sending them to see.

“And I think I remember ever inch we walked last year,” Kovin teased with a laugh. Mitt laughed with him while Phil appeared puzzled.

“Looks like we need a refresher. We didn’t cover near enough of it from what I see,” she volleyed in return, grinning to herself.

“Only if you’re flying us over it, Mitt,” Kovin vowed with a sigh, as laughter was lighting up his eyes. “I’m not tackling that on foot again!”

“Really? Ryes is planning a spring hunt. You’re sure you want to stay home and just keep an eye on things?” she challenged.

“A hunt?” Phil asked promptly, wanting to be sure he heard it correctly. “A real hunt? For wild animals?”

“How do we get in on it?” Kovin added, avid interest in his eyes now. “I’m sure I’m out of practice!” he added with a groan. Mitt’s merry laughter filled their headsets. Darman and Rinna came into the control room, spotted the pair and walked over, noting their mirth.

“Is it good news?” Rinna asked, hope showing in her eyes. Kovin and Phil looked up from their screens and grinned as they gave her a nod.

“There’s a plentiful supply to be had,” Phil told them, as Darman signed in relief. Both caravaners now had big smiles across their faces.

“The only problem, as we see it, is where to start the extraction. We want to grab the beams and metal plates from a place that won’t cause further collapse of the remaining structures inside,” Kovin explained, also smiling as he gave them a nod.

“Why would that be a problem?” Rinna asked, wondering. “No one’s going to be living there.”

“We want to go there to find what we can of our original technologies and who knows, maybe if Winterhaven gets big enough, we’ll have to use what’s left of Hailys for living space?” Kovin replied, chuckling at his humor. Darman’s eyes took on a speculative look, as he thought on it.

“So, did they have lesser villages ringing the larger city?” he asked, wondering. Mitt, who’d been listening to them through the headset, shifted her flight path further north.

“Tell Darman there was nothing like that to the south, nor east sides. I’m headed north to check there,” she told them. Her eyes centered on the towers, which were still distant, as curiosity lit up in her heart. Phil repeated what she said for the caravaners. Darman gestured for one of the headsets and Kovin took his off and handed the fragile-looking device to him. He quickly donned it with now-practiced ease, giving him a nod of thanks.

“Mitt, why not look near that space ship landing place Ryes was telling us about last month? Where they were Time Walking to see her aunt?” he asked, hoping. “Wouldn’t they have to stop the city’s buildings to keep the people safely away from the star travelling ships?”

“That would sound right,” she returned, “Give me a few minutes to get over that way.” She changed her course again; a little disappointed but promised herself to check out the north towers soon. Since they’d been to the space port before, the location was set into the nav system. After another half hour, she was finally over the area where Hailys did, indeed, end before the starport complex began. It surprised her after a fashion, as she grinned to herself chagrinned.

“What do you think now?” she asked over her mic, having been listening to the others discuss the coming hunt. The caravaners were explaining how a larger hunt should be conducted to the younger men. This reminder that there was something more important that needed their attention brought them all back to the screens. Mitt ran a slow sweep of the area, going further towards the starport in small increments to give the instruments time to get a good reading.

“That is amazing!” Rinna’s voice was clearly heard over her headset. Mitt grinned to herself as she wondered if the men even noted that she’d taken over. During the winter months she’d gotten to know and understand how Rinna used power subtly to get what she knew needed to be done, accomplished. She didn’t need to be loud and demanding, as her own sister usually behaved. She got things done with a quiet air of command, akin to her brother’s demeanor. People listened and obeyed. Mitt imagined she just gestured for Darman to hand over his headset and he did without thinking about it. She smiled as she imagined he was well trained through the years they’d been together.

“This looks like the place we should start,” she agreed. “We only have to figure how to get it out of there.”

“We do have Ryes and I believe she could use the practice,” Rinna wisely counseled. Mitt could hear the teasing smile, in her voice.

“Yes, we do,” she responded, her own grin widening. “And yes, she does need the practice,” she agreed. She continued her flight out to the middle of the starport area, marveling at how huge this area had been, too. And she noted the scans showed whole starship shapes below. This was something she suddenly wanted, too.

“After the hunt,” Darman finally put in, having noticed the screen and the readings before them. As he had taught Ryes many things about life when she was younger, she’d taught him many things about how to deal with the human technologies they lived among now. While he didn’t understand all the instrumentation was displaying, the metals he did note and understood.

“It’s an amazing treasure trove,” Phil commented, as he and Kovin had given their attention back to the displays too.

“Are those starships?” Kovin questioned, not believing his eyes.

“I think so,” Mitt returned. “And quite a few seem to be intact.”

“We need them,” Rinna declared suddenly, as if voicing what was already in Mitt’s heart. “Those are our true future!”

“I believe you’re right, Grandmother Rinna,” she replied, feeling the truth in her words.

“But first, let’s start with Tayna and new vans to travel the roads. Then we’ll worry about the stars and the good and evils they might contain,” Darman insisted.

“And that looks like a warehouse area, probably for the starport,” Phil supplied, surprised so much seemed intact. “We need to check them out further!”

“Come on home, Mitt. We have all we need,” Kovin advised, grinning. “We have a hunt to plan, first.” She laughed at hearing this as she turned for home.

“On the way,” she said. She took scans as long as she flew above the ruins, hoping for as much information gathered in one trip as possible. You never knew what true treasures still lurked below.

“Taroom!” Nalin called out as she was reluctant to trespass in his new home, which they were busy building in Matlowe, itself. The walls were up and the roof was up and they were working away on the inside. The most amazing part of this house was it was two-story! The first ever in Old Matlowe! It’d been the talk of the Village all winter long. People from Winterhaven had come over to help with the building, as well as repair and pour new foundations nearby. People, who’d come in from Riverward, and now some other hamlets and villages out of the east, were also helping in turns; learning the new skills in building sturdy new homes; homes they’d soon be living in, themselves. Many relished a winter free of the crippling snows and were finding ways to live their lives anew.

“Nalin,” he answered her call, appearing in the doorway, “How can I help you?” He wiped his hands off on a rag, as a tired smile graced his lips. She returned the smile, happy to have given him an excuse to take a break.

“Kort says we’re leaving tomorrow and that Axel dropped off something for you from Rowan. It’s a big box that was heavy,” she replied.

“From Rowan? Truly?” he questioned, wonder in his eyes at this news. He glanced behind him, then back to her. “Give me a moment and I’ll go back with you.” She nodded, expecting it. He turned and walked up the wide stairs to the second level. She heard him talking to someone up there, then appeared a few moments later, practically running down the stairs. She giggled at this.

“What?” he asked, grinning widely. “It’s a little like an unexpected Winterfest gift.” She nodded and they both walked back towards the Yuri; sometimes racing each other while laughing. The old, crumbling walls that had once lined this path were now gone. The world was opening up around them, again.

Kort was pulling out the last few boxes to load into his van. They were getting everything ready for the journey’s start tomorrow morning. The fact that only three families would be leaving from Matlowe for the first time in all caravaner history made it a memorable start for their annual departure. They were actually leaving three other families here to stay the whole year in Matlowe! That was amazing! The rest of the caravaners would be leaving from Winterhaven. Some would be following them to the east or north, while others would be headed west, or south. The business of the land lay before them. It was a lot of work to maintain peace and order, but it was a life to which they each dedicated themselves fully. And this year a handful of humans would travel with them to learn a little of their ways and the peoples of Tayna, as they could. It promised to be an interesting year!

Rowan, Darman and Rinna’s home had been fully stripped of all their personal possessions. Most of the furnishings had been left behind and the home now served as a small community gathering place for this small collection of homes and families. There were new rugs and paintings supplied by Darman and Rowan, who took their own ones back to Winterhaven. The bedrooms were now meeting rooms and Rowan’s loom room was now a small library with several bookshelves with books to be shared by all living in their small community. More had been saved from the fires of Riverward than was expected. The loft now served as a classroom so their children could all learn reading and writing. And the great room was the inside meeting room when things needed to be discussed or shared. The kitchen was still the gathering place for the hunters. Having freedom and new responsibilities had finally freed the people from the fire’s terrors and sorrows at last. Kort paused and realized he was going to sorely miss both New Matlowe, which they’d all fallen into calling this area now, and Winterhaven. In his heart, they were both his true homes and where he planned to retire, when it was time.

“Kort!” Nalin called out, waving, as they came out of the trees. He laughed as he waved back; glad she’d been quick in her errand. Nahees’ sister was always someone he’d found could count upon to help. He set down his box and waited for them to join him.

“Thanks for coming,” he told Taroom with a smile and nod.

“What’s this about a box sent by one of the flying machines - just for me?” he asked amazed. “It sounds extravagant,” he added. Kort laughed and nodded his head in agreement.

“Darman also sent some things for the rest of us, as well as for those who are staying this year. Elders do seem to get what they want done, accomplished,” he replied.

“That they do,” he agreed. Kort gave him a sweeping bow in jest and both men fell to laughing. Nalin swatted at him playfully.

“I have to make sure all my things have been properly packed!” she declared as she stepped up the porch and into their home.

“In another four years you’re going to have your hands full as suitors start seeking her out,” Taroom observed. Kort nodded his head, having turned to watch her disappear down a hallway inside, then turned back.

“That I will,” he said, then sighed. “Let’s get your box, now,” he added and gestured Taroom follow him. He had a small storage cabinet built into the one side of his home, as did some of the other caravaners. Right now it was unlocked, so he opened it up and gestured at a large green box. Taroom ran his hand across the top, then down the sides; wonder playing in the depths of his light brown eyes at this curious container.

“It’s made of metal?” he asked, unsure. It was finely made!

“In part, and a substance called plastic. The humans have many such and have given a few to us to have, too,” he related.

“And this box is mine to keep?” he questioned, wondering. Kort gave him a nod and smile.

“It is,” he assured him. A big grin broke out across his face as laughter lit up his eyes in joy. “Let me help you with it. It’s pretty heavy.” Kort squatted down and lifted up on one end as Taroom hefted the other. They carried it over to a nearby table and set it down carefully. “Well, are you going to open it?” he teased, wondering if he could figure out the clasps that sealed the box, on its front side. It didn’t take Taroom long to figure it out as he pulled the latches up, releasing the slender metal loops that held it locked tightly. He pulled the loops free then slowly opened it to peer inside.

On the very top was a beautifully-made green and blue blanket. Taroom laughed as he ran a hand across the weave, noting how soft it felt. It was fine, indeed.

“He’s learning to use some of the new fibers the humans have available and loving it. The dyes are amazing too and hold the colors well,” Kort explained, tugging on his new shirt which was an amazing shade of blue. Taroom nodded his head.

“This in itself, as well as the box, are great gifts,” he said, then Kort pulled back the blanket to reveal the real treasure beneath. Taroom gasped, then gently fingered the tools and books that lay there before him. Tears sprang to his eyes as he picked up a wide leather belt with many tools and a few devices hanging from it. He shook his head amazed. Aylita walked around a corner and saw him holding up the belt. The tools were so new they gleamed in the sunlight, dazzling her eyes. She stepped closer to see them for herself.

“Oh, Taroom, where did you get such a marvel?” she asked breathlessly, wondering.

“From Rowan. He sends us some late Winterfest gifts,” he told her. She helped him fasten the belt around his waist and admired it with joy.

“He’s an Elder with great wisdom,” she commented. “Your name’s carved into the tools, too, so no one else can claim ownership!” Taroom handed her the blanket and her eyes misted with tears as she held it and cuddled it in happiness. “This is amazing!”

“And these books,” Kort said, seeing what some of them were titled. “Rowan said he found them among his things and wanted them to be yours, most especially, Taroom. He’d forgotten he had them. He said they’re for a man with forward-looking vision.”

Taroom picked up one that caught his interest immediately. He opened it up to see pictures of the tall buildings of Berrals and illustrations drawn about their structures within. Perfect material for a carpenter! He laughed.

“I think he wants me to remake Old Matlowe to be a great city to challenge the cities in the east,” he stated, grinning as he looked at the other books still in the box. There were also more tools.

“I think he wants you to create what you find in your heart with new ideas for how to make it happen,” Aylita suggested, grinning.

“He is the wisest Elder I have ever met, as well as the most generous,” Taroom finally answered, still awed it was all for him and his family.

“That’s the truth,” Kort agreed with a laugh. “Let’s get this over to your home, now.” Taroom gave him a nod and gladly closed the box, locking it again, then lifting his end, using the sturdy handle built into it, as Aylita followed with the blanket in her arms and a big smile alighting her face in joy.

**New Possibilities**

"You're sure you've got enough backup batteries?" Ryes questioned, worried. It was like sending her own cubs out into the world for the first time.

"Yes, Ma'am," Eric Crandall assured her with a laugh; enjoying her fussing. She was just like his own mother, only much younger! "I'll be sure to call in my reports, regularly," he promised, trying to appear solemn once again.

"And I'll keep a close eye on him, to make sure he doesn't get himself into too much trouble," Rinna promised with a smile. It was hard on Ryes to see them go off into the unknown, as she knew it. She sighed and finally smiled, then threw her arms about Rinna, giving her a hug and kiss. She was her grandmother and always in her heart.

"Thanks, I don't know what I'd do without you," she admitted, as she held onto her. Rinna laughed as she hugged and kissed Ryes, in return. This was the first time in years they weren’t crying upon parting from each other! They were both smiling! Next she hugged Eric closely, wishing him well in a soft voice.

"I'll be careful," he promised with a chuckle as he let her go. She gave him a nod then turned for the next of her charges, Paul French, who stood before Damian Hacker, Steven Granada, Wyatt Thurlowe, and Gracie Ortega. These people were finally chosen to journey with the caravaners this year, to officially survey what of Tayna and her peoples they could; to collect information they all needed at Winterhaven. She felt closer to Eric, because he put in so much time serving as her and Neil's aide, but still knew she'd miss the others, just as much. Paul threw up his hands with a merry chuckle and smile.

"I promise to be careful, too," he assured her, then threw his arms about her for a big bear-hug. He was a big guy who was as tall as Torr and well-muscled as Sabin, yet was one of the gentlest men here. Ryes laughed as he released her, giving him a nod of her head.

"You'd better come back in one piece, too," she threatened, teasing him. Then stepped over to Damian, who’d helped watch after the younger cubs, and it was hard to see him leave. He'd been so good at teaching them!

"Be careful, or you'll have all the kids here upset with you," she reminded him, trying to look serious.

"And their mothers, too," he finished, smiling. The children had made a "special book" for him with each of their pictures and a small drawing, story, or poem written especially for him by each of them. Ellen helped them create it and it touched him deeply. Ryes laughed at this in full agreement, as she hugged him too.

"We'll see you at the spring gather," Steven promised, as he was next, suddenly feeling like he was being cut off from all he knew of as "safe" in this world. It was daunting, yet exciting.

"Yes, we'll expect you to be there on time," she teased. Steven was one who usually showed up to their meetings a few minutes late. He was always trying to do so many things at once, he often forgot. He laughed at this, nodding his head in agreement.

"Since Missa will be driving, I think I'll be able to make it," he agreed. There was laughter from the caravaners as they knew him well by now, too.

"Wyatt, don't get so wrapped up in your studies that you forget to report in." Ryes gave him a hug, too. He blushed as he returned it. The community here was small enough that after the long winter, everyone knew each other well by now.

"I'll try not to," he promised, going as far as he felt he could. This was a fascinating world, and now that they knew more about its origins, there was even more to learn. He was excited about this journey. Tayna called to him in a way he could never explain to anyone else. Ryes saw his inner struggle and laughed as she nodded her head.

"At least give it a try," she agreed, knowing the caravaners he'd be travelling with would keep an eye out for him, too. Finally, she stepped over to Gracie. She was so very reluctant to let her venture out with a small group of caravaners alone. She was bound for one of the northeastern routes, heading for Cootain. They wouldn't be at the spring gather, as they had a far distance to go, but would be back for the fall gather. At least, once they had their communications satellite up in orbit, they'd have clear reception for her reports. It should be up well before they reached Cootain.

"Keep on the alert," she advised, "The caravaners may know you, but few others would behave in a civil way around you. That Badge of Passage should help, though. We'll signal you, as soon we have the new system operational," she promised. Gracie gave her a solemn nod of her head, and then threw her arms about her, hugging her tightly. Ryes returned the hug with a heartfelt sigh. With Gracie being a woman, some customs might be slanted against her. It was why she asked Darman to give her a Badge for this journey, which he did gladly with true understanding.

"I'll be very careful," she promised. "I'm going to miss you," she added as she kissed her cheek and pulled back from their embrace. Ryes smiled at last, her stomach still in knots.

"I'll miss you, too," she told her, then looked to the others, "all of you." There were replies mumbled and shouted, and then they started to break up, heading for the vans and families to whom they'd been assigned, getting last minute good-byes from the others, who'd be staying here in Winterhaven. Garth threw an arm over Ryes' shoulder, hugging her to his side.

"They'll be fine," he assured her. She chuckled as she looked up to him.

"I just wish I could go along," she admitted. He laughed at this, knowing her well. Yes, this was what lay in her heart for a very long time.

"You'll just have to content yourself with flying over everyone's heads by helicopter, rather than the longer journeys," he teased with a merry smile in his eyes. "I think our journey here to Winterhaven was the last, old-fashioned way of traveling for you." She sighed, knowing he was right, giving him a nod.

"At least I still get to go out hunting," she ventured. Even if she could feel the death of what she stalked, the forest was still her home and sanctuary.

"For now," he hedged as he waved good-bye to Darman. “I can envision a time when we both might be too busy for such leisurely pursuits.” Ryes looked up at him sharply, wondering what he meant. Then realized what he might've implied and sighed. If things kept up the pace they'd taken, they might all be too busy to be simple hunters and gatherers. It saddened her in a way she could never explain.

"Why the long face?" Ardis demanded, seeing Ryes suddenly looking downcast - most unusual for her! "I'm sure they'll all be fine," she assured her with an encouraging nudge and smile.

"Oh, it's not that. Just… all the changes we still have before us," she explained, spreading a hand out, palm up. Garth gave her a nod of his head, agreeing with her phrasing. It said it all.

"We'll talk about it later. We have to check our things for the trip to Matlowe, the day after tomorrow," he ordered. Sabin gave him a nod of his head, seeing there was something more on his mind, as he threw an arm about his wife's waist.

"Come Ardis, let's go check on our cubs," he urged. She gave him a strange look, but allowed herself to be led away. Ryes sighed heavily.

"The humans are having the time of their lives relearning how to create with their hands, once again. And here we are, having the time of our lives, getting to learn to create with their handy machines. We're surely a mixed lot," she commented as she looked up to her husband, mischief in her eyes. "I know a great place where we can catch a few minutes, just for ourselves," she teased in a low voice, smiling.

"Too late, Maren's heading toward us and he doesn't look happy about something. I bet he needs to talk with you," he told her, a sigh of regret following. Not that they didn't get time for each other at night, but it was rare when they could frolic together at any other time. He put his arms about her and kissed her heartily, then released her as Maren stepped up to them.

"I hate to bother you, but could I talk with you a moment, Ryes?" he asked, "cousin to cousin," he added. She gave Garth a wink, then let him go, turning to see the look in Maren's eyes. It was a serious matter indeed.

"Anytime," she assured him, "How about if we take one of the rovers out to gather some plants I didn't get a chance at yesterday?" she suggested. He smiled. It'd give them some time away from interruptions here in the facility, and the chance to get out and unwind from the pressures on them both. He hadn't been outside of Winterhaven since he went to fetch her out of the icy sleet of a powerful storm on Winterfest day last year!

"Sounds like the best idea," he agreed. Garth smiled and gave her a nod of his head in agreement.

"I'll take care of our cubs and see that Sabin, Neil and Ted handle things for you two, so take your time," he told her. She smiled her thanks as she grabbed Maren's arm and headed toward the garage with him in tow.

"Wait, shouldn't I tell someone where we're going?" he laughed out, wondering if they could just take off like this anymore. She laughed, shaking her head.

"The Base Commander just told us to take our time. What do you think? Between Tennan and Ted, I think they'll be able to handle things in the medical department without you for a little while," she informed him. He suddenly realized she was right! He took the lead, now pulling her along.

"Let's get out of here before Jim Dawe decides he has to escort you," he reminded her. "If I can't look out for you all on my own, what good am I?" he added, realizing he meant it. After all, Garth trusted him to take care of her! She laughed as they picked up their pace to a quick trot. They ended up racing to number seven, each opening a door and jumping inside. Ryes kicked the engine to life and pulled out quickly. She saw Bethany waving to her, but merely waved back as they pulled away, up the road heading toward Hailys.

"We made it," she commented, smiling merrily as Maren relaxed back into his seat. Now they both pulled on their restraints, otherwise the computer would bug them about it, nonstop.

"Ah, I've missed this," he told her, as his gaze watched the scenery outside moving quickly past them; he was well past being distressed with her speed.

"I got to go out yesterday, but yes, I've missed running out with only you, cousin. It sure beats having an entourage in tow." He heartily agreed, having seen the way she had to plan each expedition out, making sure she hadn't forgotten anyone, or anything. No more making a quick dash for a rover! He wasn't quite ready to talk with her, suspecting anyone in the control room could tap into their conversation over the rover's radio, so bided his time until they pulled up beside the building where the bubblenut trees stood upon. He smiled as he recognized it.

"It wasn't so long ago, yet it seems like it was a lifetime ago," he told her as they got out of the rover, grabbing a sidearm each and a small water container. Ryes smiled back at him, fully agreeing.

"It was an eternity ago," she agreed with a laugh, securing her door. She walked around to the back and took out a large sack to put bubblenuts in, for everyone back in Winterhaven to try. The first ones should be ripening by now. They climbed to the top of the hidden building in companionable silence, memories of all that passed in this last year fresh in both their minds.

They laughed like cubs as they gathered the fallen nuts; Maren daring enough to climb the biggest tree to shake down more. It was a banner year for this old tree, its branches drooping under the weight of the nuts growing upon them. They finally sat, looking down upon the avenue, where they spent so much time last spring, trying to pry out the secrets these old ruins held fast. They were barely beginning to decipher what the crystal rods held, having finally unlocked and copied the information. They munched happily upon the nuts, talking about the journey they made last year.

"Tennan told me yesterday that Teris is Tian's father and she's looking to mate with him when she next comes into season in a few months," Maren finally told her with a heavy sigh. "It seems she just figured it out."

"You don't sound too surprised," Ryes observed, wondering.

"I followed Korman after he set Tennan up in that old house. I was worried that our father wanted to try mating her, first. So, I saw who he picked and heard how he threatened him. It's no wonder Teris kept quiet. Disembowelment is a foul way to die," he told her, his mouth twisted down in distaste.

"You don't approve of Teris?" she asked, seeing this seemed to go deeper. He was very upset over something.

"Not really, but she won't listen to anyone. So, if I leave her alone about it, she may give up on him and look elsewhere? It seems everyone I suggested is wrong in her eyes." He met Ryes' eyes with the rest of his inner burden begging to be voiced. He just didn't think he could. "When did my sister become like my mother? After I moved out, she really changed! All I did was turn my back for a few moments."

"Look at Rowan! Last year he was ready to curl up and die in a dark corner, now even I can't keep up with him! I have to scold him for running in the halls, as if he were a cub!" Ryes protested, shaking her head. "The only one I know I can blame is myself. After all, if I hadn't taken the lot of you out hunting and somehow gotten enmeshed in your lives, I might've fallen under Doran's clutches, without Garth's life to fight for. And after all that, we find Winterhaven and look where that's led us all." Maren laughed at this, nodding his head in agreement.

"I still don't think you would've fallen under Doran's power, though. But, I do know we saved the lives of most of Matlowe Village when we found our new home. Even if several villagers moved in with us, it still left more food behind for the remainder. They owe you in a way they'd never understand," he scolded her, teasing. She laughed merrily as she shook her head again.

"Tennan has to live her own life now," she finally sobered, reminding him with a sad smile. "I know you're littermates, but she's got her own path to tread. She still doesn't approve of you and Dotti and nothing we've done will ever change her mind. She IS just like your mother!" She saw a pain go through him at the mention of Dotti's name and frowned. Could it be what lay at the heart of his problem? Were they having troubles of some kind?

"Dotti…" he started, not quite sure where to begin. Ryes closed her eyes and grabbed his hand. If he felt this deeply about it, it had to be something serious, for sure. If so, the most direct way was always the best. Maren felt better as he saw what she intended, so closed his eyes too, trying to relax as he centered himself. He reached out to her, still reluctant.

There was the presence of her pool of power, which never dimmed, even when she was unable to tap it from the end of her pregnancy until just a few weeks ago. He knew her frustration with being unable to use her abilities, but now felt her irritation as Ted and the others wanted to conduct a series of tests to see exactly what she could do and try to fathom how. She was not a willing research participant.

He finally opened up and let her see what bothered his mind and heart so deeply. Dotti pined for a child of her own to hold. With Brenda's little one and the large number of cubs recently born, she felt left out of things. It was something Maren knew might happen, but so far everything he tried to distract her with didn't last. He was helpless to know what to do. She vehemently refused to consider an artificial insemination by one of the human men, here in Winterhaven and he was unable to give her what she craved so deeply.

It was true that they had 23 chromosomal pairs, as the humans, and they were closer genetically to them than more than ninety-eight percent of the other animals upon their homeworld, but there was still that one point six eight difference in their genetic coding, which lay as a great gulf between them.

"She wants me to try using my Healing Talent to help fertilize a child within her. A child which would be from both of us. If I do this, it could result in a terribly misshapen thing, which would be better off never being conceived," he admitted. She felt his strong tide of emotions on this issue. He wanted a child as much as she, but thought it would never matter to him if it were fathered by another human, as it does in her mind. Ryes understood Dotti's view, too well. Maren was where her soul and heart rested. No one else's child would ever come to mean the same.

"You have to try," she pressed. "I know what this means to you, especially within, to consciously create something with your Talent which goes against nature, but for the sake of both of you… please try. If you need my help, I’m here" she offered, understanding this was something he could never breathe near his own sister. Her own Healing Talent may be weak next to his, but it existed and she could lend him the strength with her pool of power to tap for such a task. "Could your Talent operate upon such a deep scale, as to make the child `right' from its very inception?" she questioned, wondering with the finite scope required for such a level of healing. Mentally he smiled at her, shaking his head.

"I've no idea. I know that the more I actually know about the body and its functions, the better and faster I can direct my abilities, but I've never tried it on such a scale, before. What happens if I fail and it's mis-formed?" he pressed.

"What did we do with Rhin?" she returned, "Either redirect it to the way it should be, or abort it and be ready to try again, later. She won't give up until you succeed," she reminded him. "You know Dotti, once she sets her heart upon something."

"So, you two come all the way out here to pig out on bubblenuts and have a chat, which you could just have easily have had back home?" Mitt demanded merrily, having joined in, in their inner conversation.

"Mitt!" Maren replied, exasperated, "Can't we have any peace, anywhere?"

"Not you two," she quipped back. "Jim demanded I bring him out to where you went. He's just polite enough to not barge in on the both of you. You know he has to watch your backs, but was happy to see you were both armed, at least," she told them.

"Mitt, this is serious," Ryes told her. "Dotti truly wants to have Maren's child."

"Then he should help her to do so," she agreed. "It'll all work out, I'm sure. You remember ol' Ryun? I bet she still wants to bear a cub, even if she never will."

"Wait a minute, I did forget about her!" Maren agreed. "I'll make sure she can have her own cubs, since we're going to Matlowe the day after tomorrow, anyway," he told them, happy to see there were others he could still be of service to, which he hadn't thought of before.

"If you can try to help her have cubs, why not your own wife?" Mitt pressed. "Maren, I believe in you and know you can do it!"

"I do, too," Ryes added, giving him her full support. He finally gave in, deciding to try at least. "Do you think you'll need my help?" she asked.

"For this attempt, yes I will," he decided. "I've never attempted a healing upon this level and don't want to fumble this one," he told them.

"I'll bring Rhin along, just in case," she returned. They felt that once he accepted the challenge, he could relax again. They withdrew from the inner commune, opening their eyes to the lush, green world about them.

"How about after dinner?" Maren asked Ryes, smiling.

"How about as soon as you two get back?" Mitt countered. "That way you can make sure things are settled, one way or the other, so she can go with us to Matlowe."

"That's an idea," Ryes agreed, smiling. "If you can pull her out of the labs, that is," she teased her cousin. Dotti was helping Bethany with some computer modeling, which Dr. Cruthers decided he needed done. Bethany admitted to her that Dotti was much better at it than she was, so was taking lessons from Dotti.

"For this, it'll be no problem," he promised, standing up and giving each of the ladies a hand up.

"Then let's finish gathering these nuts and head on back," Ryes suggested, waving to Jim. He strode over to them, looking unhappy.

"You know you're supposed to have an escort at all times," he scolded her.

"I did," she quipped back, "Maren." She pointed to her cousin, standing beside her. Jim frowned at this in disapproval. "Just give us a few minutes to gather more bubblenuts, then we'll be on the way back home." He gave her a nod of his head, then stepped closer to look down upon what was an ancient avenue, below them.

"Nice place to have lunch," he commented, finally smiling. He'd keep it in mind the next time he and Bethany had time to sneak off together.

"It is," Ryes agreed. "It hasn't quite been a year since we were last here to eat lunch, but the place hasn't changed much," she sighed.

"Yeah, Kovin found your trail up here and when we saw the group below, we knew we'd found you at last," Mitt told them as they turned and started picking up more of the fallen bubblenuts. "That was the day you went Time Walking and Ardis started her season. I'll never forget that one! I thought I'd lost my brother to you, for sure," she admitted. Ryes looked at her surprised, as Maren chuckled in understanding.

"You have to understand, Ryes. Garth never paid any attention to any of the other women in Matlowe and the only one to really occupy his time was watching over his little sister, Mitt. Karr had Gann waiting upon her, hand and foot, so Mitt felt secure knowing her big brother always kept an eye out for her. You come on the scene and suddenly she's second. It must've stung, at the very least," Maren explained. Ryes straightened up, blushing darkly at hearing all this for the first time.

"I'm sorry, Mitt. I never knew…" she started, not sure how to apologize for something of this magnitude.

"It's all right. Now I have the big sister I've always wanted, and still have my brother's love. But, he's so busy now, he doesn't have much time for either of us. He's the one I really feel sorry for," she assured her, smiling.

It had been exactly as Maren said. The lump in her throat betrayed her remembered feelings on that day, so long ago. She decided to get to know Ryes, to understand this change in Garth, so she could deal with it. She intended to split them up, but when she learned Ryes was pregnant, she knew that idea was on the wing. As she sought to find anchorage once more, she discovered Ryes' inner core of steel gave her the strength to find the center within herself. And somehow through it all, she came to love Ryes, as if she were her own, older sister, knowing she could never be the cold, cruel woman Karr had come to be.

"And our cubs will need him more and more, as they grow older," Ryes added in, sighing. "If we can get things going, the momentum should help carry things onward and free up some of his time for more important pursuits." Jim smiled at this line of conversation as he helped gather the nuts with them.

"I can't wait for my son to be born," he admitted. "Maybe if we can use this coming winter to take a break and bond with our families like we should, next spring might be much happier?" he queried, hoping. Ryes and Mitt laughed as Maren looked thoughtful.

"Yes, we'll give it a try. After all, once our apartments are finished, we'll have far more living space for each family," Ryes agreed, then began to look for more nuts. After a few more minutes, they had almost more than they could carry.

"Raya's going to love these," Mitt declared as they carefully tread down the path, down the grass encrusted building.

"Forget Raya, Shadd will be absolutely delighted," Ryes countered.

"She does love these things," Maren agreed, recalling last year when she decided to try growing her own bubblenut trees, so she'd never have to be without. The little seedlings she started last summer beside their creek had survived well through the cold winter. Given a few more years and they'd have their own trees providing plenty of nuts for everyone. Ryes laughed in agreement as they packed them aboard the helicopter, for Mitt to take straight back to Winterhaven, then boarded the rover as Mitt took off.

After lunch, Ryes was going over some of the plans she wanted in place while she’d be out of the office while over in Matlowe Village. She was waiting for Maren to come and get her to help with Dotti. But, Mitt and Axel came in with anxious looks on their faces. It appeared to be important. Ryes stored her program and stood up, ready for anything, she hoped.

“What happened?” she asked, wanting to be direct. Smiles broke out on their faces and Axel gave her a nod.

“Nothing dire, but we need your help,” he replied. Mitt nodded, letting him take the lead. “It’s time to get to the shuttle engines and we have an idea, which only you can do, from what we know of your abilities.” He, too, could be straight to the point most times. She smiled at this, her eyes lighting up. Mitt chuckled.

“Can you spare some time, so we can at least try?” she requested, looking hopeful.

“Sure,” she assured them and stepped around her desk. The three of them headed off down the hallway for the shuttle hangar. When they got there, Stephen Fairfax was there waiting for them.

“I don’t know why you need me, Axel. I’m more a pure scientist than star craft technician,” he told him.

“You’re just the person we do need today,” Axel assured him, smiling as he gestured him over to the chairs he and Mitt had arranged earlier this morning.

“Good afternoon, Stephen,” Ryes said, smiling merrily, wondering what they did have planned now?

“Good afternoon, Ryes,” he replied, giving her a nod and smile. He’d never been in a place where the bosses were so open and friendly with everyone, before. He politely held her chair for her as she giggled in embarrassment, then settled onto the seat.

“So, what is it you need all of us here, today?” she asked, looking to Mitt and Axel as they settled into their places. One chair was empty, still. Raya rushed in, a little breathless, but a happy smile upon her face.

“Just in time,” Axel said, appearing delighted.

“I had a couple of little ones who needed mommy,” she said as she sat down on the empty seat, seeing they appeared ready now.

“They’re certainly more important,” he replied as the others were all smiles and nodding their heads in agreement. Then his eyes practically gleamed as he looked over at Ryes. “Mitt and I have an idea for changing the engines on these two ships and need your help, Ryes.”

“And how do I fit into this?” Stephen questioned, wondering. He’d heard about her amazing abilities, but never thought he’d be included in any important projects.

“You have a unique understanding of the nature of atoms, their structures and bonds, which is invaluable for this project. You know things on a molecular level,” he stated, as Ryes appeared puzzled.

“Let’s start and see where it goes,” Mitt urged as she reached for Ryes’ hand, ready to begin. She still had a big grin, as she gave Ryes a merry wink. “How do you know if you can’t do something until you try?” Ryes huffed a laugh and gave her a happy nod in return.

“A new day for new discoveries! Anything for you, Sis,” she returned as she gripped her hand, then extended her other hand to Raya. Raya grinned as she gladly took it, wondering what kind of wonders they’ll find today?

“Everyone please relax and join hands,” Raya requested. Axel knew what was needed and immediately complied, while Stephen paused a few moments with his uncertainty and a touch of fear in his eyes, then he grasped both Axel’s and Raya’s hand and closed his eyes, too. Raya closed her eyes as both Mitt and Ryes had called up their Talents, ready to being. Raya established the meld of minds and managed to get Stephen calmed down and more relaxed as she assured him they’d only share what thoughts he wanted to project to them. Once he was settled, Axel took over, to direct them.

“Mitt has shown me how dangerous and wrong our shuttle engines are. We want to try to remake them by taking them down to the molecular level and reshaping them the way they need to be, to best do the job we need them to do,” he let them know.

“Molecular level?” Stephen questioned, wondering and understanding why he was included now. He’d been a chemist before his enforced cryogenic sleep and could help them with the way the atoms should be behaving and the bonds formed. Somehow this pleased him immensely.

“We need you,” Mitt assured him, seeing he now grasped his role in this project. Then she and Ryes reached out to the first shuttle engine and the wrongness screamed to their senses through their Inner Sight Talent. The others could see it clearly now, and were shocked.

“Let’s use your Manipulator and Fire Shaper to start breaking them down,” Axel instructed as he and Mitt took over her Talents and wielded them as if surgeons. She got a feel for what they wanted after a few minutes and with Stephen to help guide her Talents down to the molecular level, they pulled all the molecules of the engine into a dense cloud of loose matter, ready to be reshaped.

“Now for the hard part,” Mitt teased. Slowly and carefully they put together the new engines the way Axle, Mitt and the AI had designed them. When they finished they still had plenty of leftover isotopes.

“Finally, we have the truth of the universe in our hands. Let’s pull these dangerous atoms apart and remove the danger,” Stephen directed. Ryes redirected the energy and heat released as they slowly reformed the molecules to become harmless materials which were far safer to use for other purposes, dumping the inert materials into some empty nearby bins. They could be used by the replicator to create new, needed things. When all had been done with the engines on the first shuttle, they repeated the process on the second shuttle, which went more quickly, now that they had the process established. Once finished there, Axel then had them remove all danger from the Quest’s engines, themselves, as well as the remaining, damaged shuttles which were not going to be any more than extra parts for the two they were keeping. Stephen actually started using Ryes’ Talents himself, seeing she’d let him use them during the last few ships; showing them an even faster way to do it, now that he understood.

“That was a lot of work!” Ryes complained, feeling drained but deeply satisfied. “And Stephen, that was amazing! I learned so much from you, that I’m still trying to grasp it all.” He grinned from ear to ear, pulling his long dark bangs out of his eyes.

“And you gave me a real vision of how to reshape our world, one molecule at a time. You have fantastic powers, Ryes!” he declared, standing up; feeling as if he’d been jogging for the last hour, now. He helped Raya to her feet. She gave him a grateful smile.

“That was amazing!” she stated, still stunned. “I never knew you could build things so complex in such a way. Now I’ve seen the universe within is as beautiful as the one without!” Her wonder was still shining in her eyes as she looked to the massive bulk beside them.

“I never imagined doing that before either,” Ryes told her, “but now I do know a little more of what I can do and am going to have to practice it more on a far smaller scale.” She stepped over and gave Raya a hug, then Stephen and Mitt, with Axel last. “Thank you, Axel!” He chuckled, giving her a nod, letting her go.

“I had better get back,” Raya said turning for the door, her wonder still glowing in her eyes.

“Me, too,” Stephen agreed, still dancing on the clouds as he trailed after Raya. Mitt pulled her aside, after the other two left.

“Did you feel it? It wasn’t just a combination of your Talents working in concert,” she said, as Ryes gave her a nod; surprise in her eyes. Axel realized it, too.

“So, what’re you going to name your new Talent?” Axel asked, joining the women.

“How about Molecular Manipulator?” she asked, laughing. “I feel astounded, but it’s unique and operates apart from all my other Talents. It is a new Talent!”

“So, you’re a Talent of Many and amazing,” Mitt teased, laughing as they all hugged again.

“Smart observation, Mitt,” Axel added, laughing.