

PROMISE OF MERCY



KURT D. SPRINGS
A Dreamscape Warriors Novel

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TATE PUBLISHING
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This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Andre Norton, considered by many as the “Granddam” of science fiction, who died on March 17, 2005, at the age of ninety-three.

You have been an inspiration to my literary career with your Witch World and Forerunner series being among my favorites. You began writing in 1938 and were prolific to the end, writing in many genres, but were especially famous for science fiction and fantasy. I hope I’ve made you proud.

Acknowledgment

Once again, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and efforts in this endeavor. I would especially like to thank my lead editor (a.k.a. Mum), my brother, my sister-in-law, and my nieces for their editorial input that vastly improved the storytelling. Many thanks to Wayne Sawyer for the picture that appears on the back of my book and to Dr. Donncha Ó hAodha, emeritus lecturer at NUI Galway's *Áris na Gaeilge* for his advice on the Irish/Finnian language. Finally, I want to express my appreciation to all my readers and reviewers for making the continuation of the Dreamscape Warriors Novels possible.

Prologue

Jarek poked at the fire. Camping on a world like Etrusci was different from when he was young on his home planet of Gothow Prime. He smiled as he looked up at his five charges. Three girls, identical triplets, now eleven, were the image of their Neo-Etruscan mother—flaming red hair and green eyes. Their little brother, Aidan, age four, also had his mother's eyes but his Finnian father's dark brown, curly hair. Ted, a brown, furry bear-lizard around Aidan's age, was cuddled next to his friend. The two were on their backs staring at the stars.

This is the first time Neo-Etruscan and Finnian have mixed, Jarek thought.

Of the two genetically altered branches of humanity the Neo-Etruscans had remained isolated while the Finnian had reconnected with their Terran ancestors.

Ambassador Jarek of the Galactic Alliance was officially on Etrusci to meet with the High Council. He had been saved from routine meetings when he volunteered to deal with a small problem with the O'Connor clan.

With their father, Liam, on deployment with the Alliance and their mother, Celinia, at a closed meeting at the Temple, "Uncle Jarek," an old family friend had decided that the children needed a diversion.

This was especially true since he had been called to the school to pick up the girls. He'd found the triplets, Deirdre, Aisling, and Bayvin, sitting in the headmaster's office glaring at four older boys. One boy had a black eye. Another had a bloody nose. The other two were nursing bruises as well.

The weary headmaster had looked up. "Thank the Creator I'm retiring soon. My replacement can have the joy of Liam, foster son of Marcus's children."

Jarek had smiled sympathetically. The man had to maintain order, but the children had inherited the Finnian's contempt for bullies.

Jarek stared into the fire. "*Maireann fós an saol atá caite*," he said with a sigh, quoting a Finnian proverb.

One of the three, who had been sitting protectively next to her little brother, looked up. "Uncle Jarek?"

Jarek smiled at the child. "It means 'The past still lives on,' Deirdre."

Aisling, who'd been staring at the fire in fascination looked up and smiled impishly. "How do you know she's Deirdre?"

"Let's see," he said, enjoying the game. "Since you are the one staring most intently at the fire, you can only be Aisling. Bayvin is drawing intricate designs on the ground. That leaves Deirdre, who's hovering over your little brother like a protective mother *raaber*."

General Aisling O'Connor, Jarek mused, you would be proud of what they are becoming.

General O'Connor had been the product of an experimental program to create a warrior race. The creators were three human geneticists from Old Earth (now called Terra)—Malcolm Roberts, his wife Emily, and their assistant, Aidan Stevens. Dr. Stevens couldn't resist telling their *children* tales from the folklore of his ancestors. Their creation eventually began to call themselves *Finnian* after a group of ancient Irish heroes led by, some say, a mythical Finn McCool.

I suspect that the children needed an ancestry to identify with. Jarek scratched his chin. *Something their Founders hadn't considered.*

At the same time as the Finnian were being created, another group of geneticists were working on this planet. They were Utopianists seeking a perfect society. Their names were Carl Black, Richard Jones, and Michael Isaiah.

Jarek sighed wearily. *A bad idea whose time, even then, had long since passed.* One thing they didn't plan on was that certain individuals would develop strong telepathic and empathic abilities, especially females. This was the basis for the Priestesses' healing powers—almost unique in the galaxy. The Founders had disappeared before those powers began to evolve. The legend among certain groups had grown up that one day the Founders would return.

Jarek looked at his charges again. Over time, some Finnian also developed a strain of telepathic abilities like dreamwalking and stepping out of time. Abilities known to other species in the galaxy.

Liam and Celinia's children are showing signs of becoming quite powerful, Jarek thought.

Storm Cloud, a bear-lizard shaman, had been instructing Liam.

Storm Cloud has a knowledge of dreamwalking that is even more extensive than my own, he mused. *Now the children are getting the shaman's attention. How far will they go? The girls are already a force to be reckoned with.*

The five lay back to look at the stars. Jarek lay back with them.

"I hope Daddy comes home soon," Deirdre said.

Aisling stifled a sob. "I hope he comes home."

"He's been going into danger since before you were born, child," Jarek said, trying to sound confident. "He'll be back. Never fear."

They stared into the nighttime sky, trying to see into eternity.

Chapter 1

Eleven years later

The small compound was located on the Isle of Circe in the Arctic zone above the Northern Continent of the planet Etrusci. The compound had been placed in a secluded valley and left to the elements to prevent thermal scans from detecting it.

Three aged humans, the Utopian Founders, rested in their stasis chambers in a cold, dimly lit room. Within the stasis fields, time had stopped for Carl Black, Richard Jones, and Michael Isaiah. Kergan, a marshal in the Rebellion against the Galactic Alliance debated, not for the first time, if this was really worth the effort. His eyes, as did those of his technical staff, easily pierced the gloom. Natives of a planet that circled a red dwarf star, the long-lived, black-scaled Gothowans were used to colder, dimmer conditions.

“I still don’t see the point of this, Marshal,” Teramiah said. “There must be more effective diversions we could use—with less aggravation.”

Kergan smiled at his lead technician.

“I was here nearly six hundred years ago,” Kergan told Teramiah, his Gothowan aide. “Marisa and Azurius put them in these stasis chambers with a promise to create new, young bodies

for them—clones, but with Utopian improvements. When the new bodies were ready, Marisa and Azurius were to transfer their consciousnesses into them.”

Teramiah frowned. “There’s no guarantee this will work.”

Kergan only nodded.

“Besides,” Teramiah continued, “any knowledge they have is well over five hundred years out-of-date. Moreover, the Neo-Etruscans have repudiated their utopian philosophies.”

“Not all the population,” Kergan said.

“The pro-Founders’ movement is a very small minority,” Teramiah reminded him. “I’m doubtful they can turn the people to our side.”

Kergan nodded. “There are still some who would follow them. Grant you, most would not. They just need to draw the Alliance’s attention to Etrusci long enough for us to complete our real purpose elsewhere.”

“As I said before, there are more effective methods of distracting the Alliance.”

“The danger of Etrusci changing sides will cause a debate in the Alliance Council,” Kergan said. “Some will want to let the Neo-Etruscans sort it out for themselves. Others will want to intervene, especially if it turns into a civil war. What’s more important, this will take Liam O’Connor out of the picture. He is the one person that could disrupt our plans.”

Teramiah glanced at Kergan. Of all the people under him, Teramiah had been with him the longest. If Kergan could call anyone his friend, it was Teramiah. Teramiah watched Kergan grimace as he spoke Liam O’Connor’s name. Eleven years ago, Major, now Colonel O’Connor had taken a ragtag composite force of humans of Terran, Neo-Etruscan, and Finnian origins and pulled off a stunning victory. His victory denied Kergan the system of Beta Proximus Four.

Teramiah knew this was a sore spot and changed the subject. "Making the clones wouldn't have taken this long. Why didn't they do this six centuries ago?"

"No time," Kergan said. "The Alliance intervened in human space, and the whole Rebellion changed. We started losing ground."

"Couldn't Azurius have done this when he came back here? After all, he was on the planet nearly six decades."

Kergan shook his head. "He couldn't be bothered with the Founders. He wanted direct control of the planet. Things might have been different for him if he had."

"Marisa wasn't keen on this," Teramiah reminded him.

"She hasn't been keen on much since she gave birth to her daughter," Kergan said sourly. "However, I was helping her with this back then. Moreover, I have access to her research. She already had the beginnings of this worked out. The Forerunner information we were able to get filled in the blanks. So we don't need her."

Technicians rolled in three more chambers containing the new bodies. They looked to be in their late twenties in human years.

"Ah," Kergan said with a laugh. "Modified clones. They wanted to be able to walk among their children without being ashamed of not being perfect."

Teramiah laughed as well. "Vain idiots."

"Useful, vain idiots," Kergan corrected.

The technicians began to connect each set of chambers—old body to new.

"Almost ready, Marshal," Teramiah said.

"Very good," he replied, looking down at the six figures.

A few more adjustments were made.

Teramiah nodded.

"Do it," Marshal Kergan ordered.

The technicians turned off the stasis fields and simultaneously started the transfer of the consciousnesses. The machines hummed to life as chemical and brainwave activity pulsed through the

connections. Monitors showed the movement of the Founders' minds and consciousnesses from their old bodies to the new. Kergan watched as the process took place. All seemed smooth until Richard Jones's bodies convulsed and warning lights began to flash.

Teramiah leapt into action. "Cardiac arrest on the original body!"

He pressed the release and forced open the lid of the old chamber. Teramiah found the location of the heart on the old man's chest and began compressions in a centuries-old technique that spanned most humanoid species.

"Cardio-stimulator—now!"

A technician threw open a box and elbowed Teramiah aside, stepping out of time to attach the connections. Teramiah dropped to his knees to complete the connections to the cardio-stimulator, bringing it online as the last connection was completed. He started sending a stimulating current to the old heart. Both bodies seemed to relax.

"We have to be careful, Marshal," he said, looking up at Kergan. "The stimulating charge could disrupt the brain processes. If we don't risk it, he will die before we can complete the transfer."

"Understood," Kergan said.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. Kergan could see beads of sweat forming on Teramiah's forehead as he focused on threading the needle of keeping the old heart going while not disturbing the transfer to the young body.

"Get the other cardio-stimulators ready," Kergan ordered, "just in case."

Technicians began making connections and stood ready to intervene. Fortunately their precautions proved unnecessary. Twenty minutes later the process was complete.

"Our instruments say it worked," Teramiah said, slumping in exhaustion. "We should know shortly."

"Their old bodies?" Kergan asked as three alarms sounded.

Teramiah glanced at the three monitors. All of them had flat-lined. "Dead."

"Get the blankets we have warming," Kergan ordered. "Have Gaius bring the thermal jumpsuits."

Kergan turned to look at the new bodies of the Founders. The rise and fall of their chests seemed regular. A technician looked inquiringly at Kergan who nodded. With a touch of a button the seals on the new chambers' lids were broken, and the lids swung open.

"Is there any reason not to awaken them?" Kergan asked.

"Everything seems normal," Teramiah said. "I suggest we keep them awake for no more than ten minutes. Their minds may require time to get used to their new bodies."

"Do it," Kergan ordered. "I want to be off-planet before we're discovered."

As the technicians injected a special stimulant into the three men, a Neo-Etruscan human walked in carrying a stack of three jumpsuits. Kergan turned to regard him.

"It's true," the man whispered in awe. "After all these centuries, they're back."

"It may take time for them to acclimate themselves to the new flesh they wear, Gaius," Kergan said, "but yes, they're back."

Slowly the three men began to stir. Their eyes fluttered open, and they looked disoriented. Their eyes closed, and they began to breathe deeply. Finally one opened his eyes and sat up.

"It... worked?" the man croaked.

"Yes, Carl Black," Kergan said, "it worked."

Kergan turned to Gaius. "Get the Founders the nutrient drinks. Their throats will be parched."

Gaius nodded, handed the suits to one of Kergan's technicians, and left the room.

Another Founder sat up as Carl swung his legs over the edge and climbed out of the stasis tube. A technician caught him in a

blanket as he staggered and helped him to a chair. Gaius returned with three glasses of a pale yellow liquid.

"This will help you rehydrate and replenish your electrolytes, Founder," Gaius said respectfully. "It may not taste like much, but you'll feel better immediately."

Carl took the glass and drank it. He made a face and handed it back.

"You were right on both counts," Carl said. "Thank you, my son."

As each man left his chamber and was guided to a seat, he was wrapped in a warm blanket and given a glass of the liquid to drink. Then he was helped into a thermal jumpsuit.

Carl looked up at Kergan. "You kept your word."

"In the end," Kergan said, "yes."

"In the end?" The Founder named Richard Jones looked up.

"I'm afraid so," Kergan said. "Shortly after we put you into stasis, the Galactic Alliance found we were active in the area and intervened. That led to many complications. Eventually Marisa figured out how to create new bodies without an independent mind developing and then how to transfer your minds into those bodies. However, various problems, starting with the Alliance's interference, delayed us from completing our part of the bargain in a timely fashion."

"How long?" Michael Isaiah asked.

"Close to six hundred of your years," Kergan told them, "and much has changed."

All three men stared at the Gothowan.

"Six centuries," Michael whispered.

Carl shrugged. "Longer than we anticipated, but we're here. Now we can begin to guide our children again."

Gaius grimaced. Richard picked up on this at once.

"What's happened?" he demanded.

“Well,” Kergan said casually, “your children have been on their own for almost six hundred years. That sect of the Creator you invented took on a life of its own.”

“It’s a travesty,” Gaius said. “They even allowed a high priestess to marry a misborn.”

Carl looked up sharply at this.

“That does bring me to that part of the story,” Kergan said. “Azurius didn’t want to wait to bring your children into the Rebellion. Since the Neo-Etruscans, as they now call themselves, refused to take sides, he tried to compel them with an invasion of chitin. He even enlisted a councilor named Licinius to help him. You remember Malcolm and Emily Roberts and their assistant Aidan Stevens?”

“I was in Aidan’s class at the University of Chicago,” Michael said.

“I remember,” Richard said. “Didn’t their own creations turn on them in the end?”

“Yes,” Kergan replied. “Their creations—called Finnian now—became valued members of the Alliance’s military arm. They sent some, uh...advisors to assist when the chitin were first discovered some seventy years ago.”

“They let aliens on the planet?” Carl asked incredulously.

“Oh, not at first,” Kergan said. “There was some trade, and your children did declare themselves neutral—not knowing our agreement, of course. But the chitin Azurius brought here caused the Alliance to worry. The Alliance sent a few Finnian to keep an eye on the chitin. However, over a period of ten years, Azurius and his chitin armies nearly wiped out your children’s population. They were forced to abandon their cities, and those remaining retreated to New Olympia. Then Azurius, with Licinius’s help, exterminated the Finnian on the planet.”

“Good,” Carl said.

“That being said, many of your children felt indebted to the Finnian for their selfless heroics,” Kergan said. “A High

Councilor, named Marcus, rescued a Finnian baby and raised him as his own son.”

“What?” Carl snapped.

“There’s no point in getting mad at me,” Kergan said. “It appears your children are more softhearted than you intended. This might not have happened if Azurius had kept his word and left the chitin at home.”

“What happened?” Michael asked curiously.

Kergan smiled. “Liam, the Finnian boy, joined the city’s military when he came of age. Naturally the boy excelled in military training. He fought some heroic battles and was instrumental in the death of Azurius and the destruction of the chitin.” Just for affect, Kergan sighed dramatically. “It was worthy of those old tales Aidan Stevens was so fond of. Liam and a high priestess, Celinia, got married and now have four children.”

“What!” cried Carl. “Our creation is being polluted?”

“I suppose she couldn’t resist being a hero’s wife,” Kergan said with a shrug. “From what I’ve been told, their children have become accomplished in their own right. The three oldest girls have joined the Finnian military. Their son is likely to join too.”

“Why didn’t they join the local military?” Michael asked, out of curiosity.

“The Utopian military—pardon me—the Neo-Etruscan Military has no provision for female soldiers,” Kergan said. “But I believe they will soon be coming home on leave to see their parents.”

The three Founders began to slump.

“Ah, I see I’ve tired you,” Kergan said with feigned concern. “I need to get off-planet soon. I’ll leave Gaius to fill in the details.”

He turned to Gaius. “I suggest you let them rest for at least eight hours. Once you get them back to a more civilized part of the planet, you can take up the tale.”

He handed Gaius a large medical case. Gaius opened it and found rows of hyposprays containing a clear, pale green liquid.

"This will temporarily neutralize telepathic abilities, including the ability to dreamwalk," Kergan said. "You may find it useful. There is also an antidote." Kergan indicated a small number of hyposprays containing a different liquid.

Gaius took Carl's arm and other technicians assisted Richard and Michael. Kergan grinned as they left the room. His aide joined him.

"Masterfully played, Marshal," he said suppressing a laugh until he was sure the men were out of earshot.

"Thank you, Teramiah," Kergan replied. "Interesting how one can manipulate people with the truth."

Teramiah laughed out loud.

"We leave within the hour," Kergan said. "I want the transfer mechanism dismantled. As we leave the system, dump everything into the sun. It must not fall into Alliance hands."

"By your order, Marshal."



Liam stood at the South Corinth Spaceport as a spaceship made its approach. Celinia held his hand. It had been over eight months since they had seen their three daughters.

"Is that the ship?" Aidan asked his parents.

"Yes, son," Liam said.

Aidan looked at it. "Finnian *Lugh* class battle transport."

Liam smiled at his wife.

How do you know? The telepathic communication came from the young bear-lizard, Ted, who was Aidan's friend and constant companion. He was the grandson of Swift Hunter, a bear-lizard who had saved Liam's life during the Azurian Invasion.

"Retractable star-drive nacelles," Aidan said. "That's a new feature with the *Lugh* class. It has to get close to an enemy-held planet, so it's bristling with weapons like heavy rail launchers, x-ray lasers, and plasma cannons. It needs to protect itself and deliver close-in support."

Oh, Ted replied.

"If you applied the same diligence in school, young man," his mother said, "you would be getting high-level grades."

The fifteen-year old tossed her his "Oh, Mom" look and went back to studying the ship.

Liam smiled at his wife again as the ship touched down. He knew that she wished that at least one of the girls had possessed the calling to be in the service of the Creator. At the same time, she was proud of them. The three had just completed advanced military training on *Albain Nua* (New Scotland).

"Battle Transport *Conn Cétchathach*, set to begin disembarkation," the loud speaker announced.

"That means *Conn of One Hundred Battles*," Aidan told Ted. "An ancient Irish king. Remember, Aunt Gráinne (Gran•ya) told us about him."

Soon uniformed troops began to exit the transport. They assembled into ranks. Two soldiers walked to the front of the group. One, a corporal with a red curl peaking out from under her cap, shouted a command, and the troops went into an at ease stance. The senior officer spoke briefly. Then the corporal gave a dismissal, and the soldiers broke up. The two in front turned toward Liam's family as two more joined them. The four walked in step across the tarmac.

Liam grinned. His cousin, Gráinne, had brought his little girls home. Not so little anymore. The triplets were now twenty-two.

The same age I was when Azurius attacked New Olympia, Liam mused to himself.

"Well, here ye go," Colonel Gráinne O'Connor announced as they approached. "Yer three wee girls, home safe and sound."

Deirdre, Aisling, and Bayvin stood at attention, their faces a disciplined mask until one saw their green eyes sparkle with mischief. The three snapped their father a crisp salute. Then they tossed military discipline to the winds, dropped their rucksacks and ran to throw their arms around him.

"We missed you, Daddy," Deirdre said into his shoulder.

Liam ran his finger along the Finnian corporal's insignia on her shoulders. There would be a tale to be told on how she earned them.

"Congratulations, Corporal," he said proudly as she beamed back at him.

The three then embraced their mother. Finally they wrapped their little brother and his friend in their arms.

"We even missed you, baby brother," Aisling said with a laugh. Aidan returned the hug. "I missed you too."

Gráinne greeted her cousin and his wife.

"So," Liam asked, "have these three been behaving themselves?"

"O'Connor women, behave themselves?" Gráinne replied with a laugh. "Don't be daft. If they behaved themselves, we'd disown them."

Celinia raised a stern eyebrow at her daughters.

"Don't let her fool you, Mom," Bayvin said with a disarming smile. "We didn't get into anymore trouble than anyone else."

"At least," Deirdre said with a mischievous grin, "we didn't get caught getting into anymore trouble than anyone else."

"What was the *Conn Céthach* like?" Aidan asked.

"We didn't get to see her in action," Aisling replied.

Gráinne smiled at the boy. "I have. It and eight others like it took my regiment right up to Rigel Five. They put up such a fierce barrage that my shock troops weren't even noticed. We were a little disappointed. The enemy was surrendering by the time our feet touched the surface."

Aidan looked enthralled. Gráinne leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Still training to be a pilot?"

Aidan smiled. "Jarek is having a friend of his, Tymier, teach me."

"Just remind him that not everyone has six arms," Gráinne said.

The girls picked up their rucksacks and fell in with their family.

"You have your assignments yet?" Liam asked.

"Not yet," Deirdre said. "We do know that we're going into separate units," she added with disappointment in her voice.

"Good reason for that," Gráinne said. "If you get into a bad scrape, we don't want to have to send three condolence messages at once."

Celinia hugged herself at the thought. It was something no parent wanted to think about.

"Ted is learning about astrogation," Aidan told Gráinne.

Gráinne looked at the bear-lizard who'd been quiet up to now.

It's fascinating, Ted said. It applies a lot of advanced math. Plotting courses to get to places, taking into account gravity wells by planets, stars, and black holes.

"Tymier has been teaching him as well," Liam said. "He says Ted has talent."

The crowd thinned as they left the spaceport.



The first leg of their journey home was a trip through the portal from the South Corinth Spaceport to the island city of New Santorini. Then an automated transport took them to their village just outside the city and let them off in front of their house. The girls were regaling them with stories from their training when Deirdre stopped mid-sentence.

Across the front of their yard was a large banner that said: "Welcome Home Aisling, Bayvin, and Deirdre." Inside the yard was a throng of family and friends.

Deirdre was the first out of the transport and into the arms of their great-grandparents.

"*Seanathair* (Grandfather) Patrick, *Seanmháthair* (Grandmother) Maggie!"

Patrick and Margaret McGregor were Liam's grandparents on his father's side. They had become building contractors when they retired from the Finnian Military. When they learned that their only son's child had survived and was married, they came to

Etrusci to build a house for him and his wife. Then they decided to stay. Some of their crew also stayed, making the seaside village of Aran a Finnian enclave.

"Aren't ye three a sight?" Margaret laughed through her tears. "Taking yer place among the Finnian heroes."

"Hi, Uncle Randolph, Aunt Teresina," Deirdre called. Her sisters echoed her greeting.

They turned to their cousins. The oldest was Kia, now a novice priestess, and her younger brother Marcus, several years older than Aidan. With them was Priestess Sylvia, a family friend who had often looked after them when they were young.

"It's good to see you all," Aisling said, grinning as she remembered the adventures they'd had as kids.

"Sylvia and I got a day off for your homecoming," Kia said as she greeted her cousins.

"Arch Priestess Arria sends her love," Sylvia added.

"How about you, Marcus?"

"Heading out tomorrow morning for New Terra," he said. "I start university soon. I'm majoring in Mining Technology."

A group of furry quadrupeds ambled over to the receiving line along with Ambassador Jarek.

Well met, Swift Hunter said.

Great Heart came beside her mate. *So like their father.*

"They did inherit their mother's looks, though," Jarek of Gothow said.

"Aye, that, Ambassador," Gráinne said, coming up behind them. "They broke many hearts during training."

Other friends and family gathered to say hello as Ted and Aidan went off to sit by the seashore and talk.



Liam went up to Swift Hunter. The rest of the party seemed to slide around them.

"It's been a joy to watch how their friendship has blossomed," Liam said, looking after his son and Ted.

Ted will be traveling paths that few of our kind have traveled, Swift Hunter said. *With Aidan at his side they will take on the universe together.*

Liam smiled at the thought. "The universe has a fight on its hands."

You were with the Great Shaman, Storm Cloud, when he crossed over into the next world, Swift Hunter said.

Liam nodded. "Jarek had mentioned it once. How some people, at the end of their lives, can step into the dreamscape with their physical bodies."

That is rare, Swift Hunter said in awe, *even for my people. I've not heard of it happening in many lifetimes. That was a great thing to have witnessed.*

"We were dreamwalking when he did it," Liam said. "It was like all the burdens of his old body had fallen away. We talked a little more. He named me 'Dream Warrior' and passed me the mantle of 'shaman.'"

You were helping him with the spirits, Swift Hunter pointed out.

"I don't know if I could ever be ready to do that on my own," Liam said.

It seems that way with any new task, Swift Hunter said. *When you confront it, it will get easier.*

"As you're fond of saying," Liam replied with a smile, "most things do."

I'm fond of saying it because it's true, Swift Hunter told him. *Have you told Jarek?*

Liam nodded. "Jarek said that now there are a few things I could teach him."

Liam's grandmother came up to them. "I know yer conversation is interesting, but we have guests."

"Sorry, Grandmother," Liam said. "Swift Hunter, we'd better start mixing."

Swift Hunter gave a growl that sounded like a chuckle.



As the party wore on, the instruments came out. Ancient Irish and Finnian songs and dances filled the air. Liam played the old uilleann pipes that he had inherited from an uncle. The music built. Some of the Finnian from the village began dancing the distinctive straight-armed dance that was over a thousand years old. The stark, primitive beauty of the music startled those that weren't Finnian.

Finally the instruments were put away, and the party began to break up.

"We've got to get back to South Corinth," Randolph said. "Tomorrow I head to New Olympia for a council meeting."

"You shouldn't have been such a naughty boy," Liam teased his foster brother. "Now you've earned the worst punishment they could give—High Councilor."

Randolf laughed and put an arm around Liam's shoulder. Then he turned to his nieces. "I'll see you again before you're reassigned."

"I'll see ye later," Gráinne said. "I promised Ephram I'd call him before I went to bed."

"Give him my regards," Liam said. "Tell him I wish him all the best on his new position as an instructor for basic training on *Éire Nua* (New Ireland)."

"I also have to call Dillon and his wife. They promised to visit us," she said. "I've got to go to Thrace and remind them. Now I must get back to the ship."

"Good night, Aunt Gráinne."

Even though Gráinne was Liam's first cousin, his children followed the tradition of calling her "aunt" out of respect.

We'll be going too, Swift Hunter said. *We'll be around, by and by.*

I'll see you tomorrow, Aidan, Ted said as he joined his parents, Silent Shadow and Plains Flowers, to walk back to their home, a hillside cavern outside the village.

"After we help with the cleaning up tomorrow," Aidan said, "we can look at some of the astrogation manuals Uncle Jarek gave us."

I've been wanting to look them over, the young bear-lizard said.

"Once you've finished helping," Celinia reminded them.

"Yes, Mother," Aidan said in resignation.

After the last guests had gone, Liam and Celinia herded their children into the house.

"You've had a long day," Celinia told them. "Time for you to get to bed."

"Yes, Mother," the four said in singsong unison, like when they were little.

Aidan headed to his bedroom. The triplets headed to the room they'd shared since they were children.

Liam put an arm around his wife, and she leaned her head into his shoulder.

"They've grown up too fast," she said with a sigh.

Liam kissed her on the cheek. When he started to pull back, she turned and kissed him soundly on the lips. They lingered like that for a minute, then broke off and nodded their heads together.

"I think we should follow your advice as well," Liam whispered in her ear.

Arm in arm, they headed to their bedroom.



Carl Black looked out over the city of New Olympia. Richard Jones and Michael Isaiah joined him on the balcony of the apartment Gaius had provided for them. It had been over three months since they had come out of stasis. Once sufficiently recovered, they had traveled around, visiting many of the cities.

"Different from what we planned," Carl said.

"They kept our design for the Temple like the one in Visul," Richard noted. "The priestesses have more power than we intended. I'm surprised at the ways they changed the religion."

Everything we put in about keeping the purity of the race and Utopian philosophies is gone. It's like some ancient clerics came and reshuffled everything."

"Now they follow a belief in a universal Creator, similar to old Earth and most of the galaxy," Michael said. "It seems pretty well established."

"We'll just have to unestablish it," Carl replied. "We've been away too long. The plan our faithful children have devised should alleviate the problem. Everything is ready. We start as planned."

Carl turned to look at his compatriots. "Now, what've you found out?"

"Malcolm and Emily's Finnian *kids* are definitely here," Richard said. "A shipful of commandos just landed for leave. In fact, they brought home the big hero's three girls."

Carl grimaced.

"I overheard some of the Finnian talking," Richard continued. "I could hear Aidan Steven's influence. They sound more Irish than the Irish used to."

"I think the family is celebrating the girls' return this evening," Michael put in. "I was able to get a look at their training records—high marks. They seem to favor their father in that."

"Obviously hybrids," Carl said dismissively. "What was the word that Gaius used? Misborn? That applies even more to them than to their father. Utopian women would never consider a military career. That, at least, bred true."

"It's almost like the Creator planned this," Michael said. "We don't wake up for six hundred years, and she gets a free hand with our children."

"That almost cheers me up," Carl said with laugh. "You were beginning to sound like you were buying into this stuff."

"Well, we certainly didn't give them the ESP powers at the level they have them," Michael countered. "In fact, we didn't mess with ESP at all. And where did the empathic healing powers

come from? That isn't an ESP power I've heard of. I've only read about it in religious texts and old myths."

"An anomaly?" Richard suggested. "It may have been an unintended consequence of our genetic conditioning. It was latent when we went into stasis. It became active afterward."

"What are we going to do about the Finnian?" Michael asked. "What if they decide to interfere? From what we've seen, the pro-Founders' movement is a pretty small minority."

"We stick to our plan to strike at the power base—the Temple," Carl said. "But now we have to neutralize one of the priestesses' biggest protectors. This Liam O'Connor has got to go."

Michael looked shocked. "Carl, he saved our children from utter destruction. If we kill him, everyone but the pro-Founders' movement will be set in stone against us."

"You're going soft," Richard said, laughing derisively.

"He has a point," Carl said. "Killing the big hero and displaying his broken body for the masses would not be conducive to winning people over to our side."

"Not you too," Richard said. "These are supposed to be the epitome of human perfection. We can't have them—"

"And we won't," Carl told him. "I said he has to go. I didn't say we have to kill him."

Carl turned to face them. "Remember the plan our loyal children outlined for us. We are going to take the Temple. We get all the high-ranking priestesses there, and then our forces move in and hold it. The military won't dare to attack, or there won't be any priestesses. Then we can level conditions such as non-Utopians and misborn leave the planet."

"Wonderful," Michael said. "Then the security forces storm the Temple and crush us."

"They aren't used to hostage situations," Carl said.

"Neo-Etruscans might not be," Michael said, "but I believe the Finnian are. Don't forget, the Finnian Shock Forces are considered elite troops. If they get involved, they can kill us

and stack our bodies like cordwood before we realize we have a problem.”

“We’ve already arranged to have spies at the portals leading to New Olympia and other strategic places,” Carl said. “If we see them moving people into position, we warn them that we know and threaten to start killing the priestesses.”

“What about the priestesses themselves?” Richard asked. “The aforementioned ESP powers could prove to be a problem.”

Carl hefted the case at his feet. “Marshal Kergan gave us a present. We inject each of the priestesses with these every seventy-two hours, and they won’t be able to send anyone messages. We can use this on Colonel Liam O’Connor as well.”

“And what do you intend to do about him?” Michael asked.

“Remember that interdimensional portal we found on the Isle of Circe when we first came here?” Carl said.

“Yeah,” Richard replied. “It’s supposed to be older than even the Alliance’s portals.”

“We just send him through that,” Carl said. “We don’t kill him. We just make him leave.”

“Shouldn’t we send people to get his kids out of the way?” Richard asked. “If they surrender, they can leave with the Finnian. If not...”

Michael turned and looked out over the city as Richard and Carl walked back into the room. He felt very uneasy about all of this.



Deirdre had eaten breakfast and was clearing off her dishes as her father came into the kitchen. Liam was in Neo-Etruscan security fatigues.

“Hi, Dad,” Deirdre said, as she kissed her father on the cheek. “Where are you heading at this early hour?”

Liam gave her a hug. "New Athens. Major Leonardo sent an urgent message saying he has a problem. He's sending a transport to pick me up in South Corinth."

"I'll walk with you as far as the portal in the city," Deirdre offered.

Aisling, Bayvin, and Aidan were just coming down the stairs.

"Hey," Aisling said, "no fair."

"You chose to sleep late," Deirdre said with a laugh. "Sorry."

Like they were kids again, Aisling stuck her tongue out at her sister. Deirdre just laughed and waved. She took her father's arm, and they walked through the gate and into the village lane.

"So," Deirdre asked, "what does Major Leo want now?"

Liam shrugged. "Message didn't say. I wish he'd learn to do some problem solving on his own."

"You could retire," Deirdre pointed out. "You've earned a rest."

"What makes you think retirement is restful?" Liam asked. "Everyone will think that since I've got time on my hands they can ask me to do all sorts of things."

Deirdre laughed. "Perhaps you'll become High Councilor."

Liam pretended to suppress a shudder. "No thanks. I saw what that job did to my father and what it's doing to my brother."

Deirdre knew how her father felt about his brother and squeezed his arm.

"I think bear-lizards would call on you for spiritual matters," Deirdre said. "Some lost spirit needing you to point the way home."

"Don't remind me," Liam said. "I should be really annoyed with Storm Cloud for making me his heir. At least it doesn't involve paperwork."

They waved to Ted as he jogged by on all fours. He tossed a wave as he passed.

"Well at least life isn't boring," Deirdre said brightly.

Liam laughed. "When you get to be my age, my daughter, you'll realize that there is a virtue to boring."

Deirdre shared her father's laugh as they approached the edge of the town.

"When I was your age," Liam said. "I couldn't imagine living in another city. I could barely even imagine another city."

"Now you live in a Finnian village just outside another city," Deirdre said. "Storm Cloud once told us that change is the only thing that's constant in the universe."

Liam squeezed his daughter's arm. "That, and the Creator's love."

"I haven't had breakfast." He looked at his daughter. "Pastry? My treat?"

Deirdre grinned and nodded. They walked to their favorite street vendor.

"Tarpier." Liam looked at his daughter.

"Make mine *treaten* fruit," Deirdre said.

They accepted the flakey pastries, and Liam handed the man his money.

"Keep the change," Liam told him.

"It's good to see you home, miss," the man said.

Deirdre smiled back at the vendor. "If only for a little while."

"I must confess," the man said, "I'd be worried sick if my girl was going to war."

"I just keep telling myself that the Rebels are the ones who need to worry," Liam said.

"Does it help?" the vendor asked.

"Sometimes," Liam replied.

He and his daughter walked on, eating their snack.

Liam smiled at her. "I hope that with you three joining the fight, it will be over soon."

Deirdre took a thoughtful bite, chewed, and swallowed. "Then we can consign the Rebellion to the dustbin of history along with Azurius."

"The Rebels have skilled leadership now," Liam pointed out. "The names Kergan and Marisa get floated around most often."

Although, in the last few years, Marisa seems to have dropped off the grid. I heard a rumor that she had a child."

"Isn't Kergan some kind of protégé of Azurius?" Deirdre asked, remembering the intelligence briefings she'd sat through. "A formidable dreamwalker in his own right. Marisa is much the same except she helped create the chitin. Evil *brizo*, to use the Gothowan, from what I hear."

"Watch your language, young lady," her father said as he raised an eyebrow.

"I understand that she was once Azurius's lover," she said.

"I heard she dumped him," Liam replied. "So perhaps she's not all bad."

"Dad, she is the butcher of Epsilon Vega Five," Deirdre said. "If I get a clear shot at her, I'll put her down like a mad felino."

Liam looked at his daughter. "That was centuries ago." He squeezed her shoulder. "I know you're a soldier now, but the Creator requires us to be merciful. I made that mistake once. I don't want you to repeat it."

"If I get her," Deirdre said fiercely, "it won't be a mistake."

Liam decided not to argue.

They made it to the portal station as they finished their snacks. Liam handed her some money.

"Get the others some fruit pastries on your way back. I should be home before dinner. I'll call otherwise."

Deirdre put the money in her pocket, threw her arms around her father and kissed him.

"I love you, Dad," she said. "We'll have dinner cooking by the time you get home."

Liam broke away from his daughter, waved, and was lost in the crowd. Deirdre felt a pang of uneasiness. She turned and headed back home, stopping to get four pastries for her sisters, brother, and Ted.



Liam walked to one of the portals and got in line. Even after twenty-five years, New Santorini was still coming back to life.

"You can go ahead of me, Colonel," a man down the line offered.

"No need," he said. "I'm not heading to anything I'm looking forward to."

"If it weren't for you and your brother," the woman ahead of him said, "we wouldn't be here."

Liam sighed, not particularly wanting to be reminded of the past. "So where are you headed?"

"To Thrace," she said.

"I've been there many times with my wife," Liam said. "It's a lovely mountain village."

"I hear three of your girls just got back from Finnian space," she said.

"Completed advanced tactical training," Liam said. "We're very proud of them."

The woman shivered. "I'd be terrified to let my daughters do something like that."

"I won't say that it doesn't scare us," Liam replied, "but we realize that it's a fear parents have had to live with since they started sending their children to war."

"I'll bet your three will shorten the war considerably," the first man chimed in. "We'll see what happens when we mix Neo-Etruscan with Finnian."

Liam laughed. "If the Rebels knew what they were in for, they'd surrender now."

"I wish it were that easy," the woman said sadly. "I lost my father in the Azurian Invasion."

The first man spoke to the operator. His destination was set, and he passed through the portal.

"Family in Thrace?" Liam asked the woman.

"My mother went to live there," she said. "After losing Dad, she wanted to go somewhere quiet. You?"

"New Athens," Liam said. "The local commander wants advice on an unspecified problem. Probably something he could have asked over the com."

"Don't be too hard on him if it is," she said. "I think he likes that he can call on a hero for help."

"Well this 'hero' was just pulled away from a reunion with his daughters," Liam said. "If he does it again, I'll let them deal with him."

The woman laughed as the operator took her destination. She step through the portal and was off on the next step of her journey.

"Where to, Colonel?" the operator asked.

"Ultimately, New Athens," Liam said, "but I'm being picked up in South Corinth."

The operator looked puzzled. "I can put you down in New Athens in two seconds. Why go the long way?"

"The commander's message said that he was having a transport pick me up to fly me there," Liam said. "The message was very mysterious. I guess he wants me to see what's troubling him from the air. I'll ask when I see him."

"As you wish," the operator said.

He punched the destination into the portal.

"Good luck, sir," the operator said.

"Thanks," Liam said as he stepped through.

There was a brief disorientation. Then he was clear of the portal and in the South Corinth spaceport. A man in uniform directed him to a waiting orbital transport craft.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting," Liam said to the pilot.

"Not at all, Colonel. Just refueled."

Liam looked over the unusual craft. "One of the new Terran Starlifter Elevens?"

"Yes, sir," the pilot said, opening the hatch.

Liam climbed in and sat down, wondering why such a craft had been sent. The pilot finished his preflight and followed suit.

“It’s a trainer, sir,” the pilot explained. “Terra just sent us several.”

“I know,” Liam said. “My son knows every craft that flies in or out of the atmosphere. He’s getting lessons from Tymier, a Movorian flight and astrogration instructor.”

“How’s he doing?” the man asked.

“Tymier says he’s very good,” Liam said, “considering he only has two arms.”

“We’re starting up, sir,” the pilot said as the engines wound up. “We’re getting up high, so use your oxygen mask.”

Liam shrugged and strapped on the mask. He looked out at South Corinth. Seeing the spaceport from the air was an experience. The *Conn Cétchathach* was berthed. He saw the port crew working on her.

Suddenly he began to feel strange and felt something irritate his throat. He reached for his mask then felt consciousness fade away.