

*~ Celestial Journeys ~ Sky Bound Intrigue ~*

# *Quest for Destiny*

*by*

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*Galaxy Frontiers*

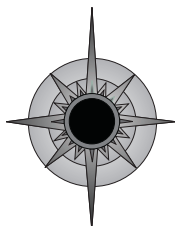
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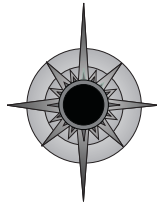
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To the scientists throughout history and still with us, I give my eternal thanks for their inspiration to many. They helped me to see the universe in all its diverse glory. Here are a few notables.

*~ In Honor of Eratosthenes ~*

His insight of light down wells led to the first known  
calculated measurement of a spherical Earth.

*~ In Honor of Hypatia ~*

Though her end was tragic and unnecessary, I admire her dedication  
and courage to the pursuit of knowledge – even when ignorant  
doctrines swirled around this scientist, eventually leading  
to her violent death. Her legacy lives on.

*~ In Honor of Bruno, Copernicus and Galilei ~*

The results of their scientific cravings is still with us, despite  
ridicule and persecution set upon them by those  
who choose to remain ignorant.

*~ In Honor of Charles Robert Darwin ~*

His consideration for a direction of evolution, others had similar  
courage to grow understanding of nature and our place in it.

*~ In Honor of Newton and Einstein ~*

Because of their pursuit for answers to a few basic questions  
of the universe, we all have more to think about.

*~ In Honor of Carl Sagan & Neil deGrasse Tyson ~*

In helping people comprehend the marvels of the universe,  
many of us have a better grasp of science.

~ ~ ~

*~ To All Current and Future Scientists ~*

May the quest for knowledge grow stronger in each of us, and  
let us all recognize those on the quest.

~ ~ ~

*~ A Special Thanks for the Library of Alexandria ~*

This place of accumulated knowledge was lost to the world, its  
works ravaged by those who would suppress the pursuit of  
knowledge. Let the history we're making now be steps  
to true understanding of the universe and not  
a regression into ignorance.

~ *Introduction* ~

**Q**uest for *Destiny* goes far beyond the legends of vampires, werewolves and extraterrestrial visitation, as well as other myths and controversies. It shows the relation of Vampians – the root of the various legends, including vampires and werewolves – with the Earthier sapien population and how extraterrestrial civilizations influenced both.

Many mysteries are threaded through history and it takes extraordinary minds to unravel the gnarls permeating through societies. Sarita has such a mind, though the depth of her discoveries become overwhelming.

The anatomy of this and other extraordinary tales of JZ involves layers of interlaced relations. Components and threads throughout the volumes are not gratuitous – and are presented to build a broad view of interdimensional history, cultures, unique qualities of people, shared affections, elements of sciences, interstellar connections, reincarnation, interdimensional entanglements, mystical arts, appreciation of full femella form and much, much more. If you're a mature, thoughtful person who views the universe on a grander scale, then venture into this and other intrigue tales of Jeremiah Zimmerman.

~ *Celestial Journeys: Sky Bound Intrigues* ~

## QUEST FOR DESTINY

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

~ *Prelude* ~

On a late, peaceful evening within a diner at Sunset Beach, California, a mature woman read passages from a hardbound book between bites. Her crescent, aqua eyes regarded the waitress with interest while the younger puttered about, keeping busy. Bells within the corner tower—providing the name for the establishment, the *Bell Tower Grill*—toned softly eleven times after a brief rendition of Für Elise. Christmas lights framed the window of the booth, giving the femella a view of the nearly empty street. Her forest-green, ankle-length dress and black knitted shawl conveyed a heavy appearance to her modest stature.

She took time to savor the rare lamb chop and colorful sautéed strips of bell peppers over a bed of wild rice. After her eighth bite, she reached into a spacious, cluttered, rusty-red suede purse lying next to her on the booth's vinyl seat, retrieving an ear piece from an inside pocket.

With one hand, she slipped the deep-gray, oval device on her left ear. The flattened egg-shaped device cloaking the ear like a smooth, padded muff wasn't quite hidden under the butterscotch braid wrapped twice around the crown of her head. The braid was held in place by a trio of decorative black rods. Reaching back into her purse, taking hold of a squat, circular, dark-metallic instrument that fit comfortably in her hand, she heard the soft identifying tone in her ear.

Releasing the module, she pulled her hand from the purse, instructing softly, "Ivmarla. Please connect me with Dayton Logistics."

"Yes, meerum," came a pleasant, feminine voice in her ear, using an honorific expression from home others in the diner would relate to as *madam*.

After a couple rings, a man answered. "*One Eighty-Fourth Logistics.*"

"Hello. This is Alice Nicholas for Trayton DuRoss. He may be out at this late hour." Her inflections had a foreign blend none of the local populace would trace.

After a series of barely audible clicks on a keyboard, the voice informed her, "He is out at this time, ma'am. I could pass a message."

"That would be nice. Please, tell him I'm around for a few hours and would like to talk. He has my comm-number."

"I'll pass the message."

"Thank you. Farewell."

"Have a pleasant night."

The woman touched the piece at her ear and the connection was severed.

A few bites later, the taller waitress came closer, asking, "How is everything?"

"Quite enjoyable. Thank you," the mature woman told the slender, yet shapely femella, having loose, wavy, light-brown hair. She wore a red trimmed, knee-length, cream uniform dress.

"More tea?"

"Yes, please. That," closing the book, pushing it to the edge, closer to the waitress, "and an autograph. I would also like some of your time to discuss this work."

Pale-hazel-brown eyes of the waitress looked at the dust cover titled *Into the Night; When Abductees Stay Missing*. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"We haven't met before." Opening the book to the inside title page for her to sign, "I was hoping to talk about it." Fingering the second author name, "You are Renée Hogan, are you not?"

"I am." Pulling the pen from her apron pocket, "A few of my customers knew I was part of that, though you're the first I didn't know personally who placed me with it. Would you like it to you?"

"To *Alison* would be nice."

Once done, "How did you know it was me?"

"I saw depictions within a group of archive journals."

"I suppose I should get used to this. Max warned me." Placing the pen back in her apron, "I'll bring you another tea now."

"I *would* like to talk about this book."

"Sure. Let me check on the other customer and I'll be back."

"Take your time. I'll finish this meal and we'll share a couple slices of cobbler and milk – or whatever you would like. I saw there was some raspberry rhubarb."

"It's very good."

"I'm sure it is."

The mature woman continued her meal, still observing the waitress. She put the book in her purse, extracting the current December, 2006, issue of *Newsweek* – one of five similar periodicals she picked up earlier.

The other customer departed several minutes later and Alison finished the meal. There was little of the second cup of tea left when Renée returned with two saucers and glasses.

"On the house," the waitress stated, arranging the spread and sitting across from the formal-looking woman.

"That's not necessary."

"I'll be closing shortly. Cobblers, pies and pastries are prepared fresh each morning, so let's eat." Indicating the purse, "What did you think of the book?"

"It's informative. You and Mister Yeager conducted a fair amount of research."

"Max had written others. Have you met him?"

"Briefly. I doubt he would remember."

"Knowing him, I'm sure he would," Renée commented, glancing to the form in the green dress, the front barely clearing the table and full to the navel over a slightly chubby belly, showing a degree more cleft within the cowl neckline than Renée's own palm's width. The older woman was striking, lacking cosmetics to spoil her natural appeal. A striking, pleasant demeanor glowed on the femella's oval face. "He knows more about visitors than I do. How long have you been interested in UFOs?"

Finishing a morsel, "A long time; ever since I was young."

"Me, too."

"You and Maxfield talked to Richard's family?"

"His son and wife – and her sister. The wife and son moved to Canada to get away from their troubles."

"I suppose it was hard on them."

"It was. Patty started smoking again. She had quit, but losing her husband was too much for her. Jerry was taking it hard as well, though he seemed to be doing better when we last saw him."

"Have you seen them recently?"

"We lost track. Not even Patty's sister is in contact. They just

got away from it all. I hope they're okay and have a better life."

"I hope so, too."

"Why are you into this stuff?" the waitress asked, then nibbled another piece.

"I'm a historian. Throughout centuries, there had been many unexplained phenomena that influenced events. I'm researching those influences."

"This isn't history. It was only a couple years ago."

"We're making history all the time. What we do now influences each other and events." The elder sipped her milk.

"Courses I took in sociology during my short time in college taught me how events influence people."

"Why didn't you pursue it further?"

"Researching visitors became overwhelming."

"The two aren't exclusive. How societies respond to visitors is important."

"Some of my course studies helped, including biology. I wanted to know how visitors were changing us and why we're so different from apes – especially us women."

"Some answers are partially in this book."

"Max and I often discuss the breeding program visitors seem to be conducting. A lot of us in the field think they're shaping mankind for a destiny. Max and I agree that view has several flaws. They're taking too long. We breed animals to our liking in a much shorter time."

"That's done with non-sentient beings absent of cultural biases and pressures."

"Those biases were a big reason I majored in sociology, having a minor in biology. I wanted answers for why my sister and I were so dissimilar. It seems to go beyond culture and upbringing, since we were raised much the same. I love her dearly and live with her and her husband, but we see the world so differently. Sometimes I think those out there had something to do with it. I feel there's more to why our population has so many distinctions. Some of it might be explained by isolated pockets evolving separately for a while, then mixing later, but there's so many missing pieces. No other species has such diverse physiology and behavioral distinctions than we do. I was hoping to get answers from classes, but they didn't seem to have them."

"It's not my field, though I know there are reasons to be found. Why did you stop pursuing those answers?"



"I still pursue them, though I'm more interested in the visitors."

Alison expressed between bites, "It's my understanding that factions beyond this world are partially the reason we're so diverse. I've heard of other hidden groups imposing their own influences. Keep that in mind."

"I will. You're studying those hidden groups with the visitor phenomena?"

"I mainly focus on how both affect historical events. That's what you do, as well," Alison expressed, then sipped more of the chilled milk.

"There's not many of us investigating sightings like this one. Fewer delve into historical or social effects. I read a lot about past events, but I wouldn't call it history."

"It's true there are not many of us, but there doesn't have to be. As for what you discovered in Oregon; you and Maxfield were trying to locate Richard?"

"Neither of us expect to find him. We hoped to understand what happened. Visitors rarely keep those they abduct and it was clear something went wrong with the craft and it crashed in the ocean. The FAA and Coast Guard, even Canada, acknowledged something may have occurred over the north Pacific, even if nothing was found. There were no official aircraft disappearances that day. Of course, they won't admit losing experimental aircraft. They won't say it's visitors either. There were some people on a yacht and cruise liner who saw the craft change course. It became erratic after leaving Oregon. Initially, it was heading west, then came back towards land before hitting the water. No one saw it splash, but we're certain it did."

"That's the last it was seen?"

"Max and I are still keeping an ear out for new evidence, but nothing solid has come to us yet. Why are you interested? When it happened, there were a couple other people interested."

"Who would they be? I don't recall reading about anyone specific."

"Most people we talk with don't want to be mentioned and we'll keep their confidentiality intact." Standing, "One moment. It's time to lock the door. Don't go anywhere."

The waitress went to the entry, latching it before sliding the sign to *Sorry, Closed*. She then went to a side wall and turned out most lights.

Returning with another two slices of cobbler, "I work up an appetite doing this job."

Accepting the saucer, "Thank you. I could do with seconds." Forking a piece, "Names weren't mentioned, but you have details of reports involving the Air Force Base in Ohio."

"There's a lot going on at Wright-Patterson. Pieces of the Roswell crash were taken there. Max doesn't think any of the one from Oregon got there, but others we put in the book probably did."

"Have you been there?"

"I've been near the base, but not on it. I know they won't show me anything I want to see."

"Like what?" the woman asked, taking another nibble.

"Underground facilities. I have files of clippings going back to the Forties about the place. There are rumors you wouldn't believe."

"You may be surprised about what I would believe."

"I suppose. You did read that book."

There was a tone in Alison's ear and the pleasant feminine voice informed her, "Meerum. Trayton DuRoss returned the call. He's waiting for your response."

Setting her left hand gently on Renée's arm, holding it, the mature woman told the waitress, "One moment. I'm receiving a call." She then touched the device at her ear with her free hand, saying, "Thank you, Ivmarla. Please have him wait a minute."

"Yes, meerum."

Releasing the younger, Alison extracted a flap-covered wallet from the matching suede purse, telling Renée, "I'm sorry. I have to take this. I didn't expect him to call back until morning."

"That's fine," Renée told her, as the formal woman slid a hundred dollar bill from the wallet, nudging it under the saucer having half the cobbler remaining.

Standing, Alison shouldered the purse, returning the wallet. Her extraordinary zaftig nature became more apparent as she leaned to the younger, kissing Renée's cheek. "I'll see you another time. Take care."

Rising and following the customer to the lobby, "I have to let you out."

"Thank you."

As they drew closer to the entry, Alison stopped at a collection of photos stapled to the main wall. There were scores of pictures.

The elder commented, "I was looking at these when I first came in."

"They're fun. They're some of our customers over the years."

"You're with a lot of them."

"A few. I've been here a while."

Indicating a round faced brunette, Alison queried, "Marissa was here?"

The waitress noted the standing woman pictured between two tanned surfer-like men in colorful buttoned shirts. The chubby femella in a modest sweater was a blend of the two who viewed the image, having soft-looking, darker hair.

Renée told the other, "That's Mary. She used to work here. I never heard her use that other name. You know her?"

"Somewhat."

"She moved up to Oakland a few years ago. I don't know where she is now. She met someone and left there a while back."

"A lot of people disappeared," Alison toned, going to the door. With a slight bow of her head, she expressed, "Well – I thank you again."

Outside, strolling down the sidewalk, she heard the door relatch. Streetlamps provided ample light, as the woman spoke to the air, "Ivmarla. Please connect me with Trayton."

"Yes, meerum," the voice stated, then there was a tone.

"Hello, Trayton. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"That's quite all right. This is a pleasant surprise."

"You sound awake."

"Peter and I had been listening to a radio mystery from the Nineteen Fifties."

"That's a lost art."

"Not lost in this home. Are you coming to visit?"

"Not this trip. I'm calling to warn you. Sarita and Raanana are drawing close and will meet soon. You'll need to take care of both when they come asking."

"So it's beginning."

"There's much we don't know. Please find out what you can. I would appreciate it."

"You have more resources."

"It only seems that way. There's too much confusion and I'm unable to contact most of those who may be involved."

"They *do* keep to themselves. What can you tell me?"

"Only what's in the files I already gave you. There may be

a connection with what happened in Tennessee and the Oregon forest."

"We read the files carefully. If there is a connection, it's elusive."

"A lot had been lost," Alison remarked. "Those people may have answers."

"We'll keep a watch on them."

"Thank you. Take care, Trayton."

"You, too. When can we expect a visit?"

"That's hard to say."

"I suppose. Thanks for the heads up."

The femella glanced to the sky, then realize what he meant.

"Yes – heads up. No problem. Bye for now."

"Bye-bye."

Touching the earpiece with her left hand, the woman pulled it from the ear. Still strolling along the sidewalk, she dropped the device into one pocket of her purse, then felt within another for a small metallic sphere differing from the comm-device. Allowing it to identify her while approaching the corner, she pressed three of the couple dozen inscribed dimples. At the end of the block, still holding the buttons, the femella turned wide to her left, then circled towards the right in a wide half circle as though going back towards where she came.

A flickering spectrum of soft psychedelic waves fluttered in her vision a few moments as the building next to her faded with the street and sidewalk. It was replaced by the interior of a powder-blue, semi-translucent tubular corridor curving down towards her right. Releasing the device, extracting her hand from the purse, she strolled down the sloped ramp – a ramp some nine paces across.

The ramp continued another three full circles of the seven loops that made up the corkscrew tube, suspended as a vertical cylinder. The tube itself was supported by cabling and wrapped around a central containment sphere having a bluish-silvery sheen. That sphere was held at the top and bottom by broad cylinder enclosures, all with thick protruding energy rods that passed between the ramp-tube to other apparatuses.

The femella exited at the end of the passage through a broad oval arch into a long, cobalt-blue receiving chamber having twenty-six monitor-computer alcoves along the wall to her right. None were occupied at the time. The darker floor, like most in the complex, felt good to the femella, having a compression much like

the slate-colored leather shoes she wore, giving her the sensation of walking across a grassy field.

"Welcome home, Alsóna," a taller, slender man greeted from her right. His black hair draped passed his shoulders and he spoke a language none she was talking to before would recognize.

"Thank you," she responded, then glanced up to the raised observation-control chamber, higher towards her left, briefly waving to the crew on other side of eleven windows spanning the length of the straight room.

A venerable masle standing between consoles at one of the out-tilted windows touched a button on an overhead communication-board. His gray hair was pulled back in a tail and the wrinkled face possessed a trimmed mustache and goatee. His voice came over the speakers within the high ceiling.

"Differential residue has you returning early. Is everything all right?"

"I hope so," the femella told him. "I achieved my goals before expected. It was still a long trip."

"Is there anything we should record?"

"Not this trip. This is a matter of Epsilon Apollo Dynasty, unrelated to Zeta-Aurora."

"If there's nothing more, meerum, have a good morning."

"Thank you. There is nothing more. Could you please arrange transport? I'm fatigued and would like to go home."

"At once." He then nodded to an operator.

From that chamber, she passed along a processing-reception area having nine, staggered, semicircle consoles. All were unattended, though each could service eight voyagers. Beyond there, through a broad corridor, Alsóna traversed under a wide oval arch into a rotunda having lift-shuttle alcoves on either side.

Stepping to the left, she placed her right hand on a glowing, goldish panel some twice the palm's width and half again as tall, telling the wall, "To surface."

A resonating tone was heard and a curved door rotated near her right within one of the eight alcoves. Stepping into the round room nearly twice her height across, the door closed. Leaning against one of the wooden panels—finely engraved to resemble artistic stonework—she waited as the lift comfortably accelerated her to the top, where it gently halted some half minute later. The smooth, golden display on the door announced *Alsóna Nylsaan Authorized Departure*, then opened.

The spacious lobby was quiet with a single man in a deep-gray uniform of fitted, long-sleeved shirt and slacks trimmed in silver. A high-peaked chevron alongside three pips was presented on the left, upright collar. He came to attention as Alsóna approached, his hand resting casually near the flat-black pistol held within a cradle holster. The barrel of the weapon resembled an oversized, elongated almond with staggered ridges. Slung over his left shoulder was a contoured, elongated rifle having similar flat-black texture and ridges as the sidearm.

"Good morning, Missus Nylsaan."

"Good morning."

"Your transport is eighty seconds out."

"Thank you."

Stepping beyond the lift lobby, into the antechamber, the woman passed through one of seven, glass-gold, automated, revolving doors that kept pace with her casual stride. Out in an extensive garden, Alsóna strolled a few dozen paces under a row of staggered, tinted glass coverings held up by fluted, pink-stone columns. The high cover failed to provide shelter from the light mist carried on the breeze.

The early morning felt good to Alsóna, with faint sunrays peeking from the horizon through mostly cloudy skies. The glow highlighted the meadow of green trees and flowering bushes stretching to the southeast. From under high clouds, a silvery-blue transport capsule descended. A bit longer than a dozen meters long, it had a flat bottom and wrapped with dark windows. Settling close to the ground, the capsule floated closer to the waiting woman, its nose towards her right.

The starboard mid-craft door within an oval ring opened, extending a short ramp. A pleasant masculine voice greeted her. "Missus Nylsaan. Are you ready to depart?"

Stepping on, "Quite ready. Thank you." Inside—noting three passengers in conversation seated mid-craft port side, having swiveled their seats to face each other—she went to the front, settling in the right, aisle side, contoured seat of deep-blue fabric. The left closer seat was occupied by a tall, thin man of golden-brown complexion and long dark hair. The woman told the computer, "Transport destination Oskelee-Ninety-Six-Jeviskee-Three. Thank you."

The pleasant masculine voice on the speaker nearest her replied

while the capsule lifted smoothly into the sky, "Arrival time six fifty-one."

Checking her dainty gold watch on her right wrist – the face hands and date having adjusted to local calendar-time – she noted aloud, "Twenty-two minute flight time." To the man alongside her, reaching that hand out in a greeting, "Hello. I'm Alsóna."

Taking it, kissing the back, "Leshovoe." He was attired in a loose-fitting, sangria-red jumper shirt tied at the waist by a sash the color of mahogany. His trousers were a couple shades darker than the sash.

Swiveling the seat a bit, "Nice meeting you."

"Likewise," he responded, then casually glanced to the display on the arm of his seat. The man asked the woman, "Is this trip duty or pleasure?" He then pressed the endorsing hieroglyph, allowing comparison of social pursuits from each of their personal communal modules – Alsóna having done the same.

As the computer quickly correlated interest ratings, Alsóna told the man, "Duty is done. I'm heading home." Perusing common interests, Alsóna remarked to the one doing the same, "You play Zhelkar?"

"When I can."

Checking the rear of the cabin where four unoccupied seats next to an extendable table were situated under the back windows, "I keep dice in my purse. High score gifts the other when our first arrival bell chimes?"

"We have a game," the man stated, standing, fanning a hand towards the back. "I have a long flight to look forward to. I would like a distraction that's not taxing on my thoughts."

"That's why I keep the dice handy. Sometimes I have to let the mind release everything I deal with."

"Same here."

The pair passed the seven rows of seats, ignoring the westward trajectory. The craft skimmed under clumps of clouds towards a distant modular structure hovering under thicker overcast. That distant city was an extensive complex of uneven layers, having domes and towers anchored on top and below. Other transport capsules of varying forms gave a hive appearance to the structure some dozen miles across and a dozen times that away. Another floating city could be seen somewhat closer towards the southwest.

The woman reached in her purse, retrieving a leather pouch containing nine, pale-gray, marble, regular-dodecahedron dice having engraved number markings. There was also a complementary peg scoring plate. She settled in the starboard seat as a portion of the table extended smoothly.

Alsóna asked the man, having sat opposite her, "Where are you bound for?"

"I'm boarding a sky tram for Atlantica Launch Station, then lifting to Luna Tranolloer-Eighteen. They're expanding three habitat domes for agriculture. My specialty is environmental botany."

"That *is* a long trip. My sheffiree goes to Luna on occasion, as did my father before he went wild. They're both engineers." Seeing an inquisitive expression while handing her opponent the dice, "My father joined one of the wilderness tribes before I was born. I was adopted within a metsee to help prevent a forced trim-culling and became a historian. That doesn't give me reasons to visit Luna much, though I've been there a few times."

The conversation and game progressed. The flight passed quickly, having one in-flight passenger exchange with another capsule, then a porting at a high tower on the hovering city. Fourteen hands of the game were played by the time a faint bell announced the arrival for Alsóna's stop. The pleasant masculine voice announced near the femella, "Approaching destination for Missus Nylsaan."

The capsule docked into a porting-tube at the high base of one of the staggered, inverted, pyramidal towers mounted under the hovering metsee sky city.

Kissing the hand again, the man told the woman, "Thank you for a pleasant diversion. You're good at pulling my runs apart. When I get back, maybe our families could get together for some games."

"It would be a pleasure. My schedule is chaotic, though you now have my comm-contact."

With quick farewells, she stepped from the transport, letting the man go on his way with six who boarded. Alsóna strolled to a lift-shuttle lobby where eight persons in various flowing, colorful attire mingled and passed through with casual pleasantries. Smaller than where she surfaced, this lobby was embellished in maroon, having a butterfly motif. Once doors to a lift-shuttle opened and she entered, it whisked her to the floor near her residence.



A short stroll through part of the poly-floor, helix garden connecting local homes brought Alsóna to her spacious abode styled as a Roman villa. The butler—a short, stocky man—greeted her while lifting off the shawl, “Welcome home, meerum.”

“Thank you.”

Alsóna extracted the book from her purse, then set the purse into an open compartment of a sculpted, metallic, carousel shelving unit that turned for her. She strolled from the foyer into a broad lounging chamber.

Evenly spaced within the room were six octagon columns containing hidden structural tension cables hooked to gravity modules throughout the tower. Each column was façade in green granite tiling having audio speakers and oblong mood lighting closer to the sculpted tile ceiling, as well as two lower governing comm-panels. Assorted doors and passages on three walls led to other areas.

“How was your night?” the masle asked.

“Eventful. Is yev’sheffiree here?”

“He’s supposed to be home in a couple hours. There seemed to be a problem with an accelerator.”

“He’s been having issues with one lately. It’s been temperamental.”

A pair of long-haired, sister Birman cats with a long hair, rusty-colored raccoon came to her for attention on the back of a seat within the circular lounging area contained within a wooden henge-like curtain frame. Most of the canopy’s fuchsia curtains were drawn back. Scattered on the encircled seats between polished granite side tables were artistic throw pillows. A variety of sculptures, potted plants and wall art were displayed throughout the chamber.

“I wouldn’t know about temperamental accelerators, meerum,” the masle stated, watching the femella rubbed necks and scratched behind ears. “Would you like breakfast? Voveerlee is preparing lemon-berry prestoest and sausage slices. We could have something sent by venduk.”

“I ate out, thank you. I’m going to the vault, then to bed.”

“As you wish, meerum. Consort Zharine is in your chamber. I’ll keep the children quiet.”

“Send them in before they head to school.”

“As you wish.”

Alsóna went through a passage opposite tall bay-windows that gave a high stunning view of the sprawling landscape of forested

hills and lakes. Domes and towers of varying shapes hung like stalactites from the sky city foundation reflecting the morning glow of the new day. Scattered across the landscape below, as islands on a green sea, were massive structures and walled cities linked with suspended rail lines.

Going to one of the doors within the family study, she placed her left hand on a side panel, facing a silvery bubble some half fist across. Her eyes open for recognition, the femella faintly hummed a tune at receptors. The door to her right swung in casually. Inside, Alsóna stepped to one of the many glass shelves backlit from walls and partitions. Shelving was cluttered with a great many assorted items, most of them books. She set the newly signed volume with others of similar size from assorted authors investigating off-worlders.

Stepping to the left, she considered another set of taller books. The femella stroked spines of eleven matching, well-bound, leather volumes containing assorted papers titled; *Known Works of Physicist Sarita Rosenda Layla Walsh-Dunlap*. The books were held vertically by a hand-carved, antique, stone ossuary and a two-part, black marble urn figurine in the shape of a domestic cat – both associated with the author.

Softly, Alsóna spoke to the volumes as though the author was nearby. “I wish I knew what you went through back then, so we could help during this early time. We just don’t know enough and there’s too much confusion. It’s unclear what happened to you and so little survived for us to gain understanding of your lives. Know that you’re watched over as much as we can and we’ll help those we’re able to.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*~ Part-I ~*

The night was cold – not surprising for February in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yvette – slender, of modest stature – walked with her friend and fellow second-year student. They both ignored overlapping, aging announcements stapled to a telephone pole, including one bragging about a *Rave of the Century* that occurred on New Year’s Day, 2007 – now weeks old.

“Thanks for helping me understand this experiment,” the thinner expressed, buffering the wind with the hood of her long, wool, cornflower-blue coat.

“We’re partners,” Sarita responded. Her light-brown ski jacket closely matching her complexion barely covered her broad hips. Snug jeans were not suited for the season, but that was what she wore and the pressure gave her assurances. “You’re helping me fill out lab reports so they make sense.” Both had packs and purses slung on outside shoulders.

“Reports are simple. These experiments are not and they’re driving me nuts. I wouldn’t be doing as well, if I had to do this with someone else in the class.” Yvette further complimented, “You’re better at the practical side than all of us combined.”

“You’re fine. You’re catching onto the laser control program. You just have to work on mirror alignments.”

“And tuning equipment. I thought I was good at science. I got decent grades in high school, but this course.... I don’t know if I’m going to pass it.”

“You’ll pass – and you *are* good at science.”

“Not like you.”

“This is about all I’m good at. This, and a little history. My reports are terrible.”

“Stop putting yourself down.”

“I’m only getting a B,” Sarita admitted. “I would do better, if not for those reports and essays. I have to get my points up, if I’m going to get into NASA.”

“You and me both.”

The two chatted while walking east from George R. Harrison building along Albany Street, a familiar route for both. The poorly

lit road was across rail tracks from the heart of the campus and about as far from Charles River one could get and still be part of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The area appeared more an industrial district than a key center of learning. Once upon a time, the area had been part of an industrial district.

Both women had parked in their usual lot, four blocks away. Though it was not student parking, Yvette's mother had a friend who managed the associated building and arranged permits for them. Parking there gave the two more freedom, allowing the pair to study late – as they did that evening.

Clearing the weathered redbrick building—having a newer extension of blue glass and cream stone, giving it a jagged horseshoe layout—they turned left into the driveway.

"Damn," Yvette muttered, looking across the lot. "That light is still out."

Sarita peered to the distant row of empty parking spaces. The lonely, decade old, powder-blue Honda hatchback of her friend sat near an island with two small barren trees and the darkened light pole. "Why did you park there?"

Walking passed the shoulder-high chain-link fences surrounding a grassy storm drainage ditch with its stone intake, Yvette told her, "It was one of the few places left." Bushes and taller trees surrounding the lot obscured more distant streetlamps.

"I'll walk with you."

"It's too cold," Yvette stated. Hugging her friend, "Go to your car and get warm." Releasing the other, "Besides, the moon is nearly full. There's plenty of light."

The heavier, slightly shorter student glanced into the clear eastern sky. The three-quarter moon – large and bright – hovered a few degrees above the bordering trees and distant roofs.

"Okay."

"See you tomorrow for class."

"Yeah. Fun. Literature."

"At least I'm good at that," the thinner remarked.

"That's why I'm taking it now. I can get your help with it."

"Glad to. After class, we'll do something fun – something to distract us from the studies for a while."

"For sure."

Beyond the drainage ditch, the two separated, strolling to their respective vehicles. Sarita unlocked the door of her maturing, burgundy, compact Subaru, slipping inside. Laying the pack and

purse on the right passenger seat, she relocked the door before starting the engine. Giving a half minute to let the oil circulate, she pulled forward across the open space in front of her. Normally, Sarita would exit onto Main at that end of the lot. Seeing that Yvette had not driven away yet, she circled around the island closer to her with its floodlight and two barren trees, orienting the nose towards her friend's car.

Pulling across three rows of parking and over to the driver side of the hatchback, Sarita placed the gearshift to park and peered through her passenger window. Distant lights formed silhouettes. There was no movement in the other car. There was no Yvette.

Leaving the engine idling, Sarita got out and looked around. Stepping in front of her car, she expanded her view beyond the Honda. At the tree line a row away, she caught a glimpse of motion. Wind rustled bushes and trees swayed. There was more. Something was happening near the slope of the ground just within the trees. Sarita's heart raced as she realized what the motion meant.

One thought rippled through her mind while stumbling to her driver door. *He's raping her.*

Turning the engine off, removing her keys from the ignition, the woman fumbled with the mace canister cap. Her hands shook while the memory of her past overlapped the present. The man of her past forced Sarita face down on her own bed, holding wrists together near the simple, blonde-wood headboard. He seemed practiced and confident as he pulled her deep-blue elastic pants down, groping the fullness before undoing his belt.

In the present, the panicked woman ran to the trees, trying to shake away the past while pain of her own memory flowed to the moment that man invaded her backside. In front of Sarita at the trees, another man laid over her friend. His long dark hair in the scant light obscured Yvette's face. Dark trousers and suede coat made him hard to see. Yvette's blank eyes stared up into the trees. It was difficult to distinguish much in the shadows.

"Get off her," Sarita cried out in a shaky voice.

Without a word, the man slowly turned his head to view the woman standing some three paces away. Locks of unkempt hair hung around his narrow face. Eyes focusing on Sarita glistened in the meager light had a silvery-redden glow.

Sarita's voice cracked, "I've got mace. Get off her."

The man rose slowly, stepping closer. His stocky, tall stature was menacing.

*Good*, she thought, realizing he didn't need to pull up or fastened his garment. *He didn't get far.*

"Mace, huh," the voice toned, resonating his displeasure. There was a slight southern quality. "That won't help you."

"Get away," the terrified femella exclaimed, taking two steps back.

Still slow and methodical, the stocky man approached Sarita. Retreating a couple more steps, the woman stumbled. She fell back, landing with her head hanging over the curb. Rolling into the gutter, she scrambled to rise. A strong hand took hold at the base of her thick, black, braided hair.

"I wasn't this hungry," the man muttered, "but what the hell."

Turning her back into the tree line, he gave a shove. Sarita landed across her friend, who remained motionless. Still clutching the mace, Sarita raised it to the silhouette of the man's head, pressing the button. The scream was nothing she thought a grown man would make. It didn't sound human. It sounded more like her cat back home when she stepped on its tail.

Still making out the shape of the man through the glitter of panic in her gaze, she held the spray above his chest and shoulders. The shape thrashed back several steps, letting out another cat-like wail. The canister stopped flowing, but she kept holding it as though it did.

"Damn you, bitch," the man cursed, wiping his face. Moving close again, "I'm going to tear you apart"

"Sire," another voice was heard calling from beyond the trees at the road. "I heard him over here."

"Help," Sarita yelled, her voice cracking more. "Help! God. Please help!"

The man above her looked momentarily through the shadows of the trees and bushes, then ran into the lot, quickly crossing it.

Rustling told Sarita she was being converged upon by several persons. The first arrived beyond her feet at the right. Sarita brought the empty canister up to him. "I got mace."

"It's all right," a masculine, calming voice told her, having a foreign accent she might have placed in calmer times. "I'm not going to do anything to you."

Another man approached near the first, while a third arrived

more from behind. A fourth came into view, remaining further back from the first pair. The last differed from the others, having short white hair, striking in the near darkness.

Frantically, Sarita shifted, whipping her fist around at all four. "I have mace. Get back."

"I've heard," the second remarked, his voice much like the first. They all wore dark attire. Turning to the one on the far side, a taller man, the second instructed, "Go get him." There was controlled anger in his tone.

"At once, sire," the taller responded, his accent tracing to the British Isles.

As the third arrival darted into the lot and disappeared, Sarita eyed the others. None of the men could be seen clearly enough to tell much about them.

"We won't harm you," the man addressed as *sire* explained, "though she needs help."

"What?"

"The one you're on. She won't live long, if we don't do something about the bleeding."

"Bleeding?"

"Lady," the masle stated firmly to bring the femella from her panicked shock, releasing some of his own frustration. "If something isn't done soon, she won't live."

Looking at her friend closer, the ample woman still couldn't discern much within the shadows. She did make out a glistening sheen around Yvette's left shoulder, a sheen that told Sarita her friend was in trouble. "*Oh, my God!*" the woman exclaimed, dropping her keys and pressing both hands to her friend's shoulder and neck.

A sympathetic, firm grip pulled her back, helping her to stand. "That won't help."

The other closer man knelt to the woman on the ground. He quickly pulled the coat the rest of the way open, popping off what buttons remained. He then tore the seam of the cream-colored blouse away from the collar and sleeve, opening the fabric before pushing the bra strap down the arm to fully reveal the wound. Sarita heard a guttural sound and the man leaned closer. It seemed he spat a misty spray into the gash with a faint hiss. Sarita lurched forward in response.

"Relax," the man called *sire* told her, still holding the shoulder. "He knows how to handle this."

She attempted to see what the stranger was doing with his face at the wound and hands pressing flesh together. Sarita wanted to run. She would have, if it didn't mean leaving her friend. Realizing there was something she *could* do, the femella twisted from the hand, scrambling to her car. The driver door was still open. Leaning over to her purse, she pulled out the cell phone. Standing to look towards the building for its address, she began dialing.

Only two numbers were pressed by the time a firm hand cupped the phone, shutting it. The one called *sire* asked, "What are you doing?" The masle gently took the phone from Sarita's trembling hands.

Startled, the femella shifted a couple steps away, telling him, "Calling nine-one-one. Yvette needs a doctor."

"No, she doesn't. She needs time – not a doctor."

"She's bleeding."

"It's almost stopped."

"How?"

"That doesn't matter." Scanning the lot, noting they were not observed, he commented, "It may have been simpler to let her pass onto the next life, but there would be more questions. We don't need others looking into this matter."

"Someone has to."

"That would make the situation worse."

Sarita could tell the man was wondering what to do with her. Under the circumstances, she wasn't comfortable with giving suggestions – not with the look he presented her and their surroundings. They stood in silence a few seconds, then the tall, white-haired masle came from the trees where the wounded student laid.

"Sire."

"Yes?"

"Is Yvette okay?" Sarita asked the taller. Terrors of the past and present were shifting to tears, her emotions welling in her eyes.

"She should be fine in a few days." Turning back to the other man. "Sire. May I speak with you over here?"

"Sure," he told him. Tossing the phone to the far floor of Sarita's car, shutting the door, the man instructed the woman, "Stay put."

The man then stepped with the other masle a few paces away. Sarita watched the two in the faint, yellowish glow of distant lamps and moonlight, the panicked glitter now fading. The smaller,



autocratic man had darker complexion, reflecting his Middle-Eastern heritage. Sarita realized that was the source of his accent, now that the pounding of her blood had eased. She could barely hear the whispers.

"The woman will live," the white-haired man stated. "Did you recognize her?"

"Should I have?" the smaller queried, looking into the patch of woods.

"Gulzar is protecting her and sanitizing the area. I didn't recognize her at first, but she smelled familiar. She's the second born to Mistress Fontaine."

*Sire* looked to Sarita, recalling the name used. "Yvette Fontaine?"

"I'm certain of it."

Looking around. "Damn. What is she doing here?"

"I don't know."

"What's taking Barry so long?"

"I'm not sure."

"Go help him."

The taller man said nothing as he darted in the direction of the other man, seeming an Olympic sprinter.

*Sire* stared at Sarita. She felt as though he pushed her to the car – the gaze of his deep-brown eyes compelling her back as he contemplated what was learned. She bumped against cold metal and glass, realizing it was a reaction to his intimidating gaze that pressed at her. That same gaze held her at the car. Neither said anything. She also realized this man, nor those with him, wore coats. They were each attired as though stepping from an upscale club. This one wore a silver ring on his left small finger.

A while later, the two masles returned holding the stocky assailant between them. *Sire* didn't move as the other men walked the captive to him. Piercing eyes shifted to the restrained man, digging deep. Sarita couldn't see the face of the captive, but he had to be supported, so not to drop fully to the asphalt.

The autocratic stranger asked the supported masle, "What are you doing here?"

"Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"I cannot fathom a reason why you or your sister would return here. Did I not make it clear what would happen, if you did so?"

"You did, Myer. *You did indeed.*"

"And yet, you're here."

"I am."

"Again I ask; what are you doing in my territory?"

"Playing."

"Playing? I don't think so. There's something more to this."

"Fine," the assailant taunted. "Hunting, then."

The motion was savage. The smaller man lashed his right hand across the captive's face, more as an animal swiping with fingers bent, sharp dark nails curled in. Sarita screamed from the sudden motion, as the captive gave that high-pitched wail again.

"You were not just hunting," the smaller masle snapped. "If that wasn't Yvette Fontaine, I may have believed your story. But, it *is* her. I now recognize the smell of her family. What are you trying to do?"

"Sire," Barry addressed softly, motioning his head to the woman behind him.

"She's coming with us anyway, though you're correct. We need to do this elsewhere." Latching his left hand to the captive's throat, the autocratic masle spoke to the other men. "Place Yvette in the back of her car – gently." The pair went to do so. To the woman in front of him, "What's your name?"

"Sar... Sa... Sarita"

"Sarita. I'm Myer. We need to take Yvette to my home and care for her. You're coming with us."

"We're not going anywhere with you."

"Where would you go otherwise?"

"To the hos.... Yvette needs to go to the hospital. She needs a doctor."

"She'll be fine in a couple days. A hospital won't help."

"But—."

"Please trust us. This situation is out of hand and Yvette needs to be protected."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not expecting you to. You may never comprehend this night." The man sighed, still releasing frustration. "I'm asking – though it is just a courtesy. I'm not giving you a choice."

The woman looked to the man standing in Myer's grip, now turned a bit to the side. His cheek dribbled blood from four gashes, seeming black against the light complexion. The captive didn't struggle. That told her something, though not clear what. Her mind was still foggy and panic lurked close to the surface.

Sarita did take something from what she felt: Her life was in the balance.

Seeing that conclusion, Myer assured her, "We will do you no harm, though you need to come with us."

"I... I—."

"Say nothing for now. Please open the door to your car and set the seat forward."

Hesitating a couple seconds, she did so. Myer backed the assailant to the Subaru, pressing him into the rear seat. Barry drew close, handing Sarita her keys while the other two cautiously set Yvette into the back seat of the other vehicle.

Ensuring the captive was not going to the other side and escape, Myer told Barry, "Follow us to my home." Addressing the white-haired man, "Jeremy. You're driving this car." The autocratic one then told Sarita, "Give him the keys and get in the other side – in front." With that, he crawled into the back, shoving the captive over.

After the plump student got into the passenger side – having moved her pack and purse to her feet, obviously protecting them – Myer told the femella, "Place your phone into one of your bags. When we get to my home, leave your belongings on the floor. No one will disturb them."

Sarita did so before buckling the seatbelt. The white-haired man adjusted the other seat back, then the mirrors. Still dazed, Sarita became a passenger in her own car with a stranger at the wheel. That masle started the engine, placed the shift to drive, then led the way from the lot. Sarita could only sit and wonder how what happened to her friend related to dreams and aspirations that guided her since she could remember.

\* \* \*

## *Chapter 2*

Few words were spoken the entire trip from the parking lot. Jeremy led the way a couple miles, then turned into a gap within a patch of woods, following the cobbled way a bit towards the right. They stopped at a sturdy wrought-iron gate bracketed by formidable, square, stone columns having tall, red brick walls stretching into the woods both directions.

Barry hopped from the other vehicle. Once the gate was unlocked with one side swung in, they proceeded along the driveway onto the secluded property, pulling up to the front of a broad, three-story, colonial-style home.

A man stepped out the main doors onto the portico. Seeing Myer crawling from the back seat with the prisoner, as the other men carefully lifted the limp woman from the hatchback, the thin, dark haired masle turned and called inside.

Several minutes passed in a blur for Sarita, as people funneled from the home, taking directions from Myer. Sarita got out of the passenger side and stood offset from the commotion, her legs weak. A few of the residents took hold of Yvette, bringing her inside, then both cars were driven beyond sight.

The assailant was questioned more by Myer a couple dozen paces away in the presence of three men who wore simple, thick, nearly-white attire. Those three then took the captive around the side of the long, grand home. Others came and went, asking the other masles of the circumstances, only to be shoed away.

Myer went into the home with Jeremy, leaving Sarita to be guided by a woman the patriarch simply told, "Get her cleaned and have her sit with Yvette."

That femella—thin, in a slinky, cream-colored gown—went to Sarita. "Hi. I'm Katy."

"Katy?"

The thin woman waited for more. The newcomer's mind was still searching for comprehension of her situation. Katy invited, "Please, come inside. You must be cold."

"Cold? Uh. I am. Aren't you?"

"Getting there. Let's get inside. A hot shower will do wonders for you."

"I... I should..." Sarita had no idea what to do, just that she should be doing something for her friend.

"There's nothing for you to do now, except get cleaned."

Sarita was guided up the steps onto the broad, covered portico with its two-story white columns. They passed through polished dark-wood doors into the grand foyer, then up curved, stone stairs on the right, having patterned runners a shade darker than her car. The steps landed on the white balcony looking into the atrium of the grand foyer. Katy walked her a short distance into a hall to the right, entering one of the doors along the north side of the guest wing.

The large chamber didn't seem like a bathroom; having heavy, dark drapes and rugs; a seating area with a settee, three chairs and a chaise lounge; as well as a mirrored table near the door with a stuffed brocade stool. There was a free-standing, brass tub to one side with matching shower head and two-part curtain ring fastened to the sculpted ceiling. A sturdy wooden stand rested on a broad rug near the tub with folded towels and hand cloths. Illumination from two table lamps befitting the early Nineteen Twenties gave a warm feel to the plush chamber.

"We have to get you out of those clothes," Katy explained in a soothing tone. "I hope they don't stain."

"Stain?" Looking down, the soft light of the room allowed her to see more. Sarita saw her bloodied hands clearly for the first time. She screamed, wiping them a few strokes on her coat. Turning, she bounded towards the closed door shouting, "Yvette?"

Katy sped after her, taking hold of an arm, pulling the woman away from the door before it could be opened. The grip was not forceful, though firm, especially for one more petite. "They're helping her settle. Please take those off and we'll get you showered."

"I..."

Releasing the hold, guiding Sarita towards the tub, "Please take them off before they become permanently stained."

For several seconds, Sarita looked around while standing near the tub. Everything was a haze. Nothing felt real, as strange hands unzipped her coat, nudging it off soft shoulders, allowing it to fall on the floor. Katy pulled the light-green sweater over the

student's head, letting it fall as well. Kneeling to unzip high boots, the thinner pulled each as Sarita lifted her feet in turn. Next off were the jeans and socks.

That left the bewildered femella standing in undergarments, both black as her hair on the light-brown figure that had never shed baby fat.

Still unsure of what to do about the shock, Katy took a moment to examine the broad oval face with its sloping chin. Sarita's nearly black eyes under thick brows stared at her own bloodied hands. With no comforting words to give, Katy moved to the back of the woman and began unraveling the waist long, thick, coarse braid. She then unfastened the hooks of the bra.

Sarita squealed when the pressure released. She spun around, clutching her arms across the volume of her chest that showed a few inches of cleavage above and curvature below.

"It's all right," the stranger assured Sarita. "You're safe here." Katy then told the skittish newcomer while collecting clothes from the floor, "That shower will help. I'll be back with something for you to wear after I put this in the wash."

Sarita watched, turning in place as the woman left the room. After standing for several seconds, she cautiously went to the door, opening it to peer out. Three people near the balcony some dozen paces away chatted too softly for her to comprehend. They went silent when one of them caught sight of her and the other saw where she looked. Sarita closed the door.

Still holding the unfastened bra with an arm across her chest, she went to the tub. The shaky, loose hand turned the two brass faucets. She pulled the brassiere free, draping it on the tub's edge. Looking around, she thumbed her panties down past broad hips.

Sarita spun around and screamed. A flash of the one who sodomized her took momentary hold.

The door opened and another woman's face appeared, asking, "Are you all right?"

"No. Get out."

The door closed.

Kicking the undergarment away, Sarita stepped into the tub. The shower curtains hung from two, brass, half-circle bars suspended at the ceiling. She pulled the parts to encircle herself, the fabric draped within the heavy, contoured tub. Once closed, Sarita peered out one side, then the other. She listened, then looked to

the door again. Not satisfied, though needing to clean, the young woman picked up the homemade bar of soap scented with a blend of flowers, lathering her hands. The attached perforated brass shelf also held a peach-colored hand cloth and a corked, purple-glass bottle of shampoo.

She rinsed hands thoroughly before proceeding to her shoulders, down the arms and under firm mammae. Taking time to ensure she was still alone, she proceeded to her chubby belly, pelvic based with a thick tuft, then along her waist, square hips, backside and down legs. She checked beyond the tub again before rinsing thoroughly. After washing her face with the hand cloth, she shampooed the hair.

Resisting the desire to let the warm water flow over her in an attempt to wash memories away, she reached to the knobs, ending the shower. Concern for her friend pressed stronger than her fear of the past and present. Looking through the curtain, the woman yelped at the sight of Katy a few steps away.

"Sorry I startled you," the thin femella apologized while gliding gracefully closer, taking a towel from the stand to spread out for the guest. "I knocked."

"Not loud enough," the student stated. Carefully reaching out, she snatched the towel. Wrapping herself in it, Sarita stepped from the tub, well away from the other woman.

"There's a nightgown and robe on the settee," the thinner explained, "and slippers below them. I'll be outside while you dress. When you're ready, I'll take you to your friend."

Less than a minute later, Sarita was in the heavy, taupe-colored, full-length gown clinging to her still damp form. It exaggerated her femininity, presenting more cleft within the crossed fabric than she was used to beyond a summer date. The cream robe helped with her modesty and the matching slippers were cozy.

From the one room, Katy led her across the hall to another, a few strides further from the foyer. Yvette was the only other in the sizable chamber. The injured woman—now in a frilly, cream-colored, flannel nightgown—laid in the elegant, spacious bed, appearing peaceful under the maroon comforter and beige flannel sheets. An ornate chair of dark hardwood having stuffed, brass-tacked, brocade seat and back was positioned near the headboard of the bed, complementing the decor of the room. A crackling fire in the hearth framed in gold-vein, deep-red marble and pink stone

warmed the spacious interior.

"You may sit here," Katy told Sarita, indicating the chair, "or crawl in and hold her. We will not disturb either of you. In the morning, we'll bring breakfast."

"Why can't we take her to the hospital?"

"She'll be fine. She may not wake for a couple of days, but she will." Seeing the shorter woman was not convinced, Katy repeated, "She will be fine."

"What did he do to her?"

"That's hard to explain. For now, know you're both safe. We will not let harm come to Mistress Fontaine's daughter or her friend."

"She's Yvette Halpen – not Fontaine. I don't know any Fontaines."

"We tend not to use her mother's married name. We know who they are."

"How do you know Yvette?"

"I know little of her. Let the questions wait until morning. Rest now. If you need anything, ask anyone you find. We'll be up all night. We have to decide what to do. For now," cutting off any other questions with a politely raised hand, "rest."

With that, Katy left the room, closing the heavy, sculpted door.

Out in the hall, a well-dressed blonde man stepped to Katy, asking, "Is that truly Raanana's daughter?"

"One of them is. The other is her friend. Don't disturb them."

"We won't. What are we going to do? What if she comes here?"

"I don't know. We had enough trouble with Eblin – and now this."

"Was he after her for what happened in Memphis?"

"It would seem so. I don't know any more than that. I'm going to talk to Myer now."

Heading along the hall, then downstairs to Myer's personal study, she stepped in. Myer was the only person occupying the room of dark hardwood with heavy drapes the shade of rich chocolate. The chamber was warmed by a fire that provided the only light. He held the black handset of a decades-old phone, listening to the receiver.



Cupping the mic, he asked Katy in a whisper, "Yes?"

Also in a whisper, the femella responded, "They're settled in the room."

He nodded, then put up a finger, speaking into the phone, "I had no idea she was here or how Eblin knew she was. I'm going to talk to him later about it. I want Mistress Fontaine to know Yvette will recover. We're taking care of her. Tell her we have the one who did it and he's not of our colony."

"And Eblin's sister wasn't with him?" a mature feminine voice asked through the receiver, having a distinct accent, seeming of many places.

"She was not. One moment." Recapping the mouthpiece, he asked Katy, "Is there anything else?"

"Not really, my lord. People have a lot of questions."

"So do I. Send some of them out and see if Caroline is in the area."

"Right – the sister. She wouldn't be that stupid."

"The brother was." Myer casually waived the woman away with a palm down finger sweep. Returning to the phone conversation, the masle apologized, "Sorry about that."

"That's all right," Lavina replied. "I should go there and talk to Yvette."

"She's sleeping now. I doubt she'll be awake tomorrow. Eblin opened her wide. She'll live and be fine, but he almost succeeded."

"Then it happened."

"It had to. There was no other way to save her life."

"I understand. I'm certain Raana will as well. I'll be there in the morning. It will take longer for Raana to arrive at your estate."

"She has to know we did what we had to. There was no other choice."

"I know. I'll tell her, but I need to talk to Yvette."

"You're welcome to see her, though I doubt she'll be awake when you get here."

"Then, that will have to do. I can be at Boston airport by sunrise."

"I'll have a car waiting and set a room for you here."

"Thank you. Try not to worry. I'm sure she'll understand your position."

"Thanks for your help with this. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"I wish it was under more pleasant circumstances."

"Me, too. Bye for now."

"See you at sunrise. Bye-bye."

After hearing the click from the distant end, the man set the heavy handpiece on the cradle. He breathed softly, considering the situation and what could be done. Nearly an hour later, Myer rose from the seat.

He went to the grand foyer of gray-veined white marble accented in black marble with gold-veins. A gilded chandelier filled much of the open area overhead. Two broad, third-circle stairs with burgundy runners led to the curved balcony overhanging the underpass he came from, opposite the main entry doors.

Standing off center on the Persian rug, he observed the crowd in hushed conversation on the balcony. As more noticed the master of the home, the murmur quieted. Once silent, he took a few seconds to assess the demeanor, then addressed them.

"For now, we're not in danger. Lavina will be here at sunrise." To the upstairs maid—a petite woman with dark hair hanging loose down the back to her waist—he requested, "Please prepare a room for her in the east wing."

"Yes, my lord."

To a tall man, the butler—his hair slicked back—Myer instructed, "Have a car sent to the Boston airport in about four hours." There was a nod. "Please, have Jeremy meet me around back. I'm taking a short walk. I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Of course, sire."

"As for the rest of you. Go do something. Head to bed. The children should. They still have school in the morning."

One of the parents—a slender woman of moderate stature—stepped to the marble rail. "Myer. How can you insist on school with all this going on?"

"This is but one problem and doesn't concern you directly. The tutors will be here at their usual time, so have the children well rested and in the classrooms."

"I'm not sure we'll be here in the morning."

"That's up to you."

Her husband spoke from the mother's left. "Why did you not know a Fontaine was nearby?"

"Why would Raanana feel she should keep us informed of the whereabouts of her kin?"

"She should have told you. This is your land."

"You know the delicacies of the relation. Mistress Fontaine has no reason to inform any of us of where she sends her children for their education."

"She forbade us from entering all of Colorado. She and her kin should not be in Massachusetts."

"If you like, take it up with her when she arrives. That is, if you're still here. While you're on my estate, you're under my protection. As I said, this matter is not of your direct concern. Mistress Fontaine will know that. Now I have things to do. Don't hang around up there – and keep it quiet. Yvette and her friend need their rest."

With that, Myer exited the front door, leaving the crowd to decide what each would do. The masle casually walked down the portico steps. He sniffed the air, now just a breeze. He had hoped for another, more feminine odor. It wasn't there.

By the time the man circled around back, along the east side of the extensive home, his manservant was on the high, broad, half-circle patio overlooking the south meadow. Myer waived for Jeremy to join him on the grounds, then angled towards the southeast.

With the patriarch still walking casually, it only took a couple minutes for the taller man with white hair to reach Myer and ask, "So, are we going to get some answers from him now?"

"I hope so. I had to discover a few things and give him time to consider his position."

"What did you find out?"

"That we may not be in immediate peril."

"You should have killed him when he was here last."

"It didn't seem necessary at the time. It was a disagreement between the Sullivans and Fontaines. I was not about to deny Raanana the pleasure of the hunt."

"And now?"

"If Raanana wishes to have him, she can."

"What of the sister?"

"The same."

"That's a shame."

"I'm sure if you wish, Raanana would let you entertain for a while."

"I may request it."

"We have to find her first."

They talked of what they knew as they approached a red-brick, single-story building attached to a corral stretching west and east towards the woods that surrounded the property.

A stout man of light complexion, wearing an off-white, loose shirt over tan trousers, leaned against the wall next to a single, heavy, aged door.

Myer asked him, "Has he said anything?"

"Nothing useful."

"Oh well," the shorter muttered with a nod, then entered.

A single candle lit the open interior from an iron, wall sconce. The hard walls and terra-cotta tiled floor did nothing to muffle sounds. A faint scent of rotting flesh hung in the cold air. The scruffy captive, his clothes having been removed, was shackled by his wrists to a short chain that ran through one of the iron rings secured to the floor. The four scars on his cheek had crusted over.

Eying the master of the estate, the captive asked, "Come to kill me?"

"At present, I have no intentions on ending your life." Myer then turned his head to a pair of soldiers resembling the man outside. They sat on a long table mounted at one of the walls – a butchery table as sturdy as they were. "Has he babbled anything useful?"

"Nope," one of them responded. "Just that same rubbish as before."

Nodding again, the patriarch readdressed the shackled prisoner. "I'm here to talk to you about your sister. I would like to speak with her. She's more forthcoming with the truth."

"She's weak."

"Possibly. However, so are you." Drawing quite near, Myer sniffed the bedraggled man. "Being on the run didn't appeal to you."

"I'm not on the run. I'm on the attack."

"Is that what this is?"

"You don't have long to live," Eblin expressed, his tone spiteful. "Raanana will destroy you."

"Yvette lives."

"I know what you had to do. You think saving her life will make up for that?"

"It's all beyond you now. Your only hope for a simple, quick end is to explain your actions and tell me how to find your sister."

"You haven't figured out why yet?"

"I'm certain I have. I want you to tell me."

"You explain it. I'm dead either way. When that Jewish bitch comes to kill you all, she'll find me. I'm sure she'll do something special. Once I'm dead, I'll wait and catch her spirit."

"You're no match for her – alive or dead."

"We'll see."

"I doubt we will. As for here and now, tell me why you felt it necessary to kill Yvette."

"You could have helped us when we came for it. You chose instead to send Caroline and me away. *Move to Mexico, you said – or to South America.*"

"Deeper Central America was an option. I'm sure you could have flown anywhere. All you had to do is leave the U.S. We would have ignored you. But, *no*; you had to come back. For what? Some pitiful delusion of revenge?"

"It's not pitiful. She'll destroy you."

"I think Lavina could calm her."

"She's not here."

"She will be by sunrise."

There was a flicker in the man's gaze, then Eblin forced a smile – a smile the shorter man knew was strained. "No matter. Either she kills me or Raanana will. Then you will die, if not before me. There is nothing you can do to escape that. You're done. Eight hundred years and poof. You're done; dead; finished."

"No matter what is said about us, we all die."

"Lavina doesn't. Or, are they lying about her."

"I doubt that's a fabrication. That's something you're more familiar with. You seem to lack the ability to express truth consistently." While Myer talked to the man, he moved behind him, leaning closer, sniffing Eblin's skin. "Where were you before coming here?"

"She's not there now."

Grabbing the back of the straggly hair, Myer pulled the man as far as the chain would allow, yelling, "Where is your sister?"

Not the timid man anymore, Eblin asked, "Losing your temper?"

It reminds me of someone we know." He was pulled back even further, straining his wrists. "You can rip off my hands, but the truth is the truth. This is not a *fabrication*."

Myer hissed. Sharp, canine-like fangs flipped down, displayed fully to the one he held. Leaning over, he sank them into soft tissue on the far side of the throat under the ear. Eblin cringed as flesh opened enough for Myer to suck the pair of incisions.

After a while, Jeremy casually addressed the patriarch, "Sire. He'll pass out."

The man was ignored. Myer sucked for several minutes, as thick, deep purple-red, oily fluid came from the core of the man to replenish the loss. Eblin did pass out around half way through the draining. The patriarch continued drawing out fluid.

Once done, Myer let the man go. The limp masle slumped over his own knees, his face turned sideways on the cold tile, arms bent out, still held by the chain. Unable to hold his nausea, Myer vomited beyond the victim under him. After several expulsions, heaves turned dry, eventually easing to a stop. Rising, Myer took the towel offered to him by his manservant and wiped his face.

Tossing it to one of the counters with a sink, he told Jeremy, "Thank you." To the pair of men still sitting on the table, "When he wakes, find out where his sister is."

"Yes, my lord," one responded, looking to the man appearing deceased on the floor.

Outside, heading back to the mansion, Jeremy asked his patriarch, "Why the sister?"

"She'll tell me things he won't."

"Maybe not now. It's been three years."

"She'll tell me."

"All right. Then what?"

"Then we give them to Raanana and hope that settles this."

"He almost killed Yvette."

"She lives. She'll recover."

"But what will Raanana think?"

"That, I hope, Lavina will be able to tell me when she arrives and has a chance to see Yvette."

As they continued discussing the matter, they saw Katy on the distant patio. She watched the men approach under the moonlit night, contemplating their situation. After some three minutes, a man approached the slender woman from the wooden, etched-

glass French doors behind her.

Katy turned to the soft sound of steps. "What is it?"

"Sarita woke. She's screaming. We can't calm her."

After glancing to the pair still approaching across the meadow, she headed for the entry, muttering, "It's going to be a long night."

Arriving at the room she had left the friends, Katy passed through the crowd outside the door. Addressing the gathered mob, "I'll take care of this. Go away. You're all scaring her."

Nudging a couple to prod them along, the thin woman entered the room and approached the bed. The only light came from the open door and weakened flames at the hearth.

Sarita was in the bed with her friend, wearing the gown and robe given her. She wasn't screaming now. "Who are you people?" the student asked. Yvette still laid peacefully next to her. "Where are we?"

"You remember me. We met a little while ago. I'm Katy."

"Katy?"

"Yes. You dozed off. That's good. You're at Myer's estate. You and your friend were attacked."

"Katy?"

"Yes." The thin woman saw disorientation fade. What remained was the confusion Sarita arrived with. Stepping closer, intending to sit on the edge of the bed, the thinner assured the other, "You're safe here."

"Get away. I'm remembering. The Vatican was destroyed. The Pope's dead."

"Vatican? Pope? Nothing like that happened. What are you talking about?"

"Get back."

Retreating a step, Katy expressed, "You're safe in this home. So is Yvette. No one here will harm either of you."

"Where are we? What mayor?"

"Myer. Not mayor. He's our lord. He saved your friend. Just relax. You had a nightmare. It's no wonder with all you went through."

"The Pope. He's dead. The Vatican is gone."

"Nothing happened to Pope Benedict. He's fine. The Vatican is fine."

"Not Benedict. John – Pope John is dead."

"John Paul had been dead for a couple years."

"Not John Paul. Just John."

Confusion in the eyes of the plump woman grew again. Katy had her own growing bewilderment. She watched the woman in the bed, examining her dark eyes intently. She then went to the door, waving to the nearest person – a woman – to come closer. Katy told her softly, "When Myer gets to the house, have him come here. He should be at the back soon. Tell him there may be another dream traveler. Then check the news and see what's going on. Something may be happening in Rome."

With a glance into the room, the woman departed. Katy stepped further in, leaving the door cracked.

Though Sarita let the thinner draw nearer, she told her, "That's close enough."

"This is fine. Myer will be interested in discussing that dream you had."

"How did you know?"

"I sensed it. You have conflicting views."

"It's just a dream. I was confused."

"Possibly. However, this may not be an ordinary dream. I gather you had this happen before."

"I'm not talking about it with you."

"That's all right, but please tell Myer of this dream. He's collecting them."

Myer entered the room, asking, "Who's collecting what?" The woman who retrieved him remained at the door.

"You, sire. Sarita had a dream. It sounds prophetic."

"Really?" Myer responded to the plump woman.

"It's just a dream."

Moving past Katy, the man replied, "Dreams are never just dreams. You seem better than before."

"I'm not. Yvette still needs to go to the hospital."

"You'll find that here is the best place for her."

"And where is here?"

"This is my home."

"You all keep telling me that," Sarita snapped.

"There is much to discuss, but you need rest. Please sleep."

"I'm not tired. Why is this happening?"

"We're not entirely sure."

"Then find out."



"We're working on that."

Sarita looked around the shadows in the room. Her mind was clearer, but no less sure of what was real.

"Sire," Katy addressed. "She talked of Pope John being dead."

The woman at the door muttered, "Oh yeah. I was supposed to check the news."

"Before that," Myer told her, "please have Eiddwen come here – and have her bring a pad."

"Yes, my lord."

"Sir," Sarita addressed. "Why do they call you that? Are you royalty?"

"No. My father was a blacksmith."

"Huh?"

"Don't worry about it." Indicating the chair, he asked, "May I sit there?"

Shifting to face the edge of the bed on that side, gently pressing a soft hip against her friend – a protective gesture – she told the masle, "Okay." She then ensured her friend was covered to her neck and seemed comfortable.

Myer sat and watched, informing her, "We'll have someone in the morning give her liquids. We have a broth that will help her recover."

"What happened to her?"

"The man who attacked Yvette knows her mother. He's trying to start a feud."

"A feud? As in fighting?"

"I'm afraid so. He's upset and feels your friend's mother will do something about us."

"Yvette doesn't talk about her mother much. Not that I ask."

"I'm not surprised."

"You know her mother?"

"Many of us do."

"How? I know she has friends around here. She arranged our parking with one of them, but I didn't know she had this many."

"We have little contact, though I would like to think myself counted as one of Raanana's friends. She may think otherwise." Turning to Katy. "Please bring another chair, then leave us to discuss this dream."

"Right away."

As the woman departed, Myer asked Sarita, "You dreamt of Pope John?"

"It's not important. It was just a dream."

"To me, it is important."

"Why?"

"We're all connected in the Akasha and dreams relate us with others in different planes."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"All things are connected," the man told Sarita. "We can sense bonds, if we consider them. It's simple enough to sense our entwined essences. Dreams are more difficult to unravel. Even as long as I've been doing this, I still have difficulties."

Katy returned with a chair matching the one Myer sat in. She was followed by a good-looking, shapely, blonde femella wearing a deep-green gown. The blonde sat in the chair Katy placed at the masle's left. The thinner stepped back a bit before exiting, closing the door behind her.

Sarita examined the seated woman, whose right leg was draped comfortably over the left. Hands of the blonde were cupped on a leather folder. Bright, hazel-brown eyes on her round, pale face watched the newcomer, seemingly in a daze of her own. Thick, loose hair cascaded over the left arm of the chair.

"Who are you?" Sarita asked.

"Eiddwen. I chronicle the lives of our people."

"Does everyone speak that way here?"

"We say what is needed."

Myer smiled. "Yes, Sarita. We tend to speak this way. You'll find that we – by choice – stay separated from the rest of the world. We're connected, as all things are with the Akasha, but we choose to retain much of our past. You'll learn this."

"I'm not going to be around that long. Neither is Yvette."

"We'll see. Now for that dream and Pope John. Do you know which John?"

Seeing the blonde open the folder, taking a gold pen, making notes, Sarita told them, "The current one. The current one in the dreams. I know Benedict is our current Pope. I feel strange."

The man looked to the blonde, who gave a slight shake of her head. He then asked Sarita, "Are you nauseous?"

"No. I'm rattled. It seemed so real."

Eiddwen told the man, "Sarita's had these dreams before."

The student asked the woman, "How did you know?"

Myer answered, "She's good at this. So, you have prophetic dreams." His statement was not a query or of doubt.

"I don't tell people." She then clarified, "I haven't told anyone since I was young."

"You may speak freely here."

"Not that freely."

"Take your time. We have it. Since we don't have a current Pope John, can you recall which John it was?"

"I'm sure it wasn't one from the past, so it was just a dream."

Eiddwen spoke to the masle, "There are several planes with a John XXIV. Some are very close to ours, and ours may be flowing in similar ways."

Sarita declared, "There was no John XXIV. The last John was the Twenty-Third."

"You know your Popes."

"I'm Catholic."

"You pay attention," Myer stated.

"Why does it matter which Pope John it was?"

"Because some planes have a current John." The look he received was dubious. "For now, you don't have to believe any of this."

"You think I dreamt about another dimension?"

"It would seem so."

"Whatever you want to believe." Sarita looked the room over again, then asked, "Am I a prisoner?"

"No."

"Then I want my clothes. I also want Yvette's clothes – and my phone. I'm calling for an ambulance and we're leaving."

"I can't allow that."

"Then we're prisoners. This is a kidnapping."

"You're our guest."

"A guest who can't leave."

"I'm afraid so," the masle declared.

"Then we're your prisoners. Say it as it is."

"We're protecting you."

"I'm finding that hard to believe. Protecting us from what?"

"For now, from Eblin's sister. Caroline may try to finish what he started. I doubt she would, but I'm not taking that chance. Eblin might have other people hunting Yvette."

"Hunting?"

"I'm sorry. I know this sounds strange to outsiders."

"Crazy is more like it," Sarita stated. Her eyes betrayed her thoughts of flight, as she assessed her options.

"Ma'am," Eiddwen addressed in a soothing tone. "You should stay here. All of us will protect you." She then responded to another flickering of the plump woman's pitch-brown eyes. "The police are not familiar with any of this and will not be able to help you."

"How did you.... Never mind." To the man, "Could I get my clothes?"

"They should be clean and dry. I suppose *you* could go. I wish you would stay. Yvette *has* to, but I suppose there's no reason to hold you here."

"I'm not leaving without her."

"Admirable."

"We're both leaving."

"Your phone is in your car and both cars are locked in the carriage house. I'm sorry. You're not taking Yvette."

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

"We have to. Eblin started something. Until we know how Raanana is going to react, this is what has to happen."

"What does Raana have to do with this? She should be told Yvette is hurt."

"She will be – after we know more. She may already know."

"Give me Yvette's phone. I'll tell her."

"You know I can't let you do that."

"I don't know anything. That's the problem."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"You told me enough. You're all crazy. Alternate planes? This is all nuts. Please let us go."

"Ma'am," the blonde addressed the younger. "Please stay." To Myer, "Let me talk with her. I'll get things calmed."

With a nod, he responded, "Of course." Pushing from the chair, "I remind her of the attack too much." To Sarita, "You're our guest. I'll let Eiddwen tell you what we know, which is precious little. In the morning, you'll meet someone who may be able to elaborate on the situation. If she feels it wise, you can call Raanana."

"It's Raana."

"That's a shorter, less formal variant I'm not comfortable with."

I'll see you in the morning. Try to rest. And, please tell Eiddwen of the dream. It is important to us."

The man departed. Sarita looked at the blonde. "I take it you believe this nonsense – this alternate reality thing."

"I do. We have a man who's gaining insights from a place where Adolph was assassinated early in the war."

"So," the brunette asked, going along with the delusion, "World War II went good for us?"

"Depends on who *us* is. With what we put together, France and Egypt remained under the Reich German flag – though fascism was driven underground. America didn't get fully involved. The Germans gained nuclear weaponry before the others and held a good portion of Europe. Greece rose as a world power. The Jewish population in Germany did well under the new regime. The assassination prevented the Holocaust. The new leadership embraced the ethnics and it strengthened Germany's position – though there were struggles. Einstein even returned to his nation of birth."

"Great," Sarita stated in open sarcasm.

"Let's talk of your dream. It won't matter if you believe any of this or not."

"I guess it won't. What do you want to know?"

The conversation went on for over an hour until Sarita's eyes became droopy and she scooted down to a more relaxed position. They chatted about most dreams she could recall, though retained personal particulars to herself.

The blonde set the pen in the folder. "I should let you sleep. I enjoyed this."

"Me, too, I guess. I never told anyone most of that – and none since I was young."

"You have a good memory."

"I have a lot of them – the dreams. They seem related, but not. There are always differences."

"You're picking up on several lives."

"Other lives?"

"We all do. Mostly, we ignore them – or they're forgotten." Closing the folder, Eiddwen rose, telling the brunette, "Sleep well."

"Not while Yvette is like this," Sarita responded, shifting to hold her friend, attempting to warm the cool form.

Eiddwen watched a moment at the door, then shut it, leaving the students in the dark. The hearth fire was down to embers. The blonde went to Myer's den, finding him alone in thought.

"Sire?"

"How is she?"

"Better. Do you have time?"

The masle gestured to a chair at his left. "All night, it would seem."

Taking the seat in a similar fashion as upstairs, "Not going to question Eblin some more?"

"He won't be talking for a while."

"I see. What happened?"

"He gained a backbone to add to his distrustful nature. Very unbecoming – and irritating." Bringing his full attention to the woman, "You must have something."

"A few things. She's definitely a traveler. Strong one at that. She has a good perspective."

"She didn't seem to think so."

"She's still growing into it. She's worried about her sanity, but she's calmer now."

"That's good. Did you get a sense from Yvette?"

"It will be a while before she wakes. She's fighting to live."

"I felt that."

"Those two are close," the blonde told him. The man nodded. Eiddwen added, "Sarita's outcry about the Vatican is interesting."

"There was nothing in the news. We called friends in Italy and they're fine."

"They may not be in a few years."

"Premonitions?"

"I believe so. It appears she also sees Joselynn succeeding the next President's second term. The upcoming presidential election will likely see a breaking of the race barrier, though there is an assassination attempt early in his presidency."

"That fits our plane, as we see it unfolding."

"It does. It should be clearer when Joselynn becomes the Governor of Pennsylvania."

"That might be tricky for a state Secretary of Transportation."

"Modern politics are a tricky affair."

"That assassination attempt appears significant," Myer muttered. "A lot seems to change at that moment."

"There are other differences prior to that attempt. What will we do when he becomes President?"

"Nothing. It doesn't affect us."

"Are you certain?"

"I am. We'll do nothing about it. Senator Obama seems destined to take office and he lives either way. Other changes come from those events. Which path is more beneficial is unclear."

The blonde nodded. "Sarita saw other events I'm intrigued about. She's interested in working for NASA. She has a great interest in the sciences and thinks it's why she's into science fiction. I feel it's the other way around. More that her interest in other worlds and beings beyond here steered her curiosity towards science fiction, leading to her pursuit in science."

"Why would that interest us?" the masle asked, cocking his head. "We have no such pursuits."

"As you told her, we're connected."

"This connection through Eblin and Caroline will be severed once that sister is dealt with."

"I think more is unfolding around us. Sarita has an active guardian. I felt her."

"Her?"

Nodding, Eiddwen elaborated, "I don't think Sarita is fully aware of her, but she is acting from the guidance. That's why Sarita and Yvette became close."

"Do you know why they were brought together?"

"Related to the guardian activities?" Receiving a nod, "Not yet; however, I sense we will know soon enough."

"Soon enough for what?"

"I'm not sure."

"Could this help with Mistress Fontaine?"

"It may," the blonde replied, "though I'm not sure how."

"Fascinating."

"Indeed, it is."

"Thank you. This gives me more to consider."

"I'm glad. I don't think there's much more for now. I'm going to the library and look through a few of the journals. If you would like to discuss more, I'll be pleased to."

"I'm fine for now."

"Would you like company? I could send Nikhil in."

"He has classes in the morning."

"I could stay, if you like."

"That's nice, but I should just think for now. Lavina will be here in a few hours."

Rising, "If you change your mind...." The femella let the offer hang naturally while she swished elegantly from the room.

The man sat in the firelight, contemplating all he knew and how it led to this moment. He felt a profound transformation in their lives took place, yet little had happened. Eblin didn't mean much. Neither did his sister, yet there was great change. The masle felt it as much as Eiddwen.

Myer's manservant entered with a woman whose poise exceeded her modest stature. The patriarch glanced to the window with the morning glow peeking along the edge of the heavy drapes. A quick check of the clock and fireplace told the masle he had lost track of time.

Looking into the woman's upturned paisley eyes—darker than his, complementing her more golden complexion, slightly darker than his—he attempted to assess her mood.

"Myer," the woman addressed softly, as he rose to greet her. "It's not as bad as that."

"I hope not." Stepping close, taking Lavina's dainty left hand, he kissed the silver ring on the small finger. The ring presented an image resembling a curly haired Venus figurine displayed in a museum of antiquities. "Welcome to Cambridge."

Taking the man in her arms, "Thank you." She then kissed his left cheek, releasing him.

"I'll get drinks," Jeremy told them.

"And something to nibble," Myer added.

There was an unspoken agreement from the woman and the two sat while the other departed.

Lavina told Myer, "I talked to Raana when we got in the air. She's on her way. She should be here sometime tomorrow evening."

"Lovely," the masle toned, reflecting the nervous mood permeating throughout the home.

"There's no doubt Raana is upset, though she appreciates what you did."

"I hope so. Did you explain all of it."

"Not all. Some has to be discussed with her here, once I have a chance to catch up."



"Is she aware Yvette may not be awake when she arrives."

"I explained that. I'm sure she understands what to expect."

"How do you think she'll respond?"

"Better than with Bethany."

"I sure hope so. None of us knew Yvette was in the neighborhood."

"Raana is aware of that, as well. Her daughter isn't on the same path. Yvette is going to college here – nothing more."

"I found out. We smelled Eblin and were tracking him when this happened."

"So you told me when you called."

The two discussed matters – partaking of the light nectar, toasted bread, sliced meats and cheeses that Jeremy brought on a silver tray – then Lavina expressed, "I wish to talk to Eblin."

"He's still recovering. I drained him."

"Why?"

"I want the sister."

"We all do. Who's going to be there when he recovers?"

"My soldiers."

"I see."

"He should come to later today. I hope to have Caroline by tomorrow morning. I'm sure she's nearby. We haven't picked up the scent, but I doubt she'll be far from Eblin. Both were on the run."

"I'm sure she'll remain close. Are you feeling all right?"

Myer finished the bite of lightly seared, spicy lamb. "Better. My stomach's soothing. I've held you up too long. Your room is waiting. I'll see you to it."

"I'm fine for now. I napped on the plane. I would like to see Yvette."

"She's still sleeping with Sarita."

"That's all right. I just want to see her."

"As you wish. I advise caution. Yvette's friend is touchy. Sarita is having night terrors."

"I expect she would."

Standing, the masle told Lavina, "We're sure there will be others."

At the door to the bed chamber, Lavina eased the knob and slipped in silently. The man remained in the hall while the more mature woman observed the two youthful femellas, marveling at

the way Sarita held her friend. She watched for a couple minutes, then slipped out as silently as she entered.

Once the door was shut, Lavina commented softly to Myer, "They're sleeping peacefully enough now."

"Good. Sarita woke from a night terror earlier. With what she experienced, I doubt she'll sleep soundly for days."

"Little we can do about that for now." Setting a hand on the man's arm, "You're more troubled than you need to be."

"It's been a troubling evening."

"I could comfort you."

"I doubt I would be good company. I keep forgetting how my stomach reacts to us."

"Later then?"

He nodded with an affectionate smile. "That would be nice."

"We'll smooth the feathers with Mistress Fontaine." With a pleasant squeeze, she requested, "Please show me the room you set for my stay. I wish to make a call."

"Raanana?"

"Canada."

\* \* \*

### *Chapter 3*

Waking in the strange place again, it took several seconds for Sarita to recognize where she was and longer for some of the previous evening to filter into her mind. She held Yvette, who still felt cool to the touch. Sarita had longed for a time when she could be more than a friend with casual satisfactions. The reality of why she was there came slowly – very slowly and hazy.

Laying her head on Yvette's modest chest, the fuller woman listened to the breathing. It sounded steady and strong. Thumps of the heart were less so. Yvette's neck had a red scar. The nightmarish gash had sealed. Sarita dared not touch it, though wondered why it wasn't bandaged.

"Yvette," the young student whispered. Not receiving a response, she repeated softly, "Yvette? Please wake up." Still nothing.

Watching for quite a while, Sarita realized she could see the cool room clearly. Bright light beamed around heavy drapes. That meant the sun was well over the horizon.

"Damn."

Looking around, wondering what she should do, the femella got up, ignoring the slippers. Going to the door, she slowly opened it and stepped out. The crowd from the night before was gone. There was one man leaning against the curved marble rail. He saw her oval face and smiled.

"Sir?" she addressed. "Where's Katy?" Her voice was timid.

Nudging off the rail, the man responded, "I'll get her."

Before he disappeared, Sarita asked, "Sir? Where's the bathroom?"

Pointing to where she had showered, "The tub is in that room."

"I didn't see a toilet."

Indicating a door next to where she showered, closer to the west balcony stairs, "That's the closest water closet." He then went to find Katy.

Reluctant to be away from Yvette, Sarita quickly scooted to the

smaller room adjacent to the grand foyer. It was still a spacious chamber, especially considering its sole purpose. She hastily finished what she had to do and returned to Yvette, waiting near the bed. She slipped her small feet into the slippers.

It didn't take long for the door to open. Sarita had mixed feelings about that. The strange woman entered a couple of steps. She wore a Mayan-blue formal gown having a gray, laced bodice. Sarita needed her there, but didn't want her nearby.

"How do you feel?" the thin femella asked.

"Not good. I want my clothes. We have to leave. Yvette still won't wake up."

"She should be awake tomorrow sometime. I'll have someone clean your friend – and we'll feed her."

"She can't eat. She won't wake up. She's still chilled."

"Her coolness is normal for her now and we have a broth to give her with a sponge. It will help her recover faster."

Remembering Myer's statement from the night before, "Will it really help?"

"It will. As for you; you could eat here or in the dining room." There was no response. "You are hungry, aren't you?" A slow nod came. "Good. I'll have it brought here." Glancing to the one in the bed, "Don't worry about her. She's healthy. This takes time, no matter what you may have heard."

Sarita couldn't respond. Distrusting eyes watched the thin one leave and pull the door shut. The student began pacing the cool room. By the time it reopened, Sarita was in the chair closest to the bed, having ensured her friend was as comfortable as could be.

Katy entered, followed by three slender women who wore gowns of dark colors. The first two carried towels, a steamy bowl and pot. The third rolled a serving cart with a variety of silver covers. The more familiar woman took the other seat, as the cart was rolled in front of Sarita.

"Ma'am," the taller, bright-auburn woman beside the cart addressed the student. "We didn't know what you like." Opening lids momentarily, revealing plates and bowls of fine china, she detailed the contents. "We have some fruits; strawberries, sliced pineapple and chopped cantaloupe. There are waffles, bacon and scrambled eggs, with a breakfast steak cooked to medium rare. We could cook it more, if you like, or serve another less so."

"This is fine," Sarita stated, amazed.

"I'm glad." Opening the last briefly, "This is oatmeal. Under

the cloth below, you will find butter, sugar, salt, pepper and a variety of syrups." Gesturing at two glasses and a cup on top, the woman told her, "There's pineapple and orange juice. Some of us like to mix them. There is also the coffee. We could bring tea, should you prefer. There's a variety of creams underneath."

"Why?"

"Why what, ma'am?"

Katy chuckled and told the redhead, "This is great. Thank you. You can go."

"Yes, ma'am." To Sarita, "I hope this meets to your approval."

"I... It's... It's a lot."

"Yes, ma'am," the other woman replied. With that, she departed.

While that was going on, the other pair at the far side of the bed busied themselves. They started by pulling back the covers and hem of the nightgown, revealing a cloth around Yvette's narrow hips as a diaper. One removed it, exposing a less dramatic patch which the woman wiped with a warm cloth from the pot, parting the legs enough to clean underneath. Once done, a fresh cloth was gently placed and the hem lowered with the covers returned.

That woman left, taking the soiled items. Sarita had noticed the scent in the air from their activities was pleasant. A mix of floral and herbal scent neutralized what was expected.

"Your friend is recovering well," Katy told Sarita, as the other carefully propped Yvette on the pillows, then fed her from the bowl. Indicating the cart, "Please eat. If you don't mind, I'll have some of that pineapple."

"Oh. Sure. Of course." Sarita took off the lid and set it aside, letting the woman take a round slice of the yellow fruit. "Katy," the plump woman addressed, watching her tear it in two, munching on half, then the other. "I don't want to leave her, but we have class today. I should go and get the assignments."

"I'm sure they will understand if you don't attend class today."

"I guess."

"You don't look ready to sit in class. You've been through an ordeal."

"I should go, though."

"We'll pass a message to the faculty. Myer has friends there."

"He seems to have friends everywhere."

"He's been around." Gesturing the spread, "Please eat."

Sarita did. At first, she nibbled a piece of pineapple, imitating Katy politely, who had another. The student progressed to a strawberry, then had a slice of bacon. With those appetizers, her stomach woke and she picked up the pace, sampling everything. By the time nearly an hour had passed, the woman on the bed with Yvette had eased much of the broth into the sleeping femella, using a small natural sponge. She then settled Yvette down, still propped on two pillows, covering her well.

"How was it?" Katy asked Sarita of the meal.

"Fabulous. Why be this kind?"

"Your friend has a special place with us and you're her friend."

"You all keep saying that. We're not special."

"We believe you are. You may not know it yet, but you're unique."

Sarita watched her friend sleep, then responded, "I don't feel it."

"That shows modesty. That's a good quality." Seeing the concerned expression in the young woman, Katy added, "She really will recover. You may remain here all day, if you wish; but you should take a walk some time. You could go anywhere on the grounds."

"Can we leave?"

"You can, but Myer made it clear to everyone that Yvette has to stay. At least until her mother gets here."

"Raana's coming?"

"Tomorrow is what I've heard."

"Why so long?"

"She's driving."

"Why not fly? She'll be here faster."

"As I understand, Mistress Fontaine doesn't fly. You'll have to ask her why yourself." After a bit of silence, "We have an extensive library, if you wish to read. We have horses, should you like to ride."

"I'm okay. Where's our cars? My pack is in mine. I should study."

"They're in the carriage house – garage. I'll have your pack retrieved for you."

"And my purse. Tell me where the garage is and I'll get them. I'll need my keys."

"I'll show you to your car. But for now, if you're thinking of calling someone with your phone, I'll have to say no."

"So I *am* a prisoner."

"Circumstances are delicate. Until you understand what's going on, we have to control the situation. If you wish to go, we'll make arrangements to return you to the campus with your car."

"I'm not going without her." Not seeing other options, "I'll just have my pack."

"All right. I was told you like science fiction. We have many."

"Hmmm." The sound was more a tone of dissatisfaction with her predicament. "Maybe later."

Shortly, Sarita was alone. The day crept on. The woman paced a while, then peeked out the window overlooking a square garden on the south side of the wing. It was enclosed by two stone walls on the south and west, and a wing of the mansion towards her left aligned on the main entry. After more pacing, she laid with her friend, paced again, sat in the chair, paced more, sat in the other chair, did some studying and resumed pacing.

When Katy brought lunch and ate with her, she told Sarita, "The school had been told. They gave their sympathies, assuring us that you and Yvette could make up classes next semester and that the fees will be transferred. You don't have to worry about the cost for classes or other expenses with the University. Myer also covered the fees for Yvette's dorm room and your sorority for the next three years."

"Huh? Why?"

"It's a small thing. You two got caught up in a mess. You shouldn't suffer for it."

"I don't know what to say."

"When you feel you mean it, thank him. Not now. We all know you still don't trust us. None of us blame you. Your friend almost died. We still have trouble heading our way. We don't know how her mother will react."

"She'll be thankful. She has to be. You all saved her life."

"Yesss," Katy toned slowly. "But, for that to happen, we had to do something she may not take well."

"What? She's alive. Her breathing is strong and the heart is beating much better."

"We're all pleased to hear that. Well, I'm going to go rest for a while. I've been up most of two days."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," the thin femella responded, setting a comforting hand on Sarita's. "It's my pleasure." Rising, Katy added, "If you need me – or anything – just ask anyone you find. They'll all help you."

"Uh. Okay."

Kissing the left cheek, Katy departed. The pacing resumed, then sitting, laying with her friend, a quick trip to the water closet, then more pacing. A couple of hours passed when the room began closing in on her.

Warily, Sarita stepped from the chamber, confident her friend was stable and she could do nothing by being there. Going to the balcony, she looked at the grand foyer. The few people in the area asked if they could be of service and were declined. The home had an elegance she was not used to and barely remembered from the night before.

A chill preceded a woman's soft voice addressing her. "Sarita, dear?"

Turning, the plump woman saw three persons. Myer, she knew. With him was a large, dark femella of extreme form wearing a gown of browns and violets presenting more cleft than Sarita could ever exhibit, having more under the crossover neckline.

The other femella caused Sarita to stare and freeze. She was not large. In many ways, the woman was petite, seeming to come from the same region as Myer. Her voice was unlike his. Sarita knew it was this woman—in a simple black gown befitting the home—who had addressed her and now took her in her arms, saying, "I'm so sorry about all that happened to you."

"I...." was all that came out.

Releasing Sarita with an affectionate squeeze, "That's all right, dear. You've been through a trauma – both you and your friend. We're here to help." As the larger, soft woman hugged Sarita in the same manner, the one who gave her chills introduced, "This is Marcella. May we see your friend?"

Being released, all Sarita could do was stare and nod.

"Thank you."

Taking her hand, the elegant woman guided Sarita to the room she spent much of the last twenty hours in. The other two followed a couple steps behind. Sarita did nothing while the oddly mannered woman examined the sleeping friend, even sniffing around close.

With a light kiss to Yvette's forehead, the woman told the



femella laying under covers, "Sleep well. Your mother will be here soon." Erecting, she stepped to Sarita. "I'm Lavina. I know you have many questions. I'm sure Myer and Katy tried answering some, though they don't know what I may."

Sarita glanced to the man who didn't seem offended for his ignorance of whatever this odd woman knew. "They've been kind."

"They're very kind to friends. Let's you and I go talk. There's nothing that can be done here for now and I would like to learn more about you and your friend before her mother arrives tomorrow."

"I don't know what I can tell you. We were attacked. A man tried to rape Yvette. Myer seems to know more about what happened."

"We won't speak of the attack for now, unless you need to. I want to know about you and Yvette. Would you mind walking with me?"

Sarita looked to the man and very shapely woman for reassurance, then realized the only one on the property she could trust was not able to reassure anyone at the time. "I guess so."

"I'm glad."

Taking Sarita's hand gently with a peculiar comfort, the thinner woman casually guided the younger out the door, then to the back of the mansion. She was not rushed. Lavina sensed a reeling mind that needed to run before she would have a chance of pulling in the emotions. If done too soon, the mind would recoil.

The younger knew she was being given the time and that was slowly evolving towards the first question forming in her thoughts while they went outside. Sarita released the hand to exit through the French doors. Orange-purple glow of early dusk stretched across the sky. The sun had dipped below the horizon beyond the trees at the far end of the manicured lawn.

Strolling across the half circle stone patio, Sarita finally asked, "Why is everyone here so helpful? They say Yvette and I are special and what they're doing is to make up for the attack. I don't even know who did it. He didn't rape her. I don't think he intended to. I thought he was, but he just cut her throat. That's what it looked like."

Sarita was still in shock and her words were more like reporting current events in some pop-speech assignment. Lavina listened while they descended the west stairs adjoining the rounded wall of the first floor. The steps landed at ground tiles level to the lawn.

Both strolled on the soft turf, with Lavina telling her, "That's all true. Very regrettable. We're working to prevent escalation. There are still many unknowns."

"Katy said trouble is coming."

"Yvette's mother is someone to fear, especially for those who she finds harmful to the way things should be."

"Raana owns a ranch. She's not the police or FBI."

"We have no fear of those officials. Raana is different. We all have utmost respect for her. She can be a delight, unless crossed. She protects her family and is very capable of it."

"I don't understand. Yvette doesn't talk about her much, but she didn't tell me any of that."

"There's no reason she would. Raana would not harm you."

"Yvette and I are friends, but we just met last year. I don't know why any of this happened – or what exactly happened. What I do know, is Yvette is alive. Raana will be grateful."

"It's not that simple. We're different and she knows it."

"Different how?"

"Let's discuss you and Yvette. Raana will be here tomorrow and I'm hoping to have something to calm her with."

"You really are worried."

"Not for Myer or myself. I have concerns for the others who are here. Not you. She'll not harm you. You said you have been friends since last year?"

"We were in algebra together."

"Algebra?"

"Yvette was going to be an accountant. She's good at math."

"And you?"

"I'm not good at math. She's much better."

"What is your major in?"

"Aerospace engineering."

"Really?" Lavina toned, given the girl a more scrutinizing look. "Why did you decide on that major?"

"We both are now. Yvette changed hers."

"But you came here to do that."

"I want to work at NASA."

"Intriguing."

"Huh?"

"Just thinking. You met Yvette in algebra and became friends."

"We did. Why was she attacked?"

"Remnants of a family wish to start a war."

"War? Myer said feud last night – this morning – I think. What family?"

"We'll handle that. I would like to know more about you and Yvette. I know Raana very well, but we don't talk of her children."

"Yvette has two brothers. She doesn't talk about them much, either. I know she loves her family, but we talk about everything else. We have our studies and that fills a lot of time."

"What do you talk about, besides studies?"

"Just stuff. We end up talking about class work, since we're taking the same courses now – mostly. I'm adding some history."

"Knowing what happened in the past is good, but I sense you knew that."

"You know more about me than you should. We never met."

"Not really."

The walk was long and the discussion went into countless tangents as they meandered throughout the property, skimming close to a few out-buildings and a couple garden areas. Sarita saw that the south wing of the home with the centered raised patio was not the full length of the front. The rest had the garden her room overlooked. Small wrought-iron gates were framed within a stone arch centered on both walls of that garden. She discovered the guest wing extended west in front from the entry foyer, having the rest of the mansion wrapping an enclosed square courtyard.

By the time they returned to the mansion, entering through French doors, the sky was dark with a multitude of stars backdropping the moon coming up in the east. The student was quite hungry.

"I'll arrange a meal," Lavina told her, sensing the need.

"I was away from Yvette too long. I need to get back to the room."

"She's stronger. But yes, you should go. I'll be there shortly. I'll have the meal brought to your room."

The younger looked the hall up-and-down from the entry area. "Where do I go?"

"To the left. You'll remember."

Lavina watched the plump woman swish away, still in the robe.

"She's pretty," Marcella stated softly coming from the other hall, close to where their room was. She saw the student turn right,

progressing into the west wing that led to the foyer. The fuller, darker woman slipped along her beloved's side, taking a hand.

"Yes, she is," Lavina agreed.

"I feel there's something beyond the obvious."

"Indeed, there is. She's majoring in aerospace engineering."

"That could be useful."

"It can."

"You think she could get some information?"

"It all depends on Raana."

"There is that."

Turning to the larger woman, kissing her full lips. "Let's get something to eat." Heading towards the closer stairs leading them towards the kitchen, "We're dining with Sarita in her room."

"Of course we are."

"Jealous?"

"I learned not to be envious long ago."

"It's sweet that you have been."

"I've grown since those days. I'm fine now."

"This won't disturb what we have together."

"I know it won't. I'm familiar with your varied yearnings and comfortable with our future."

\* \* \* \*

Raanana turned the dark-gray, extra-long, Chevrolet, crew cab truck into the deceptively humble driveway of the estate – a meek, cobblestoned bend off the paved road. It led to a property like nothing she was used to or felt comfortable on, even if *those* people weren't there. She examined the broad, two-part, wrought-iron gate that would be no match for the full push-grill mounted on the front of her truck. The six tires and considerable horse power was suitable to pull or shove what she needed.

Setting the emergency brake, leaving the gear in neutral, the femella reached over to a well-worn, leather, shoulder bag laying on the passenger side. It passed as a purse. She retrieved a glass vial from a compartment. Unscrewing the metallic stopper, Raanana dabbed some on her neck and behind her ears as perfume. Doing so twice more, she partially blocked the mouth of the vial with her thumb and sprinkled it around the front area, then over her shoulder to the back seat. Recapping the vial, returning it to the bag, she slipped her phone from a vest pocket.

The woman observed the driveway that continued beyond

the gate, a path well-lit by the diffused early afternoon sunlight filtering through trees. Besides tall trees and bushes bordering the cobble drive bending towards the right, little was viewable.

Pressing Lavina's entry, there came a ring, then a familiar feminine voice answered. "Hello, Raana."

"Hello, dear. I'm at the gate."

"You should've called when you got in the area. I would have met you."

"That's all right. I had to calm down first."

"I know this is difficult for you. Yvette is well, though she's still sleeping. We're on our way."

"Just release the gate. I'll drive up."

"It's not automatic. Few things here are."

"That figures."

"It won't take long."

"Take your time. Bye for now."

"Bye-bye."

Ending the call, Raanana waited. Several minutes passed before three people—now all in white or cream colored outfits for the bright day—rounded the shady drive. All were known: Jeremy, Myer and Lavina. The shorter two held back as the white-haired man unlocked the gate, pulling the side in front of the truck wide.

Releasing the brake and setting the gear, she pulled in slowly until even with Myer and Lavina on her side. Lowering the window, she greeted the smaller woman who wore a broad-brim sun hat. "Hello, Lavina. I would offer a ride, but I doubt any of you would be comfortable."

"I understand. Go ahead. We'll be up shortly."

With a nod, Raanana advanced. Jeremy joined the pair after relocking the gate.

Myer commented to Lavina while strolling towards the house, "She's as hard to read as ever."

Lavina responded, "She's upset, of course. I don't need to go deeper to know that. She's working hard not to slaughter everyone here."

"It would have been better if Yvette was awake."

The rest of the walk along the S-shape drive was in silence. Coming in view of the home, the three saw Raanana finishing a walk around her truck, lightly sprinkling a whitish powder from a leather pouch she held in her left hand – more on the truck than

soil. Her right hand clutched a thick, intricately engraved walking stick.

"That wasn't necessary," Myer stated when he got into earshot. He stopped some three strides from the newcomer.

"Don't worry. A good rain will wash it away."

Standing beyond the small territory she claimed with the powder, having tossed the pouch in the bed of the truck, alongside a tarp covering a mound of supplies, Raanana examined the others. The rancher was around Lavina's height, though fuller, wearing weathered jeans, indigo vest, pale-purple flannel blouse and a dark-brown, wide brim, felt Akubra hat. Braided frizzy brown hair hung down her back from under the hat.

Lavina—in a white flowing gown—approached. Holding a deep breath, she hugged the woman before backing to arm's-length. "Good to see you."

"Likewise," Raanana responded. "As for those living here; not so much."

"I understand." Wrinkling her nose, scratching it. "It's strong."

Glancing to the other two, knowing she was being observed from the home's windows, "I had to."

Nodding, the more formally dressed woman told the rancher, "I'll take you to Yvette."

"Please."

The pair were joined by the men, each giving respectable distance. The taller advanced to the door, opening the right side, allowing the others to enter.

Within the grand foyer, a slender man and woman stood in curiosity near the east stairs. Another man looked down from the balcony. Raanana's left fingers casually opened that side of the vest exposing a side holster with a Glock tucked behind and under the curvature of her ample bosom.

"You're safe here," Myer insisted to the guest. "No one will molest you in my home." To the trio, "Please, find somewhere else to be."

The two on their floor slipped through the passage under the balcony. The one above backed from sight.

Jeremy climbed the stairs to his left while Myer led the women up the other. At the top, going down the right hall for the guest wing, the three entered the large bedroom set aside for the recovery of the young woman. Jeremy remained in the hall.

Raanana nodded a greeting to Sarita, who sat on the bed with her daughter – the only other in the chamber. She went to the sleeping femella on the far side while Lavina and Myer held back. The rancher lightly brushed her daughter's cheek, then fingered strands of hair from the face. Faint moans came from Yvette. Her brows tightened and she shifted her face away.

Still watched intently by Sarita, the older woman pulled the blankets and top of the fresh, fuchsia nightgown robe back to present the neck and collarbones fully. The wound was the color of the gown, now fully healed over. There was another moan from the sleeping one.

"So," Raanana scowled, turning to Myer, "you had to do it."

"I wish there was another way."

"So do I." Turning to the other younger woman who sat close by on the bed, still protecting her friend, "How are you doing?"

"Fine – I guess. I'm confused."

"I don't doubt that. Come give me a hug."

First checking her friend, returning the gown flaps and covers, Sarita rose. She circled around, taking hold of the mother, a femella nearly as full everywhere except in height – the younger being an inch shorter.

Sarita whispered, "I don't know what's going on."

Petting black hair hanging loose to the waist, "I'll tell you what I can later. For now, stay with Yvette. I have to see the man who did this." Kissing the cheek, "Be strong. I believe you're safe here." The student nodded and was released. To the patriarch, "Take me to Eblin."

"He's at the far side of the estate."

"I don't care where. Please take me to him."

"Of course."

Raanana told Sarita, "This may take some time. We'll talk later."

Receiving a nod, the older woman left the room with the other two. Lavina and the rancher were followed by Myer who was joined again out in the hall by Jeremy.

Trailing the women, offset with Jeremy to his outside, Myer addressed the more recent guest, "Mistress Fontaine. We have a room made up for you next to Yvette." Other residents kept their distance, scooting from sight.

"Thank you," she told the man, letting her friend guide the way, "but I won't be needing it. I'll be taking my daughter back to

Colorado and care for her there."

"She would be safer here. We'll take—."

"Thanks, but enough happened around here. I'm taking her home. When she recovers, I'll set her up with a school there."

"Ma'am," Lavina addressed, more formal than she usually did with her friend. Knowing the woman was avoiding a growing contradiction related to what her daughter was becoming, she told her, "The school here is one of the best for what she wishes to do."

"I know she changed her degree, but that was because of Sarita. There are good schools around Denver. Or, I'll set her up in California."

"We're far from there."

"That's the point."

"We have less control out there."

"I'm aware of that."

Myer's manservant told the newcomer, "You can't clear us from every state."

"Can't I?" Raanana's tone was menacing.

"Be respectful, Jeremy," Myer scolded the masle.

"Yes, sire."

Myer told the rancher, "I apologize for his behavior."

"He can speak his mind."

"Not while he's in my home. I'll not have my guest disrespected."

"I prefer honesty. As for California; the region is disordered. It may need cleansing."

"Raana, dear," Lavina addressed. "Please don't act rashly. If they get out of control, let us handle it."

"They're out of control now."

"It's just a few skirmishes over turf. You know California."

"All too well." Taking a deep breath, "Fine. Their bickering hasn't produced many casualties beyond their nests. You may warn them, though."

"They know your displeasure," Lavina stated while the group passed through the southern French doors.

"They better."

"You know I respect you greatly," Lavina warned, "but remember; you *are* just one person. With your children not following your path, you're alone."

"I'm not alone. There may not be many of us, but I have



friends." Seeing Jeremy's expression, she told him, "I know how you feel. I often pray to God about you people and ask him why he placed you here."

"We don't accept your God."

Before Myer could object to the man's snippet remark, Raanana told the host, "As a guest, I would like him to speak freely." Seeing the resignation to the request, she told Jeremy, "I'm aware of your views."

"You're a contradiction of your God. You're breaking your own Commandments."

"Some of us have to. I may be m'khashaphah – but as long as there are people like you, I have to be what I am." Raising a warning hand and one eyebrow. In response to the slight shifting in the man's stance, she told the taller, "Don't try it."

Jeremy slowed a moment to add a step more distance.

Seeing the masle wasn't going to express more of his thoughts, Lavina told her friend, "Many things are changing. Yvette was not taking the apprenticeship, otherwise she wouldn't be here. Your sons are limiting themselves to the ranch."

"I'm not discussing my family." Out on the lawn, noting the direction gestured by Myer, Raanana angled to the distant red brick out-building. After a few steps, she asked Myer, "What else is known from Eblin?"

"We found where he was with Caroline last. She wasn't there."

*"Of course not."*

"We're still hunting her."

"Bring her to me when she's located."

"If she's alive."

"Try to keep her that way. After all this, I want to handle her myself."

"We'll try. You are aware she's mostly innocent of what occurred in Tennessee."

"She was part of what her family was doing. I won't let her live."

"Jeremy was hoping you would."

Raanana told the white-haired masle, "I know she's pretty, but I won't let her live. I may have before, but not now."

"That's a shame," Jeremy replied.

"If you think so." Examining the one who was more openly defiant, she commented, "There are plenty of pretty women here."

Why bother with her?"

"I don't think she's at fault."

Seeing Myer about to respond to the manservant, Raanana told the patriarch, "Please. Let him finish."

"All right."

The woman asked Jeremy, "Why don't you think she's guilty of plotting to kill my daughter? I'm sure you're aware of what her and her family was doing to my grandniece."

"Caroline is weak willed. She'll do what others tell her. She would do anything her parents told her to. With them mur... gone, she turned to Eblin. He controls Caroline. It's not her fault."

"She *did* follow Eblin and he tried to kill Yvette."

"I am *quite* aware of what Eblin did. I don't think Caroline was with Eblin because he knew she wouldn't go through with it. I trust her and now she's alone out there."

"She can't hide forever."

Myer told the woman, "She may be heading south. When they were here last, I told them to go to Mexico – or farther."

"They should have."

Nothing more was said as they closed the distance to the brick building. Reaching the structure, the soldier leaning in the shade eyed the newcomer, then opened the door. To the patriarch, "No change, sire."

"None expected," Myer stated, entering first.

Inside, Raanana sniffed the air, looking around. "A slaughterhouse. How fitting."

One of the two soldiers inside was laying on the cot in the corner. Coming awake and seeing his liege and company, he stood, patting his clothes in place. The one on the counter, having seen Lavina and newcomer, slid off and stood as well. Recognizing Raanana, that one snatched a sheath from the counter, gripping the hilt of his hand-and-a-half sword while backing a step. He stood half turned in ready stance.

Raanana's pistol was in her right hand, the muzzle pointing at the tiles just in front of the second masle who wore heavier white attire. The walking stick was now in her left grip.

"Relax," Myer told the soldiers. "You knew she was coming. Mistress Fontaine is our guest."

The newcomer forced a smile to the man near the cot, seeing that his open palm was nearly a foot from the hilt of his weapon resting at the corner.

"That's quaint," the newcomer muttered, as she returned her pistol to the holster, having hooked the vest on that side with her walking stick to give her access. She then told the one who had slid off the counter, "You do know I'd have you shot before the blade cleared, then your friend there would be next without a chance to get to his."

With a gesture from Myer, the one soldier returned the still sheathed weapon to the counter and the other held his hands together in front of him. Both retained their wary stance.

Shaking her head, Raanana turned her attention to the naked man lying on the tile floor, muttering, "Templars are so old fashioned." She drew closer to the nude one who scurried back until the length of chain halted his progress. Four scars on the left cheek were faint and barely noticeable. Leaning on her walking stick, Raanana told Eblin, "I'm glad you remember me."

"Now what?"

"I examine you. Not long after that, I'll relieve this world of the miserable existence you call a life."

Eblin glanced to the soldiers, saying, "Why let any of us live? Murder them all like you murdered my family."

"Some stay where they can live in peace. Most don't want a fight. For some reason, you couldn't be like them."

"You murdered my family."

"Shall we discuss my grandniece?"

"We didn't know who Beth was."

"It's more like you didn't care. We'll find your sister, then I'll end her existence, as well."

The naked man's anger flared and he lunged at her, taking the woman's throat in a tight grip, chains dangling down her front. The others moved closer, then realized Raanana wasn't struggling. The femella's head was cocked slightly with her brows raised, waiting.

The man repelled from the older looking woman, coughing while rubbing his hands.

"Now, now," Raanana toned, taking a deep breath, "we'll have no more of that foolishness. You're too weak for such an outburst, not that I would allow it for long. You know what this is about. You stay put until I'm done. Then we deal with the remains."

"There's nothing I'll tell you. Just kill me." Glancing to the others in the room, "Murder us all, like you did my family."

"I'll kill you once I'm done. As for the rest, you failed. I don't

plan to kill them. I've been friends with Lavina a long time. You were too high from tapping kennel addicts to think straight. I believe some of you call what you suck from addicts cocaine nectar? Cocaine seems to be your personal preference."

"It's better than other elixirs."

Raanana shook her head, "None of you considered the ramification of your activities. Your parents lacked restraint and your entire family progressed unwisely. Now, we have to mop up after them."

"Is that what you call murdering my kin?"

"I call it extermination of a pestilence. I'll deal with you now, then locate your sister and handle her. I was planning to just kill the vermin for what your family had done to Bethany, but I've been thinking about what Jeremy said. Maybe giving her to him will be better. They can have children and make up for what was done by your family."

Obviously not caring for that prospect, Eblin expressed with a bite in his tone, "*You wouldn't. You hate us. You wouldn't want us to breed more. Those are your words. We breed like animals, you say. We're animals, aren't we?*"

"We all are. I don't know where you're from, but God didn't place you here. You're not natural on this world." There was a long silence while the woman's brown eyes looked deep into the masle.

"*I feel you,*" the man eventually expressed softly, his venomous tone breaking the silence. "*There's nothing to know.*"

"I'm sure you feel me. I'm not being subtle. You're weak. They fed you more than I would, but I wouldn't have fed you at all. I should thank them for what little they gave you. It will make this more satisfying."

The man's eyes widened when the short woman pulled the top handle of her walking stick from the lower stock, letting the tube drop with a clamor echoing off hard surfaces. The effect was calculated and the response was as she hoped. Straining away, Eblin's eyes were held by the woman's captive gaze. He couldn't clearly see the leather wrapped hilt of the stiletto-like misericorde with the dark, nearly ten inch, star-diamond blade, tapered evenly to a point.

"You witch. This isn't over."

"It is for you."

"I know more," the masle stated as the woman moved in, taking

his mangy hair, pulling the head and body back. His shackled wrists strained the chain taut.

"Not enough to keep your miserable life going any longer."

The man choked, as he coughed from her scent. His legs fought to grip cold tile – failing to do so. Raanana brought the tip of the blade to the base of his neck, just above the collar bone. She plunged the blade deep and fast, driving the hilt to flesh. The broad rim of the guard, matching the pommel, pressed the wound. Fizzing blood seeped around the edge and down the front of the man. Burbling squeals echoed throughout the chamber.

None beyond one of the soldiers moved, as the captive thrashed and choked. That soldier shifted to a window, opening it. He then opened the door to let in fresh air.

With the left hand still clutching his hair, Raanana released the hilt, leaving the blade where it was buried. The rancher then reached under the right side of the vest with her free hand, unsnapping one of the pouches on her holster strap, removing a glass vial.

Telling the man still thrashing, "Goodbye, Eblin," she shoved the vial into his mouth.

The woman then slammed his jaw up, closing the mouth hard. There was a distinct crunch, as the vial broke under the man's teeth. The Jewish witch held tight as the victim convulsed, legs thrashing. Foam snorted out the nose, as more seethed from his lips like a rabid animal.

Others in the room backed away, the scent of the perfume growing stronger.

Seconds later, Eblin went limp.

Taking the hilt back in her right hand, she stood fully, pulling his head up and forward in a smooth synchronized motion while drawing the blade out, shoving the body away from her. It crumpled to the tile. Blood flowed onto the floor from the higher internal pressure.

Going to a sink she had noted before, Raanana held the blade under the faucet and pumped the lever. It took several strokes to draw up water. When it did, she cleaned the blade and her hands.

Lavina came closer, though remained at arms distance. "We could have helped with him."

"I needed to do it myself. He almost killed my daughter."

"I would never deny the kill. We could've held him for you."

"He wasn't as strong as my calves. This was satisfying."

"I'm sure it was."

"Besides, would you want to be that close to me right now?"

"Not with that stuff on you."

"I didn't think so. Now I have to find Caroline."

"We will," Lavina told her, watching the woman dry her hands and blade with a clean cloth. As the friend retrieved the base of the walking stick, inserting the misericorde with a quarter turn to lock it in place, "Did you get anything from him?"

"Not much." To Myer, "Please release Eblin, then have your knights gather wood outside."

The short man motioned to the two soldiers, who set about fulfilling the request. Raanana waited for shackles to be carefully released, then stepped to the crumpled man. She held the walking stick in her left grip as a cane. Clutching the hair, close to the scalp, she pulled the body around. Taking care not to step in the oily ooze, the determined femella dragged the deceased outside, using the stick for additional leverage. Blood streaked the floor.

Myer and Lavina followed the soldiers in front of the rancher. Outside, Raanana dragged the body some fifty feet into the meadow, releasing him. The knights had set about gathering wood from the back of a nearby building, placing loads on the body.

As that continued, Raanana strolled along the tree line where the corral containing sheep met the woods, gathering twigs. Lavina went with her.

Well out of earshot from the others, the witch asked the matriarch privately in low tones, "Are you planning to say goodbye before leaving?"

"I'm not going anywhere for a while. There are still things to do around here."

"I'm not referring to this property. Eblin heard about your plans. Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. I have the Vineyard."

"Eblin seemed to think you're going somewhere beyond the reach of us."

"You know how I feel about the way things are progressing in the nations."

"I know. We've known each other a long time. You knew Wendy all her life. You've been around a long time and we're just a small part, but I've grown to like you."

"I like you, too."

"I know you've seen many people come and go, but I would like you to remember that I'm still here. In your plans to leave, include saying goodbye to me. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," Lavina echoed. "I've been working on that project a long time. Until more recently, I thought it would take much longer. We still have too many questions."

"What questions? I feel something has changed? I hope it doesn't have to do with him," indicating the corpse.

"He didn't change our plans, though he seemed to have involved himself. I'm still working it out."

Picking more dried grass, "I did some readings last night while I rested at a stop. This man and you are linked. It goes back to when you and Marcella helped me. I hate to say this, but my grandniece was used. There are spirits guiding them."

"I feel it," Lavina stated.

"So you felt something with Sarita, as well."

"And Yvette, but more so with Sarita."

"Please keep my daughter out of it. This will not go well. I have to keep her safe."

"We're all trying to do that. What did you find out?"

"I don't think Caroline is running. The readings and his thoughts have her remaining close to here. Keep looking. We have to find her. If we don't, she'll become more entangled with my daughter."

"You changed your view since Memphis. You're not sure of killing her."

"God knows I want to." Seeing a flicker in Lavina's eyes, she explained, "I know. It's a habit. It's the way I was raised. I'm aware of what Yahweh is. This helps for the others."

"I wasn't going to say anything. Hell – I still go to church."

"You're still messing with that Reverend Paul guy?"

"I haven't done anything to him."

"Good. He's dangerous."

"To himself."

"To you, as well. The cards show struggles between you and him."

"It's been building for years."

"Be careful – please."

"I will." Indicating the pile of wood, Lavina asked, "Is that enough?"

"Sure. We can add more, if it's needed."

"We burn faster than your kind."

"You know I'm aware of your biology. This one I want to incinerate thoroughly."

"I don't blame you."

Raanana stepped close to the wood pile. Pulling dry grass from the area, she bent and laid it at the edge under overlapping chopped firewood with the rest of her collection. She then took out a folding knife from a vest pocket and began slicing shavings from a dry piece of wood, placing them on the dead grass. She broke up the gathered twigs, laying several on top, then set flame to it from a lighter she pulled from the same pocket. Returning the knife and lighter, she added more twigs until the flames grew higher, taking hold of more material.

After some time, the pile evolved into a bonfire. When it did, Raanana backed up, muttering, "Farewell, Eblin."

Lavina stood upwind next to her friend who attempted to get a feel for what was hidden. "Please don't do that," Lavina warned her. "You know I can't let you in and I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't probing."

"Close enough. When I'm ready, I'll tell you."

"I hope so."

\* \* \* \*



## *Chapter 4*

There came a knock at the bedchamber door of the Cambridge estate. Raanana looked up from the aged book she read – one of many in Myer's library. The door opened and Sarita peaked in.

"Yvette's awake," the younger stated.

Setting the book on the bed, Raanana quickly rose and followed. Her hat and vest were left at the wall table and chair, though her holster was worn for all to see. Only Myer, Lavina and Jeremy got near. Even so, her fading scent kept those three a couple steps away. The rest of the household remained on other floors or in the far wing.

The home had returned to a semblance of normality in the last seventeen hours since the bonfire died away – a normality enforced by Myer. The mother who went out one door and in the next could only surmise what constituted normal in such a place.

"Morning," the young femella greeted from the bed, seeing her mother. There was little resemblance between the two. "Why are you here?"

Going to the young woman on the side where the chairs rested, taking hold, "That's a very silly question."

Squirming from the embrace, Yvette scrunched her nose with a sneeze. "What's that smell?" She scooted back more.

"Sorry. I let it fade, but you know I'm naked without it."

"I like the perfume. This is different."

"It's different to you now. It's going to get worse."

"What do you mean?" Without waiting for an answer, "I'm starved. Is there something to eat?" She then considered her surroundings, "This is nice. Where are we?"

"Could I have a chance to answer one questions before going on to the next?"

"Sure. Why am I here? What happened?" she asked while feeling around her hips to discover what bounded her. "I have to pee. Why am I wearing a diaper?"

There was a nervous chuckle from Raanana as Katy, Myer, Eiddwen and Lavina entered through the open door.

"What's going on?" Yvette asked, followed by, "Who are all of you?"

Raanana rolled her eyes, losing track of answers for her daughter, saying, "First things first. Go to the bathroom."

"I'll show you," Katy stated.

"I'll do that," Sarita told the woman who wore a tomato-colored satin gown.

Raanana instructed her daughter, "Leave the diaper in the bathroom. I have your clothes from the other day. Now that you're up, we'll get you out of here and back home."

Myer objected, "We talked about that."

"You have one thing to do. Find Caroline. I'm taking Yvette back to Colorado and away from all this."

"I have classes," Yvette stated.

Sarita corrected, "We don't. We missed some days and Myer arranged for us to begin next semester."

"Or the one after that," Myer added. "Or whenever you're ready."

"He paid our resident housing and classes for the degree."

"You did?" Yvette asked the man. "You're Myer? Why would you do that?"

Raanana rose from the bed, eying the man, "You can try answering this barrage. I'm still waiting for a chance to begin with the ones presented to me."

"What's going on?" Yvette asked.

"Now she's repeating," Raanana stated to the group. Turning to her daughter, she told her, "Go to the bathroom. We'll get some food on the road and discuss this."

A realization began filtering through Yvette's mind. Looking to the man. "You're Myer."

"I am."

"My mother talked about you. You're...." She looked to her friend. "Did they hurt you?"

"No," Sarita replied. "A man attacked you Tuesday."

"What day is this?"

"Friday."

"Dear," Raanana addressed, taking her hand. "Go to the bathroom. There's a lot to explain."

"That smell. It's the perfume." Her eyes darted to each person in the chamber, as she shifted against the headboard in an attempt to get further from the disturbing reality. Centering on the three

she knew the least, she surmised, "I'm one of you." To Lavina, "I remember you now. Why did this happen?"

"I'm so sorry, dear," the thin regal woman stated. She wore a white gown that barely veiled her form. "It was necessary. You would have perished from this life."

"Perish? Huh?"

Sarita moved closer, next to Raanana, telling her friend, "I thought he was raping you. Then.... I saw.... There was so much blood." Tears flowed freely. "I couldn't do anything. You were dying and I couldn't do anything."

Eiddwen caught her eyes. "It's all right."

"No, it's not all right," the younger, plump femella snapped, her voice cracking. "It's not right at all. I don't know what's going on, but it's not all right."

"No, it's not," Raanana agreed. "It is what it is and we have to carry on."

Yvette looked to her friend. "I remember part of it. I was at my car. I got in, but a man pulled me out before I closed the door. I don't know where he came from. He was fast and strong. I tried..." Her voice clogged in the throat.

"It's in the past, dear," her mother soothed, setting a comforting hand on the arm. "You don't have to tell us. We know what happened. The man's gone now. He'll harm no one else."

"He pulled me to the trees. I tried to scream and bite his hand. He held my mouth. I thought he was going to... to.... That's not what he did." Looking into her mother's eyes, "I know you told me about them, but I didn't believe you. You even had those people show me videos. I thought it was just a wild Wiccan thing."

"I'm not Wiccan. You know they couldn't do what I do."

The room closed in on Yvette. Everyone watched the young student while her life flashed in confused imagery. "This is real," she muttered.

"I'm afraid so," the mother replied. "I explained some of what I knew, but I didn't want to fully expose you to them until you were ready. I made a mistake."

Pulling her friend across the bed with her, Yvette slid off the bed at the far side. "Damn, I have to pee. Let's go." She was still assessing her surroundings.

Sarita shuffled to the floor, then guided Yvette to the exit. "I'll show you."

Passing through the sculpted frame of the open door into the

hall, the thinner student declared, "Hell with the bathroom. I'm getting out of here."

"Yvette," Lavina addressed. "You can't leave."

Ignoring her, the thinner student looked both ways along the hall, asking her friend, "How do we get out of here?"

"This way," the plump one told her, taking the lead, guiding her into the foyer, then down stairs to the front door.

"I have to pee."

"Just do it. You have a diaper."

"I can't hold it any longer."

The two trotted out the door, descending the portico stairs. Yvette—in the powder-blue nightgown she woke in—had an odd waddle as the bladder spurted with each step. Her friend bounded beside her in the wheat-colored day gown, her fullness fighting for its own escape.

By the time they reached the gate, they were panting heavily.

"Now what?" Yvette asked, looking at the sturdy, locked, wrought-iron barrier. She extended her view to either side where nine-foot, red brick walls continued beyond sight.

"We climb. We get to the road and find help."

"Please stay," a man's voice came from behind.

Turning, the two saw Myer being joined by Lavina, then Katy, Raanana, the striking blonde femella, a large dark woman and a tall man with white hair. The rancher was the only one breathing deeply, though less so than the students who backed to the gate. Metal clanged when they slammed against the cold grid. The bright early sunlight filtered through trees.

"Let us go," Sarita pleaded. "We won't tell anyone."

"We can't allow that," Lavina stated, "especially the way you're dressed. You'll draw attention."

"Dear," Raanana added to her daughter, moving the closest. "As much as I dislike being here – or the situation – you can't go yet. You need to clean up – and I suppose you should eat before we go. You haven't had anything more than broth for over two days. We have to talk, then we can go home."

"I have school."

"I'll get you set up in Colorado, where you'll be safe and I can protect you."

"She'll be safe here," Myer declared.

"She wasn't," the mother remarked, her tone dismissive.

"None of us knew she was here."

"Eblin did. His sister does."

Lavina told her, "Your family's scent is known to us. That's all Eblin and Caroline needed."

"Then you all should have known."

"I wish we did. We could have protected her. I would have had a guardian for her."

"Well, that didn't happen."

"Of that, I'm sorry. You and I have been friends for years. Why not tell me Yvette was going to college here?"

"I knew she didn't wish to follow my path. I hoped to leave her out of it completely; letting her have a normal life. She could be the accountant she was planning to be."

"I'm going to work at NASA," Yvette declared.

"If you wish," her mother told her. "You can get an engineering degree in Colorado."

"This is a better school, even for accountants."

"If not Colorado; California has good schools and it's far from here. I can set you up there."

"I want to go here."

Katy told the mother, "They're both paid up for the next three years."

"Give it to someone else. I'm taking my girl home."

"Sorry, Mom. *I'm going to this school.*"

"No you're not. It's not safe."

The students looked at each other, then the group in front of them. For a while, none knew what to say, then Yvette expressed, "I need to change clothes and I'm starved."

Myer took a step forward, speaking to Sarita, "You know you're safe here. Let's go back to the house. You can show her where to bathe. Her clothes are waiting. We have other clothes, if she wishes. Once she's freshened, we'll dine and answer all your questions. Later, we'll send both of you with the car to get things from the dormitorium. You have rooms here. You can stay as long as you need."

"We have the one room," Sarita remarked.

"We could give you another. There are some in the other wings we could prepare for you. There are several adjoining rooms that would allow you two to be close."

"Why do all this for us?" Yvette asked.

"We owe you. You were attacked because of a decision I made three years ago. I should have terminated him then. Or at least,

held him for your mother to deal with. Now, we have a mess."

"You killed him?" Sarita asked.

"He's no longer with us," the man explained.

"What about the police?"

Raanana answered. "This is beyond law enforcement. They're not equipped to handle these situations. They're not able to handle these people, so it comes to others to do it."

Myer caught the implication. "*Handle us?*"

"Yes. You may have lived longer, but we can handle you. It's easier to let you be at peace, as long as you stay out of our way."

"I see. Well, there won't be any *handling* for now." Turning to Katy. "Please head back and have a meal prepared. Yvette has much to learn."

"So do I," Sarita added.

Myer smiled. "Are you ready?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have choices."

"It didn't seem like it. You wouldn't let us go."

"You were able to go. Yvette had to stay."

"If she stays, I stay."

"You will?" Yvette asked, squeezing her hand affectionately.

"Of course. We're friends."

"I'm glad."

The pair looked at the expectant group, then Sarita admitted, "I'm hungry, too."

That ended the urge to flee, but not the apprehension. The pair allowed themselves to be guided back. They went to the room first presented to Sarita on the night the students arrived at the mansion. Yvette took the first shower, then Sarita.

The students dressed in fresh gowns laid out for them; Sarita in cerise, her friend in jade. Yvette accepted it over the clothes she arrived in, even though they were cleaned and repaired, showing no sign of the trauma they experienced.

The meal was prepared and Eiddwen escorted the friends to the dining room where a wide range of cuisine had been spread on the long table having a cream-colored cloth. Indirect sunlight filtered through a row of curtained windows opposite the doors overlooking the courtyard within the non-guest wings. Four candelabras were unlit along the table. The decor of the chamber and layout was suitable for a noble feast.

The friends halted as they entered. Only a portion of the seats

were occupied, and those with the same people at the gate. Myer sat in a chair larger than the others, midway on the far, long side. Next to him, in slightly smaller chairs, were Lavina to his right and Raanana at his left. Twenty-seven other smaller, yet regal chairs continued on either of the broad sides. No seats were at the ends.

Jeremy stood behind Myer's left. Marcella sat opposite Lavina. A setting was empty on Raanana's left.

"That's for you –" Eiddwen told Yvette, "with your mother." Smiling to Sarita, "We sit on this side."

The friends looked longingly at each other, but felt ill at ease to complain. Sarita sat at the setting mid-table, facing Myer with the blonde at her right.

"Welcome," the patriarch greeted, eyeing each with a pleasant demeanor. "There's a variety of dishes." To Yvette, as she approached her mother, "Those near you should suit your growing tastes. Though, if they're still too spicy, please say so and we'll move others closer for you to sample."

Taking the seat, the thin student replied, "I'm sure it will be fine. I could eat a horse."

"Well, no horsemeat is here. We have lamb and beef today. There is a variety of fruits, spicy mushrooms...." To Sarita, pointing to a platter closer to her, "Those mushrooms are tamer with a pleasant stuffing."

"Why the difference?" the plump woman asked, taking a couple and some medium rare beef strips, as well as salad.

Raanana answered. "These people's tastes run stronger. It has to do with the way their digestion works. Spices help with the rare meats."

Katy stood on their side, pouring wine into silver goblets for Sarita and Eiddwen while Jeremy poured something that looked like thin cream of tomato soup for Yvette.

"What are you giving her?" Sarita asked Jeremy.

Lavina told her, "You won't care for it."

"Why not?"

Raanana explained, "Yvette is changing. She has been since the attack. That's the price for saving her life."

"Changing?"

"I'm afraid so," the woman responded with a sigh. Her eyes were sad, flickering to retain anger. "She's becoming like them."

"What does that mean?"

"Mmm," Yvette toned, after a drink. "This is good. What is it?"

Myer told her, "We call it crimson milk."

"What's in it?"

Myer looked to the friend on the far side, asking the plump student, "How much do you *really* want to know?"

"Everything."

"That's a great deal," Raanana replied. She then spoke to everyone at the table. "Before anyone says anything more about this meal, let's discuss Yvette's situation with Sarita." To the fuller student, "I should have told you more before now." After a measured breath, "My daughter is going through changes. I had hoped to spare you details, but I see I won't be able to."

"What changes?"

"Remember back to your puberty and how your taste in food changed?"

"Sort of. I guess I do like different stuff now."

"Precisely. Our tastes matured. I'm getting old enough for it to happen again. Menopause does that to us women. Men are spared this delight. Their hormones are simpler." With a glance to her daughter, "Well, Yvette is changing again."

Watching her friend cut a slice of lamb that was pinker than seemed healthy, having a good amount of ground peppers and seasonings, "I'd say. I didn't think she ate meat like that."

"She'll eat more of it. She'll need the protein." Fighting disgust, "There's protein in that drink, as well. My daughter is becoming a thing of legends and she's going to eat more like them."

"What legends?"

"Most all of them. Beyond this estate, these people are myths. I wish you never had to know the truth of it, but you insist on remaining friends."

"Of course we're friends. Why say that?"

"She'll need friends like you. It won't be easy. I'm worried about how you'll take it."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. I can't blame you. No one here does. You don't know the extent of what's happening. It took me years to fully accept the reality of these people."

Lavina told the woman from the other side of Myer, "You began learning how to *handle us* when you were not much older



than Sarita. Those myths misrepresent us. We're not complicated to know."

"The years made you complicated, though it is true that myths have you distorted. Even so, they do have insights."

"Most all of them are distorted."

"Please let me handle this."

"Of course. *Handle it.*"

"I'm sorry for that choice of phrasing." Back to Sarita, the mother explained while each around the table sampled dishes, "My girl is changing. It's more drastic than puberty – or menopause. She's becoming something more than simian – as they think of us – a lot more. She may seem like us in many ways, but she won't be. She'll be more than simian."

"How much more?"

"This is where it gets complicated. It all depends on who did it and what was absorbed." Raanana looked to Myer expectedly.

"It was Gulzar."

"And?"

"He's been around longer than I have."

"*Great,*" Raanana moaned, seemingly physically ill. She looked past the man.

Lavina told her, "Not as long as I have, and I'm not saying how long that's been."

"I have enough to ponder your years." To Sarita, "Well – this will complicate her new life greatly." Raanana emptied her goblet, then held it up. Jeremy filled it from a bottle much like the one served to Sarita and Eiddwen. Taking another gulp, "I need to think." Catching the eyes of everyone at the table, "I don't want this discussed yet."

Myer nodded, then told Sarita, "That wine you and Raanana are drinking is from Lavina's Vineyard."

The discussion went to wines and the matriarch's estate in Virginia, then to foods in general, avoiding any of the more exotic dishes.

Eventually, Lavina changed the subject abruptly, asking Sarita, "You mentioned you're working on an aeronautical engineering degree."

"That's the plan. Yvette and I are hoping to work at NASA."

"What courses are you taking?"

"Right now? Literature and physics with Yvette, and history on my own."

"You did mention that. Are you delving into gravity wave theory?"

"Not so much. Gravity wave principles, beyond the obvious, are more advanced and we haven't discussed it much."

"So, nothing about what happens within concentrated gravity of singularities?"

"There's some research, but it's all theoretical."

Yvette praised, "Sarita is good at it."

"So is Yvette," the friend stated. "When she gets mirror alignment's worked out, she'll get her grades up in this class."

"I guess I have to do that next semester."

"Both of us."

"We'll ensure it," Lavina told them. "Whatever Myer doesn't cover, I will."

"I still don't understand why you're so generous," the plump woman admitted.

Marcella set a hand on Sarita's arm. "Accept it. It's meant as a compliment and we all know you will do well."

"I don't know. I hope so. These classes are hard."

Raanana looked over. "I'm sure your parents will appreciate the assistance. Tell them you gained a grant from a private institute. *That is what happened.*"

"I guess. We were going into debt for this."

Myer finished a bite, then told her, "Give me the details later and I'll deal with it."

"Please, love," Lavina told the man. "I'll take care of that."

Sarita shook her head, eyes moistening. "I can't believe this. It's like a dream."

"A good one, I hope," the thin, mysterious woman remarked.

"Not entirely."

"I suppose not. If you know anything of gravity wave physics, I'd love to hear about it."

Myer looked to the woman at his right. Raanana did as well while the masle commented, "This is a side of you I didn't know existed. *Physics?*"

"I'm curious."

"I know – but *physics?*"

"There had been many breakthroughs. I'm just wondering how far they're getting along."

"Pretty far," Sarita told her. "I'll ask the professor if we're studying it more. He may not want to go into much, since it's not

the focus of our course."

"Don't lasers measure gravity waves?"

"They could, theoretically. They split the beam, sending them on different courses of the same length. That's the hard part. The lengths have to be precise. The two beams are rejoined when they return. Differences and fluctuation in phasing could show a gravity wave. We may not have anything sensitive enough to feel them. At least, nothing's been detected yet."

"We have time. I'm just curious."

Lavina led the conversation around the student's curriculum until the only ones interested were the students and Lavina.

In a lull during dessert, Raanana came out of her silence. "I suppose this situation is as much my fault as anyone. More so probably."

"I can't see how," Lavina told her.

"You helped me three years ago."

"We were saving your grandniece. It's the Sullivans who are at fault."

"I'm referring to here. I let them escape. I failed to get them all." To her daughter, "I'm sorry about that. I should have done more."

"I'm fine," Yvette stated, taking a bite of her second helping of strong custard.

"No," the mother told her softly with a long sigh, "you're not fine. You'll have to learn a whole new life. I'm afraid they're correct in this matter. I'm not equipped for that. I'm more suited for endings than beginnings. I can't take you home. I know that now. I should have realized that before. God knows, I still want to take you with me. I now know I can't. These people will teach you what you need to know." Fighting tears, Raanana told the man next to her, "I'm placing her in your care. I don't have to remind you what would happen if—."

"No, ma'am," the man stated, cutting her off. "You don't have to tell me. Everyone here will ensure her safety."

Lavina agreed, "They will. I'll also keep aware of what goes on with her."

"Thank you both." Rising, the mother expressed, "I'm exhausted. I'm going to lie down now."

"Are you all right, Mom?"

Kissing her daughters forehead, "I'll be fine. I didn't get much sleep since I heard of the attack."

"I'll come with you."

"No. You stay. They have to talk to you." To Sarita, "I want you to come with me."

"I want to hear what they have to say."

"Not yet. There are things they have to show her. She knows some of it, even if she may not have believed it before. You're not ready for that. Neither is Yvette, but it's her life now." To Lavina, "I trust you the most here. Please, be gentle with my girl."

"We will. I'll ensure it."

The Jewish witch and plump woman left the room. In the antechamber, after the sculpted doors were shut, Raanana told Sarita, "I'll tell you what I can at my room."

"I don't want to leave her."

"It's beyond us now. She's one of them. She'll remain your friend, like Lavina is mine. However, she now lives in a different world. I never thought I'd lose one of my children to this, but life has ways of handing out surprises."

~ ~ ~

For over an hour at Raanana's room, the two talked as they sat on the bed. They had been leaning against the headboard when there came a knock at the door and Yvette entered.

"Hi," the young woman greeted both. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"None of this is your fault."

"I'm still sorry."

"Come give me a hug. They may become fewer. I'm not comfortable without the perfume."

"You don't need it here. We're safe."

"You didn't think so before."

"I know. I was confused."

"I'm still not sure what's going on," Sarita stated.

Patting her leg, Raanana expressed, "We all have a lot to catch up on. I have to get used to what happened."

Yvette nodded, "Me, too."

"What did they show you?" Sarita asked.

"I'll tell you later. Let's go. They're taking us to the dorm and sorority."

"Why can't we drive ourselves? Our cars are still locked up?"

"For now, they're going to drive us. That Caroline woman is still out to kill me."

"You're taking this well."

Raanana remarked, "That's part of the changes. Like puberty

prepares us for bearing children, these changes prepare them for this life." Nudging Sarita off the bed, "Go. Enjoy your time with Yvette. She's still much the same. Her eating habits have changed, though she'll still eat pizza and cheeseburgers, so don't act differently with her. If it's bland for her, she'll still eat it." To the daughter, "Don't complain when it's bland."

"I won't."

"I'm still waiting for my last hug."

"It won't be our last. Don't put the perfume on."

"I have to. I still have a lot of people who wish me gone and it keeps them back."

"What about gas masks?" Sarita asked. "Couldn't someone use one to get close without the effect?"

"They could hold their breath, but it does affect the skin. It gives me a warning. Unless the masks are completely self-contained, like scuba gear, it won't work. The aroma is too fine, though the powder would be blocked. It would be obvious if they wore one. As a perfume, I'm warned about who they are when they get close. The reaction is instant. They can't tolerate it. I have other ways of handling them when I know who they are."

"Yeah; that gun."

"For a start."

Yvette told her friend, "You should check out that walking stick closer."

"Another time," Raanana stated. "Now give me that hug and get going, so I can cry."

The two students embraced the woman.

"Happy Sabbath, Mom."

The older woman just nodded, unable to reply without choking. After she was alone, Raanana cried for a while, applied more perfume, then cried herself to sleep.

~ ~ ~

The pair of students rode in the back seat of an early model luxury sedan, the interior having leather and polished wood. The plump, young woman watched her friend. Sarita had changed back to the outfit she wore on Tuesday. Yvette was still in the gown and both wore coats. There was silence. Neither knew what to say first. Sarita's mind was a whirlwind of questions. She kept glancing to the driver – a tall, solid, well-dressed man she only knew from the mansion. She had no reason to trust him.

Yvette didn't know the driver at all and was still weak and

confused. So much had been said to her, she figured it would take weeks to sift through it all. Though raised knowing about these people, it was hard for her to consider their existence were more than stories and videos.

Long looks between the friends didn't pass knowledge as it once did. Their world changed and there was no common references to connect the two.

"I know," Yvette finally expressed, making an assumption of the last spark in the other's eyes. "We can talk at the room." Seeing the glance from the man through the rearview mirror, the thinner whispered, "Myer said he'll stay outside."

After a while, the car pulled along a street across from a long brick building. The driver turned back to the pair, his right arm along the seatback. "Is this the place?"

Sarita nodded, as Yvette told him, "It is."

"Good. Take your time. I'll remain here, should something happen. You'll have enough commotion to deal with without having to explain me. Run along. Have fun. Talk it out."

The two exited the vehicle on the walkway side and went to the nearest corner.

Sarita looked to the car in the shadows of the low sun. "We don't have to go back."

"I do," her friend stated, as they stepped into the crosswalk.

Looking up and down the streets at the assorted people, mostly femella students their ages, Sarita expressed, "We don't. We can stay here and catch up with our classes. Your mother can bring us our cars and stuff."

"I'll go back to class next semester. But for now, I have to stay with them until we know where Caroline is. If I don't go back, Myer will send people to find me. They can smell us. We'll talk in the room."

Reaching the main entry, the pair ascended the three steps to the landing. After a brief pause with Yvette holding the handle, the thinner pulled open the aluminum framed glass door and both proceeded into the warm lobby.

"Yvette – Sarita," a high pitched voice called from the top of the texture-coated, metal side stairs painted pale-blue. "You're back?" Rushing down, "What happened? They said you were sick, but wouldn't say what it was."

"Hi, Mindy," Yvette greeted the slender brunette. "I'm fine, now. It was nothing."

"It was something," Sarita told her friend. "You almost died."

"Died?" Mindy asked.

"It's nothing," Yvette insisted. "We have to pick up a few things."

"They said you dropped out."

"Only for now. We'll start classes again next term." Giving a quick hug, Yvette told the brunette, "Good to see you. We have to go."

Up the stairs, the pair left the casual student-friend with more questions than answers. Other students greeted them and it took a while to reach Yvette's room down the long hall.

Inside, Yvette closed the door. "Whew. I forgot how noisy people can be."

Sitting in one of the two chairs, Sarita stated, "You didn't mind before. You gossiped with them all."

Going to the small bed at the left, Yvette plopped on it, laying back, "I guess. It's different now."

"Your mother said things would be different. They all said that."

"What did Mom—." There came a knock at the door. "Go away," the thin student called out.

The door opened and an older woman entered. "Hello, Yvette. I came to check on you."

"That was fast."

"Mindy's worried. We all are."

"I'm fine."

"You look exhausted. Shouldn't you still be in the hospital?"

"I wasn't. I'm fine."

"All right. As Head of House for your team, I have to make sure."

"Thanks. I'm really okay. I'm tired. That's all."

"You do look tired. Your room is paid up for a long time, so.... Well, I guess that's it. Welcome back."

"I'm just getting a few things. I'll be staying with friends for a while."

"Good. I hope you feel better."

"I do."

The woman left. Sarita rose and locked the door. Turning to the friend, "I'm sorry."

"That's not your fault. She just had to check."

"Not her. None of this would've happened, if not for me."

"Eblin hunted me. Not you."

"I got you to take the physics class. You wouldn't have been out there that late, if you were taking normal math courses without lab work."

"I would've been bored."

"You wanted to be an accountant. That's as boring as it gets."

"I'm good at it. There's good money in it and lots of jobs available."

"True. There is only one NASA."

"We're still going."

"Are you sure? Doesn't what happened change all that? Your mother explained some of what you're going through. Could you hide it?"

"I don't know. I will though." Yvette glanced at the other bed, saying, "It's a good thing Janet isn't here."

Sarita examined the woman's neck peeking from the bodice and coat, "It's a good thing that scar is gone."

"They say the redness will fade in a week or two."

"That's incredible. You didn't see it. It was gross. I thought you were going to die."

"I didn't." Sitting up, Yvette asked, "What did my mother tell you?"

"Not much. She talked a lot about what you'll be eating."

"Yeah. Food's tasty. Their food is."

"I guess. Our salads are out."

"I could eat salads, but eggs sound better – and a meat lovers pizza. Go order it."

"Eggs and pizza?"

"Just pizza. With anchovies and jalapenos."

"I don't think so."

"On half then."

"They'll wonder."

"Let them wonder."

"Hiding?"

Yvette looked the inquisitive friend over. It took a few moments to grasp the meaning of the question. "Just a meat lovers. Is that all right?"

"Fine. I'll be back."

It took several minutes for Sarita to return. When she did, Yvette watched the young woman lock the door. The thick coarse black braid dangled close to her full, rounded rump and square



hips filling out the snug jeans more than Yvette could.

"Come lay with me," Yvette requested – having removed her coat while the pizza was being ordered. It now laid on the floor by a simple side stand near the bed.

Observing the sensual, grayish-green eyes, the fuller woman told her friend, "Your mother warned me about this."

"We've done it before. We have time."

"About forty minutes." Sarita went to the bed, standing close, watching the reclined woman, now scooted towards the wall.

"What's wrong?" Yvette asked.

"You know how much I like you and enjoy our time together."

"And? What?"

"You haven't been this interested before."

"I have been." Glancing to the door, "I wasn't comfortable with it. It's the way I've been raised."

Removing her coat, dropping it on the one near her feet, Sarita laid on the bed, facing her friend, propping her head on her hand. "No it's not. Your mother and I talked a lot while you were... sleeping. She didn't raise you that way. She didn't say anything specific about how she raised you, but I saw the way your mother and that Lavina woman acted together. It reminded me of Glenisha and me."

"Your high school friend?"

"Yeah. We act like that still."

"They don't see each other very much."

"Neither do Glenisha and I anymore. That's fine. I have school. She has her kids."

"You didn't talk about her much."

"You hardly told me about your mother."

"Now you know why. What was I to say? Mom's a witch who ends people's lives?"

"She does?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"No."

"Oh." Leaning over, Yvette kissed lips as full and soft as the rest of her friend.

Sarita let the contact linger. After, she expressed softly, "I don't know about this. You were nearly killed. Now you tell me your mother's a murderer or assassin, then kissed me?"

"I like you – and you like me."

"But, Raana killed people. More than one by the use of people."

"They're not really people. Not like you and me."

"Me. You're one of them now. Whatever that really means. I'm still not sure. Your mother said the myths are wrong; that you're a combination of some sort."

"Mom told my brothers and me about them when we were growing. She showed us videos. She taught me to shoot and stuff, but I didn't care for it much. Now I'm what she told me about. At first, it sounded like the old horror movies, but it's different."

"How?"

"I don't crave blood."

"Blood?"

"Yeah. I enjoy the taste with meat, but spices are better. It's not like the stories."

"Your mother told me about that. What did Myer and Lavina show you?"

"That was freaky."

"Yeahhh?" Sarita urged, lengthening the tone for the other to elaborate.

"Well – they became wolves."

"Wolves?"

"Slowly at first. They changed their eyes – then the rest. Meyer did it first. It was like some of the videos I've seen at a place Mom took me to. Lavina changed next, much faster. Then they changed back, like it was nothing. They just stood up."

"With clothes?"

"No. They took them off first."

"What else?"

"That's all they did. They said they can do other animals – or parts, mixing what they want."

"You weren't attacked by an animal. He was a man."

"They don't have to change. Eblin could have, though."

"He was strong," Sarita stated, as a chill quaked through her body. "He pushed me on you from the gutter like some doll."

"Yeah. I forgot. They told me what you did. You could've been killed."

"You nearly were."

"I'm fine now."

Shifting closer, the thinner woman kissed the other, brushing strands of loose hair from the rounded face. Sarita let it happen,

her left hand sliding to the back of her friend's head in a gentle, affectionate manner.

After a couple more light kisses, Sarita told her, "I'm nervous."

"I feel it."

"I don't want to be."

"I feel that, too. We're still friends."

"I know. Your mother said that won't change. Lavina and her are friends – and Lavina's like you." Looking deep into the other's eyes, "That's so weird to say."

"It's weird to hear." A few more kisses, then Yvette pulled her head back. "Did she tell you how they do this – my mother?"

"She doesn't know I know. She told me you would be more assertive. That's the word she used. She also said how passionate they are – also her words. Your mother told me you would be more passionate, as well. Mostly, we talked about the foods you would prefer now." Examining Yvette's face more, Sarita told her, "You seem normal, but more aggressive than I'm used to." Taking a deep breath, "I like it."

"Me, too. I was thinking about my mother's perfume."

"She said she wears it a lot."

"All the time. The others are allergic to it. I guess I'm allergic to it now."

"If Raana wears it all the time, then Lavina couldn't be.... Maybe they're not."

"I think they are. It makes sense now. I know my mother had lesbian friends. She still does."

"That's why I said you weren't raised that way – the way you said. I didn't know that before. I thought it was because you were Jewish."

"I'm not very Jewish. Neither is Mom really. She does a lot our rabbi wouldn't approve of."

"I would imagine."

"I don't celebrate Sabbath unless with family."

"I know."

"I'll have to ask my mother about Lavina."

"Don't. She doesn't know I suspect."

"I'm sure she does. Mom knows things about people. I'm certain she knows a lot about you now. That may be why she told you about this."

"Oh, God; I hope not."

With a kiss, Yvette expressed, "It's okay. She likes you. I think you're more of a daughter to her than I am."

"That's not true."

"It is. I look more like my father."

Sarita made a show of looking the triangular face over, then to the modest bust peaking from the neck line of the gown. "I don't think so."

"I sure didn't get Mom's boobs."

"You may, when you have children."

"I doubt it. I saw pictures of my mother when she was younger than I am now. She always had them."

"Yours are cute."

"I wish mine were like yours."

The two chatted, their affection growing to mutual satisfaction. They were working on more pleasures when a knock came from the door and a familiar, high-pitch voice called to them in a playful tone. "Pizza for Yvette Halpen. Get it before we do."

"Damn," Sarita muttered, scrambling from the bed, pulling the panties and jeans up, zipping. Shoving fullness of her mammae back into the black bra, she buttoned the blouse.

Yvette grinned from the bed, her gown already brushed, pushed and tugged into place, covering her feminine form. The friend opened the door and exited. Mindy gave knowing glances with a smirk, as the door closed.

By the time her friend returned from the front entry with the medium pizza and sodas, Yvette could tell the flushness in Sarita's light-brown complexion had waned.

"I'm so embarrassed," Sarita declared while locking the door and setting the box with a balanced six-pack on the table. Taking one of the cans, opening it, she took a deep swig.

"Don't worry. Your skin's darker. I doubt they know."

"Ohhh – *they know*." Taking another swig, "Mindy does. She'll tell the others."

Rising from the bed, Yvette went to the box. "It doesn't matter. You don't live here." Taking a slice, "After we eat, we should go to your sorority and get some of your things."

"That won't take long."

"We can take as long as we want."

"I don't want to stay there that long. I'm so confused. I don't know what to tell the sisters yet, but I don't want to go back to that mansion."

"We have to. Tell your sorority sisters I was sick and you were helping me."

"Sick with what?" Sarita asked. "Why didn't you go to the hospital? Why not let people visit?"

"We do have to tell them something."

"What?"

"I was in private care. I have some illness they haven't figured out."

"Make it cancer. That way you can cover more absences."

"That's good. Leukemia. My blood is different and it's not contagious."

"You're not losing your hair. You're not going through chemo?"

"New drugs. We caught it early."

"That's better than the truth."

"We better not tell them that."

The friends ate, catching each other's eyes. They giggled of knowing what they had done and what the others around the residence hall may be discussing. No words passed between the two. For the time, it was as it had been before; each knowing the thoughts of the other.

"Yvette," the plump woman addressed after a few minutes.

"Yeah?"

"There's something I've been able to do for a while. More like, it happens to me. It's the reason I apologized."

"You don't have to."

"I do. I knew we would be friends when we first met."

"I know. You told me."

"I didn't tell you why."

"It's like a soulmate thing for friends."

"Something like that. There's more to it. I had dreams about you since I was a kid."

"About me? We never met before coming here. You're from Michigan."

"I am, and you're from Colorado. I still dreamt about you, as well as coming to MIT. I didn't bother applying to other schools. I knew I would be coming here."

"What about NASA?" the thinner asked. "Do we go there?"

"We work for a space program – so, yes. That's the only one we have. I don't think we go to Russia or Europe, or somewhere else."

"I hope not. I don't know Russian or Chinese."

"Neither do I. Japan, India and Europe have programs. I don't imagine going there, either." Sarita took another bite. After a deep breath, she told her friend, "I had a lot of dreams about Lavina. They go back as far as I can remember."

"When did you meet her?"

"Wednesday. She arrived the morning after the attack."

"You never met her before?"

"Not in this lifetime."

"You believe in reincarnation?"

"Maybe. I'm still disoriented. I told Eiddwen about some of my dreams – most of them. I began remembering others."

"She knows you dreamt about us – and Lavina?"

"Not Lavina or us. Not by name. I told her there were people I didn't know. She said they may be people in other dimensions."

"Now you believe in that, too?"

"I don't know what to believe. I love science fiction. That's what got me into science. Or, was it the other way around." Finishing the can, the fuller added, "Many of my dreams come true. I used to tell people, but it freaked them out."

"I would think so."

Seeing flared emotion, "I shouldn't have told you."

Yvette took hold of Sarita's right hand, squeezing it affectionately. "I'm glad you did. We're friends, no matter what happened to me."

"It happened to both of us," Sarita stated, kissing the hand before releasing it.

The students smiled, ate and talked of lighter topics.

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