

Chapter 1

The Lacs struck just after sunset. The maroon horizon framed them in a menacing silhouette; nature conspired in portending their intent. Unlike previous visits, they remained mounted on their zeelis and thundered through the front gates, ji'hoks held up ready for action.

Unmindful of this differing posture, our leader approached them and attempted to mediate, but the Lacs weren't interested in conversation. His decapitation was swift. The ji'hok flashed in the waning light and severed the man. His wife's shriek was cut short by an equally devastating flash. The rest of the village scurried to their homes, but most didn't make it as the rampage began. Those who made it inside were soon coaxed out with flames which licked their hovels clean in brief minutes. While I had no great love for my neighbours I couldn't help but feel a tinge of regret at my inability to prevent the carnage. A 63 year old man with arthritic hips could not don the mantle of heroic intercessor.

I scooped up Lamren. He exercised brief protest until an ember caused him angst and he curled close to my chest. As I dodged through the doorway of my home into the village square, the heat and tiny pricks from the sparks alighting on my neck told me I was now homeless and destitute. All my belongings, most of my writings were chewed to ash.

Neighbours in varying degrees of dismemberment littered my escape route. Lamren sniffed the air and whimpered at the stench of blood. It infiltrated my nostrils and lodged within memory, sure to resurrect in dreams and nightmares. I stepped around a maze of arms and legs forever separated from their torsos. Decapitations stared at me; mouths gaped in condemnation. The Zeelis' hooves echoed through the earth like a director-less percussion band, and their Lac riders augmented the mad orchestration with war cries.

My chaotic and panicked path probably saved me. The Lacs' ji'hoks couldn't zero in on my escape, no matter how good their aim, nor how loud their screams. Despite slipping and falling in blood puddles and once scrabbling to recapture a terrified Lamren, all the flashing crescent blades, while they came close enough for me to hear them whistling by my ear, missed me. If prone to superstition I might have believed gods or destiny had other plans. I continued my drunken path and made my way to the village perimeter stone wall where I knew I could find brief refuge in one of the underground tunnels leading to the outside plain.

I squeezed through the narrow opening into a flat dark and travelled halfway into the passageway where I caught my breath and tried to think. The mounted Lacs could not follow me in here, yet once they finished their rampage they would search all village areas on foot. So I couldn't stay long. But where to go? To the canyon in the east where the village had emergency shelters fully stocked? Much too far to make a run for it. Much closer to the west lay the forest. Not only would I find immediate shelter, but a refuge. No one, especially the Lacs, would venture into its leafy interior. Most of the inhabitants of the plain, including my own people, believed it to be a haven for ghosts and demons. I had no such misguided misgivings. Ironically what made me different, and thus persecuted even amongst my own people, might save me -- if I could reach it without being detected.

"Well, Lamren," I whispered into the dark, "to the spirits!" I shifted the trembling ball of fur and scales to a more secure position under my arm and crept to the end of the tunnel where I listened for several minutes and accustomed my eyes to the black expanse in front of me. A dark voluminous cloud shielded the full moon and worked in my favour allowing me to trek unmolested across the plane. Behind me the pathetic machinations of so-called civilization continued to kill and to die while I conducted a slow, steady pace to freedom. Their sounds faded

by gradual degrees the closer I approached the forest until the natural oasis of green offered only night time noise which calmed Lamren. By the time I stepped into the leafy interior, he nodded off to the chirp of crickets.

To say my initial excursion into the trees was accomplished without trepidation is a lie, for I had a life time of brainwashing to overcome. Even though I never believed the stories of spirits and demons, I witnessed strange lights and sounds many years before. I, however, always believed there to be a logical explanation. While never given the opportunity to explore my beliefs I refused to succumb to the illogical treatises offered by the elders, or my parents, thanks in no small part to my grandfather.

As I crept further into the greenery I could almost hear him, 'Kagol,' his voice boomed, 'Fear will only serve you if it saves your life, and even then it should be faced - challenged. Fear should never be given status of the unexplained. The unexplained will fester and gnaw at your intellect and courage.' After such a lesson he often attempted to smile and would rub the top of my head. Yet the elder warrior could never quite carry off the wise old grandfatherly image. His talks with me always sounded more like commands verging on disciplinary threat.

A shadow flipped by my peripheral vision and startled me. "Just a glider, just a glider," I said as I remembered there were many species of gliding reptile reputed to be in the forest. As I progressed fatigue pressured me to stop. The muted sights and sounds of the dark forest sang a lullaby, yet I wanted to ensure I was deep enough into the protective canopy just in case the Lacs overcame their superstition.

The clouds released the moon and allowed me to see a large oak which protected a partially covered hollow. This I selected for a bed, for it would provide shelter from inquisitive eyes. As I settled in, the moon, as if in collaboration, covered itself with a cloudy quilt and I fell asleep.

A warm wet woke me. Lamren sniffed and snorted his usual wake-up call on my face, a ten year long pattern unshaken by neither circumstance nor place. Light filtered through several breaks in the green canopy overhead. Morning -- and I lived. I attempted to rise, but despite the soft bed of moss and dead leaves this proved challenging. A sharp pain in my lower back forced out a moan and a curse. At Lamren's insistence I half rolled onto one side and pushed to a sitting position. He bounced five feet away as I tried to stretch joints into mobility. "Come, Lamren, let's check you over." The little tanlit bounced back to me, swishing and snapping his scaly tipped tail. His long scale-covered snout bore the brands of fire sparks. They glared angry and red. "We'll have to find some salve for that." A ridiculous statement I realized. Where would I find salve? The rest of his body fared better. The long fur on his body and tail were covered in soot from the fire, but the scaly legs and tail tip escaped the injuries inflicted on his face. I tapped his back and he jumped away, bounding down a moss covered path, eager to move on. "Be patient, Lamren, be patient," I called after him, and struggled up to stand and lean against the ancient tree. I checked myself over and found to my surprise that other than my sooty robes and tiny neck burns I looked and felt pretty good. However, dexterity and motion took some work.

Lamren chirped from up ahead and bounced back. His face was wet, and his large furry ears hung sopping and bedraggled. "You find some water?" I asked and followed the tanlit's trail. A trickling sound soon touched my ears, and the closer we approached the more I relished the idea of scrubbing off the soot. We reached a miniature pond fed by a tiny rock tiered waterfall. Sunlight beamed down on the pond and I sank my head into it, scrubbing every part until I felt cleansed from the previous night's horror. The dirt settled to the bottom and my reflection stared back as the water calmed. My memory wandered back over the last 12 hours.

The Lac medicine woman started it all. For two seasons she harped at and cajoled her Lac

brethren into believing we, the sky strangers of three generations past, were responsible for recent droughts and the migration changes of the herds. She claimed the gods were angry by our intrusion into the Lac bloodline. Yet because of the sky strangers my mother and her family and many other families survived a devastating plague, and in return the sky people were given land on which to settle.

“No good deed goes unpunished,” I muttered into the pool and sank my head into the cleansing cool again. Yet instead of calming me, it produced first disgust, then outrage followed by bitter anger. Everything I had ever worked toward was gone. Conscience demanded I should be more outraged by the multiple murders, but if the truth were known Pulling my head out of the water I called for the tanlit. He scampered over, tail shaking and snapping with every bounce. The scaly ears perked forward. “Let’s investigate this green world further, Lamren.” The creature raced down the mossy path, stopped, turned and raced back to my side. I dried my face with a semi-clean corner of my robe while he pranced beside me. “Lead on,” I pointed, and he charged part way down the path again, stopping only periodically to allow me to catch up.

We continued this pattern for another hour. All the while I wondered what to do. There were still members of my mother’s family left in the village to the west of our settlement. Yet how far had the medicine woman’s poison spread? I might simply be trading one massacre for a lynching. I could turn around and try to make it to the caves, but the Lacs might check it for other escapees. The forest seemed my best refuge, but for how long? And what about food? While familiar with the natural foods offered on the plane, I wasn’t so well informed on what might be offered in the trees.

Lamren chirped and bounced with growing enthusiasm. He drew my attention to a large hill which looked out of place. Despite being covered with moss and ground cover and with trees converging upon its perimeter something not ring true. Lamren continued chirping. The warning timber of his vocalization alerted me. It was the same sound he made when the Lacs rode into town. A chorus of unseen birds were encouraged by the tanlit’s talk, and they set up a varied cacophony. I slowed my pace and peered closer at the unusual hill, and then it struck me there was no visible soil - only vegetation. I poked at the base of it trying to clear away a portion of the greenery to look for dirt. None existed. The matted and tangled vegetation grew upon succeeding generations. As I continued to travel the hill’s lower circumference poking and prodding the strange green material it suddenly gave way before my fingers, and hung like a tattered bit of tapestry. Lamren’s chirp changed to a rapid clicking. He backed away from the live drapery, tail lowered and ears pushed forward. “What is it, Lamren?” I pushed at the knitted green. It swayed and parted. I pulled the two pieces apart and discovered a low ceiling. Silence weighed complete. I pushed my hand up to the top of the cave and touched a smooth surface, too smooth to be rock.

Visions assaulted my inner eye. People, so many people shocked my conscious mind. I recognized them as childhood visions. Not memories, but mind visits from unknown beings, as if the forbidden knowing sense, angry at my inattention over the years, resurrected with impunity. One face, one vision rose above them all and smiled. A patient, caring smile - a familiar one. She haunted my day and night dreams as a child, but I outgrew her years before. She existed only as a childhood fantasy; something to counteract an unforgiving and unrelenting father. Yet here she returned and seemed real.

My hand tingled with the touch of the smooth surface. An unusual calm descended upon me.

A fearsome noise wiped the sensation away. With great cracking and groaning a section of the cave ceiling moved and yawned open. Total fear fixated me. Caves do not open, let alone move. When the noise ceased, a dim light filtered down from the belly of the cave. I ran.

Twenty or thirty strides outside the cave a stitch grabbed my side. I stopped and worked at it with frantic knuckles. Lamren chattered and clicked from behind a nearby tree. In an attempt to resurrect my dignity I called to him in a voice belying my fearful internal pounding. He popped his head around the side of a tree and rattled his tail. It snapped with a regular rhythm, yet he crept away from his hiding and sat beside me.

I returned my attention to the strange cave and contemplated explanations. Perhaps an earthquake? Lamren, a great predictor of strange, yet natural phenomena, exhibited indicative behaviour prior to my entrance to the cave, so perhaps this remained an undiscovered phenomenon. I reasoned aloud, "Like everything, Lamren, there is a logical explanation." I scooped him under my arm, and stood straight. "We just have to figure it out." Yet I hesitated to return because of my old friend fear.

My grandfather schooled me in the art of pushing away the outward appearance of fear. Feigned bravado usually worked well, but the last twelve hours had drained me. I felt panic rise and I tried to imagine my grandfather's response to the present situation. He would have marched up to the strange cave and faced the unknown. My usual response was forced calm and avoidance.

I stood there and stared at the drooping moss. Lamren shifted and clicked within my grasp. The woman's kind face resurfaced within my mind's eye again. She smiled encouragement. I inhaled a deep breath, strode forward and parted the moss curtain.

Stairs had opened from the belly of the cave. One by one I climbed them. Each step proved to be a battle of will. At the top of the stairs I beheld a glorious, shiny hallway - not a cave at all. I crept down the hall ever alert for something, anything. While I refused to believe in the spirits that my father and people were sure inhabited the forest and its enclosures, I could not discount them. Their existence, pounded into my brain, remained a part of my thinking regardless of my personal belief. My heart thumped. Curiosity and fascination not felt since childhood propelled me forward and seemed to aid in overcoming the inner fear.

Doors of incredible beauty lined the hallway up and down. They were framed in gold and precious looking stones. An understanding of sorts filtered from distant memory. The ship! The old ones talked about it, and lamented over its many machines. Upon my birth, very few of the ship's machines remained in the settlement. As I grew older they all disappeared through disrepair. My father claimed it to be for the betterment of all.

The old ones would speak of a place which shone and sparkled. Often the stories were cut short by my father and his supporters. He said speaking of such things only brought discontent. We had to live in the here and now, and survive. Years passed since I heard the word 'ship' even whispered.

I continued down the passage and came to a caged-in circular area. In the middle a spiral metal staircase reached up beckoning my increasing curiosity. As I climbed I passed three more levels of hallways lined with the glittering doors. At the top was a diamond shaped room. The walls were lined with strange metal sideboards, covered with handles and buttons encrusted with the unknown jewels. An odd looking chair stood in the middle of the diamond room -- the only such chair in the entire room. I touched it. The tingling sensation I experienced upon first entering the moss shrouded cave passed through me again. The comfort came with it. I felt at home. The feeling gave me courage to sit in it. More visions flew in my head. Visions of flying through the clouds, and beyond, came to me in a series of flashes.

A different, more physical tingling sensation worked through my fingertips and into my body. I tried to get up, but couldn't. The chair held me in a firm, relentless grip. I struggled.

“If you press the release mechanism under the seat, you'll be able to get up,” a voice spoke behind me.

Lamren too was caught in the chair's grip. He squeaked and squealed on my lap and tried to claw his way off. I tried to fend off his panicky scratching while trying to extricate us from the seat. The little animal's actions were the only reason I remained conscious. My control over the display of fear slipped away and I shouted at the tanlit. I struggled harder. The chair turned with my battle, and forced me to confront the voice. A tall woman in flowing white robes stood before me. Her hair, abundant and red, framed a long face which grinned at me. Lamren found escape and bounded to a far off corner.

She walked toward me. “Do you want me to show you?”

Speech choked in the base of my throat, and I held up my hands to ward off the apparition. She advanced further. I thought my heart would fail. She leaned over, hair dangling down in a great mane, and pointed to the underside of the chair.

“Push this,” she urged and stood back.

I saw her hair brush my hand, but I did not feel it. As I lost consciousness a sinking feeling that my father and the elders were right swept through me. Spirit demons did exist.

A while later I woke, neck stiff from the awkward cant of my head on the chair back. The memory of the spirit came back, and I rolled my eyes around searching for her. No sign. I swivelled around and leaned down to find the mechanism.

“For a moment there, I thought you died on me, old man,” she said from the front of the room.

Her voice froze my search, until my friend fear urged me to seek out the release mechanism. Peripheral sight revealed her form coming for me. With desperation I pounded on everything under the chair, finally finding myself loose. I leapt up and raced for the door, but it had closed. The redhead advanced. I sank to the floor.

“Computer,” she said, “increase lighting by ten percent.”

My eyes and mind raced for another escape. I heard Lamren chatting from his corner refuge.

“Who sent you?” she demanded, close enough for me to see the colour of her eyes. Green. They blazed, and dug into my soul.

“No... no... body,” I stammered, shame rising at my quavering voice.

She stopped. I breathed easier. The constriction around my chest lessened.

“Someone must have sent you. Do we have orders to leave or what?” she asked, plunking her hands on her hips, glaring at me.

“I... I... don't know what you mean.” I wheezed again.

She studied me. Pushing a long lock of hair behind her ear she grunted, “Obviously not.” Turning as if to leave, she then whipped around to face me. “Are you sure Katreia or Teygol didn't send you here?” She frowned, looked away and sighed. “Couldn't be Katreia or Teygol. They must be dead by now.”

At the mention of my grandfather's name, I struggled up from the floor. “Teygol? My grandfather's name was Teygol.”

“Was?” she asked. “So he is dead?”

“He disappeared a long time ago.”

“Disappeared?” she repeated and turned around. “Disappeared? How?”

“I don't know. The old ones say many left one day and never returned.”

The spirit seemed to contemplate my words.

“Your grandfather?” she asked with a bemused expression and resumed her advance peering at me with laughing eyes. “I guess I can see some of him in you. Although to your credit, the

skin is not as pasty and the striping not as evident, but the temperament ...," she paused and laughed. "The temperament is not Teygol. Had you been Teygol facing me for the first time you would have attempted to slice me in half ten times over by now."

Her insinuations did not bode well for my ego. I reddened.

"Ah," she said with a large grin. "That's more like it. A little striping goes a long way in Redokan circles."

With her comment I realized my unusual reaction to stress had resurfaced -- another occurrence long since inexperienced. I felt the blood vessels straining against my skin causing lines to cross my complexion.

"How do you know of my grandfather?" I asked, embarrassment and anger empowering me.

"Of him?" she laughed again and crossed her arms in front. "I didn't know just of him -- I knew him, and quite well I might add," she finished with a toss of her head. "The stories I could tell." She sighed. "But that's gone -- all gone," her voice trailed off.

Her statement caused my heart to sink as it confirmed my suspicions of her spirit status. To look so young and yet know Teygol personally proved it. "Then you are a spirit," I said, risking more nerve.

"Spirit?" she cocked her head and grimaced. "For lack of a word you could understand, I suppose that will do."

Gaining further courage, and curious as to what information she possessed, I walked closer. "What was he like?"

"Teygol?" She turned to face me. I nodded in answer. "A brutish being from a brutish race." She paused in thought. "Although once involved with Katreia and the Alocans he evolved -- somewhat."

"Katreia -- she was my grandmother. Alocans? The word sounds familiar."

"And so it should," she said with a touch of scorn. "Your grandmother was Alocan. The Alocans were the antithesis of the Redokans. A philosophical, thoughtful people. Some would say too much so." The woman laughed. "In fact your grandmother fought against the Alocan traditionalists for years."

I felt more at ease and took a couple of steps toward her. "Tell me about her."

Her eyes narrowed, as if she didn't know whether or not to trust me. "It's all here," she pointed to the sideboards against the slanted wall. "All you have to do is access the computer. It will tell you everything you want to know." She paused, interpreting my confused expression. "You don't know how to access it?"

I shook my head.

"Oh very well, I suppose I can tell you about her. She was a complex character especially for an Alocan and it would do better coming from someone who knew her. I knew her well." She threw up her arms. "I knew them all well, too well." She motioned to the chair I escaped from earlier. "Sit," she commanded. I hesitated. "Oh, sit down. It doesn't bite."

So I sat, and felt the strange tingling. Lamren ventured back with jerky fits and starts. The ghost moved closer and peered into my face. "You have her brown eyes. Gentle brown eyes ... but her determination to change her people's way of thinking was not so gentle."

Braced against the ancient oak, sling shot eye level at arm's length, the young woman prepared the stone projectile for launching across the green glen into the practice gourd. A rustling bush wavered her determined brown eye. Dellep's voice rose from her subconscious, 'Concentrate. Concentrate,' it chided. Pulling the leather cup tighter, she fired.

A shocked voice from behind whipped her around. "Katreia!" her youngest brother Tebar stared wide-eyed. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

Angered at the intrusion, Katreia snapped, "What do you think I'm doing?"

Tebar continued to stare in horror at the home-made weapon. "Something wrong," his voice trailed to a whisper.

"Nonsense. It's only a toy," she scoffed and stuffed the sling shot into her waist pouch.

"But if anyone should see," he pointed, face wrinkling, "Katreia, you would be sent away -- banished," he whispered the word as if the very sound might bring the elders running.

"But nobody has seen it. No one but you," she raised a questioning eyebrow and tucked her hair behind her ear.

The little boy looked up, tears brimming the terrified brown. "Oh, Katreia, I would never tell...."

"Not intentionally, no," she agreed, "but if you don't learn to control your thoughts better, even crazy old Lema will know," she added with a frown.

Tebar stared at his feet, tears ran down his olive face. "It's too hard," he sobbed with a hint of anger.

Sympathy soared as Katreia crouched down and hugged him. "You can do it, Tebar. Just practice." She lifted his face up and wiped away the tears. "Remember what I taught you. Recite the Legends in here," she tapped his head, "and nobody will be able to read anything else. Besides," she said standing, "when Father reads what you're doing, he'll be so pleased he won't look for anything else."

The little boy swiped the rest of the moisture away with a floppy sleeve and attempted to regroup his dignity with a half grin.

"So," Katreia asked, smiling, "Why are you out here sneaking around?"

Tebar scowled, trying to remember his errand. In sudden recollection he blurted, "Father needs your help with his pony. The twig wound from last week won't heal."

"Come along, then." Katreia strode through the oak grove and down the path. Her light cotton tunic and leggings swished with each step.

Tebar walked behind her double time, wondering how he would ever get along without Katreia if someone should find her weapon and report it. She, the oldest of five was the closest thing he had to a mother. Father, when not engaged in elder business, often studied the Legends leaving little time for attention or play.

"Katreia, slow down," he complained.

She moderated her pace. Tebar hurried forward. Faint village sounds filtered down the forest path. Voices called out to wayward children and ponies. Dishes from the noon meal in the fields clinked together as they were cleaned in the fountain. The tinkling water added to the musicality of the light chatter of the washers.

While a familiar wave of comfort waved over Tebar, Katreia's mental defences focussed as she blocked out the village minds. ESP and telepathy were common traits of the Alocans, but Katreia had been endowed with a powerful sensing. A burden and curse in her view. Her father Namash often tried to convince her of the ability's value and the honoured post awaiting in the elder chambers when she became of age -- in another twenty-five years.

They entered the village and as they passed the first thatched house Katreia tried to close her mind, but crazy Lema's anguish intruded. Katreia winced.

Five years before, Lema watched her only daughter dragged off by the hideous sky beasts. Nothing lessened the mother's pain. Countless times Katreia sent soothing, healing messages, but

Lema, too far gone, couldn't sense them.

Katrea quickened her step to get out of Lema's range. Memories of her own close encounter with the sky beasts leaked into her consciousness. A shiver walked her spine. Mental and verbal screams sifted through her as the memory of seeing five field workers prodded with stinging sticks by the ugly beasts into a shiny bird where they lifted up and disappeared in a burst of flame. Katrea shivered again and touched the pouch holding the sling shot. They would not get her without a fight.

Soon their walk through the simple village brought them to Namash's home. She turned to Tebar. "Tell Father I'll be there in a minute. I have to put something away." Tebar scowled. "Recite your Legends," she reminded, reading through the scowl. The boy nodded with a concentrated frown and scurried off to his father.

Katrea walked to a smaller version of her father's house at the property end and tucked the sling shot in behind a loose flap of grass close to her bed. She hadn't dared consider such action while living in her father's house. Before she earned the right to her own hut upon reaching the fielding age of eighteen, she hid the sling shot behind the barn and under a rock. Easy access proved difficult without raising eyebrows, and so proficiency came later with her hut. Uncle Dellep would be pleased with her accuracy.

"Katrea," a voice called from across the barnyard in through her window. "Bring your healing bag."

"Yes, Father."

She grabbed another pouch full of herbs and roots and a small mortar and pestle. Tying it to her belt she rushed off to help with old Tic.

The pony was in a state of agitation when she arrived. Not even her father who had cared for the animal for over twenty years could calm him. Namash stood on the other side of the prancing pony muttering in a soothing tone.

Katrea never noticed until then how age had crept up on her father. His bowed head revealed dark streaks through the brown. Funny how she'd never seen the diminishing white streaks before now. She pulled a strand of her own hair over, the streaks were pure white. Because he no longer worked the fields, his skin had lightened compared to Katrea's dark bronze, but, Katrea smiled to herself, his hands were still as strong as ever, and the arms still lean.

"Katrea, mix up some heart root and pipe wood," he instructed without looking up, "and make it into a salve."

"What's Tic done now?" Katrea asked as she rummaged for the ingredients and crushed them in the mortar.

Namash looked over the pony's back with a wry grin. "He decided to pay a call to the unclaimed mare outside the village boundary again and picked up an infection in the puncture wound. I keep telling him he's too old for that kind of behaviour." Looking back at Tic he frowned and admonished, "Next time I'll make you stay in the barn."

Although barns were provided for the animals' comforts they were seldom used. Animal freedom was believed necessary if one wanted quality work in return, and after many generations the method appeared to work. Rarely did a pony not show up when summoned.

"There," Katrea announced, "it's ready."

Namash took the offered mortar. "Good. Now, Katrea you take the head while I take the wound. He doesn't want to listen to me today."

Katrea positioned herself at Tic's head. Taking it between her hands she stared into the wild brown eyes. In a few moments Tic listened to her silent ministering while Namash spread the

medicament over the puncture wound. The pony fidgeted, but Katreia kept him locked in her head. The eyes narrowed, and the nostrils ceased flaring as the pain from the injury subsided.

When finished, Namash gave Tic a pat on the rump and told him to rest in the barn. The pony pranced off. Namash smiled after the animal as he wiped his hands clean of the salve. He turned his attention to Katreia. "Are you eating with us tonight?" After a short pause he smiled and added as an incentive, "Adree is cooking."

"In that case," Katreia answered with a twinkle, "Yes."

Namash laughed. Cooking wasn't one of his talents. "She'll be pleased. It's almost ready so we better get in. You know your sister when we're late."

Fourteen year old Adree bustled around the dining area issuing orders to Tebar as to the setting placement. The young boy rolled his eyes in quiet rebellion, yet followed the instructions.

Once the family of six settled around the table, Adree kept the conversation constant with all the latest gossip and events. Katreia smiled. Adree reminded her of Mother every day in appearance, and temperament. Namash often recalled many a hard day in the fields passed without effort because she kept everyone laughing.

"Did you know there was another sky beast attack yesterday, Father?" Adree continued as she passed the fish down the table.

Namash looked up. "Yes, but how did you know?"

"When I delivered the meals out to the south fields today, I overheard some of them talking. Apparently several of those misinformed devotees in the next valley were laying out in the field waiting for those beasts to come and take them." She turned to Katreia and asked in disgust. "Can you imagine laying yourself out and waiting for those hideous creatures to come and grab you?"

Katreia stuffed a generous amount of vegetables in her mouth, keeping quiet.

"Now, Adree, don't berate the poor souls so," Namash interrupted. "They simply interpret and believe the Legends a little differently than we do."

"Well really, Father. They have taken things just a little too literally, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," Namash commented. He glanced at Katreia, expecting some kind of response. Although not as inviting to the beasts as the devotees in the next valley, his people were passive, too passive according to Katreia. Namash's concern over his daughter's increasing anger grew with each year since her encounter with the sky beasts.

The evening meal finished up in silence. Katreia thanked Adree for the fish and made her excuses about having to be up for first day field duty.

From her hut Katreia stared at the moons, reluctant to lay down. With the sky beasts so fresh in her mind she knew dreaming would take a nightmarish turn.

Closing her eyes she quieted mind and body, drifting in a state of relaxation. Without warning the face of a young child drifted in from her subconscious. Although familiar with such manifestations, this face looked different. The boy was pale, his eyes frightened and confused. A strange mottling developed as he lowered his head. He winced with an abuse she could not see. Compassion for the unusual child filled her and her subconscious smiled encouragement. The boy's face faded, an old man replaced him. The same odd skin tones looked back at her. A shiver touched her.

Who were they?

When Professor Andy Burne read the Katreia and Kagol segment he thought it the work of one of his summer composition students. He almost didn't open the email. It came in the junk folder along with the penis enhancements and latest lottery scams. He rarely chanced perusing through

the suspect folder, but this was the university's computer, so what the hell? The subject line 'What would Shakespeare do?' captured his curiosity and so he clicked and read. Not until he reached the note at the end of the story did he see where the real Shakespeare connection came in.

The note gravitated toward the ingratiating. Normally he never fell for sweet flattery, but something sincere in the writer's words crept out of the electronic communication; something he couldn't put his finger on so he continued to read.

The mystery communicator wanted to commission him to write a Shakespeare style play based on the story of Kagol and Katreia. Further details of the story would be forthcoming if he agreed to the project. Compensation promised to be worth his while. Andy stared at the email for a while and contemplated. Might be an interesting challenge. Even though old Will had covered all the bases when it came to storytelling, and he could be integrated into almost anything or any style it would prove a challenge to mimic his nuances and talent. He needed a challenge. His life as an educator had become patterned and unenthusiastic. Fervour for opening young minds to the intricacies of literature waned. Was it his fault or the students? Years ago one of his Profs maintained the student was never to blame -- yet Andy noted changes in the quality of student over the years, and the present student seemed the worst of all.

They only wanted the degree. A degree which would take them places and earn money. The words no longer excited them. They weren't interested in getting to the crux of the author's possible meanings or intentions where research and careful thought would reveal the mystery of the words. They didn't want to be bothered studying the ancient texts where the keys for literature lay waiting. Most students never picked up a Bible let alone studied it, and Homer had been much misunderstood if read at all by the time a student reached university level. This attitude proven infectious and even lethal.

Every now and again a promising student crept into his domain of desk and pen, but without exception they soon moved to the Gordon camp. He supposed Gordon provided the romantic ideals of what a Literature Prof should be where every text was broken down into its titillating parts. Flamboyance and the search for innuendo were Gordon's key to holding the 21st century student who held any promise. Andy believed his craft weighed more than that. Sure there were lots of texts that could be interpreted that way, but even deeper meanings presented themselves if one looked closely. Many of the studied writers were prophetic in their deliberations.

The digital sound of an alarm reminding him to go to class pulled him back to the here and now. Time for Professor Burne to make a living. He'd never needed such devices in the past especially on the first day of a fall term. He silenced the alarm and once again stared at the email. To do or not to do? "What the hell," he muttered and clicked on the print function. Even if his communicator were some kind of a nutter the whole idea captured him and deserved further thought. He jammed the print-out into his weathered leather briefcase and quick-stepped out of his office only to return and snatch the term text off his desk. With Will's complete works in one hand and bag in the other Andy shifted into late-for-class stride.

Chapter 2

The spirit used an unfamiliar word -- telepathy. I stared at the red headed woman. "This telepathy, is this the knowing sense?"

The red hair bounced as she cocked her head to one side. "The knowing sense?"

"When you know things for no reason, or see things in your mind."

"Yes, I suppose so. The Alocans were famous for it, especially Katrea," she paused, "and her Uncle Dellep. Teygol came to depend on it more than once."

"So the knowing sense is natural?" I felt betrayed, yet at the same time vindicated. Betrayed because it went against long held belief; vindicated because of my father's ramblings against it. Yet I didn't trust it. Even though experienced as a child, logic dictated something so ethereal could not be based in reality.

"Quite natural. You must have some ability if you are her grandson."

"My father discouraged it. The Lacs were suspicious of it."

"Typical Redokan mentality. Sounds like your father inherited more Redokan genes than Alocan." She flipped her hair.

"He was a good man," I defended, not knowing why. Perhaps familial bond which succours loyalty despite the reality prevailed. "A hard man, but concerned for his people." My thoughts roved back to childhood when I discovered the knowing sense. To sense people's inner truth seemed natural at the time. I kept silent about the ability because I thought everyone else could do the same, until the day a mob of Lacs arrived on my neighbour's doorstep.

They accused the mother of manipulating nature with her witching ways. A Lac crop next to her family's plot failed for the second season in a row. Her husband's crop thrived, and suspicion fell upon her. She'd made no secret of her knowing sense.

My child eyes watched them drag her from the house. Lacs held the husband back as others hauled her down the road. We never saw her again.

The next day my father took me aside and asked me if I ever experienced the knowing sense. I stood mute. The vision of my neighbour being dragged off because of her knowing sense glued my mouth shut. Little boy fears and imagination conjured up horrible consequences. Father became incensed with my silence, and sent me out to the fields to work extra hours.

Later, while trying to fall asleep in spite of the aches and pains of the extra work, I heard my mother and father whispering about the knowing sense and me. The fear in their voices convinced me never to use, or acknowledge, the ability. Although difficult at first, I suppressed it, and kept us out of trouble -- for the most part. Only one small incident concerning a lost girl prompted me to resurrect it for a brief time.

"Are you hungry?"

Her question pulled me back.

"You must be hungry." She brushed her hair back, and walked to the entry door. "Follow me. I'll show you how to use the MPU."

I didn't know what an MPU was, but as soon as she mentioned hunger, my gut growled. Eighteen hours separated me from my last meal.

She led me through the exit, and into the staircase cage. I followed at what I hoped to be a safe distance. Lamren trailed along in fits and starts. The ghost babbled on about things I couldn't understand. The ship consisted of four decks plus the bridge -- a bridge? We walked down to the second deck where the same opulence I'd found elsewhere on the ship glittered

around me. I felt shabby in my soot and soil encrusted robes. We turned into a large room filled with tables and chairs, all carved with beasts and birds. My mother's meticulous writings invaded my memory. She wrote of such things and more, which at the time I believed to be fanciful imaginings.

Unlike other Lacs my mother adopted the ways of the sky strangers in a complete and decisive manner. She had lost her parents to the plague that the strangers had cured upon their arrival. One of the new couples took her in and consequently she fell under their influence. She learned to read and write their language and became engrossed in their histories and scientific structures. The traditional Lacs never approved, but then they were not willing to take her in. Orphans in the Lac world were abandoned and whether they survived or not was of little concern.

She wrote and learned about everything she experienced: the ship; the strangers' histories and cultures; she even posited her own theories of her natural world based on their science. I learned and grew from many of her notes, but many I ignored because I thought them tainted with her Lacién superstition. When she died I rescued all her work and hid it from my father. He never truly supported her thirst for knowledge despite his sky stranger bloodline. Through the years I cursed and blessed her legacy to me. Cursed because it made me different from the rest of the village, yet blessed because it made me valuable to them in weather prediction and knowledge of the natural world they depended upon.

"So what do you want?" Her voice pierced me.

"Huh?"

"What do you want to eat?" she asked, hands on her hips.

"Anything." I shrugged.

She pointed to a grouping of gemstones laid into the wall. "Push those," she instructed.

In spite of myself I was truly awed with the results. A plate of food appeared within the wall recess! The implications for my immediate future were far-reaching.

"It won't bite," she grinned at my hesitation.

"How is it done?" I poked at the tray with experimental fingers

"If I went into details about the process, your eyes would only glaze over again like they did on our way down here. Try it," she coaxed.

Lamren leapt upon the sideboard and snatched a cube of something. He nibbled with caution at first, then devoured the cube and grabbed another.

She laughed. "Your little companion is braver than you."

"His stomach usually rules over his common sense," I snapped.

I grasped the tray and set it down on a nearby table. Immediate visions slapped my consciousness. Beings engaged in various activities or conversations assaulted my mind. They disappeared once I dropped the tray on the table and removed my hands.

My actions betrayed my discomfort for the woman asked, "What pictures do you see?"

"I see nothing," I snapped.

She laughed. Her delight in my discomfiture angered me. I bit my tongue and tried to manoeuvre the conversation to further discussion about my grandfather. One of the visions I saw in particular clarity was Teygol, but he looked different than I remembered. "What did he look like before he came here?" I asked as hunger overcame me and I started to eat. I tried to push away the uninvited visions as her description matched what I saw. In my vision he not only looked younger, but he looked fiercer, ready to take things into his own hands no matter the consequences. This Teygol was far different than the man I knew as a child. This Teygol did not

forgive, and would kill in a second.

“You know, even Teygol came to respect and even rely upon your grandmother’s natural talents, yet his mistrust of her people in the beginning spurred him on to certain paths which led to your existence.”

“How did they meet?” I dipped a utensil into the food and willed away the persistent pictures. “Unpleasantly,” she answered with a laugh.

Coping with the spoils of war and the supremacy earned, proved far more formidable than the original conquest, the Redokan warrior surmised while viewing the alien-packed chamber.

“Warrior Teygol,” a slave announced the summons above the buzz of alien languages. “Lord Chlack will see you now.” Teygol marched to the massive wooden doors. The waiting warrior’s snarl curled an eye-to-jaw battle scar. He strode into Chlack’s audience chambers.

The large receiving room strewn with soft pillows and lights exuded a feeling of peace and comfort; two things of little value in the life of a Redokan. True Redokans shunned such comforts, but Chlack’s true self had become infected with the influences of the various alien worlds he conquered, or traded with, or enslaved. Wealth made easy with the Technics and their machine magic in trade for Redokan minerals had corrupted the values of the chieftain warrior.

As Teygol’s disapproving eye toured the chamber, further disgust welled within at the sight of Chlack. Gone were the traditional furs and armour, and in their stead the soft flimsy cloth of the Alocan slaves. The abundant Lord looked foolish.

“Lord Chlack,” Teygol, close to choking at the obscenity before him, stood to attention and thumped his chest in Redokan salute. “You summoned me.”

Chlack grinned from his comfortable position on several ornate pillows. “Teygol, Teygol,” he paused and studied the stiff traditionalist wondering how he could move with all the warrior garb. “You must learn to relax and enjoy the bounty around you.”

Teygol stared back. “Warriors do not....”

“Yes, yes, I know, warriors do not allow their guard down,” he waved at a large pillow. “But if a warrior accumulates enough he can delegate that tedious business to someone else. Times are changing, Teygol.”

“Too quickly, Lord,” Teygol ventured.

Chlack’s black eyes flashed a warning. “Beware, Warrior, someone might mistake your avid loyalty to the old ways as treasonous.”

Teygol lowered his head. Not yet time to ire the fat Redokan. “For what purpose did you summon me, Lord?”

Chlack smiled, pleased with his handling of the warrior. “I need more slaves, more Alocan slaves. They are pleasing and easy to train.”

Teygol’s eyes narrowed. “Alocans?” A weak and contemptible people whose planet was not considered viable for conquering. No challenge to the venture, yet something about its creatures caused Teygol anxiety. “Lord, if I may suggest a few more of the little people from Graynoir. They too are easy to handle....”

“Yes, but not as pleasing to the eye, Teygol,” Chlack wrinkled his face in distaste. “Besides the Graynoirs don’t have the ability to know what’s expected of them before ordered.”

“That ability should not be trusted, Lord,” Teygol said in a low voice glancing at the Alocans present.

“You are old fashioned and superstitious, Warrior. They lack the intelligence or muscle to be a threat. Just ready your ship and do as I order. About five should do for the present. Dismissed.”

“Yes, Lord,” Teygol clenched his jaw, and thumped his chest.

His quick exit startled a slave on the other side of the entrance doors. Teygol felt his anger welling. Soon his translucent colour would betray that anger as the blood lines bulged and striped his pale skin. Chlack may look docile, but the numbers guarding enforced the Lord’s powerful influence.

The Redokan's strong, short legs marched through Chlack's cavernous holdings and out the front exit into the cool mid afternoon. He stopped to adjust his furs under the metal alloy breastplate, one of the few articles manufactured by the Technics that Teygol used. Its lightweight strength allowed greater freedom during battle. As for the other changes in his decaying society, Teygol refused to adopt. Unlike many Redokans who converted to the free-standing shells brought by the Technics, Teygol kept his ancestral home hewn from the mountainside. Many Technic shell homes clustered around Chlack's mountain. Teygol snorted in contempt as he passed them and wondered how anyone could feel secure and safe in such flimsy construction. After only a few Redokan winters they fell apart, pieces scattered by the harsh winds over the unforgiving terrain of the foothills.

Teygol slowed his pace as he threaded through the market place. A squabble broke out between customer and vendor. The warrior smiled as he watched an old female thump a demanding customer with the nearest object. The Redokan spirit was still intact, but not for long. The new generation mutated and defiled daily.

The market place thinned out, as did the habitation shells. Teygol walked through a towering rock arch and into a flat expanse of ground which in days gone by had been void of anything save snow drifts and wild beasts foraging for edibles. Now stood a busy complex full of waiting ships. For twenty years now many an alien and his wares entered the booming planet through their doors.

The Technic ships preceded the corrupting changes and allowed the natural conquest urges of the Redokans to expand and unite their people from a feudal society into a strength many star systems feared. That such a noble beginning should evolve so ignobly mystified Teygol.

He entered the complex and advanced to his ship bay. A scowl lined the thick face when he thought back to the nature of the mission -- slaving, but he would be out in the element he enjoyed most, in a ship and in command.

Teygol walked with a deliberate pace around the craft. This he did as a matter of precaution, but also in a secret appreciation of its slender lines. The main body flowed from a point into the upper fixed wings. The longer secondary wings were swept back and under, awaiting the command to reach out and spread to freedom. A fast, quiet ship complements of the Technics' modifications via Redokan request. When the warbirds cast their shadows over a new planet, surprise and not the blasting of weapons usually held the population to the desired attention.

Teygol ran his beefy hand down the side of the ship. To make such a magnificent machine perform slaving runs was unforgivable.

More anger bubbled in the Redokan, transforming the skin into the striped pattern -- a common trait of late.

Chlack would pay.

There was another email and another chunk of the story waiting for Andy when he returned to his office from his last class. A little annoyed at the mysterious sender he whipped off a curt note in response requesting the sender give him a little more time to make up his mind whether or not to take on such a large project, and would they ‘provide some kind of contract or documentation

as to the precise nature of the project, and a fee schedule'. After he punched 'send' he regretted some of his comments. All due, no doubt, to the disappointing first class turn out.

It got worse every year. They showed up late, or not at all on the first day. In fact less than half of them showed up today. Feeling churlish he awarded each student present with an extra five percent on the first exam which wouldn't happen until the beginning of December. The others could kiss his ass. When he announced his plan there were several giggles coming from a group of first years in the back. As he had smiled back at them he realised they would probably need that extra five percent. They didn't strike him as the scholarly types. On the other hand there were a couple of promising students.

They were older students, students who were either starting life over again, or who had extra time and money after early retirement to work out a dream. Either way they would give his Shakespeare's Histories class a different tone where discussion not dependent upon the accepted answer or caring what someone else said would make everyone think, including himself. Andy enjoyed the mature students because they were serious about learning and discovering. They soaked everything in and kept him on his toes, and he'd have some interesting and well written papers to read when they came due. Most of the younger students slapped together a paper a day or two before the due date and then wondered why they received the mark they did. Seriously?

Andy checked the clock. Time to go home. He packed up his worn leather bag as he printed out the second instalment of the story and walked out. Autumn touched the air with a hint of crisp in the late afternoon. Too late this morning to take advantage of the faculty parking he'd parked his car on the other side of the campus. Andy enjoyed walking through the campus. Along with the crisp air an early kaleidoscope of coloured leaves that had given up on summer skipped in front of him. Students chattered to one another as they wandered across the many paths between buildings. Many of them exhibited the exuberant tint of youth combined with a prospect of some kind of adventure. Unfortunately the adventure usually leaned toward what bar they would hit tonight. He watched a couple of students charging in front of the student union building and thought back to his own university days. Was he really any different back then? "Andy, my man, you have gotten old," he muttered under his breath. He found his car along Tower Road and headed home.

Home, or what he called home these days, stood in a less than desirable neighbourhood. He was forced to take the small apartment after the divorce settlement. Cynthia, and her lawyer took everything he'd worked so hard for over the years. His real home sat only a few streets away from the university, settled in a calm and nurturing area where the cops made regular patrols only to make sure the mayor's wealthier constituents were happy. In his new neighbourhood, cops were also present, but for much different reasons. As he drove past his old home, he couldn't help but peer at the two story cape cod. All seemed well. The upper right hand corner, damaged during Hurricane Juan, still looked good. He'd worked very hard to correct the damage. In fact every room, every nook had his stamp upon it. When they'd moved in twenty years ago the house required some tender loving care after the previous owners grew too old to keep it up. The house kept him busy for many years, and truth be known he'd enjoyed the endless projects and maintenance. Now he had no such distraction. The apartment was maintained by someone else, and Andy had lost interest in such busy activity. It reminded too much of what he once had before Cynthia decided he bored her and she needed someone who exhibited more interest in what she considered to be important. Bitch!

While never seeking divorce, when Cynthia asked for one Andy felt a certain amount of relief. Over the years they'd gone separate ways. She wanted the trappings of a shallow lifestyle

where the latest designer fads, and social standing, were all that mattered. He preferred puttering around the house and attending the odd lecture of visiting profs. Getting dressed up to Cynthia standards and being paraded about to social engagements were not his idea of a good time. So when Cynthia decided he was not playing the game to her specifications and asked for a divorce, Andy didn't fight it.

As he turned onto his street and geared down to climb the steep hill, not for the first time Andy realised he liked this side of the city. It provided an insight into what reality was all about. He'd lived far too long in an ivory tower out of touch with how the majority lived.

A moving van stood outside the front door. People were forever moving in and out of the building, but actual moving vans were a luxury few could or would choose. He slowed to a crawl to get past the van and drove up to the underground parking entrance. Parking arrangements were odd to say the least. He pulled out his security key, poked it out through the car window and opened the garage door, only to have to drive through to the end of the underground, pull a rope dangling in front of another garage door where he drove back outside into another lot where he finally parked. He supposed his car was safer than many with such a convoluted access. After getting out of his car he walked back to the garage door and used his key a second time to gain entrance where he walked back through the underground parking and then through a door on the far end and into the lobby.

Various boxes and furniture littered the common area. He couldn't help his curiosity as he walked by an open box full of books. A veritable plethora of scholarly titles peered back at him – Complete Works of Shakespeare, biographies of Milton and Keats, Complete Works of Wordsworth, and one Gardiner's Ancient Egyptian Grammar. Interesting. As he approached the elevators a woman walked out of the freight elevator. She looked familiar.

"Professor Burne," she said with a surprised lift to her voice. "You live here?"

He recognised her as one of his mature students he'd seen this morning. "Hello – ah, yes I do ...," he held out his hand.

"Theresa Mills," she introduced as she shook his hand. "I'm taking your Shakespeare's Histories class."

"Yes, of course," he smiled and then looked behind him at the scattered belongings. "This is yours?"

She nodded. "Almost finished. One more load and everybody can have the second elevator back," she smiled. A surly looking tall, teen followed behind her. "This is my son, Max. Max, meet Professor Burne. One of my Profs."

Despite the sullen appearance, Max offered a disarming smile and stuck out his hand. "Professor."

"Nice to meet you, Max." Andy smiled as he shook the young man's hand. "Welcome to the building. If you need any help, I'm in 512."

"Thanks, Professor," she smiled as she grabbed another box. "I think we've got it covered."

As Andy walked into the other elevator he wondered why he said that. This could be a crazy woman, and now she knew where he lived. As the doors closed he shrugged. It wouldn't have taken her long to find out what apartment he lived anyway, whether he told her or not.

As he walked into his apartment a large grey cat sauntered over to him. "Hey, Chuck," he bent down and scratched the cat's head. Andy was surprised at how he had taken to the cat. He'd never seen himself as a cat person, but a colleague from the university who took an overseas sabbatical asked Andy to take him in for the year. He'd grown quite fond of the feline and really didn't want to give Chuck back in another eight months. Chuck fit well with his lifestyle. He

was quiet, very clean, and seemed to know when Andy needed attention. He also, in a very prompt and decisive way, took care of any wandering mouse. Chuck proved to be an ideal roommate.

As he did every evening Andy set out Chuck's food and threw a dinner into the microwave for himself. While he waited for the dinner bell he sat down in front of his computer located in the dining room converted study.

When he opened his personal email he was at first surprised, and then alarmed to see another email from his mysterious writer. How did they know his personal email address? He shrugged, "Must have googled me." The email answered his previous questions, and if he were honest sounded much more professional than his. It also directed him to check his PayPal account for a deposit.

Andy checked his PayPal account. A deposit of ten thousand dollars looked back at him. The Professor's mouth dropped open. He double checked by signing out and signing back in, thinking by some fluke he'd slipped into someone else's account. But no, the same deposit reappeared.

He didn't hear the microwave beeping. Chuck jumped up on the computer desk and gave a loud meow. He poked his head over the screen, blocking Andy's view. Andy shook himself to awareness.

This was going to take some thought.

Chapter 3

Perhaps there was more of my grandfather in me than I realised. Where Chlack became dependant and enamoured of his alien servitors, we became too entangled with our native hosts. Our leader and his elders decided it prudent to forge alliances with one or more of the Lac factions. I opposed it. With the changing weather and herd patterns some of the Lacs became emboldened and launched small raiding parties. The alliances were meant to ward this off, and for a time this strategy worked. Yet something told me these alliances were nothing more than invitations to abuse. I tried to warn them, but our wise leaders cast my warnings aside. The illiterates knew better.

Many years prior, however, they did listen to my mother's same warnings. Because of her Lac heritage they reasoned her to be the voice of prudence, and despite her disinterest in political matters she had many staunch supporters. When I was a child she, in no uncertain terms, informed the elders of her time that inviting the Lacs in would only lead to trouble. The Lac people saw only their immediate future and immediate needs, and strove to satisfy these ends. But after her death her warnings faded away. My father did his best to keep our village as Lac free as possible, and to his credit he succeeded to a certain degree. The Lac incursions into our space were minimal. But within a few years whispers and murmurs of alliances resurrected especially when the raiding parties began in earnest. Our present leaders opened the floodgates, and bartered protection of our village and surroundings fields for food and information on herd and weather changes. But as my mother warned so many years before, the prices got higher and the demands became ruthless. Kidnappings started, and crop pulling became so normal we planted the outer rims of our fields for just such a purpose.

Through all this time I voiced my objections and even came up with solutions. My Mother's notes and writings contained several ideas on setting up defences whether they be monument workings or the training of defenders. During my Mother's time the villagers took this to heart and set up the perimeter fences and gates, but once the villagers of my generation invited in the Lac alliances, the walls meant little and there were no defenders to man the gates. When I suggested we needed to set up a defence force they rejected the idea. Their only interests in me were in the matters of weather and environmental predictions. My relationships with the elders became even more tenuous than ever. Their treatment of me finally ended my marriage. Because we were often excluded from village life, my wife decided our cohabitation was no longer a viable one. She also objected to the time I spent on exploring and recording our natural world. She left and moved back to her original Lac village, taking my daughters with her. Years later one of my daughters showed up for a visit with my one and only grandson. Her curiosity got the best of her, but it didn't last and she too left. While I saw nothing special in her, I did see a spark in my grandson. He exhibited a curiosity and a desire to learn. I wanted to keep him and teach him but my daughter would not hear of it -- just too much like her mother. At that point I decided the village children needed the benefit of organized education. Until then their only knowledge was gained through the stilted intellect of their parents.

To my utter surprise the elders agreed to the idea. Not until several months into the project did I realise why when I overheard two of them in conversation. They simply wanted to see me replaced by someone trained to do my job. I ended the classes and maintained my indispensability.

Lamren startled me and bounded to my lap and the table, snatching yet another piece of food.

An involuntary yawn escaped me.

“You're tired?” the red head asked.

I nodded, and yawned again.

She stood up from the dining table and said, “Follow me.”

She led me up to the first deck. A short walk later she stopped in front of a door, which swished open on her command.

Never had I seen such luxury. A room rich in red draperies and floor coverings commanded the eye. A large canopied bed of deep colour wood begged to be slept in.

The red head smiled with my obvious astonishment. “Teygol used to say warriors shouldn't live in such comfort for fear of being corrupted. He never really became comfortable in this room.” She waved in the bed direction. “Make yourself at home. I'll check on you later.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and settled into the downy comfort with a sigh. Lamren sniffed everything and climbed up and around the furniture. Once I lay back he settled by my feet and slept. As I drifted into sleep and dreams I realized, unlike my grandfather, I could get used to this....

“I spoke with the other elders today,” Namash announced while passing the dish of roots down the table. His eyes rested on Katreia. The family didn't pay much attention. Namash spoke to the elders almost every day. “They agree you should begin your training earlier than normal, Katreia.”

Silence weighted the air. Each family member looked up from his or her plate with renewed interest. Katreia froze between mouthfuls. She stared down at the table. A growing dread twisted her gut.

“How much earlier?” she asked, eyes narrowing.

“They want to initiate you into junior eldership on the next harvest festival.”

The table burst into a babble of delight and congratulations. That a member of their family should be considered for eldership was an honourable tribute, but to begin training before the allotted years remained unheard of until now. Adree babbled and raced from the table into the pantry where she pulled out a bottle of their best wine. Tebar grinned from ear to ear. Her two other brothers slapped her on the back and kissed her on the cheek.

Katreia remained frozen.

“Katreia?” Namash looked at her.

“I won't do it,” she said. All mouths clapped shut.

Namash's mouth twitched with a half grin. “What do you mean you won't do it?” He shrugged his shoulders; grin still attached. Refusal was not an option.

“I won't do it!” she said standing up and sending her chair toppling. Throwing down her napkin, she strode from the house.

Namash looked at the shocked expressions around the table. “She's a little overwhelmed,” he explained. “I'll speak to her.” He left the table and walked outside.

Katreia paced in front of her hut.

Trapped! Trapped into a life she didn't want.

Katreia stopped in mid pace as a horrifying thought hit her. They would find out about her association with Dellep and the banished as soon as the first training session began! All initiates were open to probing. She couldn't block twenty elders at the same time.

“Katreia,” her father's calm voice spoke behind her.

She whirled around, startled.

“I know this is sudden, and a surprise, but you knew it had to happen sooner or later.”

“Later, Father, later,” her eyes widened. She resumed her pace.

Since memory had become coherent as a young child she always felt and sensed she would be spared the trappings of eldership. Something deep within told her things would change in the Alocan way before she had to surrender to the doggerel.

“What difference does it make if it's a few years early?”

“I'm not doing it,” her eyes blazed.

“There's no choice, Katreia,” he reiterated. “You were born with a strong ability and it must be trained. The sooner the better if you ask me.”

Katreia stared at her father with sudden insight. “You put them up to this didn't you?”

Namash sighed. “The elders were considering passing you over for future eldership.” She looked back in askance. “I suggested to begin your training to prevent any further...,” he paused, face wrinkling.

“Any further what?”

“Damage,” he answered.

“Damage!”

“Your change of attitude since your sky beast encounter can be fixed if we start the training early.”

“I don't want it fixed. I want to remember. I want everyone else to remember and I want them to do something about it.”

“Impossible,” he said, patience eroding “The Legends forbid weapons or...”

“Legends!” she scoffed.

Namash frowned. His daughter's aberrant thinking worsened daily. He sighed. “Katreia, if you continue along this path, they will banish you.”

“They?” Her eyes flashed. “Or you, Father? The same way you turned in your own brother?”

“Those were different circumstances,” he snapped, patience crumbling.

“The intentions and results were still the same. Blood turned on blood.” She let out a sharp whistle. Her pony trotted from behind the house.

“Where are you going, Katreia?” his voice raised in fear.

Once on the pony she smiled. “Maybe I'll pay Uncle Dellep a visit. I'm sure he'd be interested to learn things haven't changed much in his absence.”

“If you go anywhere near that settlement, don't come back here,” he yelled at the disappearing pony. Instant regret filled him, but Katreia was gone.

Instead of returning to the house the elder went for a walk. The brilliant full moons illuminated a path. Soon Namash reached the three-spire mountain boundary, a place the Legends dictated out of bounds. He searched for the secret entrance in the surrounding thickets and entered the forbidden area.

A brief pang of guilt assuaged him. What business did he have to criticize Katreia about her subtle waywardness when he practiced blatant disobedience for years? The closer he came to the mountain entrance, the quicker the guilt faded. The special place drew him like a pony to a watering hole. Its secrets, although unfathomable to him, were irresistible.

A rock wall, which stretched to the tips of one of the spires, loomed in front. He waved his arm over the right hand side. An invisible door opened and closed without a sound upon his entry.

He wandered through the interconnecting maze of tunnels and soon reached the mountain centre. The pathway broadened into a small green valley where he imagined the Ancients going

about their daily business in a manicured landscape which now needed attention. Many of the flower and tree containers split with time, sending the roots of their inhabitants prowling and searching for other avenues of procreation.

Most of the hard, mottled surfacing had cracked and heaved with the passing seasons, making walking a precarious past time, but Namash hopped, leaped, and jumped in a well rehearsed pattern to reach the stone bench he often contemplated upon.

Once seated he sighed and stared at the towering spires surrounding him.

“Contemplation with frowns? You must be troubled, Namash,” a voice startled the elder. Namash whipped around to confront the intruder.

“Dranon,” he acknowledged with a simultaneous surge of fear and relief.

Even after years of returning to his special escape, Dranon always managed to creep up on him. Long ago Namash resolved Dranon had to be a ghost.

Their first confrontation ended with Namash falling face first into a marble container. When he woke, Dranon had left and Namash retreated. But something drew him back and nothing, not even a ghost would keep him from his enjoyment of the place. It filled his soul with ... something. He felt stronger in his convictions here -- reinforced somehow. All the study and belief were valid in this sanctuary.

Over time Namash became accustomed to the spirit. They developed a friendship of sorts, even if unequal, with Dranon the high philosopher and Namash the ever-stumbling student.

Namash returned to his contemplation of the spires. “I am troubled.”

“Not that daughter of yours again?”

“Hmm,” Namash nodded. “Her behaviour digresses with each passing moon.”

Dranon chuckled. “She is young, Namash. Give her time. In fact,” he commented, fingers under his chin, “give her credit.”

Namash stared at the ancient. “Give her credit? For what? Trying to undermine everything we stand for? You of all,” he hesitated, still unsure after all these years how to refer to Dranon, “... beings, should see her errors.”

“Change can be good, Namash. After all, change created your present civilization. Intelligent beings cannot help but wish for change. It's evolution, a natural thing to spring from the wells of life.”

Namash shook his head at the image. “I don't understand you, Dranon. One day you expound the virtues of the Legends, and the next you advocate change.”

Dranon stood, white robes flowing out in a breezeless gust. He smiled as a father might to a curious son. “Change will happen no matter what. Being able to adapt and work with change sometimes remains our only defence.” The form disappeared leaving Namash confused.

Shaking his head, the elder raised up, feeling old and yet naive. An encounter with Dranon always left him feeling inadequate and frustrated ... and enlightened in some strange way. Namash returned the way he entered wondering if Katreia felt a similar paradox when she spoke to him.

“You still haven't explained why you're here at this time of day, Katreia.” Dellep squinted.

Upon her unexpected arrival Dellep detected trouble just by looking at the pony. He'd been ridden hard, something Katreia never did. Dellep tended the pony while Katreia paced back and forth in the lean-to. He could feel anger mixed panic in her every nuance

“I had an argument with Father,” she snapped, arms crossed over her chest.

“Ah,” he said with a slow nod. “As I remember those were hard to win. His calm logic used to

drive me crazy.” He motioned her to follow him into the grass hut where he poured her a cup of cool mint tea.

“He wasn't so calm and logical this time,” she grimaced, sipping on the liquid.

Dellep frowned, accenting the fine weather lines. His bronze face reminded her of Namash only a little. The younger Dellep grew tall and thick whereas her father developed shorter and slight. “Doesn't sound like Namash,” he mused. “What did you do?”

Panic outmanoeuvred the anger. Her eyes widened. “They want me to start eldership training this festival.”

“And this bothers you because...?” he prompted.

“The probing!” she stared at him, exasperated. “During the first lesson they will know -- everything,” her shoulders sagged.

“So?” Dellep threw up his hands. “So they find out about your double life. Seems to me,” he said with a wink, “it might provide a way out.”

“A way out?”

“You've dreaded the idea of conforming to the eldership.” He smiled and chuckled. “Once they know, well,” he shrugged, “your problem is solved.”

“But that's not the way it was supposed to happen,” she stomped her foot.

“Ah, yes. Your romantic notion that somehow all will change and evolve.”

“It's not a romantic notion! I've felt it for years,” she defended.

“Katreia, listen to me,” her uncle's eyes flashed. “Just because you wish it, will not make it so. We all have to face reality. Things won't change, unless...” his voice floated off, his eyes glazed over.

“Uncle?” Katreia looked over.

“But they might change,” He locked his eyes on Katreia. “If we had someone on the inside.”

“Impossible,” she dismissed with a glare. “I'm not trained nor powerful enough to resist the probing of twenty elders.”

“You might be with help.” He grinned.

“You?” she asked.

“Why not? You and your father weren't the only ones to come out of the family with ability.”

“How would you do it?”

“I'm not sure, but we have time. Right now,” he concluded with a yawn. “I'm going to get some sleep.” Dellep pointed to the floor. “Make yourself comfortable. There are extra coverings in the chest. Good night.”

Katreia grunted.

Dellep retreated to his room. As he settled in for a well-deserved sleep he thought back to their first introduction right after her encounter with the sky beasts. Her difference and strength of mind blazed from her expression. With boldness he'd never before seen in an Alocan, she'd ridden into the settlement and asked for him. A ten-year-old wisp determined to be taught how to defend herself. She asked for him because his was the only name she'd heard in whispered, careful conversations. And so began their pseudo father/daughter relationship and her training of which she proved worthy.

Dellep's eyes roved over to the storage cupboard where a sling shot twice the size of her original and twice as powerful waited. This one would not just sting: it would kill. He still debated over giving it to her. If she should become careless and injure someone or kill as he had done so many years ago, he would never forgive himself.

Katreia woke the next morning refreshed. Sleeping in the small settlement always gave her a

sense of complete peace. She didn't have to be on guard for wayward thoughts.

Dellep waited outside the hut with breakfast of smoked fish and flatbread. He introduced her to the slingshot and gave dire warnings of its potential. Katreia slipped it into her pouch with a pleased smile and ate.

Once finished she whistled for her pony.

"I'll go with you half way," Dellep offered, "and forage on the way back."

The two struck off through the settlement. Years before, a short time after his banishment, Dellep gathered the banished together and founded the tiny village naming it Nadea after Katreia's mother. Why, she never knew.

"So," Dellep began, "been thinking about what we talked about?" She nodded. "You must patch things up with your father if this is to work."

"I will." She sighed, her tone capitulated, "I know he's only looking out for me. It's just so frustrating living with those who won't fight back."

"Who knows," Dellep smiled, "maybe we're wrong. Maybe the Legends will prove themselves truthful. Many predictions have come true. It could be just a matter of time until the three spires save us from the beasts." Dellep nodded at the object of his statement. The three points bathed in morning mists towered to the left.

"Are you going soft on me?" she grinned.

"Not on your life," he stated. "This is half way." He stopped his pony. "Now remember, guard your thoughts and be very careful with that thing." He glared at her pouch and turned back.

Katreia continued along a path running adjacent to wheat fields. As she rehearsed what to say to her father she saw a group of workers in the field. Looking up at the sky she realized midmorning refreshment would be served by the under eighteen year olds soon. Tebar worked this sector today. On cue three small Alocans laden with food and drink struck off across to deliver their goods.

Katreia urged the pony on. Tebar would appreciate a ride back.

The bright morning sun dimmed with a passing cloud. Katreia looked up to scowl at the intruder, but it was no cloud.

"No," she choked. "Dellep!" she screamed over her shoulder and kicked her pony into a frightened run.

The shadow, silent and sinister, swooped in over the workers. Too involved in their the labours, the hapless workers did not see the sky demon. Katreia screamed warnings. Tebar looked over and waved.

Sling shot in hand, yelling like a mad woman, Katreia motioned up.

Tebar looked. Terror shook his thin legs. The sky demon settled on the field and spilled out its ugly cargo.

Before going to bed, Andy transferred some of the PayPal money into his chequing account. Typically in 24 hours he would see it. Only when and if that happened would he agree or disagree to the mysterious sender's request. He set his alarm for an early wake up call, intent on gathering his research together just in case he did decide in favour of the job.

When the alarm lifted him to semi-consciousness he wondered why he was getting up so early and then remembered the plan. Chuck stretched and yawned as he followed Andy into the kitchen. He blinked several times as Andy fed him, as if asking 'What the hell...?' Andy smiled, "You might have to get used to earlier hours, Chuck, if I decide to take this job."

After he ate a light breakfast of toast and fruit, Andy started to open moving boxes in the

spare room looking for his books, but the boxes weren't labelled. An hour later found him surrounded by ten opened boxes, none of which held his books. He sat back and looked at all the stuff, mainly kitchen utensils and dishes and wondered why he'd taken it. "Spite," he answered aloud. The divorce agreement said half of everything. He grinned at the half sets of china, kitchenware and silverware. Cynthia had gone ballistic.

Andy looked at his watch. Time to get to the university. He'd pick up this mess when he got back home. As he left the room he looked back again and wondered why it took him until now to unpack it. He supposed if he were honest he always thought this was just a temporary situation. Cynthia would come to her senses and ask him to come back. But that had not happened. Time to face reality. Time to get on with his life.

He gave Chuck a pat goodbye, grabbed his bag and headed out the door, down the hall and the stairs where he pulled on the chain leading out to his parking area. Off to his right someone struggled to start their car. The unmistakable sound of a car battery be pushed again and again to turn over an engine caused him to look. His new neighbour, Theresa, muttered and mumbled under her breath. Low curses and threats about junk yards made him smile. He walked over.

"Morning, Theresa. Problems?"

"Sonofabitch won't start," she growled before looking up. When she did glance up from the driver's seat she grimaced an apology. "Sorry, Professor. She just won't start this morning. Usually if I clean off the cables she'll give me enough to start." The hood was open, and a small stiff wire brush sat beside the radiator cap.

He checked the battery. "The cables are as clean as they're going to get. I'm afraid you need a new battery. I have a mechanic friend who can give you a good deal if you're interested. In the meantime if you're going to the university I can give you a lift."

Momentary doubt narrowed her eyes. "I don't want to put you out."

"You're not. And if you're coming home the same time, we can stop by my mechanic's and get a new one."

Again doubt sifted through her expression. "That really would be helpful." As she slammed the hood shut and grabbed her bag she asked. "What time do you leave the school?"

"About four."

"That's perfect. My last class is 2:30. Over at quarter to four." A smile crept over her face. "You're a life saver." Despite her words, Andy had the distinct impression she didn't like being helped, and she wondered what his ulterior motive might be, but her present situation didn't allow her the luxury of being particular.

As they got into his car he added, "I know what it's like to be a struggling student. There's always something breaking."

"No kidding," she sighed.

"So how are your classes going?" he asked as he threaded into the main road traffic at the bottom of the hill.

"Good," she said. "I think I'm going to enjoy them."

"Is this your first or second year?"

"Second."

"So a ways to go yet," he commented as he slid the car into third and another major road where highway traffic met city traffic.

"Yep -- but I'm enjoying every minute. Should have done this years ago."

"I sometimes envy you students," Andy grimaced, "the best years of my life were school years. Max must be getting close to high school graduation. Is he going to take his education

higher?”

“He’s in his last year. School has been a bit of a struggle for him, so I really don’t know what he’s going to do.” She grimaced and added, “I don’t think he knows what he’s going to do.”

Andy chuckled. “I’ve heard that from a lot of parents over the years especially when I taught in the public system. He may surprise you.”

She grunted, “For better or for worse?”

The rest of the drive remained quiet in the main. As Andy parked the car in the faculty lot he said, “So I’ll see you back here around four and we’ll get that battery?”

Theresa smiled as she hoisted her bag over her shoulder. “You’re a life saver, Professor. Thanks. See you at four.” She struck off across the lot and into the front doors of the university’s main building.

Andy went through the side doors and up to the English Department offices on the third floor. As he stepped into his office he perused the titles on his shelves, wondering how many Shakespeare titles he owned. There were many, but as he studied each title he realised they really wouldn’t help him in his quest to write like the Bard. He needed books with a more definitive slant on Shakespeare’s style. As he poked through Table of Contents and Indexes in a couple of his books the desk alarm interrupted and reminded him to go to his Intro class. After class he would poke through the university library’s online offerings.

His Intro class was full of first years fresh from high school. There were the typical jocks, partiers, giggling girls, and a couple of real students. Real students were few and far between. They were usually the quiet ones who kept to themselves, and they were the ones who knew the rules of grammar and could write a coherent paragraph. They were the students who Andy held out hope for society. Most of the others wouldn’t make it through the first year of their academic training, and while the real students might be flipping burgers for a while they would learn and grow through whatever life presented. They were the ones Andy wanted in control when he retired and hobbled off to an old age home.

He passed out the semester syllabus and went through the motions of explaining his expectations. There were the usual moans and groans when they realised this class would consist of basic grammar and a small paper which would be worked at step by step to teach the format they would use to get them through the next three to five years of paper creation. Do forgive me for interrupting your precious party time, and don’t give me that BS about not needing the basics of grammar to get through your non literary discipline. Every discipline requires the knowledge to write a cogent paragraph and analyze research material.

At the end of the class Andy sat back and watched his students filter out. He wondered how many would be walking out the door by the end of the semester. All Profs lost a good percentage of first years. Most of them had no business being here at all. With that in mind Andy collected up his papers and walked back to his office. He had some spare time to start his research.

Just as he logged into the university library and entered key terms for Shakespeare style search a loud knock at his open door caused him to lift his head.

“Andy, got a minute?”

“Sure, Dave. What’s up?”

Dave plunked down in the chair opposite Andy. “Reggie’s got a new scope. He needs us to help set it up this weekend.”

Andy leaned back in his chair. “Another one? When’s that guy going to stop?”

Dave shrugged. “Go figure. The astrophysicist likes telescopes.”

Andy chuckled.

“So -- you up for a night of beer and trying to keep Reggie from a nervous breakdown?” Dave continued.

“Yeah. I could probably use a night out.”

“Good. If I had to deal with Reggie by myself the cops might have to be called.” He got up to leave. “We’ll take my truck. Pick you up at six on Friday?”

“Sounds good.” Andy watched his old friend leave. The three of them had been friends for years. Where Dave was a pragmatic football player trained as an engineer, Reggie was the Big Bang nerd living in the world of geekdom. They’d met as university students decades before. Somehow the unlikely mix of engineer, literary professor, and astrophysicist worked and being these friends weren’t connected to Cynthia they remained friends. All the other so called ‘friends’ faded faster than a sailor’s money wad on shore leave. Andy shook his head with a smile and returned to his research.

Through the rest of the day he collected up a list of possible books in between classes and by three o’clock he poured through the library’s third floor and hunted down most of the titles. It took two trips to the check out desk.

As the library tech checked him out he asked, “Do you have some bags with you, Professor Burne?”

Andy shook his head, “Didn’t think I needed this many. My car is pretty close though. I’ll just make a couple of trips.”

“That’s okay, Professor, we have some here.” But even with the bulging bags Andy had to make three trips. On his third trip out to the car he wondered what he’d been thinking. Getting them up to his apartment would take just as many trips. Just then a possible solution called out.

“Hi, Professor. Just in time I see. Need a hand?” Theresa asked as he plopped the last bag into the back seat.

He smiled, “I will when we get back to the apartment.” As they settled into the car he tried to cover up the fact that he’d only just remembered his offer of help earlier that morning. “So we’re off to get a battery. I have a friend who runs his own small garage and he usually has refits for a decent price.”

“As long as it gets my car going.” She shook her head, “Hate being without my car. You forget how much you depend on them.”

Andy smiled, but his mind kept wandering to his Shakespeare research as he tried out different versions of first lines in his head.

“Professor!” Theresa’s voice raised in alarm as a car careened in front just missing them. A horn blared in accusation.

Andy jerked the steering wheel over at the last second. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“I don’t mean to be critical, Professor, but generally they want you to stop at a red light,” Theresa’s fingers grasped the dash and door in a death grip.

“My fault,” he confessed, “mind is on others things.”

“You sure you don’t want me to drive?” she asked, eyes wide.

“No, no ... I’m okay. I’ll keep my mind on the road.” He pulled himself together. Been a long time since his mind wandered like that. This project was catching his attention like nothing else had for many years. A good thing, as long as one could make it alive through city rush hour.