

SECOND COMING

By Kathryn Flatt

General Gat paced and stole glances at Tok the Seer who huddled over the cylinder which allowed him to view beyond the world. Silence shrouded the room, as murky as the daylight seeping through the yellowed and crazed dome of the derelict alien warship. In a shadowy recess, Tok's apprentices--one at the end of adolescence, the other barely weaned from mother's milk--watched their master and struggled against their youthful energy to remain still and not disturb him. Gat shared their impatience, but not out of restlessness. He wanted answers.

Finally, Tok raised his head, and Gat tensed. "Well?"

"Matha comes," Tok rasped.

"Are you certain?"

"The instruments do not lie."

"How soon?"

"Quite soon."

"Ah," Gat sighed. The announcement brought both swelling satisfaction and deep dread. He caught himself stroking his white whiskers out of habit and made himself stop it.

Tok squinted to scan the room and then pointed a shaky finger. "You! Rin. Come look."

The older apprentice scurried over to assume his master's position at the viewer.

Tok ambled to Gat's side with the extreme caution required by his advanced age and physical disabilities. "You appear troubled, old friend."

"Indeed." Gat tempered an urge to express his deepest feelings because a leader must never show weakness. "We cannot truly know what will happen when Matha arrives."

"I know she will smile upon us," Tok consoled wisely. "We kept her memory and teachings alive."

Gat nodded and turned to wander across the circular space, through the jagged break in the metal hull, and halted at the portal to the outside. Just ahead of his toes, the packed-soil floor ended in a sheer drop. Far below, his people, as tiny as insects, tended the crops in the perfectly round field. The rust-red cliff face, pockmarked with openings similar to the one he occupied, arced to the left and right to encircle most of the cultivated land. The Warrens, the home of the Righteous Ones.

Straight ahead, through the break where the cliff ended, he eyed the smooth stone wall which hid the city built by the Nonbelievers. The sight angered him as it always did for Matha would surely judge the building of such a thing as an abomination. The sun setting behind it turned the sky as red as the flames of Matha's retribution when she came again as promised.

"Soon they will learn, eh?" Tok questioned from close behind him.

"I once hoped it could be different," Gat observed glumly. "But hope for the Nonbelievers died so long ago. They will not accept the error of their ways until Matha comes to show them."

"Show them?" Tok cackled. The subject always riled him. "Matha will rain fire upon them! She will destroy their blasphemy!"

"Perhaps some may redeem themselves," Gat offered, mainly to dampen Tok's agitation. While the Seer was not much older than Gat himself, injuries suffered on the Night of Stones left Tok more fragile than his ego allowed him to admit. "We have all waited for Matha's return, have prayed for it, and when I was younger, I prayed I would live to see it."

"And now you doubt?"

"No," Gat countered quickly. "I do not doubt Matha's return or the fate of the Nonbelievers. I simply doubt how much I desire to witness it."

"We all must be strong," Tok advised more calmly. "I too remember the First Coming. Death and destruction, confusion and despair. Until Matha saved us all." He turned and shuffled back inside to join his apprentice at the viewer.

Gat watched him for a moment, reflecting on those dimly recalled days of his youth. Only he and Tok remained from their generation, the only witnesses to history. Time and life had blurred the memories until he no longer knew where memory left off and imagination began.

The Keepers of the Day sounded the horns to mark the end of work, dislodging him from his thoughts. The workers in the field began to cluster together and flow into the pathway through its center to the tunnels which led into the Warrens. With no offspring of his own, Gat felt a fatherly pride while observing them. *They are all my children.*

Movement by his side startled him, and he looked down at the apprentice, Rin. *I am truly old. In my prime, such a young one could never have approached me unawares.*

"Master Tok asks if you will pray and eat with us," Rin invited respectfully.

Gat patted the boy's head. "Tell your master I accept." Rin scampered away.

He took one more glance through the portal before returning to the round room. Shadow figures played on the outside of the dome as gatherers returned from the highlands with their loads of plants for spinning into silken fibers. Tok spoke gently to the younger apprentice as they set places for the meal which Gat knew would be more lavish than most of his people enjoyed. *Age has its privileges! And so does the position of General.*

The Keepers of the Day blew the second time.

"Will you lead us in prayer, General?" Tok asked. "My voice requires too much wind these days."

"Thank you," Gat accepted. He sank to his knees and gazed up at the ivory dome. "Mighty Matha, we give you thanks for this meal and for the safety of our home. You gave us the knowledge to survive by living together and protecting one another, and to make our lives rich and rewarding. For this we worship you, Matha, and we await your return to see how we honor you and to strike vengeance on the Nonbelievers." He savored the sense of completeness the prayer always brought before looking at the faces around him. "Let us eat."

Ensign Saundra Monino touched down on the eighth planet of the Lechter system at the base of a high ridge of rock. As the

surface of the landing pod became transparent, words and numbers flickered before her eyes indicating safe atmosphere, solid ground, slightly favorable gravity, and nothing alive in close proximity other than plants. At the press of a button on her belt, the egg-shaped pod collapsed around her and shrank into a small ball which she tucked into a pocket. She switched on the communication bud in her ear.

"I'm down," she reported. "You there, Reilly?"

"Reading you, Sandy," came the voice of Ensign Billy Reilly aboard the space cruiser Plymouth. "You're right on target."

She shifted her shoulder bag of gear into a more comfortable position and scanned the landscape for her objective. Above the ridge, the grayish orb of Lechter Seven filled half the sky and formed the backdrop for a deeply-eroded volcanic cone. Under her feet, rocky ground decorated with scrubby weeds gradually sloped into the ridge.

"I don't see the cliff dwellings." Her breath made white puffs in the air. "You sure you got the right coordinates?"

"Positive," Billy replied. "They're about two miles on the other side of the ridge."

She gritted her teeth. "Thanks a lot. You couldn't have set me down a little closer?"

"Yeah, but then you would be out in the open, visible. Besides, some climbing and walking won't kill you."

"You're all heart."

"Captain's orders. Can't have the locals seeing you miraculously appear."

She donned gloves to tackle the steep climb. "Talk to you again when I get to the top." She muted her comm before adding "Jerk."

Even with lighter gravity on her side, the ridge proved more challenging than its height suggested, and the chilly air became welcome. Winded when she reached the summit, she paused to drink from the water canister in her pack. Finally, she lay on her belly to check out the terrain through a scanscope.

Fading sunlight glinted off the dome of the fighter craft that crashed and buried itself in the top of the sheared-off bluff half a century ago. The cave-riddled horseshoe-shaped cliff wall formed the Warrens, home to the people of this world, a somewhat primitive society according to the ship's databanks. But something not in the briefing grabbed her attention.

She hit the comm. "Hey, Billy. The locals are supposed to be cave dwellers, right?"

"Yep. What's up?"

"There's the cliff with all the holes in it, but between me and it is a castle."

"A castle?"

"Yeah." She refocused the scanscope and noted the readings. "Like a thirteenth century Earth fortress with walls, watch towers, and a bunch of buildings inside. Scope puts it about one square mile. Can you do a scan for numbers?"

Pause. "About eleven hundred life forms, around sixty percent in your castle, the rest in the caves."

"So don't you think there's something funny about some of them moving out and imitating Earth's early Middle Ages architecture?" Her simple reconnaissance mission had turned into anything but simple, making her regret volunteering for it.

The comm went quiet for an uneasy moment. "Well, it's been fifty years, and they're supposed to be smart."

"But I wouldn't expect them to build a *castle*," she shot back. Billy could sometimes be as dull as a post. No wonder he never got promoted. "Maybe some pirates came in and took over. Did you ever think of that?"

He did not reply for several seconds. "Hang loose. I'm kicking this upstairs."

"Oh for crying out loud! Hang loose? It's around forty degrees down here, and it's getting dark." Irritated, she put away the scanner and stood. "I'm going down there."

"Sandy, wait! You don't--"

She cut off the link to avoid hearing about not having orders or authority. Her mission was to fulfill a long-overdue

promise to check on the indigenous population of this planet, and check on it she would. Besides, her sidearm could handle almost any threat in the known galaxies, and she could call on the Plymouth's weaponry if push came to shove. She started picking her way down the other side of the ridge.

After a brisk hike, she reached the outer wall of the fort. She removed a glove to touch its remarkably smooth stone blocks, roughly four feet on a side, stacked five rows high. Her first scan from the ridge had shown no gate or other opening, and the precisely-set wall offered no edges for footholds, but further along, the tops of substantial trees loomed above it. She headed to them, keeping a hand on the wall to guide her through the gloom.

Under the cover of an overhanging limb, she withdrew a climbing cable from her pack, tossed the hooked end over the wall, and gave it a couple of test tugs before pulling herself up. From a distance came the sound of horns playing three mournful notes, but it seemed too far away to have anything to do with her. After a quick glance around showed no observers present, she sat on the half-foot-wide top and swung her legs over to the other side.

A small but intricate garden lay below: flowers, shrubs, and paved pathways within a narrow border of ornamental trees. On either side clustered small buildings with soft light

emanating from narrow windows; on the far end, a larger structure rose above the treetops. She focused on the garden's main feature a few yards away, like a small monument, indistinct in the near darkness. She switched on her headset in hopes Billy could enhance the image via the Plymouth's scanners.

"Can you see this, Billy?" No answer. "Reilly? You there?"

His appeal to higher authority must have opened a huge can of worms. She dared not use a portable light lest she attract unwanted attention, but curiosity beckoned. *My mission, my decisions.* She retrieved the cable and slid off her perch to drop down for a closer look.

A single row of the same stone blocks enclosed a five-foot tall mass which looked as though someone dumped molten lava from the sky and allowed it to solidify. On top, right angles and clean lines grew out of its irregular curves to suggest something man-made. As she strained to make it out, a memory from long ago teased but remained out of reach. She gave up and considered what to do while waiting for Billy to come back online.

A rustling of shrubbery from behind her made her freeze. One hand on her weapon, she whirled to face the intruder and got a quick impression of a youth, an adolescent male, before he bowed his head and dropped to one knee.

"Matha!"

She opened her mouth to ask a question, but a gruff voice from her left stopped her.

"Who goes there?"

*

Iya walked carefully across the smooth floors of the palace so she did not slip and fall. The jeweled slippers hurt her feet, but they were the mark of her station, a Lady betrothed to Prince Tig, and she bore the pain with pride and dignity. From a distance, those dreadful horns from the Warrens played their final notes of the day to send the primitive faithful to bed, but thankfully, the heavy tapestries decorating the walls quickly stifled the echoes.

A more civilized chime played to signal the serving of the evening meal would soon begin in the dining hall. Iya stopped several feet from the massive door to the room where the king met with his council, hoping to greet Tig as he emerged with his father. Unlike in many arranged matches, she loved Tig with her whole heart and would feel exactly the same if he had been an ordinary citizen as she was when they fell in love at first sight. She eagerly waited for the day she would become his wife, his queen, and they would rule the city with courage, wisdom, and benevolence.

Finally, the door opened and Tig came out, shutting it softly behind him. As always, his handsomeness made her breath catch as he hurried over to embrace her.

"The council will not adjourn for dinner," he told her apologetically as they separated. "I knew you would be waiting, and I slipped out to tell you."

His obvious tension set her nerves on edge. "What is wrong?"

Tig looked left and right down the length of the hall before answering in a hushed tone. "They believe the Warren Dwellers are planning something, and they are discussing appropriate defenses."

"Defenses?" Her throat tightened. "Do you mean they will attack us?"

"That is the fear," Tig confirmed. "Gat has visited Tok in the alien wreck several days in a row. One of our watchers saw him there today looking quite triumphant. It is possible the old wizard has found new weapons on the derelict."

Anxiety turned to alarm. "Do you really believe they would attack us?"

Tig regarded her fondly. "We merely discuss the worst possible case, but my father believes Gat is capable of such a thing. He might goad his people to it for vengeance."

The hatred of the Warren Dwellers always made her feel guilty, and her history studies told tales of royal families which fell violently to rebellions and civil unrest. "But why do they all hate us so?"

"Not all," Tig corrected. "I believe most of them envy us and wish they could live as we do. Gat and Tok led their followers out of the city and back to the Warrens so they could not observe how we live and doubt their teachings. It is those two who hate us."

"Is it because of the wall and the monument to Ara?"

Tig reached out to stroke her cheek. "They believe it is sacred ground. They elevated a mere mortal to a god and now insist the wall come down to give them free access to their shrine. The King has offered many times to negotiate, but Gat always flies into a rage about heretics and retribution, most likely because negotiating means he would have to relinquish power. And there is Tok. He became especially bitter after the Night of Stones."

Iya shuddered. Although it occurred before she and Tig were born, what she had learned of the event had inspired nightmares, more often as she rose in rank in the royal family.

The door to the chamber creaked open, and one of the King's ministers stuck his head out. "Your Highness, the King requires your presence."

"In a moment," Tig told him and turned back to Iya. "I must go now, my love."

His calm strength always amazed her. She wished he could stay and make her feel safe, but she could not ask. The future queen must show the same strength. "Will you come to my chambers when you finish?"

"This could continue until very late. You should not wait for me."

"If I fall asleep, you can wake me," she answered. "I need to know."

They embraced, cheek to cheek for a moment, his whiskers tickling her nose. Then he backed away. "I will come."

Iya watched him disappear into the Council Chamber with deep foreboding. While she had faith in the king's wisdom, if General Gat made war Her appetite vanished, and she decided for forego eating in favor of a stroll in Monument Garden which always brought her a sense of peace.

But as she started down the tree-lined path, she heard voices. Curious, she hurried toward them but pulled up short at the sight of a most unusual group: two guards, a youth, and something else.

Sandy half raised her hands and sized up the two figures dressed in militaristic garb who held metal-tipped spears pointed at her.

"Sandy!" Billy said through her headset. "What's going on?"

"Locals," she muttered as her fingers itched for her sidearm.

Surprise gradually overtook the features of the two spear-wielders, but their slow response allowed her to study them: mainly human in form but with a feline quality in the round eyes, sloping nose, and divided upper lip sporting long whiskers. The hands holding the spears looked human enough except for the faint sheen of smooth fur starting after the last knuckles. Both of them suddenly dropped to their knees and laid down their spears.

"Ara," they intoned in unison.

"Oh, brother," she sighed.

"Sandy . . ." Billy warned.

"What is going on here?" another voice demanded, female this time.

Sandy watched the new arrival approach from behind the guards. She wore a long satiny robe and jeweled slippers and carried herself like royalty. Pretty in her feline way, even with the long whiskers jutting perpendicularly from around her nose, she eyed Sandy with open astonishment.

"I wasn't expecting a welcoming committee," Sandy remarked, trying for a light tone.

The female drew herself up imperiously. "I am Lady Iya, betrothed to Crown Prince Tig, son of His Highness King Bov, son of--"

"Save the genealogy," Sandy interrupted. "I get it. I am Ensign Saundra Monino of the Space Cruiser Plymouth, Interplanetary Naval Service." *Cite your pedigree to me, will you? There's mine!*

"Keep it cool," Billy warned. "The captain escalated this from mission to incident, and the admiral is coming to the bridge."

The admiral! Known for a fierce temper and able to reduce seasoned officers to tears with only a withering stare. "Pulling rank on the captain? Why?"

"How should I know? They're assembling a security team to rendezvous with you."

"Oh goodie," she muttered. "Just what the situation needs: more people."

The two guards stood again and lowered their spears, looking uncertain what to do. Since they posed no immediate threat, she turned attention to Iya.

Iya studied her warily for a moment and then resumed her authoritative persona. "What is happening here?" she asked the guards.

"My Lady," one replied meekly. "We heard suspicious sounds while on regular patrol and came to investigate. We found this young one sneaking through the shrubbery, and then--" He turned his awestruck countenance to Sandy and ran out of words.

"You!" Iya pointed at the youth. "Who are you and why are you here?"

"I am Rin," he said shyly. "My master sent me."

She stiffened. "General Gat?"

"Tok the Seer."

Iya's confidence faltered enough to show she wore her regal manner like a disguise over insecurity. She turned on Sandy.

"And you. What are you doing here?"

"I guess *my* master sent me. I really just dropped in to say hello."

"Ensign Monino," came the admiral's voice in her ear.

"Aye, Admiral!" Out of reflex, she straightened her spine at attention and sensed all the aliens watching her.

"While everyone on the bridge is stifling amusement at your witticisms, I can see through your camera they are lost on the locals. You will adopt a more official attitude. Understood?"

"Aye, Admiral."

Iya took two steps backward. "Everyone stay here. I shall fetch Prince Tig." She turned and rushed back up the path.

The guards and Rin returned to staring at Sandy, and she wondered if she looked as strange to them as they did to her.

"This is a potentially explosive situation, Ensign," the admiral instructed in a gentler tone. "And I need more information. Find out what the kid was up to."

Sandy cleared her throat. "Uh, Rin. What did your master send you here for?"

The cat-boy blinked in surprise. "To consult the tablets."

"The what?"

In response, he pointed at the monument, and she turned around to aim her video pickup at it.

A series of gasps came into her ear from the bridge crew and set her scalp prickling. "I can't really see it."

Instead of answering, the admiral cut loose with a stream of cursing which made Sandy want to pull off her headset.

Another figure, also regally dressed, came down the path with Iya trailing behind him. The guards dropped to one knee again, and Rin looked like he wanted to make a run for it.

"I am Prince Tig," the newcomer announced. Unlike Iya, his authority came easily and fit him perfectly. "Who might you be?"

"Ensign Saundra Monino," she said and overrode an urge to curtsy or salute. *I must be getting used to them because he's actually sort of attractive, fur, whiskers, and all.*

He offered a polite smile and a heel-clicking bow. "I welcome you to our city as a guest and ask if you would kindly accompany us to the palace where we may discuss in comfort."

Before she could defer, the answer came back in her ear. "Accept, and call him 'your majesty.'"

"I accept, your majesty."

He turned to the guards. "Bring the young one."

They surrounded Rin and each grabbed a handful of his ragged tunic. The prince, with Iya on his arm, led the way through the garden, and Sandy fell in behind with the other three bringing up the rear.

"Glad to know you can behave with decorum when the situation demands it, Sandy," the admiral said, amusement evident. "Now listen carefully, but don't let them see you react. I'm coming down there."

Sandy swallowed hard, throat gone dry. *The admiral coming down?*

"I need you to stall proceedings however you can until I make my entrance, understand? Clear your throat if you do."

Sandy coughed lightly into her fist.

"Very good. Hopefully, you will not need to do anything more than listen, but I need everybody in one place at the same time. Over and out."

Sandy wanted to confer with Billy Reilly, but the others were too close to allow her to talk to him. She could only guess at what sort of plan had been set in motion.

General Gat dreamed blissfully of a holy war. His people cheered his name as the walls of the city fell and the most sacred place once again dominated the landscape. The heretics cowered in fear at Matha's retribution, the brilliant beams of light that destroyed whatever they touched.

Then he realized the brightness came not from his dream but from beyond his closed eyes. Sudden alarm brought him instantly awake as he struggled to his feet.

Intruders! Two of them almost filled his sleep chamber, standing between him and his weapons and shining lights upon him. They wore armor and helmets which concealed their faces and lent them an insect-like aspect. He had seen something similar once before, but recognition only deepened his alarm.

"You are General Gat, yes?" one of them demanded in an unnatural metallic voice.

"Yes," he answered and cursed himself for sounding humbled. He caught a glimpse of yet another figure standing guard outside his chambers.

"You will accompany us to the palace in the city," the first figure declared in official monotone. "Immediately."

Gat's heart fluttered in his chest. "May I dress, please?"

"You may."

He stumbled toward his pile of clothes while the speaker swiveled to keep him in view. As he donned his coat, he felt certain they would notice his sheathed knife and take it from him. Even if they did not, it would be of little use. Four against one was terrible odds.

The Second Coming had begun, and he feared it would not play out in a manner anything like his dreams.

Sandy clenched her teeth to keep her jaw from dropping as they entered the huge space Prince Tig referred to as the royal audience chamber. Six fighter craft could have parked within it with room to walk between them, and the vaulted ceiling soared at least three stories overhead. Narrow windows between tapestries gave glimpses of the garden outside. By the light of torches in tall iron stands, a throng of elegantly attired locals watched their short parade with curiosity.

They approached the far end of the chamber where the wall, decorated with multi-colored tiles in a starburst mosaic, formed the backdrop for an ornate throne upon a high platform. King Bov, splendid in his jeweled crown and shimmering robe, watched them gravely. His short, smooth fur glowed a tawny gold.

"Your majesty." Tig made a graceful, sweeping bow. "At the monument to Ara in the garden, Lady Iya encountered two palace guards with this boy, Rin, an admitted spy for Tok the Seer and this" He glanced at Sandy, showing a hint of uncertainty.

"If you please, your majesty," she jumped in, drawing words of royal respect from some plays she once studied in school. "I am Ensign Saundra Monino, Interplanetary Naval Service, Space Cruiser Plymouth currently on patrol in space quadrant fifty-seven dash six." She halted before stating the nature of her assignment; stalling would give the admiral time to arrive.

"You are species *homo sapiens*?" the king asked coolly. He made a beckoning motion.

"Yes, your highness." She took two paces forward to stand at the base of the platform at full attention.

His cat mouth tugged with amusement. "You may dispense with titles. You are a guest and owe me no honor or allegiance."

"Thank you, sir." She relaxed her stance. At least he seemed a reasonable sort.

Silence reigned for a couple of minutes while he studied her. "I never met a human before," he observed calmly. "May I ask your purpose here?"

"Sir, to check on the safety and progress of the indigenous people of this planet as promised by the last human visitors some fifty years ago."

Bov sagged back, aghast. "Indeed. Could it be--" Abruptly he refocused his gaze on the opposite side of the room.

A murmur rippled through the crowd and flowed like a wave, surging toward the throne and leaving silence in its wake. Tig moved beside his father and began whispering urgently in his ear. Sandy turned around.

Four soldiers in full space armor surrounded a fifth figure in solemn procession toward the king. The cat-man in the center gave an impression of age and authority under confusion and wariness.

"General Gat!" King Bov spat when the party came to a halt. "What is the meaning of this?"

"You ask me?" the new arrival demanded. "I was awoken from a sound sleep by these, these, whatever they are and marched here as though I am a prisoner! I should be asking you what is the meaning of this!"

"How clever," the king mocked. "Pretending indignation to cover having been caught."

"Caught at what? I told you I was at home and dragged out of bed."

Sandy wondered if she should intervene but could not think what to say. Tough reputation aside, she suddenly wished the admiral would arrive and take over.

"Did you not send this boy to spy on us?" Bov pointed an accusing finger at Rin, who cowered.

"I did not!" Gat replied.

"Do you deny you and Tok are planning an attack upon this city?"

Sandy jumped slightly as one of Gat's escorts edged up beside her. She looked him over but and wondered why he thought it necessary to get so close. "Do I know you?" she asked softly.

"Attack?" Gat repeated. "Why would we attack?"

"Oh, please do not insult my intelligence," the king retorted. "All here know how you feel about the monument to Ara and about our city. You desire to lay waste to us all because we do not worship your manufactured deity."

Gat squared his shoulders. "True, you are all blasphemers, but my people possess no weapons other than knives and crop-tending tools. As their general, I am well aware we are no match for your guards with their superior armaments."

"No weapons, you say? My watchers have long suspected Tok has found new devices in the alien craft." The king turned a

withering glare on Rin. "You, boy, stated to Lady Iya that your master sent you to consult the tablets on the monument."

"Yes," the lad admitted hesitantly.

"Consult them about what?"

Rin stole a sidelong glance at the general before bowing his head to look at his feet. "The alien weapons."

More shocked murmuring from the crowd. Sandy felt sorry for the terrified Rin; she knew how it felt to be caught in the act of following orders and held to account for someone else's decisions.

"There!" King Bov accused. "Why would Tok be interested in such plans other than to wage war on us? He, even more than you, Gat, despises us."

"Because you built a wall around your city," Gat fired back. "You shut the altar to Matha away from my people."

The soldier beside Sandy leaned nearer and muttered, "Now we're getting to the meat of it."

"Who are you?" she whispered back.

"Yes, we built the wall," Bov countered. "Only because Tok taunted my people with threats of doom unless they worshipped as he desired. After the Night of Stones, many feared for their lives and pleaded for the throne's protection." He shook a warning finger. "And you should know better, Gat. You made the

treaty with my father which placed the monument in the city's territory."

"The treaty never made mention of erecting a wall around our most holy ground!"

"Holy because you say it is so! We too are grateful to Ara for saving our race from extinction and providing the knowledge to better ourselves. But you turned gratitude into worship as a means to wield power over others, to keep them subservient and backward to maintain dominion over them."

"And you wield no power, do you?" Gat sneered. "By what right are you king? Because your father was?"

"Even *your* people initially accepted the idea of a monarchy!" Bov argued.

Gat appeared utterly surprise for a moment as though not sure what to say. Then he shook his head and resumed his attack. "Tear down the wall, Bov! Only that will resolve our differences!"

"Not until I am certain your people will keep their religion to themselves and not terrorize my citizens!"

Gat and Bov began arguing over each other, volume rising, and the soldier sighed, "Okay, that's all."

"What do--?" The words stopped in Sandy's throat as the figure beside her hit the helmet release latch.

"May I have your attention, please," the admiral announced after setting the helmet on the floor.

Gat staggered back, gaping, while everyone else fell silent.

"I am Admiral Barbara Matthias. Apparently, I am 'Ara' to some of you and 'Matha' to others, but I assure you, we are one in the same."

Gasps swirled through the vast space like gusts of wind. General Gat fell to his knees, peering at her with a confused expression.

Admiral Matthias regarded the aliens with an ironic half smile, and Sandy sized her up. For a woman in her sixties, she was in remarkable form: trim enough to fit into standard battle armor, back ramrod straight, glints of silver in her dark hair more a badge of experience than a telltale of age. Along with her volatile temper, the mission exploits and tactical genius of Barbara Matthias were the stuff of legend at the space academy. Sandy felt a spark of smug pride that this woman had spoken to her as an equal a moment ago.

"General Gat," Matthias continued pleasantly. "You shouldn't kneel to me, old friend."

He stood as if obeying an order and seemed unable to look away from her face.

She smiled. "I'm very glad to see you alive and well after such a long time. Don't you recognize me? Do you remember how you and Tok and I explored the wreck buried in the ground above the Warrens?"

Gat nodded slowly as some of his puzzlement faded, an amnesiac recovering his memories, and then he sneaked a glance around the great hall at the baffled spectators.

"Please understand," Matthias resumed, addressing the onlookers. "Your lifespan is shorter than of my species, but it appears my old friend here has defied the averages, as has Tok."

Poor Gat managed to convey a variety of emotions: bewilderment, fear, guilt. Sandy felt sorry for him.

"Perhaps I should provide some history," Matthias stated. "Fifty standard years ago, when I was still an adolescent, my parents and I were on a colonization flotilla passing through this quadrant. A scout ship reported that two bands of pirates were engaged in a space battle over rights to pillage this world's rich resources of precious metals and gemstones. Our fighters were dispatched to defend the people here who were caught in the crossfire. One of them crashed on the plateau above the Warrens when its engine fell off and melted into that lump of slag in the garden outside."

Everyone from the king on down looked confused, and Sandy shared the feeling. None of this had been part of her briefing.

"I came along when my parents volunteered for a mercy mission to help your ancestors recover in the aftermath," she continued while starting to pace a short course before the throne. "We spent eighteen Earth months here. The people were quite primitive, living in the Warrens, the societal structure still very loose, but I remember being deeply impressed with how quickly they learned our language and how eager they were to understand us. For my part, I had never met a nonhuman before, and in my youthful ignorance, I felt powerful taking the role of teacher." She stopped to face both Gat and Bov. "When I left, I promised to return one day, and so I have. But now I see I did something very wrong back then, and I must try to correct it." She turned her head to nod at one of her security detail.

The soldier slid a pack off his back, opened it, and withdrew two shiny black rectangles, each approximately eight by five inches and a quarter inch thick. When he held them up, a new hum of amazement flowed through the spectators.

"Oh my stars," Sandy breathed as she recognized the puzzling shapes atop the monument.

"These are called readers, or what you refer to as tablets," Matthias explained. "They are devices capable of storing and displaying vast amounts of information for reference and education. These are older models but of similar design to the two on your monument. One of those was once mine, and I gave

it to my friends, Gat and Tok, to allow them to study human history after I departed." She pierced Gat with a meaningful glare. "I am curious about the other one. Can you tell me where it came from?"

The general just stared with his mouth hanging open, shoulders sagged in defeat.

"No answer, eh?" Matthias turned to Bov. "Your Highness? Any ideas?"

"Tok found it on the vessel buried above the Warrens," he replied gravely. "After your party left, explorers of the wreck found many wondrous things which helped to improve our way of life. Soon after the city was completed, the devices ceased to function. Tok claimed the tablets had gone dark by Matha's decree because of our wickedness."

She cocked her head to one side. "Is that why they call him 'Seer?'"

"Tok is a master wizard," Rin burst out with awed pride. "He looks into his cylinder and sees the future. I have looked into it, too!"

"Ah," Matthias sighed, and smiled at the youth. "I suspect his magic cylinder is the derelict's telescopic sensor which lets him look some distance into space."

"And he has other magic," Rin continued. "A power as strong as the sun to transform things from one shape to another or make them vanish."

"I see." A frown creased her forehead. "Perhaps someone could explain why both tablets are now part of that monument."

King Bov eyed her warily. "After the Night of Stones, Tok began preaching about judgment and retribution from above. In an attempt to frighten others into following him, he placed the tablets on the metal mass and unleashed a magical beam to fix them there."

"Night of Stones," she repeated vaguely, and then cast a glance at Rin. "But this boy says his master sent him to consult them. If they ceased functioning, how is that possible?"

Rin dug into a pocket on his tunic and withdrew a tiny black square with short wires attached to it. "He taught me how to attach the threads to the tablet and make it work again."

"May I have it?" Matthias asked him and held out her hand.

Rin took two hesitant steps forward and hastily dropped it into her palm, his gaze riveted there.

"Looks like a solar-charged battery from a robotic perimeter weapon," she mused after studying it. "He must have figured out how to retrofit it to power the readers. What did Tok send you to find out from the tablet?"

"He said his magic is growing weak," Rin mumbled, although in the silence of the chamber, his words rang out clearly. "He needs to know how to renew it."

In a blur of movement, Matthias grabbed Sandy's sidearm from its holster.

"And does his 'magic' look like this? Or something a bit larger?" She did not wait for an answer before handing the laser pistol back and turning a steely glare on Gat. "Is this all accurate, Gat?"

The general remained speechless.

She tapped her foot impatiently. "Perhaps I should order Tok be brought here to enlighten us."

"No!" Gat rasped in alarm. "He is old and frail. He seldom leaves the buried vessel anymore. Being brought here was traumatic enough for me. I believe the stress might kill him."

"Very well," Matthias agreed and looked angry and resolute as she addressed the entire audience. "Humankind's history is by no means a model upon which to base other societies. We have made many mistakes since we came to stand on two legs, and I made a grievous mistake all those years ago. *This!*" She spread her arms to include the entire room. "All of this should not be here. It would *not* be here but for me giving that reader to my friends. And you would not be a people divided by walls and ideology, fighting over a little piece of ground and a melted

pile of junk. This situation must not continue." She lowered her arms and touched her earpiece. "Ensign Reilly, has the target been acquired?"

"Affirmative." Billy replied. "Weapons are locked."

Sandy's stomach went into freefall. *She would not! She could not!*

"Prepare to fire on my word."

The onlookers grew more agitated as General Gat knelt again and folded his hands as though about to pray. "Oh, Great Matha, please have mercy!"

She turned to him with an astonished look. "I don't believe it! Do you honestly *worship* me, Gat?"

He bowed his head in response, clasped hands trembling.

"I never asked to be worshipped, and I don't think I like it," she said sadly. "We were friends, Gat. What changed? How did I become a deity?"

Gat swallowed hard, unclasped his hands and let them fall to his sides. "When there were few of my generation still alive, the young ones turned to Tok and me to hear about the First Coming and about Matha who gave us knowledge. Then Tok learned how to revive the viewer on the crashed ship and told everyone he could foretell the future. No one believed until he predicted a display of falling stars in the heavens. He needed to stay close to the wonders remaining in the ship, so he declared the

city wicked and distasteful to Matha. He told of the Second Coming, and how Matha's wrath would destroy the evil of the city. Those who believed moved back to the Warrens."

"Did you believe, too?" Matthias asked wryly. "Or did it become a habit once you named yourself General?"

Gat did not respond, but his guilty look provided the answer.

She turned to King Bov. "You do not worship me, do you?"

"We do not," he stated, affronted. "Revere, yes. Honor, yes. But we do not worship."

"Well, Gat?" she challenged. "How did you become General?"

Grief pulled at Gat's features. "One night, as Tok stood on the monument preaching of your promised return, someone threw a stone that hit him in the chest and knocked him to the ground, injuring him gravely. His followers began throwing stones at the citizens out of anger." He shook his bowed head. "A dozen died on the Night of Stones. I realized the true believers needed leadership and discipline to temper their religious zeal and Tok needed protection. Soon after, Bov's father ordered the wall built, barring us from the monument."

Matthias studied his pitiful form for a long, uncomfortable moment, and Sandy caught herself holding her breath, wondering what she would say. And do.

"You did not stop Tok," Matthias accused with a hard glare. "You knew better, but you let your people believe he possessed magical powers. Then you took advantage of their belief to appoint yourself leader, and I find that reprehensible." For a moment, sadness touched her eyes before she drew herself up. "Ensign Reilly," she commanded. "Fire at will."

"Aye, Admiral," Billy replied tightly. "Firing."

A shudder raced through Sandy seconds before blinding white light poured through the narrow windows as an explosion outside shook the walls and sent vibrations through the floor. Nearly everyone in the great chamber flinched or cringed, and many cried out. Some of them surged closer to the throne as if seeking their king's protection while others huddled against the quaking walls. As the light faded outside, clouds of fine dust swirled through the windows.

"Target destroyed, Admiral," Billy reported.

"Target destroyed. Thank you, Ensign. Stand by."

Gat collapsed in a heap, and Matthias crouched beside him to lay a hand on his back. "I'm sorry, old friend, but I had to do it."

As her tension eased, Sandy swallowed against a sudden lump in her throat. All about her, faces tight with anxiety stared as if they might be the next target of attack. Sympathy for them pulled at her heart.

Matthias patted Gat lightly before rising to address all present. "It is not in my purview to tell you what to worship, but only to state that I am not worthy of it. Possessing knowledge and technological wonders does not make one a god. I am human, flawed, and prone to make mistakes, the same as my ancestors whose history you have imitated.

"Now there is no holy ground. No monument. No tablets. Nothing stands in the way of you coming together and using your combined ingenuity to go forward." She retrieved her helmet and returned to stand with her escorts and Sandy. "I doubt I shall ever return, but I wish you all peace and prosperity."

Following Matthias' lead, Sandy placed the clear ball of her transport pod on the floor and stood still as it expanded to envelop her. As she waited for the others to prepare to depart, she caught sight of Iya hugging Tig, both of them wearing vacant looks of fear and wonder. Did they understand any of what happened? They were the leaders of the next generation, and she wondered how they would consider the second coming of humans. Poor old General Gat remained kneeling and staring, utterly shattered, and tears of pity stung her eyes. The last thing she glimpsed on departure was King Bov, seated on his throne, wearing an approving, triumphant smile.

To Sandy, the return trip to the Plymouth seemed to last hours although it required only minutes. The images of all those

alien faces stayed in her mind as she tried to unravel conflicting emotions: anxiety and anger, guilt and shame. As soon as her pod settled on the transport deck of the Plymouth, she breathed a sigh of relief and tried to force those images into the depths of memory.

"As you were," the admiral told the deck crew perfunctorily. She eyed Sandy as she began releasing catches on her battle armor. "You look troubled, Ensign."

"Yes, Admiral," Sandy agreed and bit back on the opinion on the tip of her tongue.

Matthias wore a wry smile as she stripped off her breast plate. "I noted from the early parts of your mission log you seem willing to speak your mind. I sense you don't agree with my solution."

She pondered a number of responses and then settled for the truth. "Begging your pardon, Admiral, but I thought it a bit harsh."

"Really?" Matthias asked with interest. "Why?"

She chose her words carefully, wary of the admiral's temper. "I think General Gat really believed you were some kind of god. Maybe he doesn't remember too well because he's old and he got used to the idea over time. He looked so devastated."

"I had to dissuade him of his beliefs," Matthias stated bitterly. "Do you agree?"

Matthias' hardened look almost silenced her, but darn it, she *had* prompted Sandy to speak her mind. "I don't think you succeeded."

She blinked in surprise. "And why is that?"

"Well, it's just like, boom, we're there, and then part of their way of life is changed forever and then we're gone. History repeating itself. And the looks on all those faces--horror, shock, uncertainty. I'm not sure they really understood what it was all about. Maybe a new legend has been born."

Admiral Matthias studied her, puzzlement morphing into respect. "An interesting analysis, Sandy, and point well taken. In attempting to undo the damage of my first interference, I may have only compounded it. Perhaps interference is always that, no matter the intent." She frowned as she pulled off the armor boots. "Still, being divided by a myth was the greater evil. There are so few of them, and they remain vulnerable to pirates and other exploiters. They need to stop squabbling and work together."

"Yes, ma'am." So the admiral's hard solution had a humanitarian side after all.

Matthias raised her head, smiled and winked. "You did a good job down there. I admire your initiative and cool-headed thinking. I believe you'll go far, Ensign. In fact, I shall recommend you for promotion post haste."

Swelling pride made her straighten her shoulders, concern for the aliens evaporating. "Thank you, ma'am!"

"But on one condition."

Sandy flinched. "Ma'am?"

"You promise one day, when you have your own command, you'll come back here to check on them. And I trust you will not make the same mistakes again."

"Yes, ma'am," she said automatically, stalled on the idea of having her own command.

"Good." Matthias tugged her uniform into place and grinned. "We're not gods, Sandy. We learn from our mistakes and do the best we can."