

The Wild One



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This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

Please note that I use Australian spelling throughout. You will see ou's (colour) and 'ise' not 'ize' (realise) as well as a few other differences from American spelling.

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The Wild One

Chapter 1

I heard the shed door slam open and my heart began to race. The floorboards inside the doorway creaked and I held my breath, not wanting to betray my presence. The double layer of stacked barrels hid me from view, but if someone came around them, I was cornered.

The hair on my neck prickled. Who ever had come in was either standing at the door, or was able to move very quietly. I watched the end or the row of barrels, prepared to scramble over the top at the first sign of anyone. There was light coming in through the high windows, but I was in shadow. Still, my mind was mentally repeating my mantra, "Let nobody see me."

The trick had worked last week when the Sherriff had come after me. I would be stuck in the county detention centre right now, if he hadn't walked obliviously past.

I became aware of a sniffing noise. It sounded close. A shiver of terror travelled from my head all the way down my spine. I could now smell a musky odour, overlaid with something sickly sweet, and thought about the Chinamen that the townsfolk claimed Lammond had working for him. I had seen a few of them, dark haired and thin, always bowing to their master. My brother called them, "Dope smoking, weird-eyed sorts."

There was a noise above me. The creature that snarled down in triumph was dark haired, but otherwise unlike my brother's description. The light made it's slightly bulging eyes glisten and glinted of a row of sharply pointed teeth. With its brown tinted skin, it didn't look human.

"Female! Master uses females."

That was enough! I grabbed my pack and ran, diving low under the down-stretched arm. It must have toppled into my hiding place, for I heard scrabbling and more snarls.

Once outside I began to run, Lammond's old estate manager appeared in front of me and I had to swerve. He moved quickly and caught my arm.

"What mischief are you up to?" he demanded as I struggled to get free.

"Nothing," I said automatically. I wasn't going to admit I had intended to pinch food from the big house when it was dark.

"Miss Cassidy, do you realise that your father has had the whole district looking for you? A good American girl wouldn't be..."

I butted my head into his stomach and he released me. That was what I thought of being a good girl. The dark haired creature was emerging from the shed as I fled across the gravelled yard to a gap between two rows of vines.

Briefly, I berated myself for not staying in the stable at the hotel and enduring the continuous playing of "Oh, Donna" on someone's gramophone.

The sun was getting down but it wouldn't get dark until it dropped below the western hills. As I sprinted along the wide gap between two rows of bushy vines, I glanced behind me. No one was in sight and that surprised me. All the same, when I came to gaps in the vine rows, I checked each way. Did I want to head further into hills or cut back to the main road? I still needed to get food, but I couldn't stay here.

I felt a warm breeze on my back and inhaled the fresh smell of the ripening grapes. August in the hills of Southern California was my favourite season, with everything green and growing. It made me feel I could run all the way to the top of the ridge of the next range of hills.

However, the breeze also carried the sound of loud voices; they were searching for me. I decided to cut through towards the road at the next break, but I felt the breeze turn chill and then I heard the sound of sandalled feet padding on the ground one gap over. Somehow, they had caught up to me, so I stopped running and crawled under the bushy leaves, and lay right next to the vine stems, and thought very hard, "Don't let them find me."

The trick worked this time. Sandalled feet passed along the row beside me, and I had a whiff of the odd musky scent. I didn't try to look, I kept absolutely still until the sounds of voices died away, and the sun dropped behind the hill.

While waiting, I decide two things. I would rather go to the moon than back to the farm, and the "Master uses females" statement gave me shivers.

Once it was dark, I listened very carefully before crawling to my feet. I hung my pack on my left shoulder and began to walk quietly to the next gap in the vine row. Here I checked no one was waiting for me before crossing to the next row. I'd ignored the 'No Trespassing' signs on the way in, but then, I hadn't expected to be seen.

Lammond was known in the district for his magnificent beneficence, but well... I wasn't. My recent brush with the local Sherriff and a city policeman had decided me that I had to get far away.

As I peeked out to look down the next row, a dark figure suddenly sprang in front of me. I let out a shriek; it looked like a man with bat wings. My heart tried to leap out of my chest, as I tried to stop and spin around to avoid him. I tripped, and felt the brush of cloth as I rolled to avoid his grab. I sprang to my feet again and tried for a spurt of speed, but something grabbed the back of my overalls and yanked me to a stop.

"Let me go!" I insisted, as I struggled, twisted, kicked, and punched. I heard a snarl as some of my attacks landed, but I doubted I'd hurt the man. He half lifted my feet from the ground before shoving me in front of him, back along the furrow towards the house.

My brother's unheeded warning returned to haunt my mind. He'd mentioned something about girls going missing. Well, I didn't intend to be another one.

"Who have we here, Lars?" I heard a voice ask.

The old manager said, "It's the missing Cassidy brat, Sir. Probably up to no good as usual. I'll get the truck and take her to the Sheriff."

The gravel of the yard crunched as the owner of the voice, clad in a light coloured suit moved to look down at me. I tried to pull my head back when he reached for my chin. The tall and solid looking figure had to be Lammond himself.

"Jai Cassidy," Lammond said thoughtfully, as he held my face to study it. "I had the idea you were older, but you are still a child."

I squirmed, in the grip of my captor. I hated anyone telling me I was too young to do what I wanted.

"What were you doing here?" Lammond snapped.

I gave my automatic answer, "Nothing."

"You were trespassing on private property," Lammond said sternly. "However, I will over look that this time. I believe your father is most anxious to find you."

"I don't care!"

Lammond ignored that and spoke to his manager. "Lars, she can come inside and clean up and have something to eat before you take her back. Go and ask the cook to prepare something and then bring my car around."

"I'm not going back home!" I said defiantly as Lars went off to obey Lammond.

"You just can't roam around on your own," Lammond told me in that 'I know better than you' voice adults love to use. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen," I lied. If I really were those two years older, he wouldn't be able to force me to go back.

"Let her go, Lucion. She is old enough to leave home if she wants."

I shook off the grip of the dark skinned man, and poked my tongue out at him. He looked a bit like a moron, because he had big eyes and his rounded features like on a doll's face.

Lammond put an arm around behind me as if sweeping me into his mansion. I was glad it was dark and I didn't have to look at the puke pink brickwork of the place. Only the white trim around the window frames stood out. I glanced up as I approached the rear door. This place had two levels and what I had seen of the rear made me think that even its ground floor had three times the area of my family's farmhouse.

He directed me down a passage, and at first glance, my heart began to race. The last time I had been in a building this big and fancy, was when that policeman had taken me to the County sheriff's office. That time I had been taken into a holding cell until my father had come to get me.

I was relieved when I entered a fancy sitting room. This was the sort of room my mother drooled over in her House and Garden magazines.

I looked around dismissively. Sure the red velvet curtains looked nice, and the matching floor rug was soft as sand under my feet, but what value was it really, if you had to keep beating dust from them. And the silver tea service on the redwood sideboard? You'd have to keep polishing fingerprints off it.

My attention went past the dark brown leather armchairs to another corner of the room, caught by a hint of light and movement. Lammond had a television set.

"George Burns and Gracie Allen," Lammond remarked. "Have you seen them before? No? They are quite amusing. Sit and enjoy the show. I'll have some refreshments brought in."

I gave Lammond only a passing glance as he walked out. I'd heard of television, but the farmers and herders around Crystal Brook didn't have money for things like that. My brothers spoke of shows they'd watched at the hotel - they liked Alfred Hitchcock's show. It gave them ideas of ways to annoy Eva and Lucy, my sisters and it was probably where my mind had come up with that bat idea when I was outside. I laughed at my self as tinny laughter came from the television sound speaker.

Lammond returned with a tray of sandwiches and a bottle of coca-cola. He placed them on a low carved table made from the same wood as the sideboard.

"Help yourself," Lammond invited.

Only ham sandwiches I noted, but I didn't need a second invitation. I rose and grabbed two then went and sat in one of the chairs that faced the television.

Lammond poured the coca cola into a glass and asked casually, "I understand you ran away. Was it because your father beat you?" He brought the full glass over and handed it to me. His hand brushed mine as I took it and I felt my flesh try to crawl from that place. This close to him, his cologne had an acrid bite that I felt at the back of my nose, and under that was a hint of a musky smell.

"Oh no," I said between bites and a mouthful of bread. "Never, but I don't want to stay at the farm, being a drudge. I want to do something more interesting."

"You just can't wander around," Lammond told me sternly. "What did you plan to do?"

"I'm going to get me work on a horse farm," I reckoned, or at least, that had been my idea.

"Admirable. I do have friends who breed horses," Lammond said thoughtfully. "I am sure I can get one of them to give you a trial."

"Why'd you do that for me?" I studied Lammond as I drank half of the glass of coca-cola.

My father wouldn't let me tend his horses since it was men's work. So why was this supposed do-gooder, who intended to take me home, offering me what I wanted?

He had an odd-looking face, I decided, not ugly or anything but with his light coloured hair pulled back off his face in a tail behind his neck, his eyes seemed to bulge slightly. When he smiled, I sensed nothing from him. Why should I trust him?

"Well, if it's what you want to do, you won't be causing mischief around here. Though working with horses is hard, physical and dirty. I'm surprised it would appeal to a girl."

I wanted to be able to stride up to him to stare into his eyes and correct his impression of me, but to be at his eye level, I would have had to stand on his little table. I didn't dare do that, so I stayed in the chair and imagined myself a queen and him my abject servant.

"Do I look like some gooey eyed female who only wants a husband and kids?" I said in the confrontational tone that infuriated my mother.

Lammond chuckled, glancing at the clothes I was wearing – cast offs from my older brothers. I flushed, but he smiled, as if politely agreeing with me. That dismissive chuckle and his calm acceptance of my deliberate rudeness, made me shiver. No, I wasn't going to accept his offer; I was going to get out of here as soon as he left me alone again. Adults who ignored me that way tended to turn on me when they thought I wasn't expecting it.

"Eat up," he repeated. "You can stay here tonight if you like. I can give you a ride to Pine Hill tomorrow. I'll have my maid show you where you can clean up and she can have your clothes washed and dried by morning. That way you will make a better impression."

As soon as the door closed behind Lammond, I jumped up from the chair aiming for the food. I was going to need something to keep me going until I found more. My head spun a bit and I felt unsteady. The sensation eased once I got moving, and I grabbed the other two sandwiches, wrapped them roughly in the paper doily from the tray and shoved them in my pack. I took the half-empty bottle of cola and drank the rest straight from the bottle. I was aiming for the door when I had another dizzy spell and began to feel like I was falling. So I went to the nearest armchair and sat back, hoping it would pass.

I was glad that I was left on my own while I was feeling so odd. To distract myself, I imagined what my mother would do if I sat with dirty dusty clothes in one of her parlour chairs.

She would have a fit and tell me to get the brush to remove the dirt. I would be reminded that the parlour was for visitors and had to be kept spotless. In fact, the only time I was allowed in there was to do the dusting but having to dust around my mother's knick knacks made me want to throw them against a wall. Lammond, I noticed didn't have any dust collecting junk in here and not even any photographs.

Anyway, I didn't want to go back home where I was expected to act like a lady. I didn't like sitting properly and doing fancy sewing; or cooking when I had to follow my mother's recipes precisely. As for washing, my mother didn't trust me with the dishes, only the cooking pots, and whilst I liked clean clothes, I didn't like washing the cow dung and mud of my brothers' things.

The only person who hadn't seen my preference to be outdoors in all weather as an aberration of some kind had been Nanna Cassidy. She had chosen to be a farmer's wife and helped at everything. My mother on the other hand had been brought up as a proper lady, and her family expected me to be like my sisters. I wasn't one to stay indoors and be quiet and polite and insipidly bleh!

I didn't dislike my mother, not really. She probably didn't like being told by her family that I was a disgrace, any more than I liked being kept from doing what I wanted to do. It just seemed that I felt more alive outside. I would have helped my brothers, except my father wouldn't let me.

The television speaker emitted a blast of laughter and applause, and I realised that I had been dozing. The screen when I glanced there had only lines of writing. It then switched to some man saying how good his hair looked because he used something or other. That man was followed by another announcing news headlines for 'August 17th 1958'.

I remembered that I wanted to leave, and tried to stand up and couldn't find the strength. That's when I began to feel really scared – helpless scared and I didn't like it.

I really, really, really, had to get out of there!

No matter how much I tried to force myself, I couldn't get up. I felt sweat beading on my upper lip, and running down from above my eyes, and trickling down my back. What was happening to me? Was Lammond some crazed fiend who was going to ... all the things that the policeman had warned me about came into my mind in graphic detail.

No! That wasn't going to happen to me!

"God," I screamed mentally. "Help me get out of this...please?"

I wasn't sure that I believed in the God the parson preached about...or wanted to. Parson Hawker was always on about being punished for our sins...and everyone in the district probably thought I was overdue for that.

But what about helping the innocent? I didn't ask for this. I repeated my mental pleas, but heard no divine promises in my mind. I thought I felt a faint breeze drying the sweat from my face, moments before I heard someone enter the room.

Lammond walked into my sight and I began shivering uncontrollably. He saw this and his smile could only be described as malicious. I wished that I could spit in his face, or make part of the roof suddenly fall on him.

"Well, it seems that I am in a position to do you a favour, my girl," Lammond said, still smiling. "It seems that an old friend of mine needs a girl like you to help him. No housework, and plenty of physical activity, and a guarantee that no one will make you go home. How does that sound?"

I couldn't answer him, and it didn't seem he could read my mind. I was thinking, "Get away from me you bastard. I don't want anything to do with you."

Lammond's smile began positively demonic. "I will take your silence as agreement."

He went back to the door and called to someone. It didn't seem strange when the brown-skinned creature that had captured me entered the room. He looked at Lammond and waited for instructions.

"Take her upstairs, Lucion, and put her in the warded room."

The brown-skinned man came over to me, and I saw that he didn't really look that old. He lifted me without difficulty and carried me along a passage under some glowing globes hanging from the roof.

I watched the creature's face as he said, "This one ain't asleep." He had funny looking teeth, pointed, and his eyes bulged more than Lammond's did.

"She won't be any trouble, but don't damage her," I heard Lammond say. "Stacion is after a virgin female for some ritual. I'll need to check her out. Some of these farm bred girls are little more than animals themselves."

My mind suddenly jerked as the sense of the conversation came to me, and it went into a spasm of panic when I realised I couldn't struggle. I had to endure being carried upstairs to a room, and being placed like a sack of carrots onto the bed. It might have been a delightfully soft bed, but I wanted to get out of Lammond's house and to run away.

"No!" I wanted to scream, as Lammond and his brown-skinned servant began to strip my filthy overalls off me.

Lammond dismissed the servant when they had finished undressing me. He moved away and took off his jacket and tie, and left them on a chair. With his jacket on, I hadn't noticed it,

but now he only had a shirt on, he looked as if he had a hunched back. That gave me ideas for a dozen horrid rumours I could start about him, once I was out of here.

He returned and began to feel all over me as if I was a horse he wanted to buy. His touch revolted me; it felt like insects crawling on my skin. I couldn't help flushing because he enjoyed feeling me flinching from his touch. He watched my face, when he went on to probe in private places. I assumed he was only using his finger, which had looked to have short manicured nails, but what I felt then, was like a claw on the end of the finger. I wanted to squirm away from him.

"Virgin indeed," he sounded pleased. "Clean you up and you might just please my master."

I wanted to spit at him and punch that satisfied leer off his face.

"You might as well stop resisting," Lammond said callously. "Stacion likes his females spiced with terror." He left me then, and walked out of sight.

What appeared next, right in front of me, from nowhere, was another brown-skinned creature – but this one wasn't human. No ordinary man had batlike wings and a long slender tail curling up his back and around his neck. It had a kind of vest on, but that was all. It picked me up by the neck as if I was a puppy and I dangled a foot off the ground. Its fingers had claws instead of nails and I could feel them just pricking my skin. My body seemed to freeze; I could imagine those claws piercing my flesh. I looked away from its face as it reminded me vividly of every picture I had ever seen of a devil. My eyes were drawn to the muscles rippling in its lean torso, revealed by the gaping rabbit skin vest. There wasn't an ounce of fat on this creature.

It looked me up and down and glanced to where Lammond was walking in the door.

It said something guttural, and Lammond replied in the same speech. The creature sniffed me, and made the same inspection as Lammond had but the touch of this creature made me wish I could shed my skin and when he probed with his talon, I felt a surge of pain shoot through me. He sniffed me again and abruptly dropped me. My head bounced on the plain wooden floor and I felt my vision greying out. I grimly held on to consciousness, and tried to listen to the conversation, and maybe learn what they intended. I looked up at the creature that was standing over me, and wished I hadn't. From this position, his male bits were exposed and they looked nothing like anything I'd seen when peeking on my brothers. Nausea overwhelmed me and I was sick.

A foot rolled me onto my mess. It felt like it was covered in fine scales.

"That one doesn't smell right," I heard. "Put it with your other animals. It will be worth more to us as a toy for the human men. Some of them like taming unripe females and provide us with an abundant yield of energy."

"I will test it for you, Master," Lammond offered.

"Don't let it escape like the last one. If too many complain of you, we will have to harvest human women somewhere else."

"All is under control, Master. Your warriors amongst the human police, and my bribes to the senior ones, have ensured that the other woman won't be listened to."

Lammond and the creature he called 'Master', moved away. I didn't breathe any easier, because my mind was babbling. "This is a nightmare, it isn't real. Oh, God, let me get away from here, don't let them find me again."

My breath was coming in short fast gasps, I kept trying to move, and finally I felt I was. I kept trying to get up and run. All I managed at first was to roll, and then to crawl and scabble to where my clothes had been discarded on the floor. I struggled for the energy to dress, managing to pull on the overalls and then my shoes and shoving the rest in my pack when I finally fetched it from near the door. I gradually felt myself able to stand and shrugged the pack onto my shoulder.

I was right next to the chair where Lammond had left his jacket. After what he'd done to me, I felt no remorse in searching his pockets, and even less when I found his wallet. From that, I took a wad of notes, and shoved them in the pocket of the overalls. I shoved the wallet back in the jacket.

The door was locked - no surprise there, damn it! Was that what Lammond meant when he said it was warded? Perhaps I could get out the window. Maybe the creep wouldn't expect a girl to be game enough to climb out of one on the first floor.

"Yeah, locked," I muttered. "But these window locks are older than that creep Lammond and I know how to get them open - if I had something to use."

I scanned the room, looking for a likely tool. Nothing - but that wasn't surprising if he kept people in here. Then I tried his jacket pocket. He'd had to use a bottle opener on that drink of coke he'd given me; maybe he'd dropped it in a pocket...

"Jackpot," I muttered.

I heard scuffling outside the locked door, and felt myself go cold and shaky. Thinking fast, I moved the chair to jam it under the door handle, and ran to the window.

As I fiddled with the bottle opener, I heard someone trying the door. I was running out of time. The lock came open as easily as the ones at the farm. I shoved the opener in my pocket, pushed the two window halves open and climbed up on the sill...

"What the ..." I muttered, finding myself suddenly lying on my back on the floor, my pack beside me. I scrambled up and approached the window again, and gingerly reached out to touch the sill.

Nothing happened. I moved my hand into the open space where the glass had been - it began to tingle as if it had been asleep. I had the distinct feeling I didn't want to move my hand any closer and I backed off, totally confused by what my mind was implying - that there was some kind of electrified wall there that I couldn't see.

If I wanted to get out of here, I only had two choices and someone was trying the door already.

"Okay...what can I throw through the window?"

If I was going to risk trying to get out again I wanted to see what might happen.

I threw the bottle opener...

Just as well I wasn't standing in front of the window - there was a brilliant flash of light and a clunk on the floor. The metal opener had bounced off ...something...and was now just a fused blob.

That...could have been me!

No...I was only thrown back in...

The door handle rattled more violently than before, and then changed to heavy thuds of someone trying to get in.

"Open up you little bitch or I am going to blast the door open and you next."

"No way, creep," I thought desperately, "God, what do I do now?"

A chilly breeze came through the window and it found its way inside my overalls. I didn't think I had time to put on the rest of my clothes, so I grabbed Lammond's jacket and put it on.

The thudding was intensifying, and the chair was starting to move. I was backing towards the window without thinking about it.

Stay and have Lammond kill me or jump and maybe not kill myself - some choice!

"Well if I am going to die," I told myself. "I am not giving Lammond the pleasure."

I went as close as I dared to the window and tried to look out. All I could see was darkness. The door exploded open and I dived for the window, scrambling up to stand on the sill. I ducked my head out and reached for the eaves. I had no time to realise I hadn't been blasted this time when I heard a feral snarl.

I felt my left ankle being gripped. I kicked out viciously with the other foot and connected with what I hoped was Lammond's face. I heard that snarl again. My hands reached a drainpipe just beside the window, and I grabbed it, trying to stop myself being dragged back in the room, Lammond had a hold like a solid iron ring on both my ankles and yanked. He was too strong for me and broke my grip. I didn't fall to the ground headfirst but only because he held me. My back slammed onto the sill, and my head hit it and then the floor when he dragged me in.

The blood was roaring in my ears and my vision was nothing but fireworks of light, and I had no idea what had happened until I felt the pain of someone slapping my face. Lammond was straddling me; he thought he had me again, but he shouldn't have knocked my wits back into place. Suddenly I was aware again and if Lammond expected me to be petrified, he was wrong. I was desperate and furiously angry with him for tricking me and trying to do things to me. I writhed, trying to get free, but he immediately grabbed me by the throat.

The sharp points on his fingers that I had felt but couldn't see were ready to close on my neck. Lammond's face was contorted into an expression of raw fury, and he snarled something unintelligible into my face. I brought a knee up hard, saw the shock of pain on his face, and felt the sharp nails dig into my neck as his hand twitched reflexively.

I'd hurt him, but not enough. Everything I had learned from watching my brothers fighting jumped from memory to action. I freed my hands and slammed them into the sides of his face. His grip loosened. I kneed him again and he collapsed onto me, cursing. I found strength I didn't realise I had and pushed a writhing Lammond off me. He wasn't able to stand, but I hadn't shut his mouth.

"I'll have you arrested for grievous assault," he threatened. "You'll be jailed for life doing hard labour, whipped every day for the rest of your life."

I stopped listening.

"You'll have to find me first, you bastard," I spat the words at him as I reached the window and put my head out.

I did as I had before, standing on the sill and reaching up for the eaves. Nothing blasted me away. As I looked down, I saw points of light spreading out in all directions. Had Lammond raised an alarm somehow? Climbing down was not a good idea; neither was staying in the window. I pulled myself up onto the roof and crawled along it to where a tree grew close to the house. I could clearly hear Lammond roaring at his workers to find me – to search everywhere.

My mind pleaded, "Oh, God, please don't let him think of the roof! Please don't let him find me up here!"

I didn't move again until it was nearly dawn, and just light enough to be sure none of Lammond's servants was still roaming. I was thoroughly chilled, and eager to be moving. The tree proved to be close enough to the roof to act as a route down. Once on the ground I discarded Lammond's now torn and filthy jacket and ran, not caring where I was going, so long as it was right away from vineyard and mansion. My mind was still pleading to whatever power would hear me, to 'let no one chase me'.

When I reached the outermost buildings of Wetherby, having heard and seen no signs of pursuit, I stopped running and looked for a place to hide; I needed to rest a while. My mind suggested the market, since that was the only place I really knew. I had come there with my parents on some Wednesdays when it was market day here. If I remembered right, today was Thursday, so the place would be deserted until next week.

I wasn't quite right about that - the Greek's grocery truck was parked in the street. Seeing no one around, I instantly decided to climb on the tray, get behind some empty crates and pull his canvas over me. It was probably safe enough for me to have a short nap.

I woke about an hour later as the town of Wetherby came awake, hearing the early trucks rumbling along the highway. Nearby I heard a few local cars and the milkman rattling crates – I didn't dare try to sleep again, in case someone thought to look under the canvas. I had time to wonder why the Greek, I think his name was Dimitri, still had his truck here if the market was yesterday. The answer to my question came when I peeped out and saw Dimitri approaching, accompanied by an old man wearing greasy overalls and hefting a tool kit. Both men were talking in mechanical jargon, and I didn't understand any of it, so I had no idea what the problem was. I was just glad that they didn't take more than an hour to fix the engine, because during that hour, as I peeked from under the canvas, I had seen the local sheriff's car cruise past three times.

It didn't take a genius to know why.

I finally heard Dimitri thanking the mechanic in his accented English. I hoped that meant he was going home, because he would give me a lift out of Wetherby and that would be five miles that I wouldn't have to walk.

Dimitri hurtled his truck along the main road until he got to one of the roads that led into the hills. He slowed a bit on the dirt road, but the truck still bounced along it, rattling the unsecured crates. The engine laboured a bit on the last stretch before it skidded to a halt. He got out and slammed his door. I hoped he wasn't going to unload the truck just then or I would have to explain my presence. He didn't, and I heard a screen door slam nearby.

Long after the sounds of loud Greek voices stopped, I crawled to the edge of the tray and jumped down. No one challenged me, though Dimitri's rangy hound came over and whined softly to be patted.

I smelt familiar farm like smells here, more vegetable though than animal. That reminded me that the Crystal Brook market was on tomorrow, two days after Wetherby's, and Dimitri might have crates ready to load for that. I moved stealthily around the truck and was rewarded by seeing a neat pile of crates stacked by a shed. Without trying to move any of the crates, I filched carrots, peppers and beans – all I could stuff in my pockets or down the bib of the overalls. Then I patted the dog, called it 'good boy', and made my way through the cabbage patch to the dark bulk of the hill; the sun hadn't reached this side yet.

I cut through the scrubby trees to the continuation of the road and began to climb. I let the fresh air, drive out the last traces of whatever stuff had been in the food Lammond gave me. I thought of the weird creature he had spoken to, and decided my imagination had been warped by the stuff. No one looked like that. The sooner I got up in the hills, and found myself a hideaway, the better I would feel.

Chapter 2

The labouring sound of the bus's motor bounced around the rocks where I was hiding. It was what I had been waiting for. I grabbed my canvas pack and left the little cave I'd made my home and clambered nimbly up a rocky section of the hill. My rough trail led to the place where I could watch the weekend hikers as they emerged like ants from the bus.

Right on schedule! One of those blue buses had come both Saturday and Sunday for the past three weekends that I had been hiding up here. From the car park down there, the hikers could go up one of two trails.

This tourist group, I soon realised, was taking the steeper track leading to the top of Wetherby Falls. That track passed only yards from my watching position, so I needed to move deeper into the undergrowth. Here, the large ferns provided cover as their fronds curved gracefully down to the ground making a cave like space. I wasn't very tall, so I had room enough to crouch out of sight.

My current pair of overalls was a faded brown, and the shirt was grey, both were well dusted with the black dirt that competed with the rocks. None of the tourists had ever seen me watching from here and in this shady spot it was cool and I didn't have to swat at flies.

As the hikers passed me, I lay on the dirt and examined them through gaps in the fronds. They were a mixed lot, mostly young men and women, wearing jeans, hiking boots and backpacks – fancier ones than mine, but I could mingle with them on their return. If I had my pack on, I would similar – just a bit scruffier and if I put my shirt outside of the overalls, maybe they would think I was another hiker and ignore me.

I listened as the bush noises returned to normal and felt the occasional gusts of the sun warmed breeze that rustled the ferns. It smelt pleasantly of plants and warm rock and I settled back to wait the hour it would take the tourists to get to the falls and back. Their return would be heralded by my lookouts - the birds first and then the animals and insects.

I liked it up here – but I needed food and personal supplies again. That meant getting down the hill before it was too late – without being noticed and seeing what I could get with my remaining money. What I couldn't buy, I'd have to scrounge. Actually, this time I was hoping to cadge a lift into town on the bus - by pretending to have a sore ankle.

The birds went quiet, well before I expected. Soon after, I heard a thump-thump noise, seeming to come from above me. I crouched into a smaller ball. The sound seemed to be circling – not merely passing over. I carefully moved a frond to see up into a patch of blue sky and had a glimpse of an odd flying contraption, and a word came into my mind - helicopter. This was some new machine like the one I'd seen on a newsreel at the cinema. I couldn't think why one would be here.

Maybe someone was lost and they were helping to look for him? It couldn't be looking for me – could it? No one knew I was hiding up the hill – surely. Anyway my father couldn't afford to pay for a helicopter to find me and my brother would probably rather let me stay lost.

Admittedly, I had barely eluded the local sheriff a few days ago; he had seen me scrounging fruit at the market and I had to run as fast as I could to lose him. Surely, I wasn't important enough to have a helicopter searching for me. I wasn't a dangerous criminal.

Who was I kidding? Old hunchback Lammond wanted to find me. He wouldn't have forgotten me just because I had been out of sight for three weeks.

Just remembering that encounter made me feel cold and nauseous. I tried not to think about what he had wanted to do with me and let others do. "A toy for human men" I had

heard that mind-twisted vision say. “No housework, plenty of exercise and I wouldn’t be forced to go home,” Lammond had said.

Yeah, well, I wasn’t interested in that sort of exercise, and he certainly wouldn’t want me telling anyone about what he really was. The bastard deserved what I had done to him, and really, I was only defending myself.

That trouble hadn’t been my fault; I had just walked into it. Couldn’t say that about the rest of the things, the sheriff might want me for...but Lammond could afford to pay people to hunt me - everyone said he was filthy rich.

I didn’t see why that mattered. There had been Cassidy’s in Crystal Brook as many generations as there had been Lammonds in the district but if it came to his word against mine, no one would listen to me. He wouldn’t want people to know I had got the better of him and he had threatened to have me arrested.

Somehow, I had the feeling that Lammond disliked Cassidys to start with. Must have been mutual – I’d overheard my father muttering nit-picking comments about Lammond’s do-gooding for show and to get more power in the district. But he can’t have always thought that. The Lammonds had done well in business while the Cassidys had stayed farmers but Lammond’s son, Vince, and my father had been so close that they had run off to war together.

Maybe the problem had been that Matthew Cassidy had come home and Vince Lammond hadn’t. Lammond could splash his money around because he had no one to leave it to – my father had six children to feed and to follow on after him.

So Lammond had power because half the town owed him their livelihood, in one way or another, and I was... just wanting to do what felt right to me...and no one wanted to let me.

Damn them all! I wasn’t going to let them find me.

The hovering helicopter moved off, and I breathed a bit easier. I’d be right once I joined the tourists – no one would expect me to be in a crowd of hikers. To get ready to join them, I transferred the grey linen shirt from under the overalls, to the top so I would look like I had trousers on.

While I did this, I heard the birds return to their normal activities. I tried to identify the different calls, but I really only knew what a cuckoo sounded like. I had learnt about them, because I’d heard someone call me one, back when I was first taken to school. I didn’t understand what that speaker had meant then, but by the time I was ten I had it figured out.

I was the short dark haired cuckoo in my family’s nest of tall blonds. The only thing we all had in common were blue eyes. My siblings behaved as if I was an accidental addition to the family though my parents tried to treat me the same as them even when I persistently resisted any attempt to be cuddled. My brothers didn’t like a girl tagging after them anyway, and my sisters didn’t want a tomboy messing their room.

I sometimes caught my mother looking at me as if I was some strange or alien creature that might become dangerous. By the age of ten, I had stopped caring what anyone thought of me. Since I was twelve, I was known as the district delinquent. If mischief had happened – and gates were left open or horses strayed into different fields, or someone’s cows herded themselves onto the road - the Sheriff came to me first. Not that I ever admitted what he couldn’t prove.

When I turned sixteen, I’d decided to leave home. That was after the lecture Grandmother Everett, had inflicted on me – about the behaviour expected of young ladies. She wanted me sent somewhere to have my mind twisted by doctors to find out why I was such a ‘horror’.

My oldest brother, Henry, found me two weeks later. He didn’t have a chance to drag me home. I fought him until he called me an ungrateful bitch and predicted I would end up in hell. I ran off before he could recover from the kick in the groin. That still amused me.

Obviously, he hadn't realised how much I had learnt from watching him fight my other brothers and listening to three of them bragging. And, he wouldn't want to admit that five foot two and slight could beat his husky six foot four. I'd bet that when he went home, he'd said he hadn't found me - which suited me.

The helicopter returned just after I heard voices from up the track. When the hikers came into sight, chatting about the great photos they'd taken, I was sitting on the edge of the track apparently examining a painful ankle. Very soon, I had a group of concerned hikers about me. They thought I should have it bandaged, but no one had anything to use. Instead, one of the young women offered to help me back down the track. My limping progress slowed them down, and the tail-enders caught up to us. One of these last ones was soaked and still dripping water onto the dusty trail. He must have had a swim in the pool at the base of the falls. I wished I could have done that again to get the dust off my clothes. As it was, my skin began to itch as I moved out of the mountain's shadow and into the sunlight.

With the cover of so many people, and the anonymity of a ride, I reached the town. When the bus parked outside Wetherby's petrol station, I was helped into the diner section but I noticed the bus was plastered with the sign proclaiming, "Orange County Tours". I wondered, vaguely, how far from here that was.

Inside the diner, I thanked my helpers and assured them that friends would pick me up. I tried to ignore the two uniformed policemen that were talking to one of the staff by insinuating myself into the queue for food. As I slowly inched forward, I listened to the conversation a few feet away. I finally ordered a hamburger with the lot and a coke and by the time it was ready I knew I had to get away.

I followed a couple of hikers out of the diner, swiping a brown Wetherby Falls souvenir hat off a rack as I passed. I hovered with them near the bus until I saw the police driving off in their car. The older of the two had seemed familiar. He wasn't the local sheriff - but he had eyes that looked like they wanted to pop out of their sockets - just like that bastard Lammond.

Even though the day was hot, I shivered. They had my description; the clothes they described were stuffed in my pack. They knew my name. I had heard them say it - Jai Cassidy. They were looking for me. Not just some general, vague woman. Me.

My plan for getting supplies meant I needed to move around town. I couldn't do that now. Once the tourist bus left, I would be noticeable. Knowing I couldn't stay, I walked off at a fast trot towards the back of the petrol station - as if heading for the ladies' toilet. I was busy eating the burger as it was a way of hiding my face and I'd put the hat on and roughly shoved my black hair up under it.

A quick glance around, showed me a yard full of old rusted junk, mainly car bodies and bits of machinery. Beyond that was an open area with several horses grazing. I considered that I could use the junk to hide me as far as the field - then I could make for the trees. A row of pines grew along the far boundary of the horse field and changed to natives beyond that. There was a good chance there was a creek or river down there and with luck, I could hide there until dusk. Perhaps I could go back into the diner to get some food to take with me. Maybe, when I left, I could take one of the horses to get away, and then let the animal loose down the road a bit.

I considered my idea of going to one of the horse breeding farms I'd heard of and pretending to be a boy looking for work. Then, I thought better of the idea. Lammond supposedly had friends that bred horses. He might have asked them to look out for me. And really, since I'd found my cave I hadn't managed too badly. I trapped the occasional rabbit to supplement the food I bought or scrounged from town. I liked living on my own.

When a man spoke from just around the corner of the building, I trotted to the door marked with a plaque in the shape of a woman in a dress. I slipped inside, pulled the door shut, and latched it.

As a ladies' toilet, it was filthy; the floor wasn't swept and dirt and leaves had blown in under the door – but probably no one used it now. Still, it was private and I could quickly change my shirt to one that was darker coloured. After that, I brushed dust off the toilet seat with my hand and used the facilities. The little hand basin had rusty looking water stains, but the tap worked. I washed my hands and face then used my shirtsleeve to dry them.

The voices were still outside, and until they went away, I wasn't coming out.

"I have a spare," I heard a young male voice saying. "Won't take me more than half an hour to swap it over for you."

"That had better be true. I'm in a hurry. I have to get to the city tonight."

That voice gave me shivers. It was arrogant, as if needing the help of a local peasant was beneath him.

"I'll organise a free coffee for you, Sir," the younger voice promised.

I heard what might have been a grunt as a reply. Then the voices stopped. I waited for a while before unlatching the door and peeping out. It wasn't completely quiet outside. I could hear purposeful mechanical noises and muttering. Someone was fiddling under the jacked-up chassis of a rusty, once yellow, car. I slipped between two others and kept out of sight.

I jumped slightly when a tool dropped and the user cursed. It was the young man's voice.

"Damn!" Then there was more clanking. "Hey! Can you help me?"

I froze, with my heart racing. I looked around, looking for somewhere to run.

"You with the legs! I need a hand here."

The voice sounded more amused than authoritarian so I approached warily and crouched down to glance under the car.

"You – please?" the young man asked. "I am kinda in an awkward spot here."

What I could see of the man's face was a pair of light coloured eyes and his amused grin.

"Okay," I found myself answering. I moved around to where the man's greasy trousered legs protruded from under the car.

I kept my head down and asked, "What do you need?"

"Can you grab that shifter I dropped? I can't let go of this. If I break it the bastard will have my hide."

The tool was easy to find; it was just out of the young man's reach. I dropped my pack and leant down to collect it. I gave it to the hand that emerged from under the car.

"Now, could I get you to get a bit closer and hold this while I undo the hose?"

I decided to help and stretched out on the ground to reach my hands under the car. I felt something put into them.

"That's got it," the voice sounded relieved, and I felt the weight in my hands increase.

"Can you manage that?" the voice asked.

"Yeah," I agreed. I was strong for a girl.

The young man wriggled into view, and nimbly climbed to his feet. He had a pleasant face, despite the dirt smudges and dust. He grinned and brushed some of the dust from his already grime stained overalls. He was lean and lanky and not much taller than me.

"Thanks," he said, as he reached out and retrieved the mechanical part he had scrounged.

He finally took a good look at me, and I saw his easy relaxed stance become tense and his greenish brown eyes narrow slightly with suspicion.

"You're a girl," he said, and his hand went up to rub some of the dust from his hair with a hand that was even dirtier.

"Yeah," I agreed with amusement. He had just put greasy black muck in his short brown hair. I added, "Is that a problem?"

“Ah, no! I was just surprised. I assumed you were one of the local boys playing hooky.” That wasn’t it at all. His eyes had stopped meeting mine when he said that. I began to lean down to grab my pack.

“Are you one of that hiker group?” he asked abruptly.

I looked up at him, startled by the question. He looked to be studying me, in much the same way as my mother did. “No,” I admitted. “I was just passing, needed the ladies room.”

“Just as well then, the bus left ages ago.” The man relaxed and grinned. I decided that he couldn’t be much older than me. “It probably isn’t a good idea hanging out back here though. The boss doesn’t like it.”

“He won’t see me.”

“Are you staying around here?” he asked.

“No, passing through.”

I wondered if he was trying to pick me up. I’d never had boys interested in me before. I left them to my sisters. The man grimaced and rubbed his hair again.

“Look, I don’t know if you have heard, but there’s some lunatic around here grabbing women and killing them. They found one down the track to the tip a couple of days ago. There are deputies and city police everywhere. You really shouldn’t wander around alone.”

For an instant I relaxed, thinking, “They aren’t after me.” Then I remembered that the police in the diner had my name and description.

“I’m not staying,” I muttered, edging away. I had the strongest feeling that this mechanic knew who I was.

“If you like, when I get off work, I could drive you somewhere,” he offered diffidently. He glanced away from me and lounged against the car.

“I’ll be okay,” I declined. If that was a pick up line, he wasn’t pushing it.

“Well, be careful. They think the person they are looking for assaulted Olivier Lammond. The paper said he was robbed of over five hundred dollars and left for dead.”

I was momentarily stunned. That lying bastard! At most, I pinched about thirty dollars.

“Lammond?” I tried to sound casual. “Where’d it happen?”

“In his vineyard. What they reckon is that he was checking out a sighting of someone hanging around and the guy must have surprised him.”

That young mechanic was watching me again. “He gave the sheriff a really good description.”

“When was this?” I dared to ask, but I was thinking, “that was a month ago, why all the police and the helicopter now?”

“Fortnight, roughly,” the mechanic admitted. “We’ve had a plague of deputies since then. The guy was seen a few days ago in town, and others have seen him out in the hills. They think he has a hang out around here or up the hills.”

Two weeks? Why did Lammond wait so long? Had he first tried to find me himself? I shivered at the thought.

I hadn’t missed the mechanic referring to the police quarry as male, and for some reason, I took that to mean he did not intend to mention me. I risked another question.

“I heard two deputies mentioning a girl?”

The green-brown eyes gave me a sweeping foot to head glance.

“If they believe that, they’re balmy,” the mechanic shrugged. “They asked me about strangers too – we get enough of those through here all the time. Do you want to know what I think?”

I shrugged, and he took that as an invitation to continue.

“Yeah, I reckon, some woman or girl put Lammond’s nose out of joint, maybe in fact. I had a glimpse of him last week and half his face is purple. Anyway, I’d say he got onto his

pal the Governor, and claimed old Sheriff Herbert was out of his league, and demanded the city police and all the trimmings, and that's why it feels like a law convention is in town."

"But if some woman did it..." I began.

"Like I said, they're balmy if they believe it," the mechanic interrupted, almost rudely. "Lammond is a huge old git."

"Yeah, but...what about those other women?" I asked. Was Lammond trying to have me blamed for them too?

The mechanic shrugged upright, hefted the mechanical part, and muttered impolitely, "Probably some of Lammond's cast offs." He began walking away. Someone was yelling, "Where are you, John, you lazy sod?"

"What?" I blurted. "What do you mean?"

He paused and half turned. His face tightened with suppressed anger. "The bastard tried to rape my sister. So, if I ever meet the 'vicious beast' that attacked him – I will tell him he deserves a medal. Sherri hasn't been the same since then. The town is calling her a tramp and a whore and no one believes her because he is the local bigwig and his son is a policeman."

He stalked off. I was sure he had figured out that the police were looking for me and pretty sure he wasn't going to dob me in – but no one had ever believed me before. I sat down between the cars and tried to think what to do.

I needed to get food, but obviously, I couldn't go to town now. Not if there was a pack of people looking for me. I'd better get going now...just in case I was wrong.

The mechanic came back, "The offer's still open. My car's a green VW beetle. It's parked around the front under the tree. Not locked."

I shrugged, not committing. He walked off, not glancing back. I stayed down between the cars and considered the idea, but no, I had to get going.

The thump-thump of the helicopter changed my mind. The sound grew louder, making me crawl under one of the cars. It sounded like it passed right over me, and was much lower than it had been up the hill. The sound changed and I guessed it was descending somewhere close.

A sense of dread filled me and my heart hammered in my chest. I had no intention of being caught, but to move now would be a very bad idea. I stayed quiet and listened, ignoring the sounds of the occasional car going past on the road, and freezing when one pulled in at the garage. I held my breath when footsteps came around to the rear, and breathed again when the men's toilet flushed and the footsteps went away. Each time I was mentally muttering my prayer, "Let no one see me."

Later, as it was coming on dark, I heard two voices – official sounding. Police I guessed, exerting their authority. Neither sounded like the easygoing local man, and from their conversation I had confirmation of the mechanic's gossip. I also learnt that the helicopter had landed in the town's park and two policemen would be sleeping in it. They had come to the diner to get food and have a thermos filled with coffee.

By dark, the activity that had begun with the arrival of the helicopter had ceased. No one had come near my hiding place but that hadn't made me relax. My stomach was still in knots over the nearness of the police.

Faint whistling alerted me. I carefully raised my head. In the faint light coming from the window next to the toilets, I could see a lean shape moving idly and smoking. Every now and then, the face of the young mechanic was lit up.

I imitated the call of some bird. I didn't know what it was. It was what my brothers used as a signal to each other when one of them was returning from a secret visit to a girl and needed to be let back in their bedroom window.

Without replying, the man stopped whistling and walked slowly towards the side of the petrol station. I followed, but keeping behind some of the metal junk. When I got there, I

realised that the man had moved his car. It was close enough now to slip into without being seen. I did. When he finished his cigarette, the young man went around to the driver's seat. I was crouched out of sight as he drove out onto the main road.

"It's okay, kid. You can sit up."

"Thanks."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere."

The man sighed. "I understand if you don't want to talk about yourself. I won't mention you to the police. But if you just wander aimlessly, they'll soon catch you."

"No they won't."

My driver shrugged. "Have it your way. What say I just start driving and when you want to get out, I'll stop?"

"Okay. Perhaps to the hills?"

"As good a direction as any."

He kept quiet for a long time. That suited me. I was learning to be wary with men.

"Wouldn't it be better to go to Crystal Brook? You could get a train from there."

"I hate towns. Here will do."

After a moment to consider, my driver pulled over to the edge of the road and stopped.

I opened the door and stepped out, dragging my backpack from the floor space.

"Thanks."

"Luck, kid."

He drove off up the road to turn around and I saw his taillights vanish and the headlights appear. By the time he came back, I was hidden in the drainage ditch.

Once he was gone, I climbed back up to the road and began to walk along the edge of it. When I heard cars approaching from behind or saw the loom of their lights from ahead, I hid in the ditch again until they were past. After a while, I came to a fire track going off into the pine trees on the right and I followed it.

I breathed in the clean scent of pine resin, and finally felt my muscles and mind relax. I shouldn't encounter anyone around here. This was an old pine plantation, established a generation ago before the logging companies closed down.

The trees were growing in neat rows, like soldiers on parade, and they soared into the sky higher than I could see. The nearest ones were just far enough from the track to allow some faint illumination from the moon to light my way. I was tempted to remove my shoes and walk barefoot on the thick carpet of pine needles, but every now and then I felt a sharp rock pushing out of the dirt below. Twice in a few minutes, I nearly twisted an ankle.

The track began to climb steadily, but that was no problem. I wasn't tired and now that the evening had turned cool, I felt I could walk all night. I was enjoying the solitude and thinking vaguely of a place to stop for the night, when I became aware of orange flickering lights further up the hill. I edged my way off the track and made my own path between the trunks of the pine trees by feeling from trunk to trunk. I was heading more northeast now than north.

As I drew level with the flickering light, I heard the faint crackling of fire and smelt the smoky tang of burning pine. The fire didn't seem to be growing in size, and I tentatively guessed that someone was camping up here. My hair prickled on my neck and I glanced around and saw several other flickering orange lights that were moving around.

I began backing down the hill, going from tree to tree to have a sense of safety. Who ever was camped up here, I didn't want to meet. If they didn't care that their fire could ignite the whole forest, they probably wouldn't care about what they did to a lone female. I had kept myself safe so far, but I wasn't sure I could handle two or more men at once.

When I had retreated far enough that the fire's glow was barely perceptible, I came to a track that headed east. Using the faint fire glow as a reference I began to circle around the camp.

One thing I had learnt from my brothers was how to move silently when hunting. I had needed to if I didn't want them to hear me. After the first time, I didn't want another smacking, or to be dragged home. Perhaps if I had been a boy, they would have liked me better.

The forest was silent and that didn't feel normal. I should have been hearing night birds or insects or the scurrying of small creatures. All I could do though was to continue to put distance between me and the town of Wetherby and the camp up the hill. With the moon shining down through the treetops, I could see well enough where to go, as I wove carefully between the trees.

The first inkling of danger came when I heard horses' hooves drumming on the ground. Instinctively, I curled into a small ball near the bole of one of the pine trees and hid my eyes. I peeped through a gap in my crossed arms. What I saw first was a ghostly apparition - a woman, dressed in white, carrying a child. The child was whimpering in terror; the woman quietly hushing him as she tried to run between the trees and hitting more than she missed.

The hoof beats were getting closer - there must be another trail just ahead. Then three dark horses thundered past. I cursed the men that rode them, for I knew that horses preferred to see where they were going and of their own choice wouldn't gallop at night on a trail like this. I had stepped on enough stones buried under the pine needle carpet to know that the riders were risking the horses twisting and breaking their legs.

As they passed, I smelt the unmistakable odour of the horses' terror-sweat but it was mixed with a musky odour I couldn't place.

I considered running away but then I heard the woman scream. The sound was stifled quickly, but from the volume, she wasn't far away.

I hadn't survived on my own this past month by making trouble. Enough just found me - like now. I didn't race in to help the woman because I doubted I could do anything except get caught too. For now, she was scared but unharmed. The men didn't seem to be about to rape her though two of the dark figures were holding her; and a third had the child hanging limply in his grasp.

I realised my fists were clenched, and my muscles trembling. First, the horses, innocent creatures that deserved to be able to trust their riders, and now the child who might have been a dirty old rag they'd just picked up. He must be unconscious, helpless. I knew what that felt like and how I resented being small and unable to fight against implacable and inexplicable adult demands. I found myself creeping closer, determined to thwart these callous men.

One of the men began to speak, but I couldn't understand his words. His fellows chuckled nastily. The woman began to struggle desperately. I wasn't sure what I could do. If I made a diversion, they'd likely find me too.

The group began to walk off, leaving the horses who were breathing heavily and too exhausted to move any further. The woman was being forced to walk with them, her struggles having no effect. The one with the child flung him over his shoulder, strode ahead.

I followed, managing to keep pace with them. They were not going in the direction of the camp and that made me wary. I kept checking behind me. I really wanted to know who these people were and what was going on. They didn't belong around here.

They walked faster, making me jog to keep up with them. I soon realised that we were descending and would eventually come out onto the main road.

The group stopped, at the edge of the road. The woman was no longer struggling; she seemed to be half fainting, since the two men needed to hold her up. The child was still a limp bundle over the man's shoulder. I edged around them and watched from behind a tree a few feet away. The moonlight shone on their faces. I studied them. All had long lean features and short dark hair. I had the feeling that something was odd about their faces, but I needed more light to see them properly and I wondered what they were waiting for.

The faint breeze from behind me made me shiver. I smelt again the musky odour that I had not recognised. Then a cloud obscured the moon and a loud rustling noise came from nearby. Someone else had arrived – a dark shaped that seemed to be hooded. The three men were reporting to him but I still didn't understand the low voices. Nor did I dare try to help the woman and child. I tried to tell my self that I shouldn't be there, but I couldn't leave. I eased off the straps of my backpack and lowered it silently to the ground. Something was about to happen; I had the feeling like when a storm was about to break.

That's when I heard a car approaching. The engine was labouring and I heard the grinding of gears as it climbed the steep hill. It would probably accelerate soon, because the road levelled out near here.

"Do it!" I heard clearly.

Were the men waiting for the car?

The man with the child walked down onto the road. He placed the child there as if he were putting down a sack of rocks. He was back hidden by trees when the car headlights started to light the road from around a bend.

Very clearly, I understood that they were going to make an unsuspecting driver kill the child. Unreasoning anger burned within me and I stopped thinking. Killing an innocent child was wrong, and blaming the driver was unfair. I ran from hiding towards the dark bundle on the moonlit road and scooped up the child with one arm. I kept running and fell into a culvert on the far side as the car gunned past. Without pause, I picked myself up, grabbed the child again, slung him over my shoulder, and began to run. I dropped over the edge of the road verge and ran down hill, getting faster with the help of gravity.

The slope was steep, and I couldn't stop now if I tried. It was all I could do to stay on my feet and weave between the randomly place native trees. For the most part, I could run under the lowest branches, but the slender saplings seemed to spring into my path and whip their branches into my face. I brushed against them and smelt odours of pine and cedar and I felt leaves both broad and needle-like swipe my face. I tried to avoid them all, but there wasn't enough light and I prayed I wouldn't trip.

As I ran I saw a flash that destroyed my night vision, but I couldn't stop. Another flash and all I could see was the brilliant after image.

I tripped, fell, and with the child held tightly in my arms, we rolled and slid further down the slope until I felt myself slamming into a tree.

I was having trouble breathing, but I heard the child groan. As my breath came easier, my pain increased. I couldn't move – not even if the men found me. I could hear feet pounding down the hill. My mind called out to whatever power might hear me. "Don't let them find us!"

Maybe I blacked out. My head was certainly hurting and it took me a while to recall where I was and how I had got there and longer again to realise that the sounds of pursuit had stopped. I lay flat on my back and listened to the silence.

The child moaned softly and I rolled over and crawled to where he lay. He, I assumed, from the clothes he wore. In the moon's light, I saw the child's pale face. He looked no older than eight or nine, and might have been younger, since he was slightly built. I gently used my left hand to feel his face and head. There were rough patches on his face and a bump on the side of his head, but when I ran my fingers through his white blond curls, I felt nothing damp

or sticky. That relieved me of one worry – he wasn't bleeding. I also gave his limbs a cursory check. He might have concussion, or some fractures, but no major injuries.

I didn't feel so lucky. My right arm felt broken and some ribs too. Breathing deeply was painful. I glanced around, saw a shadow under a stand of bushes, pulled the child with my good arm, and dragged him into the hollow. I crawled in after him, wrapping myself half over him to keep him warm. I hoped he wouldn't wake up and yell. Even a whimper might betray our hiding place to those men. I mightn't be able to hear anyone but the hair on my neck was still pricking me.

Chapter 3

I woke when the child struggled from my arms. He scampered through the screen of leaves but stopped a few feet away to watch what I did. A glance at the sky, through the leaves, told me it was just before sunrise. I was cold, my ribs and arm were sore, and all of me was stiff.

If he ran off, I couldn't have chased him.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded as I hauled myself out of the hollow, wincing as I moved. He backed away from me.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I told him. He didn't reply.

I studied him. His blond curly hair was dusty and had bits of twigs in it and his pale face showed scabbed grazes and developing bruises. His eyes were a piercing blue and that reassured me that he didn't have concussion.

"Where is Nurni?" he demanded in a shrill voice.

"Shh!" I warned. "I don't know. Some men had her, but ..."

"If she dies – so will you!" the child promised me.

"I saved your life you ungrateful brat! Those men were going to let you die on the road."

He stared at me, not believing me. "Where have you taken me? I don't recognise this plane."

"This place," I emphasised the word, "is down the hill from the road where they tried to kill you. Where are you from?"

He didn't answer that. "Who are you?" he insisted.

"I'm Jai. Who are you?"

Again, he didn't answer. Instead, he glanced behind up and trotted past me. His expression showed relief. I heard people approaching and tried to turn, but couldn't move. Every muscle was reacting with pain. However, if the boy recognised whoever was coming, it probably wasn't some of those man beasts from last night.

It wasn't. A man walked casually around to where I could see him. His face was a sharper version of the child's. They had the same facial bone structure, the same piercing blue eyes but the man's hair was a darker blond and it grew in tighter curls that fell to the top of his shoulders. He was dressed, incongruously, in a light coloured suit.

He studied my face for a long moment and then walked around me, studying me from all sides as if he thought I was the one guilty of kidnapping the boy. He seemed perfectly confident that he had the situation he had found, completely under his control. I wanted to run from the power I sensed in him.

I pushed myself up, wincing with pain and tried not to look too dangerous or too helpless. There were six more strangers in a semi circle behind me. All shared an ethnic likeness to the man, noticeable in the face structure and blond hair, though they all had their hair styled differently. These six were dressed in something like blue-grey coveralls, with a waist harness bearing odd-looking objects. All had rod-like objects pointing at me.

The leader, the one in the suit, gestured with his hand and the objects were lowered to point at the ground. He spoke to the child, in a language I didn't understand. His voice sounded well modulated and more pleasant than those of the man-beasts from last night. I guessed he thought I was the one who had injured his son. Well, I had, but by accident, not design.

"What happened?" he asked me, in faintly accented English. It was a polite demand, and he was looking down into my eyes as if he expected me to answer at once.

“We fell down the hill, while running away from the four men who were trying to kill your kid,” I said, guessing he was the boy’s father, since the boy was now clinging to his leg.

“Four!” the stranger exclaimed as if amazed. “How did you escape them?”

“Don’t know. I think they just stopped following.”

I didn’t think the man believed me. His eyes narrowed a bit.

“Perhaps they figured we killed ourselves,” I suggested with a shrug.

“Perhaps,” he echoed, agreeing amiably enough. “Did you see a woman?”

“Yeah, the men had her too.” I went on to tell him what I had seen. His facial muscles tightened a moment. He gestured with his hand again and I glimpsed three of the other people moving off.

“I am in your debt for saving my son,” he said with a faint bow. “Is there any way in which I can repay you?”

“Forget it,” I muttered. The thought that a man such as this owed me gratitude was a novelty. A pleasant feeling, but I wasn’t going to accept anything from him. “I didn’t do it for you and you should have taken better care of your kid!” What I really wanted was to be away from these men.

The man nodded as if acknowledging the rebuke. I had a sudden intuition. Was that why my father had sent my brother looking for me? I didn’t care.

“Could I offer you breakfast?” the man asked.

“No thanks.”

He gave another of those funny almost bows, and I wondered if he was being sarcastic.

I took a few steps away from the man, but had to stop and stand for a moment as my head seemed to spin. It soon stopped, but the aches just got worse. “See ya. I’ve got places to be.”

“The police may need a statement,” the man commented.

He couldn’t have missed the start of fear. I grimaced with pain caused by the spasm.

“Just tell them what I told you,” I suggested, without looking back at him.

“Perhaps I will, Jai Cassidy.”

I glanced at him for the last time. The child must have told him my name - except I hadn’t told him my full name. Suddenly I wanted to be far, far away.

They didn’t follow me as I trudged up the hill and I didn’t look around to see where they went. I wanted to get my backpack and get away. At least the stiffness was easing as I used the muscles. I saw signs of my uncontrolled decent, and followed them. When I came to where I slipped, I looked around. I remembered tripping, but there was nothing that I could have tripped on – no rocks, no branches or dips in the dirt path. I shrugged and was about to continue climbing when I saw odd marks on a tree. I remembered seeing two flashes. I went and looked at the mark. It seemed like a burn mark made by a fine rope. I backed away and glanced around me. As far as I knew – those chasing me were too far behind to have tried to trip me. If the boy’s father had done it – he’d have found us well before morning.

I didn’t want to admit it but I was freaked.

I forced myself to climb as fast as my protesting muscles would work and was relieved when I reached the shoulder of the road. The sun was well up by that time and I studied the shadows across the road before crossing. The men must be long gone as I could hear the normal forest noises.

When I returned to where I had dropped my pack, I swore. It was gone. I wasted time trying to find traces of the men who had been there and found nothing. They might have flown there and away.

What was I going to do now? I had no food, no spare clothes, and no money. I probably had a broken arm, and no doubt looked as bruised as the boy had been. I couldn’t outrun a snail and if I were to hitchhike, I wouldn’t be able to fend off the wrong kind of lift and the right kind would take me to the hospital and that would be one step away from the police,

who would be called in to find out how I was hurt. They might believe me – but they would also arrest me.

“Bastards!” I yelled to the air. “I hope you die and rot in hell.”

It didn’t occur to me to wonder how the people I stole things from felt, just that I would have to pinch what I needed, but not in Wetherby. I would simply have to get to the next town.

As I walked, I thought back to the encounter with the boy’s father and I wondered what the other men had done with the woman. I hoped she was okay, but I really had doubts. Still there was nothing I could have done. I was lucky to have saved the boy and survived.

I wondered what my father would have said if my brother had dragged me back. It wasn’t important because I wouldn’t have stayed. Going back wasn’t an option, even now when I was desperate.

Forcing one step after another, I trudged on keeping just inside the trees. When the slope of the hill became awkward, I scrambled down to the road and walked on the side where I could see cars coming. As the sun warmed my back, my muscles began to feel better and my future seemed more optimistic. I kept my eyes on the road ahead and the hills beyond.

Several cars passed me from each direction without slowing. Later another car came level with me, slowed for a bit and then roared off down the road. I watched it disappear and only then paused to think that at any time, one of the searching police might drive by. I cursed myself for stupidity and crossed the road. There was more likely to be a trail to follow on the upslope side of the road and I had no wish to fall down the hill again. Then, since I was no longer walking towards the traffic, I couldn’t watch cars approach so I would have to listen.

Normally I had good hearing, but as I thought that – I heard buzzing in my ears. My eyes began to lose focus and I felt light-headed.

“Don’t you dare black out Jai Cassidy,” I said aloud. Some of the feeling passed, but my ears now felt blocked.

Very soon, I would need to find a place near water where I could rest up. However, I wanted to be near a source of food too. Fortunately, I wasn’t hungry at the moment.

The embankment on this side of the road was quite high; much too high for me to climb in my present state. As soon as I reached a place where it was low enough, I’d get off the road again.

I never heard the next car coming.

Perhaps it crawled up on me before revving its engine and slamming me into the embankment. Pain on pain. I clutched at the earth and tried to hold onto awareness. My left leg gave way under me and I fell onto my face in the drainage ditch. I couldn’t move.

I was vaguely aware of the car revving to get out of the ditch. I faintly felt the hands turning me over and back again. I may have dreamed someone saying, “That should finish her.”

“I am not going to die you bastards.” I didn’t try to say it aloud. “You bastards will die first – and horribly.” I wished I could believe that, but I intended to live – to spite them.

All I did was move my head so I was breathing air, not dirt. I listened as cars went passed and never noticed me. I really wasn’t sure if I was glad or sorry. I needed a doctor, but I didn’t want one. While I lay there, I wrestled with the question of who had tried to kill me twice in a day.

Chapter 4

“Kid?”

I focussed on the voice and tried to make my eyes work but my sight was too blurred. Behind the face was a larger pale green blur.

“Mechanic?”

“Yeah. Are you okay?”

“No.”

“Can you move?”

“No.”

“I’ll go and call an ambulance.”

“No.”

“You need a doctor.”

“Yeah! Drive me?”

“Okay – but what if I make things worse?”

“Doubt it.”

“Oke...I’ll try not to hurt you.”

I clamped my mouth shut. He was trying his best.

“Not Wetherby!” I managed to say while hissing with pain.

“No. The town is swarming with police. They want you, kid. But somebody’s wife went missing too.”

I said nothing. I didn’t want to be involved.

“I’ll take you to the big hospital.”

“Okay.”

Once again, he drove without talking to me. I allowed my mind to drift, but not to black out.

If I didn’t move, the pain wasn’t too bad.

At the hospital, my mechanic friend went in and summoned help. He hovered uncertainly by me as a gurney was wheeled out and two white clad nurses lifted me from the car and laid me on it.

As they began to wheel me to an examination room, I muttered, “Thanks. I’ll be fine. You go.”

“You’ve got guts, kid.”

“Scrambled, right now.”

He grinned. “I’m John, kid, and I want to say that I told my sister about the unfortunate Lammond. It’s the first time she has smiled in five months.”

I tried to smile. I was glad his sister knew a girl had hurt Lammond. He waved and let the gurney move away from him.

“Well, I’m for it now,” I thought as I was wheeled beneath a ceiling with long lights at regular intervals, and into a room full of unfamiliar equipment.

The doctor who came to tend me was young. He had hair as dark as mine and big eyes behind thick glasses. He looked down at me.

“Your friend tells me you were hit by a car. You were very lucky. Are you in pain?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll get you something for that. Then we need to x-ray you. Where do you hurt?”

“All over. Arm. Leg. Ribs.”

He nodded. “I’ll get that shot. Meanwhile, the nurses need to get you out of those clothes so we can examine the damage.”

I submitted to his commands and was relieved when they allowed me to wear a white gown that did up at the back. Once the painkiller kicked in I felt almost normal, but I continued to pretend weakness. If the police came, I wanted them to think I was worse than I was.

I was x-rayed, poked, prodded and several doctors conferred over me for an hour and then, inexplicably, I was x-rayed again.

"What's the verdict," I asked the young doctor as he looked at the latest x-rays.

"That you are one, very lucky young woman. Your right arm and left leg have hairline fractures so we will need to put them in plaster. Your ribs are just bruised, as is most of the rest of you. There is no sign of concussion. I will keep you here for a few days as a precaution. Is there anyone that we should notify?"

"No."

"I had to tell the local police about you. They will be sending a man around to find out what you can tell them about the car that hit you."

"How's my face?"

"Well you won't win a beauty contest this week, but it's intact."

"Bruised?"

"And grazed."

I grunted. Maybe they wouldn't recognise me. I had already told the staff a false name. A policeman arrived just as the last of the plaster was being applied to my leg.

"My patient may be a little dopey. I had to give her a large dose of painkillers. If you could keep your questions brief – she really needs rest at the moment. I will recommend that she spend at least a week at the Hilltop Rest Centre."

Maybe I was a bit dopey. The look the doctor and policeman exchanged with each other seemed to suggest that the remark had some significance that I wasn't meant to understand.

They wheeled me to a private room and helped me onto the bed. Once I was comfortable, the policeman took out his notebook and began to ask about the incident.

I stared at the white ceiling and told him what little that I could about the hit run – recalling that someone had come and turned me over and back. He questioned me further but I could add no more. Then he began to ask me where I had been going and why I was walking and where was my identification and belongings? I had to concentrate hard to stick to the story I wanted to tell. I made no mention of the strange men up the mountain or the woman and boy, nor his father. I was simply travelling, but I had lost my pack somewhere – could they look for it near the accident scene? I told them I was eighteen and had no family left.

After a while, I realised that they were asking the same questions all over again and I was having trouble staying awake. My last waking thought was relief that they hadn't linked me to the girl they were searching for.

I can't have been asleep for long when I surfaced again, because the policeman was still talking to the doctor. I opened my eyes a tiny crack and watched them. Seeing them together, side by side heightened the likeness between them. Both had black hair, both had long gaunt faces and large eyes. They reminded me of the policemen I had seen in Wetherby, and I realised with a tremor of fear – the men I had seen with the woman and who had meant to kill the child. What was going on?

I couldn't understand what they were saying – it was like a foreign language. Why did they not speak English – particularly if they thought I was asleep?

I gave up trying to understand and tried to think of how to escape. After a while, I realised that the strange words made sense.

"The human boy from the garage brought her in. Told us her arm and leg were broken. We took x-rays. The first ones showed definite fractures. The ribs showed that the bone had

been broken and had recently healed. An hour later, I had another set of films taken. Both the arm and the leg looked to have faint fractures and signs of new bone growth.”

“Apart from interfering in the master’s business, that is the creature that grievously damaged my sire,” the policeman said. “I had seen it around and wouldn’t have believed it capable of hurting him – no human is that strong. He told me that this little female is the image of Jai Ansuni. It has to be Atapi.”

“Didn’t Ansuni allow herself to be raped by a human?” the doctor asked.

“Yes. I remember the master’s rage. It would have been sixteen or more years ago.”

“Then she would be dead. No Atapi woman can survive childbirth when bound in human form. That is why we terminate all such pregnancies. Or did the master deal with her?”

“Apparently not. But it puts a new light on our problem,” the policeman spoke aloud. “It means she is not human, but one of us. A traitor.”

The doctor nodded. “She is bound in that form and that was probably why she was not identified earlier. But there is little doubt - no human has our speed of recovery.”

“She may have other latent Atapi talents,” the policeman warned. “Make sure you keep her securely until I have a chance to talk to the elders. They will not be pleased to hear that one of ours saved a Kumatan child. That is high treason and the punishment we gave her for being an interfering human is not enough.”

“I’ll make sure she gets to the Hilltop,” the doctor promised. “The elders can examine her for themselves.”

It wasn’t my intention, but I fell asleep.

Chapter 5

I woke suddenly as I often did, remembering everything clearly but keeping my eyes closed. I played the events through in my mind and considered the things I had overheard. They made no more sense now than then. Those people – the doctor and policeman – must have mistaken me for someone else.

Those people thought me a traitor and I had no idea why saving a child's life was treason. I opened my eyes a fraction. It was dark as pitch. I heard shuffling close around me like mice in the wall, but nothing touched me. I smelt that musky smell I'd noticed in the woods and I was lying on a concrete floor. At least, I wasn't in a police cell, but I wasn't sure that my present situation was better.

My first task was clear. Find out where I was and how to get away. For that, I needed information. I tried to move but my arms were tied together at the wrists. I could lift them up and I did so but I felt nothing. I realised then that the plaster had been removed. Did that mean that I had healed completely? I tried to move my legs – but they were bound at ankles and knees. I wriggled and fingered the bindings. They felt like plaster bandages but I could find no edge to pull on. I kept trying and with time, the amount of light in the place increased and I finally freed my legs.

There were bars above me set about five centimetres apart. I rolled slightly and saw similar bars all around me. A wave of mutterings echoed around the wider space beyond my cage. I turned the other way and saw about a dozen people were watching me. All could have been siblings of the doctor or the policeman. All wore either tunics or just trousers, but none of them were in cages like me. They could wander at will about the bigger room.

A completely new interpretation of the conversation between doctor and policeman occurred to me. I had, in my mind, assumed that I had run into some crazy religious sect. I could have dealt with that. However, these people seemed to believe they were better than human – and could do things that humans couldn't do - like healing rapidly.

I wriggled my arm as much as I could. There was no pain, no lingering ache. I looked at my arms - no grazes and no bruises. I felt over my face – no sore spots, no rough grazed areas. That was odd – but perhaps I had been here a long time, yet some instinct told me I hadn't. Somehow, I was dressed again in my own clothes, but they didn't look dirty. My shoes had been tossed in with me.

No matter what they thought – I wasn't one of them. I was human! And they were going to pay for stuffing me about and trying to kill me.

I turned to stare at those who were staring at me. When I kept my gaze on them, they moved away and watched me warily.

Then I stood and walked around my cage. It was tall enough to stand in – if you were no taller than five foot and a bit. The area was about six foot square – big enough so that if I was in the centre of it none of the gawkers could touch me.

“Well – what are all you doing here?” I asked the muttering audience. I expected no answer but the sudden silence made me think they feared me.

“Hey! I want food.” I yelled and those around me covered their ears. The muttering took on a sense of amusement - probably at my ignorance. Perhaps they didn't feed their prisoners. My companions were a scrawny bunch.

I soon tired of taunting the other prisoners, and lay on my side with my back to them, half-dozing. In that state, I once again seemed to understand their mutterings.

“I thought they had killed all the half alien bastards...”

“They found no trace of its mother...”

“It’s an abomination...”

“They say she chose to have its child...”

“No sane woman would choose to be raped by a human...”

“She killed herself giving birth to it...”

“They tested it. It can’t change its form...”

“They think it has latent talents...”

The last comment startled me awake. Once again the speaking was babble. At thought occurred to me. I relaxed and cleared my mind. The words made sense but I didn’t want to hear those slanderous comments.

That last remark got me thinking. Perhaps one latent talent was to be able to understand them when they weren’t speaking English. I wondered about the form changing business. They said I couldn’t – but then humans can’t. Besides – they didn’t look alien. Weird maybe, but still human. So if this wasn’t their form – what was?

Finally, two guards came for me. They opened the door of my cage and spoke sharply. It was probably some version of “Come out.”

I chose to ignore the command in favour of staring at them. They were both about six foot tall and clad only in grimy trousers and a hanging-open sleeveless vest. I was somehow not surprised that they too resembled the doctor and policeman and all the other creatures in this jail of theirs. One bent over and entered the cage, and began to drag me out. I didn’t choose to make it easy for him, and grabbed and held onto a bar with both hands, but he produced a rod like object and slammed it on my extended arms. I lost my grip. The second one was ready when I emerged from the cage. He snapped a metal band on each of my arms and after that, cut the bandages at my wrists. They both began to drag me past the staring prisoners, some of whom spat at me without getting too close to the guards.

I didn’t blame them; these two men had the metal ends of weapons poking from several places in their cloth vests. I couldn’t make out the design on the fabric, because it made my eyes feel weird.

Once outside the prison room, the guards increased their pace. I couldn’t keep up with their longer stride. I’d had enough and I began to struggle as fiercely as I could, but my efforts had little effect. I lost my footing and my felt my heels being rubbed raw as I was dragged along a series of cement-lined passages that sloped downward.

My destination was a small chamber that looked to be cut out of greyish rock and where an arc shaped table and three chairs were the only furniture. I wasn’t led to a seat; instead, I was taken to the bit of wall facing the table, pressed against it. The two guards efficiently clamped my arms to the wall. Houdini couldn’t have got loose. The guards stayed next to me – as if escape was possible.

I hadn’t been there long when three aged men entered the room and walked to the seats. These wore trousers and tunic under a long hooded fur robe of rabbit skins stitched together. The edges of the skins were roughly bound in off-white linen. Somehow, I got the feeling that the Atapi court was now in session. It reminded me of the one time I had been hauled in to face a human judge.

They spoke to me in Atapi but I was in no mood to clear my mind and relax to understand them. They were forced to speak in English. Round one to me.

“You are charged with treason,” the central figure spoke. He was like all the other Atapi I had seen, except that when he had lowered his hood, his hair was white and thinning out. “As is customary – you may speak for you self or have another speak for you. Which do you choose?”

"I choose to have John the mechanic speak for me," I said, curious as to what they would say.

"He is a human. Humans have no place here." That was the grey skinned one on the left.

"I am human you monkeys. I shouldn't be here!"

"You are Atapi. Only an Atapi can speak for you," the third male spoke. He had a slightly crooked nose and white hair poking out from under his hood.

"I am human. What the hell are Atapi?"

"Then you must speak for yourself," the centre one said evenly, ignoring my outburst.

I had already decided that I had no other option. I doubt if there was any unbiased Atapi that would help me. For that matter, I suspected that there was an unspoken charge here too - that of being a live half-human bastard.

"You are charged with abetting an enemy. Two evenings ago, you assisted a Kumatan enemy to escape from Atapi justice. How to you explain this?"

"What had that woman and child done to you – besides simply existing?" I asked.

"That is not the issue here. How do you explain this?"

"I'm not guilty of anything, you morons. I only saved an innocent child from being murdered by you lot as you later attempted to have me killed."

"Silence! Bring in the first witness," grey skin ordered.

I was beginning to have a very low opinion of Atapi justice.

There is no point in repeating what the eyewitnesses stated. The judges questioned each creature that came into the room and what they said was factual enough but skewed – and their words were tinged with disgust.

I was permitted to ask questions. To each witness I asked, "Was the rescuer of the child Atapi or human?"

All had answered, "An Atapi bound in human form."

I then asked each of them if they had known that fact at the time. Each answered, "We know it now."

That was the gist of it. The panel were satisfied with the case, but I couldn't understand their reasoning.

"You may begin your defence," crooked-nose invited.

It's hard to be eloquent when you cannot use hand gestures and walk around. I had to try even though I doubted if I could alter the preset decision of the panel.

"I'm not the one who should be on trial here, you morons. I'm not an Atapi, whatever that is. I didn't try to murder a kid. I don't even know what a Kumatan is let alone where they come from. The kid looks as American as I do and you look like creepy old men. If I got mixed up with some petty feud you have going, how was I to know? And you have already punished me for that. I'm not one of you, so I can't be a traitor and you have no right to keep me prisoner."

"You are Atapi. We have the right," crooked nose stated.

"No, you creeps! I was born human. I have grown up as human. I don't accept that I am related to any of you. I have a large human family, lots of human friends who are already looking for me. If I am found murdered – they will stop at nothing to find the killers. They will find out all about your crazy sect and all of you will be put in prison."

I think I had hit a tender spot. Somehow, I doubted that they wanted humans to know about them. I thought that was why they were holding this mock trial in the first place. It wasn't my 'treason' that was the issue, but my existence. It was the difference between killing an abomination, like they perceived me to be, at birth and one that had strong human ties. They would have readily killed an Atapi traitor, for none outside their, I assumed, secluded colony would notice the death – but me?

The panel of three were conferring. I pretended to ignore them, but I relaxed enough to eavesdrop. They were considering ways to kill me and make it look like someone else did it. They were talking in riddles – or discussing concepts that they referred to but didn't state openly. All I was sure of was that they planned my death to be in a way that would be worse than merely dying.

The three old men – old Atapi - spoke together, "The penalty for treason is death. You will be taken back to your cell until this is arranged. Do you have anything more to say?"

I had a sudden idea. "Yeah. You reckon I am an Atapi criminal but I still don't know what I did wrong. If I am a cross breed – as you claim – I have no knowledge of my Atapi heritage. If you want me to truly regret my actions – you will have to teach me why they were wrong."

Thinking that I didn't understand their language, they didn't guard their thoughts and words. I gathered that they planned to take me into Kumatan territory and were certain that their enemies would kill me because they killed all Atapi they found there. They seemed to realise that I wasn't mortally terrified of the Kumatan, and that weakened their 'death sentence', so they decided to educate me.

As I was dragged back to the cage – I wanted to smile. Round two to me. The boy I had helped and his father owed me a favour. I didn't think they'd kill me. And now, I was going to learn more about those I considered my enemies. At worst, I had earned a reprieve to look for a way to escape. At best – I wasn't going to die.

At least, I hoped that was the case. When I had time to think about things, I realised that these alien creatures might be related to Lammond. If that bastard knew I was here – being human wasn't going to protect me. He wanted me dead.

I was kept in the cage for a few days and fed a meagre portion of something edible but unfamiliar each evening. The other prisoners had stopped whispering about me and seemed to be a little in awe of me. It was as if they knew that I was a traitor but hadn't expected me to return.

When guards came for me again, they clipped chains to the bands on my arms. Then I had to walk between the two of them.

I took a very deep breath once I was outside in the fresh, pine-scented warm air. It felt so good to be outside that I missed seeing my guards attach the chains to something in the ground. They pushed me down and warned me not to try anything. They had something like a long rod pointed at me. I got the hint and decided I could wait to figure out what it was.

Both of them hovered behind me as I waited for whatever was to happen. I glanced around. I was to one side of a clearing that had native grown trees around it – mostly maple, dogwood, ash and oak. Above them, I saw the tops of pine covered hills, not too far away. I wondered if that was the plantation where I had seen the woman and boy.

The ground in front of me was dusty, with scattered patches of dead or dry grass. It seemed like a well-used area.

After a short while, I saw women emerging from between the trees, coming from the direction of the hills. Most were either carrying wriggling tiny children, or trying to hold on to fidgeting older ones. When they saw me, they kept to the far side of the clearing.

The exception was the white haired old woman, who was easily the age of the Atapi 'judges'. She came and sat near me, settled her scarf of grey rabbit fur around her neck and ordered the other women and children to come closer. They all obeyed her.

It seemed that I had been brought to join the lessons of the Atapi children. To my eyes, they all looked like a bunch of family related human children with big eyes, dark hair and thin bodies. As the day progressed however, I finally saw the true Atapi form, or rather their juvenile form. Mostly the children appeared human, but every now and then, a mother needed

to remind her child to maintain the human look. One very young child fell asleep and changed form. I was able to study it for a long while.

The big eyes and thin frame were the dominant features of the true Atapi form. However, the Atapi skin was brown and lizard like, and there were small, poorly formed tail and wings present.

I hid my fascination and learnt about form changing through the unguarded thoughts of the children. Those that had relapsed into true form had to concentrate on the steps to change back and I found that I had these thoughts coming into my mind. I was amused by the fact that the clothes the children had seemed to wear were absent in Atapi form and they didn't seem to realise that humans could take their clothes on and off. It was like they each had a specific image that they used to change form.

Fascinating, but even if this was a talent they thought latent in me – no one would be teaching me how to do it. I made the most of what I picked up from the children. Perhaps one day I would try this for myself.

I don't know what other talents the Atapi had, but changing form was all I had discovered. What ever they were, I wasn't present when the children learnt to use their talents. I was only dragged out for the "brainwashing" sessions.

Well, that's what they were. I reckon that Atapi bedtime stories have Kumatan as the wicked evil creatures that will get you if you are bad. Certainly, these children were being told in grisly detail how the Kumatan tortured and killed Atapi. I gathered that there was war between the two races, the origin of which was so ancient that it might always have existed. From the body language of the old female, I got the impression that there was an ingrained and deeply rooted terror in each Atapi that the mere thought of going near a Kumatan petrified the nervous system.

I was probably missing something though. If that were the case, then the Kumatan would only have to walk into the colony and they would all wait to be killed. It hadn't stopped some of them kidnapping that woman and child.

As the lessons went on, I learnt about the brave warriors that raided the Kumatan colony, killed the leaders, and tortured those who had information vital to Atapi security. These brave heroes were the reason why the Atapi colony still existed and why the Kumatan never dared to attack them.

Utter rubbish, I decided. A much-skewed way of justifying the barbaric tendencies of their race. Even if the stories of the Kumatan treatment of Atapi were exaggerated, I wasn't surprised that they treated the Atapi as they did.

I never heard any indication that Kumatan ever raided the Atapi colony even if they had no mercy on any Atapi found in their territory. According to the tales, Kumatan made slaves of any Atapi found on their territory. This was beyond tolerance for the magnificent Atapi race, so the Atapi thought only of escape. Escaped slaves were punished (tortured according to the Atapi) and eventually killed.

Maybe I was wrong, but my logic suggested that the Kumatan seemed to keep to themselves and defended themselves, but didn't initiate attacks. That made me feel I could trust them more than the Atapi. Either way, I wasn't, and never would be afraid of the Kumatan and the Atapi just couldn't see it.

I did wonder though. Some Atapi were posing as humans – for reasons unknown to me. Perhaps Kumatan were too. How could I know?

Chapter 6

The repetitious ‘lessons’ were boring. I had learnt all I was going to and didn’t intend to be a prisoner for much longer. Rather than listen to the old woman I was busy considering ways to escape. Idly, I considered the business of form changing. Humans couldn’t do it, but I kept thinking of the steps the children used to change and one was to change the dimensions of their limbs. Their Atapi arms were shorter and stubbier than human arms – they had to stretch their arms and make them narrower. I didn’t think any thing was happening until I realised that the chain was looser on one of my wrists.

While I tried to effect the same change on the other wrist, I looked around me, studying every possible escape route. The timing of the patrolling presence of guards was unvarying and it would be easier to escape from out here than from the cage. I let my anger build up. I had no intention of taking what I deserved for my previous actions. I’d be damned if I were going to accept punishment for some trumped up excuse for preventing murder. I was tired of being pushed around.

I waited until my guards were about to grab me again. I had freed both hands, slid the chain from the ground loop, and it was now poised to be a weapon.

As one leant over to free the chain and the other contemptuously reviled me – I acted. With a flick of my wrist, I wrapped a loop of the chain around the neck of the one leaning down and I sprang up, aiming my head into the other. He grabbed me and yanked, but in doing so, the chain tightened around his partner. He was distracted a moment and that was enough for me to twist free, aim an anger fuelled kick to where I hoped it would hurt most and to begin running.

They had no idea that I was so fast. By the time the other two guards had reacted, I was well away, running a zigzag course through the trees and away from the hills. The patrolling guards were even slower to react.

I expected some sort of barrier, but found none. So I kept running. It felt good to be free. I didn’t know where I was going, but I figured down hill was best – I would find a road or track and follow it to a town. I’d even go back to Wetherby and let the police get me. I could always escape from them again.

Finally, after alternately running and walking for hours, I began to tire. I slowed a stop and listened. I hoped I had given the Atapi guards the slip, and that they couldn’t track me. I heard nothing above the pounding of my heart, and my laboured breathing. I kept walking at a slower pace, taking more notice of the plants and trees. I had identified maple, dogwood, ash and oak near their village, but now I saw cypresses, several types of pine, each with cones and leaves that were distinctly different, and even caught a whiff of cedar. I kept walking until it was late afternoon, feeling hopeful that I had lost my pursuers. I was considering finding a place to hide and a way to try to catch a rabbit or squirrel to eat.

Moving quietly now, I began to see rabbits in patches of shadow, grazing on the low grasses. They stopped eating when they became aware of me, sitting on their haunches and twitching their ears, but didn’t run away. I walked under a tree branch and had a squirrel gaze curiously at me. Had these creatures had never seen a human before? They would be easy prey. I needed to find a stone to use as a weapon.

Even though I was hungry, I decided finding a place to hide for the night would be more important. A cave would be good, but the terrain seemed wrong – it was too flat with no rocky outcrops. Failing that, I wanted a thicket of trees or a tangle of fallen ones. I walked for a while longer and found nothing thick enough.

My next thought was up a tree – there was a leafy oak tree a short way off. It wasn't an easy one to climb, but I'd climbed trees since I could walk. Once wedged in the tree, I kept still and listened. For now, I heard only the breeze rustling the leaves, and felt the afternoon sun where it filtered through gaps in the leaves. I was at eye level with a branch still bearing last year's acorns, and beginning to think I was hungry enough to pretend to be a squirrel.

Just as I decided to try acorn salad, my skin began to prickle. A sensation I was coming to associate with trouble. I listened very hard.

I didn't hear my pursuers; I smelt them. I'd got immune to the distinctive Atapi stench whilst they had kept me in that prison hole but since running off I had breathed in clean mountain air. When I began to smell that musky odour again, carried on the breeze, I knew that they were close. A short time later, I saw through gaps in the leaves, several Atapi guards pass under me – oblivious.

The smell was getting stronger – so more of them were coming, but I saw none of the creatures below me. I could hear a snuffling sound like a dozen dogs vigorously sniffing the air, so I kept very still and very quiet.

When I suddenly heard an odd buzzing sound, I wondered what it was. All too soon, I found out. My body suddenly lost all sensation and if I hadn't been wedged in a fork of the tree, I would have fallen. That's when I knew I was in trouble. I could hear the sounds of trees being shaken. Not just the hissing of the leaves like in a wind, but the groaning of thick trunks being bent to breaking point. I saw my tree moving, and tried to hold on, but I couldn't.

I didn't feel the landing, but I saw the circle of Atapi. I hadn't seen any like these before. They were tigers when the guards I had hurt were house cats; warriors and fighters rather than merely guards. They each had leggings in light close-fitting flexible leather that revealed every muscle and they wore a tabard of thick leather over their bare muscled chests. Each tabard was ornately decorated in geometric designs done with coloured threads that glowed when a ray of sun glinted through the leafy canopy. No two tabards were the same but all had places for a variety of odd-looking weapons. I couldn't see any of them clearly enough to figure how they would be used or if they were like the ones I'd seen on those Kumatan guards. The ones pointed at me were the long rods like my former Atapi guards had carried.

The Atapi warriors stood there, silent as statues, and as implacable as a stone wall. Doing nothing but watching for me to make the slightest move.

I couldn't.

From my lowly position, I was aware of more Atapi warriors approaching in a tight group. When they were close, the group split and one of the three old males from my farce of a trial emerged. He studied me for a moment with an impassive face and eyes full of hate.

"The sentence will be carried out tonight," he stated, in English for my benefit. "Tukon, have four of your warriors see to it."

One of the circle of warriors nodded. Another spoke up. "It deserves to be whipped."

"Yes, but it will not." The old one spoke in a tone that implied it must be heeded. "It is part human and bound to this plane. We cannot risk it being found with scars that cannot be explained by human weapons. This traitor would help our enemies – let them show it their gratitude."

Several of the younger warrior-Atapi shivered with terror. I simply glared at the old man. Let him think me afraid if he wanted to.

Two of them lifted and carried me silently through the bush. Two more followed. I was still weak and incapable of resistance. I may have been impressed by the silence of their passage, but not with the sense of my limbs being pulled out of their sockets. After a very long walk, by which time it had become moonless night, I began to sense a difference in my captors. Half the group stopped, only the two carrying me continued.

The Atapi began to emit a different smell and I associated it with fear. I figured we had entered the territory of the Kumatan. I tried again to struggle and succeeded a little - enough to distract them and make them miss their step.

The two carrying me stopped and sniffed the air. I did likewise, but I only smelt their fear stink and the tangy resin of pines and cedar. The Atapi were moving their heads around as if sensing danger, but not able to locate it. They still hadn't released me and I still couldn't get free.

Two faint beams of light touched the Atapi and I tried to see where they came from, hoping that whoever had the torches were friends.

I felt the grip of the warriors ease and they dropped me. I fell and rolled. The warriors had identical looks of shock, similar to something I had seen on the face a movie gangster when he had been shot. They clutched their chests and tried to draw breath in, but only managed to fall beside me. I couldn't see who had disabled them.

Now I heard sounds of people or creatures approaching. I tried to push up, but I hadn't yet recovered enough strength. I lay on my front and pretended to be unconscious.

Moments later a torch lit up the ground around me and someone chuckled, "What have we here? Are they bringing us sacrifices now?"

"It seems to be female," another said in a tone that made my skin crawl.

"Let's look at what they brought us," a third voice said sharply. I was rolled over. This man I recognised. It was the boy's father and he was still wearing a suit. I saw the recognition in his eyes, but he didn't betray the fact that he knew me.

"It's human," the chuckling voice changed its tone to anger. The hands feeling me dropped away. "Why do they bring us their human prisoners?"

"I think our medics will find there is Atapi blood in her. See, Klon, they have banded her. The Atapi do not waste slave bands on humans."

"Two bands," said the voice that identified my gender. "If she is indeed Atapi - can we have her as a slave?"

"No, Saxim. This prisoner is mine. There is much I must find out about her before I report to Leader Katech. Don't you wonder why they fear such a small female?"

The chuckler chuckled. "You are wise indeed Traeger. We would not want to destroy what might be a weapon against the Atapi barbarians."

The blond haired man, called Traeger, looked me in the eye and said, "Come."

He turned and began to walk away. I was compelled to follow, but when I finally stood, I fell after the first step. My legs were still too weak to support me. I tried again with the same result. After the third failure, Traeger returned, crouched beside me, and looked into my eyes. His eyes seemed to glow for a moment and then his hand brushed my forehead and he spoke a few quiet words. In that moment, the weakness vanished. This time when I stood, I was able to walk normally.

I had only a very vague idea of where I was but my location didn't seem important. All I needed to do was follow Traeger. He never looked around to see if I followed him. Perhaps the other two Kumatan were there to make sure I did. Except that occasionally one or other would move ahead of us and vanish off the path for a while before returning. My impression wasn't so much that they were guarding me as protecting Traeger. I might have been an obedient dog.

Perhaps I was. When I thought that I was meekly following some stranger, I tried to resist and run off. I thought I could, but my body kept plodding onward, five paces behind Traeger.

We reached the crest of a hill just as dawn was colouring the sky. I had a brief glimpse of forested hills before descending onto a trail that would lead between two of the lower hills. After a while, the path threaded the space between two tall trees. I felt an odd moment of

disorientation, soon forgotten when the trees thinned and I saw a small township spread out before us. It was nestled in a small valley, surrounded by the hills and the forests.

As we walked down a trail, and drew nearer the town, I was struck by the absence of streetlights, powerlines, TV antennas and other signs of the modern world. Most noticeable to me was the absence of any kind of vehicles. The matter occupied my mind until we were walking along the main street and had passed most of the buildings.

I supposed that the town was too isolated for the power to have come there yet. After all, where my father lived, they hadn't had it on all that long, but I would have expected at least one car or tractor. The people who lived near my family hadn't the money for tractors. What they had done was get one to be used by all the nearby farms. Surely, these people could do something similar. Those already labouring in the fields would be able to do so much more.

I suddenly realised that I had stopped and that Traeger was talking to me and I had missed most of it. I ignored the rest as I stared at the house beside us. It was the second last building in the town and the largest in the street, the only one with more than one level. It was also the most elaborate with a portico entrance with white trim around the windows and door and its wooden walls painted a light yellow colour.

"Come," I heard again and my feet took the rest of me into house. My eyes, took in the grand spacious hallway, with pale green plaster alternating with light brown wood panels. On the walls, paintings hung where the plaster sections were and statues stood on pedestals in front of the wood. I saw the stairs spiralling up to a higher floor and I began to feel afraid. It reminded me of the municipal building in Wetherby and there they had locked me up for a while. It was like old man Lammond's house and that had been a trap.

I thought this man, Traeger, was different. However, he was just like everyone else – thinking he had the god-given right to make me do what he wanted. He had said one word and I had no control of my body. It wasn't an invitation, and admittedly, if it had been, I'd have said no because enough was enough. I wanted no further part of this Atapi – Kumatan feud – but he hadn't asked!

And now I was in what I supposed was his grand house, in his control, in a place that was probably another kind of cage or trap. Maybe he didn't intend me harm – like Lammond had, and maybe his captivity would be more comfortable, but he had no right to keep me here.

He'd learn.

Just like everyone else.

Chapter 7

Traeger was obviously an important person. He was met by servants in deep blue trousers and lighter blue shirts – well trained enough to seem to ignore me. They looked human except for that ethnic bone structure. One helped Traeger take off his suit jacket and took it away; another softly reported some information and disappeared.

After I was led to what was plainly an office, the same servants brought him refreshment – a brown liquid poured from a coloured glass bottle into a matching low glass. Of course, I was ignored.

Traeger seated himself behind a huge wooden desk. He had told me to, “Stop.” I stood facing him from five feet away. As I waited, he drank from the glass and stared at me. When he finished his drink, he rose again and this time studied me from closer. He circled me slowly, several times. I felt that his eyes could penetrate my clothes, my skin and see right into the heart of me. I was relieved when he again sat behind his desk.

“You are a most interesting creation, Jai Cassidy,” Traeger told me thoughtfully. “It is perhaps fortuitous that your human heritage is dominant.”

“No matter what those bug-eyed creeps say, I am human and what the hell are you if you’re not?”

I had a very good idea, but would he admit it?

A glimpse of movement to the sides of me caught my attention, and I glanced each way. The two guards in the bluish-grey coveralls were still watching me with weapons out. Traeger gestured as he had before and the guards pointed the weapons at the floor.

“That part of your heritage that is Atapi...”

“I have a human mother and a human father,” I interrupted, and heard indrawn breaths from the two guards. Wasn’t I allowed to have a say here?

“I can appreciate that you would not wish to be part of that vile race,” Traeger admitted. “But you are unfortunately part Atapi and your presence here is going to cause problems.”

“You didn’t have to bring me here,” I told him. “You can let me go. I can look after my self.”

“Until now, perhaps you have. However, I believe you are wanted by the police for assault and the Atapi will not rest until they have killed you. Returning to your previous life will be suicidal for you. At best you will be locked away somewhere and I doubt that you like to be restricted.”

That was all too true, so if he knew that why did he make me come here?

“I wasn’t going to stick around.”

“Leaving the area is a temporary solution at best. If you were to do that – eventually the Atapi will find you. No matter how far you go. And I do not wish them to spread too far.”

“What do you mean?” I suddenly, really wanted to know.

“Now that the Atapi know of you, they won’t stop trying to kill you,” Traeger reiterated.

“They’re not so smart,” I claimed.

“Atapi warriors tracked you,” Traeger reminded me.

“So? They expected you to kill me. So if I go and take a train someplace, they won’t know I am still alive.”

“The warriors are not the only threat,” Traeger told me. “You have not encountered their leader, the sorcerer devil Stacion Ansuni. As a human, you cannot conceive the power he has, or the rituals he can use to find you. He only needs something of yours, clothing perhaps, or strands of your hair.”

I shivered; maybe he had that. Someone had taken my backpack and if those creeps had noses as sensitive as that of a tracker dog...

"So? He could find me here too!" I argued.

"True, but Stacion Ansuni dares not come here. He is not ready to face me."

I sensed more than a little arrogance in that statement.

"If you are so all mighty, why haven't you gone out and gotten rid of him?" I challenged.

Traeger's face tightened a little as if that was a sensitive topic. He said, with his voice well controlled, "The Kumatan are here to provide protection for the people of Earth."

Huh? What the hell did he mean by that, I wondered.

"What do you know about the Atapi?"

"Not much."

"Which is exactly why you are vulnerable."

"I know that they think your kind is barbaric and evil. The boogiemens in Atapi children's tales are Kumatan. I told you that they expected you to kill me for them."

Traeger's face turned grim. "Yes and that is all the more reason to keep you alive."

I had the idea that Traeger disliked the idea of being manipulated, and I began to feel a little more relaxed.

"So why do they hate you?" I glanced around, wondering if there was a spare chair somewhere.

Traeger waved his hand as if to dismiss the question. "To turn back to our original subject, I brought you here because I am in your debt for saving my son's life. While you are here, on our estates, I will ensure your safety. You will, however, have to obey me and do as I direct."

There it was – proof that he intend to control me. My lifelong dislike of being thwarted from doing what I wanted began to surface. I felt my fists clenching.

The movement was noticed by Traeger, but he seemed confident in our relative positions. He was still leaning back in his chair.

"The Kumatan, unlike the Atapi, only mingle with the humans of this world to observe the Atapi who have infiltrated the human towns. Unfortunately, the Atapi are slowly spreading their influence. They look human, act human and some have even infiltrated into positions of authority. However, their purpose is to pick victims for their sorcerer's rituals. Usually they find those without family or friends to notice when they go missing. Mostly they bury the remains but sometimes animals dig them up."

I shivered remembering the mechanic at Wetherby had mentioned a body. That could have been me. The next mutilated corpse found in the forest and reported in the papers.

"I don't want to stay here," I said glancing around again. "I mean, I don't know who you are either - besides being another alien." I wanted to run, but seemed rooted to the floor.

Traeger ignored the comment.

"It isn't that simple. I recognised your bastard heritage when I first met you. It was obvious that you had no knowledge of us or of them. If you had – you would have been afraid of me. It surprised me that one with Atapi blood could be so civilised."

"I'm human!"

Why did none of them believe me? Would they believe me if I said none of my elders would call me – civilised?

"Most of my people would quickly realise, as I did, that you are part Atapi. To them, that would be reason enough to treat you poorly."

"How? Those others only figured it out when they saw me healing quickly, and I don't look that different to you."

"Atapi have black hair," Traeger began.

"So do lots of humans, you idiot," I told him.

He continued, outwardly unperturbed. "And no human needs to be banded as you are."

"So? What are they for?"

"To keep track of you," Traeger told me. "Amongst other things."

"Can't you take them off me?" I demanded.

Traeger shook his head.

Can't or won't, I wondered.

"My superiors would say that you should be returned to your people. Even if that meant you would be killed by our enemies."

"So – why don't you? Why do you care?" I asked sourly.

"For the same reason I brought you here. And if you stay here, working for me and serving me well, you will be safe from the Atapi, no Kumatan will harm you and I will have reason to put off any humans who may wish to take you away."

I felt sure that there was more to it than that – still, the offer was tempting. Except that I was standing here and he was obviously intending to keep me around whether I agreed or not.

"What is your answer? Will you serve me?"

"Can I think about it?"

"You must decide now."

I closed my mouth and stared at him. I tried to move backwards, to make a dive for the door, but something was stopping me from doing even that much.

Traeger stood and walked to face me. It had to be him. Somehow, he could control me. I watched him come closer and as soon as he was in reach, I jabbed both of my fists into his stomach. He doubled over in pain, but as I turned, determined to run, sure I could run, I realised that he wasn't helpless. I had forgotten the guards behind me. He spoke a command, and I went numb all over once again. I knew I was falling, but I didn't feel myself land.

After about a minute, when I saw Traeger straightening up, the numbness wore off and the pain began. As I lay where I had fallen, I realised that I was crying helpless tears of frustration. I had never cried before.

I was aware that Traeger was standing over me. I closed my eyes to hide the tears and turned my head away.

"Atapi prisoners are not liked here. I regret to say that we do not usually treat them as well as we treat ourselves. They are too barbaric to understand us. We usually offer them the choice of their life or to serve us. Most try to escape. We don't let our enemies escape."

That warning frightened me. He had told me that his kind would consider me Atapi, but I had begun to think that he didn't consider me an enemy. And yet...

I had tried to fight him so that I could escape – I always resorted to that when someone was trying to force me to do something not of my choosing. I didn't feel guilt.

For a fleeting moment, I saw my self as Atapi, trying to escape mindlessly, without a plan, and dying.

I didn't want to die, but trying to escape captivity was a human trait too. I remembered my dad telling stories of the war. And this was a war – between Atapi and Kumatan – and I didn't belong in it.

I writhed and tried to turn over so I could push my self up, but my legs and arms refused to work.

His large gentle hands lifted me up. I blinked a look. His face wasn't scrunched in anger. He helped me to stand and held me close to him until the tears and pain subsided. For the first time in my memory, I felt ... peaceful...like I didn't need to be fighting to do something.

There was no memory in me of being held this way by my parents. My father had tried – but I had never let him. In an unwanted vision, I saw the Atapi children always trying to wriggle free of their mothers. I didn't want to think I was like them.

"I am the only one who can help you," he said very gently, as if he was aware of my thoughts. "I can help you be human, not Atapi."

It was what I wanted. After meeting the Atapi – I desperately didn't want to be like them. I found myself agreeing to enter his service. All thoughts of rebellion had gone. I wasn't happy but I was cornered. He had offered me safety, and I assumed that meant food and shelter. I could hide here, and perhaps the Atapi would think me dead. And here I wouldn't have to pretend that nothing weird had happened to me.

I wriggled and Traeger released me. I had made my decision. I would stick to it – for now. Right then though – I really meant it. I would have to keep remembering my reasons. Unless Traeger turned out to be like that lecher Lammond...

An odd feeling came over me. I felt the vague need to apologise to Traeger. I clamped my mouth shut. I never apologised and I wasn't going to start now. I caught a faint fleeting smile on Traeger's face. Perhaps it was because he had gotten his way.

I controlled the rush of anger that I felt at being manipulated because the warning about Atapi behaviour was too recent. For an instant, I saw my father forcing himself to control his anger with me. He had never hit me, or my two sisters. Yet he had shown his hand often enough to my brothers.

Oddly enough, I realised that I didn't really hate my father, even though I had screamed at him that I did. We had been like two incompatible surfaces rubbing together. Surely, I had been more vexing to him than any of my brothers. I stifled a smile of my own. I wondered what he would think if he knew I was using him now – as a model.

"You have made a wise decision," Traeger told me as he returned to sit in his chair. "You are a person of honour. I am, perhaps, the only one who can begin to understand the forces at war within you."

I hung my head, thinking "I have honour?" OK, I had saved his kid but – if I had honour it must be so weird as to be unrecognizable by any grown up I had previously met.

I straightened with determination, again catching a faint smile on Traeger's face. Could the man read my mind?

"You will need to learn what is expected of you," he told me formally. "Benku, my chief of staff will be in the charge of you and assign you duties and I expect you to obey him. The people in this town have no reason trust you; you will need to earn that by being obedient and by restraining your instinct to fight. If you don't, or if you try to leave the village, I will discipline you – the same as I would any other servant – as often as needful."

I had the feeling I was being treated as an errant child. Most people that knew me probably thought I was because I usually had my way – no matter how I managed it.

Somehow, though, I knew that I didn't want to anger Traeger. He was quietly and politely spoken but I sensed the strength of will that would be more than a match for mine. Where my father would have given way to me – this man wouldn't.

"Will you remove these bands?" I asked, rubbing my arms where they clung to my skin.

"Not just yet," he said softly. "You must first prove that you are worthy of that favour."

"Damn you!" I swore, frustrated at my helplessness. I hadn't forgotten my decision or the reasons for it but – damn it!

I had no chance for further comment. Two servants entered the room, without announcement, and spoke in their own language. One had Traeger's jacket, and from their excited tone, I gathered that something important was going to occur.

Traeger donned his jacket and straightened it, then briefly left the room. I glanced around to check if two guards still had their attention on me. I tried to move, causing the guards to bring their weapons up part way. I mentally shrugged. They didn't have to worry; I was still somehow glued to that one spot.

Their weapons lowered again when Traeger reappeared. It looked like he had given himself a very quick grooming. His hair was back in neat curls, and not looking like he had tramped all night through trees and bushes.

His attention was on the door and he hadn't even looked my way since he'd returned to the room. Obviously he thought I wouldn't be going anywhere, and wouldn't be a problem. I was curious as to who he was expecting, some formidable superior I assumed. It would have to be if such a confident and self-assured man as Traeger needed to check his appearance. I twisted to look that way.

Two guards strode in, gave the room a raking glance, and came to attention facing me. A man dressed in an elaborate purple outfit strutted in; his hands were clutching the white fur trimming down the front of the long sleeveless over robe. Two more guards followed him, but stayed at attention to either side of the door. I saw the newcomer's eyes glance in my direction and then flick away as he graciously received Traeger's bow of greeting. The guards behind me were duplicating the respectful greeting.

The reason for his visit was obvious, even if he didn't look directly at me again. He spoke sharply to Traeger and gave a shoulder shrug in my direction. Since he stayed near the door, I amused myself by imagining that he'd asked if it was safe to be in a room with me. The soft, even answer from Traeger I decided might be, "Of course, Jai Cassidy is a human, and nothing like the Atapi."

Not likely, I admitted to myself as I watched the newcomer. He looked older than Traeger, but still held himself ramrod straight and his head high. However, he kept moving in randomly directed spurts, forcing Traeger to move too, to keep polite eye contact.

Pompous ass, I thought. A human man wouldn't be caught dead in the all in one suit that guy wore, especially not one in that lurid purple colour. I wouldn't mind the long over robe, though; it wouldn't look bad over jeans and shirt.

I stopped thinking fashion and realised that Traeger and this other guy had their attention back on me and their discussion was probably about me. Since I was resenting being the prize specimen of human, I resorted to a trick that I knew was annoying and mimicked the self-important twerp. I straightened my shoulders, held my head high and waited until he looked directly at me. Then, after briefly meeting his eyes, I deliberately turned my head and pretended to study the shelf of odd looking relics on the wall behind Traeger's desk. In my side vision, I saw the guy jerk as if I had insulted him. His voice was slightly higher in pitch when he next spoke to Traeger.

For my benefit, Traeger switched to English. His tone was still calm, positive, and deferential. "Jai Cassidy and I have come to an understanding, Leader Katech. She has agreed to work for me though I expect she will need time to learn our ways."

"Manners," I mentally translated. He could try, I thought, as I considered Katech. He would have to work to earn politeness from me, since he wasn't giving me the courtesy of speaking so I could understand. It was obvious he understood Traeger's comment in English.

Whatever waspish comment he had just made, Traeger replied to it with, "Yes, I will be responsible for her."

Katech spoke again, and Traeger replied, with more emphasis, "Leader Katech, I do not think placing her there is appropriate. She has been raised as human, not Atapi, and she is female, the others are not."

"Female or not, Mosellan, she will have to prove her loyalty. Those slaves of yours don't know her. It is either that, or you take her back."

Traeger didn't answer, nor did his face betray his thoughts. He had simply taken on a tenser posture. When he did speak, he seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "She saved my son's life, when Stacion wanted him killed. She is no friend to the Atapi, and if they fear her enough to band her, I would like to know why."

Katech proved he was as fluent in English as Traeger. “She’s a hybrid – isn’t that enough for them? Great heavens, Stacion has been picking off human women for over a decade and not worrying if his victims die. Maybe you need to use her as bait to find him. None of your methods have worked so far.”

“They expected us to kill her,” Traeger reported and this made Katech swing to face his subordinate.

“Really? That is interesting.” Katech admitted, and he finally approached me.

Katech conversed with Traeger as he walked around me, inspecting me as if I was some prize cow. Traeger met my eyes and seemed to be warning me not to try anything.

The arm bands were noted with surprise. Katech lifted my arm to examine one closely, but I jerked away. He gave me a glare of loathing and I stared back at him. He looked away first and spoke sharply to Traeger.

I felt something cuff the back of my head – as if to get my attention, or warn me. I turned and glared at the impeccably groomed guard, but that one didn’t look away.

After that, I don’t know what Katech said, but I felt shivers run down my spine. Traeger replied in calm even tones, even when the visitor sharply disagreed. After a while, it seemed that Traeger’s logic had won out. The visitor fell silent and then spoke a brusque sentence.

I wondered if it was something like, “Have it your way,” or “If it steps out of line, kill it.”

Katech gestured to his guards and stalked from the room. Traeger relaxed slightly and returned to sit behind his desk.

He looked at me and spoke in a tone of gentle rebuke, “Your rudeness to our Leader will endear you to no one.”

“He’s a pompous old...”

“He is the leader of our colony and as the eldest here he deserves our respect,” Traeger told me.

“I don’t owe him squat,” I retorted. “I was told it was rude to speak about people in front of them when they can’t understand the language. He could’ve talked in English. What was he before you came here? A picky bureaucrat?”

Traeger seemed to need time to comprehend my meaning. “He was an administrator, and here, his work is as important as mine.”

“It didn’t sound like he thinks that...”

“That is of no importance. What matters is that your position with me is assured.”

“And that is? Some kind of slave?”

“A servant,” he corrected me. “As I mentioned, Benku, my chief of staff, will assign you duties and arrange sleeping quarters. You will begin work tomorrow, as I expect you will require rest today.” He walked back to his desk pushed something on the top of it.

“What is your name?” I asked, wondering who owned my life just then.

“I am Jenhari Mosellan. You will call me Traeger.”

“Is that offer of breakfast still open?” I decided to ask. I hadn’t eaten since yesterday.

He smiled, and nodded. “I will have some arranged.”

The next arrival made the floor vibrate, although I heard no footsteps. Involuntarily, I looked around. I felt the hair on my neck rise. I assumed the man-mountain was Benku, because he bowed to Traeger, deeply, from the waist. I stared at him as Traeger gave him instructions. His muscles rippled with every movement, visible because he wore no shirt and skintight black trousers. His feet were bare too, explaining his silent approach. What startled me most was that he was completely bald and towered over Traeger by at least six inches. He seemed to be twice my height.

“Go with Benku, Jai Cassidy.”

I swallowed hard as I looked Benku up and down. He carried what I guessed to be a weapon, probably similar to what had just been used on me and he prodded me with what

looked like a baton that he carried in his other hand. My eyes only came up to the level of his chest.

At least my feet worked again and I took faint amusement at the way my shoes clattered in the silence of the house.

The door to Traeger's office was opened for me by one of the guards, the other preceded me out and Benku followed me. I was directed by a series of prods, along passages to the house's back entrance. From there I was prodded along a path that skirted a poorly tended garden and went on to a barn like building set a hundred or so yards away, on the edge of a stretch of cultivated meadow.

Benku effortlessly heaved the heavy wooden door open and pushed me into the quiet, dark interior. Light coming in through the door showed a wide corridor in front of me, but I was prodded to the left and my feet found stairs. Benku indicated that I was to go up. On the next level, there was a corridor like that on the floor below. I was prodded along it, right to the end. Here there was a room, with a door made of metal bars. Next to the door was the one window at the end of the passage. At least I had some light.

Benku prodded me into the room and I had a fleeting thought of diving past him to go back out. The moment passed. I knew I was quick, but probably not quick enough.

The room had a mattress; probably straw filled judging from the smell, and a blanket. In one corner were a bowl and a jug of water.

"Where is the toilet?" I asked as Benku closed and locked the door. I guessed that he didn't understand me. He simply walked off.

"Hey!" I yelled and kicked the door. It had no effect except to hurt my foot, but the pain soon passed.

I needed an answer, so while I still had light, I explored the room. In the corner, furthest from the bed, where the back wall met the side wall, I found a basin shaped recess, covered by a ceramic plate. From the smell, though it wasn't strong, I knew I had found what I needed.

Next thing I needed was food, my stomach felt like it was trying to eat itself.

For a time I paced the room, angry and frustrated at being locked in a combination of cage and jail cell like an animal or criminal. Even when the promised breakfast arrived, I was only partly appeased. A Kumatan servant, one like I had seen in the house, delivered a tray by slipping it under a section of the barred wall.

Whatever it was, tasted okay and it filled me up, and gave me the energy to pace the cell and curse being locked up. As the day wore on, I grew bored and with nothing to do finally sat down on the mattress and let the smell of fresh straw remind me of the farm. I was still heartily glad to be away from there, but I hardly thought my position here was better. The way Traeger had spoken, I expected to be able to do some kind of work – he hadn't said I'd be locked up all day.

I found myself yawning, and wondered if this enforced idleness was a subtle hint that I should rest like he said. Well, I had been running most of yesterday, and walking half the night and...it was quiet and otherwise deserted here...and the bars would keep people out as well as me in... I slept.

Chapter 8

Later, when I awoke, I realised that the light coming in the window was less bright. The building was still quiet except for rustlings that I presumed were caused by rats and which I hoped would not come near me.

As the light continued to fade, I heard Atapi voices getting louder; they stopped suddenly. It became so quiet that I heard the padding of bare feet and the sniffing of many noses. No doubt that they could smell me – as I was increasingly able to smell their unmistakable rank, sweaty and musky odour.

Only one came as far as my room and he glanced through my door and sniffed. He was prodded into his room, the one opposite, by a smaller man-mountain than Benku. This one was dressed the same, but had long blond hair tied back in a ponytail.

I walked to where I could stare at them both. The man-mountain ignored me and strode off after securing the door opposite. I continued to stare at the Atapi; he who was only wearing dusty brown trousers and otherwise looked like all the other male Atapi I had seen. The main difference was that this one had his black hair long and shaggy, not cut to above shoulder length. Unlike the Atapi prisoners at the colony – this one didn't back off. Neither did I.

He waited until the overseer had left before hissing at me. "Traitor! Pond Scum!"

The hissing was echoed by all the other Atapi on the upper level.

I rubbed the bands on my arms and continued to stare. The Atapi opposite was once a warrior, I decided, but he began to move uneasily, though still determined to outstare me. I ignored the increasingly incomprehensible insults he was directing at me. Instead, I was wondering what it was about me that unsettled this conceited bastard.

It could have been that I was female and trying to dominate him, or that I was a traitor. The bands probably told him that but having two on had surprised the Kumatan; I wished I could figure out what two bands meant to the creep opposite. Did it mean that I was – dangerous? I smiled at that idea – and that angered the Atapi. He began to pound on his door and snarl rabidly. His fellows took up the banging.

I stood still. Mute, silent and defiant.

Shouted commands in Kumatan, silenced most of the banging and hissing. My cell neighbour was beyond reason. The overseer took in my silence. Listened to the filth being hissed by the Atapi and used his weapon on the Atapi. The hissing changed to a scream. The Atapi didn't fall over, but he shut his mouth and glared at me. I smiled and walked away from the door. I heard one snarl of rage, and then a thud.

A baton rattled my door. I looked over and saw the overseer. He spoke sharply to me. I didn't understand him. I was surprised then when he spoke in accented but understandable English.

"Noise make, why?"

"He started it," I told the man in answer to his question.

The Kumatan nodded and departed. I guessed that he had understood my answer. I told myself not to make too many assumptions about the Kumatan.

When all had been quiet for a while, I sneaked a look out my door. The Atapi in the cell opposite was apparently unconscious on the floor. He had fallen on his face, and I felt no guilt at studying him. Most of the other Atapi I had seen had been mimicking humans and wearing human like clothes, and the guards and warriors had worn vests over their trousers. Now I saw one that was half-clad, and was disappointed that I couldn't see any gross

differences between him and half-clad humans. Perhaps the shoulder blades did stick out a bit more, but that was all I could see in the dim light.

I shrugged. All things considered, I decided, I had won that round. Even without outside interference. No doubt, the creep opposite knew it too and resented it.

I had probably made an enemy, I thought, with a touch of censure for my stupidity. Then I had to admit, that they had already been that.

Later, when the low hissing started again, common sense intruded. As soon as any Atapi saw the bands I wore – they wanted me dead. I had proved that I could do nothing but stare and they would react, and I thought with a malicious smile, they would be punished.

The thought that these once proud Atapi warriors, reduced as they were to the status of slaves, might die because of me, left me unmoved. I hadn't started the war between them and me and would have been quite content to have remained ignorant of them.

It seemed that Benku was aware of the hostility the Atapi had for me. For the first few days, I worked alone in Traeger's garden – watering and weeding. No one was allowed near me, but that didn't bother me. In fact, I was quite enjoying the task. I liked the feel of the dirt caressing my fingers and the smell of the damp earth. I felt energised, out in the sun and the breeze.

I progressed from weeding and watering to trying to neaten the privet bushes that formed the boundary of the garden. I given a nearly blunt pair of pruning shears to use and they were as useful as breaking of the protruding twigs with my fingers. I tossed the shears on the ground and began to walk to the wooden box attached to the back wall of the house to look for something better.

"Where go, female?" a Kumatan guard in the blue-grey coveralls called imperiously from three yards away. I glanced that way and continued on. He repeated his question as, "Female's work not here. Go now or I has you made." His attempt at English was appalling.

"I'm not running away you daft idiot. I need a better tool to fix the hedge," I said over my shoulder, quite calmly as I kept walking.

His boots scrunched on gravel as he trotted to come between the toolbox and me.

"Back now, female," he told me, standing poised for trouble, and just out of my arms reach. With his rod like weapon aimed at me, he looked like he felt absolutely confident that I was in awe of him. Lucky for him I didn't think it worth the effort to prove him wrong.

"You are stopping me working, you young idiot," I told him. "I need something better to cut the hedge."

The guard simply stared back at me as if he thought his glare could make me quiver. I returned the look. He couldn't have been much older than I was, full of himself and typically Kumatan with his blond hair waving down loose to his shoulders – and none of it out of place. I glanced at his uniform, noting the sharp creases in the trouser part of the coveralls, the shine of the metal fasteners and the pristine state of the fabric. I caught a whiff of new fabric smell.

The words that came to my mind were 'tailor's dummy' – something one of my brothers had said about a brash young door-to-door salesman.

"Officious little know-it-all," I thought, finally shrugging and backing off. "Probably thinks he's the perfect little guardsman."

I turned my back on him and walked back towards the garden, trying to decide what I could do instead of tidying the hedge. When I did glance behind me, I saw him still standing and watching me. Little twerp probably didn't understand anything I said.

They – encompassing Chief Servant Benku who had told me to fix up the garden, and the overseer who had given me the blunt shears – weren't in sight, so I couldn't ask them for

better shears. I would have complained about the guard stopping me from trying to solve the problem too, if I had a chance.

So I looked around this end of the garden and decided I needed to do a bit of digging to remove some dead remnants of last years plants. However, all the shovels were in use and I didn't even have the little trowel I had used for weeding. I wasn't going to go and ask to borrow a shovel, since they were currently being used by Atapi slaves to dig out rocks from the ground at the far end of the garden. I had a clear view of them down the swathe of grass I had mowed yesterday – the decrepit mechanical contrivance I had used had been a bit better than today's shears.

The overseer was busy watching the Atapi, but he did glance my way occasionally. I sensed movement beside me and stepped aside just as another guard was about to prod me. He wasn't the 'tailor's dummy', although his uniform was almost as impeccable. This one was older and didn't assume I wouldn't fail to recognise his authority; his eyes were more wary.

"Work," was all he said.

"Yeah, yeah," I told him, deciding that he smelt of starch.

With a lack of other ideas, I tried asking, "Can I get better shears?" All I got was a repetition of, "Work." All I could do was take up the blunt shears and pretend I was working. It wouldn't be my fault if they didn't like the result.

For the next hour as the sun began to play hide and seek with the clouds, and the breeze grew cooler, I pretended to trim the hedge, and actually watched the guards patrolling around Traeger's house. The one's I had named 'tailors dummy' and 'starch' stayed watching the garden – others came and went.

While my work had occupied my mind until the past hour – it was now coming to note the mental muttering of the Atapi down the garden. It had to be them; they were repeating over and over how they would like to shorten my 'thousand devils preserved life'. I laughed silently and repeated in my turn the old 'sticks and stones may break bones but names will never hurt me' jingle.

I wondered what they thought their muttering would do – make me die of fear? I might be little better than a slave myself at the moment, but at least I didn't have an overseer watching my every move. As far as I was concerned, 'tailors dummy' and his minder didn't count.

After a while, the Atapi began a particular tuneless humming. It was both arrhythmic and mentally jarring and unlike the monotonous drone of the last teacher I had at school or the harping of Grandma Everett when she'd tried to list my faults – it was difficult to ignore.

For a while, I managed to concentrate on recalling my victory on my first day when the Atapi got into trouble for their noise. Then I realised that one of those Atapi down the garden was the one slept in the cage opposite mine in the barn. For the past week, that bastard had been deliberately ignoring me, but I knew he hadn't forgiven me. A shiver raced down my spine and my hands stopped pretending to prune. My whole body began tingling and I dropped the shears.

Those Atapi wanted me dead, and had since they set eyes on me. They would have, even if I hadn't made the matter personal. I had expected trouble before this, but all they had done was hiss and mutter in the evenings. Perhaps they couldn't act in that barn for some reason.

I couched down to pick up the shears, just as a waft of heat seemed to settle on me. As I tried to stand again, all my muscles seemed to twitch at the same time, and I felt I wanted to be sick. I fell onto my knees, and wished I felt I could get up and run and run and run. My fingers went into a spasm and dug themselves into the newly weeded ground under the hedge. Somehow, some of the inexplicable sensations eased, and I told myself, "I...will...not, let...them...get to ...me."

A prod in the small of my back was a warning for me to get back to work. I shook my head, not even trying to get up. I felt strange – oddly detached from reality, and jiggling with suppressed energy. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. My pulse was racing, thumping in my ears, and my eyesight was blurring.

A foot pushed me over, freeing my fingers from the dirt. I stared up at the sky, which seemed to swirl around, until a hand grabbed the front of my overalls and dragged me to my feet.

“Again, you work, female, or make you,” ‘tailor’s dummy’ warned me. I swayed unsteadily when he released me.

My mind was caught by what the Atapi were now chanting and I closed my eyes to listen and try to steady myself. I felt another prod, smelt new fabric and starch, and opened my eyes, a protest on my lips.

But my eyes saw three Atapi in front of me, and I took an involuntary step backwards and turned to run. Five more were behind me. Once again, my eyes blurred and I had to force myself to focus. How had the Atapi got this close to me? Where were the guards and the overseer? Why did this have to happen now, when I was feeling so weird?

I teetered to one side, feeling giddy. The circle of implacable Atapi faces closed in on me, and I recalled what the Atapi had said they wanted to do to me. I had to get away. My mind told me that these were not Atapi slaves – but warriors.

They each had the close-fitting flexible leather leggings that revealed every muscle and they had tabards of thick leather over their bare muscled chests. Each tabard had geometric designs, and three or four odd looking weapons in pockets. Getting away from these wouldn’t be easy.

I felt my right arm grabbed. I reacted instinctively by swinging my other arm around at full force and with no control. I blinked when my arm seemed to move through a snarling faced Atapi as if he wasn’t there. My arm was jarred by the force of my blow as it contacted with flesh. I heard a ‘wumph’ as the air was forced out of the Atapi holding me. I smelt a waft of new fabric smell, but all it told me was that I had to get free. I kicked and punched until that one released me and fell to the ground.

Shouts from Kumatan guards were lost in the chanting of the Atapi. I was fully roused, furious at what the Atapi were doing to me and determined to fight every damn one of them.

The next one to touch me felt the full force of my anger, I hit out, blind with fury. A whiff of starch smell momentarily distracted me, as if it was something important to consider, but the moment passed. That Atapi went down and my mind crowed with gleeful success. I looked for the next one who would try to take me on, and decided some of them dared not come at me, and only dared snarl impotently.

The third opponent grappled with me, and I had to use every dirty fighting trick I knew to squirm free. I looked, saw a gap in the ring of enemies, and dived for it, surprising all of them as I raced out of the garden and along the back of the house.

Suddenly, my back flared into agony as something jolted me. I stumbled, almost fell, but regained my balance and kept running. The pain seemed like nothing. The painful jolt came again and I felt myself screaming as I fell stiffly to the ground, with every nerve in my body on fire. I begged whatever power could help me for it to stop. While I lay motionless, it seemed to ease.

Hands on both arms dragged me to my feet, turned me around and dragged me back to the garden. All I could see were swirling colours of light, and all of me was twitching to get free. Pain surged with every jarring movement. I wanted the agony to stop so I could stop screaming.

Something cold and wet struck me in the face. Sense came back to me, and I opened my eyes, blinking water from them. I saw a Kumatan guard dropping the water bucket. I didn't try to run again as he came and yelled at me.

"Why you do this?"

I shook my head, finally comprehended his question and looked down to where he pointed. Two Kumatan guards and an overseer were crumpled and unconscious on the ground.

My mind said, that wasn't me, and I jerked my head around to look for the Atapi, but they must have run off when these new guards arrived. Then my mind was filled with malicious laughter and I realised what the Atapi had somehow done to me. They had made Kumatan appear to be Atapi, and must have forced me to fight them.

Fury boiled up inside me again, and strength I didn't realise I had gave me what I needed to wrench free of my two captors so I could run down the garden to exact my revenge on those laughing bastards.

Pain jolted me again, I felt it, but then forgot it beneath my desire for vengeance. I kept going. Vaguely, I heard someone call out, "No more! Use the net." Then I heard a loud popping sound and something fell over me, tripping me.

I fought and writhed, but it tangled me, becoming tighter as I tried to get free – until I couldn't move, but I wanted to. I cursed and swore – the vilest things I could think of.

I was hefted over the massive shoulder of the overseer with the blond ponytail. I kept trying to writhe free, but it grew harder to breathe and I felt everything becoming a grey blur. The laughter was still in my mind and now I felt, rather than heard, the tuneless singing. I fought to stay conscious, using my anger.

From that position, held tightly and dangling over the high shoulder, I thought I saw the start of a gravelled path, and the steps leading to the back door of Traeger's house. I tried again to free myself, not wanting to face Traeger.

The instant I passed through that door, the noise in my mind ceased and my whole body fell limp. Distantly, I realised how tense I had been.

I was put down more gently than I had expected to be and was rolled onto my side. The floor here had black and white rubber tiles and that reminded me of the laundry floor back at the farm. Oddly, that resemblance made me feel safe.

Right then though, I could do nothing even if I had wanted to. I had gone from full of aggressive energy to limp and weak. All I really wanted to do was to take one really deep breath but what had tangled me was too tight. I began to panic and take quick rapid breaths.

How long I lay there, fighting for breath and in pain, I couldn't have said.

Finally I heard, as if from a distance, Traeger say, "Take the net off."

The pressure around me eased and I couldn't help myself gulping for air.

"Get up, vermin?" someone demanded of me.

That wasn't yet possible. All I managed to do was roll onto my back, rousing the pain back to agony. I tried to see those I sensed standing over me through darkened blurred vision.

Someone asked me a question, but with the blood roaring in my ears, I couldn't understand it. Then I felt myself poked, and I looked into a face that was only inches away.

"Answer the Traeger, vermin." The overseer's face was hard and determined.

I made a feeble attempt to get up, still gasping for breath, but I collapsed and managed only to croak, "What?"

"Answer, vermin. Tell Traeger why you try kill three Kumatan?"

My eyes managed to focus on the one leaning over me – it was the overseer with the blond ponytail.

"Thought Atapi," I managed to say.

"You attack own kind, vermin?" the same insistent voice demanded.

"Not...I'm human...hate Atapi," I forced out.

"Enough, Tenkin," Traeger spoke calmly. "I know the Atapi don't like her. And it seems she has a strong instinct to survive."

Now my eyes were focussing better, I saw Traeger looking down at me. Not only that, I felt the sense of someone in my mind, and tensed again. I reviewed images of the past hour as they paraded through my mind. They still made no sense to me. I remember fighting Atapi, not Kumatan.

Traeger leant down when the images stopped, and his hand brushed my face. Some of my mental fog receded, and I was able to take in what I'd done. I felt sick. I began breathing fast again. Until a voice in my mind urged me to relax and breath long and deep.

"Tenkin, which Atapi are working in the garden?" Traeger asked calmly.

I heard five names listed and none meant anything to me.

"Evalant," Traeger repeated. "Is he the one who made the disturbance some nights ago?"

"Yes, Master. Vermin not like that one," Tenkin answered. "I had to whip him quiet."

"So, he had a reason to cause trouble again," Traeger mused.

I seemed to sense the thoughts of the mind, lurking in mine. Traeger, I assumed. He was concerned about me, and wondering how it was that I was still conscious after three jolts from an immobiliser. Side thoughts told me that one should have paralysed me, or made me unconscious and he needed to understand why I was resistant.

"Have those five Atapi removed from the garden and isolated from each other and questioned. I want to know what they did, as I do not intend for this to happen again," Traeger directed. "And have Benku sent to me."

Tenkin departed. I knew he was gone when the floor stopped moving.

Traeger spoke down to me. He wasn't alone: I could now see two of the impeccably groomed guards watching me.

"If, as you believe, you were fighting Atapi – what did they do to anger you?" Traeger asked me. "They did not come near you."

"They attacked me," I said defensively. "And must have run off."

Traeger used the human gesture of shaking his head. "Did I not warn you, Jai Cassidy, to restrain your fighting instinct? I have sent three of my guards to the healers because of you. If you can't restrain yourself, I will have to impose a compulsion on you, so that you cannot fight – except if your life was in danger."

"Perhaps you should," I said sourly. What he threatened sounded like magic and I didn't believe it possible.

"Why?"

"Because I was trying, really trying, to ignore those bastards," I told Traeger, defiantly. "When they were merely muttering, I managed to ignore what they were promising to do to my 'thousand devils preserved life'. But when they began humming and chanting – that did something to me."

"You understood them?" Traeger asked sharply.

"I usually have to concentrate to understand them but this time they were in my mind."

Traeger was silent for a long moment. "Tell me what happened to you."

I looked at Traeger's shoes and described what my mind told me I had experienced in as much descriptive detail as possible. If he had been in my mind before, he wouldn't hear anything different now.

I felt Benku arriving as I had ran out of things to say. From my place on the floor, looking up, I felt like a mountain was standing over me. I could see his muscles rippling under the skintight black trousers.

“Master?” he queried, bowing from the waist.

“See that Jai Cassidy is cleaned up. Find new apparel for her. When this is done, have her brought to me.”

Traeger walked off. Benku reached down and dragged me to my feet. My legs felt like jelly and with Benku’s vice-like grip on my arms, my head was only up to his chest. He may as well have been carrying me. The two guards still watched me.

I finally had a better view of the room. It wasn’t that big and it was empty except for a washtub in one corner and a showerhead over a floor drain in another.

Benku took me over next to the shower and released me. I grabbed and held onto the frame of a pearl glazed window as he effortlessly stripped me of the shirt and overalls I’d been wearing and everything I had under them. When he tossed my clothes on the floor, I noticed the dirt, and rips and even some blood on them. I was too surprised to be outraged, and soon realized that Benku had no interest in me as a female. I was merely something that had to be cleaned. He dragged me under the showerhead, holding me up as a rush of cold water poured onto me. He didn’t seem to care that he was getting soaked by the splashes, though from waist up, he wore nothing and he was totally bald so he had no hair to get wet. At least his huge bulk was blocking the view for the two guards.

The water, cold though it was, felt delightful. It cleared my head, cooled my skin, numbed the pain in my back and in an odd way, energised me. I swatted Benku’s hands away when I felt able to keep myself standing, turned my back to the room and scrubbed myself as best I could with my hands. He moved away and returned with a block of an odd smelling substance I hoped was soap. I made good use of it, getting myself clean for the first time in weeks. Then I did what I could with my hair, glad indeed that I had hacked it short.

When the deluge stopped, I felt stronger and more alert. Benku grunted in approval and prodded me to where a towel and some clothing had been dropped on the floor. I hadn’t even seen them being brought in.

The towel was old, not quite threadbare. The clothes were of an odd weave, brown and fairly coarse. It was the same sort of thing that the Atapi wore, except they only wore the trousers. I had some kind of smock top with long sleeves. It suited me well enough – at least it wasn’t a dress, but it was the closest thing to a dress that I had ever worn.

Cleaner and dryer, I felt more human than I had for a while. Benku gestured to the guards and they came over and immediately hustled me to the door leading further into the house. I glanced back to see Benku beginning to clean up the watery mess, not seeming to mind walking barefoot on the wet floor.

In the passage leading from the cleaning room, I tried unsuccessfully to jerk free. My guards tightened their grip and one removed a baton like object from his harness. Both these guards, old looking as they were, hadn’t grown weak. They had eyed me when they could during my wash, but even so, they were not treating me like a female. They were treating me more like a potentially dangerous animal.

I had time to note that these guards also smelt of starch, and I assumed that being well groomed was an expectation of the household guards. This time, the smell provoked another thought; one that made me shiver with dread. When I was fighting Atapi, I had smelt that starch smell, not the characteristic musky odour of Atapi. I should have realised that it was an illusion – the Atapi weren’t there, Kumatan were. I had beaten three of them into unconsciousness.

“Oh hell,” I thought. I wanted to pull away from the guards and run away from Traeger.

To no avail. I was placed to stand in front of Traeger’s desk, on an area of the wooden floor that was varnished a different colour. The same spot where I had been on my first visit. The guard’s released me, but I was unable to take advantage of that. Somehow, this spot kept me there without Traeger needing to ‘command’ me.

It didn't stop me looking around at what I could see. When I had been here before, just over a week ago, I had been too angry at being made to come here that I hadn't bothered to study the room. I'd noticed the objects on the shelves behind the desk, but little else.

What was most noticeable was how tidy it was. I assumed that was how Traeger kept it. Then I studied the furniture, and decided that the wooden desk and the carved chairs were probably quite expensive, not to the same degree as the furniture I'd seen at Lammond's mansion, but definitely way above what my parents had at the farm – even in the parlour.

I remembered the impressive façade of this house and wondered how Traeger got his money. He was definitely a 'gentleman', not a farmer or merchant, and I hadn't forgotten he was an alien. Did his people build this house or did he pay local people to build it? Or was it built by some kind of sorcery? It was none of my business, but I wanted to know.

Movement of the guards straightening up warned me that Traeger was coming. I hadn't heard any sound, but moments later he strode in. He seemed to ignore me as he went directly to sit behind his desk. His face was impassive, but I sensed restrained anger, disgust, and something like resentment for having to do a distasteful task. I began to tremble, recalling his warning to me last time I stood here. I tried to remind myself that this wasn't my fault, but I was feeling like I wanted to vanish.

Traeger studied me for a long time. I grew more scared as time passed. Finally he spoke.

"The five Atapi from the garden are dead," he told me, still watching me.

I felt malicious amusement.

"You might feel some remorse, they died because of you," Traeger chided me with a trace of waspishness.

"Why? They didn't have to try to have me killed. They didn't have to make me hurt your people. I did nothing to them."

"What about Evalant? On your first night here?" Traeger challenged.

"That bastard? I just stood there and stared at him – I can't help if he had a guilty conscience. They started the noise as soon as they smelt me and they got riled as soon as they saw these band things. They must know what they mean, and hate me for it. Do you know why?" I demanded.

Traeger didn't answer, but I reckoned he did know. Instead, he spoke of other things.

"The reason you attacked my men is due to the 'Ritua di Agri'. It is a particularly obnoxious ritual created by the Atapi, and outlawed on my world. I must admit that I did not expect those slaves to be able to invoke it so I can only surmise that Stacion Ansuni was behind this, and he worked through them."

My mind picked up on the name 'Ansuni' and I tried to think where I had heard it before. I forgot that niggling question as Traeger continued. "It has been used on Kumatan in the past, and the victims never fully recover. We have developed a means to counter it, if we reach the victim in time. I wonder why they thought to use it on you."

"Is that because I'm human, or because I'm Atapi?"

"I was not aware that they would use it on their own kind. With humans, it only tends to work on those with very low intelligence and little imagination."

"I'm used to being called a stupid bitch. Can't you teach me to deal with it?"

"I am not permitted to do that," Traeger stated, and his tone seemed expressionless.

I accepted that for the time and asked instead, "Then he, that Stacion guy, has used it here before?"

"Many years ago, when he could disguise it in the heat of battle," Traeger admitted.

I considered what that implied. "Then you've been here at least a dozen years, the war finished thirteen years ago."

"At least that," Traeger agreed.

"So, why did he do it?" I asked "What did he get out of it?"

Again, Traeger did not answer my question, and distracted me with more information, “The singing, chanting – call it what you like, was the invocation of the ritual. That part disconnects your conscious mind from your primal instincts. It stops your mind processing logic or anything higher than merely reacting to deep instincts. The next part of the ritual is to send to your mind an illusion of what ever you consider your deadliest enemy. By then, it only takes the slightest provocation to make you react. In your case, I am told that the household guards noticed you acting strangely, and thought you might be unwell. They tried to talk to you, but you seemed not to listen. They were going to bring you, to me, but their touch ignited your hidden aggression.”

I felt the blood rushing from my head, and I swayed on my feet. I had to believe Traeger, and there was no reason for him to lie to me. I had indeed seriously injured three Kumatan, who had done nothing to anger me. I didn’t want them to make me do this again.

“Why don’t you do what you said before – that compulsion thing?”

“If you really believe, as you did today, that your life was in danger – it would not work,” Traeger warned.

I thought about that and agreed with his assessment. But...if the Atapi thought it did...

“Might work, sometimes,” I suggested.

He walked around his desk and approached me. I didn’t quite know what to expect. He towered over my modest height by at least a foot and a half. I looked up at his face and he placed his hand under my chin.

“Very well,” Traeger decided. He firmed up his grip on my chin, and I found my gaze locked onto his. I heard him speaking softly, and felt something strange happening in my head. It was a ‘calm’ strangeness, not the strange jittery feeling the Atapi had caused. When Traeger dropped his hand, and walked back to his desk, all odd feelings vanished.

“For your own protection, you will stay in your sleeping quarters for several days. You will need time on your own to recover.”

I still felt jittery so I took that to mean, ‘calm down’. He had to have sensed I was still angry with the Atapi, but sleeping in the same building with the rest of them wouldn’t be conducive to calming down – not with them hissing and muttering at me each evening.

It seemed that Traeger read my mind. “Consider it a test – if you can resist their annoyance.”

“Ah, yeah, I guess,” I muttered. I wasn’t happy about the restriction though.

“Be thankful that I am not going to punish you any further for attacking my people...this time.”

The warning seemed to hang in the air between us. It made me think being caged for a few days was preferable. “Is that what your boss wanted you to do?” I blurted, resentfully.

“He wanted you to join the Atapi slaves,” Traeger said bluntly. “They earned death for invoking that ritual.”

“But, why’d he want me killed?” I asked.

“It is because those who have channelled blood energy once, often crave it again. They can become unpredictably dangerous.”

“That’s hardly a fair reason. I’m no sorcerer – or what ever you said that Stacion guy was. I can’t even sense such energy,” I argued.

“It makes one feel jittery,” Traeger said, and he saw my sudden understanding. “Unfortunately, it will take time for the blood energy to dissipate. However, the immobilisers negated most of it and you used more when you fought the net restraint.”

His last statement was terse, and I wondered if he wanted me out of his sight. My sense of when I was pushing my luck warned me to back off. I had been granted all the special

treatment I was going to get. And perhaps Traeger had limits to his patience or tolerance towards me.

I looked at my feet and tried to act suitably humble, as he spoke to the guards.

“Return her to her assigned place, ensure you stay well away from the remaining Atapi – they are somewhat agitated at the moment.”

When the two guards gripped me again – I found that my feet could now leave that patch of light coloured floor. I didn’t try to fight them, or to get free. The idea of solitude had suddenly become very attractive.

The weather outside had turned to rain, and my escorts muttered to each other. Me – I liked the rain and let it fall on my face, soak my clothes, and wash a lot of tension away.

We passed a number of soaked Kumatan scurrying back to the house. They were lower class servants, dressed in coarsely woven brown trousers and tunics. Most cringed when they saw me, as if afraid I would break loose and attack them. One glanced from his startled recognition of me, to a point on my left. I followed the line of his gaze to a framework at the bottom of the garden and made out the five figures dangling from it. So now I knew how the five Atapi had died. I glanced away – not caring.

Chapter 9

After four days and nights pent up in my cell-room, I needed to get out. When my door was opened, only the solid grip of the overseer stopped me racing away. Perhaps he sensed the energy surging through me. He gripped my arm tightly and led me out of the barn. Since I was getting out, I forced myself to be patient at moving at his deliberate pace. This was the overseer that had been minding the now dead Atapi – recognisable by his short blond hair that spiked up on top.

The Atapi slaves had gone out earlier with another overseer. They worked from dawn to dusk in Traeger's fields.

"Antel say you dig hole here."

'Here' was around the rear of the barn.

"How big?" I asked, thinking it useless to ask "Why?"

The Kumatan overseer, whose name I assumed was Antel, pointed to the five Atapi bodies still strung up on the frame. "That big."

Antel fetched a shovel and gave it to me. "Antel check you."

I nodded. I had the way of it. They didn't have a guard watching just me but I had to stay in sight of the overseer watching the Atapi slaves. In that much they trusted me more than the Atapi.

The digging wasn't so bad. I actually enjoyed it. Perhaps it was because I had never been allowed to do such "man's" work. Maybe if I had been a 'proper' girl, I couldn't have lifted the shovel with its load of dirt. Poor proper girls.

It didn't take the Atapi long to notice me and for them to renew their subtle assault. The muttering began again, but the Atapi were further away this time and easier to ignore. They were mostly repeating the insults used by the five still scaring birds from the garden. Though there was one new one – "death to the death bringer."

For a while, it amused me to think back at them, "Yes, keep trying to kill me – you'll die too."

When I was thirsty, I stopped digging and went to the tap beside the barn. It took me moments to realise that I couldn't hear the Atapi muttering. I glanced toward the Atapi slaves. Nothing seemed different. When I'd been digging, I wasn't thinking of anything, until I had heard the Atapi. Could their voices be all in my head? Could they hear my thoughts too? I could experiment.

Once back in the rhythm of digging, the voices became clear again. I wondered what insults would enrage them. My brothers got angry when their manliness was insulted and the Atapi's malicious laughter had angered me.

I imitated the laugh in my head and told them they were cowards, too scared to try to escape. For fun, I added that their mothers must have been humans.

After a while, I risked another glance at the field. Antel had joined the overseer there and I saw both of them using their force weapons. The murmuring in my head ceased. I smiled and returned to my task. The hole was almost deep enough.

The brief flick from a force whip made me spin around. A light touch, to get my attention.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded of the ponytail wearing overseer.

"Tenkin know you agitating Atapi slaves."

"Just seeing me agitates them," I retorted.

"You thinking at their minds."

"What?"

“Tenkin knows. Vermin calling them cowards.”

“That’s impossible,” I insisted, but having my suspicions confirmed by a third party was unnerving.

“You hear Atapi voices in mind?”

“I heard them with my ears.”

“No, slaves silent. You heard in mind.”

“Oh!” I pretended surprise.

“Tenkin like whipping Atapi slaves, but Tenkin in trouble if stop slaves working. Vermin stop using insults to stop Atapi mind filth or I whip Vermin.”

“I’ll try Tenkin,” I promised meekly. “But I only thought I was thinking it to myself so I wouldn’t get angry and start fighting.”

He nodded, satisfied.

“Tenkin cut crow bait down. You bring and bury.”

My face curled into a grimace. I didn’t want to get any nearer the dead bodies than I was now; the occasional whiff on the slight breeze was enough. Tenkin saw my expression and grinned. Damn him.

I hitched the gathered neck of my smock over my nose in a poor attempt to reduce the fetid smell. There was no way I was going to carry the bodies. I hoped I could drag them.

The Atapi had looked human four days ago when I had seen them dangling. Now I was seeing the real Atapi adult form. The brown skin had dried and felt leathery. The rounded facial features were alien – the eyes had dried and sunk into the skull. The cheeks looked gaunt and twisted in agony. Purple tongues lolled out of the mouths. I looked quickly away from there and studied the hands. The hands, like the feet had five digits, but both were longer and thinner than normal for humans. Most bizarre, were the small wings on their backs. They weren’t feathered like on birds or filigree like dragonflies, but leathery like bat wings. They seemed much too small to support the Atapi weight for flight.

“They cannot remain here Jai Cassidy,” I was reminded. I recognised Traeger’s voice.

“I know.” I rubbed my hands on my trousers. “I just didn’t expect them to look so alien.”

“No creature looks its best in death, Jai Cassidy.”

“My grandfather looked peaceful.”

“Then he was indeed blessed. The Atapi are not a peaceful race. Only proof of a horrible death deters them from causing horrible deaths.”

“Why must I deal with them?” I asked, trying not to be sick.

“They died because of you, Jai Cassidy.”

“I didn’t tell you to kill them.”

“They died because they disobeyed commands and performed forbidden rituals – because of you.”

“They should have left me alone.”

“That isn’t their way. Now you must deal with the results of your continuing existence.”

“Yeah!” I muttered taking a deep breath from behind me and gathering all my determination.

Traeger didn’t stay to watch me work. I didn’t blame him. It was bad enough that I had to watch me work. At least, with my mind on the current task, the Atapi murmuring was silent.

I wasn’t being particularly reverent, or disrespectful. On the farm, I had learnt that animals had to die – most being for food. However, I had heard my mother telling my sisters that the body was just a husk – whatever spirit had inhabited it was gone.

When the last body was in the hole, a Kumatan came and sprinkled a white powder liberally over the bodies and then walked away. He didn’t speak to me. I assumed that I was

now to fill in the rest of the hole. As I was doing this, the Atapi murmuring began again and grew in intensity.

Very angrily, I thought in my mind, "Keep that up bug-eyes and I'll leave the hole open so the animals can gnaw on their bones, and I won't care if I am whipped for slacking."

Amazing! The noise in my head stopped.

The Atapi started again the next day – well before spiky haired Antel came to fetch me. I was already in a triply foul mood when he opened my door and twitched his nose in disgust.

I knew I reeked of rotting flesh. My room reeked of the food I hadn't been able to keep down. And I had to smell both, all night, because no overseer came in after the cells were locked. I had tried to wash the stench off my skin, but I hadn't been able to do anything about my clothes.

"Antel take you to garden to work." His nose kept twitching fastidiously.

"Antel would be better taking me to where I can wash myself and my clothes." I told him.

"Atapi slaves don't wash."

Figured! No wonder you could smell them coming.

"I'm human, Antel." I poked a finger into his chest. "Human! And I need to wash."

"Slaves, no wash."

I poked him again. "Then Antel must enjoy stink of dead meat."

Antel grabbed my wrist before I could poke him again. "Slaves don't poke Antel."

"Humans shouldn't have to smell like this. Let me go. I'm going to be sick."

He didn't. I was. He wore it. I didn't say sorry.

"Vermin give Antel trouble?" Tenkin sounded too damn cheerful.

Antel answered Tenkin in a tone that suggested he was swearing.

"Tenkin throw vermin in river. Teach what clean means."

"Please do," I said quickly. "With soap!"

"Antel take rebellious slave to Traeger."

"Like this? I'll make everyone else in the house sick," I said quickly.

Antel glanced at Tenkin and stalked off.

"Tenkin find soap." He pushed me back into my cell and locked the door.

I fumed in silence and tried to rinse my mouth with the last few drops of water in the jug.

Antel returned first with Traeger when I was crouched over the ceramic hole, retching again. Traeger took in the smell and the condition of the room in a quick glance. He would have noticed the ripped bed, the straw falling out. I had needed something to try to clean up my messes.

"Have this room cleaned," Traeger ordered in an even voice.

I turned and saw Antel nod to acknowledge the instruction, and Tenkin returning.

"Tenkin have soap."

Traeger raised his eyebrows. "Soap for what, Tenkin?"

He chuckled. "Wash Vermin in river. Show Atapi slaves what clean means."

Traeger looked thoughtfully at me then nodded.

"I know what clean means," I snorted. "And I promise I won't swim away."

"Go," Traeger directed.

Tenkin grabbed my arm and dragged me down the stairs and into the open.

"Vermin smell better out here," he announced.

"Yeah," I agreed, drawing a deep breath with relief.

"River this way. Slaves not allowed at river, but Vermin reeks."

We had to walk past the field where the Atapi were working. Their eyes followed me; their thoughts taunted me and insulted me. When they realised where I was going they laughed at me. Their mental images changed from threats to kill me to visions implying I was some sort of cripple or cretin or child – something mindless.

Translated into English – they were saying I was a stupid bitch. That was provocation in my view of things. I shook off Tenkin's grip and turned to face the Atapi. I took one step towards them and froze. My mind seethed with anger and frustrated revenge. I wanted to severely injure each and every Atapi in my view. My vision seemed red.

Tenkin jolted me back to awareness with his weapon.

"Traeger wise. Vermin ignore Atapi mind filth – heh?"

"Yeah," I agreed. I felt my muscles unlock and I turned my back on the Atapi.

Their taunts changed to imply I was an obedient pet animal to the Kumatan and that I needed their permission to shit. And – only cretins needed to be washed.

"Your turn next – bug eyes," I thought back.

Tenkin grabbed me again. "Traeger make you not fight, Vermin. Careful. Atapi slaves in dangerous mood. Two overseers watch them now. Don't provoke slaves."

"What do you mean – dangerous?"

"Traeger knows."

"Can we hurry up?"

Tenkin wasn't overly worried about the mood of the Atapi. I didn't share that lack of concern. My back had begun to itch and not from the gore and mess covering the rest of me. I would have liked a long soak, but I had the feeling of being watched and not just by Tenkin.

I went into the river fully clothed and Tenkin threw the soap to me. I used it first to scrub the muck off my smock and trousers, then lifted the smock and washed me as best I could. I was enjoying the feel of the water too much to hear the Atapi mind mutterings clearly.

I stopped moving suddenly. The animals in the forest beyond the river had just fallen silent. The Atapi mind murmuring had stopped. I edged back to Tenkin.

When I reached him, he smirked at my appearance. "You look like drowned Vermin now."

"Shh."

Tenkin glared at me.

"Everything is too quiet," I said.

"No Atapi mind filth," Tenkin agreed, but he became alert.

"No animal or insect noise," I added. "Something is around here that shouldn't be."

"Tenkin feels it too. Come back to slave field."

I followed, not wanting to face that unknown alone, unarmed, unable to fight.

Tenkin drew his weapon with one hand and withdrew something from around his neck with the other. He put that thing to his mouth and blew; it was like a dog whistle - I didn't hear a sound.

"Traeger warned. Hurry."

"Double hurry," I urged and I ran past Tenkin towards the field.

"Antel! Behind you!" I yelled when I was in sight of the field. I had seen what the Atapi were up to. At first glance they were still working, but they were watching Antel and one had got behind him.

I tried to run to stop them but the compulsion stopped me. I was in no danger from those Atapi, so I couldn't fight. I could only watch in horror as the Atapi slaves pounced on Antel. When I turned to urge Tenkin to help, I sensed something above me. Something huge landed on me and rolled me up in its wings. It cut off my shriek and I began to pass out for lack air. I couldn't even struggle.

Chapter 10

I am tied to a tree, I realised as I came awake. My neck and shoulders ached, but I didn't move immediately. I opened my eyes fractionally. From the amount of light, it was evening. I sniffed cautiously. Atapi! My memory of events returned. It had been morning – I must have been tied up a long time.

I slowly turned my head to locate the source of a rasping sound. I saw Antel, wide eyed and terrified, tied to the next tree.

The forest was around me, but I didn't know where I was in it. I sniffed again. Faint smoke, pine scent and...

I considered the other scent that was noticeable above the Atapi stench. Fear. Atapi fear. To my mind that meant that we must still be in or close to Kumatan territory. The latter I thought most likely. I had the idea that the Kumatan usually didn't hunt Atapi away from their own land – but did if the Atapi intruded.

Unable to get free, I tensed and relaxed my shoulder muscles to ease the pain there while I listened to the soft voices of the Atapi. There were two groups, I noticed. The shaggy haired slaves, clad in the brown fabric trousers were still in human shape and huddled together under some trees on the edge of the clearing. Others were Atapi warriors, mimicking humans. These were moving lithely, confidently in and out of the clearing with the flexible close-fitting leather leggings revealing every muscle movement. They each had a weapon in one hand, ready to use. I sensed another very strong presence.

The slaves exuded the fear smell. The Kumatan would kill them if they were found. They all wanted to leave but fear of that other presence was stronger than their desire to flee. Their minds slid around the identity of the presence as if not wishing to draw attention to themselves.

The strong, confident warrior-Atapi ignored the slaves as nonentities - broken vessels from which the spirit had departed. They were intensely curious as to why their enemies hadn't killed me.

Their thoughts were revolving around the possible reasons why the Traeger had kept me alive. By the time I started listening to their comments, they had degenerated to suggestions that were crude and disgusting. The most polite suggestion I overheard was that the Traeger preferred to couple with animals.

When I straightened my neck and opened my eyes, the watchers gave an indrawn hiss of breath. Did they think me a threat? Small chance of that with me tied to a tree and held tight from shoulders to waist.

I counted twelve Atapi, but I was sure more were behind me. A thirteenth Atapi walked around into my sight and I knew that this was the presence I had felt. This one was making no attempt to mimic human form. His brown skin gleamed faintly and he was bare to the waist, and only had a pubic sling below that. I had seen this creature before, and had thought him a hallucination.

I tried to see his visage, but my eyes wanted to look away from his face. When I peeked at him out of the corner of my eyes, his face seemed to be changing from moment to moment - Atapi, human, grotesque.

"Abomination," the presence snarled at me. "Misaborted excrescence."

"The feeling is mutual," I said, adding "What ever you just said."

"How did you exist so long?"

I pretended not to understand. "What's that?"

"I know you can understand me – and since you will die tonight the answer does not matter. For now, you have a use."

The creature turned his back to me and I confirmed that the wings on this male were huge – large enough to fly with and he had a tail that curled up over his shoulder.

An Atapi warrior trotted into the clearing. "They come."

All the Atapi melted into the trees. I wondered why each warrior took an ex-slave. The winged Atapi seemed to walk into invisibility.

I saw a chance to get free. I concentrated on the dimensions of my arms and of my body. I imagined taller and thinner. My back of my head scraped bark and the ropes around me loosened slightly. I wriggled and the ropes fell lower. I kept wriggling until my arms were free and I could use my hands to push the ropes low enough to step out of. I went at once to Antel and began to fumble with the unfamiliar knots in the rope.

"Hurry, Jai Cassidy, this is a trap," Antel urged.

I was grabbed from behind and dragged back by the shoulders. "No you don't, scum crawler. You are bait for the Traeger."

The hissing voice belonged to the winged one. I struggled to no avail.

"The Traeger fancies you, and you abase yourself for him. I should show you what it is like to mate an Atapi male but the Traeger is coming and you will kill him and his kind will kill you."

I kept struggling as his hand explored my private places.

"They don't dare kill me," I said in a loud voice. "Just as you don't dare. If my body is found the humans will hunt you down and all your kind."

"Silence! You will die tonight – with the Traeger – the slave master."

"The humans will find our bodies..."

The Atapi laughed. "Brainless cretin, the humans do not exist on this plane. No one but the insects and animals will ever find your bones."

I spat, trying to get his arm. He laughed at me. "You will take this weapon."

To my horror, my arm reached out for it. I didn't want to take it, but I did. I tried to drop it but my hand wouldn't open for me.

"You will kill the Traeger."

"NO!" I resisted.

"You will!" the Atapi said. "You wear the slave bands. They remove your free will. They make you obedient. I know their secret."

"No," I said again, but with less force.

"Silence, vile scum. You will not warn the slave master."

I moved my mouth but no sound came from it.

"He comes. Wait here and kill the slave-master."

Knowledge of how to use the weapon was forced into my mind and the Atapi withdrew his hands and vanished into the night. I closed my eyes. Perhaps if I couldn't see him, I couldn't kill him.

I felt hard bony fingers around my neck and the faintest of pressure from what seemed like pointed fingernails.

"Open your eyes. Do it!"

My eyes opened, blurred with tears. My mouth opened to yell soundlessly. My hand aimed the weapon at the fuzzy white suited figure of the Traeger. I felt the vibration as the weapon fired.

The figure didn't fall, but kept walking toward me. My hand kept firing the weapon.

I heard Antel scream. "Don't kill her! Don't kill her!"

I didn't understand. No one had a weapon aimed at me. However, the bony fingers at my throat and the hissing voice in my ear were urging me to kill the figure walking closer. My mind was sickened - I didn't want to kill anyone.

I felt the winged Atapi's hot breath on my neck, as he realised that the Traeger was unharmed. The approaching figure was glowing as if protected by light, and the face wasn't clear. I kept firing.

In my mind, I heard a roar of outrage and felt the movement of great wings cupping air to take off. My neck was still being held as my feet left the ground. My hand was still firing the weapon at the shining figure below my feet.

In my ear, I heard a scream of agony. I felt the edges of the blast of heat on the flesh of my arms and face. The winged Atapi released me. I fell heavily to the ground, landing on my feet and then collapsing onto my face.

In spite of gulping for breath, I was still compelled to fire at the Traeger. My head moved slightly and I saw the glowing figure looking around. My arm was moving without my will in control, and the weapon seemed fused to my hand.

A heavy foot stood on my wrist and something whacked the side of my head. I don't know if it meant to knock me out, but it didn't. My vision was blurred, but I saw the shining figure change into one of the Kumatan guards.

In my mind, I felt a roar of outrage, at being tricked. It wasn't my emotion; I was personally relieved, because my hand stopped firing the weapon. It was only a temporary respite. There was still an overpowering compulsion to "Kill the Traeger".

I tried to push up with my free hand, to look around but only managed to half roll, to look up at the owner of the foot. The Kumatan guard looked down when I moved and fired his weapon. For once the numbness was a blessing - whatever demon was in my mind, snarled and retreated. I felt myself blacking out.

Chapter 11

I felt someone slapping my face. "Wake up little Vermin. Wake up. Traeger had great victory. Wake up. Wake up."

"Don't. It hurts." I groaned.

"Then wake up, little Vermin, and look. Victory for Vermin too."

My back hurt, and I realised I was leaning against a tree. Tenkin moved away and I saw Antel was free and tossing a rope over a tree branch. He used the other end to pass two loops around the neck of an Atapi, made a quick half turn to keep the rope in place and heaved on the free end. I had thought the creature was dead, but it now kicked and struggled. "Kill the slave master," it screamed at me before the rope tightened and silenced his voice and his life.

The killing compulsion re-awoke in my mind and I looked around for the shining figure. Then I felt a mental slap, and a command to look for the Traeger – the slave master. I could only see ordinary Kumatan guards, so my body was being forced to move, to crawl, to stand up. I resisted by trying to dig my fingers into the ground and saying, "NO!"

Tenkin came back, or it might have been another overseer, since I could only see the black skintight leggings. A black covered leg pushed against me and rolled me onto my back. The compulsion surged again, and I rolled further and sprang to my feet, and darted under the grasping arm.

I evaded that overseer, but Tenkin moved fast and caught me by an arm before I had gone more than a yard.

"What you doing, Vermin? You told to sit by tree."

I struggled like a trapped rabbit, and grabbed a weapon from a loop at Tenkin's side. Something in my head recognised it, and my hand moved into a position to use it. Even while being held, I was looking around, searching the Kumatan faces for the slave-master.

Tenkin kicked my legs from under me and I sat down abruptly on the ground. I tried to throw the weapon away, but my hand gripped it tighter. That failing, I closed my eyes and drew my knees up to my chin and hugged them with my arms – as tightly as I could. The weapon was pointing at the ground.

Over and over, in my mind, I thought, "I don't know the slave-master. He isn't here."

"Leave Jai Cassidy to me, Tenkin. Go and find out if we have any casualties. Instruct the squad to bring prisoners here."

I recognised Traeger's voice, but didn't dare look at him. But the mind that was invading mine sensed the recognition and didn't want to be thwarted. The voice of the winged Atapi was screaming in my mind, and I felt the metal bands tightening on my arms as I resisted. The pain was so great that I whimpered involuntarily. Traeger placed his hands on the bands and whispered something. The metal eased back to normal.

"How did you resist the slave-band command, Jai Cassidy?"

"I couldn't," I whispered with tears streaming down my face. I still didn't want to look at him. "I thought I was killing you."

"Not then – just now."

I told Traeger what I had done, and stared at the dusty ground.

"You really don't know," Traeger seemed to marvel.

"What?"

"Antel told me that the sorcerer-devil had admitted that you were bait for the Traeger – the slave master."

"So?"

"Jai Cassidy, I am the slave-master."

I shivered violently. “No you are Traeger. You said I could call you that. I am Jai – my name. I was to kill The Traeger – some nebulous creature without a face – the slave master. I didn’t know the slave master.”

Traeger laughed softly. “They assumed too much of you.”

“Why?”

“They see only Atapi. They assumed that what they knew, you must know.”

“Most of you do the same,” I pointed out.

“I see that clearly now,” Traeger admitted. “Yet, had you known – I would be dead now.”

“No!”

“Yes. I know how the Atapi slave bands work. You would have kept trying until I died.”

“But...you stopped it – the command. Didn’t you?” Now I looked up, pleadingly.

“Yes, Jai Cassidy, I did.”

I slumped and my vision blurred with tears of relief.

“Rest, Jai Cassidy. We cannot leave yet. There is much to be done this night.”

He stood and walked to the centre of the clearing – facing away from the now still Atapi warrior. I crawled back to lean against the tree with my knees pulled up, listening to the sounds around me with my eyes shut. The Kumatan made little noise and so I became aware that whilst the night animals were still quiet, the insects had returned to their normal sounds. I relaxed and fell into a light doze.

A faint breeze blowing in my face woke me from a fevered nightmare in which I again faced the winged Atapi. I felt quite hot, and had no desire to move. I heard quiet breathing beside me and turned to see Antel, asleep, leaning against the same tree. Further away, I saw Traeger walking slowly around the clearing, and Tenkin standing watchful and alert.

Slight movement caught my gaze. An Atapi – tied to a tree as I had been, was coming back to consciousness. At his feet was one of the Atapi slaves - dead. There was a similar tableau at a second tree.

As I watched, Kumatan guards brought in more captives and dragged more bodies. Ten slaves had been in the field and I had counted twelve warriors, plus that other. The Kumatan hadn’t found them all yet.

Then two Kumatan reverently carried a covered body and laid it near me. Later, two more Kumatan laid a moaning comrade beyond the silent one. One of the guards remained; the other disappeared back into the trees.

Something kept my attention on the injured guard. I wondered what had happened to him. I found the energy to crawl around to see.

“What happened to him?” I asked.

The Kumatan snarled at me. I moved back a bit. “I only thought I could help.”

I didn’t back off further. In the faint moonlight, I could see blood on the snarling guard’s clothes and blood seeping onto the ground beside the prone man.

“He’ll bleed to death if you don’t do something,” I said aloud.

Traeger turned in my direction, so did Tenkin. The latter came over.

“Josan dying. He fight with devil and get knife in side and impaled on talons. Healer comes – maybe too late. You let him rest little Hooman.”

“Does that devil poison his talons?”

“Sometimes. No cure.” I gulped, I was lucky that bastard had wanted me alive for a bit.

“Can I try something?” I glanced at Traeger, as did Tenkin. Traeger nodded.

“Do you have a knife?” I asked Tenkin and he produced a huge one.

“Something smaller,” I said waspishly.

“Tenkin need knife for enemy, not food.”

“What do, slave?” the other Kumatan asked me, still in a snarl.

"I cut cloth. Tie pad to wound to stop bleeding. Then your friend might live long enough for the healer to help."

"Slave do it for Josan." I was offered a much smaller knife.

"Could you turn him on his side?" I asked as I began ripping the sleeves off my smock.

Josan's friend objected when I slit open the injured guard's clothing but hissed when he saw the ten puncture wounds eight of which were swelling darkly.

I put the cloth pad over the deep stab wound and told the Kumatan to press down as I slipped a tie of joined strips of fabric under him and up and around the pad. I studied the swellings as I tied the pad in place.

Not unlike snakebite, I thought. Quite a while back, I had watched my brother help a friend – should I try? If I died – really – what loss would it be?

I took the knife and ripped more fabric from my sleeves into strips, still trying to decide. The unvoiced sense of hope I felt from the Kumatan decided me. I took the knife then and felt for the first swelling.

"What doing?" My wrist was grabbed.

"I want to cut swelling and suck poison out."

"You die!"

"Hope not."

He released my wrist and watched me closely; flinching back when liquid spurted from the first swelling. I swabbed that away, then put my mouth to the wound and sucked and spat until nothing else came out.

My mouth burned but I ignored it as I tied a pad in place.

"Tosef give drink."

I took the flask he offered, and filled my mouth with liquid fire. I spat that out, and felt my mouth go numb.

Each of the seven other wounds was treated the same way. I used the fiery drink to rinse my mouth and hoped that the potent, disgusting brew killed the poison. The remaining two wounds were clean enough and I simply put a pad on them.

I felt decidedly sick when I had finished, and I didn't know if my actions had helped or not. A lot of time had already passed by the time the injured guard had come there. Still, I'd tried. I just wished I could exchange my mouth for a new one.

After all that, I didn't feel like moving, so I lay down beside the Kumatan.

Something nudged my back.

"Wake up little Hooman."

I wanted to tell him to go away, but my mouth was dry. I felt like I was on fire.

"Wake up. We go back now. All Atapi dead. Devil gone too."

I groaned.

"Hooman, wake up. Traeger comes. He be angry."

I rolled from my side to my back. It was about all I could do. The sick and the dead Kumatan were no longer next to me.

Something cool was put on my forehead. I hoped it would stay there. I heard Traeger, and he did sound angry. Then I felt something wet near my lips and I made an effort to reach it. I let them drip water into my mouth, but they stopped well before I had enough. Someone began to lift me.

"Traeger Mosellan, it not right you carry slave. Antel carry slave."

"Why do you feel so, Antel?" Traeger asked.

"She yell warning to me. Gave me time to block blow. Didn't get dead like Koll. Then she try free me when Atapi come to use her."

“Indeed, Antel. More of us would have died without her warning. She sensed that devil in time for Tenkin to warn me. Take her to my house and have Benku send for the healer – immediately.”

Someone murmured dissent. “She’s Atapi – a slave.”

Traeger heard it and snapped. “Slave no more. She has more than proved that her loyalty is not to our enemies. And if they wish her dead so badly – I will discover why and use her against them.”

Tenkin added his piece. “Not vermin this one. Hooman.”

I found the exchange barely interesting. I was tossed over Antel’s shoulder and he began to trot.

Chapter 12

I lapsed into and out of awareness for a long time. Usually I sensed someone with me. Sometimes I felt something cool on my face, sometimes water on my lips. There were times when I felt burning hot and times when I couldn't get warm.

When at last I awoke, feeling weak but better, I was alone. I kept my eyes closed as I tried to workout where I was. I certainly wasn't in my cell-room because I was in a real bed with sheets and a pillow. Nearby, people were speaking in a language I didn't understand. One voice sounded like Tenkin. I heard an occasional word I could translate.

"Why you here, young master," Tenkin said, switching to his version of English.

"No reason," I assumed was what the young voice answered.

Then I heard a woman's high pitched and highly annoyed voice. I didn't understand anything she said.

Tenkin replied to it. "Healer say she sick from Atapi poison. Kumatan not in danger." There was another tirade in the woman's voice.

"I speak hooman around this one," Tenkin said firmly. "She save Josan. He sick – not dead. She save Antel. He sore head, not dead."

The woman's voice rose to a higher pitch.

"Hooman didn't know she fight Kumatan. Thought she fight Atapi. Your brother stoopid if he couldn't defend self against little hooman woman. And he not dead – just addled."

Well, I thought, I'm in Traeger's house, being nursed by Kumatan. That told me that I must have risen in the eyes of these human looking aliens. So what did they expect of me now?

My nurse, Tenkin, soon told me. He poked me and said, "Know you awake, Hooman. You want food?"

"Yeah! Why am I here?"

"Heh! Heh! You sick got Atapi poison fever. Weak little Hooman. Traeger want you better. You stay in his house. Be servant to wife."

I swore. "I'm no damn lady's maid."

"Hooman will manage. Hooman fight Atapi and win. Hooman eat poison and live. Helping woman – easy, heh?"

Tenkin was a bit too cheerful for me to feel comfortable. If the woman I had heard was Traeger's wife – we were probably not going to get on. Hopefully the worst that would happen would be for me to be sent back to the barn, as it seemed that Traeger wanted me alive.

"You eat, Hooman. Then get up. I take you to Mizes Mosellan."

Tenkin prodded me into an unfamiliar part of the house which had lush carpets of grass green and pictures of strange landscapes hanging on walls painted in pale green. The aura of the passage was very calming. The effect the décor lasted until Tenkin knocked on the door at the end.

"Mizes Mosellan, this be hooman, Jai." He bowed in greeting the woman, but not as deeply as he did to Traeger.

I took my first look at Traeger's wife and shuddered. It wasn't that she was ugly – far from it – but her whole demeanour seemed hostile. She was as stiff and tense as a bundle of brooms. She grimaced, and then turned up her nose as if she had smelt something vile. Her hair, what escaped from a very tight knot, was light brown. Most of it was hidden under a

purple-black piece of fabric. Her dress seemed very austere and was in the same purple-black material.

She snapped something at me.

“Mizes Mosellan ask what you do,” Tenkin translated.

“Lots of things. I used to live on a farm.” I looked around the room and tried to figure out what the woman was like. The room was impeccably tidy; my mother would have found nothing to complain about. Except perhaps that the fancy wall hangings would collect dust.

“Tenkin tell her that you can sweep, clean, is strong,” he said before translating.

If possible, her nose went up higher. I’d met snobs like her before. She spoke again, still too rapidly to try to recognise any words.

“What did she say,” I asked when Tenkin didn’t translate.

“Hooman don’t want to know.”

The woman spoke more.

“Mizes Mosellan say – you smell like milk animal crossed with midden and she don’t want you near her son. She going to get you clean then you scrub house. You sleep in cupboard in laundry in case you make mess on floor.”

I slowly counted the strange little statues on a shelf across the room. There were fifteen.

“Tenkin, you can tell that bitch that I would rather muck out the midden than be civil to her.”

“Tenkin not dare say that to Mizes Mosellan.”

“Then tell me the words and I will tell her!” I snapped.

Mistress Mosellan demanded something of Tenkin. He turned red and scuffed his feet.

When Tenkin replied, Mistress Mosellan came closer to me – her eyes blazed and her mouth looked pinched. She slapped me hard, four times then spoke venomously.

Tenkin bowed, grabbed me and dragged me from the room.

“Hooman make her very angry. You go into cupboard, until she not mad. You not go back near until you clean, disinfected and know polite.”

“Suits me,” I said. “Tenkin, teach human to speak like Kumatan.”

He nodded and grinned. “Then you tell her she’s stuck up bitch and she threaten your woman bits not my man bits.”

“Did she do that?” I asked.

Tenkin nodded. I shook my head. Obviously, my time here was going to be a worse trial than when I slept outside. Oh, well, I could always run away and be killed escaping!

After half an hour in the cupboard, that option was already feeling preferable. The cupboard was stuffy, hot, and little air got in. If I wanted to sit down it was a very tight fit. No one answered me when I banged on the locked door. I needed a toilet, or a commode or even a hole in the floor – urgently. I really didn’t want to make a mess on the floor like an untrained puppy. She’d probably rub my nose in it.

Tenkin opened the door when I was extremely desperate.

I told him what I needed. He didn’t understand my polite phrasing, but did understand the cruder term – shithouse.

I think he sensed my desperation. He shoved aside two grey haired women, clad in blue shapeless tunics, who were intent on grabbing me and told them something in a tone they dared not ignore.

Tenkin dragged me outside to a small building at the bottom of the garden. It was screened by trees and my nose told me it was a toilet.

“Servants use this. You servant now. I wait.”

Tenkin prodded me back to the house. “You get clean now,” he said and he left me with the two women.

I saw now that they had filled a tub in the laundry room that still had steam rising from it. My hopes rose and I let the women grab me and drag me nearer. Next to the tub, one woman produced a knife and before I realised she was ripping my clothes off me. The other woman took up a scrubbing brush like I'd used to scrub floors at the farm.

"Oh no," I said aloud. "I can wash myself."

I twisted from between them, stepped into the water, and splashed until I was completely wet. The two women may have been surprised but one still had the brush in hand and a determined look on her face. The other had a cake of what I knew was a harsh yellow soap. I splashed water at both of them to try to keep them away. They started chattering angrily and were not smiling. They each grabbed an arm. One used the soap where ever she could reach and the other began scrubbing furiously with the brush.

Enough was enough. I jerked my arm free from the soap woman and grabbed the brush from the other. I threw the brush across the room. That got rid of one for a bit. I grabbed the soap from the first woman and shoved her away. I wasn't sorry to see her land on her rump.

I used the soap, harsh as it was, to wash myself and my hair as fast as I could.

The brush woman stalked back looking twice as determined as before.

I stood up, pointed a soapy finger at her and said slowly, "Do not – bring that thing – near me."

I was trying to look stern and dangerous. I think I partly succeeded – they stayed just out of arms reach. Very quickly, I ducked down to rinse my self and dunked my head to rinse my hair.

Before I could bring my head up again, I felt something keeping it down. Anger made me strong enough to force my head up. Then I grabbed the woman's head and pushed it under the water. Her friend began to scream for help. I stopped and pushed the woman away from me, then stepped from the water.

I looked around for a towel – all I saw were several rough pieces of hessian. I didn't know if they had been washed, but I would drip dry before using chaff bags to dry with. They hadn't brought any clothes for me either.

Tenkin rushed in – probably because of the screams.

"Get out!" I yelled. He backed back to the doorway. "Get me some clothes."

"What happened to last clothes, Hooman?"

"Ask these murderous morons," I said, then yelled again. "Now get out."

I turned back to the cowering women. They finally scurried from the room, leaving brush, soap, hessian and tub. I looked at my slashed clothes and tried to cover myself with them.

Benku arrived, looking stern, with the women jabbering behind him. He spoke sharply to me. I didn't know nearly enough Kumatan to understand him. Still, the tone was one I was very familiar with.

I stood straighter, looked him in the eye and answered what I guessed he was asking.

"I do not need help getting clean. I am not an animal and I am not an imbecile. I won't allow you to treat me as either. I prefer to be clean and I will keep myself clean – given the means to do so."

Knowing that this time I was in the right, I kept my voice calm, not insolent.

Tenkin arrived back then and was barked at by Benku.

"Tenkin asked what you say. What did hooman say?"

I repeated it and Tenkin translated.

Benku considered my answer then barked another question.

"Benku ask why you wreck clothes again and wear rags."

I pointed to one of the women. "I was given no chance to take them off. They cut them off and you know I have no knife. They weren't even going to allow me to dress. I will not stay naked if I am meant to be servant to Mistress Mosellan."

I kept eye contact with Benku, even though he towered over me. It was a tactic that had misled and annoyed some authority figures in my past.

Benku nodded as if satisfied with my answer. He asked questions of the two women. They jabbered at him angrily. In a very stern tone, he asked me what Tenkin translated as "Hooman, why you try to kill old woman?"

I looked at Tenkin as he spoke then back at Benku. "I pushed them away so I could show them I could clean myself. I didn't need to be scrubbed with a floor brush." I moved the rags aside to show when the woman had scrubbed me raw. "That might be needed for Atapi skin, but I'm human!"

Benku examined me impersonally and asked another question. I answered in exactly the same rational tone.

"She tried to drown me first." Then I did something that used to annoy my sisters. I burped and fortuitously I burped up some of the soapy water I had swallowed. Bubbles foamed out of my mouth. The two women screamed – they probably thought I had rabies.

Benku roared two words. The woman stopped screaming and shivered as they stared at him. He spoke in a milder tone and what ever he said drove all colour from their faces and sent them backwards out of the room – heads bowed and hands crossed over their chests.

"Stupid old women," I heard Tenkin mutter under his breath. He lifted the pile of clothes he had returned with and showed them to Benku.

Benku nodded and returned to studying me. I wasn't backing down. He spoke.

Tenkin gave me the human version of his comments. "Benku say to tell hooman that servants who fight or hurt other servants receive beating."

I drew in a breath to argue, but Tenkin wasn't finished. "Silly old women no longer work for Traeger. Hooman not to be beaten this time. Do again - Benku beat you twice as hard."

I turned to Benku and said, "I won't be treated as animal just because I am human."

Benku nodded and left the room.

"Thank you, Tenkin. You good friend to this human." I took the clothes from him and hoped he'd leave.

"Hooman, you don't push Mizes Mosellan. She good wife, just not now."

"If she doesn't act like a bigoted bitch, I won't start anything," I promised.

"Hooman dress. I take you back. Tenkin must teach Mizes Mosellan to speak hooman."

I glared at Tenkin. "I'll dress quicker if you turn around."

"Why? You fine figure of hooman. What matter?" He turned around with a confused shrug.

I dressed quickly and I mean 'dressed', damn it. Though I wasn't going to complain just now. I considered that Tenkin hadn't seen me as a female – just as human. At least he had stopped seeing me as Atapi. Personally, I couldn't tell Kumatan from human and wondered if those lesser Kumatan, such as those women, could tell I was alien.

Chapter 13

Tenkin took me to the suite where I had last seen Mistress Mosellan. The open area was deserted. I was led to a door just inside the main door. Tenkin opened it and said, "This servant's room. Yours now."

I glanced inside and saw a bed, two armchairs, some drawers, a small table and a cupboard that had an embroidered curtain across it.

"How do you say that in Kumatan?"

Tenkin obliged and I tried to imitate his words. He grinned when I succeeded.

He let me enter and look around. Someone else's stuff was in there but the room had a smaller alcove with bath and commode. There was a pale yellow curtain that could be pulled across for privacy. Elsewhere were potted plants and knick-knacks.

"Who slept here before?"

"Servant now gone," Tenkin said abruptly.

I wanted to find out more but asked instead, "Where is Mistress Mosellan?"

The suite of rooms was too quiet. Tenkin shrugged.

A voice spoke from some concealment. "Maman is sleeping."

"Young master, you come out. Meet Jai hooman."

I recognised the boy who emerged from behind a chair.

"She's Atapi," he stated with some belligerence. "Maman says to stay away from her."

"Your Papan say Jai hooman is servant to your Maman," Tenkin corrected him.

The boy stared at me. "Papan say you saved me. Maman say you hurt me."

He had spoken in English! I replied giving him a slight bow. "When I got you away from those men, I didn't know who you were. I never meant to hurt you except I slipped down the hill."

"But you are Atapi." He sounded confused.

"So your Papan says. So the Atapi say. I grew up as human and I don't believe it. The Atapi call me an abomination because I am half human."

The boy's eyes widened, "But..."

Tenkin broke in, "Atapi want Jai hooman dead. Jai hooman want them dead. She help kill ten slaves and twelve Atapi warriors and save Tenkin and Antel."

The boy's mouth opened with awe.

"Young master, come with Tenkin. Jai hooman needs rest while your Maman sleeping."

I looked longingly at the bed, but I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep well with the former servant's stuff all around me.

I decided to leave the leafy plants around the room. They went well with the yellow painted walls, and someone had been watering them. They made the room feel restful. I picked up clothes from the backs of chairs and the foot of the bed, and packed them and the personal things from near the alcove into the drawers and moved this piece of furniture into a corner. The clothes from the hanging cupboard went into another drawer.

The knick-knacks from around the room, which included little statues of funny looking animals, I arranged with care on the top of the drawers. Most of the rest were little pieces of human junk; they must have fascinated the servant.

My sleep was broken during the night by piercing screams mingled with hysterical sobbing. I didn't know what I was expected to do. It seemed that Mistress Mosellan, in addition to being a bigot and a bitch – was mad.

I waited, listening, but no one seemed to come. After a while, I heard Traeger's son.

“Wake up, Maman. Wake up.”

His mother’s voice changed and she screamed something. I heard a thud and then a child crying. I ran to the source of the noise, still reluctant to go in. The sobs of the boy made my decision for me. The room wasn’t totally dark – oil lamps burned low around the walls. I saw the boy and went to him, ignoring the screams from the woman on the wide bed.

“Are you hurt,” I asked the boy.

He shook his head but his eyes were streaming tears.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

The boy said nothing but his eyes pleaded with me to help. I didn’t know what to do.

I crept over to the bed. His mother had been tied to it, but she had managed to free one arm and had tossed her blanket covering aside, and her son too when he had tried to comfort her. Yet I could tell she was not awake. She had no idea what she was doing.

Very deliberately, I untied the other arm and told the boy to release her ankles. He was nervous, but I thought I could hold her if she began to thrash around again. She began whimpering. I stopped thinking bitch and began thinking ‘injured puppy’.

I held her close to me and she seemed to quieten as I kept whispering, “it’s alright, you’re safe”.

I was sure she had no idea who was with her. When she lapsed back into sleep, I eased her back down and covered her.

A small hand slipped into mine as I left the room. The boy was shivering.

“You should be in bed,” I said gently.

“I’m scared,” he admitted, but he led me to his room.

I followed him in, and here too, oil lamps burned low on one wall. I couldn’t see much of his room, but the boy went straight to his bed. I moved directly behind him.

When I had tucked him in, he reached out and gripped my hand. His mother would be angry if she woke and found me there.

In desperation, because I wanted to get back to my room, I began telling the boy a fairy story that my sisters had loved. At the time I had simply tolerated the nonsense.

“Did that actually happen?” I was asked at the end.

“Nah! In my world, wooden puppet boys stay wood. Now, go to sleep.”

The hand released me and I walked back to my room.

In the morning, I reinstated the word “bitch” and it was well for my temper that I had managed to get enough sleep.

I was dressed in another clean white dress, trying to comb my hair with my fingers when the door of the room slammed open. A joyous cry was replaced by one of outrage. Mistress Mosellan grabbed me and dragged me from the room, still screaming at me. She was stronger than I expected and looked quite demented. I couldn’t understand her words.

She released me but only to began hitting me. I grabbed her wrists to stop that, and hoped she’d calm down. She changed her tactics and tried to kick me.

“Let me go Atapi cow. Get out of here.”

This time her screaming brought results. Tenkin and a blue clad Kumatan servant rushed in. The stranger held Mistress Mosellan from behind. I released her. He spoke angrily as he forced Mistress Mosellan back into her room.

Tenkin ducked back out side and brought in a tray. “Hooman’s food still out there,” he shrugged a shoulder in the direction of the door. He took the first tray into Mistress Mosellan’s room – returning immediately.

The stranger quietened the screaming woman very quickly. Tenkin waited with me for the man to re-emerge. When he did, he spoke angrily to Tenkin.

“Did hooman untie, Mizes Mosellan?” I was asked. I nodded.

“Healer ask why? Says stupid, dangerous.”

“She was half free already and she quietened once she was untied.”

“Healer say she sleep all night.” Tenkin told me.

“He slept all night,” I pointed to the man. “She was screaming and crying. She was still asleep, but she knew she was tied and was terrified.”

The healer argued. I didn’t understand a word. He was cut off in mid-tirade.

I heard Traeger ask me, “How did you know?” He had come in without me noticing.

I turned. “I...,” I had just known. “If I woke up – tied up – I’d panic too.”

Traeger nodded and spoke to the healer.

Tenkin whispered, “He say she need night nurse and no tying up.”

“Go have breakfast Jai Cassidy. We will talk later,” Traeger directed.

“I ask you to have patience with Ellhi,” Traeger said to me as I stood the customary five feet back from the desk. He leant back in his chair and his hand rubbed his forehead. He didn’t sound quite like his usual commanding self. I hadn’t expected to hear him refer to his wife by name – he was usually so formal.

“What do you expect me to do? Let her treat me like shit because everyone here thinks that I am half bug-eyed?”

He frowned at my colloquial speech and queried that last description.

“Atapi. The ones pretending to be human have eyes that seem to bulge out – bug-eyed.”

I saw a faint frown on Traeger’s face. He controlled his features before speaking.

“When the Atapi attacked here, I believe that they meant to take her and my son. Instead, she was injured and they took my son’s nurse.”

“So – where were you when that happened?”

“What are you implying, Jai Cassidy?” I heard the hint of anger as his hands reached for a cube on his desk. Tact really wasn’t my strong point.

“Nothing!” I said instantly. “I figure if you had been around, they’d have failed.”

I saw the frown and hastened to add, “I mean – I don’t know what a Traeger does, but whatever it is they wanted you dead too. And you make them scared.”

“How do you know this?” he demanded. He was holding the cube in a tense grip.

“Their fear-stink,” I said. “Atapi have a unique stench – but scared Atapi reek more.”

Again, Traeger frowned slightly.

“Are they likely to try again?” I asked.

“There are no more Atapi slaves in the settlement,” Traeger told me. Then explained, “At the time, I was away dealing with an Atapi onslaught on a farm of humans. While I was gone, three of my Atapi slaves attacked the house. One died. Two escaped.” His fingers were almost caressing the cube and it seemed to glitter faintly.

I nodded, thinking about that. “Have you guards about your house?”

“That is no business of yours, Jai Cassidy.” Traeger straightened in his chair and his fingers went still.

Oh, yes it was! “I will assume that you do, Sir,” I said with only slight sarcasm on the title I usually never used. This time I wanted him to know I was serious. “I asked so that I might assure Mistress Mosellan that she is safe. I had thought that she had been the woman I saw with your son, and that was why she was so tormented.”

“Tormented! She is that.” Traeger released the cube and slumped back in his chair.

“Did you find that woman?” I tried to sound gentle, not accusing.

Traeger shook his head in the human style gesture. He stared at me for a while before asking, “Do you think – if the Atapi kept her alive – that they would have her where you were?”

"I don't know. They had me in some building. And when I was outside – I didn't see any other structures."

Traeger grunted.

"I was where the women and children were. Do you know where that is?" I asked.

Traeger nodded. "Most of the males reside elsewhere. I wonder why they took you there."

"They had bunch of scrawny types in the building. Prisoners I reckon. I was in a cage by myself."

"Were there any Kumatan there?" he asked in return.

"Doubt it – the prisoners all looked bug-eyed and didn't like being stared at."

"Yet they took you there..."

I couldn't figure why Traeger thought that strange.

"They reckon I'm one of them, only an abomination of mixed breeding. Their Elders were there for their mock trial. Saving your kid was an excuse; my crime was that I was alive."

Traeger sat up straighter. I think I had told him something useful.

"The healers say that my wife will recover given time and reassurance." Traeger changed the subject back to the original one.

"She wasn't badly hurt was she? Your son seems to be fine – except when Mistress Mosellan began screaming in the night. He was really upset then."

"Perhaps being unrestrained during the night will help her – but you will need to be alert in case she tries to hurt herself."

"Ok, but what if she starts indulging in more hysterical bouts of self pity and spite?"

"Indulging? Do you think she is doing it on purpose?"

"Maybe," I hedged. "I think I'm the nearest thing to an Atapi that she can get at. But my sister acted like that once. Mum slapped her until she stopped."

"I will speak to Ellhi. But, Jai Cassidy, do your best to understand her."

I nodded and shrugged. Traeger told me to go, but I didn't rush back.

Chapter 14

Mistress Mosellan was fairly civil when I returned to the suite but I didn't trust it. She had taken up some kind of sewing or embroidery and was acting meek and genteel. She set me jobs in such a way that I couldn't justify refusing.

Horrid jobs – like emptying chamber pots and washing them. Then I had to scrub the floor in the room with the big glass windows that looked out onto the garden. I was kept scrubbing all day because it was never clean enough for her. Then I had to disinfect it from Atapi contagion. When I wasn't looking at her, she threw the bucket of harsh disinfectant over me. Her laugh had a hysterical edge. My temper had a murderous one, but I controlled it.

When she was called to have her tea, she allowed me to get clean. It seemed to me that she finally had the idea I was capable of doing that for myself. With clean skin and clean clothes, even if it was another hateful dress, I was feeling quite content.

I saw Tenkin hovering when I emerged into the main suite. He'd been absent since morning.

"Heh. Heh. Do hoomans eat before getting clean?"

"What?"

He pointed to a tray with an emptied plate. Mistress Mosellan sat at the table with Jahni, who stole uncomfortable glances at me.

"I haven't eaten," I said to Tenkin.

He glanced at me and then back to Mistress Mosellan. "Tenkin get you more," he said quietly.

"Tenkin, you will remain here. My servant can eat here. Come."

Tenkin nudged me.

I walked nearer the table. When I was four feet away she put her half finished meal on the floor.

I stopped. I could not believe that she expected me to eat her food scraps – off the floor.

"Eat!" the woman demanded.

"No!" I glared back at her.

"Maman," the boy pleaded.

"Go to your room," he was told. He gave me a terrified look and ran off.

"That is your food. If you do not eat it you will not get anything else until you do."

I laughed in her face. "My mother talks like that to my brother's two year old brat."

The laughter made her angry. "You will eat it!"

"No."

Tenkin watched the exchange with a straight face. He was, I hoped, on my side.

"You will get nothing else."

I picked up the plate, spat on it, and deliberately emptied it onto her lap. I put the plate on the table and stepped back, still glaring at her.

"Your husband's Atapi slaves aren't expected to eat slops fit for pigs. I am human and I will not!"

"Go hungry then," she yelled at me.

"Fine," I said calmly, trying to imitate my mother. "You explain to your husband why I'm too weak to work and haven't got my strength back after being ill."

Mistress Mosellan shrieked, threw the plate at me and ran from the room. I dodged the plate and it broke against the wall and the mess from her lap fell onto the carpet in a line to the door.

“Hooman annoyed Mizes Mosellan again,” Tenkin muttered with resignation. I sighed, said nothing and went to find something to clean up the mess I’d caused. Tenkin had stayed, shifting his weight from side to side.

“Well don’t you have blab about me to Benku?” I challenged Tenkin when I returned with bucket and brush.

He shifted his weight a bit more.

“Before she does?” I hinted.

“Tenkin go and bring more food if allowed.”

I was trying to clean the stain from the carpet when I sensed I was being watched. The boy had crept back in.

“What’s your name?” I asked while I continued to scrub.

“Jahni.”

“I’m Jai.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Maman said you didn’t need to eat like us. She said...”

“You don’t have to apologise, Jahni. And I don’t need to know what she said. I can guess.”

“But you don’t act like Atapi.”

“A month ago – I didn’t know they existed.”

“But...”

I stopped working and looked at him. “If I believe your Papan and the Atapi – I have Atapi blood. I don’t want to believe it. I grew up in a human family.”

“But...”

“But no self respecting Kumatan would breed with Atapi.” I guessed.

“Yes. It’s evil.” Jahni said, wide-eyed.

I shrugged. “Like I said – I don’t believe it.” In truth, I did and I didn’t.

As I returned to my scrubbing, I heard voices approaching. So did Jahni – he vanished. Ignoring the arrivals, I continued to scrub. A huge hand pulled me to my feet. It wasn’t hard to guess that Mistress Mosellan had indeed complained about me.

“You come,” Benku said in accented English.

Did I have a choice? My feet were inches off the floor. I dropped the scrubbing brush next to the bucket of soapy water. I saw then that Traeger had also arrived, but he wasn’t looking at me. I wasn’t sure if that was good or very bad.

“Traeger say we teach you polite speak,” Tenkin whispered to me. He sounded relaxed. Maybe I wasn’t in trouble. But – Tenkin was relaxed about whipping Atapi slaves...

Once the door was closed behind us, Benku let me walk.

Wondering what Traeger was about, I spoke aloud, “If he is going to talk to her – shouldn’t Jahni be away from there?”

Benku stopped, considered and turned to re enter the suite. Jahni, wide-eyed followed him out when he returned. While the door was ajar, I heard Mistress Mosellan scream, “... and you aren’t doing anything.”

Jahni climbed up Tenkin like a monkey and clung. “Tenki, teach me hooman,” he said with enthusiasm.

“Jai hooman teach you,” Tenkin corrected. “We teach her to speak proper.”

Jahni chuckled, more due to Tenkin’s grin.

We went to a room that was comfortably sized and sat in well used padded chairs around a scratched and polished table. It had no carpet here, just scrubbed wood floors. Jahni seemed pleased to be away from his mother and bounced in his chair.

“Am I in trouble,” I asked Benku. He shook his head.

“Tenkin say what done. Benku say, she no right to that. You right to say so.”

I breathed easier.

"Traeger bring nurse in tonight," Benku said carefully, again in English.

"Good." I said.

"Traeger pleased with you," Tenkin added.

"Huh? What did I do?"

"You stay longer than any servant since..."

"Only because he won't let me walk out on her," I interrupted with just a bit of resentment.

"Hooman can," Tenkin grinned. "But I catch and whip."

I wasn't sure if he was joking or serious. Just then, my stomach growled loudly.

Tenkin grinned wider and pointed at me. "Better feed hooman."

Benku told him to find something. Tenkin returned with some kind of cake and Jahni promptly grabbed a piece. Tenkin growled at him and the boy sat quietly and ate it neatly.

Two hours later, Tenkin took me back to the suite, with Jahni holding his hand. Inside, the room was now dark and quiet. I hoped someone else had finished cleaning up the mess. When we entered, someone lit a small lamp.

The night nurse called herself Ressa. She already knew who I was for she had helped tend me when I was sick. She didn't seem to care if I was part Atapi. I let Tenkin take Jahni to bed and went gratefully to mine.

The screams woke me again but they weren't prolonged. I listened and heard movement in the outer suite. I slipped out of bed and opened the door. The nurse was restraining her patient with difficulty. Mistress Mosellan was trying to walk or force her way to the main door. I slipped out and helped direct her back to bed. Once again, Ellhi Mosellan was still asleep and not aware of what she was doing. When we put her back to bed she began to moan and callout. It sounded like a name.

"Poor lady," Ressa tutted. "Calling for her poor sister. Poor Suni."

Sister?

I tried to pay more attention to what Ellhi was saying even though it sounded like raving. I mentally thanked my merciless teachers of the evening. I had learnt a lot of Kumatan words – surprising them and myself. Yet the gist of the raving still made no sense.

I remembered and tried to make sense of Ellhi's raving, after we had settled her. I returned to my bed and fell asleep trying to make sense of it.

The following days were much a repeat of the previous one. Mistress Mosellan was calmer at the start of the day and when she wasn't making me scrub and clean, amused herself by making me run all over the house getting things for her. Or making me return things she claimed I got wrongly. I didn't complain. It got me away from her, legitimately. Poor Jahni, however, was being forced to stay close to his mother.

I gained an excellent knowledge of the layout of the house and the Kumatan servants got used to seeing me and soon lost their fear of me. Some even began to tease me. I grinned at them, enjoying running, even if it was only within the house. Mind you, I hitched up my hated dress for running, stopping to pull it down before I re-entered the suite. I wasn't about to let her yell at me for being indecent.

During my 'running around', I practiced speaking Kumatan, which was another way to convince the servants I was harmless. They laughed at my mistakes and were happy to correct my pronunciation. My teachers, Tenkin and Benku, kept at me in the evenings after Ellhi Mosellan fell asleep.

Mistress Mosellan's apparent calmness and politeness usually lasted until after my return from lunch, which I now had with the other servants.

She hadn't tired of the game of making me run everywhere, but she was getting me to start other tasks, and then interrupting me to send me running again. One day, I had made three efforts to finish washing the windows, when she interrupted me again to complain about my slow work on them. I tried to ignore her.

She didn't want to be ignored. She wanted to complain that I couldn't finish a task before starting another. I wanted to yell back that if I tried, she would be screaming at me.

Finally, I lost my temper. "Will you just SHUT UP?" I yelled. "I am not going to do anything else until I have finished the five tasks that you wanted done so urgently." Into the unexpected silence, I added, "While I am doing them, Jahni is expected to be with Tenkin and Antel to learn self-defence and you – if you were smart – would learn too."

"Never!" she screamed back at me. "I would never demean myself to tussle with the lower orders. I am the Traeger's wife, mother of his heir. Their duty is to protect me."

"All very well in theory," I agreed, amused by how quickly she had bitten at the idea. "But I reckon it's better to rely on yourself."

"Never!"

I shrugged. "I really don't care if the Atapi attack here again and take you. But I didn't save your son only to give him to them again. And I certainly won't let them get me."

"My husband saved my son!"

"Then why didn't he save your sister?"

She ran forward and slapped my face.

"Maman! She did save me," Jahni yelled from the couch where he'd been wriggling with increasing desire to be free.

"Keep out of this you disloyal little toad. Go to your lessons – right now."

Jahni raced for the door, afraid his mother would change her mind. I winked at him as he passed. Four hours of being petted, hugged and kissed by his mother was too much for any active child.

"Why didn't you save my sister?" Ellhi hissed.

"She was unhurt and able to struggle. Jahni was unconscious and slung over someone's shoulder. He was about to be tossed onto the road to be squashed by a car." I deliberately painted a horrible word picture.

"Atapi bitch. My sister is probably dead because of you."

"If anything – I am a human bitch. And I couldn't save them both. And I didn't even know Atapi existed then."

"I don't believe you. Spy! Traitor!"

"I can only be a traitor if I am Kumatan," I said to provoke a reaction.

"You... You..." she seemed unable to speak, so I took the opportunity to tell her a few things.

"Me! The Atapi want me dead. Do you know that? They had me – but I got away. Do you know how? Because I didn't do what they expected. All their naughty males and females sit nicely in their dark dungeon. I didn't."

"You wouldn't want to stay there," Ellhi found her voice and for once, it wasn't shrill, but normal.

"Exactly. Remember I said I hadn't known about them when I saved Jahni? They saw that I had Atapi blood and that I looked like some traitorous female and assumed that I would act in a certain predictable way. Being human – I acted human."

She had to consider what I said since she probably didn't understand all I said. "How did you get away?" she asked.

I told her as best I could; we still had some conversational gaps. She got the idea though and from the evil gleam in her eyes, she relished the idea.

“The way I see it – Atapi women are pretty docile, and Kumatan women in the upper levels are too,” I explained further, adding to myself, “Mostly.” I didn’t know how long this current truce would last and ‘docile’ wouldn’t describe her recent behaviour.

“So,” I continued, “If they attacked you, they’d expect you to be helpless – easy meat.”

She hissed at me. “Teach me to fight!”

I looked at her face, saw determination, and nodded.

The first thing I did was to go and lock the door. The second was to shuck off the dress so that I only wore the short under tunic and my underthings.

Ellhi looked shocked. I said quickly, “I can’t fight in a dress. You can try it if you want. Dresses catch on things, trip you up and do half of your enemies work for them.”

She looked questioningly at me and left her outer dress on. I soon proved my point. After a while she was as scantily clad as I was.

No one had taught me to fight. I had learned my watching my brothers brawling. Unlike them, I didn’t follow any arbitrary rules. What I did, was show Ellhi some things she could do. I demonstrated them on her – gently – then had her try them on me. Then I showed her how to block them.

We stopped in time to tidy ourselves before anyone was due to visit. I really didn’t know what Traeger would think if he saw Ellhi and I brawling like – a couple of bitches.

Ellhi was worn out. I felt stronger than I had for ages. I got her a cool drink and pushed my luck on the truce. “You could ask your husband to teach you.”

“He’s too busy.”

“What about letting Tenkin or Antel teach us? Or are there any skilled women fighters?”

“Why would you learn from them?” I was asked.

I grinned evilly. “The more tricks I know – the more nasty surprises I could give an enemy.”

She smiled back a matching grin. “Would you ... ask my husband about this?”

“Ah! Yeah, Um...”

“It isn’t something a well bred woman would do – but if it is a good idea for a human woman – he’ll listen to you.”

He would?

“Um, ok. I’ll ask him that – if you can arrange for me to wear things that aren’t dresses. Something more like the males wear.”

I got a genuine smile from her. I was asking for help on a subject that I was abysmal at.

“I think we can figure something out,” she agreed. She held out her hand, took mine and gripped it firmly, eased it and gripped again. I copied the gesture.

I think, at that moment, we became friends.

Chapter 15

I grew to understand Ellhi Mosellan but I still didn't know the cause of her nightmares. Everyone else assumed that it was because she had been attacked and her son and servant abducted. Yet she was physically well, her son was safe and emotionally fine, only her servant – her sister – was missing.

It was possible, I supposed, that they were really close. Not like me and my sisters. I wouldn't care if they vanished.

At night, Ellhi was drugged to sleep. Otherwise she would be awake most of the night. Yet even with the drug, her sleep wasn't restful. This was part of the cause of her irascible temper. The rest, I decided was the sub-conscious worry about her sister, and having nothing useful to do to take her mind off it.

Since I had begun fighting lessons and language lessons with her, and she had started designing and making clothes I would be happy in, she seemed calmer. She also stopped wearing dark purple and black and reverted to pale blue and lilac. I, as her servant, still had to wear white.

Traeger noticed Ellhi's improvement; I suspected it was a relief for him. He asked me how I had done it. I only said that I was giving her something useful to do, to take her mind off her missing servant. He accepted that and I took the chance to suggest that the daytime drug she was being given, be stopped.

After some consideration, he agreed, but he insisted that I tell him if she relapsed. I agreed, but I wasn't in agreement with the healer's treatment. It felt wrong, but I had no medical knowledge to be able to say why.

I kept Ellhi's mind occupied as much as possible, but even though she was much better, she would suddenly burst into tears for no apparent reason. The first time it happened when the healer was present and the man immediately sedated her. I gritted my teeth and didn't say what I thought. I suggested to Traeger that she needed time and not to agree to more drugs yet.

The second time, we were alone. I held her as if she were a child, rocking with her and resting my head on hers. Odd visions came into my mind and I wondered if I were sharing Ellhi's thoughts and if she were seeing something through someone else's mind. The places I saw could have been memories from anywhere.

Then I saw Lammond's mansion and his guest room – and I knew.

That night Ellhi slipped her pills to me and pretended to fall asleep. I had slipped half a pill into nurse Ressa's drink and lay awake until I thought she had dozed off. She never stirred when I slipped past her.

In her room, Ellhi was still awake - too frightened to sleep. I slipped onto the bed and hugged her from behind. Her husband would have comforted her better but Traeger hadn't slept there since Jahni's abduction. With me there, she slipped into sleep. I stayed awake, waiting for the nightmares to start. They were following an almost predictable pattern.

What Ellhi dreamed, I saw. A glimpse of a face in a mirror revealed the truth to me. When Ellhi moaned and cried, her sister was being hurt. When Ellhi screamed, it was her sister screaming. Through the eyes of Suni – I saw other women, some as young as me, being taken by men. Mostly the men were human, but some were bug-eyed, narrow faced, dark haired Atapi.

The worst, most mind punishing part of the visions and thoughts I was sharing was Suni's knowledge that none of the men using her body were Kumatan. In her culture, such cross species intercourse was taboo – in her mind, it was totally and utterly perverted.

I nudged Ellhi from nightmare to waking vision. She began to cry softly.

"I can still see it. I can't stop it," she whispered.

I hugged her, and said, "I don't know if this will work, but I want you to think at her as if you know she can hear you. Tell her that help will come."

After a while Ellhi said, "I think – she heard me. She said my name. But who will help her? Jenha can't find her."

"I don't know who can help, yet," I admitted, trying to think of a plan to help Suni.

"Why can I see what is happening? It's awful," Ellhi said, her voice husky from crying.

"Yes," I agreed. "It's obscene. Some of those girls are barely old enough and that old man – with the big eyes – he likes breaking them and stealing their minds. Suni is strong, she's fighting him. If I am not wrong, she is drawing on your strength too."

I thought to myself that John the mechanic's sister had been lucky. I'd made my own luck. I was not interested in such a life.

"I have to talk to Traeger," I said aloud. "But until morning, as long as you are awake, think at her, ask her to tell you anything she can about where she is."

"Is this real?"

"Yes – it's real. I saw a face in a room that I know. A room where you could never have been."

"Why can I see it?" Ellhi asked.

I shrugged. She felt the movement. "It's like my twin brothers. Nick was digging at the bottom of the farm when he slipped and broke his arm. Mark was about the house and he acted like he had broken his."

"Twin?" Ellhi questioned the meaning of the word.

"Yeah. Those two were born ten minutes apart."

"Like Suni and me."

Like I thought.

Ellhi now seemed determined to help her sister. I suggested she try to asleep when I left to return to my room. I needed to think before I spoke to Traeger.

"A very imaginative story," Traeger commented after I had carefully explained Ellhi's dreams in the context of what I knew.

"Don't you care?" I demanded.

"I do, of course," he said. "But my wife is a very disturbed woman at the moment. She cannot accept that her sister is probably dead."

"Probably is not positively," I said, trying to remain calm. "And there are things worse than death."

"So why do you think that you need to go down to the human town and look around?"

"Because I am human. And I know the place where Suni might be."

"No! I will not allow it."

I clenched my fists and tried to find the logic I needed to convince him.

"Do you forget that the police there want you for assault?" Traeger reminded me. "And that if you leave here, the Atapi will find you. They will be aware because of the slave bands that you still wear."

"N..oo," I said slowly. I hadn't known that the bands would attract the Atapi.

"I will talk again to the ones humans call police."

"No!" I shook my head urgently. "There are Atapi in human form in the police."

Traeger looked at me with more interest. "Really?"

I told him about the ones that had been looking for me.

"Then it is too dangerous for you to go," Traeger stressed.

"I'm onto them now. I know which ones to avoid."

"Perhaps you do," Traeger allowed. "I will look into this and let you know what will be done." He indicated that I should go, but I dawdled towards the door. I had other reasons for wanting to go to the town.

"Why else do you want to go there so badly?"

I jumped, surprised by the question. I wondered again if he could sense my thoughts the way I had come to be able to sense those of the Atapi or of Ellhi. I turned slowly, not sure what he would make of my reason.

"Old Lammond – the one I kicked in the man bits – he's the one that is tormenting Suni most. He's done things like that to other girls."

"Explain further."

"I think he's Atapi, but he doesn't look bug-eyed. But one of the bug-eyed police claimed to be his son. And...I think I saw that sorcerer once – in his house."

I didn't miss the feral gleam in Traeger's eyes.

"Yes, I will need to deal with this. Tell me, do humans allow men to imprison women so that they can mate with them?"

"It's not legal – but there are still whore houses around."

"What are they?"

"Um, I think where the women get paid money to allow men to 'attempt to mate'."

He asked me a lot of quick questions that I couldn't answer.

"I don't know any of that. Its stuff men don't talk to their wives about and if they discuss it with their buddies, it's usually when they think no women are around."

Traeger leant back and contemplated.

I added, as an after thought, "The place where Suni is, I don't think the women are there by choice."

Finally Traeger spoke. "What did you think to do?"

"I was going to talk to John the mechanic and see if he'd heard any rumours of such a place. And I was going to talk to his sister to see if she can add anything to what I know. If that didn't help, I was going to sneak around Lammond's mansion. I distinctly saw his face and a room in his house. Suni was there, at least once."

That was as far as my thinking had got. "Then if I found Suni I was going to get her out. If I met Lammond, I was going to finish the job I had started."

Traeger frowned at that.

"If this Lammond is Atapi, killing him will make him revert to his true form. The humans must not see that. There are other ways to remove him."

Traeger ways, I guessed. He changed the subject. "You say you can pick an Atapi in human form – how?"

"They all look related," I tried to explain. "I think the form they manage looks – odd. One of them by themselves would simply seem to be an ugly looking person, like Lammond. But when I saw others, it stands out."

"Very well, I will use your help."

"But you said these bands would attract them," I said. That idea scared me.

"I can mask their effect," Traeger said.

"You can remove them, can't you?" I suggested.

He looked at me then, thinking things I couldn't fathom.

"I think not. Not until I know why they put them on you."

"Huh? I was their prisoner."

"Did those others in the Atapi prison wear them? Does Suni in Ellhi's dream?"

“No. But perhaps it was because I was a human and they were going to kill me?”

Traeger shook his head, but didn't enlighten me any further.

“Go back to your work, Jai Cassidy,” he instructed. “I will speak to Inspector Holt. He is a meticulous investigator.”

I knew that name. He threatened me with the county detention centre if I was caught at more mischief. Thinking of his face, I didn't think he was bug-eyed.

It was two days later when I was brushing Ellhi's hair that Traeger entered with another man. I looked up and the brush dropped from my hand. I recognised the newcomer, he wasn't in uniform but had a badge attached to his jacket pocket. He was studying me intently.

“Jai,” Traeger spoke softly, “Inspector Holt and I would like to talk to you in my study.”

Ellhi grasped my hand. I gave hers a squeeze. She had just calmed down from another bout of crying and her eyes were still red. I picked up the brush, put it on a little table, and rubbed my suddenly sweaty palms on the white dress I wore. I felt one step away from a police cell.

Still, I had no choice about talking with him and I wasn't going to run away, not now that I knew how easily the Atapi could find me. So I followed Traeger and his guest in silence and growing trepidation.

Traeger had placed a seat next to his desk for his guest. I stood as usual, five feet away from the desk.

“You don't have to stand so far away, Miss Cassidy,” Inspector Holt commented. His tone was friendly, amused.

Traeger nodded very slightly, and I inched closer.

“When Ambassador Mosellan told me you were working for him and he was very pleased with you, I didn't believe him,” Holt commented, with a smile.

I kept my mouth shut and my mind echoed “ambassador”. Is that what Traeger told the humans he was?

Holt's smile broadened. He was probably enjoying seeing me tamed. Little did he know! He could think what he liked. Instead of scaring me into behaving, he had inspired me to run away.

“Are you happy here?” he asked unexpectedly.

I shrugged. “It's okay.”

“They work you hard?”

“Yeah, but that's okay.”

“I had you pegged as someone who hated work,” he admitted.

I smiled faintly. “I would have preferred to help my brothers with the farm stuff.”

The inspector chuckled. “Yet here I see you in a dress.”

I blushed, recognising the irony of that fact. “Mrs Mosellan is making me tunic and trousers.”

His laugh wasn't malicious and I smiled wryly back at him. Then he sobered.

“It seems that, given a chance, you can be a good citizen. I think putting you in a detention centre would push you the wrong way. And I believe that a judge might agree to suspend any sentence and leave you in Ambassador Mosellan's employ.”

“Really?” I asked, filling with relief.

The Inspector nodded. “Now, Ambassador Mosellan tells me that you don't believe that Olivier Lammond is a nice elderly philanthropist?”

I glanced at Traeger before answering, but he had no need to tell me what I couldn't say.

I told the Inspector how I had met Lammond and of his concern for me and kindness. That I had gone to his house for a decent meal, and a bath, even if he had said about taking me to the sheriff. Even now, I resented how he had fooled me. I went on talking; up to the point where the creep had tried to rape me and I had defended myself.

“Did he say that his gifts required a favour from you?” Holt asked.

“No, he just came to me some time after the meal as if he expected me to let him do what he wanted.”

Holt asked more questions and I gave honest answers.

“Why didn’t you come forward and report him?” Holt finally asked.

“Me?” I stared back at the policeman, implying that no one would listen to me. As it was, his colleagues had believed that slimy old toad, Lammond.

The Inspector stared at me thoughtfully. I didn’t sense disbelief.

“Did you see any other women?”

I shook my head. “When I was in his house, I only saw one dim-witted servant.”

“Can you describe the room in his house?”

I could and did, from my own memory and from Suni/Ellhi’s vision.

The Inspector nodded, as if my description agreed with his own memory. “And you know of another girl, Lammond had?”

“John, the mechanic at the Wetherby petrol station – his sister.”

Another nod, then, “And you think there are policemen involved in this business?”

“I don’t know. I just know that I heard one policeman saying that Lammond was his father.”

“How did you hear that?” Holt sounded sceptical.

I grinned. “The guy was no more than three feet from me.”

This time the Inspector shook his head. I wondered what he thought of such blind subordinates.

“Thank you, Miss Cassidy. I will investigate the matter carefully and discretely. I hope you will stay here as I might need to talk to you again.”

I nodded. I had no intention of leaving just then. It felt good that I had been treated like a decent woman, but I doubted that Holt would be able to find anything on Lammond. The Atapi posing as police would be quick to cover up their activities if they got wind of an investigation. Still, there was nothing I could do, yet. And to be honest, I was relieved that I didn’t have to go near that creep.

Chapter 16

Ellhi had questions for me that I couldn't answer. I went back to brushing her hair so that I could think over the interview. I was sure there were things that Traeger and the policemen knew and didn't tell me.

Later, Traeger came to the suite.

"Well done, Jai Cassidy, you helped the Inspector and kept our secret."

"Well, if I had started mentioning bug-eyed monsters, he'd have thought me balmy," I retorted. "I'm human, as I keep telling every one. I know how humans think!"

"Yes, I am coming to appreciate that," Traeger admitted. "I will tell you something I was told in confidence. It isn't only Suni that has gone missing. Human women have disappeared that were known to have been in this area. If they have been taken by the Atapi, and are at this place that you saw – then for helping the human police to discover it, we will be in their favour. Any charges against you may be forgotten."

I'd wait and see about that. I was more interested in knowing how Traeger would deal with Lammond and get him out from the custody of the police. I shrugged as a reply to the comment, and kept silent.

"Do you expect the policeman to find Ellhi's sister?" I voiced my doubts.

"He has means that I do not," Traeger answered obliquely.

"And I assume you have some that he doesn't. Including knowing that the villains are aliens."

"Indeed. What do you think the Atapi would do if they knew I was looking for them?"

"Hide!" I said at once. "And take Suni with them."

"And if the humans were looking?"

I thought about that. "I don't know, really. They probably don't think that humans would be a big threat, since they have been fooling us for years, it seems."

"Indeed," Traeger said again. This time his face and voice were grimmer. Then he made a startling admission. "My people and I have looked everywhere for Suni. Until you came to me with your story, I believed she had to be dead. An Atapi sorcerer must be shielding the place they have her."

"Well, I doubt the police will find her," I stated.

"In your vision, there are humans as well as Atapi. Therefore the place is accessible to humans."

I began to understand. "So if the police find the human women..."

"I will know where to look harder."

"What if you still can't," I asked. "And the police can't?"

"Have you a suggestion?"

"Not really...I just thought that if you find the place – I could pretend to be a male and look around."

Traeger shook his head. "Have you forgotten they want to kill you?"

"No!" I assured him with a shudder. "But I can change how I look – hair colour, clothes etc. They didn't recognise my heritage until they noticed I healed fast. I could probably get John the mechanic to help me. I'm sure he would, to revenge his sister."

"We must wait and see," Traeger decided.

Two weeks later, Traeger told me that the police had found nothing and that Inspector Holt wanted to see me. I wasn't afraid this time, though we would be going down to the town, and that would feel strange.

We walked up the trail from the Kumatan village, to the ridge that overlooked it. We went further and came to the top of a steep downward slope. Traeger led the way between two trees, and as I passed that place, I felt as if I was about to black out. Traeger grasped me by the arm, and the sensation passed. It was odd, because I have never been afraid of heights.

We met the policeman at a small guest house on the edge of Wetherby. Once again, he had his badge pinned to the pocket civilian suit, and I was still in the white tunic and trouser suit Ellhi had made me. He had usurped the use of the lounge room, and provided morning tea. As I began eating apple pie and cream, an apprehensive John the Mechanic was ushered in. He recognised me and gave me a faint grin, but he relaxed, seeing me acting unfazed.

Inspector Holt greeted him, offered him pie and when John declined, got straight to the point.

"Miss Cassidy has suggested that you might be willing to help the police with an investigation into Olivier Lammond and a possible prostitution matter."

John's look turned feral. "I'm listening."

"We have reason to believe that he might be involved in luring young women - ones with no family or few friends, into his employ to become prostitutes. This area seems central to a number of reported disappearances. So far, none of my people have been able to find any leads."

John stated what I hadn't dared to, "They aren't stupid - one hint of police interest would make them hide."

"I have had undercover detectives looking for a long time," Holt told him.

"I am sure they are good men," John began carefully, "but it would only take one suspicious stranger to spook such people. And most policemen look too honest and nice to be wanting to find a brothel to romp in."

Holt grimaced; perhaps he had already come to that conclusion. I wondered if his honest crew of seekers had any Atapi changelings in it.

"I wonder, Mr Masterton, if you had heard of any place where a brothel might be?"

John thought for a while. "I might have. I stopped at the Wyburn hotel bar, while I was looking for my sister. There was a table of blokes asking the barman about girls, and nudging each other. I figured what they were on about, and the idea made me feel sick. However, the barman gave them a card and the men went off."

Holt looked interested.

"We asked around in that bar..." Holt commented.

John shrugged. "Send in some half-drunk louts and see what you get!"

I spoke up. "What about a young man who wants to make a man of his young cousin?"

"You?" John snorted.

"Why not? I don't look like a proper girl, and everyone gave up trying to make a lady of me," I saw his glance at my clothes and added, "Ok, I've been a bit mental lately. You could lend me some boy clothes."

"What if they recognise you," Holt asked.

"I promise. I won't look like me and two furtive young men shouldn't raise suspicions. Or maybe you would prefer to use a deceptively helpless female to be bait for the whore pinchers?"

Holt shuddered. "I don't like either idea," he admitted, then glanced at Traeger, who merely nodded back.

"I'm in," John announced.

"So am I," I stated, daring any objections.

Traeger remained quiet while Holt told us how to contact him and some more details of what he suspected. Then Traeger gestured me over for a few private words before I could leave with John.

"I don't want to lose you," he said softly. I took that to mean that I had better not run away from him. He touched where the slave bands were hidden by my sleeves. "I have hidden them so that the Atapi won't be aware of them. However, I can still sense them and I will be keeping track of you. If you find Suni, touch them and think at me. I will come as fast as possible."

"What about Lammond?" I asked.

"If you get close to him, on your own, do the same. I can bind him in human form so that the police can take him and even if he dies he won't change."

I grinned. I had just learnt something about Traeger's powers; even if I didn't know what to do about it.

John drove us away from the guesthouse. It felt odd to be away from Traeger, but it seemed that I was so used to his having control of me that I felt he was still close. In an odd way – I felt safe.

We went first to the church charity shop at the end of Wetherby's main street. There John helped me rummage through the racks to find boys clothes to fit me. He thought I had grown, but I was still much shorter than he was his clothes would be much too big on me.

Our next stop was the public toilets near the park, so I could change into the trousers, shirt and a loose fitting woollen vest. It didn't take me long, and I shoved my white servant's outfit into the plastic shopping bag. Then I used John's pocketknife to hack my hair short and shaggy. I felt like a different person as I trotted back to John's car.

Only then did John take me to the town barber. We'd agreed that I was to pretend to be his younger cousin. I slumped in the barber's chair and tried to act as if it wasn't a completely new experience. Before this, my mother had always cut my hair, and then with a struggle. I recognised some of the smells in the place, one was the scent of Brylcreem that my father used on his hair, and another was the shampoo he used. John told the tubby little Italian barber that we had a double date and I had to look nice for the girls. He chuckled at my discomfort and set to work. I watched my hair fall onto the floor and was amused by how the clippers turned me into a fair looking boy. I reckoned I was better looking than my brothers. I had no complaint about the final result. No one would think I was a girl and I liked the short hair.

Later in the day, we visited the Wyburn Hotel. It was on the road out of Wetherby, heading away from Crystal Brook. I wasn't sure what to expect, since I had never been in a bar before and I had never tasted beer. I found I quite liked it but I drank my small drink very slowly and imagined my mother's horror if she knew I was here.

Before we came, we had practiced our conversation. We wanted an observer to be able to figure out what we were indirectly discussing and hopefully one would give us the "card" we needed to find the whorehouse.

This place was one of several possibilities proposed by Holt. We chose it because it was somewhere around here that John's sister had been abducted.

No one would suspect us to be spies. We were simply a couple of young males out for mischief. We spoke softly, and acted furtive and secretive as if we were doing something others wouldn't approve of. We had the bar tender's attention; he spent a lot of time polishing nearby empty tables. Of course we were aware of him and strayed off the topic every so often.

We sat sipping beer and talking for two hours before getting up to leave. The bar was getting busy by then. The barman watched us stagger very slightly towards the door and intercepted us as we passed the bar.

"You off then?" he asked casually.

“Yup,” John said with a burp. “Gotta date, I hope.”

“Ah, girls,” the barman nodded sagely. “I know a few good’ uns.”

John looked interested. “Really? Would one be interested in a date? My kid cousin wouldn’t have to tag along then.”

“You’d have to ask,” the barman shrugged. “But you’ll find them here.” He handed John a card. “Tell them Morrie sent you.”

John glanced at the card and nudged me in the ribs. We grinned at Morrie and left, heads close together and talking in low voices. We went directly to John’s car, and wasted no time leaving.

Once we were well away, John stopped his car in a quiet, hidden spot. It was growing dark and we needed to use the dim interior light to look at the card again. On the back was a tiny map of the district with several places marked in ink.

“No way,” John muttered and scratched his head. “I know this area. There’s no house around there.”

I took the card; it didn’t feel like any paper or card I’d touched before. It was too smooth and almost shiny. I glanced at the back of the card as John stared out the side window.

“What about other buildings – shops, barns...”

“Harris’s burnt out barn,” John thought aloud. “It hasn’t been used for years. I’ve been there – it’s empty.”

“When did you go?” I asked.

“A few months ago – when Sherri was missing.”

I thought the place would be nearer Lammond’s place, but, “We might as well follow the directions and see where we get.”

John shrugged and we drove in the dark along the road to the first of the landmarks inked on the card, and followed the implied directions. Finally, the narrow dirt road opened onto a cleared area near a gate. We got out; John grabbed a torch and locked the car. The map directions led us from the gate along a little used track. John knew where it was meant to go and kept making sceptical grunts. Further along, I sensed watchers and smelt them.

“I reckon that Morrie’s doing one on us.” John said as we ambled along in the evening gloom.

“Let’s keep going,” I urged. If Atapi were watching this track we were heading the right way. I was relieved that they hadn’t reacted to the slave bands.

The track climbed a short way. At the top of the slope, John seemed to trip and I sensed a feeling of dislocation. I’d felt such a feeling before, coming from the Kumatan village. The sensation passed and we walked to a curve in the track.

Through the trees ahead, we saw a glow and that drew us onward. Around another bend we came to a clearing. This was where the light was coming from. A huge two storey house with the look of a barn, dominated our view. Along the sides, under the eaves of both levels, were lights shining down the white painted sides. We stopped to take in the sight, and I heard several horses moving restlessly in a corral this side of the house.

“Which end do you reckon we go in?” John whispered the question.

I heard what sounded like a car door shutting. Voices, quiet but carrying, seemed to come from the right. I nudged John that way. From this side, two windows on the upper level showed cracks of light from the edges of closed curtains.

We moved towards the end of the house, keeping to the tree line. The light had become brighter in the direction we were going, and when we were far enough around, we saw it came from a huge double doorway. The light from it was so bright that we couldn’t see the men who were talking, only hear their shoes crunching on the gravel path, and then their silhouettes as they entered the door. There were a few moments of audible music that stopped

as the two halves of the door slid shut behind the men. Our night vision gradually returned and we could then see that there were windows either side of the door, like dull red glows, and above the door was a single white light shining down.

"This isn't possible," John muttered softly. "We should be at Harris's, but it never looked like this."

"It's huge," was all I could think of to say.

From the end, the building was an odd shape. The top level was half the width of the lower one and seemed to have been added as an after thought. A wide roof sloped down from under the level of the upstairs windows. I'd not seen a place like this. I mean, the barn on my father's farm had been big – had to be to store hay and the cows in really foul weather, as well as the milking stuff, but it had only been one level.

John was staring at the building, showing no sign of wanting to go in.

"I can't see a sign on it," I commented.

"Well, they wouldn't want casual people finding it," John supposed distractedly. "I don't get it – even before the place burnt down, it never had all those upstairs windows, or those near the door. Harris was a feed and stock merchant. He used the upper level to store hay and the far end of the ground floor to store oats, rye, horse feed and stuff, and this end had stables for the horses he sold."

"Maybe someone did it up," I suggested.

"In a couple of months? No way! And if someone had, the whole district would know," John said positively.

I had to agree, and I remembered a couple of other things - that women had been missing from around here for some years, and I had experienced that odd dislocation just down the track.

"Let's look around a bit more," John suggested.

Perhaps John had doubts, but I didn't. If the Atapi were watching, it was the right place.

We edged around to the far side of the building and saw a car park. There were three cars there and John whistled softly in appreciation.

"A Fairlane 500, a Chevy Impala and a Mainline," John identified. "Two of those must be just out of the showroom. Classy! I wonder who they belong to."

"Rich men who probably don't want to be seen," I said snidely, as a warning. "We could have driven here."

"Can you imagine my beetle next to those," John snorted quietly.

"Well, do we go in?" I suggested. "This has to be the place."

As John dithered, the big doors slid open again, and we quickly moved away from the car park. We saw two men stride out jauntily and walk towards the corral.

"Has to be the place, I know those two," John told me. "Sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah, I want Lammond in jail." I really wanted him dead.

"Right," John said as he straightened. "Let's go back to where we came in and go from there."

We did that, using the light from the still open doors to see our way, and I had the sense of being watched from close by. We were both surprised when a tall dark shape appeared in front of us.

"Are you lost?" a man's voice with a faint accent asked politely.

I tried to see the man's face, but I couldn't see him clearly. All I could tell, from the reflection of the light in his eyes, that they bulged slightly in the way I associated with changed Atapi. I sniffed, and under the smell of his aftershave, and what I had put on, I did get a faint whiff of Atapi musk.

John recovered quickly from his fright, and waved the card and spoke in an exaggeratedly slurred whisper. "We were invited. Where's the front door?"

“I will show you the way,” the man offered, politely, but I felt he was patronising us.

I tried to imitate John’s tipsy teetering, and nudged him back when he elbowed me and said, “Come on, Cuz.”

We must have passed the test, if this guard had no suspicions of us. Surely if he had, he would have insisted we went on our way. All I sensed from this one was that he was herding us like sheep to be fleeced. Still, we needed to get inside, and not raise suspicions, so we both trotted as if eagerly, behind him.

As we passed through the big sliding doors, I let my hand touch the wood and felt not the smooth finished wood my eyes saw, but wood that was rough and weathered by the rain and sun. I pushed that thought aside for later consideration.

I could tell our escort had neatly barbered black hair, slicked down with Brylcreem, and his suit looked expensive, but my attention was drawn from him to the room we had entered.

At John’s startled exclamation, and I moved around our escort to see what John was gawking at. I goggled; this room was opulence beyond my imagination.

Only in a movie, had I seen a chandelier, but here there was a real one, holding dozens of candles. It hung low, from the lofty roof beams. The light reflected from mirrors that were placed at intervals around the room between potted trees and the tall windows covered by heavy velvet drapes. The effect was to make this hall area seem ten times bigger. I noticed then that there were couches between the potted trees, and ashtrays on stands by each, and in the far wall, three doorways, one of which was open and showed the base of a staircase.

In one of the mirrors, I caught sight of the face of our escort. The left side of his face was warped by an ugly red scar from cheek to chin, and his attempt at a smile was more like a mocking leer. I shivered, glad when that man turned and went back out the door.

A well-dressed man approached us from behind a chest high pulpit like stand just inside the door and examined the card that the publican had given John. I hadn’t seen him until he moved. He was Atapi too, but one much better at shape changing than any other I had met. I could smell Atapi – but he could not smell me beneath the litre of cologne that I had put on.

I let John do the talking, and we exchanged looks when the man calmly told us the ‘price’ for a date with one of the girls. We put our heads together and checked our pockets. John didn’t have enough money for two.

“You go,” John whispered. “You know what to look for. I’ll see if they let me wait down here.” He gave me a shove and said in a normal voice, “Go on! I’ve done it before; you go and be a man. I’ll wait here if it’s okay?”

The man nodded at John, took the money and pointed to one of the couches. I glanced at John, and then scampered to follow the man. I moved close enough to him to make him uncomfortable and to lose his slightly superior smirk when he saw I was almost walking on his heels.

The stairs rose up through a dimly lit area. I sensed space beside the stairs, but couldn’t see into it. I smelt a vague musty smell. Then we reached a brightly lit area, that was as impressive as the one below but the main room here was occupied by women in varying stages of dress and in a range of age groups. All were sprawled on the velvet-covered couches or velvet floor cushions in poses that would have scandalised my mother. I didn’t see Suni, but although I had hoped to, I wasn’t surprised. I reckoned Lammond would keep her close for his own amusement or for favoured clients.

“Maybelle would suit you, I think,” my escort stated. A scantily clad woman, a great deal older than me, unwrapped herself from one of the couches and approached and thrust a provocative hip in my direction. She repelled me.

“I can show you a good first time, honey,” she promised with a practiced come-hither smile.

I shook my head and pointed to a younger woman, no more than a girl, who was trying to hide in a corner between one of the real looking potted plants and a couch.

"I'd like her," I said, and to the other woman, "No offence, miss, but you seem old enough to be my mother." For some reason, some of the girls laughed.

My escort gestured sharply. The girl I had chosen wasn't laughing, even though she sashayed over with the same sort of smile as the older woman.

"Honeybelle," he introduced us. "This is ..."

"Jack," I supplied, smiling at the girl. She forced a smile and took my hand.

"Is this your first time, Honey?" she asked in a dead voice. "I like virgin boys."

Her eyes told me something else.

"I think you are beautiful," I told her. The face smiled. The eyes didn't. I let her draw me along a passage to a room which proved to be much more homely than the rest of the place.

The room smelt vaguely of cigar smoke, and an ashtray on a stand by the door still had a powdering of ash in it. I looked further in, and saw the bed and the small nightstand beside it. There was an oil lamp on the wall above the bed, showing the bed was made, but not with the attention to detail that my mother had insisted on. Beyond the bed was a window, covered as the ones downstairs had been, with thick red velvet.

I took all that in as the girl closed the door behind me. She moved past me, walking on the thick floor rug, not the wooden floor. A musky smell rose from the carpet, and it made my head swim a little. I realised with dismay, that the girl was undoing the buttons on the fancy petticoat she had been wearing.

I suddenly realised that she would think me a boy and I had no idea how to act in this situation. It was my hope that this girl didn't want to be here and would help me. But what if I was wrong? What if she made a fuss if she discovered I was a girl?

"Uh – could we just talk a bit at first?" I suggested as a delaying tactic.

She stared at me. "If that's what you want, honey." She didn't do her front up, but sat on the bed with her breasts exposed and patted the space beside her. I went over but didn't sit too close.

"No need to be shy, honey," she said. "I can make your first time really fun."

"This was my cousin's idea," I said, feeling uncomfortable. It was not just because of the situation, but because I felt we were being watched.

"Will it be fun for you too?" I asked, and once again got that dull eyed smile.

"Of course, honey."

I leant closer and whispered, "They don't watch us do they?"

She leant towards me and began to move her hands up under the vest, as if about to undress me. I hurriedly pushed them down, but I saw the girl's expression change.

She laughed and whispered back as she put her arms around me. "Not under the blankets, bitch. What are you doing here?"

I blushed, but said softly, "I didn't come for sex. I want your help. Do you know Suni?"

She said aloud, "If you are shy, lover boy, you can undress in bed. Come on – we don't have all night."

I took off my knitted vest and shoes, and let the girl draw me under the sheets. They felt silky under my hands, but smelt as if they desperately needed washing.

"What do you want?" the girl asked me as she pretended to kiss me with one arm around my neck, the other moving under the sheet.

I explained, by whispering into her ear, that I was looking for Suni – that her family wanted her back. The girl squeezed my arm.

"Take me away too," she hissed.

"That's what we want to do," I told her. "The police want the people in charge." I really hoped that this girl wouldn't tell anyone what I had said.

Without prompting, the girl rolled on top of me and pretended we were – well – doing it. The squeaking springs covered our quiet conversation.

“I know Suni, but she usually isn’t here. The boss keeps her for special clients. I’m glad it’s not me. If I see her, I might be able to give her a message.”

I thought for a moment. “Tell her you met someone Ellhi sent.”

The girl nodded.

“Where do they keep Suni?”

“Somewhere in the boss’s house. I’ve been there twice.”

“How do you get there?” I asked.

“Through the middle door in the lounge downstairs,” she said at once.

That seemed odd. I thought Lammond’s house was no where near here.

As we continued to feign “doing it” I asked, “Have you tried to leave?”

“There’s no where to go,” Honeybelle said with resignation. “Two girls left and walked for two days and found no houses or anything. Eventually they brought them back ...how did you get here?”

“Walked,” I said, confused. “There is a hotel a couple of miles away to the west and a town a few miles to the east and farms, north and south.”

Before we could talk more, the lights went out. Honeybelle went still and seemed to be listening. I could only hear our own breathing.

“Get dressed,” the girl ordered, though we hadn’t got undressed. “We’ve got trouble.”

“What?”

“Police nosing around,” she said. “You’d better go.”

In a quieter voice, the girl said, “Don’t forget! You’ll help me too?”

I squeezed her arm and slipped out of the bed, grabbing my shoes and vest by feeling around where I remembered dropping them. I edged out the door and listened, hearing silence. I padded softly to the stairs and started down.

I smelt Atapi. Not their fear smell, more like the smell of arousal, of being ready to fight and wondered what was going on. In the dark, I climbed over the banister and inched my way down, still holding shoes and vest in one hand. I was aware that something had passed me, going up the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, I pressed myself into a remembered dark corner and listened as John argued with the man who’d greeted us. I peeked around the door frame, as John insisted again, that he couldn’t leave without me.

The lighting in that reception area had been dimmed, and now came from several oil lamps on the walls, all turned down low. I peeked again, and saw a second bug-eyed man with a torch, arrive and these two brothel staff frog-marched John out. The torch went off before they opened the door.

While they were busy and their dark vision useless, I slipped across the open space to the door that I hoped would lead to Lammond’s place. There was some light coming faintly under that door. I carefully pushed it open and stepped through. The room I saw was small and empty, but there was a closed door on the opposite wall. I took a second step and felt totally dislocated, the light vanished and I felt a lack of all sensation. I forced myself to continue to go forward, prepared for trouble.

I had a glimpse of the lounge in Lammond’s mansion, before falling backwards back into the barn. Only, when I could see again, it didn’t have the opulent interior I had left. It was the burnt out ruin that John had expected and the light was coming in the open roof from stars and moon. I might have dreamed everything from the time I’d left John’s place.

I was afraid to callout in case there were Atapi about. I waited and sniffed. All I smelt was old burnt wood and a vague smell of old manure. I shivered. Something weird was happening – had just happened, to me.

I crept out of the barn and continued to listen. I hid, crouched down under a meagre bush that grew close to the half burnt and gaping barn door. I heard no insects, no night birds or animals. I kept still and quiet, but the noises didn't resume. Something or someone was around.

Chapter 17

My night vision improved as I waited in the dark. Finally, I saw the silhouette of two men against the faint light of the sky, in a gap between distant trees. They were moving silently, but I heard the faintest of whispers. These men spoke English, not Atapi. Police, I guessed but I didn't want to talk to them. How could I explain that I had gone into a converted barn and come out of a burnt out ruin?

My hands felt for the slave bands that the girl hadn't even felt. I thought of Traeger. Moments later, I sensed his presence. He too moved silently in the night.

"Did you find her," he asked in the faintest of whispers. I told him all I knew, and then asked, "Did the police raid the place?"

"They are ready to move in," Traeger told me.

"Too late! The Atapi knew ages ago," I said equally softly.

"Explain," Traeger insisted. "No, wait. Walk with me."

I did and again I felt the strange sense of dislocation. "What did you just do? I felt weird for the third time this evening."

"I took us to where no one will hear us," was all Traeger said.

We'd gone three steps. I sniffed. No Atapi smell. I still wanted to know what he'd done, but there were other priorities.

"Tell me everything," Traeger insisted.

I did, deliberately adding the weird sensations I had felt and everything I had sensed.

He didn't tell me I was mad. My weird tale made sense to him but he explained nothing. He questioned me then, sharply and fiercely. When he finally stopped, I sensed his controlled tension.

"You've done very well," he told me. "Go and find John and go home with him. I will come for you there. Right now, I must lead the police to the whorehouse and deal with Lammond. Thanks to you, I know exactly how they have hidden this piece of villainy. Leave it to me now."

I walked with him again – returning to where I'd been hiding. I experienced that odd feeling, yet again. Traeger gave me a gentle shove. When I stopped and turned to tell him that I wanted to help – he was gone.

I walked along the faint path, kicking at rocks and resenting being sent off like a child. To be honest, I was angry because I couldn't understand all the odd events and I somehow knew that the explanation was important to me.

This time, I wasn't trying to be silent. Let the police creep around, thinking the raid would be a complete surprise. I guess one of the bug-eyed policemen had got wind of the raid, or the Atapi sentries had. Since I wasn't required, and I was pretending to be an innocent passerby, then I wouldn't be trying to be quiet. All the same, I wasn't about to start calling out to see if John was around.

My sense of direction was usually good, and eventually I came out on the main track John had started on. Soon after, I heard him calling quietly. I followed his voice and trotted up to him.

"Thank God," he said. "When they kicked me out, I thought you might get lost."

I snorted. "So that's what happened. I got told the police were nosing around and that I'd better get out."

"Any luck?" John asked.

“A little. I ran into my boss further up the track. I told him that the woman he’s looking for is there, though I didn’t see her. The girl I spoke to told me she’s kept at Lammond’s place. Then he sent me off!”

John sensed my resentment.

“We’re better out of it,” he said firmly. “Let the police do their job.”

He put an arm around me and directed me down the hill. It felt good and I put mine around him. We strode like that, side by side like two young men that were full of themselves and out on a night stroll.

I was offered John’s couch to sleep on but neither of us were ready to call it a night. We expected to hear news of the raid at any time. Yet as the hours passed without news, we talked, had a snack and finally sat together on the couch and talked some more.

How we ended up doing, what an outsider would have thought we’d done at the whorehouse, I wasn’t sure. I enjoyed it though, and it relieved a very odd tension I’d experienced since entering the girl’s room. Somehow, I think John felt the same. Maybe they had something in the air of that place. Still, I had no regrets.

Since Traeger hadn’t come for me when John needed to get to the garage next morning, I went with him and sat in a corner and watched him work. I soon realised that the night’s events were already known and circulating with various degrees of truth.

John made no mention of his part in it, but asked questions of those visitors to his work area that mentioned it. Quite a few of the men of the town called in and stopped for a gossip. Some men were making comments which were to my mind in very poor taste. Like offering to make honest women of the girls the police had found.

What I still wanted to know was whether Lammond had been arrested, but no one had even mentioned him.

Traeger, looking tired, found me late in the day. When I saw him, I grabbed the bag with the white Kumatan outfit in it, and said “bye” to John. He told me that he hoped we’d meet again. I agreed, but I had my doubts about that.

Traeger and I walked back to the Kumatan village. This time I expected the strange sensation at the top of the hill. I was determined to find out what it meant.

I tried talking to Traeger, but he ignored my questions. He wasn’t walking with his accustomed vigour, either. I assumed that he was very tired and I did wonder what he had been doing. I really wanted to know.

Returning to the Kumatan village was a let down. I went back to my room in Ellhi’s suite and wondered why I had come back. Ellhi was absent and so was Jahni. Then I noticed that all of Suni’s things were gone from the corner of my room, too. I took that as a sign that she was back. Traeger must have brought her there before coming for me.

As there was no one around to tell me to do anything, I went to bed to sleep. I couldn’t help but recall the previous night with John. It was probably just as well that I wasn’t likely to see him again. I didn’t want to commit to a man because I know I wouldn’t be a good wife.

In the morning, Ellhi greeted me with a wordless, solid hug.

“Thank you,” she said after a while. “Thanks to you, I have my sister back.”

“How is she?” I asked.

Ellhi’s face saddened. “She is very confused, but she will get better with time. I will spend as much time as I can, helping her.”

I nodded, not interested in getting involved. I still had questions, but I doubted that Suni could tell me the answers. I didn’t think Traeger would either.

The following day I was going to fetch clean linens when a screaming haridan, reminiscent of Ellhi, screeched towards me. She was intercepted by Tenkin before her fingers reached my face.

"Miz Suni, Jai is friend." Tenkin told the woman.

I stood my ground, but was ready to run if she broke free. I couldn't understand her raving and I didn't try. Instead I sighed. And said calmly, "I am glad you are safe home."

That made her worse, until Ellhi came and hugged her sister. Ellhi gave me a look of apology and led her sister off. I shrugged. Perhaps later, Suni would come to treat me as 'human' and not Atapi. After all, I had won Ellhi over.

"Too bad Jai hooman can't help her," Tenkin sighed.

"Not yet. After all – how long did it take for you to realise that I wasn't vermin?"

Tenkin chuckled. "Many still not convinced."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I muttered. "Tell me something I don't know like what did Traeger do to get Suni back?"

I wasn't sure he would.

"Once we knew where to look," Tenkin's eyes glittered. "Traeger had Kumatan guards in both planes..."

"Places," I corrected.

"What ever," Tenkin flicked his hand. "Traeger held Pass-Through open so that hooman poleece could go in and get girls. And he held other Pass-Through open so they got to Atapi place. The one you call Lammond was there. He had papers that hooman poleece smiled at. Miz Suni was there too. She told hooman poleece everything she knew."

"So what happened to Lammond?"

Tenkin grinned widely. "He not recognise Traeger, so Traeger prick him and now he bound in hooman form. He not able to use sorcerer power to escape. Poleece took him, but he kill self."

It was my turn to smile. "And he won't turn into Atapi?"

Tenkin shook his head.

"So how did Traeger convince the police that an old burnt out barn was a whorehouse?"

"Like I say, he keep Pass-Through open, till they all gone. Then he make fire in other barn and the barn hoomans know."

"I'm confused," I admitted.

Tenkin looked superior. "Don't expect hooman to understand."

It seemed as if that was all he would say, so I added, "I know a Pass Through takes you from plane to plane. There's that one we come through to get here..." I was guessing.

"Yes, so hoomans don't find Kumatan village."

"So if I walked up hill from the town without Traeger, I won't find this place?"

Tenkin nodded, grinning. "Clever, heh! Hooman would see empty bush."

"Obviously the Atapi know better. They seem to be able to find you."

Tenkin sobered. "Only some. Leaders and a few apprentices. Caught one of them too."

"So did that second Pass Through lead to Lammond's house?" I asked.

"No, no," Tenkin denied. "To office place. House far away."

I was watching his eyes and something changed in them. I had an idea that he had just lied. Was he thinking he had said too much? He had, but I didn't want him to know it.

"So what happened to the girls?"

"They go with hooman poleece. Some didn't want to."

"Did you catch all the bug-eyed guards?"

Tenkin simply grinned. I decided not to ask what fate had befallen them.

"What about the Atapi pretend police?"

"We hunt!" Tenkin said without his smile.

It was time to change the subject. "What do I do now if Mrs Mosellan is busy with her sister?"

"See Benku," I was told.

Traeger found me removing dead flowers from the flowering shrubs in the garden and enjoying crisp autumn air. I actually jumped when he spoke.

"Tenkin says you have many questions."

"I did. I wanted to know what happened," I said, keeping my eyes on my job.

"Did he satisfy your curiosity?"

"Mostly. I know the girls are okay and Lammond killed himself. That was too easy a way out for him. I'd have liked him to suffer..." My mind pictured a range of horrible tortures.

Traeger's next comment convinced me he could read my mind.

"Such barbarisms are not the Kumatan way. It shows your Atapi heritage."

I disagreed. "Atapi nothing! That is my vengeful, vindictive human heritage."

"He is dead. He can do no more harm."

"Yeah, well...Are the police satisfied?"

"Well enough. They are convinced of Lammond's guilt but feared they could not prove it strongly enough. Now it does not matter."

"What about the people involved?" I asked.

"Some of the Atapi were caught; they too are bound in human form. Some escaped. We seek them. I also believe that some policemen are inexplicably missing."

I chuckled. "And my standing down the hill?"

Traeger had to consider the meaning of what I said. He wasn't used to such colloquialisms.

"I believe you are well respected by the Inspector. He will see that the assault charge against you is dropped."

I grinned and glanced back at the bush I was working on. I wondered if that meant my family would welcome me back. Probably not, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about the police being after me. If I wanted to – I could look for a job down there.

I glanced back at Traeger – he nodded for me to continue but he was giving me a thoughtful look. I began to pick off dead flowers again and concentrate on what I was doing.

When I was sure he was gone, I reviewed that meeting and wondered if, when he was close to me, he could know what I was thinking. Was he concerned that I might want to leave? Would he stop me?

I was sure that he didn't want me to go. Probably because I was part Atapi – if there were any other reasons, they eluded me. For amusement, I considered leaving and how I would get back to town. Very deliberately, I didn't think about the Pass Through. That was for very private thinking. I pictured in vivid detail, leaving the garden, passing around the fields where Kumatan males now worked, going down to the river, then slipping back to the trail that Traeger had taken me along several times.

No one came running to stop me or check on me, so I surmised that my thoughts were too far away from Traeger to sense. Or, I added, he didn't think I would succeed. I was very tempted to try.

After a week or two, things got back to a routine. Ellhi stopped spending all her time with her sister and began doing things that I assumed were duties of a Traeger's wife. I usually kept clear of the social functions she organised, and didn't accompany her when she in turn went visiting.

Since I had been Ellhi's servant, I had got used to the idea that Ellhi slept alone – but it seemed that now she was back to being calm and normal, Traeger was resuming his former relationship with her, and some of his things were noticeable in the sleeping room. I was

getting used to her calling him Jenha, which was the shortened form of his name and seeing more of him in the informal setting of the suite

Mostly this didn't worry me. I was glad for Ellhi's sake and for Jahni's; the boy was elated to be sharing more time with his father.

Then there were times when I felt distinctly uneasy. I didn't feel threatened by Traeger, like I had with Lammond, but I began to feel less like he thought of me as a servant and more like he thought of me as equal to Ellhi. This was something I couldn't understand. When they were both in the suite, I tried to keep my distance from them.

I was feeling that uneasiness when I took a basket of cleaned laundry into Ellhi's room. It made no sense, because both she and Traeger were away at a gathering with Leader Katech and Jahni was with his teachers. So I began to put Ellhi's clothes in her clothes chest, and make a neat pile of Traeger's clothes on the bed. Just touching his clothes was making me feel strange...like I had felt after the raid on Lammond's whore house...before John and I...my face went hot.

Why was I feeling like that? Traeger was old enough to be my father! I grabbed the basket and fled to the main room, just as Ellhi and Traeger arrived back. I could sense the tension between them, nothing acrimonious – the opposite in fact. And I knew what I was sensing was the rising desire between them. I grabbed the basket and fled around them to the door.

“Jai, you don't have to go,” Ellhi called across the room.

Oh no, I said wryly to my self. “I've more laundry to collect,” I said quickly. “And you too haven't had much time together lately.” I wasted no time getting out the door.

I didn't want to be an inadvertent interloper when Ellhi and Traeger...got together, so I dumped the basket in the passage and ran until I was outside in the garden. Even there, I could still sense the highly intimate emotions and sensations. In fact, if John the Mechanic had been around I would have dragged him...

My body seemed charged with excess energy, and I needed to find an outlet before anyone tried to touch me. With no particular destination in mind, I began to run.

It was full dark when the guards found me, hiding by the river. I hadn't noticed the October chill, but as I was urged to walk back towards the house, the cold breeze made me shiver. It told me one thing though, I was still not trusted. Even the lowest Kumatan servants had free time in the evening.

I returned to the suite with resignation, not sure what would be said, but when I followed the first guard into the suite, I saw Leader Katech turn to stare at me and I stopped in the doorway. The second guard shoved me in. Traeger broke off his conversation, glanced my way and flicked his hand in the direction of my room. I fled there with relief.

As I sat on the bed, hugging my knees, I tried not to listen to the conversation between Traeger and Katech. I was feeling like I had each time the Wetherby sheriff had dragged me back to the farm. Trouble was, I hadn't shut the door completely and Katech had a carrying voice.

“... and the High Minister is adamant that we keep that hybrid controlled. If you can't...”

I put my fingers in my ears and refused to listen.

Later, someone entered my dark room and lit the oil lamp nearest the door. I was still huddled on the bed, dreading the thought of censure from Traeger. When someone sat beside me on the bed, I knew it was Ellhi.

“What is the matter?” she asked.

I sensed more than heard the question. I stayed mute. How could I tell my only real friend, that I craved her husband? She would probably want to scratch my eyes out.

Ellhi moved closer and put an arm around me, and oddly, I didn't feel the immediate desire to struggle free, as I usually did when hugged.

"You're nearly frozen," she exclaimed in concern. "I'll arrange a bath."

"Why?" I meant - I was supposed to be the servant.

"Jenha was concerned about you," Ellhi said. "So was I."

"Did he send you in," I asked, a little resentfully. "Surely I should get an evening off occasionally."

"Jenha said we had made you uncomfortable. Did we?"

"Yeah...but I didn't want to intrude," I admitted, flushing again.

"He said you were receiving things from both of us and that you should be trained to block it," Ellhi said. "It's part of a Traeger's duty. He can help you if you want him to."

I merely shrugged - I did want, and yet I didn't.

Ellhi left me to go fill the water in my little bath using water piped from a boiler somewhere in the house. When it was ready, she chivvied me into it, and began to wash me like I was a child.

"You shouldn't be doing this," I protested weakly.

"Jai, you are my friend, and I don't want you getting sick."

I was glad she didn't say much, but when I sensed a change in her manner, it was my turn to ask, "What's the matter?"

"Its...I know what you are feeling right now," Ellhi blurted. "I'm a bit of an empath myself, and..."

She was still washing my hair, and I knew exactly what she was meaning. I flushed even redder than the warm water had already made me.

"Jai...I am not angry with you. Jenha is a virile man, an excellent bed partner. I am flattered that you..."

"I'm not interested in him that way," I said flatly, trying to sound like the idea was absurd. I don't think I fooled anyone, particularly not me.

Ellhi did not continue that line of reassurance. "My mother taught me ways to help people relax. Would you let me help you?"

I didn't stop her as she began massaging my back and shoulders, and when the water had cooled and after I was dry, she worked on my legs while I was lying on the bed. It made me drowsy, and I didn't question Ellhi when she turned down the lamp.

Next morning, I awoke alone in my room and feeling back to normal. I recalled what seemed like a dream, and flushed. All I will say is that Ellhi did indeed know how to release that intolerable tension in me and with our minds like one - I knew she had shared the relief.

I went to fetch the breakfast trays, from the kitchen and learnt that Traeger had gone out early and would be gone most of the day. So when I returned, Ellhi invited me to have breakfast with her and Jahni.

At first, I still felt embarrassed, but Ellhi made no mention of the previous night and in fact began to ask me to help her make a list of things she needed to have brought from one of the human towns. Jahni, kept asking where the things came from, and between the two, I put some of last night's events out of my mind. When no one referred to my running off, I decided I was not going to be in trouble and relaxed further.

Traeger was away for a week, and my first inkling of his return was encountering Tenkin in the kitchen. He grinned at me and supplied, "Now not Atapi in hooman poleece. All now in hooman jail, bound as hooman. We had good hunt."

I decided not to ask how those changed Atapi had been found, because I didn't want to think about Traeger. And because I expected that Ellhi and Traeger would be catching up on 'news', I decided to ask Benku for something physical to do. He told me to clean out where the Atapi slaves had slept.

Since that would get me out of the house, I agreed willingly. On my way there, I wondered why it hadn't been done yet but once there, looking at the filthy state each on the separate cages were in, I decided I could guess. It hadn't been because the occupants didn't have the means to keep their space clean. There was a broom and a rubbish bin in each enclosure, and a now dusty pile of washed bed linen. I decided that the dead ex-warriors either didn't care, or they considered it beneath their male dignity to clean for themselves.

I had to assume that Traeger did not insist that Kumatan servants cleaned up after Atapi slaves. I had sure walked into this job...

Still, mentally complaining and vocally muttering about the faults of the past occupants of this barn, kept me usefully busy, away from Traeger and thinking of trivial things. After a while, I realised how quiet it was in the barn – not just audibly silent, but mentally silent.

I had just finished scrubbing the walls and floors of the third cell when voices carried up from the lower floor.

"...was messy. I don't know why you didn't just bring them here."

That was the unmistakable voice of Leader Katech. He had a slightly nasal whine in his tone. I hoped he didn't intend to come up.

I heard Traeger's softer voice, explaining. "Holt had them in his control. To remove them would have aroused more questions, and a need to search for them. The important thing is that they were all bound in human form and I made sure that Stacion Ansuni could no longer work through them."

"But they killed each other," Katech countered. "Surely that was not a desirable outcome?"

"No, but their deaths cannot be linked to any non-human agency. The local people are saying that they poisoned themselves by eating old, mouldy grain, and that caused the violent behaviour. The deaths will not be looked at further."

Me, as the unsuspected listener, was unmoved by the deaths of Atapi spies. The next part of the conversation was muffled, but then I heard Katech clearly once again.

"I may not be a Traeger myself, but I grew up with them. I know as well as you do that those bands mean she has a potential for sorcery. The High Minister has expressly forbidden any action that might teach her how to use sorcery."

I thought to my self, "What?" Who was he kidding? I threw the next lot of soiled bed linens into a pile in the passage.

My mind sensed a flick of awareness, and shortly afterwards I heard two sets of feet climbing the stairs. One was noisy and ponderous, the second no more than a shuffle. I immediately dropped down onto my knees and began scrubbing the floor.

"Was this your idea, Mosellan?" Katech asked. "An appropriate way to remind her not to run off and waste time of my guards trying to find her."

Without looking at Katech, I muttered, "I volunteered - since Kumatan servants won't clean up after slaves."

"And little wonder, hybrid," Katech returned. "You can see how little they care about their sleeping quarters."

"Your next lot of unwilling guests might feel less hostile if they start in clean surroundings, and are not caged like animals."

"Atapi are animals," Katech snapped at me.

I was about to make a very rude retort, when I felt Traeger's mental warning to be polite. I modified my tone. "Well, humans wouldn't even leave their animals in messes like this."

Katech made an almost inaudible growl and turned to leave. "Mosellan, we will finish this conversation later."

Traeger didn't leave, but I didn't turn to look at him.

"You are avoiding me," he said bluntly.

I said nothing but he knew I was.

"Have you become afraid of me?" he asked neutrally.

"No."

He had to be reading my thoughts, even though at the moment I sensed nothing from him.

"I see," he said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you could explain why finding me attractive causes you such anxiety."

I looked over my shoulder, thinking, "Typical arrogant male, expecting attention as his due."

I said aloud, "I know you know its more than that," and I looked away before I blushed any redder.

"And that is the problem?" he queried, still neutrally. Without looking at him, I said, "Yes. You are married, and must be twice my age, and Ellhi is my friend. I don't want to interfere between you and her."

Traeger was quiet for a while. I glanced at him and he seemed to be thinking. I wondered if Kumatan people considered relationships in some totally odd way.

I tried to explain, "It's just that for a human man to show interest in another woman, in front of his wife, is in very poor taste. She would be justified in being very upset. And for a woman to be interested in someone's husband is wrong too." I was sounding like some of the parson's boring sermons.

"Kumatan do look at things differently," Traeger said quietly. "I have rank and status enough to be permitted to form a triumvir if all parties were willing, and compatible. Ellhi considers you a very close friend."

I had a vague sense of his meaning – something like him having two wives.

"Can't you just teach me to block it out, like Ellhi said you could?"

"I am not permitted to do that," Traeger spoke in a suddenly formal tone.

"Katech!" I said, not hiding my annoyance. "He's balmy, I'm not a sorcerer."

From Traeger's silence, I figured out the truth. Katech said I had the potential and implied the bands stopped me from doing sorcery.

"To teach you to shield your mind, I would need to remove those bands," he said, seeming to change the subject. "I am not permitted to do that."

I stopped any pretence of floor cleaning and turned to face him, sitting on my heels.

"Surely it would be a good idea to teach me so if that sorcerer tries to use me again – I could block him out?" I tried not to sound desperate.

Again he avoided a direct answer. "It would be better for you to stay within my house, or the garden. Though if I may suggest, Ellhi is a Traeger's daughter, and needed to learn some things. I think she would be willing to help you with your problem."

I remembered how she had helped me before, and felt myself flush again. Traeger said nothing to indicate he had sensed the reason. He went on after a short pause.

"You may continue to do as much as you wish, here. I agree with your reasoning. I will require you to clean yourself carefully before you return. I do not wish any Atapi contagion in the house."

“You let me in there,” I said carefully. “Some of your kind still think I am Atapi contagion.”

His voice had that formal tone again when he spoke, “The contagion, if it remains on you, may be a means for the sorcerer to locate you.”

I stared at him. That was a horrible thought, and I had the feeling he wasn’t meant to have told me that because it came under Katech’s prohibition. Though how I could possibly use that piece of trivia, I didn’t know.

“I’ll do that. Clean up first, I mean,” I promised, and turned to go back to my task.

I heard Traeger leave, moving so quietly, that he might have been a cat.

I was reminded of ‘Atapi contagion’ when I began to notice Suni coming around more often. Ellhi seemed happy to see her twin, and Suni was indeed calmer than she had been a month ago. But as far as I was concerned, after the first few visits, I avoided her. Her attitude to me, now occupying the position she once had, was of superior nobility to moronic servant. Perhaps it was because she had learnt I was half-Atapi and half human. What ever it was, she hated me.

It didn’t take me long to notice a pattern to her appearances. It was usually when Traeger was expected to return or was normally in the suite. When she came, she stayed until late. Several times, I saw her looking at him speculatively.

She certainly didn’t come to see Jahni, her former charge. She brushed him aside as if he were a stranger, and not her nephew. After snubbing the poor child yet again, I decided I had reached my limit of tolerance for her behaviour. Even Ellhi’s apologetic, “Her mind is still delicate,” ceased to be a good enough reason to pardon her.

Suni’s next belittling remark, aimed at me, sparked my anger. When I next poured tea for her, I deliberately spilt hers. The dark liquid fell onto her demure pink dress, and she immediately sprang up spitting expletives. Some were in English, and they were things my brothers had learnt not to say. Others were in Kumatan and if their meaning eluded me, they shocked Ellhi. I was smugly pleased when Suni ran from the room.

“Oop’s,” I said unrepentantly, putting the teapot down. “I’ll go and get something to clean it up.”

I had a clean tablecloth and fresh tea ready before Suni returned, and taken myself out of the way to the laundry with the stained cloth. What I didn’t anticipate was that Suni had gone straight to Benku to complain about me. I had expected her to go and change her dress before Traeger arrived.

One of the general house servants found me and gave me a summons to see Benku. He was in an office attending to the house accounts, but he rose when I entered.

Then I realised my miscalculation, because Suni had rank enough to order Benku to punish me for my deliberate malice. I had been warned, he told me, and without giving me time to realise what was coming, he held me and applied the merited punishment. Enough that I wasn’t going to be able to sit for a few days.

I returned to the suite, under direct orders from Benku, to find Suni acting sweet, meek and adoring to Traeger. She ignored me, except when no one could see her look of satisfaction for getting me punished. Any trace of repentance vanished.

Tenkin was chatting to one of the kitchen women when I returned the tray. He had to give me his cheerful advice. “Hooman shouldn’t annoy Miz Suni,” he advised, needlessly.

“She shouldn’t annoy me!” I retorted.

“Miz Suni much better now since Traeger helping her. She wants his good side.”

So Traeger was some kind of doctor too, was he?

I had already decided it wasn't just his 'good side' she wanted. Recalling Traeger's mention of a 'triumvir' - I had her figured out. A shameless hussy, my mother would have called her.

Suni cornered me when I was off on an errand for Ellhi, and grabbed me by one arm. She knew very well, I didn't dare retaliate. I gritted my teeth to be polite to her, but she was not so constrained.

Apart from calling me 'a piece of Atapi filth', she spat at me, "You are bewitching Jenha, trying to pollute him and destroy him and I won't allow it. I can see how he looks at you, like he looks at Ellhi. You might have fooled my sister, but I know better."

"I'm not doing anything," I said. "Do you really think I am interested in a married man twice my age? Any way, I'm human, he's not."

That seemed to satisfy her. She patted my cheek and said, nastily, "You keep remembering that. In fact, why don't you go back to your human friends and forget this entire conversation."

I couldn't imagine why someone would be prodding me, and opened my eyes. When I saw Tenkin leaning over me, I tried to demand an explanation, but I couldn't. In fact, despite being able to feel the not so gentle prods I couldn't even move.

There was no recollection in my mind as to what had happened, and I felt the start of panic. I rolled my eyes to try to see where I was, and saw that Tenkin had an amazing black eye, and I was...I had to be in one of the slave cages in the barn. I hoped it was one I had cleaned.

Tenkin, irrepressible as always, grinned and asked, "You awake now, silly hooman?"

I tried to glare back at him. I wanted to know what was going on and why I was an obvious prisoner.

"What you scratch Miz Suni for, hooman? She very mad, you big trouble."

I didn't remember doing any such thing. Might have liked to...

"That why you run off, silly hooman. Ran all the way down hill?" Tenkin went on.

What? I never did...I hadn't planned to go anywhere.

"Took guards two days to find you. Puny guards. You fight like devil," he pointed to his black eye, "But Antel and Tenkin fight better."

Now I realised 'big trouble' was an understatement and I remembered none of it.

I heard another Kumatan voice from somewhere out of my limited line of sight. It sounded like Antel. "Traeger should be back by tonight. And Leader Katech says to renew the immobilisation if it starts to wear off."

My guess as to my second guard proved correct as Antel came into my view. He had grazes on his face, and dried blood around his nose. I tried to judge his mood, and decided if I had fought him, he wasn't angry with me. Of all the Kumatan overseers, and I now knew them to be the elite of the guards, these two were friendliest to me. I was glad they were my guards.

Tenkin continued his barbed teasing. "Leader Katech say you devil-spawn, full of devil filth," he told me. "That why devil use you to kill Traeger."

I heard Antel mutter, "She not devil spawn, she fight him too. Traeger should take Atapi slave bands off and use ours."

"Late for that," Tenkin's grin faded a bit. "Looks like devil blooded her."

I wished I could ask what he meant, but Tenkin reached for my head and rolled it to face a new direction. "See, he bite hooman. No guess why she fight like berserk. Need four tries to immobilise."

So that was why I couldn't move and why it was hours more before my body began to tingle unpleasantly.

I was tired of staring at the back wall of the cage when I heard Tenkin's exclamation. "Mizes Mosellan – you not belong here."

"Nonsense, Tenkin. Jai is my friend," I heard Ellhi say.

"Leader Katech say no one to come near," Antel confirmed. "Dangerous."

"Not in here, Antel. Jenha told me he has strong shields on this place. And I won't stay long."

I tried once again to speak, but only managed a croak.

Antel came to look down at me. "Starting to move. We must immobilise again."

Ellhi knelt down beside me, and took one of my hands. I felt her concern fill me. "Not yet Antel, Humans don't recover as quickly as we do."

I sensed it was and out-and-out lie.

"She half..." Antel began.

Tenkin interrupted him. "She not moving."

Antel stared at his fellow overseer, and said after a moment, "Right, not yet."

Ellhi was examining my hands and rubbing her thumb over my finger nails. I usually kept them bitten short. She also looked at the bite I couldn't feel.

"What happened," Ellhi was thinking, not saying. I heard it clearly.

With relief, I mentally wailed, "I didn't do anything. I don't remember anything."

"You don't remember talking to Suni after I asked you to get clean towels?"

"No," I thought fiercely. I stopped short of thinking Suni was lying, but Ellhi sensed it. She moved her hand to cup my right cheek.

"Suni is still emotionally delicate. She came into see me with bleeding scratches. She told me you attacked her when she rebuked you for disrespect and that you ran off when she said she would tell Jenha."

My mind stayed blank – I remembered going for towels – then nothing. I sensed Ellhi having doubts about her sister.

"Do you think I did that?" I thought to Ellhi.

She held up one of my hands and shared a picture of Suni's deep scratches. "You keep your nails horribly short. But there is no doubt that you ran away and fought the guards. Leader Katech, the unpleasant man, has insisted that I have you replaced as a servant. He says you are too dangerous."

I felt anger, but then Ellhi shared a picture of her meek, obedient self stating respectfully that Jenha had placed me there and she could not send me away.

Then she commented tartly, still in my mind. "He thinks women have no minds to think with, and some don't. He has three that fawn over him, and he is old enough to be their grandfather."

"What am I going to do?" I wailed at Ellhi. I hated being helpless.

"I will talk to Jenha," Ellhi promised.

"But he has to obey Katech," I thought.

"Katech is not a Traeger. There are things he has no say about."

"What about the one he calls High Minister?"

Ellhi was startled. "He is back on Korvu not here. Now, if you don't want to be immobilised again, stay still."

When she released my hand, I could no longer hear her thoughts. I felt alone and scared.

It felt a long time later, when I heard Tenkin comment to Antel. "Traeger and Leader Katech come."

Antel came and studied me. I closed my eyes any lay still – not easy since all my muscles had been twitching for the past hour.

Katech noticed the twitches at once. “How long has she been twitching. I told you to keep her immobilised.”

Antel spoke quietly. “An hour, Leader Katech, but she no trouble. But can’t question if immobile.”

Katech grunted. “Yes, you are correct. Mosellan, this is your responsibility. Personally, I’d say eliminate the problem.”

I heard Jenha speaking calmly. “Leader Katech, that would please Stacion Ansuni’s. He wanted us to kill her.”

“But he used her to try to kill you, Mosellan. He probably can again,” Katech reminded him.

“I have no intention of making an irrevocable decision without knowing what Stacion intends. If you fear he will use her against us – then let me replace the Atapi slave bands with our own,” Jenha spoke firmly.

“No, Mosellan. Your father surely taught you that the sorcerer’s often put a trap spell on them to kill the slave if the bands are removed.”

“I am quite capable of negating such spells,” Jenha stated.

“No, you are our only Traeger, and even if more come, only you know this world. You are not to risk yourself.”

I sensed that Jenha was annoyed with Katech’s insistence.

“Anyway, your overseer told me that she has a bite mark,” Katech revealed. “She ran right to that sorcerer and now she is blooded to him.”

Jenha came close, and examined the mark on my neck. His touch opened a mind channel between us. “Atapi certainly. The teeth mark is unmistakable.”

“So you must agree that you cannot let the hybrid run free,” Katech sounded like he had proved a point.

“And I will not agree to keeping her here,” Jenha said bluntly. “This building is well shielded, but it is inefficient to have two overseers and a squad of guards to mind one prisoner. I will take her to the healers, under restraints of course, and investigate this affair.”

“Don’t forget the matter of the attack on your sister-in-law,” Katech added.

“I will find the truth of that matter,” Jenha responded.

“Do what you must, Mosellan, but make sure that hybrid can’t escape – won’t even think of escaping. I shiver to think what she would do if let lose amongst those ignorant human savages.”

I heard Katech start to walk off then pause to say, “Wasn’t it that sister of yours that had an Atapi wench as a friend? Didn’t do her any good, did it?”

I was angry for Traeger’s sake. I felt his pain at that memory in that instant before he tightened his mental shields.

“I’m sorry,” I thought to him, not sure what I could say to make the memory less intense.

I felt Traeger brush my cheek, and I opened my eyes.

“It was a long time ago,” he said quietly. “Thank you for caring.”

Then he became the aloof, Traeger – professional and impersonal, producing a device from his jacket pocket.

As he fitted a figure eight shaped device around my wrists, he explained, “This is an energy binder, you won’t be able to run off, or make use of any power.”

He felt my resentment and went on, “From what I have heard, you were acting in an abnormal manner. Now, this building is shielded and I will ensure that the healer’s enclave is

as well, but I can do nothing about the open space between here and there. This is purely a precaution.”

“Are you believing your Leader’s delusion that I am a sorcerer in disguise?” was my sour rejoinder.

“No, I am trying to ensure you are not the sorcerer’s pawn,” Traeger told me. “Can you walk yet?”

I hadn’t tried, although the intense twitching had eased.

Traeger directed Tenkin to help me.

“You like newborn puppy, little hooman,” Tenkin teased me.

“Shut up!” I managed to say and Tenkin chuckled.

As soon as we left the barn, I knew Traeger had been wise in his precautions. I felt immediately full of jittery, twitchy energy. Even without wanting to, I was trying to break free and run. Antel had to help Tenkin hold me for the short walk to the street and along to the modest single storey weatherboard building.

I still felt twitchy, even inside, until I was settled on a bed, still held by Tenkin, and Traeger had circled the room three times, muttering all the time.

“Tenkin, bring Jai something to drink and something light to eat,” Traeger directed in his ‘professional’ manner. To me he said, “Jai, I don’t want you to leave here. I will be back when you have eaten.” He spoke several words then, and the binder things released me.

I was left alone, and that surprised and reassured me. I took the chance to look around the room. The bed was a simple wooded frame affair with a mattress supported on wood planks. The bedding was plain and much like I was used to at the farm. I assumed it had been obtained from one of the nearby towns, but the quilt looked hand made. The design was unlike any I had ever seen. My mother would have been intrigued.

There was a little table by the bed, two chairs and a curtained off section with a bath and commode. I went to the single window and found it half open, and the cold breeze was trying to get in. I closed it by pushing the open section back down. Then for curiosity, I went to try the door. It wasn’t locked and when I ducked my head out, there was no one outside guarding the door. I wasn’t a prisoner – Traeger still trusted me.

It wasn’t Tenkin who brought my food, but Ellhi. A flask of water and some bite sized savouries.

“Eat as much as you can,” Ellhi invited.

“What is Traeger going to do?” I asked her.

“He must evaluate you. It is part of what he does. You have no need to fear. You have already passed his first test.”

“What was that?”

“You did not try to leave here as soon as you realised the door was not locked,” Ellhi told me.

“Does he have to evaluate Suni too?” I asked, not caring to be less than blunt.

“He has. She has gone into seclusion for time,” Ellhi told me.

I hoped that meant locked up, but didn’t say so. Instead, I nibbled on the bite sized savouries and realised that I was actually very hungry.

Traeger returned, no longer wearing the Earth style suits he seemed to prefer during the day, but one of the caftan style gowns he wore around the suite. I found the casual outfit less intimidating.

He let me stay seated on the side of the bed and drew one of the chairs nearer. Ellhi was not asked to leave, but she went to the window and looked outside.

I felt Traeger coming into my mind, and this time the sensation was decidedly odd – implacable. I wanted to flit away, but he seemed to be holding my essence as firmly as he

was holding my wrists. Then I sensed Ellhi beside me, whispering reassurance, but not touching me.

“You trust Jenha, do you not? He will help you, but he must do this the way he was trained. You are human though, not Kumatan, so it might be strange for you.”

Strange was an understatement. If it had not been for Ellhi, I would have wanted to bolt out the door, but the mere thought of that brought the knowledge that the door was warded. We would not be interrupted until Traeger was finished.

What followed was not a question and answer session, but a complete review of my every conscious thought, every deeply personal thought, every conscious action and possibly every subconscious action. It began at the present and went back minute by minute; day by day to before I had even left the farm.

Finally, Traeger released me, and leant back. I collapsed onto Ellhi's lap, and let her stroke my hair as if I was a cat. It gave me something to focus on, that wasn't my total and absolute embarrassment.

Traeger didn't act like he'd learnt my deepest fantasies that involved him, or the memory of what I thought was a dream involving Ellhi. But I had learnt things too, possibly he didn't realise it. I felt what he thought of me, what he had discovered and I also felt his absolute integrity.

“Jai?” Traeger spoke softly.

I stiffened, and Ellhi pushed me up. I didn't want to look at him.

“I know this isn't easy for you, but I am glad you trust me. I should be able to help you.”

Now I looked at him. “You can? Even though I know you found some kind of taint on me?”

“Yes, and I am of the opinion that Stacion Ansuni is not as clever as he thinks he is. However, neither you, nor I should underestimate his power. Firstly, when the Atapi found you, they did not see your potential. The intention was only to kill you. Therefore, the slave bands were only to control you, and were not purposed by Stacion. They are not trapped, and I can work around them.”

“That's good?” I asked hopefully. “So you could remove them then?”

“No, and I will explain my reason in a moment. Stacion also made the mistake of underestimating me. He expected me to kill you on sight.”

Images, horrible images, flicked through my mind. “That stuff Katech said about your sister...”

Traeger looked sharply at me, but only said, “Yes. Stacion tried to make it look like her friend, Jai Ansuni, tortured her and covered the death by placing her near where a bomb had exploded.”

The name triggered a memory, of the Atapi prisoners talking, “She is the image of Jai Ansuni...”

I asked the next question that seemed inescapable. “Is she related to Stacion Ansuni?”

Traeger nodded. “He was her sire.”

I gulped as a truly horrible thought came to me. “If he is truly her father, that means I have his blood in me.”

Traeger took my hand again and said, looking at me, “That is to your advantage and his detriment. He did not see power in her, and he will not think it possible that you can have any, particularly as you were born here on Earth. Remember that. However, it is a complication, and so is this matter of him blooding you to him. That is a means by which a sorcerer gains control of the minds of his tribe, and others, to see what they see, and to work through them.

“Now you might understand why the bands must stay on. With him bleeding you to him, he can work through you or make you do things. Had he seen your potential, he could have used you as a conduit to draw on the aura of this world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Stacion Ansuni, never acknowledged your mother as his child, and he never saw her potential. If he had, she would have died immediately because she was female. He does not look for power in you because you were born here. He would not expect a human to be able to sense the aura. Also, he has known for years that he could not draw on Earth’s aura himself and so has made an art of harvesting energy from all sorts of vices.”

I shivered at the ideas these words invoked in me. Traeger saw it, and explained further, “Having the bands on you as your potential woke up meant that he never sensed you drawing on the aura.”

“If we change those bands for ones made by Traegers, and Stacion noticed, he would wonder why we would use them on one who was not a sorcerer. In this respect, Katech was quite correct.”

“I don’t know what this aura stuff is,” I said confused.

“I cannot tell you how to invoke the aura but those who are sensitive to it can purpose it to help them,” Jenha told me.

He watched my face. I was still confused. “I suspect you were doing that, even if you had no idea of the concept, when you sought to be hidden from sight.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “But how can I use it if I can’t see it or sense it? I only have your word that such a thing exists here.”

“It is better that you don’t try,” Jenha advised. “The bands do stop you, but if not for that, Stacion will still be sensitive to the movement of energies – and be able to track them to the source.”

I shivered again. “What are you going to do?” I asked in a very small voice.

“I am going to teach you a way to block him out,” Traeger said, evenly.

“But... Didn’t Katech say not to teach me anything?”

“Leader Katech told me to do what I must. We will begin.”

After several hours of mind games, Traeger told me he was pleased with my progress. I was totally exhausted, but I heard him talking.

“Explain things to her, Ellhi. Make her understand. I have no wish to force it on her.”

I heard Ellhi, sounding concerned, “This is not just because Leader Katech insisted...”

“No, it is the only way to break the blood kin ties, and Katech was right about that. But is it what you want to do too?”

“Yes, dearest one, it is my wish too. I will do as you ask.”

Ellhi was with me when I woke in the middle of the night, from a nightmare involving the sorcerer. She held me while I shivered, and tried to do as Traeger had taught me.

“It is fine now, Jai. He cannot reach you here; all he can do is send you dreams to force you out. Hold onto me.”

I tried, but I felt someone was trying to drag me out, and the power was getting stronger. Ellhi called out for Jenha.

My mind was a maelstrom of frustrated anger. The raging mind wanted me, craved me, and I knew if he got me, my soul would be lost forever.

I heard Ellhi, sounding in my mind as if she was miles away. However, the desperation in her voice drew me, and I listened to what she said. Nothing mattered but it offered hope of freedom from the devil that was trying to claim me.

Ellhi lost her grip on me just as Traeger arrived. He grabbed onto me and held me, bringing some kind of shield around me that blocked out the insane fury I felt in my mind.

“Did Ellhi explain to you what I need to do,” he whispered in an oddly hoarse voice.

She had, my mind told him. I was too afraid to speak.

“You have done this before, and enjoyed it,” he asked, but he knew I had. “This is a very old way to break the blood binding of a sorcerer, but I would not do this if you were unwilling.”

Unwilling? I’d do more than mate with him to rid my mind of that vile other mind. I felt the truth in his mind; this was the surest way, but, “What of Ellhi? Is it truly okay with her?”

“Did she not say so? Did she not say she would welcome you into a triumvir with us? If you wish, she will be here with you.”

No, I thought to my self, I couldn’t do it that way.

It was as well that it was dark. Traeger, no, Jenha, kept the shields around us, and that was more than just an illusion of privacy. He was, as Ellhi had told me, skilled, and this second experience was so much more intense because our minds were open to each other. I felt, along with the physical climax, the maelstrom in my mind cease.

Later, as I lay next to Jenha, I relived the exquisite pleasure, and when I began to feel guilty, another mind smoothed it away and all I felt was limitless welcome, before I fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 18

In the morning, I woke feeling very strange, but calm. Yet I couldn't help blushing when I recalled the previous night. When I opened my eyes, I found I was back in my room in Traeger's – Jenha's - suite. Feeling it was safe to think my own thoughts, I admitted to myself, I wanted to experience that pleasure over and over.

Finally, I recalled that I had duties, and it was much later than I usually rose. I dressed quickly and hurried out into the main part of the suite.

Ellhi was alone at the table eating her breakfast, so Jahni must have gone off to his lessons. She greeted me cheerfully and pointed to a covered tray. "Yours," she told me.

I didn't understand. Usually I collected the breakfast trays. Something had changed.

She smiled again and poured me a cup of tea. She had never done that for me either.

"Sit, Jai," she invited, and I edged onto a chair, and looked at her half expecting an outburst of recrimination. When she made no comment, I blurted, "Do you hate me?"

She was genuinely surprised. "Of course not. Eat up. I need to get you to help me make a list of things we need from the human town. Jenha will be going there today and may not be back for a few days."

Memories of a past Ellhi flashed through my mind, but I didn't think this was a nasty trick. As I ate, Ellhi chatted non-stop. Fortunately, she was not expecting me to answer her. I had never, seen her like this.

Since we'd become friends, we'd talk but not this way. Our conversations were more like not quite strangers, not quite acquaintances, feeling our way with each other. Now, Ellhi sounded like – well, my mother and her close friends. This sort of chatter I had preferred to avoid, and my sisters had listened to avidly.

My expression must have perplexed Ellhi. Her chatter slowed and stopped. Her face looked as if I had rebuked her.

"Have I offended you?" she asked tentatively.

"No, no you haven't. It's just I have never heard you so talkative. And I have no idea about most of what you are saying. I mean, I don't mind talking to you but I am meant to be working and you haven't told me what you want me to do today. I don't want Benku mad at me."

"He won't..." Ellhi began, stopping when she realised my confusion. "You are one of us now."

"What does that mean? I'm Kumatan now – not human, or Atapi?"

"I explained, you are part of our triumvir, you me and Jenha. I thought you understood. Jenha has ..." Ellhi had to search her knowledge of English for a suitable word. "...taken you as a new consort."

My mouth dropped open. Was I now married to Traeger?

"It's a great honour" Ellhi assured me, perceptibly nervous about my reaction. "Suni was hoping that Jenha would choose her," she added.

"Do you mean – I'm married to him?" I blurted. That meant that I had to explain 'married' to her and have her explain Kumatan customs.

In spite of her assurances, that what I was now part of was not like a human marriage, that's what it seemed like. My future was bound to Jenha, and I didn't have the right to leave him for any other man. As far as Ellhi was concerned – why would I want to?

"I thought this was only just to stop the sorcerer using me."

"Do you want that to be all?"

"No," I admitted in a small voice.

"Are you not happy?" Ellhi asked tentatively. "I am."

I had to be honest. "Last night was...unlike anything I expected – but...I grew up with humans. For them, it's a crime to be married to two people."

Ellhi laughed. "Not for us. Traeger is a most important man. Second only to Leader Katech. It is his right to have more than one consort."

"But I am human, part Atapi," I protested. "Wouldn't that damage Traeger's reputation? Isn't there some taboo about cross species matings?"

"Ye...es," Ellhi admitted slowly. "Between Kumatan and Atapi."

I stared at Ellhi, waiting for her to continue.

"Jai, I wanted him to choose you. I told you last night I would share him with you. I have felt for myself what kind of person you are. You have none of the evil traits of the Atapi. You are like us in form and you cannot change from it. You have proved yourself to be a friend, over and over. You have empathy, no Atapi has that."

As I considered her explanation, she continued. "Now that Jenha has accepted you, all must accept you."

"Even Katech?" I asked. I remember him saying about making sure I wouldn't want to escape.

"He agreed," Ellhi said smugly.

I wondered if Katech expected this, but I wasn't going to complain. The three of us had what we wanted, none of us had been coerced, and...I didn't want to think of leaving.

I had a sudden thought.

"Does Suni know about this?"

I saw a look of pain cross Ellhi's face. "Yes. I'd hoped she would be happy for me."

"But?"

"She had hoped to join us before..."

"I came along, and she is not impressed by being supplanted by some human- Atapi monstrosity."

Ellhi nodded. "I love my twin," she said quietly. "But I could not accept her into a triumvir. Not like I can you. You and I can meet mind to mind, completely open to each other. Suni is not like that – she wants for herself, and she is a purist. She would insist that I walk on you for what you are, and I will not. She will not accept that you helped rescue her. She sees only Jenha as her saviour."

I sort of understood that. "Did you two have a fight?"

Ellhi sighed. "Yes, and both Jenha and her healer think it best if I keep away from her. She needs time to recover."

"I guess so," I agreed. "But after all your worry and concern for her, I thought she would be more grateful to you."

"She was tormented for a very long time..." Ellhi said.

I took that to mean that Suni was turning into a mental case.

Ellhi spoke, changing the subject. "I cannot give Jenha any more children. If you can, even the Leader Katech must admit that humans are as Kumatan as we are – not some lesser species."

That comment amused me, but reminded me of a couple of things I wanted to think about – alone.

"Would you or Traeger..." I began.

"Jenha," Ellhi corrected me.

"Yeah! Would you be insulted if I wanted to do things around here like I was doing?"

"Why? You are no longer a servant. I told you that."

"I know, but I need useful things to do – and really – I don't mind."

"No one will respect you if you do servant work," Ellhi told me seriously.

"Really? Do all Kumatan have servants?"

"No, the lesser classes don't," Ellhi laughed at my ignorance.

"No matter what you say, Ellhi, no Kumatan will suddenly wake up today and see me as a Kumatan. They may see me as a worthy creature, but I don't want them to think that I think I'm suddenly better than them."

"Well...If that's what you want..."

I nodded firmly.

"I suppose it will save me from looking for a new personal servant and it isn't unheard of for a new consort to server the older one. I guess it is fine. But if you change your mind..."

"I'll let you know," I promised. "So what do you want me to do?"

"What ever you like," she said.

I harrumphed in disgust and said sweetly, but smiling, "I have no idea of how to run a Kumatan household. You do!"

"Not really. Benku does that."

"Will I have to argue with him about this?"

Ellhi shrugged.

"OK! I'm going to go the garden and rake up dead leaves. I need fresh air even if It's cold out there."

"I'll join you later. I have to plan a reception for the weeks end. I assume you don't want to help?"

I stared. Ellhi was teasing me. I think she was beginning to know me too well.

"Um. No!" I said cheerfully. "I'll leave that to you!"

She grinned at me. If she had mentioned it before, I would have felt I had to help. Knowing that I would not like that task, she hadn't. It told me we were indeed equals and she was considerate of my feelings. This was a strange realisation for me – I'd never had such a close, caring friend.

Outside, I didn't begin working immediately. Instead, I wandered around the large neat garden. It was impressive, with all the beds arranged in geometric shapes. The flowers had all finished blooming now, and the dead growth had been removed. All that was in the garden now were evergreen bushes and trees with multicoloured leaves.

I went down to the far end and watched the field workers. I assumed they were Kumatan of the lesser classes. Then I thought then to test my new status by wandering down to the barn. Two steps out of the side gate and I met some force that threw me backward. I stood up again and stared at the deceptively clear air. I didn't try to leave again; I retreated and began to rake the fallen leaves.

While my hands were occupied, my mind considered the invisible barrier. It was outside my experience, but in keeping with the ability of Traeger to "cross planes" and keep "Pass-Throughs" open.

What I wanted to know was its purpose. Was it to keep me in or to keep others out? Tenkin and Antel had passed through it, two field workers came in and went up to the house without noticing it but I couldn't.

I decided to ask Traeger if it was to keep me in or to keep Atapi out. If the latter, it may have reacted to my Atapi blood. Perhaps it was both. Traeger had told me that I should stay in the house or the garden. He wanted to protect me and I believed that. But I wondered about Leader Katech. He didn't like me and I probably would never trust me. So why would he agree to something that many considered taboo? What would be in it for him?

My mother had bred with a human. The Atapi called her a traitor and me an abomination. So perhaps the Atapi had some cross species taboos too. Yet Lammond had tried to breed with Suni and had allowed other Atapi and humans to try to breed with her. Was he merely perverted or did Atapi men have rights that the women didn't? Probably both.

My mother, according to the Atapi, permitted me to be conceived, but she had to be bound in human form, and she obviously knew she would die giving me life. Did the Leader Katech know that? Did he hope I would conceive and die?

Why, I wondered did I still have the slave bands if the binding was broken and I was now a trusted consort? Jenha had said he was going to explain...but he hadn't yet.

Something nagged me as I kept working. I thought of Atapi crossing planes and arriving inside the barrier. The idea terrified me but I didn't want to reveal this concern to Traeger as I didn't want to betray my interest in the ability. So I went, as I often did, to Tenkin.

"No Mizes Jai," he assured me. "Atapi must have been to place they want to go and have a good picture of it. Traeger make house look different since raid and put up barrier."

"What about those Atapi that worked in the garden?" I asked.

I was promptly told, "Them dust! All others only work in fields."

He saw me glancing around. "Mizes Jai, need not worry. Traeger busy protecting our village."

A shiver ran up my spine and prickled my hair. "Are Atapi sniffing around?"

Tenkin stared soberly at me and nodded. "We all prepared to fight."

"So will I be," I promised with equal grimness.

"They won't get inside house," Tenkin told me.

I didn't feel so sure. "Perhaps, but I will be ready – even for that. I have never been one to expect others to look after me. And the Atapi will want me. For that – my best protection is me."

Ellhi repeated Tenkin's assurance, but she and I continued to practice defensive tactics and even convinced the two lesser servants to learn too. Jahni was already learning to fight. I was trying to teach myself how to use what ever was around me as a weapon and get Ellhi thinking the same way.

However, time passed and there were no alarms. Ellhi and the servants grew less interested in practicing. I remained vigilant. I had no doubt that Traeger's capture of Lammond and his group was a major insult to the Atapi. They would want to retaliate. I knew it in every fibre of my being.

I had been in my new position in Traeger's house for nearly a month before I saw Suni again. She had been in seclusion, under the treatment of healers. I knew from Ellhi, that Traeger had done as much as he could for her, and the healers felt she was now ready to return to normal life. Perhaps she was, but when she saw me, she gave me a venomous glare. No one else saw it, for she turned to Ellhi and Jenha with a meek smile. I guessed she still resented me for stealing the position she wanted. Though why she persistently snubbed Jahni, I didn't know.

For the sake of harmony, I kept clear of Suni. So if she came for a visit when Jahni and I were in the suite, we moved outside even though it was now into November and up in the mountains, the days were cold and the wind often bitingly chilly. I was teaching Janhi about humans, and improving his mastery of English and that could be done outside as well as inside.

On one such day, when the wind was only a vague breeze, Janhi came with me to meet a family of squirrels that had moved into one of the oak trees in the garden. They let me come

close, and I often brought treats of nuts with me. They were cheekily running along the bare branches, just out of our reach, and chattering like little gossips. Jahni was laughing at them, and I thought they were enjoying being clowns.

When they suddenly vanished into the cavity in the tree trunk, I wondered what had scared them.

“Why did they go?” Jahni asked me.

“Hush,” I requested, wanting to listen. I heard a silence that seemed ominous. Even in late fall, the forest beyond the fields was not perfectly quiet - usually birds still called to each other. They went quiet even as the squirrels disappeared. I sniffed the air, noting that the breeze was coming from the direction of the forest.

Amongst the earthy smells, there was a more acrid stench – Atapi.

“Jahni – go inside! Now!” I ordered, still sniffing the air.

“Why?”

“Go!”

Something about my tone and manner decided him. He ran inside the door. I followed him. The smell was getting stronger. Traeger had not yet returned for the day, so I sent one of the servants to raise the alarm. The other was told to bolt all the doors and windows. If the Atapi got through the barrier, I doubted even bolts would stop them. I began to get out what weapons we had, laying them ready.

Ellhi finally noted my actions. “What’s wrong?”

“Atapi,” I said tersely. I glanced over at Suni, but she merely slid her eyes across me and returned to pouring tea. I noticed, though, that she had added two more cups to the tray.

“We are safe here,” Ellhi stated while glancing at Suni.

“Of course,” Suni agreed placidly. “Jenha said so.” She carried a cup of tea to Ellhi. She inclined her head to me to indicate I could fetch my own.

“Jahni, bub, there’s one there for you too,” Suni told her former charge.

Jahni looked brighter, thinking that Suni was becoming his friend again. I fetched a cup for myself and sipped it. If Suni was thawing towards me, I didn’t want to put her off.

I really wasn’t interested in drinking tea as if nothing was wrong, but did so more for something to do and I went to stand where I could look out through the French window that overlooked the garden, and the forest beyond. If the Atapi came, they would come from the forest.

The tea was a great deal stronger than I usually liked it, so I had very little of it. When I saw Kumatan guards riding out in answer to my alarm, I put it down.

The daylight faded out into darkness. The others sat with the lights off and the fire unlit, waiting to be told all was clear. It knew it wasn’t. I knew the Atapi were very close, yet the guards around the house were not alarmed.

I felt myself beginning to doze off when I had no intention of sleeping. A slight noise jarred me awake. The room had become too quiet. There had been the sound of Ellhi and Suni talking softly and Jahni trying to whittle a shape from a piece of oak wood. I very slowly moved my head around. There was enough light coming in from the moon outside to see Ellhi was dozing in a chair. Jahni was lying on the floor. Suni ... wasn’t where I had last seen her.

My eyes caught her moving slowly towards me but since she didn’t have anything in her hands - I feigned sleep and watched through nearly closed eyes. I wanted to know what she was up to. Her toe nudged me, but I didn’t react but the last of the drowsiness had burned off in an adrenaline surge.

Convinced that I was asleep, she chuckled. The sound made my hair want to stand on end. “They can have you, vile creature, and Jenha’s brat too,” I heard her whisper. “Then he

will have to take me. I can give him a child – Ellhi can't. Then I'll be senior wife and she can grovel before me."

She went and lit the lamp and sat it on the table to illuminate the room. I expected her to be quivering with fear; instead she seemed in control of herself.

I heard a faint sound, smelt a burst of earthy forest, then Atapi stench. It was followed by a crashing sound as a cup was swept off the table. I dived behind an empty chair.

"Where is the child?" the arrival asked in Atapi.

I recognised the voice of Stacion Ansuni, the sorcerer. He was making no effort to mimic human form and wearing no clothes at all. His skin was gleaming brown in the lamplight and his eyes, seen from side on by lamplight, glistened and bulged. The huge wings were tucked around his back and his tail rose from his lower back and curled at the top like that of a cat.

I didn't waste time wondering how he had breached Traeger's defences. I was pretty sure it involved Suni. I reached for a weapon. The creature had lifted Jahni and was reaching for Ellhi.

"NO!" Suni yelled. "You said she'd be safe. It's the other you want."

"Where is the other," the creature growled in a deep tone.

"By the window," Suni said, twisting around. They both looked at where I had been.

"I will take these to bind the Traeger's hands."

"But you wanted the abomination," Suni protested. "Not my sister!"

"Find it or this one will do." The creature snagged Ellhi and held her dangling from his other arm.

I'd heard enough. The creature had its back to me; I dived out and used a very sharp knife to stab it. Anger made me strong enough to force it through the tough lizard like skin. It bellowed and twisted in agony and anger. The knife, still stuck in the creature's back was wrenched from my grasp. It saw me and hissed. I moved back quickly and reached for another weapon. Its eyes glittered with hate. It dropped Ellhi and Jahni and flew-hopped towards me.

I waved a second knife at it, but it kept coming, with one arm reaching to remove the first knife from its back. I dodged under its other arm and slashed at it. Before I could rise and twist around, I felt a foot kicking me forward. I rolled and felt a kick in the stomach. Suni kicked me again and I lost the second knife. The look on her face wasn't sane and it matched that of the Sorcerer. I twisted to reach for the knife again, but my fingers hadn't quite reached it when I felt myself picked up by my clothes in an immensely strong grasp. My fierce struggles only made the sorcerer laugh.

It hissed at me when I spat at its face, then it lifted me and I thought it was going to throw me across the room.

Suni squealed, "Don't waste it too quickly, revered one. It is Traeger's whore."

I was dangled at the reach of the creature's arm. It spat at me but I ignored the rank liquid that hit my face.

"You only think you've won, creep," I told it. "The Traeger wants you – and you came to the bait."

It ignored my words, thinking them empty distractions, but I heard noises in the passage outside the suite.

"The abomination should have been strangled at birth," Suni incited, hoping to see the creature kill me.

The Atapi turned to her. "It will die, slowly. But not yet. Since the Traeger covets it – it will be useful as a hostage. I can gain much power from its death."

The noise from the passage became louder; the Atapi growled. "Female, you have no further use."

Suni backed off towards her sister.

Still holding me like an incidental object, the Atapi grabbed Suni by the neck and threw her. I heard a crack as she landed. A moment later, he jerked me over his shoulder. As I tried to lift my head, I felt pain in my neck from sharp talons and my vision blurred and went dark.

Chapter 19

I was floating in darkness. I had no sense of dimension or time or the proximity of other living things. I could have been lying on pillows or floating on water. I couldn't feel my body, so I couldn't tell if I could move or not.

I might have been dreaming, for images came and went in my mind as if I was looking through a key hole. Many were scenes of unfamiliar places and surely were not from my memory. Having the pictures parade across my mind was better than staring at blank nothingness.

Finally, I saw a place I recognised and my body jerked, as it sometimes does on the verge of sleep. I held onto that image. It was the road between my father's farm and the town. Then people impinged on it - my father, my mother, my eldest brother and his wife and half a dozen others. I gave a soundless cry. As my mother turned to look back at my siblings, my mind jarred. No, that was not my mother – merely the woman who had cared for me as a child, but to whom I had never given affection. It was clear from this perspective that she was not related to me. We both had black hair, but that was the only common feature. Her face was long and mine was round, she tended to plumpness, while I never seemed to put on weight. I wondered what had my real mother been like?

A new picture came to me of a woman of some beauty, looking at me, holding me. Her big eyes seemed full of awe and wonder. And her face was an older, worldlier version of my own. Long dark hair fell around her face. My father, much younger in this image with his hair still blond and not starting to turn grey, looked sad. He took me and I felt something wet fall on my face.

He spoke. I read his lips saying, "I will look after her as my own."

I seemed to hear the woman's voice in my mind, "It won't be easy. I fear she must find her own way."

I wanted to hold onto that memory - my mother and my father, together. My father had looked sad, did he know, then, that she would die? Why had she created me – if she knew she would not survive? Was I a creature worthy of her sacrifice? And my father loved me – I knew that now. Yet I had always argued with him. Never had I wanted so much to tell him that I loved him too.

I imagined his face as I last saw it, smoothed out the anger, and placed him back in the scene of the road – walking back from church. They were all there, walking nearer. I wanted to be there, tried to pretend that I was walking to meet them. I felt like I was the rope in a tug-of-war the tension, almost unbearable, stretching me two ways. Then something snapped and my head spun. When my vision cleared, I saw people running towards me. I felt the ground, hard and icy beneath me. In my mind was a scream of rage and curses.

Feeling the sun on my face – I finally realised that somehow, I had broken free of my Atapi captor. I was almost back at the farm.

I heard whimpering beside me and turned to see Jahni, and beyond him, an unconscious Ellhi. I remembered all that had happened and only had seconds to reconcile it with the people approaching. I sprang into a defensive crouch just as I was jerked to my feet.

"What are you doing here?" Henry, my eldest brother glared down at me. His scowl promised me the thorough beating that he had been unable to give me at our last meeting.

I didn't try to fight him this time. He wouldn't try anything with Father around and anyway he wasn't dangerous like the Atapi. In his brawny grip, I was barely able to place my feet on the ground. I glanced at Ellhi and saw Jahni's terrified expression.

My brother glanced that way, and must have seen the same fear. He released me and only then seemed aware that the clothes I wore were no longer his or his brothers' cast offs.

"I need help for Ellhi," I stated, looking to my father. "She's ill."

My mother, in her Sunday best navy skirt and white blouse, pulled her shawl around her and pushed my brother aside to kneel down next to Ellhi. "What's wrong with her?"

I shrugged. "I didn't see. I was out to it."

"Well, she can't stay here lying on the frosty ground!" My mother glared at my father and brothers – which was a change from having that look turned on me. Beyond them, I saw Eva giving her boyfriend a not so casual kiss while Mother wasn't watching. Lucy was trying not to watch them, and probably thought my sudden appearance annoying. She liked to spend Sundays reading a book.

My father lifted Ellhi and I quickly took Jahni's hand. "They won't hurt her," I told him quietly. He gripped my hand tighter and pushed in close to me.

My mother saw how Jahni clung to me and then noticed my clothes. Her glance seemed to say that she would reserve her judgement. Perhaps, for once, she was thinking I looked more demure than Eva did in her eye-blinding red dress. I wondered, maliciously, if she was cold with only that light jacket over it. I would say my sister had brought that dress for herself with what she had earned at the hairdressing salon in Wetherby. In the case of her boyfriend, and when he glanced my way I recognised him as one of the butcher's sons, the daring neckline was definitely eye catching. I suppose, now Eva was twenty-one, Mother let her get away with it – if it helped her snare a husband. My smirk stayed hidden because with the way Eric was acting, he'd better have the wedding ring handy.

Mother strode up the road ahead of Father and his burden, and chivvied Lucy to keep up with her. That meant she had to take her hands out of the pockets of the coat she wore over her more demure high neck dress.

I saw Henry return to walk with his Ellen, and take his kid from her. The little monkey scrambled up onto his shoulders and demanded a ride.

I felt Jahni relax a bit, seeing Hank Junior's antics with my brother.

As we walked back to the farmhouse, along the dirt road, Jahni whispered a question. "Are they Kimh?"

I didn't know what he meant. "Who are Kimh?"

"Papan mentioned them, he has to obey them. These people are not Kumatan," he said. I sensed his fear.

"No," I said. "These people are my parents, brothers and sisters."

"Human?"

I nodded. "They won't hurt you, I promise."

He seemed to relax a little. I suppose it was natural he was scared. He had never spent much time away from his own kind before, and I don't think he met many strangers. Personally, I couldn't see or sense much difference between human and Kumatan, but it seemed Jahni could.

"Most of them seem angry," Jahni confided.

I grimaced. "That's with me – not you."

"How did we get here?" Jahni asked.

I glanced over my shoulder to see how close my sibs were. Nick and Mark were back to nudging each other, and Eva and Eric had no interest beyond themselves.

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "But if they ask – we walked from town."

"They seem so rough," Jahni continued.

"They mainly do farm work, and don't have time to cultivate fine manners – though my mother tries..."

"But your mother was Atapi!"

“Shh. They know nothing of that or of your people and you don’t need to say anything. They can assume you’re shy.”

My mother had Ellhi laid carefully on the sofa in the front parlour, and arranged pillows and blankets to make her comfortable. She called out to my father to light the fire. I hovered protectively, and led Jahni to a chair I placed between the fireplace and his mother. He was shivering since we had been taken in the indoor clothes we had on, and the day outside was wintery. I found myself feeling warm enough from the exercise of walking.

My siblings were crowded around the door way. Eva must have sent Eric off and I gathered that my return was the most exciting thing that had happened for years. Henry edged into the room. I could hear Hank Junior screaming his frustration in the kitchen. So if the big man of twenty-five thought he could do the outraged parent act, he obviously needed more than two years practice.

“Trust you to turn up like a bad smell,” he accused. “So are we to expect the police to turn up here at any moment?”

“Henry James Cassidy!” my mother scolded sternly. “That is enough of that!”

In spite of the fact that he towered over my mother as well, she had him well and truly trained to listen to her.

“Well, Ma, you know they want her for assault. How do you know these are not more of her victims?” Henry scratched his head absently and made a mess of his slicked back hair.

Before my mother could react again, I glared at him. “Rather than standing there so that your fancy leather jacket can be admired – you could be useful and go and ring Inspector Holt at Bolton. You could let him know I am here with Mrs Mosellan and her son and ask him if he could contact her husband.”

Henry scowled at my veiled insult to his new ‘look’. “So he can throw you in jail?”

He’d like that, I thought, if only because he didn’t dare tell anyone what I’d done to him.

I clenched my fists down by my sides, not because I was planning to punch his face, though that was tempting, but so he’d read my body language and realise I was serious.

“That is a very sensible suggestion,” my father agreed calmly, as he pushed his way into the room. He’d changed out of his Sunday suit. “But first – what happened?”

With my recent realisation that he did really care for me, I turned to him, glad of his presence. “I’m working for Mr Mosellan, like a housemaid and a companion for Mrs Mosellan. I’ve been teaching her English. He has enemies who tried to get at him by kidnapping Ellhi and Jahni. They made the mistake of taking me too.”

Henry snorted at that and my other sibs muttered. Eva’s comment was, “They’re welcome to try again.”

“I got us away!” I finished, staring defiantly at the lot of them.

“Why come here?” Henry persisted. He really needed to go and quieten Hank Junior and stop trying to accuse me of something.

“Because the people involved would never think to look here,” I said. “They don’t know you exist.”

“How did you get away,” my next oldest brother asked. Nick was the older of the twins.

“How do you think?” I retorted.

Nick flushed almost as red as his knitted jumper. Mark nudged him. They probably could guess and since they were both into checking out all the girls in the district, the idea of a kick in the man-bits probably made them squirm. At twenty-three, neither was ready to settle down.

I caught a faint smile on my father’s face and a disapproving frown on my mother’s.

"I know damn well that I am a misfit in this family and no kind of lady. Frankly, I don't want to be if it means being unable to defend myself. If I hadn't learnt how, I'd be earning my living right now as a whore!"

There! I'd really shocked my mother. Her face was almost a match for Nick's. "And if I hadn't learnt to fight by watching my brothers, who knows where I'd be now."

My mother was speechless with her mouth half agape.

Into the sudden silence, Jahni spoke in a soft little voice. "She saved my life."

That neatly finished the discussion. In the minds of my family, I just went from whore (though I never said I was one) to hero.

"Everyone away from the door and let our guests get some rest," my mother took charge. She then ordered Eva to put the kettle on to make coffee and Lucy to bring some cookies.

She glanced from Jahni to me. "Would Johnnie be hungry?"

"Jahni," I corrected the pronunciation, "Certainly is." I saw her trying my pronunciation and I decided that she would think her strange guests were foreigners.

My mother nodded at me, without disapproval, and bustled off. Only my father remained. He began to work lighting the fire that was always kept ready for when visitors came.

"You look well," he commented neutrally. He knelt and blew gently on the little flame until the kindling began to burn. "What have you been doing?"

"Working, like I said. Before that I was hanging around, doing odd jobs to get money for food." I went and sat on the arm of Jahni's chair. "Stealing it when I was broke."

He turned to look at me and I saw his faint frown. "And that assault business?"

"If you speak to that inspector, he'll tell you I'm absolved."

"Truth?" he asked as he stood up and went and sat in another of the parlour chairs.

"Truth," I replied soberly. "Ask him. The guy who wanted me charged is dust. He was arrested for kidnapping women and girls and making them his whores. He killed himself because he couldn't face jail."

My father considered that. "I read something about that." I knew he would check. He knew I knew. "You've changed, settled down a bit," he said after a while. "So who is this Mr Mosellan that you work for?"

"A foreigner I think. I'm still not sure exactly what he does. The inspector called him Ambassador."

My father's eyebrows rose, and he remarked. "I'd say he knows how to handle people."

I grinned wryly. "Probably."

"So how did you meet?"

"By accident. I saw Jahni falling onto the road. I don't know if he tripped or was pushed. I just ran and grabbed him. His father came to thank me and I think he took pity on me. I was more than a little shabby, dirty and desperate at the time. He offered me a job. At the time, I would have preferred a chunk of money so I could get myself lost. But, well, this way was better. When he found out about the assault business, he listened to me. No one else would. He got that policeman looking into it. He's giving me a chance to be someone – on my own terms."

My father grimaced, but only briefly. "I'll go and make that call. Later, though, you and I need to talk." He pushed himself up and walked from the room.

When he'd gone, I went and sat next to Ellhi who was still unconscious. Jahni came nestled into me.

After a while, my sisters now with frilly white aprons over their Sunday best dresses, bought in oatmeal and nut cookies, as well as cream and coffee, cups and saucers. They set them out on the low table that my father had carved for my mother. I enjoyed the amusement

of having them waiting on me. They declined to talk to me, making do with sour looks, and left as soon as they had set things out. Suited me.

I poured two cups of coffee, and Jahni started eating the cookies.

“What happened? How did we get onto that road?” Jahni asked. He’d just finished three biscuits loaded with cream.

“We were kidnapped. An Atapi got in through the barrier around the house. I don’t know how but I think your aunt drugged our tea and then signalled to it. She wanted it to take me, not your mother.”

“And me?” Jahni asked.

“I think it was just bad luck that you were with us,” I lied.

“What...what did the Atapi look like?” Jahni asked fearfully.

“It had wings,” I said.

Jahni’s eyes went wide. “That’s the one my father has been trying to find for years. He protects all the others.”

“And is the worst of the lot,” I added and Jahni nodded.

“I thought so. I didn’t drink much tea, so I wasn’t asleep like you. He grabbed me and did something. I blacked out. Then I woke in some dark place and dream images were floating in front of my eyes. I saw my family and for the first time in years, I really wanted to be there. Then I was.”

“You took us across planes?” Jahni asked, awed.

“I must have done,” I said thoughtfully. “So I don’t think the Atapi will find us here, or rather they won’t find you. I can’t stay here.”

Jahni grabbed me. “You must stay. Maman needs you.”

“Your father said they can use the slave bands to find me.” I wasn’t sure if that was still true, but I didn’t want to take the chance of leading the Atapi to my family. Even if I didn’t like them much – I didn’t hate them that much either.

Jahni looked scared. “Can you feel father?”

“What do you mean?”

“Maman said you mated to him too. Maman can sense him where ever he is.”

“I’m not that good yet,” I said, but then remembered Traeger saying to hold the slave bands and think of him. I tried that now.

For a fleeting instant, I felt him. Or rather, the feeling of “joining” – then the feeling was cut off. I remembered what I had sensed in that instant – and studied the aura. I was suddenly sure the Atapi had him.

Jahni whimpered, “If he dies – the Atapi will kill us all.” Had the kid read my mind?

“They haven’t done it yet,” I said thinking aloud. “That means they have a use for him. Let me think.”

I didn’t get that chance. My father returned, with the local doctor. I eyed the thin, stooped, grey haired old man with dislike. He still had that little beard that made me think of a goat, and that very severe face. At least, I wasn’t eight years old any more and fighting to avoid some injection they thought I needed.

He came over to examine Ellhi. I stayed close to her but waved Jahni away. I didn’t think that the doctor would notice anything odd about Ellhi, but I was ready for questions.

“I think she was drugged,” I told him. “We all drank some tea, but I didn’t have much, neither did Jahni.”

“How long has she been like this?” the doctor asked.

“At least an hour or two. We were taken from the house, and they left the truck for a minute. Jahni and I got her out and hid for a bit and we got her walking between us. We were close so I came here.”

He checked her pulse, breathing and eyes. He frowned, but said her vital signs were good.

"She should wake up soon. I don't think I need to move her. Is she able to stay here?" He glanced at my father, who nodded. "I should notify the police of this," he added.

My father countered that, "We've done that already. They will try to contact her husband. I believe she has recently arrived from overseas."

"If she hasn't wakened by morning, call me," he instructed. "I may have to take her to hospital."

"No hospital," I said, drawing a frown of disapproval.

"I am the doctor, young Miss Cassidy."

"I know," I agreed. "But the people who took us had a reason. I assume they will be looking for us. They won't expect us to be here, but they might be checking hospitals."

"I agree," my father supported me, and I was grateful. "The woman and her son can stay here until my daughter's boss has been notified."

The doctor finally agreed. I sighed with relief when he'd gone.

"Your Inspector has not heard from your boss," my father said. "He was most concerned when he heard what I told him. He will be making enquiries."

"He's not my Inspector." I muttered.

"He spoke highly of you," my father said and I heard the pride in his voice.

"I'll have to go..." I began.

"You've only just got here," I was reminded. "Wait until your friend wakes up. Remember, we are strangers to her."

Jahni nodded his agreement. I felt torn between two urgent needs. Oh, I knew he was right, but I did not feel happy knowing that the Atapi probably had Traeger. I felt I had to help him, or at least let him know we were safe. The police would never find him.

When we were alone, I repeated my statement. "I have to go."

"Why?" Jahni insisted.

"Well, the Atapi might find me here, eventually. And I think your father needs to know we are safe."

Jahni considered that. "Maman says Father is a very high ranking Traeger. He should be able to handle any Atapi sorcerer. What could you do?"

What indeed – against a sorcerer?

"And if Maman wakes, she might be violent. Like when she was sick."

"Why would she be that? You will be here."

Jahni shrugged. "But she will know she is not amongst our kind."

I wondered if that was part of the problem when she was sensing Suni from a distance.

"I'll wait until everyone is asleep and try to wake her," I told him. I was not happy about waiting. "Between us we can handle her," I said with false assurance.

My mother came into the parlour with gray blankets and plump pillows. My father carried in two mattresses taken from the spare room.

"You'd both best sleep in here," my father stated.

"Thanks."

"Thank you," Jahni added with a shy smile.

My mother's face relaxed into a smile at the politeness. "Lunch is almost ready. You can have it in here."

That suited me. I didn't want another inquisition from my siblings.

As the afternoon progressed, the house grew quiet. Sunday wasn't a busy day, but on a farm, there were always chores to be done. Often my mother went visiting, and my brothers

went off on their own affairs. My sisters generally retreated to their rooms to read books, or in Eva's case – fashion magazines.

I gestured for Jahni to come closer to his mother. I wanted tried shaking Ellhi gently and talking quietly to her. For a long time there was no reaction, then I felt Ellhi's muscles twitch, and I heard a change in her breathing. I was ready when she woke and sprung up all in the space of two seconds.

"Hush, Ellhi," I said quietly when she opened her mouth to yell. "You are safe! Jahni and I are here."

The feral look in her eyes faded. "We are not at home," she stated.

"No," I agreed. "This is my father's house."

"Humans?"

I nodded. She relaxed.

"What happened?"

I told her quickly, leaving out mention of her sister's actions.

"Suni?" she asked.

"Later," I told her.

"You must go to Jenha," she insisted, grabbing my arms.

"I had to be sure you were okay," I told her.

"I am," Ellhi assured me. "But you must go. Jenha must be told we are safe. If he thinks us prisoners of the Atapi sorcerer he will risk himself to find us. That devil might provoke him into killing. And if he does, he will be disgraced and must answer to the Kimh."

"So? He's killed before." I was thinking of that time in the forest.

"No! He must not. Lesser Kumatan have that duty, but only Atapi who have committed grave offences are killed."

I didn't understand. If taking us by force was not a grave offence – what was?

"Janhi mentioned the Kimh. Who are they?"

"There is no time to explain," Ellhi brushed the subject aside. "I will be alright here, but I can't sense Jenha."

I thought furiously. "I asked human police to try and reach him," I told her. "But that was to get my family to leave me alone."

"They won't be able to," Ellhi told me.

"I know and they won't find the village, either,"

Ellhi nodded confirmation.

"Okay – when the police call back, I'll offer to lead them to the village, I'll lose them there and try to reach Traeger," I explained my plan. Well...not all of the plan.

"What if the Atapi find you," Ellhi asked wide-eyed.

"Let them try," I said with a confidence I didn't feel. "Just let them try."

Ellhi and Jahni looked at me with such trust that I hoped I was worth it.

I heard a telephone ringing and soon after, my mother came into the front parlour.

"There is a policeman wanting to talk to you," she said sternly. "His name is Holt – he is an inspector."

Ellhi had lain back down before the door had opened. I jumped up quickly. "Did he say what he wanted?"

My mother pursed her lips. "No."

I followed her to the telephone, which was a new addition since I had left. She had to show me how to use it which made her feel superior.

She hovered just out of sight as I spoke. My part of the conversation wasn't very informative.

Holt was confused by the failure of his men to find the track to the Kumatan village. He had been there himself, even though the village was not marked on any map. I wasn't going to enlighten him, so I pretended to be perplexed as well. "I've only been that way twice, myself," I said thoughtfully. "As you know, it's a steep track – but I think I could recognize it..."

I was smiling as I ended the call. If I could get myself to Wetherby the police would drive me as far as they could, then accompany me on foot. I would be protected for that much – I doubted that the Atapi would reveal their hunting party to a human. When I got to the Pass Through, I thought to use it and reach the village to get help.

I still had doubts, but I had a suspicion that since I had escaped from the Atapi – from that darkness – that I had the power to cross planes. Except, I really didn't know for sure how I had done it.

I allowed my mother to know that Ellhi had woken, and introduced the two women. Ellhi had enough English to answer simple questions, but without my cuing her, she acted as if she knew little more than that.

After we shared supper in the parlour, Ellhi, Jahni and I set up the bedding for sleep. It had been a long and tiring day. Tomorrow might be as well. I was glad when my father offered me a ride into Wetherby in the cart. He claimed he had a need to go that way anyway. I wondered if it was to check my reception with the police there.

I had the feeling that my mother hoped to see the last of me and I hoped she would not try to question Ellhi too much. I didn't think that either she or Jahni would admit to being aliens and their grasp of English wasn't that great yet. I did however, suggest things to say if certain questions were asked. They were to pretend to be from Yugoslavia even though I had no idea if they had blonds there. I just expected the language to be nothing like the vegetable man's Greek or the cheese man's Italian.

Chapter 20

I hadn't slept well, even though the house was so familiar to me. I was aware of the need to protect Jahni and Ellhi, not from my family, but from the chance that the Atapi found us.

Well before dawn, I was awake and had rebuilt the fire to warm the room. From outside, I heard the two roosters vying to announce the dawn, and from inside, my twin brothers clumping down the stairs on their way out to milk the cows.

Sometime later, I heard my mother stirring in the kitchen, and Henry arriving from his new place down the road. While the kettle boiled and the house filled with the aroma of cooking bacon, eggs, sausages and onion, I heard Henry and my father discussing collecting the stubble from the cornfield to store for fodder.

By the time my mother slipped in with a fancy tray of breakfast, my stomach was trying to devour me. Ellhi and Jahni seemed delighted by what I privately considered an invalid's meal. Poached eggs and toast was more like what they were used to, but I wanted what my sibs were getting.

Ellhi thanked my mother, and I added my own thanks, but my words were just empty noise.

When I took the tray back to the kitchen, I asked my mother when my father was going to leave. She was used to my bluntness and probably didn't expect the social nicety of "How are you this morning, mama?" to ever come from me.

"He's out harnessing the horses," was all she said, before continuing with preparing the breakfast table for herself and my sisters.

I slipped outside, and arrived at the stables just as my father was leading out his two old Clydesdale horses, called Norris and Turner. I wordlessly took Norris's lead rein and reached out to scratch under his chin. He nuzzled me, and I slipped him a quarter of the apple I swiped from the kitchen on my way out. Turner whickered, wanting his share of the fruit he smelt.

"Well, I'll be..." my father remarked. "When did you get these two eating out of your hand, not biting it?"

"They never wanted to," I said smugly. "They like me."

"Apparently, but bribes of apple have never worked for your brothers," Matthew Cassidy remarked.

I knew from old stories that Norris and Turner were named after a pair of particularly disliked RAF commanders that my father had served under when he'd joined the RAF at the start of the war.

"These guys are secretly ladies men," I claimed. My father guffawed.

The horses whickered like they were laughing, with their breath forming little white clouds in the frosty air.

"Are you ready to go to town?" I was asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Good. I'll take the cart around the front – I'll be about ten minutes. You go in before you get a chill and tell your friends you'll be off."

I sighed. He wouldn't let me yoke the horses, even if I asked. It was not a woman's job. But I wasn't ready to go in yet, even if it was frosty and I only had on a light tunic over a shirt and trousers. Instead, I whistled like my brother's did, and two rangy mongrels raced around the barn and ran straight for me.

My father spoke sharply to them when they began to jump on me.

"They'll get your white outfit filthy," he rebuked me.

I ignored him as usual, since getting dirty never bothered me, and this time he just shrugged and didn't try to force the issue.

Both, the darker furred Catcher and his lighter coloured offspring, Chance, tried to lick me at the same time and I tried to hug and pat both at once. Their tongues were licking almost as fast as the tails were wagging. They barked a farewell when Nick whistled them back to the barn so they could herd the cows back to the paddock.

I left my father hitching the cart and wandered down to the first paddock and looked over the farm. I could bring to mind what it looked like in every season, not just now when the fields were fallow and the cows grazed on the stubble left after the harvest. The small orchard off to the left of the house where pears, peaches apples and apricots grew, the herb and vegetable patch – all had scents that varied with the seasons.

I knew it all but it was not enough to hold me here. I felt at home anywhere I could walk in bare feet on bare earth.

Even my family - I hadn't missed them. If I missed anything, it was the animals. They had always liked me and were never judgemental – unlike my sibs and parents. Truth be told – I felt closer to Ellhi and Jenha than to any other person I had met.

Just thinking of Jenha, renewed the urgency I felt to find him. I returned to the house as the cart creaked into motion.

Ellhi and Jahni hugged me and I in turn tried to assuage Ellhi's unvoiced fears about Jenha. I stayed long enough to change into some clean human style clothes; more of my brother's cast-offs which my mother had brought in,

When I left the house, I tried to be quiet, since Eva slept in the room over the parlour and Lucy the one beyond that. Neither rose before seven.

I noticed that my father had loaded the cart with several boxes of corn and cabbages, and several hay bales. One of the barn cats had hopped up onto the cart and was inspecting the load for extra passengers. Father was already seated up on the seat that was set above the front of the cart. He was rugged up in a thick coat, and gave me a 'hurry up' look.

After I had nimbly climbed up beside him, he commented neutrally, "I know you think you don't feel the cold, but the wind will be cutting right through you once we reach the main road. There's a coat down behind me."

I decided to comply with his suggestion but only because it would look odd if I didn't and I wanted to be inconspicuous...

Wordlessly, my father twitched the reins and Turner and Norris began to plod down the drive to the lane that led to the road. He didn't seem talkative, and yet he had said we needed to talk. There was no better time than now when we were away from any possible family listeners. I tried to think of a way to bring up my mother – my real mother.

Finally, I simply blurted, "Betsy is not my real mother, is she?"

For a long time, my father didn't respond.

"No," he said at last. "No she's not. You're right. I don't know how you found out."

All I could say was, "I encountered someone who must have known her. He said I was the image of her and her name was Jai Ansuni."

"Yes. It was. She was beautiful in an exotic way and you have grown to look like her."

"Tell me about her," I urged. I'd heard the Atapi version, but I wanted to know her as he had.

"I met her during the war," he said, remembering. "I was in enemy territory and injured. She was a nurse. Her friend had been killed and..." My father stopped talking, obviously remembering.

"And you slept with her..." I prompted, without censure.

“Yes – at the time it seemed so natural. She was distraught, and afraid – and she said that she would welcome a child of mine. We kept in touch, but only met again – just before you were born.”

“How did Betsy take it?” I wondered aloud.

“With mixed feelings,” he admitted. “You know how she loves children - she would have been happy with a dozen, but after Lucy, she found out that she couldn’t have any more. She blamed herself for me having an affair but it wasn’t her fault. Your mother hadn’t been the first, but she was the last. I think she enchanted me.”

“Maybe she did,” I commented, more to myself.

“Any way when I learnt that your mother was pregnant, and wanting my help, I told Betsy – I think she was more envious than jealous.”

“But she agreed to raise me...”

“Oh yes – when she found out that your mother was having problems with the pregnancy, she insisted that she come and stay at the farm. She said that a child of mine was too precious to risk. They never became friends, but Betsy never said a harsh word to her. Your mother had a way about her.”

“Did my mother know she was going to die?” I asked, surprising my father.

“I think – I think she did, though I don’t know what made you ask that,” he said. “She wasn’t afraid because I promised her I would care for you. She did warn that you would be a handful and I think she wanted to have you, so as to leave something of herself behind.”

I didn’t know what to say.

My father spoke again. “She made me promise to give you something – when you came to ask about her.”

“What is it?” I asked eager for a link with my mother.

He took something from a pocket. “Just a plain tin box. I assume it opens but I can’t see how.”

I took the object and felt a tingle as my fingers touched it.

Plain tin? No way – it looked to be made of copper and was the most exquisitely ornate object I had ever seen. I almost blurted that thought aloud, but stopped myself. I examined the box. It was rectangular, about half an inch thick and no bigger than the palm of my hand. I guessed at once that it was Atapi made for the slave bands that I still wore were similarly worked.

I am sure that some sort of magic hid the glyphs from human eyes, in the same way as how Traeger had hidden the slave bands.

As the box was meant to look plain, I only studied it for a short time. The glyphs seemed on the verge of making sense as I slipped the box in my pocket. I suddenly wondered anew, what my natural mother had been up to – why had she created me and how could I find out?

“Are you shocked at me?” my father asked.

“No,” I answered honestly, feeling I had no right to criticise him. “At least I know you are human and I don’t have to be perfect either.”

He chuckled, I think with relief. I wasn’t going to correct his understanding of my words. I’d meant two things by what I had said.

For the rest of the trip, we talked very little. However, the silences were comfortable. At Wetherby, I had him drop me at the garage. Hesitated for a moment before leaving, then said, “Take care.”

“I will, Pa,” I said. I saw a faint smile and the trace of tears on his face. I’d never called him Pa. I watched until he disappeared down the road and around a bend.

Care I would take, but I had always attracted trouble. Right now, I had to outwit the worst kind of Atapi trouble. After thinking that, I trotted quickly to the police station and asked for the Inspector. While I waited there, in the foyer, I examined everyone I saw in case

they were Atapi in human form. I was relieved to leave after the Inspector introduced me to the two detectives who would drive me to where I had rescued Jahni.

They stopped in a little stopping area at the side of the main road. From here, they followed me along to where I remembered going down the hill. They said nothing, but I wondered if they doubted my memory. Yet I led them unerringly to the base of the hill and up to a spot just below the Pass Through to the Kumatan village.

“We have to go up there,” I said, pointing to two trees that marked the way.

I scrambled up, and walked between the trees. I felt – something – but not the sense of disorientation. I looked down into the valley and saw just that. A virgin valley with no sign of a village.

The two detectives stopped beside me. “Where now?”

I pointed down. “Usually I can see smoke from the houses,” I said, adding a trace of worry to my tone. My sense of danger warned me moments before I heard a voice.

“No one is working today,” that voice said, “because they are all out looking for you, my wife and my son.”

The voice was an almost perfect match for Traeger’s. I turned, not surprised that the “person” was also Traeger’s image and dressed in a suit like Traeger wore. I wasn’t fooled. Traeger did not smell like an Atapi and my gut was warning me that this was no ordinary Atapi.

While the false Traeger conversed with the police and assured them that all was well in the village and that he was relieved that his wife and son were safe – I dodged out of sight and tried the Pass Through once again.

This time, I carefully pictured the village as it had looked when I came through with Traeger. I walked a step, felt the disorientation, I went a second step and as had happened at the barn, I was flung back.

“We will come as soon as I have called off the search,” the false Traeger assured the police as he took a grip on my collar and pulled me upright. “Do you need a guide back to your car?”

“We’ll be right, Sir,” one answered with assurance. I wondered if they both knew these hills well enough to wonder where the village was. They’d never find it.

The fake Traeger made me walk between the two trees. He had no luck passing through to the village either.

He snarled, and then hissed. “No matter, it will not stay blocked for long. Where are the woman and child?”

I ignored the question in favour of sarcasm. “My, my, the great Traeger can’t open his own door.”

The image of Traeger changed to one of a bug-eyed wrestler. He repeated his question and held me by the arms and squeezed. I simply stared back at him.

“I will kill you if you don’t tell me,” he threatened.

I laughed. “You have been trying to do that since you knew I existed and haven’t succeeded yet.”

He snarled. “I will kill the Traeger.”

“Go for it,” I invited. “I’m told he is more than a match for you. He is probably just waiting for you to try – he will be allowed to kill you then.”

My words must have held some truth. He hissed his displeasure and tried another verbal attack.

“I’m told you are his new concubine,” he told me.

I laughed again. “I’m a servant! He thinks that giving me pleasure while he rapes me will make me obedient. But I doubt that he’d touch me if he hadn’t been ordered to by that creepy Leader Katech.”

The Atapi seemed to realise that I wasn't mortally afraid of him. I knew I should be, but my unexpected reactions were confounding him.

"How did you escape," he demanded, as he began to drag me off the trail and into the trees.

"If I knew that, I'd do it again." I wondered if he would tell me anything if I said more. "I think these slave bands did something."

I took the odd noise he made as a pointed negative.

"Why?" I asked innocently.

"Because those bands negate the power needed to escape from between planes!"

"Really?" I shrugged in his grasp. "I ended up back in the human's plane – near that damn barn you burnt."

"Impossible!"

I decided this Atapi had the weakness of vanity; he had to prove how smart he was and how stupid I was.

"It had to be those bands. If I could cross planes, I would have been through that Pass Through before you got there! Humans don't have magic powers."

"The slave bands should have prevented you escaping," he insisted.

"Do you mean I could have if they weren't on me?"

"Women, do not have powers."

Who was he trying to convince? Himself or me?

"Well one of your mates must have helped me," I muttered to annoy him as he continued to drag me along. Perhaps I did have powers, beyond healing fast. Leader Katech seemed to think I did. Dare I think that I had enough latent power to threaten an Atapi sorcerer? Was that why they put two bands on me? No, that didn't directly follow – the bands were to control me, Jenha said.

Nice as the thought was, the bands were meant to suppress the power and I had no idea how to use this mythical force anyway.

I'd had enough of this Sorcerer's company. I had thought to let him take me to where he had Traeger, but maybe it would be better to ditch him before he took me back to the Atapi colony and had me kept there.

So I planted my feet, imagined I was a huge tree with deep roots, and let him jerk my arm. "I have had enough of your company," is a polite English version of what I said in Atapi. Let's just say that my real comments were infinitely rude, but at that, I was only repeating what his kinfolk had said to me.

A torrent of the vilest part of my mother's language was aimed at me as the Atapi tried to make me move. Neither pulling, nor shoving had any effect. I hid my surprise. I knew I was stronger than other people my age, but I had expected this sorcerer to be a great deal stronger still. Perhaps the slave bands he was holding did drain his power, or perhaps his powers were limited as long as he stayed in human form.

"You will come with me," he said as he stared at me.

"Why?" My head began to feel as if I should be hearing a loud noise.

He didn't answer my question. Instead, he began circling me as if examining me for the means of my defiance and his inability to make me move. I knew he wouldn't see simple human pig-headedness.

I began to feel like I was being smothered – that the air around me was being sucked away. I reached out and felt, but couldn't see, some kind of wall of force around me. I began to feel pressure on my skin as if the wall were closing in. When the invisible wall reached my shoulders, I began to panic. My only thought was that the bands might help me and I moved my arms so that they touched the force wall.

Was it my imagination or did the force become weaker?

That Atapi still circled me with every sign of focussed intent. I'd had enough. When he was on my left, I darted to the right. Tried to. The first few steps were like walking through deep mud, but then I was able to run.

In my mind, I felt intense anger, and heard curses as I ran dodging between trees. He began to follow me, cursing me as a child of a thousand devils, a bastard sorceress and having unclean blood. I figured I had done something he had not expected. Perhaps any full Atapi would have been unable to break his power. While he cursed my unholy mixed blood, I blessed it and kept running, hoping to catch up to the police.

I didn't see and hadn't smelt the two Atapi warriors. The first I knew was when something burnt my legs and I stumbled from the sudden agony. I regained my balance with difficulty only to feel more pain, this time in my back. I fell face first onto the ground, unable to move.

They rolled me over and spat on my face. Their infuriating laugh filled my head. Moments later, their laughing stopped. They bowed to someone out of my line of sight. The sorcerer had caught up to me.

I heard a high-pitched whistle, and then I felt as if something were crawling over me. Some kind of glowing thread crossed in front of my eyes. I felt as if I were being cocooned. I tried to wriggle but without success.

My ears still worked, though and I shamelessly listened to the sorcerer talking to more of his warriors. His anger intensified as he listened to a report. What I heard suggested that the Atapi settlement was under attack. A warrior was told to bring me and that one threw me over a shoulder and walked. I felt the sensation of twisting time and place.

I was unceremoniously dumped and the warrior raced off. I could hear what sounded like a battle occurring – screams, yells, battle cries, the clashing of metal weapons and flashes like lightning. I wished I could see more.

The sorcerer was calling for more warriors and one by one they appeared out of nowhere and ran after the others. When no more appeared, the sorcerer stared out to where I assumed the settlement was. He seemed to have forgotten me.

I explored my ability to move. Walking and crawling were not possible but I was able to wriggle like a snake, which was more than I had expected. Even so, all I managed to do was roll over onto my side. I could move my head now, enough to see down the hill. We were above the camp where the Atapi women lived.

I saw horsemen wearing the uniform of Kumatan guards. They were riding through the settlement, fighting off the few guards that tried to stop them, then grabbing up women, children and old men and riding off. Some were on foot, fighting against the warriors who had been summoned. I thought I saw Traeger on foot, away from the activity, directing his men, and I rejoiced that he had got free from the sorcerer. I wondered why this sorcerer was not down there using his magic to defend his tribe, and trying to fight Traeger.

Traeger raised his arm. The horsemen wheeled with their burdens and raced towards him. They vanished as they passed him. The foot fighters turned and raced towards him pursued by whooping Atapi. As the warriors passed Traeger, they vanished and as the Atapi drew near, Traeger turned and walked three steps. The whooping changed to a weird ululation of anger as the Atapi warriors realised that their prey had escaped.

I had watched, fascinated more than horrified or elated. I tried to roll further – but had to stop trying. I was suddenly giddy and feeling sick. I now felt all the fear, terror, and pain of those left behind in the village. I rolled again, wanting to cling to the ground. I concentrated on breathing in and out.

The sorcerer's foot nudged me, I ignored him. He walked away a bit, probably sure that I was still helpless. I needed to block out the sensations coming from the Atapi. I told myself

that I didn't care if they were hurt or afraid or terrified. Yet somehow, I couldn't convince myself.

The Kumatan raid surprised me. I thought they never raided the Atapi colony, so why now? Would they kill the ones they'd taken? I thought not - though every single Atapi remaining in the colony believed their relatives to be dead now and that the enemy would return to take them to a similar fate.

The sorcerer just stood there – uncaring about those below, giving no thought to trying to rescue those taken – just wanting the death of the Kumatan. His attitude stank!

I found I had more movement and the wicked prickling of the glowing strands had gone. I was angry at the position I was in, angry that he cared so little for his people. I think I cared more for them than he did, and that was little enough. I wished that I could make him suffer all that pain/terror/fear. I wished it intensely.

The sorcerer bent over and let out a roar. I jumped, startled, and then realised that somehow, I was free.

I glanced at my captor, saw that he was for a moment incapacitated and sprang into a run, heading in the direction of the fleeing Kumatan. There was still enough confusion and weeping in the village to distract every one from my presence.

But I had forgotten that the sorcerer could fly.

Chapter 21

As soon as I began running, I had stopped wishing the sorcerer to suffer. I had affected him, but I didn't know how.

He landed in front of me; I dodged, and zigzagged through the trees. He sprang high, flew, then dropped down through the trees and cut off my path to escape. I dodged again, trying to pass him but failing each time. Finally, he let me run – straight into six of his warriors.

One grabbed me – his mind was full of elation at routing the Kumatan. A small part of my mind sneered at his delusion. His face grinned maliciously when the sorcerer gave the six warriors permission to 'play' with me.

He had told the warriors to keep me alive. So when I tried to fight back, that annoying binding kicked in and I couldn't defend myself and after a while, I couldn't help myself. All the while, the sorcerer watched, and licked his lips as if anticipating something very pleasant.

Finally, he called a stop to the torment. He drew a circle about where I lay on the ground and the warriors moved back out of the way. He circled me again, making a series of hand gestures. The hair on my neck prickled me. Somehow, I knew that he had begun a ritual of some kind, when he thought me too hurt and exhausted to resist him. Then the warriors joined in with that unnerving and monotonous chant that was as much in my head as in my ears.

I hurt. That was all I could think about. I'd had enough of fighting, enough of the pain/fear/terror of the Atapi. I just wanted to be human and never to have met any of them. I'd prefer to go to jail than this. For a moment, I thought I would give up – let them kill me. I was nobody important – nobody would miss me.

Only for a moment! Since when had I been a sacrificial lamb? This Atapi sorcerer, who cared nothing for his lesser kin – only for killing and ravaging, was not going to win.

My mother had wanted me, created me, and died to give me life. I still didn't know why. No doubt that if she had lived, this monster would have killed her. I was my mother's second chance. I would make my own new chances.

I screamed as loud as I could, "Damn your barbaric rituals!" I saw two warriors flinch, but the chanting remained constant. The sorcerer stopped where I could see that unpleasant look of anticipation. He began making chopping motions as if throwing knife after invisible knife at me. Nothing visible left his hands, but I felt as if knives were being driven into my flesh. This time I would not suffer in silence. Let them suffer my shrill, high-pitched screams: let somebody hear me and come to help me.

I wanted the pain to stop. With no way to help my self physically, I did as I had done before, wished it all back on my tormentor. I saw him jerk and his eyes begin to glow with a feral light. He began to circle me again, his mind voice forcing itself on me.

"You cannot hurt me that way, traitor. You will take a thousand hours to die. I will drink of your agony, feast on your despair. You will live through a thousand deaths, each worse than before."

He continued to spiral slowly in towards me, maliciously describing, in gruesome detail, all that he would do to me. How each little bit of life-force I lost would succour him for years to come. I felt his hot breath on me before his hands began to touch me. Where they touched, it was like acid was burning me.

So far, he had not damaged any vital part of me. Yet the pain was worse than the beating by the warriors, and the invisible knives – that pain had faded into vengeful memory.

The sorcerer's mental voice continued, now forcing me to stand up. The warriors chanting grew faster in its rhythm, "...traitor's death, traitor's death, traitor's death..."

They were almost swaying in ecstasy and that sensation swept through my mind and shocked me out of the almost trancelike state I had fallen into. I aimed my thoughts and feelings of agony at them. Their minds had no protection – they fell unconscious.

The sorcerer didn't react – he kept telling me about the knife he clutched in his hand – how he would heat it up and remove parts of me, slice by slice, each slice cauterising my flesh so I wouldn't bleed to death.

My throat was strained from screaming, and it was no longer helping. I clamped my teeth together, blocked my mind to the insidious mental voice and pretended to faint.

I didn't reach the ground. Some power of his caught me and forced me back to my feet. He gave a mental laugh and said, "I hold your spirit, traitor, you cannot die, you cannot sleep, and you will live a thousand deaths..."

Desperation is a great teacher. I knew that the further this obscene ritual progressed, the less control I would have of myself. He had controlled my spirit once before and I had escaped. I felt for the box that my father had passed on to me and drew it out.

The sorcerer suddenly became aware of the power emanating from it. He stopped circling and reached for it. His mind stopped chanting, overcome by his lust for that power.

In the instant that he touched the box, he convulsed. At the same moment, something took me over. That something was powerful, but not evil. It bathed me in a feeling of peace and of purpose. My hand reached out and twisted the ornamental knife out of the sorcerer's hand. The sorcerer tried to grab it back, but the power that had me, had him too.

I heard a female voice in my mind, but it was not speaking to me.

"All the sights you've ever seen – gone

All the places you've ever been – gone

All the sounds you've ever heard – gone

All the magic of your spoken word – gone

The name of power granted you

The talent given to very few – gone"

I heard the sorcerer moan, but he still hadn't given up. He grabbed for his knife again, but I jerked it out of reach. He grabbed me, whilst still touching the box. I stared at him.

The voice spoke to me, "Would you give him mercy?"

My entire being said, "No."

My hand moved without my will – pulling backwards like tensioning a bow with an arrow. Then it jerked forward.

In those few microseconds, he dragged me forward. "Die with me!" The words were barely a whisper, but full of venom still. The knife was in his heart. I felt him grasp my spirit.

"No!" I said, seeing the darkness around me. I pictured a scene and was suddenly there.

I was free.

I collapsed to the ground, somewhere in a forest. In one hand, I held the box, in the other the decorated knife, its blade stained with purplish blood.

My guts heaved. There was little enough to bring up but I couldn't stop. Finally, I rolled away from my mess and tried to hug the ground.

I lay, weak and helpless, sure that I could do no more – but I was wrong.

The smell of Atapi wafted to me on the breeze, I pulled myself into a crouch, ready to spring to defend myself. I groaned, realising that I had not crossed to the real human plane.

These Atapi had not smelt me, for they trotted into the small clearing without their usual caution. When they saw me, they began to spread out and circle me. There were four of them

and each stopped at a different angle to me. I stood then, holding the knife out so they could see it, and turning slowly to try to see which one would pounce first as they began to inch closer.

They stopped abruptly and stared –at the purple stained knife in my hand. They each swallowed convulsively. If they had been human, I think they would have turned pale. It seemed as if the sight of the sorcerer's blood had scared them.

I laughed. Since when had Atapi warriors been scared of blood? "Come closer," I suggested, brandishing the knife.

That was enough, all four turned and fled. I sat down again, weak with relief. All I wanted was to go home and hide. Go anywhere and hide. I really wanted to forget all this and be simply human, not some half alien monster who had just killed a living being – even if it was an evil one. I hurt. I was exhausted. I still felt sick. I needed help.

I shoved the box in my pocket and pulled my knees up and hugged myself, feeling the slave bands under my hands.

"Traeger," I called with my mind.

I felt a brief response, but it was smothered.

I tried again and felt nothing. Perhaps Traeger was busy.

I crawled to a tree and sat with my back to it. Without closing my eyes, I tried to relax and let the pain go away. I didn't want to sleep because I might still be in danger. I waited.

Two beings suddenly stood before me. One was Kumatan and the other was a stranger and definitely wasn't Atapi or Kumatan. I had never seen anyone like him.

He had blond hair, like Traeger, and his facial features were similar to the Kumatan but more hawklike. The greatest difference was the subtle 'luminance' that was about him. It was like he glowed from within.

"He who you called is not free to come," the being spoke in Atapi, but it was not his native tongue. "Atapi, why do you call the Kumatan?"

"Is there a law against it?" I asked in Kumatan. "Cannot a human – which I am, call to a friend when I need help?"

The Kumatan glared at me. The strange being frowned. "You are Atapi!"

"No! I am human by birth, by choice and by inclination."

"You are Atapi!"

"You are blind!" I retorted.

"You have used sorcery. It is all about you," the being claimed.

"Rubbish!" I insisted. "Atapi sorcery has ill-used me. The winged creep was trying to kill me using some barbaric ritual."

"Yet here you are, alive, unharmed," he said with disbelief.

I threw the bloodstained knife at the beings feet.

"Not unharmed," I told him, staring at the pale grey eyes that met mine after he recognised the knife. "Humans don't just stand around and wait to be killed."

"No Human can win against a major Atapi sorcerer devil," the being stated. "It takes sorcery, taught by an Atapi master."

"How many humans have you met?" I asked sarcastically. "Or are you using yourself as the reference?"

The being didn't answer. He just waited for me to continue.

"The Atapi reckon I have Atapi blood, but because I bleed red, not purple, all they wanted to do was kill me. Until then, and still now – I call myself human. Jenhari Mosellan gave me the chance to prove that I was no barbarian. I serve him by choice in exchange for his protection. I shall continue to do so. It's a matter of honour."

Two more of the vaguely luminous beings walked into my line of sight. They spoke to the first in a language that was neither Atapi of Kumatan. They all glanced at the knife, and then at me. I guessed by their grim expressions that they were discussing something unpleasant.

One of the newcomers asked in Atapi, "Is the sorcerer devil dead or merely dishonoured?"

I answered again in Kumatan, "He was a dishonourable creep. He didn't give a damn about his people, only killing. I hope he's dead."

"Either way – his power is broken," the third one spoke. "And you must come and see the results of your deed."

"If he is dead, he won't be attacking Kumatan or human," I said, wondering what terrible thing they wanted to accuse me of.

"Come," that third one insisted.

I remained seated. He gestured and two Kumatan guards walked forward from the trees. They took a position on either side of me but did not touch me. I forced myself to stand even though I barely had the energy to do anything. I sighed and followed them.

I learnt that I hadn't gone very far when I had broke free of the sorcerer. We were soon at the place where I had overlooked the village, and I saw where some purplish blood had fallen on the ground. There was no sign of the sorcerer. Where, a short time ago there had been life, albeit in pain and terror – now it was still.

Too still.

"Can we go down there," I asked, even though I thought I knew what I would find.

The three strange beings nodded and I started walking with the Kumatan guards right with me. It was worse than I had imagined. There was no one alive, not women, not children, not babies, not old men. All had been killed by the sword. Something dormant rose up inside me. This was wrong. This should not have been. A feral howl was voiced by my mouth and lips. Tears streamed from my eyes.

An Atapi reaction. A human reaction.

I bent down and touched the cold brow of a tiny child. I didn't understand why this had been done. I walked back to the three beings. I stifled the howl I still wanted to voice and scrubbed away the tears with my arm.

"Who did that?" I demanded of the strangers.

"You did that," they all said in unison.

"NO!" I yelled back. "You cannot blame that barbarism on me. You cannot be that deluded, that stupid..."

"Enough! An Atapi sorcerer who defeats another sorcerer can do as he wills to the other's tribe," I was told by the Kumatan.

I was angry. "And you think I ordered them dead? Me and what army? If it is true that such a choice exists – I would have given them life – freedom."

"They are dead!" one stated.

"Haven't you listened to a thing I've said? I am not a sorcerer of any kind. I'm a human. A woman. I was dragged into this nightmare. An evil creep decided to kill me. I chose life. I am sorry if your kind would let yourselves be killed. Those old men, women and children were no threat to me. I would have let them live."

"What of the warriors?" I was asked.

A hiss escaped me. "They deserve to die."

"They did."

"Who killed them?" I asked, but I suddenly knew what had happened.

"They killed themselves."

"Where?"

One of them pointed to an area of the settlement away from most of the dead.

“Why did they kill everyone? Why did they not stay to protect them? That was their job, wasn’t it?” My question got through to these odd beings.

“Yes, it was. And they did. Their people would never be captives or slaves.”

They would never be slaves to a half-human abomination, I thought.

“They were wrong, those warriors,” I said with a depth of feeling I think they sensed.

“The people should have had a choice.”

“They were barbarians,” I was told.

“The warriors were barbarians. The rest were – people,” I said flatly.

“It is the Atapi way!” the point was emphasised.

“Well, It’s not MY way,” I stated, staring at the strange beings, who in my mind spoke in contradictions.

“I’m going home,” I said and I began to walk.

I didn’t expect then to allow that and I wasn’t wrong. However, once they realised that I was heading for the Kumatan village, they merely accompanied me. The walk gave me time to think, plan a bit, figure a few things out and come up with many new questions.

Chapter 22

I intended to go to Traeger's house but when I turned off the road to go there the Kumatan guards grasped my arms to stop me. Involuntarily, I screamed. The touch of the guards was firm and not deliberately severe, but it aggravated the weals caused by the sorcerer.

They didn't release me, but one of the strangers pushed up my sleeve to reveal the vivid red burn marks. His eyes widened in recognition.

I breathed in and out, slowly, concentrating on dulling the pain. The guards eased their grip and waited for me to recover.

"Can you walk to the next house?" I was asked. I shook my head. The next house belonged to the Leader Katech and I didn't want to go there.

"I need to talk to Traeger Mosellan."

"The position of Traeger is vacant," one of the strangers told me. "The protection of Jenhari Mosellan is no longer valid."

"I agreed to serve him – no one else. Why can't I see him?"

"He is briefing us on the situation here."

"Very well, since he's not available – I require to return to the human plane."

"No."

"You have no right to keep me here, against my will. I demand to be returned to my human kin."

"Atapi – you can demand nothing! This world will be rid of your kind. You will come with us – if not freely, then as a prisoner."

Their attitude annoyed me; I should have been used to it. I tested the strength of the guards grip and wrested myself free. I expected pain, but not their reflexes. I had not even taken one step when blackness overcame me.

I awoke sometime later, covered in a layer of soft cloth and with all the red burn marks treated with an oily substance. The pain had gone, through either drugs or my own healing ability so I could lie on my back with out being in agony.

When I tried to sit up, I realised that I was restrained in some way. So I stared at the roof above me and tried to work out where I was.

Obviously, I was a prisoner, but at least in this captivity I was being treated well enough. The room seemed to be like those in Traeger's house – at least judging from the ornate ceiling and architrave. Perhaps I was in Leader Katech's house? I had doubts about that since that man didn't trust me. If I was, where were my guards? Outside the door?

"You are awake," a resonant voice spoke nearby. "How to you feel?"

"Tied up! Why don't you come around where I can see you?"

"You will see me in due course. I am to be your guardian."

"Guard, you mean," I snapped. "Prisoners don't have guardians."

"Call me what you will, it does not alter my duties." The voice seemed unfazed by my retorts.

"Which are what?"

"You will understand them in time," the voice tried to soothe me.

"Who the hell are you anyway?"

"I am Kaer, of the Kimh."

I didn't know what to think after that. Apart from knowing that Jahni was afraid of the Kimh, I had no idea what they were. I wondered if the three luminescent beings were Kimh

and if Kaer had that same luminance. Jahni had thought there were not any here. So if there were, now, what had brought them here and how?

"Go away," I told him.

I stared at the ceiling for two more days before they allowed me to walk around. Only then did I get to see the rest of the room, and it looked exactly like someone's guest room. I felt I was completely healed, and the nurses had marvelled my rapid recovery. Perhaps they hadn't been told that I was part Atapi. They left my clothes ready for me, the human clothes I had put on before leaving the farm. These had been washed and pressed too.

The metal box that my father had given me was no longer in the pocket of the jeans. It was important to me and I wanted to study it, to understand its power and what the markings meant. I wanted to know what had happened when the sorcerer had touched it.

"Kaer?" I called without raising my voice.

My 'guardian' appeared suddenly. I had finally seen him and though he had that same subtle luminescence as his elders, I was sure he was not much older than me, and probably younger than my oldest brother.

"I had a metal thing in my pocket. What happened to it?"

"It is being examined," the infuriating Kaer told me. I'd had enough of his cryptic, non-explanatory statements.

"Why? It's only a keepsake that my human father gave to me."

"It is not Earth native metal. It is Atapi work. Sorcery made."

I jumped back, as if from him. "Do they think it's dangerous?"

He took my feigned startled reaction for innocence. "Has it hurt you?" Kaer asked.

"No." I was not going to say how it had taken me over and helped me kill the sorcerer.

"It has traces of magic, and the etchings seem to be a series of senseless hieroglyphs," Kaer told me, watching for my reaction. I hid my surprise that they had even seen that much when my father had seen nothing.

"It's probably in some barbaric Atapi language," I said tartly.

"Do you know that?" Kaer asked, staring intently at me.

"Of course not! I was just guessing. Hey! Don't look at me like that. I can't read Atapi! As I have been telling you for the past two days, I was their prisoner, not their student. Why would they teach me anything if they only wanted to kill me? I can't even speak that much Atapi – even though your elders assume that I can."

The intensity of Kaer's gaze receded.

"When they finish with it, can I have it back?" My gut feeling was that only I was meant to make sense of the words on the box.

"If they decide it is safe," Kaer stated. "It has value for you?"

"If you are right and it's Atapi work, my unknown mother must have given it to my father to give to me. It would be all I have of her and it would remind me of my father – that's all."

Kaer seemed satisfied, and I dared to ask if I was allowed to walk around outside.

"Do not leave the village," he told me, before he went off again.

I grimaced to hide the fact that I wanted to grin. For two days, Kaer had been asking me questions. I had been answering him from the point of view of 'innocent human dragged into this mess and not knowing why'. I think I had begun to convince him of my humanity and to treat my 'Atapi-ness' as accidental. What those others thought I couldn't tell but with luck they would get a similar picture from talking to Traeger. That reminded me that I still needed to talk to him about Ellhi and Jahni.

I decided to my supposed freedom to walk around. It seemed that they had doubts about grouping me with the Atapi.

I had learnt, from one of Kaer's questions that the Atapi taken by the Kumatan were in the village, alive and well. Scared perhaps, but well. They were being treated as prisoners, true, but being treated humanely. Listen to me! I was the only human around.

Just for appearances, I made no effort to approach them, but I walked out of the healer's house and headed down the path behind the houses. The Atapi were being housed in the barn at Traeger's place and were allowed freedom to move outside in an area surrounded by a high wire fence. I glanced that way, saw only two old Atapi males near the barn door. Their eyesight was still as good as mine. They recognised me and pointed at me. Then to my amazement they bowed.

Startled, I skittered away towards Traeger's house. No one stopped me. I went inside. The house was quiet. I went to Ellhi's suite. The bed had been stripped, the cupboards were empty. My little room was the same. Alarmed, I called out.

"Tenkin? Benku?"

Tenkin found me. "Mizes Jai!" He sounded glad to see me.

"What's happening here? Where's Traeger?"

"He Traeger no more. Master Mosellan is with Kimh."

Did I detect a trace of concern in his tone?

"So why is this place being packed up?"

"We going home," Tenkin grinned.

"Home?"

"To Korvu."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Home," Tenkin repeated in emphasis. "Atapi devil Stacion Ansuni is dead."

"Yeah, I know but..."

"Atapi dead, except for those we rescued," Tenkin said. "No devil here, no need for us here."

My mouth formed an "Oh", as I suddenly understood.

"Where is Traeger? I have to see him."

Tenkin grinned. "He with Kimh."

"Where, you buffoon," I retorted.

"In healing place. All Kimh are there. They won't let you see him. He's in seclusion."

"What's that?" I asked. "Is he a prisoner?"

"He must meditate," Tenkin explained.

I wasn't any wiser. "If you are going home what about Ellhi and Jahni? They are still with my human family. Shouldn't they be here?"

Tenkin's grin eased. "Kimh in charge. Ask them."

"No thanks. Most of them still think I can't be trusted," I muttered and I wasn't going to say that other than Kaer, they freaked me. "What are these Kimh anyway? Why can they boss everyone around?"

"Kimh be wise people. Guide Kumatan. We honoured to serve them," Tenkin said seriously. "They know what best for all."

Arrogant know-it-alls, was my translation – particularly if they thought they could tell a human like me how to behave. I had another question. "Tenkin, why did Traeger take Atapi from their village?"

Tenkin turned serious. "They were trade for you. Devil Stacion caught Master Mosellan and wanted you. Say what he planned for you. So when Master Mosellan escape, he take Atapi."

"Hostages," I automatically supplied the human term. Tenkin shrugged.

"Why did the Kimh come?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "Maybe Leader Katech think Master Mosellan lost his mind. Maybe he think Master Mosellan kill devil unprovoked. Now devil is dead."

"Traeger didn't get rid of him. I did," I admitted.

Tenkin stepped back two paces. "You only little hooman," he stuttered, his grin nowhere in evidence.

"Remind me to tell you about David and Goliath one day," I retorted. "That devil deserved death a thousand times over. The creep underestimated me, he didn't give a damn about his people, and I got sick of him trying to kill me. Is self defence allowable with your precious Kimh?"

"Do Kimh know?" Tenkin asked.

"I haven't exactly admitted it, but they must be pretty thick if they haven't figured it out."

"Who killed other Atapi? You?"

"NO!" I shouted my denial. "Those freakish Kimh blamed me too, but I wouldn't. I couldn't. Women, old men and children – babies. How could you think that of me?"

"If you killed Stacion – his tribe is now yours," Tenkin told me.

"What would I need with a bunch of Atapi?"

Tenkin shrugged. "Kill them, make slaves of them..."

"Free them?" I suggested.

Tenkin shook his head. "Those here are like the hooman's sheep. Need leader or die. Need telling what to do."

Oh shit, was my immediate thought. Now I really did need to talk to Traeger.

Chapter 23

Kaer joined me as I walked back towards the healer place. "Come with me."

"Where?" I asked.

"You can talk to the Atapi," he stated more than asked.

"Why?"

"They are becoming agitated. You are now responsible for them."

Tenkin's words hit home. "How can I do anything for them?" I asked.

"Tell them that they will be well treated and that they will be going home," Kaer said.

After a moment of thought, I nodded. "I accept that as a promise from you and your kin."

When I approached this time, all the Atapi were outside and all bowed together.

"Will you let me in amongst them?"

Kaer nodded to the two Kumatan guards and they opened the gate in the fence to admit me. Kaer remained outside, listening without doubt.

In spite of the bow, these Atapi were scared. I could smell it on them. I beckoned the old males forward.

"Who am I," I asked in Atapi and I pointed to one of the males to answer.

"Master, Elder, you are the child of Jai Ansuni, the child of Stacion Ansuni."

That I hadn't expected.

I pointed to another.

"You are the one who leads us now – by right of blood, by right of victory."

"Well, if that is the case, all of you need to get a few things straight. I am nothing like Stacion Ansuni and I am going to need all the males to help me look after the females and children."

The men before me stood straighter. Others moved forward to be seen. I let my eyes meet those of each of them.

"At the moment, I can make no promises. I am told that you will be well treated and will be going home. To Korvu."

The old men seemed to grin.

"I don't know what will happen there, but I think that if you agree to serve the Kimh, you will stay well treated."

"What of those still at our village?" a woman called out. The men glared at her.

"If I am leading you, women can ask me what they will," I said, delaying the news I had to give them. "I'm sorry, but no one is left at the village."

The reaction was expected. The women began to howl, the men to stare at the Kumatan.

"It's not the doing of the Kumatan or the Kimh," I said over the noise. "Stacion's warriors killed all that were there. If I had known, I would have wanted to stop them. Your kin would have had the right to choose life or death."

The woman, who had spoken before, did so again. "We had no choice!"

"I know. Would you choose life – or death?"

The woman thought about it. "With you – I would choose life." Murmurs of agreement came from all.

"I mourn with you for the lost ones," I told them, and I sincerely did.

I turned and walked back to the gate. The wails and howls recommenced - audible in both ears and mind. I didn't argue when Kaer took me back to my room.

I found the box on my little table but I left it there. My mind was too full of questions to consider its mysteries.

“Kaer, do you hate me now that I am leader of those Atapi?” I asked. “Will I become like Stacion?”

Kaer looked at me and gave a considered answer. “I think not. Never have we heard of a woman leading a tribe. We must think on that. Food will come to you here.”

I took that to mean I had to stay in the room. I was proved right by the locked door. I sighed.

I sat by the window, staying there even after my meal was delivered. Keeping me apart suggested that they did not consider me the equal of the Kumatan or Kimh. I wondered if they were respecting my human heritage by not putting me with the Atapi. I wondered just how big a problem I was to the Kimh, who were obviously in charge now. I wished that I knew more about them, but Kaer had never spoken about his kind. It was as if I should just “know”.

After eating my lunch, I returned to the window to watch what was going on outside. Everyone seemed to be carting packed boxes to a place in the empty space beyond the Leader Katech’s house.

In the evening, I saw a man being escorted across my line of vision. In spite of the simple servant’s style robe he wore, I recognised Jenhari Mosellan. He glanced in my direction, as if he knew I was watching him.

I felt a rise of colour in my face, accompanied by a craving for him. I watched where he was taken, memorised the building and the door. I didn’t understand the physical reaction. It wasn’t appropriate and even though I enjoyed the sensations he gave me, I still didn’t consider myself married to him.

Without further thought, I answered that physical craving. The lock on the door was as easy to pick as those back on the farm. I opened the door, no guards stood without. That surprised me. I still thought of Kaer as more guard than guardian. I followed the passage way to the door and no one seemed to notice that I was walking around unescorted.

No one stopped me going into the building where Traeger had gone. Then, like in a game of hide and seek, I used the intensity of the craving for him to guide me. I came to a door guarded by two Kumatan. Neither noticed me as I walked between them and opened the door.

Traeger was the only occupant of the simply furnished room. He saw me and rose from an armchair set beside an empty fireplace to give me an embrace. At his touch, peace seemed to descend on me.

“Why are you a prisoner?” I asked with concern as I wriggled free. I waited to hear what he said.

Finally, “Do not concern yourself with me. Serve the Kimh as you have served me.”

“No! I chose to serve you. Kaer is nice enough, but the others freak me. They are too...too controlled.”

Traeger smiled faintly. “Then do one last thing for me. Leave here and go back to my son. Hide him from the Kimh until I am free to come to you.”

“I can’t leave here,” I said in dismay. “Only you can bring outsiders in and out.”

“No,” he disagreed softly, as he gently touched my face. “You too have that power. I sensed it when you broke free when Stacion Ansuni died. You could have broken my binding then too if you knew what to do.”

I stared at him. “But the slave bands...”

Traeger touched the bands and they sprung open. The Kimh had never noticed them.

“I tried to cross planes, but I couldn’t,” I said.

“Your mind was not clear, when Stacion died,” he said gently. “But that box you have is the key.”

“How do you know about that?” I hadn’t seen him since I had got it.

“Kaer showed it to me. I could tell them little except that it was made with Atapi sorcery and that the metal is native to Korvu, my home world. What is important for you to know, now, is that you received it in your real Earth plane and it is still with you here. It can cross the barrier. You can cross with it.”

“How?”

“Hold the box in your hands, think of a place or person in your real world. The magic of the box will pierce the barrier – then walk three steps forward, if you only take two steps the barrier will close on you and you will be caught in darkness – neither in this plane or the other.”

I nodded, thoughtfully.

“How is my son?” he asked then.

“I...when I left he and Ellhi were safe with my father,” I said without thinking. “But when I escaped from Stacion, with Ellhi and Jahni, I didn’t have the box.”

“No, indeed,” Traeger smiled. He touched the slave bands. I stared at them.

“They are metal like the box...” I suddenly knew, and I seemed to have the answer to that mystery just outside my grasp.

Traeger smiled. “And have been in both planes...” Then he touched his lips to suggest not talking about it.

“Go home to your father, Jai,” Traeger urged. “The Kimh won’t be able to reach you there and the Traegers the Kimh brought with them won’t be able to sense you like I do.”

“They don’t want me to go back,” I commented. “And aren’t you meant to be doing what they want?”

“They fear that you will become a sorceress and become a danger to the people on this world.”

“And you?” I asked Traeger.

“I know what the sorcerer devils are capable of,” Traeger admitted. “And so I think, do you.”

I did and I shivered at the memory.

“It doesn’t have to be like that. To us, the Atapi are barbarians – how they live, how they dress, and because they seem to love to fight and kill, but mostly because of the devils and their acts. It has been like that for countless generations. But you, Jai, are no barbarian.”

“Do you want me to be a sorceress?” I asked, because it seemed that he was suggesting things without stating them.

“Your mother was no barbarian either,” Traeger went on, without directly answering my question. “You have inherited gifts of magic from her and I believe, deep in my soul, that you must learn to use them.”

“Why, Traeger? Don’t talk to me in riddles.”

“Call me Jenha. I am no longer the Traeger.”

“Because of me?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I will answer for my own decisions, wrong or right. However, you must go – quickly. The Kimh will ensure that you never develop your power. They cannot see that it is the only way to change the Atapi.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because your mother believed that the only way to make them what they once were is by sorcery – her kind. I knew her before she came to Earth and later here. She asked to have a child by me but I advised her differently. She fooled Stacion Ansuni long enough to beget you. He never saw that she had magic but she was the only female sorcerer since times of legend. Her father, the sorcerer you killed, never acknowledged her.”

“She killed,” I said with understanding. “She must have hated him – he was vile. I had the box, he touched it and something took us both over...”

Jenha touched my lips. “Time is short. Atapi tribes are led by sorcery. It doesn’t have to be sorcery like Stacion’s. With out sorcerers to protect the tribes, they die out. That is what the Kimh want, though they would never say it. But in my soul, I think there is a reason why three races exist on Korvu.”

“Why did you save the Atapi?”

“For you.”

“Why? Did you know I would kill him?”

“If not you, I would have.”

I had more questions, but he stilled my lips.

“Go, I cannot hold off the Kimh much longer. Go to my son. I don’t want them to use you or him as hostages for my behaviour.”

I was reluctant, but I shared his sense of urgency.

“What if they take you home, without us?” I asked, afraid of that.

“I will come for you in time,” he promised. “GO.”

I took the box, held it as I had been instructed, thought of the lounge room in my father’s house and walked forward. On the first step, I felt my senses distorted, on the second there was darkness, on the third step I was standing in the familiar room seeing Jahni rising to his feet.

I had done it.

Chapter 24

Fortunately, none of my family were around to see me arrive out of nowhere. I glanced at the clock on the mantle and knew I had some time before the family would be around. I embraced both Ellhi and Jahni and spoke quietly. "We are going to have to leave here and I will have to convince my father that we are going back to Jenha – otherwise he will insist that we stay."

"Why are we not going back?" Jahni asked. An astute question from the boy.

"Is our husband well?" Ellhi asked.

"Yes, but the Kimh have come."

Jahni drew in a breath, Ellhi covered her mouth. My statement meant different things to each of them.

"We will leave here and when he can, Jenha will come for us." That statement made Jahni relax from his state of fright. Ellhi's gaze at me was intent. She realised that there were things that I didn't want to say with Jahni listening.

"I want to leave early tomorrow. So I had better find my father before my sibs realise I am here. I don't want them thinking I arrived back in unconventional way."

Ellhi grabbed my arm and whispered, "I want to go back to our husband." There was a hint in her look that suggested that I should too, but she would wait to hear what I had to say.

I nodded, agreeing with her desire. It was her choice.

Later, before Jahni fell asleep, I packed my few possessions, (mainly more of my brothers' cast off clothing), and considered the state of my life. I was, I thought, being moved inexorably into the destiny my mother created me for. What that was, was clearer, but I still didn't have all the details.

For a moment, I considered hiding here and waiting for Jenha to be free to return. I'd have to ask Ellhi, but I thought that with his being out of favour with the Kimh, that might be years. And then there was Ellhi wanting to be with him.

It occurred to me then that I had no idea how the Kumatan, Kimh and Atapi had travelled between worlds. For now, I would assume that they could.

If I had to wait years, I'd be stuck in the sort of life that I'd run away from. I'd lose the independence I had gained. What powers were in me, I could not practice among humans. My recent baptism in fire, when my grandfather, Stacion, had tried to kill me had rid me of a lot of human conceived notions. But my human upbringing had taught me a worthwhile set of ideals. I hadn't realised them until I had seen the worst that Stacion had done.

I had Atapi blood but I was more like the Kumatan. With a leader like me, who wasn't Kimh or Kumatan, even if not fully Atapi, perhaps I could make the Atapi less barbaric. Was that the answer to my existence? The possibilities were euphoric.

Fast on that incredible idea, I remembered that Jenha had met my mother. He knew what she had wanted, and must have realised that she had made a human child. He must have known who I was when he first saw me. He saw the possibilities in me, tested me, guided me and now, set me free.

"Jai?" I was startled by that clear thought in my head.

It didn't feel like Jenha or Ellhi, both of whom I could hear at times, usually when in close contact. I glanced up and saw Ellhi by the window, peering out. It had to be Kaer, my guardian. I wasn't aware that he was able to reach me that way. I wondered where he was.

"What do you want?" I thought strongly with a hint of annoyance.

"To know you were well," he thought calmly.

"Bull dust," I retorted. He was looking for me.

"Are Ellhi and Jahni Mosellan with you?"

"No," I lied. "Can't you tell?"

"I can tell you are lying," he answered with a hint of reproach. "They cannot stay on Earth when we leave."

So that was it.

"Ellhi doesn't want to," I told him. "You can come and get her, but you will have to arrive like a human." And, I thought, I will be long gone when you do.

"That would not be wise," he thought back, calmly.

At first, I didn't know if he was meaning his coming to the farm or if he had received my private thought afterwards.

"Your thought pattern is unique," Kaer explained. "We may be separated by the phase difference between planes, but it is no barrier to thought."

"GET OUT OF MY MIND," I mentally yelled at Kaer. I felt some sort of reaction. "I don't want to have anything else to do with your kind."

I toned down my mental comments. "You run along, take all the rescued Atapi back from whence you came and you won't have to worry about me any more."

"Your assumption is incorrect," Kaer replied evenly. "Your mixed blood is unique. You are invaluable to our understanding of the Atapi race."

"I will not be a human guinea pig," I told him, sending him an image of Ellhi, Jahni and I gabbing packs and running out the door.

"The real truth," I continued as I imaged running down the road towards town, "Is that you don't trust me. And, because I managed to convince Jenha Mosellan that I was trustworthy, you now think he is mentally defective. Well just so you know – I don't trust the Kimh either."

"I have nothing against you," Kaer emphasized the first pronoun.

"You are a poor liar too, Kaer. Watch out in case your elders think I have corrupted you too. They fear my power, such as it is, don't they?"

"Yes," was the truthful reply.

"Would you be sorry if something dreadful happened to me?" I asked.

"Yes."

I believed him. "Then, don't you see, I have to explore my abilities. That way I can have some bargaining power about my future. If I go back, I'll be restrained, stifled - like a caged bird."

"You would have a good life," he promised.

"It would be a lie," I retorted. "I must be what I was created to be. But I will promise that I will never side with the Atapi against Kimh or Kumatan."

"This is not a reasonable decision," Kaer said then.

"Are you going to stop me?" I challenged.

"As I have told you Jai, I am your guardian, not a guard."

"Oh, right – and you can't get to me – can you. Well you can tell those pitiful excuses for Traegers that you brought with you that I will no longer be at the farm. By morning I will be on a train to somewhere they will never find me."

"My superiors will not approve," Kaer warned me.

"So what can they do about it?" I asked bluntly.

"Nothing just yet, but the Traegers will find you and bring you back. Your case will be discussed in council and when a decision is made, they will act."

"Mouldy old men, who have never been here, never met a human, and who don't know me?" I was indignant. "Every single non-human I have met has assumed certain things about me as soon as they met me. Will you be speaking for me?"

"I have that duty," Kaer admitted.

"And Traeger Mosellan?"

"He will be questioned," Kaer agreed.

I grimaced. I needed to think without him listening to me.

"So, answer me this – while you keep tabs on me until your pet Traegers can find me – will you listen to him as Traeger, or as the person you are keeping locked up because he committed the heinous crime of trusting me."

There was a long silence in my head. I began to think he had gone.

"Our people have a certain set of ethics – ideals perhaps – that is a standard we try to live by. By doing so we will receive advancement, in this life and the next. We call these ideals – the Nuath."

He tried to explain it to me, but humans live by different and much less structured principals.

"So you punish people who fail to live up to some predetermined expectations?" I asked. That was how I understood him.

"The inference you placed on your words is incorrect," Kaer disagreed. "I suppose I cannot expect you to understand..."

"Of course not! After all, I am only a human!"

Kaer went on talking, ignoring my snide comment. "In the case of Jenhari Mosellan, he failed to fulfil his duty. The council will decide if he was negligent, culpable or misguided."

I mentally shrugged. Jenha would have to negotiate that mess – they wouldn't listen to me.

"So what did you do to get stuck checking on me?"

"It is a privilege. I am the fourth son of the High Minister of Korvu. You are too important to be entrusted to a lesser entity. You are the only known product of Atapi interbreeding and you carry within you the first product of Kumatan interbreeding."

My mind went blank with shock.

"Jai?"

"How the hell do you know that?" I snapped. I hadn't even suspected such a thing.

"We realised it when we treated your wounds."

"Go away!" I thought.

"Jai, listen to me," Kaer's tone was not so calm now. "My superiors don't trust you because they can't predict which part of your heritage will dominate. You claim only your human heritage. That is good and the Nuath precludes us from interfering with the lives of the people whose worlds we visit. But we must also guard the humans here from the Atapi and their sorcery. Humans have no defences against it. It's in our Nuath and it is a directive from the galactic council. Can you understand that?"

"Yes, mostly. But I won't be like Stacion!"

"Even so, you have a greater potential for sorcery than any other Atapi we have encountered. For good or ill, we are bound to protect the humans from that."

"Good night, Kaer," I thought firmly. "I'm going to sleep."

I concentrated on the dark emptiness of that place between planes and hoped he'd let me be.

My concentration was broken by Ellhi embracing me.

"We are no longer safe here?" she asked.

"Only until they can get another Traeger to find us," I muttered. "I don't want them marching in here ignorantly acting like humans. And that damned Kaer can listen in to my mind."

Ellhi gave a little chuckle. "Then let me distract him for you."

I blushed as I realised what Ellhi meant. She had started doing things to me that I thought only men could do to women.

"This isn't time for this," I said, trying to struggle free. "I don't do this with women."

"Don't resist," she whispered. "It is alright, because we are part of a triumvir. But the Kimh are prudes, they will not stay to listen in."

It was my turn to chuckle. I hoped none of my family would wander in at the moment. They were prudes too and they wouldn't accept this either.

Ellhi went on, "I knew he was talking to you, I could hear your thoughts, but not his. Now you can think what you will. I will hear, but he will not."

"Did you follow it all?" I asked.

She nodded, but didn't stop what she was doing.

"How long do you think it will take Jenha to convince the Kimh he hasn't lost his mind?" I asked Ellhi.

She shrugged then answered, "He kept his own counsel about you. Perhaps he had good reasons for all he did."

"Do you think he sees further than the Kimh?"

"I have no way to know," Ellhi admitted.

"He told me to hide Jahni," I said.

Ellhi paused while she thought. She continued as she answered. "I think he doesn't wish Jahni trained in the same way as he was."

"I agree. But would it be right to keep Jahni here – perhaps for years?"

"Ask Jahni," was Ellhi's surprising answer. "He is old enough to choose for himself. Though for me to advise him, I will need to know what has happened since you left."

With relief, I told her everything. She knew more about Kumatan and Kimh than I did and I needed that perspective. Finally I brought out the box that my father had given me.

"This was my mother's," I explained. "The Kimh examined it, but couldn't read the glyphs. They gave it back to me, but if Kaer can read my thoughts, perhaps they are hoping he can learn more about it. I think its only one attuned to me and I must learn from it."

Ellhi's face became unreadable. Then she stopped doing what she had been doing to me, and just kept her hand on my arm.

"Learn," she commanded. "I will keep distracting the Kimh."

I nodded my thanks. I felt I had very little time.

The box was indeed attuned to me. This time, I let the meaning of the hieroglyphs blossom in my mind. The subtle aura around the box seemed to grow to enclose me. The Kimh hadn't perceived this. I could because of who I was.

I stood with the box held at a comfortable distance to read the glyphs. As I read, it seemed that I heard a voice in my head – the female voice that I had heard before.

"Daughter, delight of my heart. This gift is all that I, Jai Ansuni, have to give to you. It contains the essence of the knowledge that I acquired during my life. You would not be hearing me now, if you were unaware of your mixed heritage."

"I was a freak amongst my people. A female, with magic potential. I felt the forces of magic within me and from listening and watching my brother practice sorcery, I realised what I was. From listening, I knew I had to hide my power. No other woman could do the things I could do, and one day I discovered why. Any girl child found to have this power is killed at once. It was well that I learnt early and wisely. My father Stacion Ansuni, high priest and sorcerer, as powerful as he had become in half a thousand years, cared so little for me that he never even looked at me. He never realised that I was powerful enough to extract his

knowledge from his mind or that I was more powerful than any of his magic gifted male children.

“My father might not have recognised what was in me but the Rock of Arkor, sacred to the sorcerers, welcomed me and hid me. I spent a night there, as all young sorcerers do. That night I dreamed. I saw the Atapi as the pale-skinned races of Korvu saw us. I saw the Atapi as they were meant to be – fierce warriors, the defenders of Korvu.

“I dreamt that I met a powerful woman. She told me all I could possibly want to know about magic. When I awoke, I knew that I had dreamt of Larcia – the female called she-devil in the most ancient Atapi legends.

“Those same legends say that at the end of ten thousand years, Larcia will return. It is also said, that all of Larcia’s knowledge is inscribed on the Rock of Arkor. The sacred rock is so jealously guarded, that only one who is a sorcerer may approach it.

“Proof of what I am, not only did the Rock welcome me, but I have read the knowledge there. I learnt that the way magic is used now is wrong. If the death bringing rituals were not a blatant sign, the decline of the tribes must surely be a warning to anyone in tune with the aura of Korvu.

“My sire must never have considered the source of his power, cannot have been in tune with the aura or if he was he cared nothing for the land either. He killed my closest friend, and I heard the land itself cry out in despair. I felt the land scream in agony every time my father performed a major magic.

“I hated him.

“Everything I learned from Larcia told me that there was another way for magic to be used. My dissatisfaction with the way the Atapi were drove me to learn from the pale skins. Their way of living was closer to what Larcia had shown me, but even then, not perfect. Those few of them that had magic were weaker in power because they live in cities and big towns. I knew the Atapi had to change. I knew that I was the one who must do it – for only I saw the problem. My brother listened to me and tried my ways. He grew in power and challenged our sire for control of half the tribe. Thanks to me, he won the challenge. He left at once, to tribal lands we had prepared. He escaped Stacion’s rampage of anger.

“Such was his overwhelming ego, and his arrogant assurance of his own superiority that he never realised that because of me, he had to flee Korvu. Such was my own – I thought that I could kill him.

“Yet it worked to my advantage. He would no longer be able to dominate the other tribes, to the detriment of all Atapi.

“I was angry when he ordered me to stay with him. Yet I realised that I must. He never suspected my treason, so I was alive to try again. And once I had seen and met the humans on your world, I could not let him have his way with them, the poor quixotic creatures.”

There was a long pause and it gave me a chance to think on what she had said.

When the voice began again, the tone was different.

“I thought I could begin to change things but as it was at home, I was female and of little significance. He had found a world that he could control and he manipulated the humans into a global battle and drank in the power from all the millions of deaths. And I could do nothing, except drain some of that power back to the land to bring sanity. Perhaps I did help the fighting to end, after too many deaths, but had I done nothing, the killing would have continued.

“After many years, my father grew wary of my actions. He set his warriors to watch me. By then the Kumatan had come, and even they could control his excesses. I began to plot his downfall. I knew what I must do. If I was unable to kill Stak, I must create one who could.

One who could one day go to Korvu and take my place there. So I created you. It was necessary for you to be fathered by a human. They would not recognise the talents that would be yours. Amongst the humans, you would be protected. As a human, you would learn the ethical ideals that would show you that the Atapi were barbaric and cruel. Yet you would not have the rigid inflexibility of the pale skin races of Korvu. Your humanity would protect you from the Kumatan – they have sworn to protect other races from the Atapi. They would be less likely to summarily remove you.

“One day, when Stacion is gone from your Earth, you will go to Korvu. This is inevitable. I dreamed of it before you were born. I looked into your eyes and saw the blue of Larcia’s eyes.

“So to you I bequeath my knowledge of sorcery in its pure, unperverted form. It is my hope that you will be able to use it to influence the Atapi to once again take up their true heritage. That you can show the pale skin races of Korvu the truth, that the Atapi are a beautiful people, fiercely proud and protective of Korvu.”

That was something that I had yet to see, but I believed her. She continued on.

“You must master these lessons quickly, to protect you against my father and his kind and the Kumatan who now control us. Do not antagonise the Kumatan. Do not arouse the suspicions of the Kimh.”

Too late for both warnings, I thought. I wondered if the knowledge on this box would have helped me defeat Stacion faster. I thought that had I shown any skill at magic, Stacion would have been more alert. My very naïveté and unexpected reactions had actually been my strength. He had not expected the box to be a danger to him.

Ellhi interrupted me with a brief thought. “Their new Traeger is searching for you.”

I was running out of time. I sank my mind back into the aura of the box.

“You will, I hope, develop a number of gifts,” my mother’s voice continued from where it stopped. “Most important is empathy – to feel the pain, the suffering, the joy of others. You will shrink from inflicting pain and wish to heal it. This is what made me – and will make you – so different from all male sorcerers.

“Telepathy – this should awake once you have come in contact with the Atapi people. It will develop into a way of communicating with all races. When you are used to it – you will be able to learn how to block all such contacts from your mind.

“Kinesis – the ability to move yourself, and things you touch from place to place, over short distances, across space, or from plane to plane.

“Healing – to heal the ills of the body and sooth the mind.

“Mind command – the power to command obedience of the Atapi. Though neither the Kimh nor the Kumatan can be influenced this way.

“The power to bind minds to your will. Use this only when there is no other option. In one form, the mind and body of the victim are bound in the nether region between planes. In another, it makes a mindless slave of the victim. The power to ‘bind’ is the power to break such bindings.

“You will have control over the temperature of your body and any object you touch.

“Your physical senses will be keen and strong...”

Dawn was breaking before I understood the lessons that followed the list of abilities. Examples were given, along with the rituals, words of power, gestures, chants and symbols for each piece of magic. Mastery would come later when I had a chance to practice these things. I didn’t have to use them as Stacion did – my empathy would preclude that.

My mother had confirmed that I would never be able to change form but that didn't worry me. I was happy as I was and it wouldn't prevent me using the power I had.

The final hieroglyph wasn't a written word, but the trigger for powerful mind pictures. Many vivid scenes came into my mind, staying long enough for me to see and remember. The final one stayed longest. I knew at once, what it was. The Rock of Arkor, on Korvu – close enough to be inside the cordon of guardian defences. It was the key I needed to get to Korvu under my own power. The concept was awe-inspiring. I wouldn't need a rocket or a flying saucer or a spaceship to get there. The power that implied was unimaginable.

Chapter 25

I broke from my pose and slumped back into the chair. The runes on the box had vanished as I had absorbed its aura. The box was simply plain metal once again.

The new knowledge would take time to fully understand and master. I had a glimpse of what I was to become, but I still had to find the way there.

Of one thing I was certain, just as my mother had reached out from death, through me to kill Stacion, so had she placed a binding on me. It was a binding of love and trust – to use my powers for good, not evil, love not hate, peace, not war.

Ellhi relaxed when she saw that I was once again aware of my surroundings.

“We’d best sleep. Are you ready to leave?” I asked.

She nodded. “Did you get what you needed?”

“More!” I admitted. “Too much to speak of. But I can get you to the village tomorrow so you can return to Korvu with Jenha.”

“And you?” Ellhi asked her face unreadable.

“I don’t have a choice,” I said, still thinking. Then I asked, “How will you get back to Korvu?”

“The Traegers will move us,” she spoke as if this were a natural thing. It wasn’t to me, even if I had experienced it.

“How?”

“They move us. Now we’re here, now we’re not. Coming here they needed a group of Traegers working together.”

“It’s like crossing planes,” I suggested.

“I’ve never done that,” Ellhi shrugged. “So I don’t know.”

I dropped the subject. The important thing was that Traegers did the work. I wouldn’t worry about where they got the energy from. The question was - could I block their power so that I could get to Korvu on my own terms?

“Ellhi, if I can’t speak to Jenha before we go,” I thought aloud, “Tell him that I will be fine and that I honour and respect what he has taught me.”

“I will,” she agreed. “But you will see him...”

“The Kimh don’t trust me,” I said to distract her. “I don’t know what they will do once I am there. I can’t fight them all.”

“They can’t hurt you,” she exclaimed. “You are part of our triumvir.”

“I hope you are right,” was all I answered.

What I hoped to do and believed I could do would take me out of reach of the Kimh. But it would probably wreck and chance I had of getting them to trust me. These thoughts I kept very private.

My father had arranged for a taxi and paid for it. I had told him that I was going with my boss back to his country and might never see him again. He seemed sad. He had just started to see me in a new light and he was to lose me. I felt sad too, but I was glad to have made peace with him.

My mother, though she had mellowed towards me, seemed relieved that I and her other guests were leaving. The parting wishes of my sibs didn’t seem the least bit sincere.

I told the taxi driver to take us to Wetherby, and had him pull up outside the grocery market. By chance, I spotted John talking to someone and waved. He finished his conversation quickly and trotted over. I told him what I had told my father and introduced Ellhi and Jahni. He wished me luck before walking off.

I led Ellhi and Jahni to a secluded spot in the town's park.

"I will try to get us back to the village. Jenha says I have the power to do it. Could you both think of the front of your house?"

I had Ellhi hold onto Jahni and me. My free hand touched the metal box in my pocket. It was more of a comforting thing than a necessity but it focussed my mind for what I had to do.

We walked together, three steps.

"Ah!" Ellhi breathed, seeing her home again. She began to move towards it.

"They've packed everything up," I said, pulling her back. "I think, nearly everyone is gone."

"Kaer?" I thought and said aloud.

He materialised in front of me accompanied by two more Kimh and two Kumatan.

"Jai Cassidy," one of the Kumatan greeted me. His face looked severe. "You have broken our trust in you. You will come with me."

He was using 'command voice' on me I realised and it wasn't working.

It irritated me. "You and your cohort here have only been on Earth mere hours. I never promised either of you anything."

"You were honour bound to stay in this village," that arrogant alien stated.

"No one – ever – said – I had to stay here," I said flatly. "No doubt, everyone here assumed – again – that I could read your intentions. And don't you dare say I acted without honour. I owe that to Jenhari Mosellan. I went back to the human plane – where I was born and where I belong. I went to bring Ellhi back to be with our husband. Would it be honourable to leave two Kumatan here – in exile amongst the superior humans on this world?"

I saw the face muscles go tight as he controlled the retort he wanted to make.

"I – came – back! Accept that as a sign of good faith. You don't know Earth humans do you? You've only just arrived. How would your Nuath condone to you appearing to the natives here – looking and behaving like aliens? My way – all loose ends are tied up, no humans will have suspicions – better all round."

"You have a glib tongue, Jai," Kaer warned. "Ketu will escort Ellhi Mosellan and her son to her husband."

Jahni sidled behind me. "Please," he said. "Could I stay with Jai? At least until my parents have finished greeting each other."

I sensed embarrassment from Jahni, smirks from the Kumatan and a different kind of embarrassment from Kaer.

Kaer nodded. I felt him trying to touch my mind. I used a clumsy but effective method to block him. I filled my mind with silly human trivia until he grew uncomfortable and desisted. He told us to follow him.

"Good notion, Jahni," I whispered as we watched Ellhi and her escort. I felt his hand squeeze mine.

"I didn't want to go with them," he admitted.

That was good. Now, how to explain my plan to Jahni – since it involved him.

"Jahni – do you trust me?" I asked. I felt another squeeze.

I was about to explain my plan when we were stopped outside the next house. Leader Katech was standing there with two guards.

"So you returned to and from your human spawning place – how?" Katech demanded.

The two Kumatan guards, Traegers I assumed, bowed to Kaer, but Katech's question had caught their attention. I felt a mind commanding me to answer. I pretended to fight the compulsion.

"The box..." I uttered. "I used the box." It was the truth, just not all of it.

"I will have it," the mental pressure continued. One of the new Traegers held his hand out to me. Jahni looked concerned. I seemed to be fighting the command when I passed it over.

"It is nothing," the Kumatan reported when he had examined it. "This has no magic."

"You lie!" Katech swore at me. "You used sorcery."

"No! It's truth. That was my key, I received it back with my family, and I had it here - but it only works for me. It also gave me images - one was of a huge rock."

That seemed to convince them. The box disappeared into the Traeger's pocket.

"Come," ordered the Traeger. I decided to obey and gave Jahni's hand a slight tug. I felt his reluctance.

"You have to go to Korvu, Jahni," I told him. "You can't stay here by yourself."

"I know," he muttered. "It's just that - when I get there, I'll have to be taught by the Kimh and I'm afraid of them."

"They won't hurt you," I said, truthfully enough. I didn't say that they would likely twist his mind into their rigid lines of thought. Instead, I added, "All will be well. Trust me."

Jahni squeezed my hand again.

I reached out a tendril of thought to Jenha. Nothing. A solid barrier surrounded him. It wasn't unexpected.

I was convinced that these remaining aliens had been waiting for me, Jahni and Ellhi to be brought back. I was sure that Jenha wouldn't agree to go back to Korvu without us.

We stopped at one edge of the open area behind the place of healing. Across way, I saw Ellhi and Jenha close together, talking. I made no move to approach him. I wanted the Traegers to believe that they still had control of me. It suited me at the moment to act the part. They searched me for weapons, but I had none for them to find. I smirked at their surprise.

I glanced at Kaer who had walked around to the front of me.

"What's the matter, Kaer? Not looking forward to going home? Or is it bothering you that you are going to drag me away from my world - the one where I was born?"

I had startled him.

"No, not that," he said. Did that mean that he hadn't given that idea a thought? Probably.

"Come to think of it - Jahni was born here too - wasn't he?" I added.

"The child is Kumatan. His world is Korvu," the Traeger stated dogmatically.

"I'm human! This is my world!" I shouted back.

"Atapi, you will be silent!"

"Human, you mindless creature. And if you want me silent, you must work harder to make me."

The man raised a weapon, but Kaer pushed it down. "You will not harm this woman, Traeger Pentan. She is with child." Kaer stated.

I smirked at the Traeger.

"Really?" Jahni exclaimed.

"So they say," I muttered back, and then added, "Hush."

Kaer seemed to come to a decision. "When we arrive, you will be judged by the council."

I could read my own interpretation into that. I would be, once again, accused of being a half-Atapi bastard. I would be facing people who like my Atapi kin, saw no further than that. I didn't doubt that for all their high-minded ethics, the Kimh were simply a higher caste of bigots. Arguing with them would be like hitting my head on a stone wall.

No, I couldn't agree to that. I had no choice but to carry out my plan.

Chapter 26

While I was provoking Traeger Pentan with my ideas, the others seemed to be in a group trance. For a moment, one became animated, and gestured in our direction. Pentan, still glaring at me whistled and everyone in the open area began to converge.

Jahni gripped me tighter, as one of the strangers tried to separate him from me.

“Leave him be,” I snapped, not wanting them to succeed.

“He is Kumatan, you are Atapi,” the Kimh stated.

“He has never travelled by the means you are taking us. He is afraid.” I stared back at the Kimh.

“He is Kumatan!”

“Butt out, glow-worm,” I retorted. “He’s a child. Even you were probably afraid of something at his age. And, for heaven’s sake, you are going to drag him from the only world he has known, put his father on trial for being able to think more clearly than you and drag me off somewhere to decide if I should even exist. I am his friend, no matter how much that fact disgusts you. Let him stay! If my presence comforts and relaxes him, isn’t that better?”

The Kimh glowered at me. I gathered I was skirting on the edges of that Nuath of theirs – not exactly wrong, not exactly right.

Kaer spoke up before the other Kimh could retort. “You and Jenhari Mosellan will be treated with respect at all times,” he assured me. “You are unique and my father wishes to meet you. You could greatly assist our understanding of the Atapi. Will you agree to come with us?”

Oh, no, not that agreeably, I thought. “I didn’t think I had a choice. Do I?”

“There are always choices,” Kaer replied.

“Then I choose to stay here!”

I heard Jahni draw in a breath and I squeezed his hand to reassure him. Traeger Pentan raised a weapon.

I smirked. “Stay here and die now, or go there and die later! Choices? Yeah!”

As for helping with the understanding of the Atapi – who were they deluding? I was human.

I turned to Traeger Pentan. “Do your damndest, you bastard.”

I knew that he was fully a creature of the Kimh.

The number of people decreased. As I watched, Ellhi, Jenha, a Kimh and a Traeger vanished in front of my eyes. Jahni, myself, Kaer and Traeger Pentan were to be next.

The four of us went into the centre of the group of Traegers, with Kaer holding Janhi’s other hand and Pentan holding me. A second Traeger joined us. I watched his blank eyes, shared a vision of joined hands, ours and some that were countless miles distant. I saw a picture of a building, and then my vision, inner and outer, went blank.

I woke, on the ground, with Jahni clinging to me. I was confused, dizzy and weak.

“Are we there?” I asked, with everything still spinning around me.

“No,” Jahni whispered.

“It would be better if you did not fight us,” the Traeger Pentan told me stonily.

“I didn’t,” I managed to say before needing to roll over and be sick.

After a while, the spinning stopped and I was able to stand up. The other Traeger was studying me. “The Atapi transferred easily. How did you block me?”

“Because I am human, you glow-less lackey. Have you ever moved a human before? One that is being flash-frozen by your mate here?”

This Traeger was honest enough to shake his head. Only once though.

"It should make no difference," he stated. "We will try again. He glanced at Traeger Pentan and I felt the freeze command disappear.

This time was different – clearer, more intense. I saw again the image of reaching hands, sensed a shock of power as the imaged hands clasped. I saw the picture forming again, and then felt myself being tugged in two directions. I had a moment of intense understanding. My mother had said that Korvu would recognise me because of her blood. Earth, I felt kinship with because I was born here. It recognised me and would give me power, if I asked. And I realised that I had used it before, to hide me, but I hadn't known what it was then – hadn't been able to sense it.

Again, I blacked out, but this time I wasn't sick. I woke clutching the ground, feeling an incredible energy waiting for me to use, but I didn't know how.

I heard Kaer insisting that the Traegers bring Jenhari Mosellan back. Kaer rose higher in my esteem.

"He knows this one and he knows this world better than any of you. She bears his child. If anyone can bring her to Korvu – he can. You know his power..."

Ah, I thought to myself, Jenha is a powerful Traeger. Is that why they would want to train Jahni? Is that why they want my child alive too?

Ideas flitted through my head as I pretended to be unconscious. This travel from world to world was like crossing planes. I knew how to do that. I had broken free of Stacion from the darkness between planes and that was the crux. That point. If I broke the circle link at that point, and changed my picture...

With the need identified, I felt the power flowing into me. It was like a warm wind.

"Jai? Jai?" Jahni was speaking in my ear.

I opened my eyes and stayed lying on my back. "Who's watching?" I asked very softly.

Jahni answered, also in a whisper. "One Traeger behind me. The rest are in a huddle in front of us. They are trying to bring my father back."

Five of them were in a circle. I could sense the power flowing around them. They were fully involved in their task.

"Jahni, no matter what happens, keep hold of my hand. Ok? And when I squeeze it, get your other hand free, ok?"

"Why?"

"Trust me."

"My father is here," Jahni told me. But I knew. I felt his unmistakable presence.

Jenha bent over me and saw I was awake. His face was devoid of expression.

"Tell me what you felt," he asked.

I described, in detail, the sensations of the first try. He nodded, a very faint smile twitching his lips, but only I could see it. He touched my forehead, and in that moment, it seemed our minds were one. He knew what I planned and it pleased him, but his thoughts neither approved nor condemned. His control of his mind awed me.

Then he pictured for me a series of scenes, with planetary coordinates. They meant nothing to me now, but I knew they would help in the future. Finally, I felt and understood his last message – a feeling, not a thought – trust. Ellhi had indeed passed my message to him. He broke the contact. When he spoke to Kaer it was as if he ignored me.

"It would be best if Jai were unconscious for this trip. There must be a binding between us. That way, I can stabilise her molecular structure during the transfer. It is her mixed heritage that is causing the problems with our standard procedures."

I had stiffened when Jenha had mentioned being unconscious, but he gently squeezed my shoulder. He trusted me, so I should trust him.

“Do it,” Kaer ordered.

“If it is acceptable, I will bring my son at the same time,” Jenha suggested as if the matter was of minor concern. “They will both be more relaxed this way.”

“I do not believe that is wise,” a Kimh warned.

Jenha seemed to count to ten before answering. It almost seemed that he was controlling some unwanted thoughts. He was calm as he replied. “Lord Darcel, you cannot believe that I would endanger my son, or Jai Cassidy.”

“It is not that which I fear,” the Kimh admitted, looking at me.

“My Lord, Jai Cassidy will be unconscious, and there will be guards awaiting us.”

I marvelled at Jenha’s control of expression and thought. He knew what I could do, but in no way betrayed it.

“Form the binding,” Kaer commanded.

Jenha gently wiped his hand down my face, silently reminding me that I was supposed to be unconscious. I thought a short burst of mental trivia, and then thought of the darkness between planes.

My mind was jarred. I opened my eyes, looking for the threat and saw Pentan staring down at me.

“That was a foolish move, Traeger Pentan,” Jenha said calmly. “This binding with an unborn child is most delicate.”

“You’ve put a sorcerer’s binding on her!” Pentan sounded shocked. I didn’t try to determine if he thought that a waste of energy or if I was a sorcerer.

Kaer added a comment that was also a subtle rebuke.

“You do not know her, Pentan. She has the potential for sorcery, but as you know, no male Atapi would train a woman. I am satisfied that she cannot use that potential. However, the choice of binding is in all ways appropriate.”

While Kaer was talking, Jenha whispered, “You must be as if unconscious.”

I understood and nodded very slightly. I closed my eyes and let Jahni hold my limp hand.

“Of course,” Jenha said as if adding to Kaer’s words, “Sorcerers are notoriously fluid in changing their form, so a delicate binding is required. A woman with child is also in effect changing form as the child grows. The council does not wish harm to come to the woman or the child.”

A short time later, Jenha announced, “We are ready.” He lifted me into his arms. Jahni held my hand and placed his free one on his father’s arm. Pentan placed his hand on Jenha too.

I sensed Jenha reaching out with the image of reaching hands. I felt him ‘grip’ with a surge of power. I saw him envision the building. This time I felt no dizziness and my mind stayed alert.

The darkness lasted for what seemed a very long time. I couldn’t feel my body, except where I touched Jahni or Jenha. Finally, I began to see a bright light and fuzzy blurs that must be people.

The sudden intrusion of another mind into the harmony jarred us all. I felt Jenha drop me. I sensed Jahni panic. The picture in my mind of the building faded. I was stunned for a moment, but I had planned what I needed to do. I formed in my mind the picture of the big rock. I concentrated with all my strength on it.

Chapter 27

In a small part of my mind, I felt Jenha's outrage. It wasn't all an act. He knew the effect I had had on Pentan and expected him to try something. He knew that his superiors mistrusted his detachment and that they may have expected him to take me and his son and escape.

Yet he had acted with perfect obedience and was taking me to the council chamber on Korvu. The intrusion that had broken his concentration and 'lost' Jahni and I to the void, couldn't be blamed on him. He could rightly accuse Pentan of an unforgivable breach of protocol.

I was glad that it distracted his superiors, or they might have sensed Jenha's hidden guilt. He had known and encouraged what I had intended to do, but allowing it was to act in direct disobedience to the will of the Kimh. Through his mind, I saw them as he did – the race that ruled his home world, and whom he had been taught to venerate, but he had come to question their all-knowing wisdom.

I wondered if the arrogant Traeger Pentan had followed us through the void. Would he have been thrown into the darkness? I hoped so. If he truly couldn't think for himself, he'd be lost there.

"Jai?" I felt Jahni's terror and concentrated more on the picture than on my wandering thoughts. The rock was growing larger. I studied the picture and noticed more detail. I saw what I was looking for – a tiny patch of shade under a small outcrop. Moments later, I felt the hot, soft red sand.

I had imaged the rock with my eyes closed, even the outcropping rock. I opened them to look around. The glare blinded me and made my eyes water. The heat began to sap my strength.

"Wow!" Jahni exclaimed, looking up the rock. "Where are we?"

"Korvu – where your parents came from. This is the Rock of Arkor," I said tiredly.

"That's an Atapi place," he said in a scared whisper. "Father told me of it. We don't go here without an army."

"The Atapi aren't around at the moment," I said wearily. "And they wouldn't be expecting two small people to drop in as we did. They will be watching for your army. I have to sleep, Jahni. Wake me if you see anyone."

I felt him come and sit so he was touching me and then I closed my eyes.

I wanted to sleep but was probably over tired. As I lay there with my eyes closed, my thoughts wandered to what I had sensed from Jenha. I hoped he wasn't in more trouble because of me. It was bad enough that the Kimh had stripped him of his rank as Traeger.

The picture I had sensed in Jenha's mind, just before Pentan had disrupted things, returned to my mind. I guessed I was now viewing the scene through Jenha's eyes. I saw a large room – with a long table on a raised dais. There was no one sitting there, all the people were either standing around on the lower level where chairs had been pushed back around the walls or on the few chairs placed directly in front of my view.

Many of the figures were the luminescent Kimh – all dressed in rich colourful fabrics and with long sleeveless tunic style jackets trimmed in white fur. Around them were a ring of Kumatan guards. I saw Katech come into view – his outfit was no longer purple but still mimicking those of the Kimh, was a tawdry crimson.

"You are overwrought, old friend," Katech said coming and placing a comforting hand on Jenha's shoulder. "Let the Traeger's here deal with this matter."

I could sense Jenha's resistance and understood his real concern. He didn't want Traeger Pentan to find me. To prevent that, he wanted to find me first or have Pentan recalled to answer for his breach of Traeger etiquette.

Jenha removed the hand from his shoulder, smothering a brief flicker of dislike for Katech who had caused his demotion.

From my own viewpoint, I thought Jenha had a right to be angry, but it seemed the Kimh didn't agree. A voice from someone off to one side warned, "Compose yourself, Mosellan, or you will be sedated."

I sensed Jenha pause his thoughts as if mentally counting to ten. When my mind heard him speak, he had his voice under full control.

"Councillor, my position as Traeger might be in abeyance. I might be honour bound not to use my powers but my knowledge, my Nuath, have not changed. I was taught – never to interrupt when another is taking others across planes. Traeger Pentan interrupted my first attempt. I warned him of the dangers then. Yet he interrupted me again. Was it at the councils order? Did you not trust me or did you not want me to succeed?"

"You are out of order!" the senior councillor acting as chairperson barked.

"I respectfully disagree. I was given a task to do. I was not allowed to do it properly. Now Traeger Pentan is missing. Jai Cassidy and my son are missing. It was my belief that the council wished to examine Jai. She is also carrying a child. My child. Does the Nuath allow us to endanger the innocent?"

All the faces I could see had disproving looks.

Jenha continued. "Jai Cassidy swore to serve me. She has proved to be loyal to the Kumatan! I owe her – as her master – and as her consort."

A Kimh dressed in purple more lurid than Katech had worn, stood up from one of the chairs and strode forward.

"We absolve you of that concern, Mosellan," that Kimh pronounced. "I have heard this hybrid of yours has potential for sorcery. If anyone goes to look for her, it will be a Traeger."

"With all due respect, High Minister," Jenha persisted, "The Traegers here do not know my son or Jai Cassidy as I do."

"Perhaps not," the High Minister agreed. "But that raises another matter that needs rectifying. This ill-advised triumvir... I do not think you can view this matter with suitable detachment until you dissolve it. However, since you know the hybrid so... intimately... surely you can sense where she is so Traegers can bring her here?"

Without a hint that he was shading the truth, Jenha stated, "No, I cannot. I fear she and my son are lost in the darkness."

To give some Kimh the benefit of concern, a few did look mildly distressed by that statement. I was sure they were more concerned for Jahni than me. And if Jenha could sense me, his mind was betraying nothing.

"You told me that the hybrid escaped from the sorcerer," Katech commented. "I expect she will have escaped the darkness again. She has the power of a sorcerer. Pentan is an experienced Traeger. I expect he will find her. When he returns he can explain his interference. He may have realised she was going to escape from us."

Another of the Kimh moved into view, I recognised that face from Earth. Jenha had called him Lord Darcel. "I heard that she had a vision from that box she had- of the Rock of Arkor. I believe we might find her there."

Jenha closed his mouth again. His mind was seething in frustration. I tried then to let him know I was fine, and away from Arkor, but although I had this odd link to him – he didn't seem to sense me in his mind. Perhaps they had him shielded, like on Earth. But he recognised that he had said enough to convince these 'overlords' of his that he wanted me

found, but even I could tell they wouldn't recall Pentan immediately. Still, he tried one last request.

"High Minister, I request permission to try to reach Jai Cassidy from outside of the palace shields."

"No. The hybrid is no longer your concern," the High Minister answered immediately.

"My son is missing too," Jenha blurted, his control slipping. "Is he too, no longer my concern?"

The High Minister's face took on a darker purplish shade. "As you have no concern that the hybrid will harm him, I am sure that when Pentan finds her, he will be recovered in good health. There is nothing you can do, Mosellan. Let us attend to this. You will be better off talking to the Counsellors – your time on that human world has affected your thinking. I will arrange time for them to see you."

"Very well, High Minister, if you will excuse me, I would ask your permission to go and comfort my wife. Before she left Earth, she lost her twin sister. Now she has lost her only son."

The High Minister gestured to two of the guards. "Escort Mosellan back to his assigned quarters. He is in breach of the rules of conduct of this council."

I felt as if I were being hustled from that room. He was thinking that it was as well they hadn't sensed his deception – that he had known what I intended. That he felt it was the best thing to do, bordered on treason. I thought wryly that he should remember what he had taught me – to think before acting or reacting.

I felt my connection to him cease once he was out of the Council Room, and at the same time, Jahni who had been sitting close enough to be touching me, stood up to walk around. And that was when I could no longer keep awake.

I awoke much later with Jahni shaking me.

"I found a cave," Jahni told me. "And it's getting cold."

"Show me," I said. My eyes were better, though still watery and I no longer felt drained of energy. The glaring light was further away because the sun had crossed over the rock and we were now in shadow. There was still enough reflected light to see as we edged along the bottom of the rock.

Jahni stopped where the rock was cracked. The opening was barely as wide as I was. I reached in with my arm.

"Did you go in?" I asked. Jahni shook his head.

I sniffed the opening. No Atapi stench, just damp, dust and something musty. I edged in, still sniffing. In the darkness, my eyes stopped watering and I found I could see vague outlines of the rock walls. The narrow tunnel continued for about six feet before widening into a larger cave. Jahni was almost walking on my heels.

"I think this is okay," I told Jahni. "Wait here. I will see how big this cave is."

I edged around it, feeling for more passages. I only found one and that ended in a pile of dry, dusty manure. I returned to the cave and continued around, finding a trickle of water running down one wall. I wondered where the water came from but I accepted its welcome presence.

When I got back to Jahni, I suggested that he should try to sleep. "We will be fine for the night," I assured him.

"What if the Atapi come," he asked and I heard him moving around, searching for a suitable sleeping spot on the sandy floor.

From that same instinct that had told me we were safe came the idea that Atapi preferred not to be out at night. "I think they go back to their tribes at night."

"Can you tell me another story," Jahni asked in a small voice.

“Ok, get comfortable.”

I searched my memory for a story. Reading books was something I hadn't done since leaving school. Finally, I recalled a book I had borrowed from my brother. I began to recap the story of “Shipwrecked”. Jahni's even breathing told me he was asleep, fortunately before I got to the end of the small part I had read.

To my eyes, the cave wasn't completely dark. I could see enough to know that Jahni slept. I looked around. The walls seemed to be faintly glowing and there was enough of the light to be able to walk around with out tripping over the scattered rocks. I began to explore the small cave and my hopes rose along with my apprehension.

I found shelves just around from the entrance. I reached into this darkness and felt objects and lifted them out one by one. The first was a fibrous bundle and when I examined it; it fell out into a sheet. It felt like woven raffia, but draped like wool. I tried it around myself and it felt warm. I used it to cover Jahni. The next object was a knife and then a rock. I struck the two together and made a spark. I replaced them near the front of the ledge. I reached in further and found a rolled up scroll. I treated it gently because it felt fragile. When unrolled a little, I saw hieroglyphs on it. They looked like those on the slave bands and my mother's box, but with out the magic enabling me to read them. Reluctantly I rolled it up again and went back to exploring.

Someone – a long time ago – had come here.

My stomach growled. With nothing much else to do, I went back along the entrance tunnel and stared out into the night. The air here felt dry and contained unfamiliar scents that I felt I should know. I stayed there but had no desire to explore outside since I didn't know if any predator's roamed at night. For a time, I felt that there was some creature out there and it was looking for me. I mentally pleaded, “Don't let anything find us.”

Jahni woke just as the first traces of light were tinging the sky pinkish red. The desert in front of me looked deep purple. As the light increased, I began to see white fluffy stuff on the ground and wondered what it could be. Jahni joined me and enlightened me with his exclamation of delight.

“Manna,” he said, and he would have rushed outside if I hadn't grabbed him.

“What are you talking about?”

“Manna. That white plant stuff. You can eat it.”

“It wasn't there yesterday,” I pointed out – suspicious.

“Of course not! It grew there last night.”

“Really?” I had never heard of anything that grows that fast.

“Tiny spores, Papan says. It only grows in the desert when there has been heavy dew. The spores fluff up but you have to gather it before the sun gets on it or it will dry out to dust and new spores.”

I was hungry enough to consider eating it but not so hungry to omit precautions.

“We'll go out quickly,” I said. “We get what we can and come back. Atapi may come with the sun too.”

When we had gathered as much as we could hold and stuff in our pockets, we moved back to the tunnel entrance. I urged Jahni to hurry because I had begun to feel shivers of warning running around my nervous system.

I looked up at the reddish rock, it towered over me and extended as far as I could see in each direction. It was like an island mountain in a sea of red sand. I saw channels in the rock marked with dark algae, where water must flow down, but no sign of other life. Still...

“Back inside,” I said as I pushed Jahni in front of me.

Jahni glanced around quickly and obeyed. I couldn't see anyone yet – but when I could it would be too late. I followed him inside; he was already eating the manna, but I stopped in

the deep shadow just inside the entrance. I tried some of the manna as I watched. Jahni was right; it was delicious and oddly filling.

We had returned to hiding just in time. People were coming. Atapi. Some were flying, others were on foot, and all were coming fast. I saw them as silhouettes against the sky that had taken on an aqua colour. It gave me a sharp pang; a reminder that I was no longer on Earth. But despite being used to a pure blue sky, the colour seemed to grow on me the more I looked at it.

My mind returned to those approaching, they were close enough that I saw the puffs of dust rising from their running feet. I realised that if we tried to leave now, they would see us. I had doubts that I would even have time to walk the three steps to get from place to place. When we did go, I wanted to take things from here with me.

I stayed where I was, and a subtle aura of reassurance removed my fear of being trapped. Jahni crept up to me. I heard his sharp intake of breath.

"Keep quiet," I whispered. "They don't know we are here, and this cave hasn't been used for a long time."

I didn't add that both of us were small and slender. Those that were approaching weren't.

We watched as the crowd of Atapi spread out to collect the manna too. They started at a distance from the cave, but some began moving towards us. I drew back. These were warriors, not sorcerers. The nearest noted our tracks and the signs that manna had been gathered.

I drew back dragging Jahni with me. More warriors and the sorcerers buzzed over like angry bees. They pointed at our footprints and looked right at the opening where the prints led. A warrior directed to go into the crevasse. He was too big of course, even after he had removed his weapons harness and cape.

I didn't feel frightened, but I sensed that Jahni was.

"Jahni, there is a knife on the shelf just around from the entrance. Get it for me, will you? Then crawl in there and hide." My voice was a whisper in Jahni's ear.

Moments later, I felt the knife handle pressed into my hand. I stayed back where I could still watch the silhouette of the warrior. He seemed to be changing shape to find one that could fit the passage.

"I think not," I murmured to myself as I heard and understood his cursing. He was saying that no one could get in the passage but he hadn't been told to stop trying. I wondered if I could end this annoyance.

I recalled something from the lore that had been inscribed on my mother's box. It was an empathic trick. I wondered if the Atapi were afraid of anything. Mice came to mind and I imagined a plague of such rodents, rushing out of the crevasse and swarming the warriors and sorcerers.

The warriors began jumping and twisting and swiping the perceived creatures. The sorcerers were trying to remove them with flickers of energy. When weapons began to be used against the apparent rodents, I imaged them swarming back into the cave.

The sun breached the horizon slightly to the right of the entrance and the sorcerers regained order.

"We will greet the sun!" one ordered in a commanding voice. "Then we will hunt the intruders that have desecrated our rock. We will feast on their flesh."

The warrior who had failed to crawl through the tunnel was called forward.

I heard him report, "No revered one, the walls close in within a few feet. Only such as those rodents could pass. Perhaps they attacked the intruders as well."

Satisfied, but thinking his report odd, I moved back to reassure Jahni. "Stay quiet. We're safe."

I went back to watch at the opening, thinking as I had on Earth to “let no one see me”, and listened to the mass chanting that seemed to cause currents of power. All the Atapi were watching the sunrise as part some ritual. The light was increasing, and I could see the warriors had sleeveless vests like those Atapi on Earth, but each group had decorations in distinct colours – as if they were tribal colours.

When they finished the ritual, the sorcerers came back to sniff around the cave. I saw them clearly; all reminded me of Stacion Ansuni, having huge wings and long tails, and each had a different coloured vest, richer than those worn by their warriors, but in colour patterns that matched. Like Stacion, all the sorcerers wore those vests and some kind of pubic sling. Some even leapt up onto the rock above the opening. I couldn’t help but feel their combined determination to find the creatures that desecrated their sacred rock.

After a time, the movement around the entrance stopped. I edged forward and saw three warriors on guard and the others with the sorcerers spread out looking down at the ground for more tracks as they moved amongst the low grey green grass tussocks.

We were safe, but trapped. I had no wish to try walking across planes from inside the cave. At least now, we had both food and water. I bundled the blanket thing with the stone and scroll so that it was ready when the way cleared for us to leave. The knife I kept handy.

Jahni whispered something to me, “I have found writing in here – scratched onto the rock.”

There wasn’t room for both of us on the shelf, so I reached my hand into feel. I used my finger to trace the Atapi glyphs. I didn’t expect to understand them because I still had to learn the Atapi equivalent of the alphabet. I tried to picture and memorise what I traced.

When I reached the last glyph, two things happened – the glyphs suddenly made sense and I felt Kaer trying to reach my mind.

I blocked him, but not quickly enough. However, I ignored him by picturing the huge red Rock of Arkor.

“Come out, Jahni. With a little luck, that army of Kumatan might come here. If they do, we will have a chance to leave.”

When I edged back to the entrance, I saw the warriors racing away from the rock. Further away was an approaching dust cloud.

“Get the bundle and follow me out – quickly.”

When I felt him behind me, I took his hand and envisioned a random picture. I dragged Jahni three paces forward, unseen by the approaching humanoids.

I felt the coolness of a forest, and smelt smells that were similar yet subtly different to what I had known on Earth. I collapsed, all my energy gone again. I looked up through trees that seemed to rise up to the aqua sky and though a faint breeze ruffled the narrow, light green leaves, I sensed we were the only ones around. The tree was unlike any tree I had known before.

Where we were in relation to the Rock we had just left, I had no idea but some sense inside me said the time here was afternoon, not morning. It was no surprise as to why I felt exhausted again. I must have taken us half way around the planet from the cave at the Rock of Arkor.

I knew why that cave had protected us – me at least. The writing, written in secret in the shelf had said, “The dreaming place of Jai Ansuni.” I hoped we would be as safe here as we had been there.

“Are we safe here?” Jahni asked echoing my thought.

“I think so,” I assured him. “This place was one that your father shared with me.”

That was enough for him. I didn’t need to add that it was also one granted to me by my mother.

“Walk a short way through the trees in the direction of the sun – see if there is a waterfall there,” I suggested to Jahni. He hesitated to leave me.

“It’s safe enough for now. Everything is quiet because we arrived, but further away the birds and insects are not alarmed.”

I listened as Jahni walked off. He made enough noise to startle the more distant creatures into silence and as I listened to him, I thought of the picture that had led me here. I wondered what this place meant to my mother. I smelt the air and found no taint of Atapi, but now they were only one of three races that wanted me. The thing was, on this world, the Atapi didn’t know me – yet!

I breathed easier. The Kumatan and their masters the Kimh would have no idea where to look for me. That was assuming that they believed that we weren’t lost in the void.

Jahni returned, more excited than when he had left.

“There is a waterfall,” he spoke breathlessly. “And caves in the rock. And I saw hopping creatures, like rabbits – drinking from a lake there.”

“As I thought,” I said, trying to sound confident. “Though for now, I am going to sleep. I haven’t got the energy to move.”

“Is it safe?” Jahni asked.

“I’ve slept out lots of times. This place is a lot like the hills near where we lived on Earth – but without Atapi.”

Jahni moved closer to me. He was still very young. I wondered if I had done the right thing in bringing him here. But Jenha had wanted him away from the Kimh and I would need help in eight months time.

“I’m hungry,” Jahni said quietly.

I groaned. “I have to sleep, Jahni. I can’t even lift my head. Do you have any of that manna stuff left? Check my pockets – I might have. Other wise, we’ll both have to go hungry. I’ll start teaching you to hunt tomorrow. If you are thirsty, you can drink from the waterfall. Running water is usually fit to drink.”

He nodded solemnly. “You sleep, Jai. I will guard you.”

I reached out my hand to grasp his and fell into slumber.

I woke near morning, smelling air that was fresher than I could remember. On Earth, I’d smelt smoke, or car fumes or animal smells – the odours of man. Here, the air was pristine, untouched. I breathed it in with delight, feeling as I did that I was again full of vigour.

My eyes no longer watered. The sun here was gentler and it was shining through the branches of trees that reached up high into the aqua coloured sky. I heard the insects, animals and birds going about their morning routine. I sensed no other people anywhere close.

I lay there, listening to the natural rhythm. Jahni lay close to me, covered in the strange rug from the cave. I didn’t need a rug. From my mother I had inherited the ability to adjust my body temperature. I must have done it in the night for I felt pleasantly warm.

Yes, I thought, we could survive here – until my child was born. I could hunt, and forage and I would teach Jahni. Then when I was less able to care for us, he would be ready. I began to think of all the things we would need for a reasonably comfortable life – then a realisation hit me.

I was free.

There was no one here to tell me what to do. No one to tell me how to behave. No one chasing me away from their property. No one calling me thief or vandal or traitor or abomination.

I thought of my father’s farm and saw clearly that I had never belonged there. I thought of the Kumatan village, where very few had trusted me and most watched me warily.

I looked at the trees – smelt the air again pure but with a faint metallic tang – heard the zephyr in the leaves. I felt from somewhere inside me that this was home.

Chapter 28

In just a couple of days, the cave behind the waterfall was beginning to look like home. We had collected a supply of firewood and created snares made of flexible vines for catching the rabbit like creatures. We had a few animal skins drying and we supplemented the meat with plants we collected from the forest. The plants were strange to me, but I found I had a sense for those we could eat and those we needed to leave alone.

Jahni, who soon became adventurous enough to explore on his own, found a supply of clay along the bank of the stream. From it, we were trying to make plates and cups.

Our beds were piles of springy fronds and we hoped eventually to have enough skins to turn into blankets. If we could figure out how.

Since arriving at the forest place, I hadn't sensed any further probe from Kaer or anyone else and hoped that we were beyond mind reach. I hadn't given more thought to the confrontation that had provided our diversion to escape, but Jahni had and he must have been thinking on it.

"Can the Kimh sense us here as they did at the Rock?"

"I haven't felt anyone trying," I said. "But then, I haven't tried to receive any either. I let Kaer reach me at the Rock, so that they'd come for us. I needed that diversion to get the Atapi to go away."

Jahni considered that. "Do you think many Kumatan would have died?"

I considered. "I don't know – but the Atapi were fleeing as fast as they could waddle or fly. They were keener to go than to kill Kumatan."

"But if they did – it would be our fault."

"Those that came to the rock knew what it was and the risks they took in coming. We did nothing to endanger them."

"What about the Traeger who interrupted Father when he was trying to bring us here?"

"I may have been intending to escape," I told Jahni, "but when that idiot interfered, I had to direct us to somewhere or we would still be stuck in the darkness, slowly going mad."

"Does my father know you were taking me with you?"

I wondered how to answer that. So I told the truth. "I think he wanted you to have more time before being taught by the Kimh."

"I never want that!" Jahni shuddered.

"You'll have to expect it eventually and it would be best if you could accept it calmly," was my advice.

"I don't like them! They are cold and uncaring."

"I would have said they were too controlled," I told him. "Arrogant too. They may have higher morals than the Atapi but they share the trait of thinking they always know best."

"Do they?" Jahni asked.

"What? Know best? I doubt it. Sometimes they might, but not as far as I am concerned."

"Do you know best?" he asked me.

"Let's say I will try not to be guilty of the same arrogance. I don't claim to know everything. I left school as soon as I could. Back then, I thought I knew enough. Now, I know I still have things to learn. Even from you."

"Me? I am only a child."

"Yeah and the Kimh will tell you that you are too young to understand this or that," I said from experience of human adults. "But I decided that everyone, even children, are entitled to their opinion, however wrong or misinformed it is. I made mistakes, lots of them, because I

wouldn't listen to the advice of my parents. But there were times when they were wrong too. So I started to listen to what people said for something or against it and then made up my own mind."

"Father is like that. He tells me things and asks me what I think."

"I think he has the right of it," I decided. "Getting you to think for yourself. He knew what I was when he first met me – yet he gave me the chance to prove myself. All the other Kumatan looked at me and only saw that I was Atapi and therefore something less than them."

"Is that why they made him"

He used a word I didn't know. Jahni tried to explain. My definition was 'neutralised'.

"I am sure they think I corrupted him - changed him for the worst."

"Did you?"

I shook my head. "He changed me – for the better. I was a brat! But maybe I will succeed in corrupting you!"

Jahni looked scandalised.

"Opinion is relative," I said grinning. "The Kimh might think that you and I talking together and sharing my opinions is corrupting you – because how I think and what I know is different to their views."

Jahni didn't have that Kumatan poker face yet. I saw the uncertainty of his thoughts.

I went on to say, "Later you will get the views of the Kimh, the views of the Kumatan as dictated by the Kimh. By then, you will have the views of a human from Earth – an outside view and a different way of thinking about and looking at things. Perhaps that is what your father wanted."

"What are we going to do?" he asked in a sudden change of subject. I sensed that our talk was getting too deep, even for a very intelligent ten year old.

"We are going to learn to be self sufficient," I said as confidently. "And I will teach you what you need to do when your brother or sister is born."

That idea half scared him, but he also realised that I was giving him all my trust.

"Then what?"

"Then you will take my child back to your parents to raise."

Jahni opened his mouth to comment, and then shut it. Did he realise that the Kimh would likely take over the care of my child?

"I'll remember everything that you teach me, Jai," he promised. "And I will teach my brother."

I reached over and hugged him. I think he wanted to know what I would be doing but was afraid to ask.

"I need you for that," I told Jahni. "While I learn about the Atapi, my child will learn about me – from you."

"Do you really like the Atapi?" he asked me.

"Yes and no," I said. "There have been some I detested and many who were merely people. Their culture, on Earth, has parts that I think are wrong. There might be much that is beautiful. I have to learn. I have to know. I can't do that and properly care for your father's child."

Jahni was silent. Finally he hugged me and trotted off to explore.

I heard Jahni cry out – just once – and the noises of the birds and animals went silent. I listened but there was no further sound. Alarmed, I crept from tree to tree, following the stream. Jahni liked to be beside it. I heard a soft scuffling and crept towards the noise.

Someone had an arm around Jahni and was holding a hand over his mouth.

I heard a harsh whisper in Kumatan. "I am rescuing you, you ungrateful whelp. Be grateful that I found you before your mind is filled with Atapi poison. Or before she uses you in some barbaric ritual."

The creature, humanoid in shape, looked like he had been through a war. His tattered clothes and his body were filthy and dusty. To me, he sounded mad. I doubt if the creature could believe that the only ritual I wanted Jahni for was the ancient one of childbirth. As a male he might think that barbaric too.

One thing was obvious – I couldn't leave Jahni in his hands. So was a second thing – Jenhari Mosellan hadn't cured me of barging into a fight. I had broken his compulsion – thankfully – because this was a fight I had to win.

"What a big brave male you are," I said aloud, as I stepped from behind a tree. "Using a child for protection."

As intended, I'd startled him. Also as intended, he reacted to the insult. He dumped Jahni and said to him, "You will stay here."

I recognised the force of the command and identified the creature as Pentan. He wasn't sounding like a Traeger now.

As the bedraggled Pentan turned to snarl at me, I said in the same 'command' tone, "Jahni may decide for himself if he stays or goes."

I saw Jahni stand up from where he had fallen. He hadn't been able to rise at first, but now he scooted off before my command could be countered.

"Abomination," Pentan snarled at me. "Barbarian!" He began to walk closer with manic determination.

"Look at yourself before you call me barbarian," I taunted. "I'm clean. My clothes are clean ..."

"You! Atapi!" he snarled again.

"So? I'm not the one who attacked a helpless child and intends to attack again."

I dropped to a fighters crouch and began to circle him. He was forced to spin around to keep facing me.

"How did you get to the Rock?" Pentan demanded. "That box you used on that barbaric planet had no power left and wouldn't help you here."

"Of course not – you pinched it from me," I retorted. "As for how – your homicidal attempt to kill me and Traeger Mosellan's son – backfired. When you tried to trap us in the darkness – I did what I did when Stacion Ansuni tried it – concentrated on an image and pretended to walk there."

"Mosellan taught you to cross planes, did he?" Pentan snarled. "He'll be had up for treason for that. And you should have died in the darkness and rid this world of a diseased Traeger bloodline and a vile Atapi one."

"So you admit that you intended three murders," I challenged him, still circling him.

"You should have died at birth! Mosellan should have killed you on sight."

"Are you sure you aren't Atapi? They told me that repeatedly." I goaded him further.

He lunged at me and I saw he had a knife in his left hand. I ducked his lunge, and wished that I had thought to grab the knife I had at the cave. Though I had never used one in a fight and I really didn't want to kill this madman. I didn't stop moving, and began to circle him again, this time beginning the chant for a ritual that I had learned from my mother's box.

I had almost succeeded in immobilising him when he realised what I was doing and lunged again.

I was at a disadvantage using sorcery. I had knowledge but no experience and he had experience of countering Atapi sorcery. But there was one talent I had that maybe he didn't – empathy. I was getting his emotions into my head and it was unpleasant. If I couldn't overcome him, there were others that could. The man wasn't sane.

I opened my mind to reach for Jenha or Kaer. The latter I was sure would come as fast as he could, since the Kimh wanted me. This way, if I lost here the madman would endanger no others and pay for his actions.

"Come on now," I said as I ducked again. "An armed Traeger fighting an unarmed woman - isn't there something in your Nuath about that?"

He snarled, his anger raging hotter. "It says we should protect our world from vile abominations and the poison of the Atapi."

I laughed deliberately. I thought he had rewritten the Nuath to support his own warped ideas.

"On Earth, where I belong, we have the ten commandments. One of them is 'Thou shalt not kill' I think humans have higher morals than you."

The knife jabbed at my stomach. It didn't reach me. I tried not to betray the shock it gave me. It was Stacion Ansuni's knife. I had killed my Atapi grandfather with it and it still bore traces of his blood.

"Recognise it?" the man grinned evilly. "Fitting – using what killed the Atapi sorcerer to kill the sorcerer's get. It's how I found you. You killed the sorcerer with it – it's yours by right – and your contamination is on it."

"You kill me, old man, and you are doing the bidding of that sorcerer," I said deliberately. "That's treason, isn't it? Do they hang traitors?"

"This is my own desire - to cleanse this world of such abominations as you."

"You and your kind are aliens to me – they didn't have to abduct me from Earth. Have a go at the people who insisted I come here."

"Alien! You're the alien here!"

"That's the first thing you have been right about," I admitted, "But it's not my fault I'm here. Why don't you take me back to Earth?"

I wouldn't trust him if he agreed, and he paused to consider the idea. I used the moment of distraction to kick hard at the arm holding the knife. He was angry beyond reason but recovered from my kick very quickly. He ran at me with the knife ready to stab. I sidestepped and tripped him. He rolled and sprang at me before I could kick his rear. His knife slashed my leg and it felt like fire.

I set my whole mind to focus on getting the knife away from him. I was running out of time. I could run, but he would be on me before I could get Jahni away. I began the chant I had tried earlier and began to circle, hoping he would react the same way as before. When he lunged, I was ready and kicked his left arm again. He swapped the knife to his right hand.

He still expected to win, in spite of his left arm being temporarily useless. But then, he was taller, stronger and more experienced than me and motivated by hate.

Well I was motivated too – by survival – of me, my child and Jahni.

He began to make slighting remarks about Jenhari Mosellan. If he wanted to get me angry – it didn't work. I knew that Jenha was honourable, and was sure he would manage fine in spite of the words of a madman.

"You care nothing for him," he sneered at me. "It proves that you are a rabid Atapi. You used him to get to the sorcerer, to kill him and take his power. You can cross planes – it proves you are a sorcerer."

I laughed again. "You can cross planes. Does that make you an Atapi sorcerer too?"

He lunged at me yet again. I kicked the arm aside. He grabbed my leg and pulled me off balance. He fell on me like a ton weight, laughing like something demented.

I squirmed with more strength than I thought I had and more than he expected. It took all his strength to hold me and if he were to release one arm to try to stab me, I would get free.

He realised that and fell flat onto me, making it hard for me to breathe. I saw his knife arm rise and wrenched my arm free to scratch at his eyes. He instinctively moved his arm to

protect them, the blade narrowly missing my face. Using this moment of weakness, I managed to roll him off me, enough to bring one knee into a place where human men are delicate.

I had hurt him, I could feel his pain, but he was still aware of me and tried to stab me. I jerked my face out of the way and the knife stabbed into the ground. I twisted and squirmed free, and made a try for the knife, but he was still grasping it too tightly and trying to free it.

I ran off a few steps, thinking to run while he was helpless, but he began to rise much faster than my brother had when I had kneed him. He rose and stumbled towards me. An Atapi trick occurred to me. Stacion could fly – he appeared above and behind a victim, to pounce. I didn't have wings, but I could cross planes. If I could manage it, I could walk to a place above and behind him...

I ran backwards and thought of the point I wanted. Above the Traeger's head so my feet almost touched his shoulders. I felt the twisting sensation, then the darkness and in the moment before I dropped, the back of the Traeger.

He had stopped, seeing me vanish and expecting a trick, but before he could turn, I was on him. My full weight dropped onto his shoulders and he who was leaning forward fell to the ground. He tried to buck me off, to free his knife arm. He hissed and snarled and then grew frenzied. Reacting to the man's terror, I jumped free. I wasn't sure why but when he rolled onto his back I saw he had stabbed himself. A reddish stain was spreading on his chest.

"Abomination," he hissed with much less force. He seemed unable to stand up.

I could have snatched the knife and killed him, but I didn't. I wrenched it free and threw it away. Then I tore the sleeve from my shirt, wadded it and pushed it onto his wound.

"You won't save me," he snarled, still with hatred in his eyes. "The knife had poison on it. You'll die too. I got your leg and your arm."

I hadn't felt that one, and glanced at my left arm. "Why don't you enlighten me about the nasty effects it will have?"

I was pleased that my voice sounded calm as I continued to put pressure on the man's wound. I was sure it shouldn't be life threatening by itself and was ready for signs of a renewed attack. His knife had sliced him across his ribs but hadn't gone deep.

"First it will paralyse you," he told me, his eyes looking intensely at me.

"Hasn't yet," I remarked. "Is that your problem – hasn't stopped your mouth."

He spat at me.

"Then it will turn your insides into water and eat away at your flesh."

I resisted the urge to look at my leg. "Well it seems to be reaching your vitals before mine," I commented, not intending to gloat. "Is that what that purple stuff on the knife was?"

I asked the question, even though I thought I knew the answer.

"Yes, sorcerer blood. A most potent poison with no known cure."

Ignorance must be an asset. My imagination had been tormenting me, but his comment acted like a dose of ice-cold common sense. What sort of superstitious nonsense did this creep believe in?

"Did it occur to you," I said, still pressing on his wound, "That Stacion's blood won't harm me. I am his grandchild and it is his blood that you claim is in me already."

Horror replaced hatred. I shrugged at him. "And does it confuse you that someone you want to kill, seeks to heal you?"

"Only to torment me for longer," he countered. I sighed.

"Maybe it is poison to you and if so I can't help that. I will call for help – your healers might know something."

"Too late," he said in triumph. His eyes closed and he went limp.

I felt his heartbeat as Jahni crept closer. "Is he dead?" Jahni asked.

“No,” I said with relief. “Can you go and get me plenty of those springy vines to tie this pad in place?”

Jahni ran off.

“It’s all in your damned mind,” I muttered to the unconscious Traeger. His heartbeat was still strong and regular. I hoped Jahni would hurry. I wanted to tie his arms and legs before he woke up.

The Traeger was still bleeding and that could kill him. I glanced at my leg. My pants were slashed and bloody but the wound was no longer bleeding. My arm was the same. I was healing myself and my mother said I would be able to heal others. I recalled what she had said.

“Draw power from Korvu – tell it what you wish it to do – picture it – make it so.”

I placed one hand on the ground and the other on the wound. I felt power flowing through me and I pictured the wound healing and this madman sleeping.

Jahni returned. I stopped what I was doing and checked the wound.

“It’s healed,” Jahni gasped.

“Just a bit – I’m not that kind-hearted. It’s just enough so he won’t bleed to death. Can you tie his legs together?”

I ended up doing that, as I didn’t want the creep to escape. I sent Jahni back to the cave to pack everything we had – which still wasn’t much. I told him where to wait for me.

I had thought that Kaer might have come by now, but perhaps my contact hadn’t been clear enough. I opened my mind again and sensed him immediately. I didn’t acknowledge the contact. I thought at him, “You can come and remove your insane trash.”

I felt him react, stop to memorise the picture of this place and return his attention elsewhere. Since he didn’t block me out, I stayed linked to him. At least I would have some warning when he was about to appear – which would be as soon as he could organise a Traeger to bring him.

Chapter 29

I ran to where Jahni was dragging our stuff. I took the bundle, threw it over my shoulder and then took his hand. "Walk with me."

We walked, but the change in scene wasn't obvious. Jahni and I both looked around. It was the same, except that the unconscious Traeger was no longer near us and there was no blood on the ground.

I saw Jahni's mouth open. "How did you do that – get rid of that Traeger?"

I grinned. "He is still where we left him. We are on a different plane. I did what your father did on Earth. He hid your village on a plane where humans never where. I took us to the place where we were, but on a plane where your people and the Kimh have never been."

"Will that Traeger be alright?" Jahni asked.

I shrugged. "Not our fault if he isn't. Why don't you go back to the cave and unpack. I'll follow in a while. I sent for help. I think if I stay here I'll sense when they come."

With Jahni away from me, I breathed easier. I was taking a risk staying where I was. Kaer had sensed me across planes before and he knew what Jenha had done on Earth. If he sensed me – it was possible he could explain it to the Traegers he would have with him.

With my mind as empty as I could make it, I waited by the trees, passively sharing Kaer's mind. It seemed like someone was giving him a stern lecture.

"I don't see how that hybrid has honour, Kaer. Wild, undisciplined, with no idea of obedience – no idea of respect. If you think that behaviour is honourable – I would have to conclude that you have been warped by Mosellan's aberrant notions."

And more of the same. I had the unmistakable impression that Kaer liked lectures on objectivity and attitude as little as I did.

"What is it?" I heard through Kaer's mind. "What is the matter with you? I don't think you have you been listening to anything I have said for the past ten minutes?"

I decided that this was the High Minister I was hearing.

"Nothing is the matter, Father. I have been trying to locate Jai Cassidy. Her mind is unique and quite chaotic. I have been aware of it, but unable to locate her."

Ah, I thought – he must have been aware of the fight – but he had the image now. Why wasn't he racing out to find me? Was it because running out on 'daddy's' lecture wasn't the done thing to or was he being innocently disobedient?

Hmm – the latter – since I also sensed guilt, because Pentan might be injured and need help urgently.

What was that? The High Minister was saying something about using me? Because I was part Atapi and hated the sorcerer? What ever it was, it had made Kaer feel nauseous. Something about his father would overlook genocide if it meant that another sorcerer like Stacion would never be spawned. I knew that Kaer hadn't liked the idea that I had killed the renegade sorcerer, but he had approved the fact that I had spared the lives of the remnants of his tribe.

I felt Kaer make the effort to put his thoughts under control, heard him mouth the appropriate responses to placate his father, and add a thought to me... "Stay there Jai. I want to talk to you."

I gave no indication that I was still listening – but it was nice to know that he hadn't told his father – the High Minister – about me fighting Pentan. It seemed he was trying to speak in my favour.

Once he had himself back to being the perfectly controlled noble scion of the ruling class, I didn't feel his presence so strongly in my mind. Perhaps my empathy had picked up his emotion and that was making contact stronger. I still had the link enough to know when the Traeger took him across planes. He was coming.

"Jai?" I felt Kaer's tentative thought and ignored it. After a while, I began to share his thoughts in a way I had never done before. I think he was deliberately sending them to me.

I heard his evaluation of the scene he had found, his comments to the Kumatan with him. These confirmed that he had been aware of the fight but unable to locate it. He had come after I had sent a better picture, and as soon as he had been dismissed by his father. He had known to bring healers; he had expected to find Traeger Pentan dead not healing.

"The blood is still fresh, but the wound looks days old and healed," was one thought that came through, in answer to Kaer's question as to Pentan's condition.

"Jai Cassidy was here," Kaer told his escort. "That pad on Pentan's wound is from her outlandish human clothing. There is human blood here too. No! Jai Cassidy did not start this fight. She had no weapons – Pentan had the sorcerer's knife. See – it is over there. Jai Cassidy did not attack him – she healed him."

I assume there were arguments and disbelief.

"Record the scene, study it and report to the council. They could not do other than read it as I have. Do you think that if she were truly a sorcerer that she would leave him alive? And leave Stacion's knife here?"

There was a pause. "Prepare Pentan for travel to the palace – of course cut his bindings! Put restraints on him. The mind healers must examine him. The knife? Bury it. There, beneath the blood. Yes, if you must – search the area. I do not think you will find her. She will be far gone from here. Yes, if you must, mount a guard here until you are convinced she will not return."

The thoughts stopped. I thought he had gone until, "Jai, I know you are close. You have convinced me you have honour, though it is a strange and alien concept compared to what I was taught. However, I cannot stop them searching for you. I will be satisfied if you do not wage war on Kimh and Kumatan and if you are not seen in civilised places, but how will you protect your child?"

I chose not to answer. His message was clear – out of sight – out of mind.

My plan – exactly. However, I wouldn't promise not to return to civilised places – I would have to get Jahni back – and my child. As for caring for my child – right now, he or she was in the safest possible place.

A smile came to my face. He had avoided mentioning making war on the Atapi. Had he begun to divine my purpose? Perhaps. Did he consider Atapi tribal lands as civilised places? And the knife – he'd left it there – for me?

I considered that idea. I didn't know what that gesture meant. Did he hope I would take it? Would they be waiting for me? Did he expect me to need it? Did it have any other significance?

There was a lot for me to learn. For now, I'd leave the knife where it was. I didn't want to touch it again, but it would serve to guide me back to that spot on the other plane. If it became important, I knew where it was.

But right now – I was safe. I had a child growing within me and a child to protect.

I thought at last – "Tell Jenha that Jahni is fine."

Then ignoring Kaer's further attempts at contact, I walked back to the waterfall.

For now, it was home.

Epilogue

The essence of the ancient Atapi sorceress, Larcia, stirred after sensing the fleeting hint of a familiar presence. The outer cave was empty as it had been since the mad one had fled – taking Jai Ansuni with him. Had she come back and thought that nothing remained here for her? That the Rock of Arkor had forsaken her?

The essence of the Larcia, stretched her senses through the aura, recalling the favourite places of Jai Ansuni. There! A little stranger – but like Jai Ansuni – and her potential...so innocent...so powerful...so ignorant.

A child? This little stranger was with child? A child of the Kumatan...but Jai Ansuni had befriended young Kumatan, and the stranger had a young Kumatan with her.

Larcia sent out a tendril of power through the aura and examined the girl. There was something alien about her, yes, but she could use the aura...was using it as Jai Ansuni had done... as Larcia herself had learnt to use it.

Not like the generations of male sorcerers who wasted so much power by forcing their will onto the aura, forcing it against what was natural.

This little stranger...if she but knew it...could bring mountains down or create an oasis from a desert...if she but knew how.

How could this little stranger possibly make Larcia's sons listen to her?

Larcia sent power to make the little stranger sleep and dream...to recall her life so far. So like Larcia's daughters – strong willed, knowing her own mind, fighting fiercely to stay free, so staunch in protecting innocents, so fearless...even the mad one had underestimated her.

That alien blood in her...that different view of the world...she would be vulnerable...would not know how to fight the sorcery of Larcia's sons...oh, she knew some things...had a unique way of doing things...unexpected...

Like the thought of giving her child to the Kumatan to raise...what a gift...what a way to bring the two races closer together in understanding. Such a mixed child had never been possible before – Atapi and Kumatan could not interbreed directly – but that odd ...human blood ...had made it possible.

Without feeling like she was meddling, the ancient one uttered the words of a ritual that sent the aura to find the little stranger and protect her. The Atapi needed her to show them the old ways, to help the tribes, to halt the decline in numbers...

If the little stranger was worthy...she would be the one to take over Larcia's crown, and sword, and she, Larcia, could finally rest.

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BONUS MATERIAL -

Sneak Preview of **ATAPI SORCERESS** - sequel to **THE WILD ONE**.

ATAPI SORCERESS

CHAPTER 1 Koenig and Kaer

Koenig, High Minister of the Kimh, sat at his desk studying reports. He scowled at the one in his hand. It was, written in the precise hand writing that he recognised as being that of his youngest son, Kaer.

His hand reached for a crystal glass; he touched it to his lips and realised that it was empty. A silent figure drifted to his side before he could fling the offending glass at the tapestry covered wall.

Koenig glanced at the white tunic clad servant as she filled his glass from a crystal carafe and did not turn her eyes to look at him. He nodded his thanks, not concerned that the figure did not see it. These new servants were silent, discreet and never intruded on his concentration. It almost seemed that they could anticipate his needs, even read his thoughts. Right then, he wanted and needed the calming effect of the fruity smelling ruby coloured drink. Someone had trained this servant well.

“Have my son, Kaer, summoned,” Koenig directed the servant. The silent figure nodded and retreated.

He gave the servant no further thought as he re-read his son’s report. Then he stood to stretch his muscles and straighten his official robes. The long purple open front tunic, trimmed with white fur, was impressive, but it tended to become twisted around him as he worked.

While waiting for his son to appear, he stared at the colourful geometric pattern of the meditation tapestry on the wall and found it no help to his simmering temper.

Koenig was a man of middle years. He still looked to be in vigorous good health, though the demands of his position kept him inside too much, and allowed little time for exercise. Like all his kind, his hair was white blond, his eyes purplish blue and his skin was faintly luminescent and he would not show the depredations of age on his hawk-like features for many years yet.

Kaer arrived with satisfactory promptness. He showed no signs of having just thrown on his own formal clothing of soft dark blue dyed leather. Nor did he betray his aversion to wearing the out-dated style. However, the clothing worn by the highest level of the Kimh was a tradition. If he refused to follow the dictates of his rank, his father would have more reason to disparage him verbally.

“So, you have still not recovered that hybrid,” Koenig challenged immediately. He returned to sit behind his desk, making the discussion a formal one.

Kaer walked to stand three paces away from the desk as protocol demanded. “No, Father,” he admitted, keeping his voice controlled. “A thorough search was made in the area where Traeger Pentan was found. We found tracks of Jai Cassidy and a child, between that area, the waterfall and the river but none leaving the area. The Traegers believe she has crossed planes to somewhere as yet unknown.”

“So, she has Mosellan’s son with her,” Koenig considered, pouncing on that fact. “I wonder what she wants to use him for. We must separate him from her.”

Kaer kept silent. He didn't want another lecture on objectivity, like the one he had received when he tried to show his father that Jai Cassidy had honour. He was twenty now, an adult, not an untutored child.

"That hybrid must be found," Koenig insisted, and then mused. "Part Atapi, part human – what a horrible mixture. Humans, I have heard, are a violent lot."

"I will keep the guards and Traegers looking in likely places. We will know if she goes back to the Rock of Arkor," Kaer stated, keeping from his mind that it was a lie.

Koenig flipped another report from the pile in front of him; Kaer hoped that he had finished the uncomfortable subject of Jai Cassidy.

"Pentan. The mind healers have recommended his retirement. He is no longer a Traeger. He requires permanent supervision," Koenig informed his son. "And Mosellan. The counsellors say that he needs an extended period of counselling, and possibly retraining, before he will be allowed to resume his duties. That hybrid has corrupted two senior Traegers and is probably corrupting Mosellan's son. Two eminent Traeger bloodlines – destroyed. That hybrid could not have contrived to help the Atapi more."

"Father, I do not share your impression of Jai Cassidy. The Atapi on Earth wanted her dead. She has little love for them and Pentan brought his condition on himself," Kaer stated, but he knew his father would disagree.

"If that hybrid can move herself using Atapi sorcery, who knows what else she can do. I want her here, muzzled," Koenig pronounced. The subtle luminance of his skin increased betraying the intensity of his desire. "And if I decide you are being less than conscientious about finding her..."

Kaer endured the tirade on obedience and attitude, and merely tightened his mouth when his father ordered counselling sessions for him, and all others who had been on Earth.

Koenig finished venting his anger, but did not dismiss his son. "Finding that human pollutant is your priority," he told Kaer in his implacably. "I cannot risk losing any more Traegers. Now that the Atapi are causing so much trouble, I need every one of them. Several groups of engineers that have been contracted to work here on Korvu have been killed and barbarically dismembered, by Atapi. I cannot allow further atrocities, or we will have to compensate the company or risk their withdrawal. If either happens, it will set back Korvu's progress by decades."

Kaer nodded. "I understand, Father," was his meek reply. He didn't ask why he seemed to be blaming Jai Cassidy for trouble that had happened on Korvu before she had even arrived.

"If you get the slightest hint of where she is, I want you to get Traegers there as fast as you can," Koenig told him, before waving his hand in a shooing motion.

Kaer didn't linger. He had had enough of being lectured for one day. Now that he was away from his father, he unbuttoned the front of his formal robe and considered removing it altogether.

He did agree with his father about the atrocities. He had read reports and they had shocked and sickened him. The attacks had been apparently unprovoked, but if the engineers had strayed into Atapi territory, that would have been provocation enough. What he did not understand why the off-world engineers had been that far from where their work was to be done. As far as he understood things, the power stations and irrigation systems needed to be near the Kumatan and Kimh towns.

On the subject of Jai Cassidy, he wasn't so positive. Yes, he would continue to have Kumatan guards looking out for her, but he did not agree with his father that she should be arbitrarily neutralised. Nor, that she should be used against the Atapi. She wasn't like them and didn't deserve to be treated as disposable. Even so, he knew that his father would never

get her to think like the Kimh or the Kumatan, though Jenha Mosellan had done a masterful job already towards civilising her. One thing was sure; he needed to get his mind straight about her before the counsellors broached the subject with him.

Kaer then wondered if his father had noticed the Atapi that were being housed near the palace. The idea intrigued him. By his understanding, those Atapi now considered Jai Cassidy as their leader, their sorcerer.

Mosellan had rescued them, promised them sanctuary, and so they would have it. However, since they had arrived, just over a week ago, they had shown no sign of the barbaric behaviour that everyone seemed to expect of them. What that meant, he didn't know.

Perhaps if he spoke to Ellhi Mosellan, she might be able to tell him something. He certainly could not ask her husband, Jenha Mosellan, just now.

Kaer considered the idea. Yes, he should visit her. She had lost her sister to Stacion Ansuni, the now dead renegade sorcerer, not long before they returned from Earth. Now, her son Jahni was missing and Jai Cassidy her friend and co-consort was being hunted like a traitor. Not to mention that her husband had been taken from her and placed into seclusion by the counsellors. She would need a friend that knew some of what she had experienced away from Korvu.

CHAPTER 2 Jai Cassidy - The birth of Mikha

I felt the onset of labour and I was ready for what was to occur. Jahni son of my Kumatan mentor and consort, Jenha Mosellan, was prepared to help me, but the hardest part was still mine.

It was late evening and above me, the stars were beginning to appear as bright points of light in the clear night sky. While I could, I kept walking around, trying to hurry the birth. When the contractions grew more urgent, I lay down on a mattress of soft ferns and let the gentle scent from them relax me.

In the seven months since I had come to Korvu. I had become attuned to its aura and felt more at home here than I had ever felt on Earth. As my labour pains became more frequent and of greater intensity, I felt the aura damping the pain. This land had accepted me, and it was waiting to recognise my child.

Jahni, stayed by me, giving me drinks, wiping my face and rubbing my back. He kept the fire going, so that the water in the clay pot stayed warm. He was little more than a child himself, but he was wiser and more intelligent than his eleven years suggested.

We had often talked of things, learning from each other, and I never doubted the rightness of keeping him from the Kimh. However, he was a child of an old and talented Kumatan bloodline, and they would want to train him as they had trained his father. They would want him to be a Traeger, a slave master. They would expect rigid obedience to their Nuath, the ethical code they lived by.

Jenha, the father of my child, was more than just a 'yes man' of the Kimh. He had vision, and compassion. He had seen me as a wild, half-human, half Atapi brat, before I even knew what I was. He sensed my power, before I knew I had any. He had taught me self-discipline, allowed me to prove I had honour, and that I wasn't an Atapi abomination to be killed on sight.

I spared a thought for him. The Kimh, the leaders of Korvu and the superiors of the Kumatan, had stripped his rank from him, because of me. They thought I had corrupted his mind. I knew better. The Kimh were stagnating in their minds and closed to new ideas.

After many hours, a much stronger contraction brought my mind back to the present. Another followed, and another. With them, I pushed – eager for my child to be born and with a rush, that part was over.

I breathed in gasps as Jahni lifted my child onto soft animal skins, then he did as I had instructed him. He knotted the umbilical cord and cut it. Even as he dealt with those things, my child gave one sharp cry, followed by a sound closer to a laugh.

“I have a brother,” Jahni told me. He was almost crying. I shared his emotion.

Jahni handed the child to me, and I felt his tiny face but could barely make out his features in the flickering light of the fire’s embers. Dawn was not far off and I was impatient to see his face clearly.

Jahni held the child again as the rest of the birth process occurred. I lay for a while, recovering my strength, and then took my child washed him gently with the warm water and let him nuzzle and suckle for a while.

“What will you name him?” Jahni asked, still awed by the tiny boy.

I thought of names from Earth, and none seemed right. Then a name came into my mind.

“Mikha,” I said aloud, and I liked its sound.

I heard Jahni draw in a deep breath. “That is a good name. It means mighty warrior. But it’s funny.”

“Why?” I asked.

“The Mikha in the legends was Atapi.”

I shared the joke. “Well, he has that blood too. It will serve to remind your kin what he is.”

“Why would you want that?” Jahni asked.

“Because I cannot look after him, and your father must – for me.”

“And what of me?” Jahni sounded hurt.

“You will be his most important friend,” I said. “But it is time that you returned too. Your father and mother will have missed you, sorely.”

Jahni looked away from me, towards the lightening sky. “Will you be coming back too?”

“Not yet,” I told him honestly. “I have delayed starting what I must do, too long already.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Fight every damn sorcerer-devil on this world,” I told him bluntly. “Then, when I have their attention, if not their respect, I intend to move them and their tribes to this plane where no Kimh or Kumatan can persecute them.”

“By sorcery!” Jahni exclaimed, afraid for me.

“Yes, but my kind,” I implied a great difference.

“I don’t want to go back,” Jahni admitted. “If I do, the Kimh will want to train me as a Traeger. Then I will have to act against you.”

I chuckled. “Two things, my young and very good friend. I said I would move the Atapi, to this plane, so they won’t be found. And – having been in my corrupting company for so long, do you really think you’d still be a good Traeger candidate?”

“No,” Jahni began to smile.

“Please go with Mikha and be a wise advisor to our mighty warrior. Tell him about me, and don’t let him be taught to hate me. Teach him his Kumatan heritage, and when he is older, he can seek me out to learn the rest of it.”

“I will do that for you, Jai,” Jahni promised. “But what if they decide to hunt you down?”

“It is a risk,” I admitted. “But I know what I must do.”

I moved Mikha so that he snuggled next to my chest, covered now in furs.

“Your father once implied to me that there must have been a reason that there were three races on Korvu. My mother saw the Atapi as the protectors of Korvu.”

“But the Kimh call the Atapi vermin, and say that the Atapi are little more than savages,” Jahni said, repeating what his earlier teachers had told him.

“True, but that is why my mother created me. She wasn’t free to act, but I am. I intend to change that attitude too.”

Jahni shrugged and dropped the subject. “How soon must I go?” he asked instead.

I held Mikha more closely. I meant to go this morning, once I had recovered, but now I held my child, my precious creation, and I couldn’t bear to leave him yet.

“Soon,” I said finally, fighting a very real feeling of needing to move on. Had my mother had even this much time with me? I concentrated on Mikha, sent his mind all my love, all my pride, and hoped he would remember.

The light was increasing and I adored the face of my son for a long time. His face was as red as any human newborn, but he had the pale skin and ethnic bone structure of the Kumatan, and the slightly protruding eyes and black hair that were a characteristic of the Atapi. I decided after looking at Jahni and back to Mikha, that my son’s skin was slightly darker than Jahni’s - perhaps it was a touch of the brown skin pigment from the Atapi genes. I handed Mikha to Jahni and went to get dressed again in my well-worn human clothes, and to pack my few things in a bag made from woven vines.

I returned, and said abruptly, “Walk with me.”

I took Jahni back to the place and plane where we had first been, on the plane where Kimh and Kumatan existed. “I must go now,” I told Jahni. “Kaer will come. You can trust him.”

Jahni tried to reach out to hold me, but I walked again, taking three steps to another place. Even as I transferred to that other place, using a vision given to me by Jenha Mosellan, I sensed Kaer arriving and finding Jahni and my son. Simply thinking at him had been enough. I had been put in his charge; he knew my mind. Even after seven months of no contact, he reacted in an instant. The Kimh really wanted me in their control. I wondered if they feared me or the Atapi that much.

CHAPTER 3 Jai Cassidy - planning

My almost defiant words to Jahni seemed little more than bravado now I was alone. Truth was, I had no idea how I was going to start, let alone plan to achieve my intention.

Nevertheless, as I sat in a rocky clearing near the top of a tall hill, and surveyed the land at my feet, I tried to think of my next step.

“The queen of all I survey,” I said aloud. I imagined the scrubby bushes below me as kneeling sorcerers. Then I laughed. What man ever made, could make me act against my wishes? I didn’t count Stacion Ansuni in that summation. He was dust now.

I thought of my father and various authority figures from my younger days, back on Earth. They had labelled me a brat and delinquent because I’d had a mind of my own from a very young age and never wanted to behave as everyone else expected me to.

Then I pictured Jenha Mosellan, Mikha’s father. He had been different. I thought about him from when I first met him – a half Atapi brat who hadn’t known what I was, to when I had become a member of a triumvir, with him and Ellhi. Prisoner to consort. If he had controlled me at all, it had been subtle. He had challenged me to prove my worth. It seemed now, that by telling me that no one believed I could do something, I had done so to spite the disbelievers.

The difference now was that I didn't just have myself to consider. I had a son.

Another thought intruded. I had a tribe I had promised to protect. How were they faring I wondered, and decided I really should find a way to check on them.

Faces hovered in my mind; the rounded brown Atapi faces of the few of the tribe I had actually spoken to in the brief period before coming to Korvu.

"Jai-devil?" one of the faces seemed to turn to me and speak, and I heard the words in my head. "Are you well? We have seen your son. He is beautiful."

I was startled.

"They let you hear him?" I thought in the instant that I realised that this odd communication was real.

I heard a chuckle. "Yes. Two of us work in the suite of Kaer."

"I did not think the Kimh would allow Atapi servants," I thought.

Again a chuckle. "They only see what they expect, Jai-devil. And we have practiced being perfect imitations of perfect Kumatan servants."

"I see. You are very clever."

"It is you who suggested the way," the old woman in my mind told me. "Is there more that you wish us to do?"

"Keep my son safe," I thought. "And be my eyes and my ears there. Remember what you learn, but don't risk yourselves."

"We do that already. We have learnt to be next to invisible," the woman chuckled again. "We also watch those that you care for – the former Traeger, his consort, and now his elder son as well."

"Bless you," I thought, infusing it with my gratitude. "All of you are well?"

"Yes, Jai-devil. It is as you told us. We have an area that is for us, and we are left in peace. The males do what they can – the Kumatan half expect them to fight, or act like wild men – when in our true shape. They are blind to us when we shape their form. They can't conceive that..."

"What?"

"That you are like no devil I have ever heard of. Your ideas are different, and we are different because of how you lead us. We have power over the humanoids here because of that. If we don't act as we once did, they don't see us."

I finally recalled the name for the face I saw in my mind.

"Farcine, you are a wise and wicked old woman," I chuckled I let my mind go blank and the contact faded out and I stood up and stretched. Speaking to Farcine had reminded me that I wasn't without weapons in the confrontations I planned. I knew things about sorcery, even if I had little experience using it, and I had my wits, along with the advantage of unpredictability. All had served me well so far – I should not begin to doubt them now.

Well, I had to start, and the best place to go was the Rock of Arkor. The sorcerers would sense my presence in their sacred place and come to me.

CHAPTER 4 Con Ansuni's tribe

The near naked brown-skinned child wriggled from his mother's grasp and scuttled to join a group of older children. His mother hissed softly for him to return. The other mothers shared a smile and a shrug.

"Cassia, the boy is Atapi; none take well to restrictions once they can walk. It is like trying to change the weather."

“He is only three summers old,” Cassia tried to keep her worry hidden, and to seem more adult than her sixteen summers.

“He will come to no harm with the other boys,” Opia, an older Atapi woman with black hair greying to white, consoled her. She had borne twelve children, the two youngest had potential for sorcery.

Cassia allowed her worries to ease, but her brown eyes followed her son as he in turn trotted off after a group of pretend hunters who had long sticks to imitate spears.

The women talked around their fire long after all the children had gone to bed. Most waited for their mates to finish talking about the men’s fires. Some listened to the bragging of the men, but did not grow worried by the talk of the signs of Kumatan strangers found on the edges of the tribe’s land.

With the protection of Cotek, the sorcerer who led their tribe, no strangers had ever penetrated to the sacred precincts of the tribe.

Cassia had never seen a Kumatan, the pale pink-skinned humanoids who were the enemies of her people. She had seen sketches in the sand, and heard that their features were more pointed than her own rounded ones. Her mate had never seen them either, in all the years he’s shared the patrols of the borders of their territory. Her mate’s father had once seen a group of Kumatan riding horses, but from a distance.

Though they were enemies, Cotek decreed that they would not hunt them, if they did not come onto tribal territory.

Cassia checked her sleeping child before undressing and joining her mate, Tesla, in the sleeping furs. Josai, her mate’s first wife, slept apart. She was too egg heavy for any bedspots. Josai’s three children were also sound asleep.

As the sun rose, Josai and Cassia awoke, dressed in the simple tunics they wore by day, and went to join the other women to prepare the communal breakfast. More slowly, the children began to emerge; they did not bother with clothes like those that their parents wore. The men, clad only in leather or cloth leggings, emerged last from their caves or mud dwellings.

Cassia only noticed her son’s absence when he did not come to her for his breakfast. She went into her cave to see if he still slept, but found his furs empty. Not too perturbed, she went to speak to Josai.

“My Toki hasn’t come for breakfast either,” she remarked. “I expect Luka is with him. They won’t be far. Toki never misses a chance for food. If we don’t see them, we will look for them when breakfast is over.”

The fires were out and the great kettles and dishes washed and returned to the community cave when Josai and Cassia went out. Other women were also leaving to gather food and hunt small game for the evening meal. Each group knew to look out for the boys.

“Toki likes the waterfall,” Josai commented. “We will go that way.”

Cassia nodded, but somehow felt they would not find them there. She felt a sense of dread.

The waterfall was deep in the tribal territory, and was a sacred place where Cotek taught promising children, and the warriors were initiated. Women could go near there to hunt and collect water but were not allowed there during the ceremonies.

Mindful of their duties, Josai and Cassia, hunted and gathered as they went. Their woven shoulder sacks contained several rodent creatures, and some wild land grains and some of the water grains. When they neared the waterfall, they spread out to search for the tracks of the two small boys.

Cassia let out a yell of elation. "I see tracks. I think they were going to the cave behind the fall."

Josai hop-ran to join Cassia, who was already trotting through the trees towards the river. "Wait!" Josai called. "There are other tracks here."

Cassia stopped and ran back to see where Josai pointed. On the main trail were odd marks.

"What kind of creature made those?" Cassia stared at the huge and unfamiliar oval shaped tracks.

"Boots," Josai said with a snarl. "Tesla told me once that Kumatan wear boots that make marks like that."

Josai took out her hunting knife and gestured for Cassia to do the same.

"What are boots?" Cassia asked.

"Hard leather things that cover their feet," Josai told her.

Cassia glanced at her own bare feet. "Why would they do that?"

Josai shrugged.

Both women grew apprehensive, as the boot tracks began to follow the tracks of the small Atapi feet.

"Can you smell something strange?" Cassia asked in a very quiet whisper. Josai nodded.

"Is it Kumatan stench," Cassia asked.

Josai shook her head. "Tesla says they smell a bit like the Poskal tree. This smell is an affront to the nose. It is foul."

The women began to smell smoke and cooking meat. Josai indicated to stop.

Cassia whimpered when she saw what Josai had seen. A few steps ahead was a pool of purplish blood that had soaked into the light coloured dust. From that spot, the boot prints were dragging something and purplish blood marked the trail winding through the trees. A single set of childish prints continued; Josai held Cassia to prevent her rushing ahead.

"We must warn Con Ansuni, and bring warriors," Josai murmured. She knew that Luka was dead and her Toki possibly too. She knew her son's footprints were the ones that went on. "They must know of this. If Kumatan have come this far into our land and done this..."

Cassia nodded, anger rising in her breast.

Atapi women were never made warriors, as that life could be dangerous and all women were precious. They were needed to bear children to strengthen the tribe. Yet, in a different way to the men, they were still warriors.

"It was Luka the bastard took, wasn't it?" Cassia asked, stifling a howl of grief.

Josai nodded. "Yes, for Toki has one toe bent out on his right foot. His tracks go on. I think Luka fell behind him."

"You go, younger sister," Josai urged. "I will watch." She was equally determined to avenge the outrage done to her mate's children, but right now, Cassia could run faster.

Without consciously choosing, Cassia went into stealth mode, racing back to the tribe's camp, using trees, bushes and dips in the ground as cover. Anger and fear made her run faster and kept her alert.

She raced into the camp, running directly for the tall mud building that stood alone on the far side of the communal clearing. Outside the entrance, two warriors watched impassively as she approached. They grabbed her as she tried to pass them.

"What are you doing, woman? The sorcerer will see no one until he has finished the morning devotions. He will not see you like this."

Cassia struggled free, stood catching her breath until she could speak.

"My son is dead! Killed near the waterfall. We saw boot tracks and smelt something foul, and smoke from the cave."

The stance of the warriors stiffened. They sniffed the air, and then circled Cassia, sniffing her.

“You will come with us,” the elder of the warriors ordered her.

Cassia watched the warrior push aside the door made from lengths of hanging vine. The first warrior entered, and Cassia was pushed after him. She felt a moment of fear, for no woman was to enter the sorcerer’s private cave unless chosen to mate with him. Moments before she had been prepared to force her way in, now her mind realised the possible consequences. She trembled.

The space she entered was like an empty cave, with an alcove that showed the top of some stone stairs rising from below ground, and some hanging woven mats around the walls.

The warriors escorted her down the steps cut from sandstone, to go deeper into the ground. Tiny fires inside some kind of crystals lighted the way, and the light grew brighter as they neared the wide entrance of a cave.

Cassia was pushed into the opening. She saw an altar lit by two flames rising from clay bowls. Before it stood Con Ansuni, magnificently nude, wings flared out behind him, long slender tail rising and curling at his neck, and the tiny scales on his brown skin glistening in the candle light. His arms were raised towards the figure carved into the wall behind the altar. The figure was a pregnant winged Atapi – Larcia.

Sensing the presence of others, Cotek turned, anger pulsing from him. Cassia shrank back.

“This woman has news that you must hear, Magnificent One.” The elder of the warriors bowed to his sorcerer.

“Speak, Woman,” Cotek demanded. “I will judge if it is worthy of the intrusion.”

Cassia tried to speak clearly, but her words tumbled over themselves.

“Silence!” Cotek demanded. He had caught enough odd words to know this matter was something serious. The woman was rightly terrified of him, but he needed to hear her out. He took a breath and thought of peace and harmony.

“Speak again, young one,” Cotek said in a gentler voice.

Now, Cassia found she could talk freely, and did so, not hiding her anger, fear and loathing.

As had the warriors, Cotek sniffed the woman, and scented the faint odour that he did not recognise.

Cotek spoke to his warriors. “We hunt! Be ready.” Then to Cassia he said, “Lead us, Cassia. Worthy mate of Tesla.”

Cassia stood straighter. “I will lead you, Magnificent One, unworthy though I am. My son is dead. I did not protect him.”

“A warrior’s life is dangerous. Your son was a warrior, even if young. He warned us of a danger to the tribe. Help me dress, woman!”

Cassia helped Cotek to don his hunter’s garb. The furred hopper-skin leggings clung to his legs to protect him from thorny bushes. The neckpiece of bone, and skin and crystals was the sign of his position. She blushed, sensing the male power he exuded, and was relieved when he took up his weapons and walked up the stairs, expecting her to follow in his wake.

The warriors, about eighty males ranging in age from adolescent to very old, were trembling with eagerness when Cotek emerged. He glanced at Cassia, who took off at a trot, Tesla right behind her.

When Cassia stopped at the place where they had first found the boy’s tracks, she stopped and the warriors fanned out. Tesla told his mate, “Go back! Wait!”

Emotions warred inside Cassia, and rooted her to the spot.

“Go!” Tesla warned, raising his fist in warning. Cassia obeyed, retracing her trail yet again, at a trot. When out of sight, she slowed. She knew it was wrong for a female to be a part of a hunt such as she had unleashed, but her heart cried out for revenge. A while later, Josai trotted up.

“The bastard will not escape,” she hissed at Cassia. “He is still within the cave.”

“You saw him?” Cassia asked. She saw a picture in her mind of the creature, its face hidden within a cowled robe, eating a haunch of meat. She felt faint, and no longer heard Josai describing the creature. The desire to howl in grief rose in her throat, but she stifled it. Instead, she began to run – forcing Josai to run to keep up.

The women gathered around Josai and Cassia when they returned. The sense of danger had spread to them when the warriors had gathered in force and run off. The news of what had happened spread to the forty grown women. The children, only twenty of them, listened – wide eyed and scared.

One by one, the women sent their children to hide in their caves or excavated holes. All were wearing their hunting knives slung from a loop on a waist sash. The instinct for trouble had caused them to return to the village.

If the village were attacked while the warriors were away, all the women and the few old men now patrolling the village would fight. Without anyone directing them, each woman took a position outside their homes and watched alert for trouble.

A procession of twelve warriors, led by Cotek, trotted back to the village. Four of them bore the ends of poles with prisoners slung from them. Two more carried wrapped bundles and others carried things that were not identifiable. The remaining warriors guarded them all.

Cotek gave orders when the procession stopped. The prisoners, trussed like animal carcasses to the poles, moaned softly and did not seem fully conscious, were taken into the ground level of the mud house. The unidentifiable objects went there as well.

The two warriors carrying the wrapped bundles, one of whom was Tesla, carried them to Cassia and Josai. Cotek led them. “I share your grief,” he said gently to the two women.

Cassia turned to face him, dragging her eyes from the last sight of the prisoners, and the blue blood seeping from cuts all over their bodies. She murmured the ritual reply, feeling the need to howl in grief.

“Prepare your sons for a warrior’s honour,” Cotek told the grieving mothers.

Cassia managed to nod, as she took one little bundle from Jotsu, Tesla’s brother. Josai took the one from Tesla, managing to control her face.

The men withdrew, and the women clustered around, having collected cloth, water and the blessed sacred oils.

“A warrior’s tribute,” Josai said in wonder, awed by the tribute granted to her child.

Cassia didn’t share her sentiment. With her dead child in her arms, she knew what she would find.

When the small bodies were unwrapped, all that remained of them, the howling began in earnest.

Cassia forced herself to do as the old mothers directed, though handling her son’s butchered remains was sheer torture. The front of Luka’s head was untouched, the back was crushed, and his last expression was of terror. His torso had been hung like slaughtered horsemeat, and all that remained of his limbs were bones bearing traces of charred flesh. She could see teeth marks on one arm where some flesh remained.

Josai too, worked woodenly, though her son was less damaged. Toki had died from some kind of arrow or dart, a shot perfectly placed for the heart. His body too, had been skilfully butchered, and hung for the blood to drain from it, but on all parts, the flesh had not been touched.

When the bodies were finally placed in a semblance of repose, and wrapped in cloths seeped in the sacred oils, each was placed on a litter big enough for a fully-grown male. Warriors took up the litters, Tesla and Jostu followed as they approached Cotek, now clad in his ritual finery. He chanted a ritual as the litters approached, and the darkness of the doorway to the hut began to glow with brilliant light. The litter bearers walked into the light, Con Ansuni followed.

Cassia saw the light fade, knew her child would be laid to his rest in the care of Larcia, at the sacred Rock of Arkor, and then her world went black.

The howling quietened as the women helped the grieving mothers into their cave. They placed Cassia on her bed and covered her with a fur. They made and offered Josai a drink of bark tea. For the rest of the day, the women kept company together, howling out their grief.

The warriors did not return, but the women knew they were scouring the tribe's lands for any other traces of the invaders.

Cotek retreated to his temple – to the altar of Larcia who guarded the alien remains. He squatted in contemplation, receptive to any wisdom that the Ancient One might impart. Since he had set her likeness in his temple, he sometimes thought she spoke to him.

The sense of needing to warn the other tribes grew in intensity. The urge to go to the Rock of Arkor was equally strong. He dressed in his most impressive finery and gathered his weapons.

As he prepared to walk across planes to the sacred meeting ground, his mind received an outraged message from the Old One, the oldest and most powerful sorcerer.

“An intruder desecrates the Rock!”

Cotek wasted no more time; he walked across planes to the Old One. His mind was filled with the fear that this intruder was another of the profane creatures who had invaded his lands and killed his children.

The Old One noted his prompt arrival with approval. They both walked to the distant rock, joined by other sorcerers, one by one. Cotek made mention of the child-killing intruder, and he sensed the Old Ones anger.

“There have been others of that blood,” the Old One said. “After the first, they are killed on sight. Strange that you did not find them sooner.”

“I agree.” Cotek refused to accept censure or the implication of incompetence. “What did those first ones do?”

He meant, “How were they noticed?”

“They were stealing our hidden treasures,” the Old One snarled. “The first one was sent back, to be a lesson.”

Cotek nodded. The lesson had been ignored. “Should more come to my lands, they will learn to fear the very name Atapi,” Cotek said fiercely.

The Old One growled approval.

Cotek added, “Though I would wish to know where they came from.”

“No doubt, since they consider us animals, they are known to the Kumatan or those who think themselves noble,” the Old One snarled.

The pair now had six others with them, and one of these asked, “Might this intruder be another such as Con Ansuni speaks?”

The Old One ignored the question. Cotek, known to the other sorcerers by his tribal name of Con Ansuni, said tersely, “We will draw the intruder to us, and we will see.”

They found the tracks of small feet, wearing foot covering similar to the affectations of the Kumatan and not unlike those of the blue-blood strangers.

"I have seen the likes of these tracks before," a gaunt looking sorcerer with hair turning white, told the company. "Three seasons ago. Now, as then, they head towards a fissure in the Rock."

The Old One hissed at the memory. "Yes, that one was dangerous. Recall how it summoned our enemies and escaped. Go and see where the tracks go this time."

The sorcerer ran off, following the tracks. He went right up to the rock and felt over the surface before returning at a slower trot.

"The tracks go into the Rock, but I cannot see a cave."

"We will not search for it – we will draw it to us and it will pay for its disrespect for our sacred place. We will begin, and when the slothful members of our elite arrive, they can join in."

Cotek joined the circle, and the ritual, as he thought back to that earlier time and the very brief glimpse he'd had of the intruders before they vanished. There had been two back then. He would be wary in case there was again. He wondered anew how a stranger, someone who was not a sorcerer, could find a cave and stay hidden in the Rock. Surely, the aura here would revile and reveal such a one.

A very old memory tickled Cotek's mind - a fleeting image of his sister. He stifled the memory. To think of her now would risk him sharing her aberrant ways with his brethren. Nevertheless, his sister, a female and not a sorcerer, had claimed to have done just that. It couldn't be Jai though, for she was far removed, on some distant world, with Stak, his sire.

A faint thought, perhaps inspired by his own, was aired into the group mind. "There are tame Atapi at the Kimh palace." Cotek's mind caught the thought to remember, and then tightened his own concentration on the ritual of drawing out. The thought must have come from a less experienced mind, though if it had caught his own thought, one to be wary of.

More and more sorcerers arrived until all were present. The power of the summoning grew with each addition, but the intruder stayed hidden.

The Old One gave the command to circle, and the eddy of power grew to a whirlwind. Finally, as dusk deepened to night, the Old One ignited a fire. In its light, they saw the intruder emerge and begin to walk towards the circle. The sorcerers slowed their motion but the speed of the whirlwind continued to increase. The circle of sorcerers parted to let the intruder past and the whirlwind sucked her inside.

The wind slowed, allowing the dust to settle, but power still imprisoned the intruder. All the sorcerers could see was that the short creature was not in a trance as expected, but alert and wary.

Cotek looked at her – for it was definitely a female, and she was definitely not Atapi. His indrawn breath was of shock, but it was masked by the hiss of anger as the others saw what he had.

Bad enough that it was female and resembled the pale skinned Kumatan, but it had power and was alien. However, the most unacceptable and inflammatory aspect was that it carried something only known through ancient legends – the golden sword of the ancient sorceress, Larcia.

Cotek listened to the outraged thoughts of the other nineteen sorcerers, but contributed nothing. Instead, he concentrated on an elusive mind touch that he had sensed. He should by rights, mention it. Though it seemed that none of the others had sensed it – perhaps they were too full of anger.

Perhaps he had imagined it? Just as it must be imagination that the creature trapped within the circle resembled how his sister had looked when she shaped the Kumatan.

Dangerous, his mind warned him. He must not let that idea be sensed by the others. He must not let thoughts of his sister influence him now. This was not her.

Yet there was defiance there...this creature knew things...

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