



# The Skin Territory

by Oliver Strong

**The Skin Territory**  
**(Queen in Exile part 3)**  
**By Oliver Strong**

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# Chapter 1

'My name is Amar-sin, son of Mamagal. I was a great man living in the greatest system of the greatest civilization in the known galaxy. Until one day I crossed paths with fate, she was marked for the king and I an unknown destiny to travel the star filled night in search of the Amelatu.'

An old man translated his words to a blue skinned woman. The lady dressed in a brown, squiggly patterned tunic with skin tight leggings made a quizzical expression.

'Did she understand?' inquired Amar throwing his intricately sewn cape over one shoulder.

'I have no idea. They understand a little old Ur but until our AI deciphers her language it shall be many guesses.'

The blue lady scanned her guests she'd not seen anything like this outside an old Earth play performed by a traveling arts company for her family when she was but a child.

This young man reminded her of Hamlet dressed in stockings and strange boots. He wore some very flash yellow hose along with a ruffled shirt straight out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. His cape was of black crushed velvet embellished with gold thread.

His elder companion was quite the contrast dressed in leather trousers and boots reflecting a gnarly sensibility. The young man his polar opposite was perfumed with an overpowering musk paralleling his gaudy sense of fashion.

These explorers appeared in the Ya'ax home system three days ago travelling aboard a vessel of unknown origin. Carrying a small crew it resembling two spheres welded together, one much larger than the other.

Living at the edge of civilized space the Ya'ax were subject to constant attack from various pirate nations picking at the edge of Xch'uup's influence. So upon witnessing this craft burst out of a white hole system wide alarms were raised. However, Itzel quickly realised it was not another pirate raid. This vessel was far too small for such an audacious attack.

Upon making contact it became obvious diplomatic relations were desired. Despite being totally foreign their language had much in common with old Tlillan and from there a relationship began.

The men on this star ship resembled Pixoa to one degree or another, similar to humans in size and individuality.

The Queen of Ya'ax was pleased to make acquaintance with any friendly species able to wield warships. Out here on the edge of space her people fought every day as their last. The beautiful blue skinned Queen had been pushing Triumvirate membership for many years now. With the protection of Xch'uup her people might no longer be traded at slave auctions across the Milky Way, Ya'ax females commanded amongst the highest prices.

'Amelatu?'

'Bazi, she doesn't understand, ask her again.'

'Amar, cool yourself. We must wait for our AI to process her language, when it is ready we shall discuss these subjects.'

'Ask her again about this ... woman.'

Bazi addressed Itzel in his best ancient Ur, 'Namlugallu asar Xch'uup baltu?'

The blue Queen thought for a moment. Bridge personnel stared the beauty up and down whilst Itzel spoke with her advisors.

After consulting language experts her sparkling blue eyed gaze met Bazi, 'Xch'uup la sinnis, Xch'uup Titaanis.'

The old bearded man gave a shocked expression as did one or two of the Ur crew.

'What did she say?' asked Amar.

'Titaanis?'

'Le'Titaanis.'

Itzel moved to a star chart depicting the Milky Way galaxy upon a slim pedestal beside the ship's Captain. She tapped the screen with both of her fingers before widening them to zoom in. Once focused on a specific area she tapped the Tlillan system, 'Xch'uup esharra.'

'What is she saying?' pushed Amar impatiently.

'She says that Xch'uup is not a woman but a God. She says that Xch'uup resides here, in this system.'

Amar gave a cynical sneer, 'That is ridiculous how could such an advanced people believe in Gods?'

'Have you met this Xch'uup?'

'No, of course not!'

‘Then shut your mouth, you have already got us into enough trouble! The last thing I need is that tongue of yours arousing the ire of a God. It is a wonder you have not been struck down already!’

Amar shook his head, ‘Do not tell me you believe such nonsense!’

‘I neither believe nor disbelieve.’

Amar laughed, ‘Really you do amuse me sometimes Bazi!’

The old man sneered at his young charge, ‘If not for your father I would not have journeyed here to protect you. It is thanks to your fat mouth we are both lost in another galaxy searching for a myth. Now, if you can manage to shut up and go without offending these people or their God. Perhaps you might live to see the little whore you left behind in Ur, which you so pine for each night.’

Amar’s eyes widened dramatically, ‘How dare you speak of Puabi in such a manner!’

‘Really? What do you propose to do?’

Amar unsheathed a jewelled dagger to which Bazi chuckled, ‘Boy, by the time I was your age I had killed three men in battle with my bare hands! All you have achieved in your pitiful existence is smoke lotus, concoct bad poetry and violate the King’s whores when he was away!’

The ship Captain moved between them pushing Amar away from Bazi.

The confrontation fascinated Itzel; she picked up a familiar word here and there yet struggled to understand what the fracas concerned. Eventually Amar sheathed his dagger the Captain pressuring him into taking a back seat for the rest of Itzel’s tour.

Their vessel was little more than a massive engine room/power core/wormhole generator strapped onto a tiny bridge and living quarters inside a smaller sphere. Within half an hour they were back on the bridge again, Itzel was still smiling at a dejected Amar.

It had been three days before they achieved physical contact and now before an alien Queen the young herald from another galaxy had made an absolute horse’s arse of himself.

The beautiful Queen chatted with Bazi their conversation eventually interrupted by many flashes of light. Itzel’s wrist tablet beeped urgently, she slapped it with all her might as vessels ejected from white holes surrounding the Ya’ax system.

‘What is wrong?’ shouted Amar.

'Shut up for a moment and I shall find out!' replied Bazi.

The Queen of Ya'ax put a hand on her head, 'Dakuiss, sarraqumis.'

'She says they are brigands.'

'What do they want?' asked Amar observing close to thirty pirate vessels of assorted shapes and sizes surround the star system.

'Etlu wabalu?'

'Maskab chun ek'tsab e wardumiss.'

'She says they come for slaves and something else ... iron from the stars?'

Amar thought for a moment, 'Iron from the stars, she means neutronium, they've come for neutronium and slaves ... can we get away?'

The Captain shook his head as his officers informed him of a wormhole nullifier preventing retreat.

Amar became frantic, 'No, no, no you must tell them! I am a herald from another galaxy, from the great civilization of Ur!'

'Perhaps you can tell them yourself when the battle is over, that is if you survive.'

Amar's eyes widened once again, 'Battle?'

Bazi took a perverse pleasure smirking at the terrified boy, 'Why yes, what do you think is going to happen Amar?'

Amar gestured towards the Ya'ax Queen, 'A negotiation, perhaps they will take some goods in exchange for leaving?'

The blue Queen was too busy speaking with her fleet Admiral to mind Amar, Bazi interjected, 'A good idea and may I say a generous one.'

'Generous?'

'Why yes, to offer your life for a people we have only just encountered is an excellent show of good faith from the people of Ur.'

Amar waved his arms, 'Oh no, THEY may offer slaves and neutronium.'

'I see.'

Bazi peered in the direction of the Captain, 'Do you think we can make a run for it?'

'34 enemy vehicles of various configurations the Ya'ax have three warships and us. We cannot make hyperspace there is an energy field creating a null effect upon our dark matter generator.'

Bazi spoke to Itzel, 'Abatu etlu?'

Itzel shook her head, 'Etlu daku, la'wussuru ul'naparsuddu. Simtum etlu kimah!'

Amar awaited a translation with bated breath.

‘She says that they come for murder and pillage and it is our fate to die as warriors today.’

‘I am not a fighter you must tell her this!’

‘She is aware however the brigands,’ Bazi pointed to a battle line of scum preparing to plunder the system, ‘are not interested in co-operating. It seems that we must fight to the death ... our deaths, or become slaves.’

The Ur Captain brought what few weapons his exploration vessel had to bear, the remaining friendly ships prepared for an onslaught.

Pirates cared not for bargaining often murdering her people before leaving with their booty; their next stop being the commodity markets of the Milky Way. Where anything and everything could be bought and sold outside of Xch’uup’s jurisdiction.

Amar whispered to the heavens touching his forehead with his fingertips.

The bearded man laughed, ‘I thought belief in the gods was foolish!’

Amar sweated profusely as pirate vessels closed in on the star’s fourth planet, ‘After deep consideration I have decided to open my mind to this Xch’uup or any other gods that may be watching today.’

Before Bazi could reply another wormhole opened up ejecting a long tubular vessel not far from the Ya’ax home world.

Itzel shouted into her wrist tablet, Bazi caught a little of her conversation.

‘Who is that?’ cried Amar.

‘She says they are the men ... men of the Machine.’

‘Are they friendly?’

‘Makayuuk resussun?’

‘La.’

‘She says no, yet neither are they pirates.’

The Ur Captain jumped out of his seat to observe his navigation officer’s readout. After a few seconds he shouted across the bridge, ‘The brigands are in retreat!’

Amar tugged on Bazi’s cloak, ‘Why? What has happened?’

The old man turned to Itzel, ‘Etlu Abatu, ammeni?’

‘Makayuuk,’ she replied pointing at the Makayuuk battleship which had just entered their system.

‘Ammeni?’

‘Makayuuk alal, iksuda gabbu.’



'She says these men of the Machine are great destroyers and conquers. The brigands fear these people.'

'But they have only one warship, why retreat?'

'Makayuuk isu isten, ammeni etlu adaru?'

Itzel narrowed her eyes, now she understood that these people weren't from around here. They hadn't heard of Makayuuk. Even the vilest brigands in the furthest part of the Milky Way listened to tales of Makayuuk.

The greatest warlords controlling massive empires built on plunder would balk at the sight of just one Makayuuk ship entering their system. The Makayuuk's reputation preceded them wherever they travelled; and for the first time Itzel had met someone with no knowledge of the People of Machine.

'Makayuuk etlu ilat, ul'guddana Makayuuk ma baltu ... isten baltu ... Xch'uup. Makayuuk semu Xch'uup.'

The old man absorbed her broken language processing it in his mind, 'I think she is trying to say these Machine men are supreme warriors, none have defeated them in battle. She says only one fought them and survived that being Xch'uup whom they now serve.'

'Bazi! The null energy field is down we can fold space!'

Amar leapt over to the Captain, 'Quickly get us out of here!'

'Shut up Amar!' snapped the old man, 'Do not move the vessel, I do not wish to provoke these Machine men.'

'Will they kill us?'

Bazi ignored the young herald, 'Captain, power down your weapons.'

The Captain nodded as he returned to his seat. The pirates backed off folding space one by one in quick succession; returning to the den of filth and treachery they'd emerged from.

Itzel's wrist tablet beeped, she informed the explorers of a Makayuuk request to come aboard.

'They want to come here?' asked Amar.

'Yes they do and I have allowed it.'

'Are these men not dangerous?'

Bazi sighed, 'Do you see danger around every corner?'

The young herald didn't reply.

Ten minutes later they waited outside an airlock on the smaller command sphere. As its thick hatch swung open Amar and Bazi both gasped.

Itzel dropped in a kowtow, 'Namaste Kalayuuk.'

'Liik'il,' replied Lian.

The explorers were frozen by a vision of beauty and power standing before them. A Valkyrie towered above their heads with a pair of steel eyed warriors flanking her on each side.

'Xch'uup welcomes you both to her kingdom.'

This Amazon, sword bound to waist, spoke their language with perfect clarity.

Bazi was the first to speak, 'Thank you, I bring greetings from the Kingdom of Ur.'

'The Kingdom of Ur? Don't you mean the Tamoanchan Territory?' grinned Lian.

'You have travelled to Anur?'

Lian nodded, 'How long has it been since you communicated with Andromeda?'

Bazi became a little uncomfortable at the question, 'It has been sometime.'

'Is Mammi aware of this expedition?'

'No, you must not inform Mammi!'

The tall Valkyrie dressed in her Tlillan ribbed suit and white frock coat smiled, 'Calm yourself, Xch'uup understands.'

'My name is Bazi, this is Amar-sin. We are heralds from a kingdom once the jewel of Andromeda. Today it lays dull and forgotten, we have been sent to find the Amelatu.'

'Amelatu?'

Amar chirped up, speaking before his elder could reply, 'A mythical race, great Nabus of the past spoke they will come from Mul.'

Lian looked hard at the young man in fancy clothes, 'Yet you believe in neither your Nabu nor the Amelatu.'

Amar did not reply.

'So why are you here risking your life in the unknown for something you don't believe in?'

Bazi cut in, 'Because he could not keep his sexual organs in his hooves!'

Everyone laughed except for Amar.

‘And you, do you believe in the Amelatu?’

Bazi shrugged his shoulders, ‘I have an open mind, we look and if the Amelatu are not to be found we may return home to grow old. May I ask how you speak our language so fluently?’

‘You will accompany me. Xch’uup shall grant you an audience. If you wish you may bring your vessel or travel aboard mine.’

Bazi replied quickly, ‘It would be an honour to travel aboard your vessel, Kalayuuk.’

Again Amar’s eyes widened. Lian glanced at the young man with a grin, ‘I’ll be folding space in a few hours, gather your possessions and contact Asta when you wish to come aboard.’

The tall Amazon exited their bridge with the Ya’ax Queen in tow.

After the ladies had left Amar shouted spontaneously, ‘Go aboard that? They could kill us? Or worse sell us to slavers!’

Bazi shook his head, ‘Pack your things Amar, if she wanted us dead we would not be standing here. Did you not see that fleet of brigands retreat at the mere sight of her ship?’

‘Yes but ...’

‘Do as I say Amar and perhaps you will live to impregnate another of the King’s concubines!’

An hour later and the pair sat aboard a shuttle heading towards a massive iron tube hanging in space. Bazi had only witnessed a space ship of this size when cargo vessels entered Ur on trade runs. Certainly he’d not seen a warship of this size since it would be rather impractical, why make yourself such a large target? The old man pondered this as its grey mass loomed larger; he came to the conclusion that since most ran in terror rather than fight it was a psychological tactic.

Entering a porthole their shuttle was captured by a magnetic net and guided in. Once its bay had been pressurised the two men thanked their captain for transport before saying their goodbyes.

Amar nervously clutched onto his bearskin baggage. The docking bay was large and as he looked around a door slid open revealing three men.

Asta and two of his officers dressed in traditional Makayuuk jump suits approached the anxious explorers of Ur. Asta greeted them, ‘Namaste.’

Bazi reciprocated by pressing his palms together, ‘Namaste.’

Amar watched his old family friend before dropping his luggage and quickly making the namaste gesture.

Asta spoke through a translation device in his collar, 'I am Asta 491 accompany me to your living area.'

After an icy greeting they followed these machine men through corridors of gun metal grey. So far this vessel was quite unremarkable from within; their quarters being more of the same.

Asta pointed to some steel bunk beds, 'You will sleep here for the journey to Otoch.'

As Amar placed his luggage down Bazi questioned the Captain, 'How long will this journey be?'

'Kalayuuk must visit outer systems first, twelve days without trouble.'

Amar spoke in a distressed tone, 'Twelve days? But look these beds have no mattress!'

Asta made a confused expression, 'Mattress?'

'Why yes a large textile filled with animal furs or feathers.'

Asta nodded his head, 'I understand the meaning but why would you require a mattress?'

'For comfort of course.'

Again the machine man furrowed his brow, 'Surely it is healthy to sleep on a hard even surface. A mattress will create spinal problems will it not?'

Bazi smiled, 'It is quite alright Captain.'

'I will provide you with mattresses it is not a problem,' replied Asta.

'Thank you very much,' said a grateful Amar.

'Feel free to tour our vessel, you are only restricted to quarters during a tunnel event.'

Bazi questioned Asta, 'Tunnel event?'

'The opening of a wormhole.'

'Ah, I see. Where is the bathroom on this vessel?'

Asta pointed to the far end of the room. A wall slid back, inside rested a shower unit. A moment later a toilet rose from the floor of the shower. Asta then pointed to a unit beside their beds, 'Food is dispensed from here, options are limited but you may eat whenever you wish.'

Bazi smiled, 'Thank you Captain.'

Asta pressed his palms, 'Namaste.'

Bazi and Amar replied before the Makayuuk men exited and the door closed.

Amar gave Bazi a look of horror, 'By the Gods this is torture!'

The old man wagged his finger, 'When I was a young man on campaign in the Traven Territory with your father ...'

Amar rolled his eyes, 'Yes I know you slept on catronium floors and ate insects, I've heard that story a thousand times already!'

Bazi shouted through his beard, 'You don't know how fortunate you are, if you were my son I would be ashamed!'

'Well I'm not your son and I like to have a little comfort in my life. I'll leave sleeping on hard metal and eating parasites to someone else.'

'You are a parasite!' scowled Bazi.

Before Amar could reply a crewman entered their room with mattresses, one under each arm.

'Thank you very much,' squealed Amar grabbing his cushion.

Bazi took his thanking the crewman.

Amar placed his mattress on its bed, delivering his comrade a smarmy grin.

Two days later and Amar was not grinning, 'My stomach hurts!' he moaned.

Bazi sat on his bunk with a plate of pink sludge, 'Then have something to eat.'

Amar lay outstretched, 'It tastes strange.'

'Well what do you expect?' asked the old man in an incredulous tone, 'We're in another galaxy!'

Bazi went to the food dispenser, pulled a tray out of a slot and placed it under the nozzle, 'Haanal.'

The nozzle fired a ball of pink gloop onto the tray. Bazi presented the tray to Amar, 'Here you haven't eaten properly in days. You cannot meet their leader in such a condition.'

The young man pushed himself up, leaning his back against the wall. Accepting the tray he looked at the thick sludge with disdain, 'Are there no eating utensils?'

'No, it is thick enough to use your hands. In fact it is not bad ... an acquired taste but nevertheless.'

Amar took a deep sigh and pulled a piece of the gloop off, rolled it into a ball and popped it in his mouth. He was so hungry that by now he could eat anything. The chewy Makayuuk cuisine was hardly fine dining but it did fill his stomach.

After a second tray Amar had recovered, the meal wasn't all that bad, it tasted something like a pudding he enjoyed back home.

Bazi placed both trays back in the wall unit to be cleaned, 'Let's have another look around this warship.'

Amar nodded, he needed to stretch his legs. The pair exited their quarters for another stroll. All of the obvious areas such as the bridge and engine room, they'd nosed around on the first day. Now they just wandered about to see what they might stumble upon.

At the corridors' end Bazi and Amar's ears detected chattering voices. Silently they looked at each other making for its point of origin. Turning a corner they walked into a mess hall.

The room had a circular sofa with a black circular onyx table as its focus. Makayuuk men and women filled the sofa along with Lian. They seemed to be engaged in a form of entertainment perhaps?

The pair observed as two people would place their fingertips upon the table, a hologram of a three dimensional shape then appeared in the centre. Next counters began to move inside a cube. A three dimensional game of Othello took place at lightning fast pace. Eventually the structure filled with counters of both black and white. After a tally had been made a winner was announced bringing laughter and celebration around the table.

After sipping her drink one of the Makayuuk women challenged Lian to a game of "Kuch". The Amazon refused politely but everyone egged her on, they wanted to see Xch'uup's Adjunct in action.

'Three versus one!' shouted Asta.

The crew roared in approval causing Lian to blush.

'Or perhaps she is afraid to lose?'

The tall lady looked down at Asta as if he were a naughty boy.

Asta grinned and the crew laughed.

Lian put down her drink, placing her fingertips upon the table, 'Fine, so who thinks they're tough enough?'

The machine men laughed as the first woman put her fingers down. After a second crewman entered the fray Lian peered at Asta, 'Well?'

Everyone laughed until the young man touched the jet black table's edge. Cheers went out as a hologramatic ball of whirling particles popped up in the table's centre. It was evident Lian was taking on three challengers yet the nature of this game eluded Bazi for the moment.

'Begin when it pleases you,' stated the Valkyrie in a coy tone.

Her three opponents both pulled expressions of total concentration as particles swirled in a vortex. Three definite vortices formed but remained stationary, waiting for something to happen.

Lian smiled as a fourth vortex appeared nearest to where she sat, all observed the game unfold in total silence.

As Lian's vortex formed the other vortices moved in, it seemed they were attempting to swallow up their target. However on touching its edge they met stiff resistance.

The Makayuuk's concentration intensified as they attempted to consume their foe. This looked to be a game based on the power of brute mental force ... a game of will power perhaps?

The crewmen grimaced attempting to push Lian's vortex into submission, their faces contorting with mental strain.

As for Lian she smiled, music began to play in the room and Voice of Machine sang along as she defied the mental power of three Makayuuk.

Lian sang, 'Wave your hands if you're not with a man,' the half Tlillian beauty took one hand off the table and waved it in the air, 'Can I kick it?'

The backing singers on the music recording replied, 'Yes you can!'

Some of the observers began to grin. It was obvious to them that Voice of Machine would not fall tonight. She may not prosper in other contests but at the game of Kuch Lian remained undefeated. She sang to one of her favourite songs whilst pushing back her challengers' mental force. Lian allowed her opponents to persevere for a while before turning her attention to crushing them, one by one. She pointed to one of her adversaries and sang, 'If you can't get a girl but your best friend can it's time to move your body!'

Upon finishing that line her vortex bulged out swallowing his whole. Where her challenger's fingers had rested lights dimmed informing the Mack his game was over.

Voice of Machine pointed to a young lady totally focused on the task of defeating Lian, 'I don't wanna be sleazy, baby just tease me, got no family

planned!' sang the Valkyrie as the ladies vortex was consumed.

Only Asta remained, he pushed as hard as possible but Lian gave no ground, 'Pimpin' ain't easy but if you're selling it ... It's alright!'

The Valkyrie smiled and in time with the music she consumed Asta, dimming lights around his fingers. Everyone laughed and clapped even the challengers applauded Kalayuuk as she took a bow.

Lian noticed her guests, 'Greetings gentlemen. How are you tonight?'

Bazi pressed his palms together, 'Namaste Kalayuuk.'

'Please don't be so formal, come would you like to play?'

'If I could just watch that would be excellent,' smiled Bazi.

The Makayuuk shuffled up to make room on the sofa for their guests.

'Something to drink gentlemen?'

'Oh thank you,' said Amar.

The Valkyrie brought them two glasses of a yellow liquid similar in appearance to whisky. The heralds each accepted a glass goblet sipping the fluid inside.

Amar smacked his lips, 'Hmm, it tastes familiar ... what is it?'

'Urine,' replied Asta.

Bazi placed his glass down politely. Amar spat any drink remaining in his mouth across the room.

'URINE! FROM WHAT?'

'I don't understand?' inquired Asta.

'From which animal?'

Asta attempted to calm his guest, 'Have no fear. It was taken from the crew.'

Amar went a funny colour as Bazi asked his host, 'Why do you drink urine?'

'It is a perfect mixture for rehydration, containing nutrients and antibodies strengthening the immune system. Why would you drink anything else?'

The bearded man looked at his glass and replied, 'Have we been drinking this in our quarters for the last two days?'

'Oh no, water is dispensed only from partially reprocessed urine.'

'So the ship's water is not,' Bazi went giddy for a moment, '100% purified?'

'Of course not, why remove the benefits of urine?'



‘May I ask why this is yellow and the water dispensed in our cabin is not?’  
‘This is coloured and flavoured for the purpose of recreation.’

Amar’s natural colour returned to his face, ‘What have we been eating?’  
Before Lian could stop him Asta replied, ‘Processed protein.’

Amar gave a suspicious grimace as he wiped his mouth, ‘Processed from what exactly?’

‘Deceased Makayuuk, prisoners of war ...’

Before the machine man could finish Amar went green and vomited onto the onyx gaming table.

Bazi wasn’t feeling too good however he apologised for his friend’s son, ‘Forgive him he is young and too familiar with soft living.’

The crew of the Machine warship grimaced as Amar wretched again and again. Despite the fact his stomach contents had already been ejaculated the young man couldn’t prevent the reflex action as muscles contorted over and over again.

Amar spent the rest of the evening in a med bay groaning in pain whilst his stomach wrenched from one position to another. Bazi began to see the funny side as he chatted with Lian.

Once the pair reached Otoch, the first item on the list was to get a meal. Sitting in a Tlillan café with Lian, Amar and Bazi were ready to eat for an army.

A dish of nook’ol was served, Bazi tucked into the fattened grubs. Amar sneered at his plate of squirming insects until Bazi called out, ‘What’s the matter?’

‘These are insects, live ones at that!’

The old man stretched his arm across the table, ‘Don’t you want yours?’

Amar snatched his plate. Holding it close to his chest he replied, ‘Ahh! I didn’t say that, did I?’

‘Well?’ asked the old man as he chewed on a fat nook’ol.

Amar put a maggot in his mouth, his brain acknowledged how disgusting this was yet hunger conquered any reflex to heave it back up.

That evening Amar and Bazi observed the city of Muul Kaah from the terrace of their hotel room, ‘A city of pyramids, they seem to be fascinated by these constructions.’

Bazi nodded, ‘Are you not fascinated by them?’

Amar examined many peaks through the twilight, 'I am.'

'Look at that one Amar how much effort do you believe it took to construct?'

The young man observed the peak of Muul Kaah itself, a mile high super pyramid, 'It depends on when it was built.'

'It is said the peak is eons old.'

'But how advanced were they upon its construction?' asked Amar as he stroked his chin.

'A good point,' smiled Bazi, 'perhaps there is hope for you yet?'

The following day the heralds were escorted into Muul Kaah itself, both were awe struck upon observing effigies of former Xch'uups decorating its interior. A luminescent moss lit the palace of sculptured deities staring down upon them.

Led by Nestor and his men they penetrated the Tlillan fortress, under intense observation. Matriarchs and Tlillan women sat on pews to the left and right. Upon a throne a woman rested in a long white dress. Bazi recognised her from mosaics in his hotel and restaurant. Her crown of feathers and sable locks of hair stood out on Otoch.

Russian soldiers fanned out taking their stations around Muul Kaah as Lian introduced the explorers from Andromeda. Amar could not take his eyes off a woman stood beside Xch'uup's throne. Her skin was darker than any Tlillan's; the tallest of her dark haired sisters by far.

Lian pressed her palms together, 'Namaste Xch'uup,' before taking her place upon a stone pew.

The entire palace waited with bated breath. Bazi realised they lingered on him and Amar. The bearded herald stepped before the Tlillan Queen's throne and greeted her as he would his King. Bending down upon one knee he stated, 'Ensi,' lowering his face towards the floor.

Amar quickly followed suit, bending his knee and addressing Malikah as Ensi, Ur for righteous ruler.

Malikah replied with the words, 'Uzuzzu,' something like 'rise' in Ur.

The awe struck explorers returned to their feet, 'I Bazi, envoy of the Kingdom of Ur, bring greetings from my King.'

'The Kingdom of Ur? Surely you are referring to the Kingdom of Telal?'

The old herald was disturbed, this Queen knew so much of his people and their language yet he knew nothing of the Tlillan.

Amar smiled, 'I am sorry, Telal?'

Malikah gave the young man a disappointed glare. Amitra smirked at such a weak bluff.

The sable Queen shook her head slowly from side to side, 'Do you take me for a fool?'

Bazi interjected, 'Forgive him he is young and naïve. I apologise if any insult was inflicted.'

Amitra spoke to the envoy from Ur, 'Xch'uup was only disappointed.'

Bazi gave his comrade a black stare before continuing, 'Xch'uup is correct. For many cycles we have been subjects of the Telal. I have been sent in search of the Amelatu.'

'Please describe this Amelatu,' stated Amitra.

'It is difficult ... the legend was of the Etlu ... the people of Ur many cycles ago. It is unclear as to whether the Amelatu is a species, race or single person; however the Amelatu is said to deliver the Etlu in their time of need. There is no exact description, the only words alluring to a depiction come from a Nabu long dead, "First came spirits followed by the grey mother chased by a condor of white. Until Roy D'effrayeur appears from eternity the Etlu will be slaves."'

Amitra spoke to Bazi, 'Xch'uup saw your arrival many cycles ago. In response an exploration vessel has been deployed to Andromeda. As we speak men and supplies are travelling to Masku Patu.'

Amar chirped up, 'For what purpose?'

'Masku Patu is now under Tlillan jurisdiction.'

The young man was shocked, 'What of the Kishar?'

Amitra shook her head silently.

'What of Telal?'

Malikah rose from her throne, 'We shall see. What I want from you is information.'

'Concerning?' asked a nervous Bazi.

'Every territory in Andromeda.'

'Surely you already have the information you require?'

'You can never have enough intelligence Mr Bazi, whether it be friend or foe.'

## Chapter 2

'Namaste Xch'uup.'

Earth music played softly in the background as Malikah beckoned the long haired Indian inside a penthouse suite at the Plaza.

'Take a seat Amitra,' said the sable Queen glancing up from a tablet.

The Indian sat on a circular sofa, with a smile she asked, 'You still worry over your parents?'

Malikah nodded, 'They journey to Andromeda in three months from now.'

'Your mother is a very competent ...'

'It's not my mother which concerns me, it is my father.'

'Why?'

'He is a very stubborn man with a penchant for taking stupid risks. If only he and your father could be alike.'

'My father? He is as stubborn as a donkey. Besides is not danger always feared when distant but braved when present?'

'Braved?'

'You are both alike, ready to face danger head on for the benefit of others.'

The sable Queen smiled at her Grand Priestess, 'And she who removes terror from the mind is the greatest of friends.'

'You did not ask me here to speak on your parents. Arthur concerns you presently, yes?'

Malikah dismissed her tablet, 'How is he doing?'

'He is an excellent pupil quite the student of Socrates and Aristotle.'

Malikah pulled a disparaging expression.

'You disapprove?'

'Not of Socrates and Aristotle.'

'I believe his understanding of stoic logic will bring future benefits.'

'We shall see.'

The doorbell chimed to which Malikah called out, 'Enter.'

The door slid away, 'Namaste Xch'uup.'

'Come in Sandra.'

The sable Greek stood until offered a seat beside her Xch'uup.

‘So what do you have to say on Arthur?’

The Valkyrie replied in a soft tone, ‘He understands all he is taught, the boy’s mind absorbs information as a sponge in the desert.’

‘But?’

‘He demonstrates no desire to learn any more than required. For him medicine is a chore.’

Before Malikah could speak further another chimed rang out, ‘Enter.’

‘Namaste Xch’uup,’ bowed the short Marshal of Otoch.

‘Come sit down Kaeo.’

The dark haired lady sat alongside her sisters, ‘The boy?’

‘What of his progress?’

‘Progress! All he wants to do is listen to music and write poetry!’

‘What of his swordsmanship?’

‘Passable.’

‘Oh?’

‘The kid’s a dreamer. He wants to be an artist.’

‘What of his diplomacy skills?’

‘Don’t ask!’

Amitra and Sandra both chuckled at Kaeo’s frustration.

‘Greg has given me use of the Plaza’s gym this afternoon. Arthur is waiting for us.’

‘Pah, good luck with that!’ snorted Kaeo.

Malikah arose from her sofa, her sisters followed suit exiting the room. They climbed some stairs and into a gym on the top floor of the most luxurious hotel in central New York.

Stepping through the door a young man, who looked to be in his late teens or early twenties by human years, awaited; part Tlillan, part human with short brown hair and green eyes. He possessed a startling resemblance to his father, Henry Jenkins, a feature most Matriarchs found quite disturbing.

Standing nearly six and a half feet tall his pale Darksider skin contrasted with chestnut brown hair, dressed in a normal pair of gym shorts and a green military t-shirt.

‘Namaste Xch’uup,’ bowed the young lad.

He spoke with what some might describe an English accent, though at times verbal inflections brought it close to that of a South African. Little

contact outside a small family of Mictlantecuhtli precipitated this verbal aberration.

‘Greetings Arthur, it is good to see you are punctual.’

‘You wish to test me Xch’uup?’

‘I do, Kaeo tells me you are deficient in self-defence is she correct?’

The young man fixed his eyes upon the short Thai, ‘I don’t know, Xch’uup.’

Malikah furrowed her regal brow, ‘You don’t know?’

‘No Xch’uup, I don’t.’

‘Arthur, bring me a bokken.’

The young man jogged to the corner of the gym fetching his master a bokken crafted in the style of an 1852 sabre.

Malikah took the weapon, ‘Thank you, now select one for yourself.’

The boy retrieved a similar weapon.

Malikah removed her frock coat handing it to Kaeo. Dressed only in a Tlillan ribbed suit she approached Arthur, ‘Now we shall see if Kaeo spoke the truth, ENGARDE!’

The boy didn’t react. He was taken aback at the thought of fencing with Xch’uup. Malikah quickly slapped his weapon aside before thrusting into the lad’s ribs. Arthur fell to the floor with a cry of pain, his sable Queen gave a condescending Tlillan sneer, ‘That was pathetic.’

Arthur returned to his feet taking an engage position. His eyes began to fire as embers in the night.

Malikah smirked, moving in again she slapped his blade in a quick parry carte before striking the young man’s wrist. Once again Arthur let out a cry of pain yet this time he maintained a pointed blade before rushing forward in a powerful lunge.

The sable Queen side stepped directing Arthur’s blade away and leaving the lad outstretched, blade wavering in mid-air. Malikah kicked, knocking the boy flat on the floor.

‘Is this it? I spend my time and effort educating you with the best this Galaxy has to offer and am repaid with mediocrity?’

Arthur scrambled to his feet but before getting there Xch’uup kicked him square in the face with the flat of her boot. Losing his vision for a moment Arthur dropped onto his back wiping tears of pain from his face in an attempt to restore his vision.

Malikah turned to Kaeo, 'You have failed me!'

Kaeo dropped to the floor in a kowtow, 'Forgive me Xch'uup.'

'Xch'uup does not forgive mediocrity.'

Before anything more could be said Arthur rose and in a fury charged Malikah from behind. The Empress spun around dodging his blade she grabbed Arthur's body and cast him to the floor with a mighty judo throw.

Malikah cackled as he lay beside a prostrate Kaeo.

Upon noting his surroundings Arthur spied the Grand Marshal's mantle, hanging from its sword belt.

Those present sensed an overwhelming desire to draw Kaeo's blade. Amitra, Sandra and Kaeo fell motionless awaiting the boy's next decision.

Malikah sneered in that condescending Tlillan fashion, 'Do it, don't take this humiliation ... finish me if you think you can!'

Arthur could not control his anger; in one of those moments we have all suffered where the heart overtakes any logical thought he snatched Kaeo's neutronium blade from its scabbard. Standing bloody faced before a condescending Xch'uup he roared, 'XCH'UUP! YOU WILL DIE!'

Malikah took a couple of steps back. Her sisters knew full well Arthur could not defeat her no matter what material his blade had been forged from.

Kaeo looked up in anticipation, if he attacked now it would mean the end of her toil. Secretly the half Tlillan desired Arthur leap into an attack, resulting in inevitable death. True bladesmanship came from the hand and mind wielding it, not the weapon itself.

Arthur breathed heavily through his teeth as blood ran down his face and fire leapt from his eyes. Much as the Goddess Lyssa sent Heracles into a fit of rage and insanity the daughter of Nyx filled Arthur's heart with thoughts of violence. Unable to control himself, just as the mighty son of Zeus, he rounded on the focus of his ire. Unlike Heracles Arthur's focus was not a weak woman or defenceless children. Lyssa drove Arthur into a stupor as if he were a rabid animal, hate and revenge coursed through his veins as hot lava erupting from Vesuvius.

Malikah peered through his eyes and into the soul of her young charge. Delving into a passion which swirled beneath the surface of all great artists hearts, 'You want to kill me, don't you boy?'

The lad didn't answer. Fury overwhelmed his senses leaving only revenge and hatred to be satiated.

'Well? Fight me! Or are you afraid of a woman? The son of a worthless whore and a stinking coward!'

He pointed Kaeo's neutronium blade at Xch'uup and just as he was to charge to his demise a voice reverberated throughout his entire body, 'ARTHUR!'

Detracting from his desire to plunge a blade into the Tlillan Queen's heart stood a beautiful woman dressed in golden armour. Hair of golden silk with perfect curls bouncing around a majestic face.

'Lower your blade,' spoke the Goddess in a Greek accent.

'SHE DESERVES TO DIE!'

Amitra and Sandra gave each other looks of puzzlement, it was unclear to whom Arthur was speaking. As far as they could tell he spoke to someone or something behind Kaeo yet nothing occupied that space.

'Take a hold of your mind boy! Malikah has brought down many great warriors in battle before now. She will destroy you before you have a chance to nick her arm!'

The sable Valkyrie was equally confused, 'Are you mad boy? Speaking to figments of your imagination? Your mother truly has failed her Xch'uup!'

Arthur snapped his vision back to Malikah his shaking hand vibrating the sword with uncontrolled anger.

Athene stood by his side, 'Only you can see me Arthur.'

'How?'

'Only those I wish may do so.'

'How?'

'Stop asking questions and listen. You will lower your weapon and after this foolishness is over you shall seek out Duncan McCann before he leaves for Andromeda.'

'Admiral McCann?'

'Yes, now lower your weapon.'

'I cannot, I will not suffer this humiliation.'

Athene moved between Arthur and Malikah. Her golden skin, sparkling blue eyes and cherry red lips were the perfect representation of a woman. She pushed his sword down, pressing her fingers upon its blade. Arthur could not resist despite his fury and enhanced Tlillan strength.



The Goddess whispered, 'When you see Duncan tell him that it is easy to be angry.'

'Who are you?'

'I am Athene but you shall not mention this to another soul, is that understood?'

'I understand.'

As Athene dissipated into the atmosphere her words echoed, 'Remember, it is easy to be angry.'

After the Goddess of Wisdom had left, Malikah, with a very puzzled expression, shouted in a deep voice, 'Come kill me you coward!'

Fire dissipated from Arthur's eyes, the Goddess Athene dispatched Lyssa's influence. Arthur dropped his blade upon the floor and taking a deep breath the lad walked for the exit as the Tiillan Queen heckled him, 'That's it, run home to mummy you coward!'

Before exiting Arthur turned back upon Xch'uup, bowed and said softly, 'It is easy to be angry.'

Once the lad had left Malikah looked down at Kaeo, 'You can get up.'

Kaeo rose to her feet retrieving her mantle, 'It is as I said.'

'He has little to no self-control. I'm unsure what halted him.'

Amitra stepped forward, 'Who was he speaking to?'

'Perhaps the madness is taking him?' interjected Sandra.

'Perhaps.'

Kaeo shook her head, 'He's dangerous I say put him in a control collar.'

'Arthur is not an animal.'

'Well I have business to take care of, if I may be excused?'

'Sure.'

Kaeo bowed, 'Namaste Xch'uup.'

After the short warrior left Amitra spoke, 'Did you sense it?'

'I did.'

'As did I,' reported Sandra.

'Do you think he is in love?'

'I believe he has deep feelings for her. If we wish to control him it must be done through Kaeo,' noted Amitra.

Malikah brushed her hair with one hand and discarded her bokken with the other, 'Is Kaeo aware?'

'I believe she is aware but denies the truth. Kaeo holds glory and honour in the highest esteem. Love is merely a vice, it distracts from that which is most important in life.'

Malikah nodded, 'Let him convalesce for a few months. Then we shall test the boy again.'

'And if he fails again?' inquired Sandra.

'Then drastic action is required.'

Taking his convalescent time Arthur got on the first flight to Geneva. Dressed in a polite two piece suit, cut for a young man, and carrying a small case he walked up the path of Duncan McCann's residence. Pressing his finger on the door the AI announced his presence.

Opening the door Ofra exclaimed, 'Whatever you're selling me I have one already!'

'I'm here to see Duncan McCann.'

Ofra suspected the boy's alien heritage but continued in a defensive demeanour, 'What do you want my son for?'

'My name is Arthur, Arthur Jenkins. Mr McCann is a friend of my father's, Henry Jenkins.'

Ofra took another look at the lad, 'You're the Tlillan boy aren't you?'

He smiled, 'Yes, that's me.'

Ofra grabbed the lad and dragged him inside, 'I remember when you were born. It was all over the news you know? The first male born to a Tlillan in centuries, all of those Matriarchs were furious with your mother!'

Arthur just smiled as Ofra led him through the house.

'DUNCAN!' shouted Ofra dragging her guest into the front room.

The Englishman was having a snooze on the sofa until rudely awoken by his mother, 'What the bloody hell? Why don't you shout a bit louder? They probably can't hear you on Mars!'

He rubbed his eyes to see Ofra with a young man, a young man who bore a striking resemblance to Jenkins, 'Who's this?'

'Don't be so rude to guests, this is Arthur.'

McCann dragged himself off the sofa, 'Arthur? Jenkins' boy?'

'Yes sir.'

'Well, well, well what are you doing here?'

Arthur looked down at Ofra who quickly got the message, 'I'll leave you two alone.'

After Ofra exited the room Arthur stated, 'I was sent here by a mutual friend of ours.'

'Oh? And who might that be?'

'Her name is Athene.'

McCann stopped dead. He was ridged as a plank of wood, 'I'm sorry?'

'I said I was sent here by Athene.'

'I'm sorry young man but I don't know anyone by that name.'

'She had a message I was to convey.'

'Really? And that is?'

'She says it is easy to be angry.'

McCann took a deep breath, 'I'm afraid you've wasted a journey young man.'

'Didn't I always say you were a poor liar my little Odysseus?'

The Englishman turned to his right, the Goddess of the flashing eyes had appeared. Golden breastplate and helmet in hand she grinned at McCann, 'You couldn't convince a child with that poor attempt,' mocked the warrior Goddess.

Turning to Arthur she smiled with her brilliant blue eyes, 'Greetings Arthur.'

Arthur pressed his palms together, 'Namaste Athene.'

McCann looked around the room suspiciously, 'Who are you talking to Arthur?'

Athene burst into laughter, 'He can see me but my little Odysseus trusts no-one ... not even himself!'

Arthur spoke to McCann, 'Do you not see Athene? She is in plain sight.'

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

Athene approached the young man, 'He can see us both but fears he's being tricked by your Tlillan powers.'

'Mr McCann I give you my word there is no deception,' pleaded Arthur.

'I think you need to see a doctor, perhaps I should call one?'

Athene stepped towards the Englishman, her mood changed, 'Enough Duncan, I grow tired of this!'

Despite standing directly before him the Englishman ignored Athene. The Goddesses beautiful golden hair lifted into the air, strands glued together

forming terrifying snakes. The Athenian's eyes changed from a sparkling blue to a stinging red as her bellowing voice filled the atmosphere, 'DO NOT IGNORE ME!'

McCann's body trembled with fear at such a terrifying display. Unable to speak he nodded as best he could in her direction.

Upon accepting recognition Athene's formed morphed back to that of the attractive goddess he recognised, 'This boy is destined to lead yet Malikah has failed in his education. It is now your responsibility to prepare him as you did your own daughter, for the trial. Malikah believes he is convalescing.

I will send his father with a man who will train Arthur in hand to hand combat. You shall give this man a place in your staff on the Discovery, is that understood?'

'Yes Athene,' nodded McCann.

Athene smiled lovingly, 'Good, he'll be here within a few weeks.'

'Understood.'

'Until then you'll train this boy in swordsmanship. By the time you leave for Andromeda I want to see a hardened Spartan warrior standing before me.'

'I understand Athene.'

The Goddess of the flashing eyes smiled. As she dissipated into the fabric of existence her voice echoed, 'Remember Duncan, it is easy to be angry.'

McCann turned to Arthur, 'That's a fine bloody mess you've gotten me into.'

Arthur made no reply.

'Alright young man, follow me and we'll get you settled in. Tomorrow we can start on your passage into manhood.'

The next day McCann brought Arthur along to an I.S.A fencing hall. At one end were racks of fencing weapons at the other hung protective fencing kit.

'So I take it Malikah has already taught you to fence?' inquired McCann.

'I've taken instruction from Kaeo for the last few years.'

McCann let out a sneer, 'Kaeo?'

'Is there a problem with that?'

'She's great with the blade there can be no doubt of that.'

'However?'

'However when it comes to instruction you could do a lot better.'

'Really?'

'What's your blade?'

'Sorry?'

'Epee, foil or sabre?'

'Sabre, I suppose.'

'Naturally,' the Englishman walked to a corner of the hall where an old fellow observed younger men practice; Charging back and forth in sabre duels, banging and crashing into one another.

'Gordon, I have a student for you.'

The bald fellow looked up at Arthur and gave a rather disinterested expression, 'No thank you Duncan.'

'Oh come on Gordon there's a bottle of Laphroaig in it.'

The old fellow stood up and looked the lad over, 'Have you fenced before?'

'Yes I was taught on Otoch by the Grand Marshal.'

Gordon chuckled, 'You must be quite the Zorro then?'

Arthur ruffled his brow, 'Zorro?'

'Never mind, how many years have you fenced?'

'Only three but I'm Tlillan, I can link with my instructor and learn far quicker than any human.'

Gordon grinned at McCann, 'Then why are you here?'

Arthur didn't reply.

'Why don't you fence Gordon?' suggested McCann.

The young half Tlillan looked down at the old fellow disparagingly. Gordon chuckled as he walked to the piste.

'Go get your kit on and pick a weapon lad,' instructed McCann.

'If you say so,' replied an overconfident Arthur.

Once on the piste the pair saluted, every sabreur stopped what they were doing to observe.

'Engarde,' shouted the referee, 'Ready? Fight!'

Sensors in the swords picked up and transmitted contact with the opponent's kit, there was no need for the wires used in the past. The kit was also sensitive to sword contact, lighting up in red or green at a firm touch. Arthur, confident in his physical superiority charged forward.

Gordon moved back slowly and once Arthur was in range he took the boy's blade in a bind before thrusting the tip of his onto his opponent's arm.

'HALT!' called the referee, 'One light to my right.'

The box in the middle lit up red on Gordon's side as did Arthur's kit on the area he'd been hit.

Arthur was quite confused, putting it down to luck. Surely this weak old man couldn't defeat a powerful Tlillan?

'Engarde, ready, fight!'

Again Arthur charged down the piste towards the frail old man. Arthur closed in on his target to make a strike. Gordon parried before elegantly placing the point of his sabre on Arthur's glove.

'HALT!'

This time both lights had been activated.

The referee quickly made his decision, 'Attack from my left, parried from the right, two hits, point right.'

Arthur swung his blade in frustration, 'WHAT? That was my right of way!'

The referee gave Arthur a grim stare, 'Attack parried right of way goes right.'

McCann shook his head, by the time the match was up Gordon had won 10 hits to 2. Arthur was furious, storming out of the hall after throwing his weapon to the floor.

Gordon smiled at McCann, 'I thought these Tlillans could learn anything in a day?'

'It seems humility isn't on that list.'

Gordon laughed then returned to his seat.

'Listen I need someone to train this lad, he's got three months until he has to go up against a Matriarch and win.'

'And you want me to do it?'

'Will you, please?'

'Three months? It's not possible you know that Duncan.'

'He's Tlillan, he can learn in a week what might take us years.'

'I know but that's not the problem is it?'

McCann nodded his head, 'That's my task, so will you do it?'

Gordon placed his mask on the floor whilst wiping sweat from his brow, 'I'll do what I can but you must teach him to control that temper or he'll

get nowhere.'

McCann returned home to be greeted by one of his mother's black looks.

'What's that for?' inquired the Englishman.

'What did you do to that poor boy today?'

'I took him for a fencing lesson, why?'

'He returned all upset and wouldn't tell me.'

'Yeah, he probably didn't want it all over the city by evening,' quipped McCann.

Ofra tightened her mouth then snapped at her son, 'Shut your mouth! Now go and apologise to Arthur!'

McCann raised his eyebrows, 'For what exactly?'

'For whatever it is you did.'

The Englishman shook his head, 'Jesus Christ!'

'He's in his room and if you speak like that again you'll regret it!'

McCann sighed as he made his way upstairs, 'Yes mum.'

Arthur was in his room working on his tablet.

McCann stepped in, 'What's that you're up to?'

The young man lay on his bed tapping away at a screen, 'I'm composing.'

'Composing what?'

'Music.'

'Is it any good?'

'I'm sure you would find it quite deficient.'

'According to Malikah you're very talented with music and poetry.'

'Oh really? Has she been keeping tabs on me?'

'Yes, she's very concerned about you.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'I think Malikah hates me.'

'Then why exert so much effort in your education?'

Arthur turned away from his tablet, 'You mean persecution!'

McCann shook his head slowly, 'Jesus Christ, listen to yourself you're the perfect victim aren't you?'

Arthur's attention returned to his work.

'There are people out there worrying about where the next meal is coming from. Some are going to sleep on an empty stomach tonight. Do

you know how that feels Arthur?’

The boy replied coldly, ‘No.’

‘You’ve lived in palaces and five star hotels your entire life. Fed on the finest food the Galaxy has to offer. Educated to the highest standards possible and all you can do is whine like a spoilt brat.’

Arthur quickly sat up, Tlillan fire flickering in his eyes.

McCann mocked the lad, ‘You couldn’t defeat Gordon what makes you think you’re a match for me boy?’

‘Then why don’t you just send me back to Malikah?’

‘Because you’re here to learn something.’

‘What is that?’

‘It is easy to be angry ...’

‘I know that, I’m not a fool.’

‘It is easy to be angry but to be angry at the right person at the right time ... that is hard.’

‘Is that what Athene told you?’

‘In a way.’

‘So how do I learn?’

‘Today you were humiliated, yes?’

‘I was.’

‘You humiliated yourself when you stomped off in anger.’

Arthur thought for a moment then nodded silently.

‘While you’re here with me you’ll be humiliated every single day, do you understand?’

‘I understand.’

‘At some point you’ll become numb to it, just as exposure to fear lessens its effects over time.’

Arthur nodded, after considering his actions the lad stated, ‘I made a fool of myself today.’

‘You did.’

‘It won’t happen again, you have my word Mr McCann.’

The Englishman smiled, ‘Good, now we can get on to why you lost that match today.’

Arthur placed his tablet upon the bed, ‘I don’t know. I should have beaten him. He is old and physically inferior. My attacks should have overwhelmed him easily.’



'So why didn't they?'

'Each time he out fenced me, the more aggressive I became the easier he defeated me.'

'At least you see your mistakes.'

'But sabre is a weapon of aggression and attack, it doesn't make sense.'

'The sabre is a sword. The sword is a weapon of elegance and finesse not brute force. You must learn to control yourself then you may manipulate your enemy, much the same as Gordon manipulated you today.'

McCann returned to the kitchen where his mother had prepared a dish of fish and rice, 'How is Arthur?'

'He'll work it out.'

Placing dinner before him Ofra stated, 'Eat this.'

'Oh thanks.'

'Did Malikah send Arthur to you?'

Eating his meal the Englishman replied, 'No, he came here by himself.'

'What for?'

'It seems Malikah has dropped the ball.'

Ofra walked over to the fridge and took a fruit juice, 'All I know is that he's a very angry young man.'

'That's one of the problems but I've got a feeling it'll all be sorted out by the time he returns.'

'Well he won't get anything done on an empty belly. Call him down so that he can have some dinner.'

McCann put his knife and fork down as he got back to his feet, 'Yes mum.'

## Chapter 3

On a street in London's East End a group of tired men stood in line on a cold spring morning. John Clayton numbered amongst them. Having fallen on hard times he slept beneath the heavens and ate on the charity of others.

Before this time he'd been a soldier, serving many years deep below Bandayuuk's surface but the war was over and there was little need for men of his ilk. Some became pirates, killing for profit on the edges of Triumvirate space. Some had been lucky enough to gain rank, providing a pension, others ended up on the streets.

Clayton didn't kill for money his morals wouldn't allow it. Despite many years served and medals earned he'd failed to attain a monthly allowance from the SBS.

This was the fallout of the greatest conflict the Milky Way had witnessed, soldiers discarded upon the street to die in anonymity.

A caravan opened its shutters to serve a line of dishevelled men breakfast. When Clayton reached its service counter he recognised the woman serving him.

'Here, don't I know you?' said the Londoner.

'I don't recall having met,' replied a tall red headed lady in an apron.

'Clayton, John Clayton.'

'I'm sorry Mr Clayton I don't recall having met.'

'No, but you're Chanatico aren't you?'

Chanatico gave an odd expression, 'Why yes.'

'Yeh your Jenkins' missus, aren't you?'

'Yes Mr Clayton, now if you could move on there are others waiting to be served.'

'Oh of course, I mean it's thanks to your husband I'm here. That miserable old git had it in for me from day one!'

'Excuse me?'

Clayton pulled aside his dirty old trench coat to display a row of gleaming silver, 'See that? I fought for him and he demoted me three times. If it wasn't for him I'd be living the good life, drinking Martinis with some Tlillan bird. Instead I'm stuck out here eating from a bloody soup kitchen!'

‘My husband had a lot of men under his command on Bandayuuk. I’m certain it wasn’t anything personal Mr Clayton.’

‘Well you tell him that you met John Clayton today, you let him know what’s become of me thanks to his vindictiveness.’

Chanatico let out a big huff, ‘I shall Mr Clayton now please move on there are others waiting, thank you.’

Clayton walked away but not before making a speech to the crowd of men waiting in line, ‘Thank you, is that all I get? A thank you from his wife after I shed my blood for years in those bloody tunnels! I think that bastard owes me a job at least, what do you fellas reckon?’

Mumbles of agreement came from the line of men.

‘Ah but he won’t care. I’ll just die of hyperthermia one night whilst he’s snuggling up to his Tlillan missus!’

The men gave words of support for Clayton. Chanatico stopped dishing out soup, ‘Mr Clayton, I’ll speak to my husband tonight. If he remembers you I’ll see what I can do, is that satisfactory?’

Clayton nodded.

‘Will you be here tomorrow?’

Clayton laughed, ‘I’ll have to cancel tea with the King but I’m sure he’ll understand!’

A line of vagrants laughed with the fallen soldier.

‘Then we’ll speak tomorrow.’

Since the end of Bandayuuk Henry Jenkins had retired from the military. Working for private security companies left him a very well to do man. Yet that he desired eluded him most, his son. Xch’uup possessed Arthur and Henry had to work around her schedule to see him. Being an SBS Brigadier was not compatible with such an arrangement.

Returning to his home in Kensington Jenkins retired his hat and coat before making his way into the lounge. Chanatico anticipated his arrival, dressed in a beautiful one piece lilac dress.

Jenkins raised an eyebrow, ‘Well I’m either a very lucky man or in some terrible trouble!’

Chanatico smiled, ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve either forgotten something important or you’re about to surprise me.’

‘Hmm, a surprise.’

The security advisor let out a sigh of relief and kissed his wife, ‘In that case I’ll have a brandy.’

Resting in a comfortable armchair dressed in a three piece suit the former Brigadier took a glass of Cognac. Jenkins was poured an ample portion and immediately began to suspect something was a foot.

‘Really Henry, why so suspicious?’

‘I’m sorry dear, just human nature. What was it you wanted to surprise me with?’

Chanatico sat on the large comfy chair arm, draping her long legs across Jenkins’. She massaged his shoulder as he took a sip of the fine Napoleon Brandy.

‘I met a man today who says he served with you, on Bandayuuk.’

‘Really? What was his name?’

‘He said you’d remember him.’

‘Yes?’

‘His name was Clayton, John Clayton.’

Jenkins was taking another sip of the fine French liquor when upon hearing the name he nearly choked, ‘Clayton? Where in God’s name did you see that bastard?’

‘Henry! He was eating at a soup kitchen. He said he served under your command.’

Jenkins began to recover from the shock, ‘Clayton, well I can’t say I’m surprised that insubordinate is living rough!’

‘Insubordinate?’

Jenkins got back to his feet and began to pace the room, ‘Why yes, he spent 6 months in a bloody Glasshouse!’

‘Glasshouse?’

‘A military prison, he still didn’t learn his lesson.’

‘Why was he incarcerated?’

‘Clayton assaulted an officer. If he hadn’t been so effective at killing Makayuuk he’d of been discharged or jolly well hung there and then!’

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