

THE TWELFTH ODYSSEY



Book 1 - Coda

Derrick Herbert

THE TWELFTH ODYSSEY



Book 1 - Coda

Derrick Herbert

Cover image © Curaphotography | Dreamstime.com

Copyright © 2016 Derrick Herbert. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organisations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

When the siblings of the Key first meet, the *Citadel of Voices* shall at last find its purpose and call forth the ‘Ocean of Darkness’.

Standing again in the chaos of the Citadel, the *True Keeper* and *the Receiver* of the Lifestone shall be presaged by a Millennial alignment of Celestial magnificence — a geometrically perfect circle of forty stars.

Standing alone, having been **betrayed** by all that once was held most dear, the *True Keeper* shall be a manifest warrior at heart. Mantled and wearing the ultimate seal of Concord. The *Receiver*, having **lost** all that once was held most dear must stop ‘Fate’s Tide’, for if the Lifestone be lost, the heir of the line DuKane shall stand alone in the Hall of the Creator’s knowledge.

Then shall the Nine Worlds know, who holds The Key.

*The Prophecy of the ‘Twelfth Odyssey’
as foreseen by*

Xarris Bonacita Vallunsinh

1st Toran of the Daggerleaf Temple Order

August 14, 1192 New Alliance Calendar

PROLOGUE

TIME : Approximately 450,000 years ago (Earth Time)

Day 1,047 of Viskumnr

PLACE : *The Seat, Asgard*

Odin's tired eye lingered here and there as it swept the semi-darkened chamber. The hundreds of faces that peered back at them — the three central players in this little game of do or die were rapt and attentive. After hearing all of the evidence he wondered if it would indeed be possible to preserve the young Chieftains life, much less his position on the Diar, the Council of Elders.

His head throbbed intensely once more. His skull felt like it was being squeezed like a melon being gauged for its ripeness at market and for the few moments before it peaked and began to diminish, the pain seemed almost beyond endurance. He screwed his one good eye up, scratching distractedly at the edges of the patch that covered his eyeless right socket.

The Twelfth Odyssey / 2

It was a few moments before the complete silence that had consumed the chamber reached in past the pain and grabbed his attention.

He realised how disoriented the pain was making him look and casually dropped his arm back to his side. He forced himself to sit a little taller and straighter in the backless curule style chair and resolved there and then to fight against the pain just that little bit harder.

Appearing frail in any way whatsoever — particularly here and now — would signal a degree of impotence wholly at odds with the singular office which he had fought so hard to obtain. Even the All-Father of the mighty Asgardian race had to mind his back, lest one of those that fancied themselves his equal, decide to demonstrate he was no longer worthy of that position with a dagger between the shoulder blades.

Standing at well over six and a half feet in height Odin was a huge bear of a man. If you had a care to ask, anybody would have told you without hesitation, that it was his presence more than his stature that filled the massive, gilded and ornate ceremonial seat he currently occupied and the position within this society that it represented.

Nevertheless, everybody was waiting upon him and he had prevaricated as much as he dared without it becoming patently clear to all that he was doing so. To say that the hearing was not going well would have been an understatement of epic proportions. In spite of his every effort to contain the situation, it was spiralling madly beyond even his consummate abilities to control.

Somebody coughed, breaking what little concentration he had been able to maintain thus far. He lifted his head, turning his eye toward its source.

The interruption had come from Loki, his stepson, who was grinning maliciously from across the chamber at him. Daring him to postpone the inevitable any longer than he already had. Loki coughed again as if to force

the point, his shoulders shaking with an obvious, barely concealed, mirth. He reached across the huge table, pouring himself a goblet of water from the carafe that sat before him as if to remedy the perfectly timed coughing fit.

Odin was of a mind to walk across the chamber and brain him with the ceremonial mace he was holding, but roughly pushed the thought aside. This though, was the instant from which there could be no going back once a path had been chosen and Loki knew it as well as he. Although it was not complete, Odin had a rather clear sense of the convoluted and spidering decision tree that fanned out before them. Every decision that was made from this point on would cause further bifurcations that would send them all careening down one branch or another, toward an end he could not see. The 'game' that Loki had set in motion here was vast in ambition and scope. Even though he couldn't envisage and follow every branch to its end, the few scant impressions that he was able to fathom left him chilled to the marrow.

At the end of each and every one of the branches of this tree lay a maelstrom of chaos and death and destruction on a scale that few could comprehend, much less imagine.

Closing arguments. The only thing lying between on the one hand somehow — and it was the 'somehow' bit that unfortunately was still eluding him — salvaging something of this wretched mess that Hamart DuKane had deposited at his feet and on the other the continuation of this, Loki's most recent intrigue. He shifted once more on the usually comfortable chair, unknotting muscle and bone that popped and snapped noisily, protesting what felt like hours of immobility. He reached up and lifted the bulky, eagle-winged ceremonial helmet from his head, peering curiously at the almost unrecognisable reflection that looked back at him out of its polished mirror-like surface. The natural curl had been pressed

The Twelfth Odyssey / 4

out of his silvered hair, which was wet and matted, slicked down with a fine sheen of perspiration that glistened and threw the muted light back as he gazed once more out across the amphitheatre. His craggy, age-lined skin was pallid and drawn, leeching almost of all vitality. He was certain that those looking on would say that he seemed not only daunted by the enormity of his office right then, but positively weighted down by it. He carefully set the silver helm down on one of the seat's armrests and leaned forward slightly.

His head throbbed again and this time he couldn't help but release a slight grunt with the effort of dispelling the accompanying pain. He momentarily focussed all of his attention, pushing mentally outward against the pressure that seemed to be attempting to collapse his skull inward. Only when the pain began to subside was he able to lift his head to look Loki in the eyes. It was taking more than a 'little' concentration — more in fact than he had bargained for — just to keep Loki out of his head. In the silent and unspoken battle of wills that was being waged between them, he was coming off much the worse and he feared that it was beginning to show.

Loki's surreptitious attempts to wrest control of the proceedings away from him, were not only debilitating, but were forcing his concentration to be elsewhere than it should. With the imp's congenital mastery of the mind, the ability to bend perception — anybody's — was innate. Loki had raised the skill of mind-control to an art form and although he could be beaten without difficulty in many other areas, Odin had long since realised that this was not one of them. The only advantage he had over his stepson in this particular arena was that of brute strength. The barriers he had thrown up around the core of his mind would usually have proven the equal of any attempt to bypass them, but therein lay the rub. Protective barriers of such strength could not be maintained for any great length of time.

Loki's entire defence strategy had comprised of parading an almost endless array of witnesses before the court who testified to his good character.

This was supplemented by a series of unnecessarily lengthy expositions; neither of which answered any of DuKane's specific accusations. And with those tactics he had put the lie to his actual testimony. Odin knew that what little advantage his brute strength accorded him, would be wasted the longer the hearing went on. Loki's intention to stress those barriers to the point where cracks would begin to appear was a winning one, for one little crack was all that would be needed. The imp was 'that good' he could be in and out of someone's subconscious in much less than the blink of an eye. In the weakened state he currently found himself in, Odin knew he would probably not even feel it. He had to bring this to a close — and quickly.

“Lord Hamart Eödrin DuKane — High Chieftain of the Rarom,” Odin began. “Your closing remarks.”

The young Raromian Chieftain lifted his head upon hearing his name called and climbed slowly to his feet, glancing slowly around the massive hall. He wondered how it had fallen to him, a lowly clan chief of a minor tribe to protect the integrity of The Realm. Responsibility for The Key was one thing. This was something else entirely.

“My Lord,” said Hamart, addressing Odin directly. “Bringing you to this, our most cherished and august assembly of justice was a desperate act of last resort,” he turned to look across at his adversary. Loki's brilliant, cornflower blue eyes crinkled at the corners in obvious amusement. “A wholly justifiable effort on my part to forestall the machinations of this deceitful and corrupt creature that walks among us. His avowals of familial kinship and allegiance nothing but carefully crafted lies. The mask this creature wears has fooled us all. It was only by chance that I happened upon a glimpse of what lies hidden beneath and what I saw horrified me.

That he is planning something terrible is incontestable. By taking the unorthodox step of accusing him in public of High Treason against The Realm I believe I may have shone the light of scrutiny upon those plans and

The Twelfth Odyssey / 6

at the very least temporarily curtailed them. If that is the most that I have accomplished here with my actions, I will graciously accept any punishment the court sees fit to impose upon me. There is no regret or lack of cognition on my part of the seriousness of the situation that we now find ourselves in.

Loki's past actions and his agenda are well-known and given the time to do what he does best; to scheme and to plot and to manipulate anybody he can bend to his will, he will bring this," Hamart gestured around and about expansively, "all crashing down around us and will smile triumphantly as it falls." He glanced briefly around and about before turning his attention back to Odin. "In your absence, All Father. I did what I believed to be the correct thing in the circumstances, I did the only thing that could be done."

No Hamart, thought Odin, scowling across the chamber at the young man. You didn't.

Hamart's bright green eyes never left Odin's face despite the look of displeasure that Odin had fixed him with. He suddenly wished he could conjure forth some eleventh hour substantiation to aid his case and more importantly restore Odin's faith in him, but there was none. He smiled thinly and giving the slightest of nods glanced once more around the amphitheatre before reseating himself.

A lot of people, some older, the majority much wiser in such matters than himself, had warned him about going up against someone like Loki with an obvious deficiency of solid evidence. The hope had been, in the short interval before the hearing was put before The Seat he would be able to build his case. The task had proven impossible in such a short space of time; his gamble had failed and Loki had matter-of-factly deconstructed his case in short order without actually disproving the claims. Hamart was only now beginning to realise just how foolish the gambit had been. Not only had he greatly under-estimated Loki's cunning, but he had unwisely over-estimated how much of what he knew could be proved and in the end that

was all that mattered at this time and in this place. Odin had shielded him against the consequences of his own inexperience before, but he had known that upon entering The Seat, there would be no free passes.

Odin's scowl softened at the revelation dawning in Hamart's eyes. He smiled back at the young man despondently, despite the anger he felt. He turned slowly to Loki, his heart thumping heavily in chest. He could delay the inevitable no longer.

“Loki of the Aesir, your closing remarks.”

Loki climbed to his feet and glanced slowly around the huge open space. The consummate performer, he was born to occupy a stage such as this. He walked around and out from behind the massive table with its immense, mirror-finish, obsidian surface and crossed the chamber to stand before the ranked tiers of seats that ascended up into the semi-darkness. He silently walked along the front row of seats, peering into the faces of as many of the onlookers as he could make eye contact with. When he had walked the length of the hemicyclic amphitheatre, he turned and silently retraced his steps, coming to a stop at its mid-point.

“An act of last resort,” Loki scoffed dismissively. “I challenge him,” he gestured toward Hamart with a disdainful nod of the head, “to show that he explored any avenue other than the one that has brought us all here today.

“Hamart talks of ‘incontestable’ indications,” he paused this time to give a slight shake of the head, “of something. Some scheme that he claims that I have in motion. But he's provided absolutely no evidence whatsoever about what this ‘scheme’ may even be,” he paused. “He says that he has glimpsed behind my mask of ‘civility’ — that I have fooled you all,” he gestured with an expansive sweep of one arm to the hundreds of dignitaries that were lucky enough to have found accommodation within the chamber.

He knew there were tens of thousands of others standing shoulder to shoulder in the plaza outside. The proceedings were being relayed via

The Twelfth Odyssey / 8

a scrying mirror that Civit the Cardinal of the Asgardian Sorcerer's Guild had hastily erected at the front of the building. "I call his assertions nothing more than innuendo and bilious slander.

A great many of you have known me from the time I was a babe-in-arms. He accuses me of wishing you all harm,"he shrugged as if indifferent to the claims. "He talks of my 'past actions' and my 'agenda'. But it is not my past actions that have brought us here today. It is not 'my' past actions that are being called to account here. I have been accused of a very specific crime. A charge, serious enough to see this chamber full to bursting for the first time in a millennia or more. Treason against the Realm!"

He turned and looked across at Hamart and then, for the first time since climbing to his feet, at Odin. "Treason against my family,"he whispered. He turned once more. This time to face the assembled multitude. "Treason against my kinsfolk." He paused for several moments before spinning around and stalking across the chamber. He stopped across the table from Hamart. "Treason!"he slammed a hand flat against the tabletop. Hamart closed his eyes as if hoping that by doing so he could bring an end to the ignominy he was suffering at his own hands. Loki turned away from him melodramatically and crossed back toward the front row of seats. "Hamart knows well the consequences of what he has done. He ignored the counsel of his betters who begged him not to do as he eventually did, acting like a petulant child being told he could not do as he wished. Hamart is no child and his actions must be judged accordingly. His slanderous and baseless accusations sicken me! But more than that, they do you,"he paused again before concluding, "a grave injustice!"

The tall, lean Asgardian swept his cornblonde hair back and away from his face as he turned and crossed the chamber once more. A chorus of soft, disgruntled murmuring trailing after him. Only Odin and DuKane could fully see the smirk that briefly illuminated his face as he slipped back

into his seat. It was quickly banished though as his eyes met his Father's.

Odin's heart sank. The conversation he'd had with Mimir earlier on during the day — where the oracle had taken great pains to warn him of ominous portents being signs of '...things to come' — had been on his mind throughout. Mimir, as was his wont, said little else, but even before hearing Hamart's story Odin had known there would be a connection. Something terrible was looming on the far horizon, but the only person who knew what that something was, was Loki. There were enough elements in what Hamart and his witnesses had said, to cause a shiver to crawl down Odin's spine. Unfortunately, nowhere near enough solid evidence to do anything definitive about it.

What made things worse, if things hadn't already reached their pinnacle in the boundless anarchy that seemed to stem as a matter of course from this hearing, was the fact that both men were an integral part of Asgard's social fabric: being the chief of one of the Realms' smaller tribes was in itself notable; Hamart was also a member of Asgard's ruling council and the current Keeper of the Key to the Dissolution Archives. Asgard could ill afford to lose him. Loki; well, the fact that he was Odin's son — step or no — was bad enough.

The Asgardian Chieftain ran one of his hands comb-like through his silvered hair and he stood for the first time that evening. His entire demeanour served only to further highlight his barely contained exasperation. He gazed out across the chamber briefly, then began to pace back and forth across the length of the small dais upon which sat The Seat.

"Hast thou anything more to say in this matter, Lord DuKane?" his deep basso voice filled the chamber.

"No, All Father," Hamart closed his eyes, slumping down into the chair.

"...And what say'st thou, Loki?"

He glanced across at his son who sat calmly, attired in his familiar vest

The Twelfth Odyssey / 10

of gold and green chain-mailed armour. The mail was polished to such a high degree that it managed to sparkle even in the semi-darkened chamber.

“Nothing more, All Father — the apparent weakness of Hamart’s case should speak for itself,” Loki glanced across at Hamart with a condescending sneer.

It was right then, seeing that smug and coincidentally chilling smile on Loki’s face, that it came home to Hamart just what he had done. The futility of his situation was in all likelihood apparent to every man and woman in the chamber. Even more obvious was the growing realisation that what was about happen to him as a result of this farce, depended entirely upon how good a day Loki was having and that — was a mortifying confirmation of his numerous failures thus far. He smiled and shook his head ever so slightly in a mixture of dismay and resignation. His Father would never in a thousand millennia have allowed things to come to such a sorry pass. One more nail in the coffin against the argument that intelligence was an inherited trait.

Odin couldn’t quite believe the absurdity of the position he had been put in by Hamart’s reckless imprudence. The young Raromian chieftain had inadvertently stumbled upon something crucial to the very existence of The Realm itself. Yet he, the ‘All-Father’ — undoubtedly the most powerful being in this dimension, perhaps even many others — could do nothing to avert the firestorm that he could see was about to engulf them all. He was a man of consummate action. The very idea of ‘sitting on his hands’, whilst allowing events that would surely affect them all to play themselves out to their unknown conclusions was alien to him.

He had but one desperate ploy left to avail himself of. Its success though was reliant upon a predicated lack of knowledge on Loki’s part. Odin knew though, that Loki’s understanding of the minutiae of the workings of these proceedings was unparalleled, so in that respect it was only half

a ploy at best. His son had taken advantage of that very same knowledge throughout the hearing to devastating effect. Desperation indeed.

He cursed beneath his breath and glanced out across the silent chamber. As things stood at present, what mattered most was preserving Asgard's laws. If even a quarter of what Hamart believed Loki was up to was true, this would be the wrong time altogether to start setting precedents that Loki would be able to pick to pieces at some future date. The laws were very precise and that exacting precision of which Loki was so enamoured, right now had served the Asgardian people well. Up until this very instant that was. Hamart had presented no indisputable evidence to sustain his accusation. That left him with no choice but to dismiss the case with all that the act of doing so would entail.

He closed his eyes and cursed again, this time Hamart's inexperience. The Rarom were fools to have chosen such a young and inexperienced chieftain. A third curse — to complete the triform — this one for himself and the folly of the hunting trip that had taken him out of the city a week ago. He could now sense Loki's hidden hand in the orchestration of that also. A thorn that had slowly worked its way under his skin to add to the aggravation. If he had been in the city, Hamart would have come directly to him a week ago and circumstances would be much, much different.

There was no benefit in gainsaying that which had already taken place though. There were many arcane solutions which could remedy the situation instantly to be sure, but there were hard and fast rules about such things and as 'All-Father' he was honour-bound to mind those rules. Even if there were others for whom running roughshod over those rules meant nothing. Odin knew, that Loki being Loki, he probably had some petty retribution already lined up for Hamart. There was no way he was going to be satisfied with publicly humiliating the Rarom through their Chieftain.

"Hamart," Odin paused, fortifying himself for what he knew he had

The Twelfth Odyssey / 12

to utter in the next few moments. “You have in the judgement of this court presented a weak case and unless you have any further evidence to substantiate your claims of High Treason,” he paused again, “I will have no alternative but to forego the charges brought against the accused, Loki of the Aesir.”

The great hall fell silent again and several hundred pairs of eyes came to rest uncomfortably on the back of Hamart’s neck. The young Chieftain smiled. He wasn’t very surprised and all of a sudden he didn’t particularly care. He glanced down at his right hand. The series of patterns and sigils etched onto his palm pulsed once, glimmering to life and glowing softly in the darkness beneath the table. He held The Key. What would happen if it were to be lost, particularly now of all times.

Having just recently married a year ago, his wife had not yet given birth to their first child and he could not pass the Key on until that child attained ten years of age. In living memory, there had never been a Keeper of the Key who at the very least had not attained his or her majority. It was an unprecedented situation. He might successfully argue for a stay of execution until the matter could be resolved, but that too would now fall within Loki’s purview.

“Lord DuKane?”

Odin’s deep voice snatched him out of his inattentive reverie and he looked up at the All-Father. In answer, Hamart gave only the slightest shake of his head as the glow faded from the palm of his hand. He seemed to lose all semblance of decorum at that point and didn’t even stand, as was custom when addressing the court. He closed his eyes sombrely and again, this time more noticeably shook his head.

Loud murmurs of discontent filled the hall. Loki smiled. Hamart had blundered straight into the snare that had been set for him. His naiveté and predictably two-dimensional thinking, leaving him to blindly pursue

the trail of breadcrumbs that had been left for him to follow. In truth, with what Hamart knew, or believed he knew, the only option he'd been left with was to do as he had done. By now he had most likely worked out that the entire thing had been a ruse to ensnare him. But at this point, that mattered very little and he wore the expression of a well and truly defeated man.

Odin shook his head slightly and continued with a heavy heart. "Then, in accordance with Asgardian law, Part Four of the Seventh Command, all charges against the accused, Loki, of the Aesir, are foregone."

Odin span quickly on his heels and started hurriedly for the edge of the dais. Asgardian law proceedings were heavily steeped in custom and convention, one of which stated that once the Chieftain sitting in judgement had departed the dais, court proceedings were automatically terminated. If he could only get off of the dais before Loki spoke again, whatever the imp had up his sleeve could be legitimately set aside.

"M'lord," Loki began.

Odin lurched to an unwelcome halt on the seventh and final step of the dais. The hall quietened down again and all attention shifted back to Loki.

"The charges against me of High Treason have been foregone. In your own words the case was weak and without substantiation," Loki climbed to his feet leaning forward and pressing his knuckles against the smooth, black obsidian. "In accordance with the twenty-four commands of law set down by our Creator, I wish," he paused deliberately, allowing the silence in that brief moment to inhabit the huge chamber, "to utilise the Twenty-First Command and exact a just and equitable retribution for my false and heinous accusation."

"No!"

A single shout filled the air. It was quickly joined by others until a few moments later a chorus of disapproving hoots and howls filled the air,

The Twelfth Odyssey / 14

bouncing off of the building's curved wall and reverberating around the chamber.

Odin had expected just that. He suddenly felt the last vestiges of his tenuous hold on what was about to occur slip from between his fingers. The Twenty-Fourth Command gave an absolute right of reprisal to an individual falsely accused of Treason against the Realm. When you factored in somebody of Loki's dangerously unstable nature any absolute rights became highly dangerous concepts indeed.

"Why?" Odin could not hide the dismay in his voice in spite of himself.

"Because it is my right!" Loki's response was almost abusive in tone.

"Loki-," Odin began and then halted at the look of absolute determination on his stepson's face. For whatever reason, Loki wanted — needed — this, very badly. "NO!" said Odin forcefully, "I forbid the use of the charter in this instance," he started abruptly forward down the stairs again, pointing to Hamart and adding, "the boy is young — he erred-"

"The boy," Hamart climbed to his feet indignantly, deciding there and then that he would not be condescended to — even by Odin, "is willing to accept the consequences of his actions."

Odin stopped again on the short stairway and fell silent. He was absolutely certain that Hamart had no idea what those consequences would be, or how far they might reach.

"You have not the right to revoke my privileges, My Lord," Loki said. "As I have stated — they are mine by right."

Odin slumped, in a highly undignified manner back to a sitting position on the steps of the dais. The toe of his right boot dangled tantalisingly off of the edge of the bottom stair. No matter what he said, did, thought or tried, in the end he would have to accede to the inevitable and to the laws of the Creator.

"What is it that you wish?" he asked.

With those words a deathly hush fell like a pall over the chamber. Loki fought back the urge to cry out, a wave of intense euphoria washing over him in that instant as he realised his well-laid plans were beginning to bear the fruit of his endeavours. The quelling of that simple and all too genuine emotion, manifested itself as an almost imperceptible tic at the corner of one of his eyes. He was reminded then of the words of one his most gifted protégés, who said: ‘The great mass of people will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one.’, with that thought clearly in mind, his next words were.

“The immediate execution of Hamart Eödrin DuKane, in a manner of my choosing and the banishment of his peoples, forthwith.”

A collective hiss of disbelief ran through the chamber. Odin could hear the oaths that were being muttered just within ear shot and knew then that not only had he failed, but that the failure was indeed ‘apparent’ to all. A much wiser leader might perhaps have foreseen all of the events leading up to this moment and might have successfully countered them. Now, not only was Loki managing to bend everything to his advantage, but he was conspiring — using the very laws that were used to bring him to this place bound and fettered — to remove his accuser as well as anybody DuKane might possibly rely on to remedy his situation from the picture.

“All Father!” A woman’s voice rang out across the chamber.

Hamart’s heavily pregnant wife rushed out onto the floor of the court room slipping nimbly by the pair of guards who tried to bar her passage. As she came to a stop before the dais she dropped to her knees, her eyes beseeching the only man that could make a difference to the fate of her husband. One of the pair of guardsmen reached out for her, but was waved away by Odin with a shake of his head. The two guards stepped away a short distance.

“Lord Odin, you cannot allow this to continue,” she wiped away the tears

The Twelfth Odyssey / 16

that ran down her cheeks, shaking her head slowly. “You cannot....”

Odin leaned forward and gently stroked a tear from her cheek, lounging back against the stairs as he looked down at her. Sotherland DuKane was almost an adopted daughter, one of the chosen, one of his Valkyrie. It saddened him to see her forced into humbling herself in order to secure her husband’s fate.

He bowed his head in an attempt to escape the gaze of her bright and glistening eyes. “I have no choice in the matter, Lady DuKane.”

“There is always a choice,” was her reply.

“No,” he said with a simple shake of his head, “there isn’t.”

The woman saw the unwavering resolve in his steel blue eyes and knew that any further entreaties would be wasted. She slowly pushed herself back to her feet though it was clearly an effort. Again, one of the guards moved forward, taking her arm as if to steady her but she pulled away, fixing the young man with a hard stare as she finally managed to get herself back onto her feet unaided. She was a Valkyrie. She needed the help of no man. She dropped her eyes back to Odin’s, glaring indignantly down at the top of his head as he sat on the stairs of the dais, staring pitifully at the floor. Then, ever so slowly, she began to unclip her sword belt, allowing it to fall to the ground at Odin’s feet.

The Raromian Chieftain scrambled frantically to his feet, leaning, almost prostrating himself across the obsidian table.

“Sotherland, No!”

She span around to face him, her eyes piercing the semi-darkness with an iridescent flare. “You proceeded with this course of action despite my warnings, despite all of the warnings. You made your choice, My Husband! Please. Allow me the dignity of making mine. I am married to you,” she turned to face Odin before adding, “not the glorious Realm of Asgard,” she spat the last words with a venom that twisted Odin’s gut. Sotherland turned

lightly on her toes and retreated silently across the floor of the chamber, to be consumed by the shadows out of which she had emerged. The pair of guardsmen clapped their fists to their armoured breastplates and also returned to their posts.

“My Lord,” Hamart began, “I-”

Odin held a finger up and Hamart fell silent. He leaned forward slightly, grasping the sheathed sword and lifting it carefully from the steps in front of him. He glanced across at the young man’s confounded expression. Sotherland DuKane’s unexpected and uncharacteristic show of anger was not something her husband would have expected, but of her wishes there was no doubt. Odin could still remember giving the sword to her when she had been enlisted into the ranks of the Valkyrie, she was giving it back now as a gesture of her displeasure with him. Using a thumb he pushed gently against the gold embroidered crossguard, so that the langet was eased past the lip of the scabbard. The blade slipped free with a well-oiled click. He slid the brilliantly polished blade half way out of the scabbard, before sliding it back. The blade clicked home again and he sighed deeply.

The Chief of the Asgardians climbed once more to his feet, turning slowly to glare at Loki. He stood in silence, for what seemed an eternity, fighting a desperate battle to retain what little composure he had left. It was as he stood there, staring across the chamber at his son that he had the revelation that would cause yet another bifurcation on the decision tree. Loki had made two demands. He was due but one. Executing Hamart would remove the immediate problem and would, for Loki, be personally satisfying Odin was sure. The evidence that Hamart had amassed would be none the less compelling though. All that was needed, was for somebody with a more pragmatic approach to fine sieve it. He didn’t doubt that Sotherland — once she had calmed down — would want her husband’s good name restored and if at all possible Loki laid low at the same. Loki

The Twelfth Odyssey / 18

obviously needed both parts of his request discharged. Would forcing him to make a choice hinder his plans in any way?

There were absolutely and ominously no cards left to play. Desperation indeed. He knew from experience that desperation was sometimes a better marshalling of men and circumstance than the very best laid plan. A menacing half-smile momentarily lit his face.

Loki almost grimaced at the sight of it and the sheer joy of whatever it was that had inspired the garish grin, wondering whether Odin had managed to think his way out of the box that had been so carefully crafted to ensnare them all.

“The Twenty-First Command entitles you to a single request only. So you have a choice it seems — the execution of Hamart DuKane, or the exile of the Rarom. Now which shall it be?”

All eyes turned once more to Loki who seemed suddenly shaken. A look of consternation took the place of the superior smirk that had been his constant companion throughout the hearing. Loki leaned forward dropping his eyes to the cold, black tabletop. He appeared to be weighing this latest turn of events, but even then Odin could sense that something was not quite right! He searched his stepson's expression and body language and although outwardly Loki appeared to have suffered a body blow, his plans in part being scuppered by having to make an unexpected choice, there was something in his manner that caused Odin to believe that even this was a carefully crafted conceit.

Hamart, Odin could see had been taken in by the performance and was smiling as he looked across at Loki — almost as if to say, ‘chew on that’. Was there anything that Loki had not accounted for, thought Odin.

As Loki lifted his eyes away from the table, Odin saw the glimmer of a smile ghost across his son's face and his heart almost stopped.

In complete contrast, Loki almost laughed at Hamart's expression of

righteous indignation. Did the young fool not see! Could none of them see!

“The exile of the Rarom,” he finally answered, snapping shut the jaws on his trap.

Odin grimaced, knowing with a degree of certitude that was shocking, that his failure was complete. Salvaging anything from this situation was now well beyond hope. Loki had achieved whatever it was he had come to The Seat for and the Rarom had been his unwitting pawns. He nodded resolutely, as much to himself as anybody else, sucking in a deep breath in order to steady his jangled nerves, before continuing.

“Then, in accordance with the First Charter of Asgardian law, Loki has exacted his just and fair retribution against those who challenged and accused him of treason against The Realm. The Rarom in their entirety will be exiled to a place of my choosing before Viskumnr ‘the Days of Understanding’ come to a close. May the Creator have mercy upon them all.”

Odin swallowed hard and leaned down to snatch his helmet up off of the stair beside him. He hesitated for almost a full instant, then took that seventh and final step off of the dais with all the contempt it deserved. He glanced across the chamber at Hamart again. The young Chieftain nodded once at Odin, one corner of his mouth curling upward slightly.

Odin suddenly doubted the minor victory that they seemed to have won was anything of the sort. Though without knowing exactly what Loki’s plans were, it was hard to tell.

The Chief of the Asgardians grasped his ceremonial lance firmly in one gauntleted fist and then slammed the butt down against the marbled floor. Bright white light bloomed to life with the sound of the terrific crack that filled the chamber, briefly cocooning the Chief of the Asgardians within. When the light faded, he was gone.

Another, smile flitted briefly across Loki’s face as the hundreds of Asgardian dignitaries began to file out of the massive chamber. It was lost

The Twelfth Odyssey / 20

on nobody that had been present that they had been a party to something of moment to them all. It was not just the fact that Asgard's ranks had suffered yet another blow. Firstly, the Limir had been lost and now too the Rarom. It was more the unsettling feeling that just by their presence they had been complicit in something manifestly dishonourable, the toll for which was yet to be fully tallied.



CHAPTER 1

TIME : **Day 2,499 of Viskumnr**

PLACE : *A Place of Odin's Choosing*

Hamart turned quickly at the sound of snapping canvas. Light from inside of the tent flooded out, briefly washing the green grass with shimmering gold. One of his wife's many handmaidens stopped in the entrance of the pavilion her elongated shadow cutting a hole into the light from inside. They had been forced to abandon their plans to travel overnight in order to reach their destination and so found themselves encamped on a hillside plateau overlooking a small settlement that had come to be known as Faith. His lips parted and for an instant it was almost as if he were about to presume to inquire about his wife's health, but once again, they came together again without a sound having passed them. He watched silently as the young woman bustled somewhat industriously past him on some errand or other. He had come to realise after several hours that they viewed

his presence as little more than a nuisance and the very same women who come the morning — when his child was born and wrapped in its swaddling clothes — would be dropping to their knees and bowing to him as he passed by, right now believed themselves to be his masters; and of course, they were right.

From the moment that his wife had calmly announced that she would shortly require the assistance of her midwife, a huge (it certainly seemed huge) obviously well planned and rehearsed operation swang into full gear (it must have been planned and rehearsed surely, though he didn't recall doing either), instantly relegating him to the position of novelty cipher. His questions were summarily brushed aside, his kind words of thanks and encouragement to the women were ignored, scoffed at and largely treated as if they had come from the mouth of a lying degenerate.

His men, several of whom were fathers themselves had tried to tell him not to even attempt to involve himself in it. 'It' being 'women's work'. He could hear their stifled chuckles as he stood watching the woman's back disappear around the side of the pavilion. The laughter ceased instantly, as he turned to glare sullenly into the flaming, torch-lit, semi-darkness at them. Was he really asking that much? Things had always been done this way, one of the men had said. Hamart had replied — so what! She was his wife and he wanted to know that she was alright. He was after all their leader and not the worthless simpleton that he suddenly seemed to have become. Not even worth the effort of a reassuring glance. He shook his head at the seeming absurdity of it all.

His wife's labour could not have been any less well timed than it had been, he thought ironically. They had been on this barren waste that Odin had exiled them to for less than four cycles of the three moons that traversed through the sky overhead. His twenty three thousand subjects had, in only a small amount of time managed to spread themselves far enough apart that

journeying to any of the two dozen settlements that had been established was becoming somewhat of a performance. Which also meant that when there was any kind of dispute that required his intervention he had to travel for days on end just to get there.

So here they all were, three days from what he now called home — three days from any of the little technology — and for that read decent medical care — that they had been allowed to bring with them from Asgard and his wife picked this one, singularly inappropriate moment to say those three magic words. ‘It is time!’

Those three words seemed to have the power to reduce undoubtedly one of the most powerful individuals possibly in the known universe, to a worthless scoundrel for having had the audacity to put his poor wife through what she now had to endure. It was of course all of his doing and so that justified his being left standing outside what had been a very hastily erected tent in the middle of nowhere, listening to his wife, who he had personally seen take a steel crossbow bolt through the thigh without so much as flinching, now screaming loud enough to be heard on the other side of the planet. He somehow felt she was doing it for his benefit.

The young woman brushed back past him again and swept in past the flapped entranceway vanishing again. He sighed loudly this time, gritting his teeth against the desire to scream in absolute frustration. He tempered the growing exasperation, with the thought of holding his firstborn son in his arms and rocking him to sleep. He resumed his pacing back and forth, jumping slightly as his wife let forth another ear-piercing shriek as if to counter the thought. Yes, it was his fault after all.

A newborn’s cry was the very next sound to fill the frigid night air as it took its first breath of life and Hamart stopped pacing, his shoulders slumping visibly as he closed his eyes with obvious relief. He wondered if he would now be allowed access to the tent and made to start forward toward

The Twelfth Odyssey / 24

it, turning after two or three paces and stopping. He had waited this long, he would wait the few moments more until they summoned him for his first look at his child.

It was another ten minutes or so before the flap that covered the entrance was lifted and his wife's midwife Selma stepped through it carrying something wrapped from head to toe in a grey woollen fleece. Hamart stepped before her, stopping her in her tracks.

"My son?" he whispered.

She nodded, with a smile. "Your wife awaits within, Sire. "

"Can I?" he tried to peer over the top of the fleece for a first glimpse, but she calmly drew the child away.

"The night air has a nasty chill on it, My Lord," she told him by way of answer. "Go," she said, "see to your wife. I will quickly check the child to make sure everything is as it should be, bathe him and then return him to your wife's arms within a short while. " She smiled warmly, the first smile he had received all evening. He nodded and hurried forward into the tent.

Inside, the pavilion was warm and well-lit, his wife's hand-maidens were busily tidying away any evidence of what had just occurred, while a pair of them fussed around her, one fluffing her pillows and straightening the quilt that covered her, the other mopping her face, still drenched in perspiration. All activity briefly halted as he entered and only started again when she motioned him forward. Hamart hurried to his wife's side and took the hand she proffered, kissing the back of it reverently before touching it affectionately to his cheek.

"You have a beautiful son, My Lord," she told him.

"It could not have been any less," he replied, "I have a beautiful wife. "

The young girl still tucking the quilt tightly around Sotherland DuKane, giggled bashfully and hurried away out of the tent. All of a sudden they were alone.

She smiled. “He has your sparkling green eyes. Just born and already, he sees everything. “

“Let’s pray everything else he has, he has inherited from you. “ Sotherland frowned and parted her lips as if to deliver a soft rebuke, but he touched two fingers to her lips to silence her. “So much of the time,”he told her, “I feel so unworthy of you. “ He stepped up to her and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly.

A startling scream ripped the silent night, jolting them both. Hamart span, looking toward the entrance to the tent. A deep and sudden sense of foreboding swept right through him and he lurched away from her running full pelt across the pavilion, out through the entrance and back into the darkness skidding to a stop. His men were running from all directions sprinting across the makeshift camp toward Selma’s small tent that had been set up toward the edge of the clearing they had set camp in. His heart leapt into his throat and the sudden pounding of it filled his head with so much noise, he felt he might be deafened. He started running again, even as he saw one of his wife’s attendants stumble from the tent and collapse to her knees, her wracking sobs echoing out over the hillside.

Hamart plunged past her, following several of the men into the tent. The tent that his newborn son had moments before been taken into. He stumbled to a stop, pushing his way through the crowd as even more people pushed in behind him. The sight he was suddenly faced with, seemed to suck every last ounce of air out of his lungs, so that all he could do was collapse to the ground on all fours and gape in horror. Selma, his wife’s closest attendant, lay sprawled on her back on the softly glistening grass, staked there through the hands and feet by four brilliantly polished silver knives. She had been split asunder from her breastbone down to her waist, almost as if something had punched straight through her from underneath and clawed its way into the tent. Blood and gore, stained the canvas walls of

The Twelfth Odyssey / 26

the tent and soaked the earth upon which she lay.

Hamart's head whirled madly and he thought that he might pass out there and then, but from somewhere he managed to find the air to fill his lungs and let out a desperate cry.

“FIND MY SON!!”

Even then, as the men scattered back to the outside, he knew no one ever would.



Hamart stepped up to the gates that closed off the entranceway to the estate and watched as his wife started away up the hillside. Sotherland had conducted this same expedition almost every single day since their son was so violently spirited away from them, almost fourteen years ago to the day. After the initial confusion of that night had died down, the entire area surrounding Selma's tent was found to be suffused with the residue of a kind of sorcery thought to have been long extinguished from the universe.

Someone or thing, had used Selma's body as a conduit between multiple dimensions, an act which required a staggering degree of skill and power. His wife's attendant had been dead long before his child had drawn his first breath, which meant that whoever or whatever it was, had also had the power to take the form of the Midwife; to such an extent that it had completely fooled everybody. This thing, had selected Selma for one reason and one reason only — access to his son. Whoever or whatever it was, seemed to have had knowledge of his wife's pregnancy, had perhaps even followed them from Asgard, although how that was even remotely possible he didn't know. That the security surrounding Odin's arrangements might have failed so miserably had been a constant cause for concern for them all for sometime afterward.

Sotherland DuKane's only concern though was somehow getting her son back, who, fourteen years later she believed was still alive somewhere. She had taken to furious study under Majiir, the Raromian Chaplain of the Asgardian Sorcerers Guild and had proven to have some aptitude for the wielding of magic. Majiir had been the first Raromian to be admitted to that august assembly in twelve generations and their only true Mage. Already an old man when they had all been exiled, Majiir had died less than a year ago and she had taken over where he had left off. She journeyed most days up the hill to the spot where Selma's bones still lay, staked to the ground and tried variations on different conjurations in order to prise open the portal that had originally been created in order to take her son away from her.

Initially, Majiir's efforts seemed to show encouraging signs of bearing fruit and even Hamart was able to hold out some hope for their son being returned to them. But as the years passed Hamart began to sense what Majiir had already concluded. That the task, sadly, was beyond him. Through some unspoken agreement, neither relayed their fears to an already fragile Sotherland, who's entire self-worth seemed bound up in the unspoken promise that their continued endeavours seemed to imply. Eventually, even through her self-imposed fugue, Sotherland was able to see past Majiir's increasingly vague assurances to the well of doubt that surrounded the old man and a crippling despair seemed to take firm hold of her.

Fearing that she might do something foolish, Hamart began to encourage her belief that perhaps one day their son might be returned to them. Now though, the determined almost obsessive nature of her daily pilgrimage was in its own way more frightening. She was pregnant again, this time, he had been told, it would be a girl, but his wife seemed to show no concern for the burgeoning life that grew within her. It was almost as if — to her — the child did not exist. Words of caution from her attendants were roundly ignored, or answered with dire threats. His angry remonstrations

The Twelfth Odyssey / 28

with her were met with outright hostility and condemnation. Most recently, matters had come to a head when she had let slip that her current conjuration would involve the creation of an Lifestone. According to Sotherland, the stone was to be imbued with her own life force.

Sotherland's newly appointed midwife Clarissa, appalled that she might endanger the life of her unborn child in so risky a venture, had roundly castigated her decision to perform the spell whilst with child, explaining that if she imbued such a stone with her own life force, she would also be sucking the life force away from her unborn child. Sotherland bodily threw the woman out of her chambers for her trouble and Clarissa had rushed to see Hamart. When he heard what his wife was attempting to do, he in turn rushed to stop her. By the time he reached her, she had already performed the spell and had created her Lifestone.

Hamart discovered that later on that day, Sotherland had ordered Clarissa be strung up and lashed to within an inch of her life. Nobody dared speak out against her behaviour after that.

That had been three weeks ago. Sotherland had endlessly practiced her incantations and sigils and was now ready to utilise the Lifestone she had created, the purpose of her current lone sojourn up the desolate hillside.

Hamart ran a hand through his hair and shook his head despondently. What could he do, short of having her tied down, or permanently sedated — neither of which would do the unborn child any good. His wife was and always would be a force of nature. She was a Valkyrie, born and bred. It was beginning to come to a point where he would have to do something though, for all of their sakes.

Sotherland marched determinedly up the hillside, telling herself that today would be the day. The creation of the Lifestone had been a stroke of genius on her part. Born of an inspired flash of insight into the structure of

the transport pentagram that had been used to take her son away from her.

Hamart of course, didn't understand, or chose not to. His anger at what she had done to Clarissa was in its own way understandable, but she no longer cared what anybody thought; and in the end it had had the desired effect. No one dared challenge the way she pushed herself; studying all night, sometimes without rest or food; climbing up and down the hillside twice and on occasion three times a day. She knew it was all taking a toll on her and on the child she carried, but in a quiet, dark, shaded corner of her being, she didn't care. She knew she should and dared not admit to anyone, least of all herself, that she fully understood that she was most likely killing herself and one child, in an effort to save another that at best was beyond her reach and at worst was probably long dead.

As she crested the rise of the hillside, a twinge of pain lanced up from somewhere deep inside as if to remind her that the life growing within her did deserve some degree of acknowledgement. It had been brought to life without much thought to its existence on her part and in that sense demanded at least some chance at life.

She waited until the pain had passed before continuing on toward the four knives embedded in the grass before her. Each was almost a foot long. Intricately worked jewelled hilts, each slightly different from the next adorned the quartet. In the fourteen years that they had stood exposed to the elements, the blades had not tarnished and gleamed as brightly in the dim overcast light as the first time she had seen them. Selma's bones lay exactly as her body had since that night. Majiir had bound the area with a spell that would keep the animals at bay and stop them from carrying her bones away. He had believed that, as far as possible, the site needed to be retained exactly as it had been in order to replicate the spell that had opened the portal. She had come to suspect that he had been right in that much of it.

That they had been unable to give the woman a decent burial did not sit right with a lot of people, but again, Sotherland didn't care. Selma had spent her life ensuring the welfare of the innocent young and Sotherland believed that she would be grateful that her bones might help in the retrieval of one of her 'little ones'.

Sotherland knelt before the spellform that Majiir had drawn onto the grass in different coloured powders. The ground all around was festooned with sigils and magical devices that had been added one at a time over the years with each failed attempt. She dipped a hand into one of the large pockets on her skirt and drew out a handful of the specially prepared chalk that the old man had shown her how to create. She quickly and expertly added another symbol to the crowded ground around the bones. She then dipped into another pocket and lifted from it the cherry-sized blue gemstone she had created, enclosing it in the cupped palms of her hands. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, speaking the words of the incantation with a clear, even tone that was almost lyrical in its emphasis. Bright blue light bloomed briefly to life and slipped from between the gaps in her closed hands before fading away. She uncupped her hands and leant forward, placing the now softly glowing Lifestone in the centre of the sigil she had just drawn on the ground. As had happened on several occasions the air around her began to gust and she could feel her hair being swept this way and that with the release of the mystical forces she was beseeching to come to her aid in the conjuration.

Her eyes snapped open as the final words left her lips and she could have sworn that she had seen a flicker of light hanging in mid-air above the bones, but even as she stared it seemed to vanish as if it had never been. The wind died down and the hillside fell silent again. She remained on her knees in silence for sometime afterward, tears streaming down her face as she mourned the loss of her child all over again.

After a short time, her resolve transcended her sorrow and she picked herself up, gathering the hem of her skirts up in two bunched fists and starting away down the hillside again. There were thousands of spells yet to try, if this one didn't work, one of those most surely would.

Hamart saw her coming and sighed deeply, knowing that once more her efforts had been for naught. He shook his head in dismay and determined that he had lost one child and would not idly stand by and lose a second. His wife would be made to see what she was doing if it was the last thing he did on this night. He never could turn away from her endeavours whenever she climbed the hill, even knowing as he did in his heart of hearts the futility of it, but enough was enough.

He turned away and started back across the courtyard to the main house, but stopped dead when as one there was a startled intake of breath from the guards who stood at the gates. He quickly turned back. He had always harboured the fear that one day his wife, overtired from her exertions would take a wrong foot during her descent. The image of her, tumbling uncontrollably down the steep hill, her lifeless body lying in a mangled heap at its base, came to him once more in an awful rush. He was beginning to sense that it would perhaps take her almost losing this child to bring her to her senses. What he saw instead took the breath from his lungs, almost exactly as had happened fourteen years ago....

Sotherland was half a dozen feet from Selma's remains when she sensed the glow in the air behind herself and turned. Four feet above the bones of her long dead Midwife, a glowing pulsating ball of light hung in the air. Every few moments it would pulse and increase in size, until suddenly the ball of light exploded outward to form a tall transparent cylinder of bright blue light. She let her breath out in a rush and turned fully to look at it.

The cylinder of light reached upward for a hundred feet or more before fading away. Dozens of the sigils that she had drawn over the years swam hypnotically across its glimmering surface and she could just about make out the outline of what appeared to be a room within it. Without thinking she started back up the hill toward the brilliantly glowing blue tower of light.

Hamart DuKane was sprinting as if it was his life that depended upon it, up the hill toward the glowing doorway of light. On some distant subconscious level, he could hear the heavy footfalls and the clatter of armour and mail of the half a dozen men that were following in his wake. He was screaming desperately at the top of his voice for his wife to stop, to wait. She continued forward as if she didn't hear him. She most likely didn't. They were only half way up the hill when she stepped into the brilliantly lit portal and only three quarters of the way up it when the portal began to diminish in size. He screamed his wife's name again, the agony in it reverberating around the hillside. The glowing portal had contracted to the size of a man's head by the time he reached the site and then vanished completely with a slight effluxion of energy. The hillside dropped abruptly back into the grey gloom that seemed to be its permanent state. He and the men who had followed all jolted to a stop some of them doubling over with the effort of the unexpected sprint up the steep hillside. Hamart fell to his knees trying desperately to suck in some much needed air, tears of frustration streaming down his face. The men all stood and watched helplessly as their leader slammed one of his fists against the ground over and over. Somehow they all knew, he had lost a son, now a daughter as well as a wife that he would never see again.



TIME : **Day 1,365 of Varnaðr**

PLACE : *Wyld Farmstead near Pransfort, Asgard*

Sotherland's heart was racing frantically as she reached slowly forward and unlatched the main door into the farmhouse and pushed it open. As the light from inside flooded out into the night, she stared aghast into the brightly lit interior of the main building as her eyes took in the scene in utter horror. For several, unendurably long moments, she couldn't breathe, much less speak aloud and crumpled to her knees in the doorway, shaking uncontrollably.

The tears came unbidden to her eyes and began to run in unstoppable torrents down her face.



CHAPTER 2

TIME : August 14, 2192, 20:54.55 Standard

PLACE : *HC-SD Dawnslayer* — *Somewhere in the 'Outdark'*

Princess Vellandra Roxley Miltax-Fro glanced sidelong at her escort as they stood together in the — almost certainly — contrived quietude of the elevator. The young Lieutenant had obviously been 'schooled' by somebody — Tesaira's name jumped instantly to mind — not to engage her in idle conversation on the way down and had taken the 'lesson' to heart, despite her attempts to break the somewhat starchy silence.

What was life coming to, she thought, when a handsome young man in his best dress-uniform didn't take the opportunity to flirt scandalously with a beautiful, exotic Princess? She smiled inwardly at the thought and then glanced up as the last few levels were clicked off on the digital indicator above the doors. The elevator's rapid descent slowed to a gentle stop and the young Lieutenant stepped forward as the doors hissed apart. He was forced

to pull up abruptly, almost running headlong into the petite and elfin Tegan woman who was standing just the other side of the doors.

Tufeht was standing inanimately just inches from the threshold of the elevator's double doors as they parted and smiled broadly upon seeing her. The Lieutenant quickly recomposed himself and glanced across at Vellandra.

"Toran," she began.

"Highness," the Tegan woman replied simply, bobbing her head ever-so-slightly.

Vellandra looked across at the young Lieutenant again. "I'll be fine from here, Lt. Marshall, thank you for the escort."

The Lieutenant seemed on the verge of objecting, but then looked from the Princess to the older woman and back again. He smiled, seeming to think better of whatever objection he had been about to voice and turned to face the Princess more fully, saluting sharply.

"Princess," he said.

Stepping from the elevator, he smiled briefly at the woman standing just outside and started away down the darkened corridor.

Vellandra too, finally stepped from the elevator returning the woman's smile as the doors hissed shut behind her. The Tegan was wearing a floor length, one-piece dress which was woven of some lustrous, multi-hued, blue-green fabric that seemed to at once hold the light and reflect it. As was the way with 'mystics', she had her arms crossed and enveloped within the voluminous sleeves of the dress she wore and in all truth couldn't have looked any the more sagacious if she had been trying.

"What a lovely dress, My Dear," the Tegan said.

Vellandra smiled at the compliment and was forced to admit once more, that despite the woman's short stature and 'assumed' age, Tufeht was a devastatingly beautiful woman. The Tegan wore her hair, which was completely white, fashioned into a long, tightly woven braid which travelled

straight down her back almost to the floor. But the woman's beauty was captured to a greater extent, in her brilliant lavender, gold-flecked coloured eyes which flickered and luminesced enchantingly, even in the partially lit corridor; and within her smile, which radiated a kind of blissful warmth that couldn't help but make one feel sheltered and safe. Vellandra herself was considered one of the most beautiful women among her own people, the Daigorn, but next to this woman, who's flawless porcelain skin seemed to radiate both an inner and outer perfection she had always felt somehow small and unbecoming.

Vellandra smoothed down the shimmering silver fabric of her own dress, self-consciously and smiled at her guest.

"Thank you, Toran," she finally replied. "Did you have any problems getting aboard?"

"None," the woman replied easily. "Your personal invitation was more than enough."

"Good," said Vellandra.

"...and I've asked you on countless occasions to call me Eru," the Tegan gently rebuked. "You've more than earned that right, Vellandra."

"I still think of you as my Teacher," Vellandra explained.

"A task I've not performed 'actively' for some years now," said the Tegan.

Vellandra remained silent, unable to agree with her one-time governess, but at the same time unable to voice that disagreement. The Tegan smiled knowingly and reached out to take her hand, patting the back of it sympathetically. "Come," she said, "let us be about our business."

Vellandra nodded firmly and started forward. As they walked down the corridor toward the room in which the Reception was being held, the music that was being played drifted back along its length toward them. Members of the various Diplomatic delegations wandered here and there in the semi-darkness, obviously still in the deep throes of negotiation, despite

a formal end to the Mission as a whole. Vellandra and Eru Tufeht turned into a short corridor that branched off from the main and drew up just shy of the fall of light that poured from the huge open doorway.

From what she knew, this was one of Super-Dreadnaught's many cargo holds. The crew had done a remarkable job of outfitting the dull grey cubicle, into an area fit for holding a function where royalty and high government officials filled almost every square inch of the floor. The massive bay doors had been locked open and a mixed honour guard of Alliance and Daigorn soldiers lined the length of the short corridor, standing stonily at attention in their pressed and polished dress uniforms. Despite the fact that they were 'at attention', she saw a few of the Daigorn soldiers lift an eyebrow, obviously wondering why it was that she wasn't being announced.

Tesaira, the Seneschal of the Daigorn Royal household, must have felt the soldiers' slight unease and turned in order to find its source. He almost had an apoplectic fit when he saw who Vellandra was with, but a stern glare from the Princess reminded him of the bargain they had struck.

He was an ill-tempered, old — bordering on ancient — curmudgeon of a man. Vellandra knew full well that he valued protocol and decorum above all else. Just the very thought of her entering a room without being 'properly' announced, would have been enough to fill him with an irrepressible indignation. Members of his staff had been 'cashiered' for much less. In all honesty, she fully expected him to forswear the agreement they had made, once he saw who she was with, reach across, pinch her ear and drag her kicking and screaming before her parents, just as he'd done when she was a child and he found her doing something wayward.

She'd had to browbeat the old man at some length, prior to leaving her apartments for the short journey over to the Dreadnaught. Having to resort to outright threats, in fact, before he would agree to allow her to slip into the reception without the usual fanfare that would normally have

preceded so simple an act.

The old man glared balefully at Eru Tufeht for several, long moments, then coughed decorously and turned aside as if to check his notes. Vellandra took that as her cue and exchanged a quick glance with Eru before stepping more fully into the light flooding from the chamber.

“Do you see him?” Tufeht asked.

Vellandra glanced across and down at the woman, who had lifted herself up onto her tiptoes in an almost comical effort to get a better view over the sea of heads that filled the place. The Princess’s eyes swept across the mass of people that filled the capacious hold, finally locating the man they had come to see. He was standing alone, facing the massive viewport that stared out into space at the opposite end of the room to the doorway. She glanced down at Tufeht again and smiled, nodding. Vellandra scanned the room again, this time locating all of the people that she would rather not ‘bump into’ at that point in time.

At the top of that list were her Mother and Father, who at that moment were engaged in conversation with Admiral McKenna. Fleet Admiral Ragan was another; the Marshall of the Daigorn Phalanx was likewise occupied in conversation, along with her brother Tarwen with some of the High Command officers. Vellandra picked a clear path between those two groups and her target, then launched herself across the hold, trusting the Tegan to keep up with her.

Vellandra would have been one of the first to admit, that being a Princess had many advantages. One of the biggest disadvantages though, was the simple and inescapable fact that it was almost impossible to do anything without at least one person noticing. Dressed as she was, for this Diplomatic function, her plan to slip across the room unnoticed had always been a cheerfully optimistic one. Not only did she not make it across the crowded hold unnoticed, but had to stop several times as they crossed it to

make small-talk with various Ministers and one or two of the ship's senior officers before finally arriving at the side of the man they sought. In the entire time since their entering the hold, he hadn't turned away from his inspection of the celestial event that was taking place beyond the huge viewport.

She stood at his back for a moment in order to compose herself, absently wondering if the flecks of grey in his dark brown hair had been so prominent when they had first been introduced, what now seemed quite some time ago.

The Unified Alliance of Planets twelve Special Envoy's were the kind of men and women whose accomplishments were so significant and far-reaching, that just by being in their presence you were made to feel the weight of the very history they continued to write, almost on a daily basis. You couldn't help but stand in awe when in the presence of one of them. For some, particularly those who fully understood the magnitude of those accomplishments, they were nothing less than iconic figures, worthy only of the greatest of respect.

They were integral to the Alliance for three reasons. First and foremost, was the fact that the Alliance – in the form it currently constituted – would quite simply never have come into being without them.

Second, its borders and boundaries were subject to a never-ending cycle of analysis and re-evaluation, as were the raft of treaties and accords that had brought it into being. In some cases, those agreements were the only thing stopping many of the fifty-five races; more than a few of whom were bitter enemies to begin with, from turning on each other in almost hysterical convulsions of threadbare acrimony. As baseless as many of those old feuds now were, they were still more than capable of catastrophically sundering the relatively newborn union.

Third, and most significant perhaps, was the fact that a formal

declaration of 'peace' – no matter how tenuous the link between that word and its actual meaning – existed between the Alliance itself and their adversaries across the border in the confines of the Delphan Confederacy.

The highly integrated mix of two Nians, three Kammaranians, one Phinican, three Phoenicians and two Humans were, along with the Director of the Corps itself, the most highly ranked members of the Alliance's Diplomatic Corps and were accountable only to the joint Presidentship of the Alliance itself.

"First Envoy," Vellandra finally began anxiously. Her heart was pounding as he turned slowly to look at her.

She was somewhat shocked at his appearance. He seemed worn. Somehow 'smaller' than she recalled. She had no doubt that recent events had taken their toll, but his bright grey eyes had lost their engaging sparkle altogether and unusually, he was unshaven, with a day or so's worth of bristly stubble adorning his jaw line and upper lip. She noticed too the lack of a smile and was saddened to see it had gone because of something she had done.

He was most well-known amongst those that had professional dealings with him for his strength of character and sense of honour, but gone was all of that, to be replaced by a sense of melancholy that was almost palpable.

"Princess Vellandra," he bowed his head ever so slightly to her, glancing briefly at her companion.

Vellandra had wondered endlessly about how she would broach the subject of her petition with him, but in the end had decided upon a strategy of directness, concluding that he would most likely see through any attempt to disguise her true intent in any case. She sucked in a pensive lungful of air and began. "Considering the events of the last few days – and I'm fully aware of how much of what happened lies at my feet — would it be inappropriate of me to seek a boon of you?"

As might be expected of a career diplomat, his face betrayed nothing. But there was some subtle change in the very air about him, that suggested he was genuinely taken aback by her question.

Considering the fact that he was the titular Head of a thirty ship delegation that had journeyed close to six million light years — a voyage of over two years – for a meeting with her people that had in itself been three years in the making, a meeting she had brought to a summarily abrupt end, she would gladly have granted him an expression of surprise at the very least.

Considering the fact that one hundred and sixty-five days of negotiations had, just the day before, suddenly and seemingly irretrievably collapsed amid accusations of duplicity and ‘bad faith’, precisely because of her intervention, leaving the treaty that might well have been his crowning achievement in tatters. He perhaps might have been justified had he laughed long and loud, directly into her face at her request. Nevertheless, as was the character of the man, he simply smiled warmly, the lines at the corners of his grey eyes crinkling benevolently as he nodded.

“If whatever you want is within my power to grant, your Highness — then of course you can ask whatever you wish of me.”

Vellandra smiled with obvious relief and glanced to her side. “This is Toran Eru Tufeht, High Priestess of the Daggerleaf Temple Order.”

The man straightened up the tiniest of degrees, before taking the hand that the Tegan woman presented and bending to kiss the back of it reverently. “Your Eminence?” he said, proffering the title usually reserved for senior religious dignitaries.

“First Envoy,” Eru returned equably.

“I’m afraid I have to admit to having not heard of the Daggerleaf Temple Order,” he said.

She waved away his apology. “We’re small. Somewhat secular. I would be

extremely surprised if you 'had' heard of us, First Envoy."

He looked to the Princess for some kind of enlightening explanation. Vellandra cleared her throat nervously before beginning. She knew it would only be a matter of time before Eru was spotted. "The favour I want to ask, is that you talk with the High Priestess for a few moments and that you listen to what she has to say with an open mind and with an open heart."

He hesitated briefly, as if to take stock of an unknown situation. "I listen to everybody with an open mind, Princess Vellandra," he glanced briefly at the Tegan High Priestess again, before turning an inquiring look back to her.

"I know you do, First Envoy," Vellandra said. She glanced at Eru. "I'll try and ensure you're undisturbed for a few moments. But don't count on it being any more than 'a few'." The Tegan nodded and Vellandra bowed ever so slightly at the waist, an act he found somewhat surprising, given the seeming disparity of their relative stations. Vellandra turned and swept away into the crowd.

He turned again to face the Tegan woman and found her examining him, almost as if she were taking his measure. He had confidently stood up to many a scrutinising glare in his time as an Envoy: from Emperors, Kings, Queens and other Heads of State; through to Presidents and governmental Ministers, all of the way down to Tribal and Clan Chieftains. But he hadn't been appraised in such an obvious manner in a very long time. Certainly not since taking on the post of First Envoy that he could recall. The longer she stood silently peering up at him, the more uncomfortable he felt and the harder he found it to hide the discomfort.

"You're not quite what I envisaged," she finally said.

The unexpected statement left him unable to frame a response and for a few moments he found himself floundering in her enthralling lavender, gold-flecked eyes. When finally; he was allowed to break eye contact with

her, enabling him to gather his wits, it felt as if an inordinate amount of time had passed.

“How so?”

He tried to make his response to her casual appraisal of him as nonchalant as her original comment had seemed.

“A little more polished somehow,” she said, then smiled. “Certainly more ruggedly handsome.”

Tegan’s were well known for their promiscuity. One of several races within the Alliance that advocated polygamy as a lifestyle choice, so for some of her first words to him to be flirtatious ones – High Priestess or not – was not surprising. Still, it was hard not to be just a little bit flattered. She was a striking woman.

“Are those marks against me?” he asked.

“No,” she said. He felt the weight of her evaluation of him being lifted from his shoulders by her smile alone. “Just, casual observations.”

He didn’t know why, but he was relieved that he seemed to have her approval. He turned to peer out through the huge viewport, just so that he would not have to continue staring into those enchanting eyes and she followed his lead, turning to join him.

“What do you think of ‘The Alignment’, First Envoy?” she asked.

He smiled. “It’s impressive, Toran Tufeht. Nature never fails to amaze me,” he gazed out through the viewport again and shook his head in obvious wonderment. “A perfectly geometric circle of forty stars. Who would have thought such a thing possible, given the supposedly random nature of the Universe.”

She turned at his words to peer curiously at him. “Funny, that you should use those ‘exact’ words,” she said.

“Funny?”

She looked hard at him for several, long moments before answering his

question. “Do you realise the ‘The Alignment’ can only be viewed as such – ‘...a perfectly geometric circle...’ – as you so aptly put it, from this very location?”

He nodded. “I have been told as much.”

“As have I. I’ve also been told a thousandth of one degree of a parsec in any direction from here is the difference between seeing this ‘perfect circle of stars’,” she paused to gesture out at the ring of Class I Supergiants that was being highlighted by a HUD being projected onto the surface of the viewport, “and just a random grouping of those very same stars. Which is what everybody else who is not within that one thousandth of a degree and looking in this direction from this vantage point is probably seeing right now.

“When you put it like that, there’s nothing random about that set of circumstances, is there?” he said.

“Indeed,” she returned.

He turned more fully to look at her. “What brings you out here, Toran Tufeht. I wasn’t aware that the Tegans, never mind a ‘...somewhat secular...’ religious grouping of Tegans were on such ‘good terms’ with the Daigorn.”

She laughed good-naturedly. “My title has little to do with my affiliation with the Daigorn,” she told him. “I have a certain skillset, that the Queen valued immensely at one time. My relationship with the Daigorn comes to no more than that. It seems all-but impossible for anybody to be on ‘good terms’ with these people, First Envoy,” she added, “a fact of which you’re almost certainly no doubt now aware.” She saw the way he dropped his head and instantly regretted the tone that her words seemed to suggest. “I’m sorry your negotiations with them came to an unfruitful end.” She caught the quick glance he fired Vellandra’s way before turning to face the viewport again. “What brings me out here?” she asked rhetorically. “The ‘Alignment’,” she paused before adding. “...and you, First Envoy.”

He turned to look at her again. "Me?"

"Yes, First Envoy."

"Do the Tegan's have diplomatic issues with your Alliance Charter, Toran?" he asked. "If they do, the Congress of Planets is a far better forum for-

"No, no," she waved him off.

"Is the Daggerleaf Temple looking for sponsors or-

"Most certainly not!" she interrupted again with a pleasant smile, obviously amused.

"Then this has to do with me, personally?"

"It does indeed," she replied.

He turned again to peer at her more curiously. "Do we know each other, Toran Tufeht?"

Again, the disarming smile. "No, First Envoy. But I feel nevertheless that you and I will come to know each other quite well over the course of the next few years to come."

"Oh. What makes you say that?"

"I have my sources," she replied with a knowing smile. One of the Stewards approached with a tray holding an array of beverages. Both of them declined.

"Toran-

"Call me Eru," she interrupted.

He nodded at the honour she was obviously according him. "If you call me, Mitch."

She smiled. "Would you mind if I called you Mitchell instead," she asked. "It's such a strong-sounding name."

"I haven't been called Mitchell in what seems like forever," he told her.

She smiled again. "Mitchell it is then," she said. "I like to distinguish myself from the multitude whenever I can."

“What brings you to seek me out, Eru?”he asked again.

“These people,”she replied cryptically. “The Daigorn. They truly do need you. You do realise that?”

“I’m more aware of that fact than anybody, Eru.” He sighed, shaking his head. “They need the Alliance. They need us even more than they would care to admit. Supposedly wandering around out there for the last ten thousand years, they’ve been part of our lives for the last five hundred and twelve and quite simply this existence out here on the fringes of nothingness is killing them. Their numbers are dwindling rapidly and too few new birth’s are being registered. They’re just too stubborn and independent to acknowledge the truth of the facts that are plain for everybody else to see.”

“The Daigorn are one of the ‘Lost Races’. They’re an incredibly ancient people, Mitchell,”she said. “A proud people-”

“Pride be damned!”Mitch spat, far louder than he had intended. The noise level of the general conversation immediately around them dropped momentarily and those nearest, who’d heard what he said turned to look briefly his way.

The smile fell away from her face for the first time since they had been introduced. “Pride is a powerful emotion, Mitchell and Empires far greater than the Daigorn have fallen because of it.”

He nodded and turned to reface the viewport. “That doesn’t make them any the less gone, when they finally do fall, Eru,”he whispered.

“Undoubtedly,”she agreed. “But for a people that once owned everything they cared to have. It’s somewhat of a ‘fall from grace’ to their present position as the gypsies of our age. Because they failed to ‘Ascend’ like the Lorvane, or the Emmesaal or the Du’uri it’s my belief that they feel, every bit as ‘lost’ as the races that ascended and are no longer physically extant.”

“Ascension?”he scoffed incredulously. “I hear that word bandied around far too often for my liking,”he murmured as if to himself. “There’s little

evidence for anything other than those races reaching the end of their natural evolutionary cycles and dying off.”

“You are probably right. For those of us who lean more toward the spiritual. ‘Ascension’ is a reality, Mitchell,” she told him simply.

He gave her a somewhat lop-sided grin. “Nian mysticism, Eru?” he shook his head at the concept dismissively. “I know scores of highly eminent sociologists, historians and xenobiologists,” he paused, “some of them are even Nian. They would argue that hypothesis bitterly with you.”

She smiled back. “Perhaps. What is clear, is that those other races. The ones which the Nians and Kirlians will only speak about in whispers, did exist. Now they are gone. Poooff!” she said gesturing with a hand. “All except ‘The Sprawl’...”

“Another myth!” he snapped irritably.

“...and the Daigorn,” she continued quickly, going on to add. “Were the Daigorn not thought to have been a myth as well up until their reappearance five hundred and twelve years ago?” He was forced to concede her point. “If the Daigorn exist, then why not ‘The Sprawl’. Two races, both of which apparently chose not to ‘Ascend’ -”

“Ahhh,” Mitch cut in again. “And this is where we get to the meat on this particular bone. They chose not to so that they could, what?” he asked rhetorically. “Stay behind and fight over everything of material value that was supposedly left behind by the others?”

“That is indeed one theory,” she said.

“So then,” he continued. “If we’re to extrapolate and take this ‘theory’ of yours forward, we’re left with, what conclusion?” she raised an eyebrow as if to instruct him to continue with his dissection of ‘her’ theory. He smiled and obliged her. “We would have to conclude, given the circumstances of their reappearance five hundred years ago, that the Daigorn were perhaps the losers in that battle and that they were sent packing by the Sprawl?”

“Again,” she said, “that is, as you suggest, one reading of the facts as they stand.”

“It’s a reading that doesn’t exactly paint the Daigorn in a very charitable light.”

“No,” she replied candidly. “Indeed it doesn’t,” she paused. “But then,” she gestured around the room with the sweep of an extended arm. “These negotiations were ‘your’ idea Mitchell, were they not?”

He stood back and away from her by half a pace or so, as if she had, just that instant turned into something deadly. Something to be avoided at all costs. The underlying but unspoken question being; why would ‘you’ — or anybody for that matter — want to negotiate with a people willing to give up an existence as some kind of higher spiritual being, in order for greater material gain?

She began again. “But, as you stated — it’s only a theory, isn’t it? and not a very well regarded one at that.”

Mitch, who was unused to being ‘outmanoeuvred’, wondered again who this woman was. “So?” he began again. “Where are they then?” he asked. “From all indications, The Sprawl – if indeed they did exist – were a ferociously bloodthirsty and savage people, whose belief system, if indeed it could even be termed a ‘system’, seems founded on the nihilistic basis that an individual’s right to life, only existed so far as that individual could withstand the right of another to take that life from them. When the Nians and the Kirlians do ‘whisper’ of ‘The Sprawl’ they speak of a race that was hellbent on nothing short of destroying or dominating every lifeform within their reach. If the Daigorn had lost that battle, why would The Sprawl have let even one of them survive, never mind fifty million. In fact, from what is said of The Sprawl they would have followed the Daigorn across the galaxy en masse into this, into ‘our’ sector of space, in order to eliminate every last one of them. Why are we even still alive, Eru?”

“All valid questions, Mitchell. But what if we were to suppose a slightly different reading of the facts. What if we were to suppose that the Daigorn were in fact the victor’s of that battle that was fought almost ten thousand years ago?”

Mitch wondered briefly if it was a ‘trick question’. “Then I would have to ask you,”he began, “if the Daigorn were the victor’s. Where is all of this wonderful technology that they stayed behind to seize. Why are they wandering about the galaxy like some kind of tribe of nomadic pariahs?”

She beamed proudly. Almost as if a favourite student had just worked out a difficult problem without her assistance. “Now that,”she said. “Is a very good question.”

“And your answer to that question would be?”

“I don’t have an answer to that question that I can share with you right now,”was her response.

Again, her peculiar choice of words put him on guard. It was an odd turn of phrase to be sure and one that on the face of it could be read in several different ways.

He knew he would have to pick his words very carefully with this woman. “So, tell me something else instead, Toran Eru Tufeht, High Priestess of the Daggerleaf Temple Order. Why is it that the Daigorn seem to resent ‘us’! Why do they despise us enough to condemn themselves, their children, their children’s children, to a slow agonising extinction out here! A stone’s throw away from people who would openly welcome their wisdom and their inspiration. People that earnestly desire their counsel. They didn’t ‘ascend’, right — I get it! That was their choice — so you say. It isn’t the fault of the races that they left behind. Whatever it is that they feel they are rightfully due. We didn’t take from them,”he argued.

“No we didn’t,”she replied. “The First Delphan Confederation lasted over eight thousand years, Mitchell. The Delphan’s brought such peace,

prosperity, stability, growth — both material and metaphysical to this sector of space that nobody foresaw their fall. But fall they did. Eight thousand years Mitchell,” she whispered. “They were on the cusp of ‘ascension’ but lost it all when a radical scholar — when one man — simply began to question their way of life. The Alliance of Planets is this sector of space’s second attempt to reach that lofty goal. The Daigorn look at us and they see us going where perhaps they should have. They’re afraid that in ten thousand years, we’ll ascend and then it will be just them, caught between ‘the Sprawl’ and the Delphans.”

“Ten thousand years,” Mitch looked down at her. “You pull that figure out of the air as if you know something the rest of us don’t.”

The smile returned. “I don’t,” she said smugly. “But the Nians and Kirlians, who are the oldest of the New races, surely do. Why do you think it is that the New Alliance Calendar that was established when the Graffonhite Treaty was ratified — of which the Nians and Kirlians were the primary architects — has only ten Eras. Each a thousand years long. What do you think, they think is going to happen at the end of those ten Eras, Mitchell?”

Mitch chuckled, parting his lips to deliver the ‘stock’ answer that was always, delivered by the Nians and Kirlians, whenever that very question was posed. It occurred to him though, that she probably knew that ‘stock’ answer as well as he. The smile faded slowly from his face as he found himself considering what she said in a new light. He knew the history of the ‘Lost Races’ as well as anybody. He’d studied the Daigorn intensely for three years before leaving for this mission. Could it really have been that simple? Could they just be, ‘afraid’ as she put it. Mitch knew he had a special ability for ‘reading’ both people and situations. All of the Special Envoys did. That ability was far stronger within him though than any of the others — which was why he had been promoted to the post of First Envoy.

When he had been tasked with the mission of bringing the Daigorn

into the fold, he understood it was not going to be an easy mission. But could he really have overlooked the prime motivating force behind the Daigorn as a race?

“At their current rate of decline, the Daigorn are not going to last another thousand years. Never mind ten,”he said sullenly.

Eru nodded. “Be that as it may-”

“This is all academic in any case,”he interrupted her. “The Mission is over,”he shrugged, then added. “Thanks to your protégé.”

Eru turned to look across the room at Vellandra. “I’m afraid, Vellandra outgrew me years ago, Mitchell. I would have to say, she’s one of the most intelligent and far-sighted women I have ever known. But let us lay the blame of this debacle where it should rest. Vellandra rightly pointed out some elements that should have been factored into these negotiations from the start — but weren’t,”she turned to look up at him again. “You need to take what that young woman said, very seriously. The Congress of Planets needs to put its own house in order and needs to be sure of its own motivations for inviting the Daigorn into the fold.”

“I take what she said, very seriously indeed,”he said through gritted teeth.

The Tegan stepped around and in front of him again, drawing his attention back to her. “Do you believe in prophecy, Mitchell?”

He turned slowly to look at her again, confused about the sudden change of topic. “No. I don’t,”he answered tightly.

“And yet,”she turned looking out across the room. “I count three, what is it you call them — ESPer’s in this room attached to the UAP delegation.”

Mitch followed her examination of the room. She was indeed right, there were three. “Telepath’s,”Mitch told her. “The Daigorn have their own, I’m sure,”

“But of course they do. Their are seven Daigorn telepath’s in the room as we speak,”she informed him.

The Twelfth Odyssey / 52

“How-”

“One doesn't become, High Priestess of even a small, Secular, Tegan religious Order without having — some abilities.” she told him.

He chuckled. “Telepathy is a proven field, Eru,” he shook his head. “Clairvoyancy...”

“The High Command has clairvoyant's within its ESPer Division, does it not?”

“They do-”

“In fact, Ellen Moon who heads the Division is a Level One Clairvoyant, is she not?”

He nodded again. “I believe she is.”

“She sits on the High Command JCS,” Eru continued.

“...and?” Mitch pressed hotly.

“And yet you profess not to believe in it?” she argued.

“The High Command and the UAP Diplomatic Corps are entirely separate entities. Each has their own procedural methodologies. I've been schooled over the years not to rely too deeply on Clairvoyancy. ‘Guesswork’ is what one man, a ‘very skilled’ and extremely proficient ESPer once told me it was. It's been statistically proven that more often than not, the things Clairvoyant's predict just don't bear the fruit that's promised.” He paused. “Is that what brings you to me?” he asked. “You've had some sort of Clairvoyant vision about me?”

“Not exactly,” she replied.

“Then what?” he asked, “exactly?”

“We've had in our possession at the Daggerleaf Temple, for some time now, an artefact. It was left with us and in our care. We were given the charge of locating the individual who is meant to protect it and pass it along to its final recipient.”

“So?” Mitch didn't like the direction the conversation was heading in all

of a sudden.

She sighed. “The artefact has an attendant prophecy known within the Daggerleaf Temple Order as ‘The Twelfth Odyssey’ as well as certain keys which were meant to help us identify the ‘True Keeper’ of the artefact, the one meant to protect it and pass it along.

“You think I’m this, ‘True Keeper?’”he asked.

“I do,”Eru said simply.

“And what brings you to that conclusion?”he asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. He was now beginning to think of some way of excusing himself without offending the woman.

“Two of the three keys point toward you being the ‘True Keeper’, Mitchell Rand.”

Mitch looked around and caught the eye of Princess Vellandra again. She was holding court amongst a large group of the *Dawnslayer’s* junior officers, but was staring intently at him even as she laughed and joked with them. Mitch wondered again what Eru Tufeht’s connection to Vellandra was.

“First Envoy?”Eru began again, jolting him back from his thoughts.

“Only two?”he asked.

She nodded. “The third key is unfortunately somewhat vague. Only the ‘True Keeper’ would know if it referred to him or not.”

“Would you mind if I asked what these ‘Keys’ were?”

She nodded. “I will use the exact wording as transcribed by the first Toran of the Order, Xarris Bonacita Vallunsinh one thousand years ago to this day,”she told him. She waited for his acknowledgement of the importance of that fact before continuing. “The First Key states that the ‘True Keeper’: *‘...shall be presaged by a Millennial Alignment of Celestial Magnificence – A geometrically perfect circle of forty stars...’*”

He now understood why she had been so taken with his choice of words

earlier on. “As you yourself said, Toran. Anybody within one thousandth of a degree of a parsec of this location is seeing the same thing. That’s a hell of a lot of people your ‘key’ could apply to.”

“No, First Envoy,” she countered firmly. “The ‘perfect circle’ can only be seen from here. This very point. As you move away from this location out toward the edges of that fraction of a degree of a parsec, the circle is a circle to the naked eye, but it is not a ‘geometrically perfect’ one.”

“OK,” he agreed, then turned to gesture out through the viewport to the array of ships that were spread out before them. Thirty were part of the Alliance’s Diplomatic Mission, there were a further one hundred and forty that were part of the Daigorn Fleet and God only knew how many scientific research vessels that had turned up in the last week or so as the ‘The Alignment’ drew closer. “With the Daigorn Fleet and their Homeships being here, there must be close to over fifty or sixty million individuals that can still see those stars as a ‘perfect circle’.”

She nodded. “That is true. The Second Key though states that the ‘True Keeper’: *‘...shall be at once a manifest warrior at heart, mantled and adorned with the ultimate ‘Seal’ of Concord...’*, the Primary meaning of the word Concord in this instance I think we can assume is some reference to Peace,” she paused again to await his response.

“Eru,” he glanced around. “That could refer to almost anybody on the *Dawnslayer*.”

“No, Mitchell,” she argued gently, “again — it could not. You did have a distinguished record in the High Command before you joined the Diplomatic Corps, did you not?” she asked.

“Distinguished?” he queried.

“You were in the High Command for fifteen years. For five of those years you were in the High Command’s 23rd Special Operations Group.” Mitch was genuinely astonished that she knew anything about his time in the

SOG. It was the sort of information that very few people had access to. “Would you like me to recall some of the engagements you were involved in?”

“Engagements?” he said as calmly as he could.

“Operation Silverholt for instance,” she whispered, just as evenly.

This time, he was shocked. Knowing about his time in the SOG was one thing. Claiming intimate knowledge of operations he had been involved in, was another thing altogether. Whoever she was, her sources were impeccable.

“How could you possibly know-” Mitch cut himself off and looked around the crowded room, sighing deeply. “I say again, we’re on a Military battleship that is part of a Diplomatic mission of peace, that description of yours could apply to a lot of people on this ship.”

“Earlier I said, we believed ‘peace’ to be the primary meaning of the word Concord, but the key says, he will be ‘...*adorned with...*’ or wearing ‘...*the ultimate ‘seal’ of Concord...*’” She leaned forward and brushed a finger across his medal of office that was pinned to the deep blue sash he wore diagonally across his body. The Medal that belonged only to the First Envoy. “The word Concord also has a Secondary meaning,” she told him. “A meaning specific to you. The Prime Emissary of the Congress of the Planets, ‘The Curators of Concord’.”

Mitch swallowed hard. It was as if an inescapable vice was closing in around him with every word she uttered. Even though he didn’t want to he asked. “The Third Key?”

“The Third Key states: *‘he will stand alone — having been ‘betrayed’ by all that once was held most dear...’*” she didn’t have to await his reaction this time. Mitch stepped back a pace as if he had been physically slapped at hearing her words. “Ah,” she said, noting his reaction. “This is what you feel has happened here, is it not?” she asked. “I feel that I know you, Mitchell

Allan Rand, First Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to The Congress of Planets – The Curators of Concord. ‘That’ which you hold most dear is the institution of the Unified Alliance of Planets. The institution you have spent almost thirty years of your life in one form or another, protecting and strengthening. It is this Institution that has taken you away from your wife and child for the last three years and will keep you from them for another three and yet, somebody, within the governing body of that institution has taken it upon themselves to sabotage this most important mission of yours, destroying your attempt to bring the Daigorn under the protection of the Alliance of Planets.”

Mitch stared disbelievingly down at the alluringly beautiful Tegan woman, who – right then – despite her diminutive stature seemed somehow larger than life itself. After Vellandra’s revelations of the day before, he had done a little bit of digging of his own and was only now just beginning to put together in his own mind what he believed had brought these negotiations to such an unceremonious end. How could she possibly have put a name to the feelings that had been warring within him for a day and a night. When he himself had been completely unable to do so until that very moment. Betrayal! That was as good a word for it as any other he could think of. The answer of course, is that there was absolutely no way she could have. She was obviously an ESPer of some ability, but he had too many psychic blocks and shields, erected by entire teams of ESPer’s working together for her to have been able to read his mind.

“What is this ‘artefact?’” he asked.

She dropped a hand to one of the pockets of her shimmering blue-green gown and pulled from it a small, brown, highly lacquered wooden box. She lifted the lid on the box and held it up toward him. Mitch examined the Tegan closely for a few moments before lifting the small box out of the palm of her hand. Sitting nestled within was a cherry sized, pale blue,

opalescent, gemstone. It had been mounted and set in what he assumed to be a silver, precious metal of some form that had been inscribed all around with symbols and markings of unknown derivation. The polished mount of the pendant had been threaded through with a slender silver necklace, whose close-knit links gave the chain the look of a string of liquid metal.

“It is called ‘The Amulet of Orr’,” she told him.

He looked down at it again after briefly meeting her eyes, being irresistibly drawn to the rainbow colours that seemed to swim across its polished surface. It was almost as if there was some prismatic, otherworldly liquid trapped within the gemstone itself. He lifted the pendant out of the box, drawing it a little closer to his face in an attempt to read the markings.

The jolt of energy that coursed through his system the moment that he touched the surface of the smooth gemstone, staggered him, almost to the point of dropping him to his knees with its potency. He felt the cold glass of the viewport at his back and knew he had been forced backward at least that much.

Before he could recover from the initial shock he was assaulted by several, brief but violent explosions of mental imagery. Each little vignette could only have been measured in fractions of a second, but at the same time, each seemed a fully realised scene that stretched on well beyond the bare instants it must have taken to flit through his Mind’s Eye. He was unsure as to whether there were dozens, hundreds, thousands even. He only knew that the rate with which they passed through his conscious mind made the entire experience staggeringly painful to endure. With each burst of imagery one scene amidst the *mélange* stood out...

...a young girl with bright green hair. She was sighting down the length of an arrow, taut muscles holding the clothyard shaft nocked against the string of a bow. He could feel the warmth of the sun on her bare arms, he

The Twelfth Odyssey / 58

could hear the creak of the bow as she held it at full extension and the rustle of the wind through the tall grasses that surrounded her. Arrayed behind her a large group of armoured men and women stood in mute silence. A twitch of a smile came to her lips briefly before she released the arrow and set it flying....

That image snapped away from him, getting caught up in the torrent of imagery that burst through his mind, only to be replaced by another brief snatch, this time....

...a woman with jet black hair, was standing on the large balcony of an apartment. She too was surrounded on all sides by dozens of men and women. Whereas in the first scene, they had been wearing armour. In this one, the men and women were richly dressed in modern day clothing and seemed to be celebrating some event. The woman was staring out across a city skyline that was deeply familiar to him, toward some mountains in the distance. Some intuitive sensation deep within her drew her eyes toward one of the mountain peaks in particular. She smiled, lifting the glass she was holding as if to salute a worthy adversary. Then brought the glass to her lips and drank....

That scene too, snapped and whirled away from him with a stomach-churning tumble, only to be swept away into the stream of imagery, which finally slowed to a trickle and then stopped entirely.

Mitch sucked in a deep breath and exhaled desperately. It was almost as if he had literally been underwater, swept along by a powerful undertow that threatened to pull him down into a fathomless darkness. Somehow, he had escaped it and clawed his way back to the surface. That first lungful of air after breaking the surface of the metaphorical body of water, had

been painful in the extreme. His heart was racing uncontrollably and he clutched at his chest, fearing it might explode with the effort. He dropped the pendant back into the box and looked up at the smiling Tegan.

“What was that?”he gasped.

“What was what?”she asked in return. “Did you see something when you touched the amulet?”

Mitch swallowed hard and shuddered intensely as the afterimages faded from his mind. “I-”he paused, turning to look out through the viewport again. “You said your Order has had this thing, a thousand years?”he asked.

“A thousand years today,”she corrected him.

He desperately wanted to touch it again, but somehow knew it would be unwise to. “What if I said I still didn’t believe that I was the one meant to ‘have’ this thing?”he asked. “I don’t believe in Clairvoyancy, Prophecy or whatever else you want to call it. I certainly don’t believe in it as a valid tool upon which to base my actions.”

“Then I would say you were a fool, Mitchell Rand,”she replied bluntly. “But as I said, I know you. Probably as well as you know yourself. I know without a shadow of a doubt. You are nobody’s fool.”

He looked hard at her for several moments, then flipped the lid on the box closed and attempted to hand it back to her. “Maybe you don’t know me at all.”

She didn’t take the box back. “You haven’t yet asked me why you should take this amulet. You haven’t asked me what is at stake here?”

“Toran Tufeht,”Mitch cut in. “I haven’t asked for the very simple reason that I don’t intend to take this from you. I’m not interested in whatever it is that-”

“If the ‘True Keeper’,”she broke in reclaiming his attention, “fails to take up his charge then the ‘Citadel of Voices’ shall claim this Amulet and open with it the ‘Ocean of Darkness’.”

“Citadel of Voices? Ocean of Darkness?” he pressed the heels of his hands against the sides of his head in exasperation.

“Within our order, we have found other references to The Citadel of Voices, stating it to be a ‘vile, callous beast that will destroy worlds to open the ‘Ocean of Darkness’.”

“What is this Ocean of Darkness?” he enquired.

“We have found no references to what the ‘Ocean of Darkness’ may be or signify,” she told him.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he huffed tiredly. She shrugged innocently. He thrust the box out toward her again. “Take this! I don’t want it — I don’t want any part of your prophecy.”

Another image flashed unbidden through his mind. An image of the same green-haired girl. She was running desperately, as if her very life depended upon it, through a thickly wooded forest that clung to the side of a mountain. Mitch knew without seeing her pursuers, that she was being chased. He knew it absolutely, he knew it viscerally. He grunted with the pain of the wild panic that pumped through her veins. The vision ended as abruptly as it had begun and he sucked in another desperate breath.

“What have you done to me?” he wheezed. The brief scene seemed burned into his subconscious like the afterimage of a lightning bolt.

“Mitchell,” she replied with a simple shake of her head. “I cannot take the amulet back. More, I would be failing in my charge if I did not convince you to accept it.”

“Then you’ve failed. Take it back!”

“I can’t,” she persisted maintaining her equanimity.

“Then I’ll throw it into the nearest waste disposal chute I come across!” he snapped at her. Yet another image flashed through his mind. This time it was the second woman. Her hair was as white as snow this time – a complete contrast to the black – but it was definitely her. She was lying in a hospital

bed, her head bandaged, her face horribly bruised and battered. She was struggling desperately against the straps that held her secure, screaming in what could only be described as an incandescent rage.

Mitch gasped again as the image ripped through his mind and then faded.

“You must do with it as you see fit,” Eru told him.

“You’ll give me this thing,” he gasped. The slowly fading vision had almost been powerful enough to knock him to his knees once more. “This artefact that has been in your Order’s care for a thousand years knowing that I’ll throw it away!” he barked. “How would that not be failing in your charge if you gave it to me! Take it back — I don’t believe in your prophecy!” he shouted angrily.

...Yet another scene, this time of the green-haired girl, falling to her death from a cliff-face. Mitch turned away from Eru, almost falling – just as the green haired girl was – and found himself clutching at the large observation window for support as the entire room span dizzily around him.

“First Envoy,” Vellandra whispered. She had suddenly reappeared at his side, helping to hold him aloft. “What have you done to him!” she hissed at Eru.

The Tegan, turned her attention from Mitch to glare at her. “I’ve done nothing to him, Vellandra,” she said calmly.

Mitch glanced frantically up and around and at Vellandra, his head throbbled intensely as the last of the visions faded. The room had finally stopped spinning and he was finally able to look around. He noticed that his tirade and odd behaviour had drawn the attention of most of the room which was now in silence.

“Take it!” he snapped at Eru, forcing the box back toward her again. “I don’t believe-”

“I believe!” Eru interrupted forcefully. “I believe. Enough for both of us,

Mitchell Rand,” she whispered.

Her profession of reverent faith in him stopped all further protestations dead in their tracks and seemed to refill his lungs with the air he had been finding it so difficult to take in. Mitch looked up and around the room at all of the people who were now watching what was happening between them. He caught the gaze of Admiral Sambal McKenna, she raised a querulous eyebrow and he turned his attention back to the Tegan High Priestess.

“What must I do?” he asked finally.

Eru Tufeht gave a deep sigh of relief. “Do as you feel you must, Mitchell Rand. I believe that circumstances will play out as they will. In the course of those circumstances finding their path, the Recipient of the Amulet of Orr will cross your path. You will know when this occurs.”

“First Envoy,” Vellandra whispered. “Take the amulet. Surely no harm can come of it if you accept it.”

“We don’t know that Vellandra!” Mitch snapped fixing a hard stare on Eru. “Who is this woman to you, anyhow?” he asked.

“She is — was my Novo’it, my Mentor. She practically raised me and Tarwen when my parents were busy attempting to keep this fractured society of ours together out there in the middle of nowhere. Without her influence on us — on me, these negotiations, would probably not even have come to have been,” she told him. “I’m sorry that we haven’t been able to come to terms with the Alliance,” she looked him directly in the eyes before adding, “this time. But do this thing, for me — and I ‘personally’ will be in your debt.”

Mitch looked from Vellandra to Eru and then back again. “You believe in her that much?” he asked.

“I do,” Vellandra said simply.

Mitch exhaled deeply, shaking his head in an effort to clear the heavy grey clouds that had taken up residence in his head. He nodded. “Alright,

I'll take this Amulet of yours, but understand this — I won't go looking for this 'Recipient' of yours."

"And yet you shall meet," Eru told him with a zealot's conviction.

"Have you told him about what to do if the stone begins to glow?" Vellandra asked.

"I've been attempting to get the First Envoy to accept his charge, Vellandra," Eru replied.

"What do you mean if the stone begins to glow?" Mitch cut in. "What happens if the stone begins to glow?"

"If the stone begins to glow. That in all likelihood will mean that you are in the presence of the Citadel of Voices," Eru explained. "Suffice it to say — that would not be good, for anybody. The only known way of keeping the Amulet from the Citadel of Voices," she paused. "Is to destroy the stone at its centre."

"And after I destroy the stone. What good would the amulet be to this 'Recipient' of yours?" he asked.

"If the 'True Keeper' of the Amulet makes a sacrifice, the Amulet of Orr can be reclaimed after its destruction."

"What sacrifice?" Mitch asked warily.

"I don't know what the sacrifice will be, Mitchell," she replied. "Nobody knows."

"Great!" Mitch hissed. "Just Great!"

He noted the small knot of people making their way across the room toward the three of them and sighed deeply, wondering just what he was getting himself into. The group of five people included Admiral McKenna, the Admiral of the UAP Diplomatic Fleet; her Executive Officer Commander Sidara Meridan; Vellandra's Mother, Queen Yviene; her Father Prince Regent Dask Ixill; and Marshall of the Daigorn Phalanx Doran Ragan.

“Dropha!” Vellandra swore crudely.

“Vellandra!” Eru hissed, shocked.

Mitch looked from Vellandra to Eru. The small woman pulled herself up slightly as if attempting to make herself a less palatable target. She was preparing to do battle.

“Toran Eru Tufeht,” the Regent began caustically. “I thought we had seen the last of you.”

“Apparently not, Highness,” Eru answered unabashed.

“I told you what would happen to you if I ever found you so much as talking to my daughter or son again. Did I not make myself clear!”

“Father!” Vellandra stepped forward as if to protect Eru.

“You made yourself abundantly explicit, Highness,” Eru replied, stepping around Vellandra.

“What are you doing here, woman?” the Regent thundered angrily. “How did you inveigle yourself aboard this ship?”

“I brought her aboard!” Vellandra snapped at him. This time the room did fall silent.

“Vellandra,” the Queen began. “She was forbidden to set foot aboard any Daigorn vessel.”

“And yet, I am not aboard a Daigorn vessel, Your Majesty,” Eru put in flippantly.

“So you’re not!” the Regent grated. “Depart at once, Madame. Your presence here is an offence to us. This will be your final warning. If you or any of your followers are found within the ambit of our Fleet once we return there, I will have the Marshall of the Phalanx hunt you down and end you all.” He glanced across at Admiral McKenna then to Mitch. “And you wonder why these negotiations failed, First Envoy,” the Regent span on his heels and strode away across the room. A path opened up through the press of the crowd as if he were the negative and they the positive, closing

in behind him like a wave as he went.

“What does he mean by that?” Mitch asked.

“My husband means that perhaps you haven’t researched us quite as well as you might have thought, First Envoy,” the Queen answered coolly. “If you had, you might perhaps know that the Daggerleaf Temple and we the Daigorn people that they ‘claim’ are their friends, have had somewhat of a parting of the ways of late.”

“A parting of the ways,” Eru scoffed. “Your husband just threatened to hunt me down and kill me.”

The Queen’s face radiated an unpleasant degree of enmity as she leaned down toward the small woman, placing her face mere inches from the Tegan’s. “I would say no more if I were you, Eru Tufeht. You have done more than enough damage as it is!”

“Eru?” Mitch inquired.

“It’s a long story, Mitchell,” Eru replied, glaring indignantly back into the Queen’s eyes.

The Queen straightened up finally. “Admiral,” she began. Her eyes were still locked on Eru’s. “I would put this woman off your ship as quickly as is practicably possible if I were you.” The Queen finally broke eye contact with Eru. “We will take our leave of you,” she glanced over at Mitch. “First Envoy, I can only imagine what nonsense this woman has been filling your head with,” she glanced pointedly at her daughter, “but I would take great care,” she paused, “very great care in what you decide to believe of it. Come Daughter.”

The Queen span on her heels, her brilliant gold pleated cape, snapped whiplike, fanning out behind her as she turned. She strode off across the room toward the doorway gathering her entire contingent of Ministers, their aides and the Daigorn Fleet officers in her wake. Vellandra waited as long as she dared, gazing remorsefully at Mitch before lunging forward

to hug Eru tightly. She span quickly and rushed through the remaining crowd of dumbstruck UAP personnel, disappearing out into the corridor. Everybody watched them go in silence and then gradually all attention shifted to Mitch.

“What in the name of all things holy was that all about!” Admiral Sambal McKenna looked from Eru to Mitch and then back. “You’re the Tegan cleric aren’t you? Princess Vellandra vouched for you? Do you have some sort of dispute with the Daigorn Royal Family?”

“I was Princess Vellandra’s and Prince Tarwen’s personal tutor for some years, Admiral McKenna. I fear the rest of it would take far longer than I believe I have to explain. Suffice it to say, I too will take my leave of you. I will join my followers and leave the Fleet before the Princess’s Father has the opportunity to make good on his threats.” She glanced up at Mitch. “Thankyou for your time, First Envoy. We will meet again, before this all reaches it’s conclusion, I believe,” she smiled at the Admiral and started off across the room.

“Admiral?” Commander Meridan queried.

“Let her go Sidara,” the Admiral replied, then added. “Make sure her ships get an escort out past the secure perimeter though.”

“What if the Daigorn attempt to-”

“They won’t,” Mitch interrupted. “Despite what they say, I do know them.”

Commander Meridan nodded and followed in Eru Tufeht’s wake, picking out a few of the officers present who quickly deposited the drinks they held with some of the stewards before trailing after him.

The Admiral turned to face him again, “Mitch?”

Mitch held a hand up, forestalling the list of questions he knew she must have. He stalked across the room toward the group of three ESPer’s, two human females and a Hammandanian male, that had before the departure of the Daigorn delegation been mingling with the visiting dignitaries.

“Azin, do you know what any of that was about?”he asked the young Hammandanian.

“Yes, First Envoy,”the Hammandanian replied. “I think I might.”

“Go on,”Mitch pressed.

“The Daggerleaf Temple Order were — are a monotheistic sect that base all of their teachings on prophecy said to have been handed down over the last thousand years,”the young man began.

“A sect,”Mitch groaned forlornly running a hand through his hair.

“I’m afraid so, First Envoy,”the young man replied. “Over the last ten years or so there have been allegations that their followers were being recruited using methods frowned upon by more ‘conventional’ religious groups.”

“Are you talking about some kind of Mind Control!”McKenna asked sharply.

“Yes, Admiral,”the Hammandanian replied.

“So they’re a cult?”the Admiral asked.

“That’s one word for them,”the Hammandanian replied.

“What are the Tegan’s doing about them?”she asked.

“The Daggerleaf Temple was officially disbanded by a Tegan Parliamentary Order some years ago, but at the time they had several million followers on Tega alone, Admiral. It’s generally believed those followers probably just took their faith and beliefs underground,”he explained.

“Is the Princess still under this woman’s control?”the Admiral asked incredulously.

“I couldn’t tell you that, Admiral,”he replied honestly.

“If you knew who this woman was, Azin why didn’t you say something.”

“Admiral, I’ve only read about the Daggerleaf Temple in diplomatic communiqués and dispatches. I’ve never seen the Toran — the High Priestess until today. I didn’t even know who she was until the Prince Regent announced it to the room.”

“Damn it!” the Admiral blasted.

One of the female ESPer’s pointedly cleared her throat with a genteel cough and drew the attention of the room.

“Alice?” Mitch enquired.

The young woman licked her lips nervously, before proceeding. “I managed to pick a few stray thoughts out of the Queen’s and Prince Tarwen’s heads just before they left,” she admitted sheepishly!

“You did, did you,” the Admiral growled. She looked over at Mitch and turned away briefly, throwing her arms in the air in exasperation. If the young woman had been caught. The consequences could have been dire in the extreme, to say the least.

“Out with it, Alice,” Mitch said ignoring the Admiral’s hyperbolic display.

The young girl breathed out deeply. “From what I gather, it seems the Toran ‘tricked’ her way into the Miltax-Fro household a few years before the temple on Tega was closed down and ended up caring for the Princess and her brother. The Regent believes this woman used her telepathic abilities, abilities that the Toran took great pains to hide at the time, to gain the favour, trust and respect of the Prince and Princess over them. The Regent eventually convinced his wife that the Toran was not a fit influence for their children and had her dismissed from service. His fears seemed to be borne out, when the Princess secretly ‘left’ the Homeship and followed the Toran to wherever they had re-established the Temple that had been destroyed on Tega. Prince Tarwen also attempted to follow the Toran but he was stopped and was subjected to some kind of ‘neural deprogramming’. The Princess returned after being ‘away’ for a year and a half, but the general feeling, is that she has not been the same since her return.”

“Dear Creator,” McKenna whispered.

“That’s as much as I got, First Envoy,” she concluded.

Mitch smiled. “Good job, Alice.”

“What have you gotten yourself embroiled in here, Mitch?” McKenna asked.

Mitch shook his head. “I’m not entirely sure.”

“What did she say to you?” McKenna asked next.

Mitch lifted the box he had been given into view. He had almost forgotten about it during the confrontation between Eru and the heads of the Royal Household and had been unconsciously gripping it tightly enough to almost break the skin of his hand. He looked at the three ESPer’s again. “Cora,” he began, addressing the third member of the trio. “What level are your psychometric abilities?” he asked.

“Level Three, First Envoy,” she replied quickly.

“If I had an artefact that was said to be part of a Valid Clairvoyant Construction, would you be able to take a reading from it?”

Cora O’Donnell scoffed, disbelievingly. “First Envoy, if there was such an artefact within a hundred metres of me, I’d know about it. We’d all feel it’s pull,” she told him, gesturing to her two companions.

“A hundred metres?” Mitch queried.

“Yes, Sir,” she confirmed definitively. “If it was part of a Valid Construction, there’s no way I wouldn’t sense its presence.”

Mitch opened the small box and looked at the Amulet of Orr. He hesitated for several moments before tentatively lifting the Amulet from it. This time he wasn’t bombarded with the bursts of imagery that had assailed him the first time he had touched it. In fact, he felt nothing from it whatsoever. “What about this?” he asked, suddenly unsure.

The young woman reached out and took the amulet in one hand, closing the other over the top of it. She closed her eyes briefly and then reopened them shaking her head negatively. “I don’t get anything from this. It’s inert, First Envoy,” she told him. “There’s no way this can be part of a Valid Construction,” she added.

Mitch grasped the amulet firmly in one hand the moment she released it, holding it tightly. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to pull the images he had seen earlier up from the depths of his mind. He couldn't even recall what either of the women he had seen looked like. He scoffed disbelievingly and placed the amulet back in the box, flipping the lid shut. The woman was obviously a charlatan of some kind. He didn't know how she had done what she had done, but he had almost believed her. Poor Vellandra.

"Mitch," McKenna asked gently.

"I don't know, Sam," he looked around at her. "I think I've just been used. But for the life of me, I don't understand how or why."

McKenna sighed. "Whatever. It doesn't matter anymore. We got our End of Mission confirmation a little while ago. I'm gathering the Fleet and we'll be heading home within the next three days," she patted him on the shoulder sympathetically and then turned and started toward the doorway. "OK everybody, let's call it a night!"

With that the two hundred officers and the aides that were part of the diplomatic mission began to depart. Mitch lifted the lid on the brown wooden box again, peering down at the pale blue gemstone. He sighed deeply and flipped the lid shut again, shoving the box into one of his pockets. It was a lovely trinket, if nothing else!



CHAPTER 3

TIME : July 12, 2194, 19:50.35 Standard

PLACE : *The Alcatraz* — *In Orbit around Delphus II*

“What the...?”

The Chief Duty Com-Officer of the *Alcatraz*, sat back in stunned amazement as his console lit up like a Christmas Tree. A call had come through from an undisclosed location and had somehow commandeered his entire workstation. He leaned forward again and tapped at the keypad in front of him, in a vain effort to regain control of his console. Nothing he did had the slightest effect. The man glanced back over his shoulder, locating the Watch Commander.

“Captain Devan!”

The young Captain turned to face him and started forward across the room. Even as he approached, the Com-Officer’s console went dead for an instant, before seemingly rebooting itself to resume its normal functioning.