

Beneath CatsEYE

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Chapters 1 - 3 preview

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Stalled

Fleet Admiral Pryor, Generals Spaulding and Panos stood shoulder to shoulder staring out the observation deck clearsteel window. They were the old guard, the last of the military leaders whose origins was Earth itself and not the depths of space. It had not been considered they would live to see the arrival of the colony fleet to its destination.

Below them rotated the disaster they had traveled light years to occupy. Air and soil not quite right, violent unpredictable weather. They would have to do additional terraforming and hope the ships held together long enough for the place to become more viable. They dared not land. There would be little logic in that action, even though many were clamoring to be free of this confinement. At least in space they could shuttle between vessels and send out the smaller survey ships to map the system and mine the shattered sister and its fragments for metals they would need to maintain their position. Expeditions could eventually be sent below to get better readings for an estimate of how many years it would take before people could actually live on Haven.

Admiral Pryor did not know who had coined the name, but it was certainly inappropriate. There was no haven here, no home for the hundreds of thousands of souls the military was responsible for. It was up to the scientists now. They needed some hopeful news for the colonist

regarding how long they would be denied walking in the distant light of this sun and having land beneath their feet once more. He did not want to think about the star being older than their home star or the planet for that matter. Would there be any descendants to see the future end or would history repeat itself?

General Panos considered the dark clouds racing across the planet. What views the satellites had been able to garner showed very few bodies of water of any size comparable to Earth. Command had lied to them. The military leaders of many countries had rounded up the unwilling to live alongside others desperate for a chance to live a better life on a frontier planet. Many wanted away from the corporations and military that was vying for rights to the whole Earth. The others were dissidents because they still held religious beliefs of one kind or another, were radical politically, or worse, violent in the pursuit of their goals. Frankly, Panos was considering a mass execution to eliminate some of the possibilities of future insurrection. The others would not agree, but he saw no reason to allow hard core terrorists to intimidate the law abiding people once they made planet fall. It never made sense that Earth packed them off instead of executing them. Genetic diversity was bullshit when compared to being killed in your bed. All he could see occurring was a race of nutjobs who might one day discover the means to return to space.

General Spaulding's grim expression did not bode well for any negative feedback from the scientists. The General's ex-wife had recently come to the lead scientist's attention and regrettably, some thought, they were reviewing her research. Spaulding hated the woman with a level of bile he barely controlled. Some of the Colonels had already approached Panos with their concerns that he was less than stable. The Fleet Admiral had been

placing more responsibility for Spaulding's operations in the hands of his subordinate, Major General Keresztes. Spaulding appeared unaware.

Right now they had a fleet wide crisis to prevent. Food production and oxygen levels had to be dealt with first. The doctors and scientists had to come up with a way to keep the people orientated to living on a planet when they had been and would be, born and raised in space even longer than planned. He knew the next few rotations would be a headache. Thank goodness his personal staff was loyal and obedient. Fleet Admiral Pryor was a excellent example of a leader and did not defer the hard decisions that had to be made over the rotations. Panos hoped he would see reason to at least eliminate the worst of the offenders. For the sake of survival they could not afford to have so many in lock down and resources pulled from the citizens to keep the scum alive.

General Spaulding scowled. The damn scientists were going to be allowed to experiment on the damn planet. He did not see any reason to bother. The entire trip was a dead end. Better for everyone if they resupply, repair and continue on. Be damned if he would settle for the chaotic life of the planet bound again. Instead of remaining in orbit and playing god with the environment below, they should leave. Nothing good would come of Sandra getting to influence the damn egg heads dicking around with the planet. This was going to be nasty business.

He would get his chance to speak at the staff meeting later today. Perhaps the colonists should be given more input. They could not possibly want to remain orbiting an unlivable ball when the limitless expanse awaited them. His own grandson had no interest in a planet and the general was in full agreement.

Spaulding had survived the purges and upheavals of what life had become on a planet. On the ships there was

structure and hierarchy that kept things running smoothly. Responsibility was in every individuals hands. He had no desire to go back to babysitting a world of helpless civilians and spilling blood in the dirt. Ideology was essentially crushed under the demands of keeping life support intact. Any mistake out here was death. That threat was the best deterrent for abhorrent behavior.

He remembered old Earth history when certain regimes fractured, a few countries gave up stable infrastructure and decent family life for ancient ideologies. Neighbors killed neighbors, raped and pillaged. Humans had spent centuries killing over skin color, religion and gender differences. He knew all these things would start again if they settled on a planet. Sandra had wanted the chance to prove science would amend these problems. She had proposed genetic engineering to create a more amiable human. Her experiments got her arrested, imprisoned. He divorced her because her beliefs were sick and testified against her. As disgusting as humanity was, mindless drones obeying their scientists masters frightened him more. Who knew he would wind up on an outward bound fleet of undesirables destined for death in space and the bitch would be in stasis on the prison ship. Spaulding scowled.

Long Live the King

Campfires were burning low and in the big tents the wounded slept in drugged oblivion to their pain. Within the largest tent, the nobles of Daear gathered around the cot of their king MeekBlade. A hastily erected tarp separated the deathbed from the entrance to the tent. The pallets of the dead and deathly wounded Cadre were scattered there, faithful even unto death. Bloodied sheets and thick pad of soiled bandages lay strewn around the feet of frantic Healers. In the dim corners behind the cot darker sentinels hovered, waiting. At their King's command they had left his side, for he and they knew all effort was useless. The Barons watched the Palace Healers struggle to bind the King's wounds against hopeless odds. The lances had struck thrice in his belly.

His guards had fought until they died. A sneak attack from two squadrons of the enemy wearing Daear's colors overran the King's observation post before further help could arrive. Even now Vidor's brother StraightBow struggled for life on the other side of the tarp. The old man confounding the odds once again, fighting to survive punctured lungs and snapped ribs. He stood alone over his King's body fighting the last of the attackers, as a bloody froth filled his helm. MeekBlade had refused to flee and leave his men to fight without him, proving that what many said about him was indeed the truth. He was Cadre first and always, King was an afterthought.

Baron Vidor grimaced in sympathy as the king struggled to push himself upright. The man's face was soaked in sweat, his fair skin leached of all color. His dark brown eyes were overflowing with tears and blood had soaked his Cadre braid an even deeper black. The healers propped pillows and blankets around him even as they worked to keep his intestines bound inside his body. Vidor's armor was covered in ichor as well as Baron Caddock and Baron Meinrad's. They had not quit the field until messengers had ran through the troops carrying the white flags with the red crosses that meant the king had fallen.

Baron Colwyn and his brothers, Gavin and Nardo, arrived. The latter in his perpetual state of intoxication. Baron Renfrew sat on a low stool with his sons Haul and Trahearn at this back. Their presence caused some level of bemusement in the midst of this tragedy. There were few fools willing to cross swords with the man, let alone attempt to kill him. His family was renowned for being expert warfarers at their most vicious. Haul was expressing profound sadness and was hard pressed to contain his tears. He had a strong regard for the Cadre King.

Here were the most land rich of the elite, who traced their bloodlines back to the first days on the planet. Lesser nobles crowded the entrance to the tent and spilled into the mud churned street of the tarp city. All of them were proven to carry the genes of the First Admiral and First Generals in their bodies and no less than three of their many children were Gifted in some way. Only Gavin and Renfrew had the bright auburn hair that gave further indications of their dual heritage.

All of them wondered as they stood in the torchlight who would wear the crown. MeekBlade's wife had died a few rotations after childbirth and his only child was a

mere eighteen summers, a delicate and refined young lady that was the joy of the court.

MeekBlade had not refused the drugs the Cadre Healers had administered, knowing he could not die screaming in the agony that found him once his breastplate was removed. He spat the blood that pooled in his mouth into a cup held by one of his remaining Cadre in the field. The young man, Runner, was covered in bruises from his own day spent in battle. Tears spilled down his dirty face at the loss of MeekBlade, for the King was one of the Cadre's own. Exalted to the throne by the death of his distant cousin, King Edmond who died without wife or issue. Runner would not break down however, he must stay by the King's side until the end.

A flurry of activity had the Baron's reaching for their swords, when the tarp was flung back. Princess Riayn rushed into the room shoving them away so she could see her father. Her guardian, Talon, pushed them further back by the sheer breath of his shoulders. He covered her back, even in the healer's tent where all should be secure.

Meinrad frowned and spat on the ground, his temper ill served by the battle and the coming struggle for the throne. Here was a chance few would see again. Since his last wife had died he was in perfect position to marry the princess if her father so decreed.

Caddock shook his head in sympathy. She was too delicate to be here on the field, but MeekBlade had never left her behind if he rode into a skirmish since her sixteenth summer. Of course she was surrounded by Cadre guards, with Talon many times restricted to her side. But still it was hard for the Baron to imagine so sweet a child having to see her parent die so horribly. He shuddered as his thoughts touched upon his own children, relieved they were behind the metal gates of the Citadel. They were not here, dressed in ornate bright blue and silver armor,

fit only for a parade on Union Day, watching their father suffer a long drawn out death.

Vidor had only wanted to prevent her from seeing the horror of her father's bloodstained body, but Talon was commanded by no one but the princess and her father.

It had been a bone of contention for many rotations that the Cadre did not take orders from the masters of the elite families. To many it seemed arrogance and even more so when the entire troop went to their knee before MeekBlade on his coronation. Never before had the Cadre bowed to any, King or commoner, but no member of the Cadre had ever been King. If the Cadre had been loyal before, now they were fanatical in their zeal. There would be no quarter given on tomorrow's battlefield. The remaining members would demand retribution.

Riayn caught herself before her body fell upon blood stained blankets and pillows that wrapped her father's brutally damaged body. Her eye's fell into his pained gaze and she knew he would not survive his wounds. He raised a shaking hand and she eased down beside him and grasped it to her breast. He struggled to speak and when one of the healers would have admonished him, Talon's armored arm pushed her away. The Barons were wont to protest, but the unveiled hard gaze of the protector challenged them with drawn blade. Caddock shivered. He could not endure looking into Talon' eyes. Spitting once more into the cup, MeekBlade drew an agonizing breath and addressed his only child.

"The Citadel is yours to guard my Queen . . . my Cadre to . . . to . . . your hand . . . I . . . decree. No challenge. . . Queen . . . my Queen."

The Barons were stunned, and some outraged, but Talon had not flinched. His steady blade held them away and kept them silent.

MeekBlade's knowledgeable gaze flickered to the

elite of the lands that surrounded his death bed, noting even now how some of them could not hide their bitter faces. His child already knew who to trust, who bore watching and who might need to be maneuvered into betraying their true intent. He had taught her well and honed her Chosen into the most relentless killer the Cadre had ever produced. The remaining Cadre were already hers. She had grown up in their arms, played on their training fields and obtained her own mount among their ranks one secret dark. He dared not leave his land of Gifted and ‘pure’ human in the hands of his barons, loyal or no.

There were those who would change the status of the Gifted if they could, make them slaves, deny Chosen to keep them weak. If he could have avoided this fate, he would not have left his daughter for many more rotations. But he could rest in peace knowing she was as strong as he could make her for the coming battles. He accomplished much to keep the balance of his kingdom and the world.

Blind fools did not realize if the strongest Gifted fled these lands, in three generations they would revert to what they were when the humans arrived and eventually die as a race, but not before killing as many humans as possible. The loss of their genetic material would weaken humanity and make them vulnerable to the still poisonous world they shared. Even the humans who considered themselves pure were not so much thanks to the long ago geneticist that worked to inure men to the world. Division could not be allowed to occur. Death would be the outcome for all, yet still the mad ones insisted on the purity of humanity, foolishly blind to their own doom. MeekBlade could not stop the deep shuddering breath his body demanded. It hurt more than he could endure any longer. He pressed Riayn’s hand to his bloodied lips and raised his tear filled eyes to the men surrounding his death bed.

“ . . . your Queen . . . I declare . . . it.” It might be

his last words. For long moments not even the crackle of wood burning in the pit broke the silence.

“ . . . I declare it. Riayn is Queen.” Caddock’s words ripped the baron’s from their shock and the group stared at the man as if not comprehending his words. The baron’s scarred face and curly grey beard were soaked with his tears.

“I declare it. Riayn is Queen.” Meinrad’s words were rife with sarcasm, his lips curled in an habitual sneer, as he threw up his arms in exasperation, but the words were loud and clearly spoken. He might not have the crown, but a trusted adviser could still make his way, just more time and effort had to be expended. The others stared at each other or avoided gazes to hide their various emotions. Riayn never turned to face the barons. She was lost in her father’s grinding pain and pride as he held her hand to his lips. His affection was still a bright sun in her mind and she reveled in its warmth.

“For pity’s sake, allow the man to die in peace. Riayn is Queen. I declare it,” snapped Nardo, raising the flagon of ale that almost never left his left hand. He threw the silver vessel into the flames of the pit and rushed from the tent. How could they stand to watch a man die in such agony and deny him this last wish? The poor girl would be pressured into marriage right soon anyway and the endless war would continue until they were all corpses. Nardo began yelling for his servant to bring him another measure of ale before he was anywhere near the tents of his family. Men at arms moved to avoid his wild insults and swinging fists, knowing it would be quite a while before he was drunk enough to pass out. Their King was dying and this once they would forgive Baron Nardo his tendency to strike with his fist when liquored up, which was a constant.

Inside the tent, the enormity of what the three Baron’s

had done was just now breaking through the shock that had stunned Vidor and Colwyn speechless. Riayn was Queen of the Citadel. Queen over the valley and the mountains they laid claim to. This child woman, not yet wed, not yet seasoned had the reigns of power in her hands. What would become of them?

Talon turned to face the stunned warriors. He did not speak to them, just watched as they flinched or ignored his gaze. MeekBlade would soon be no more. He felt the resolve of his Chosen and was prepared at this moment to ride into battle if so ordered. Riayn sighed as her father slipped from her mind like tumbling water into a drain. She was loath to allow him separation, but rejoiced that the relentless ache he suffered since her mother's loss was easing right along with the pain of his wounds. She held the memory of his relief as a cushion against her own loss now. She sobbed as she pressed his stained fingers to her lips and place his hand over his heart. She allowed herself only a few moments for tears however. She looked at Runner's brimming eyes and placed her hand against his cheek. The young man finally gave way and sobbed openly, clutching the goblet in shaking hands. He cried out loud and the word spread quickly across the encampment. The King was dead.

Riyan dabbed at her tears with a silken kerchief, blew her nose and tucked the soiled cloth in her sleeve. One deep breath and she rose, stepping past Talon to face the Barons.

"Hear me Barons of the Citadel. My father is dead, but we have injured in the camp that must be moved immediately. Send two armed patrols to protect them and send winged messengers to the Citadel for more to meet along the way. See that guards are set to protect those we dare not move. And make sure every other able bodied soldier is ready to attack before dawn, then get to your

own beds. We will have services for MeekBlade when all return to the Citadel.”

“My lady, we will take care. You need not concern yourself.” Vidor exclaimed. You should return to the Citadel where . . .”

Riyan appeared as fragile as the Helleborine orchid which survived only in paintings derived from the records of long lost Earth. Vidor was about to discover different.

“Do you question my authority Vidor?” The question was spoken in Riyan soft tones, but a shiver crawled stealthily up the Baron’s back like an ice worm.

The Baron’s eyes widen and he looked directly into the new Queen’s startling topaz eyes! He heard Caddock’s shocked gasp at his back and the creak and rustle of metal and cloth as the other men stirred. The innocent brown gaze of Riyan was gone and in its place gleamed the evidence of power, power held back behind an implacable will that would not be reined in any longer. Vidor reeled under the influence of that gaze. But Riyan did not ensnare him, her gaze flicked to each man in the tent.

“I expect all of you think my father erred in judgment, considering the extent of his wounds. You believe I will sit idle while you attend me in my grief. We have no time for grief. The enemy knows my father has fallen. I am sure Fredric will not hesitate to move on our position before first light to press his advantage. Prepare yourselves! We dare not be caught off guard.” Riyan turned to the grief stricken healers. “Leave my father and attend those that need your services more. The Cadre will prepare a pyre for him immediately. I will attend his cremation as quickly as it is completed.”

Surprise marked every face and Riyan sighed heavily.

“We have not the time to spend in farewells. His body must be immolated before the first of our people go into battle. Our grief must wait for memorials once we return

home. Quickly! You think the enemy will sit idle as we wail to the heavens? Move now!” Power stirred within the tent. Fire erupted in the pit. The sudden flare up and sparks scattered the Palace healers. The shadows moved to the fore and the solemn Cadre Healers, made quick work of the stained bedding and prepared the King’s body for cremation.

The Baron’s fled the tent with her commands ringing in their ears. They did not acknowledge the joyous laughter that echoed across the camp from the Baron Renfrew. In the whole of her life Princess Riyan had only expressed the weakest of talent, to communicate with Gifted. For coils sake her eyes were brown. Her hair was a thick ash brown and she was so slim she bordered on fragile. Now the hair on their bodies stood up and the first of the shock was wearing off. The Baron’s had felt it, the deep thrumming in their bones that sang of great power unleashed in their presence. It stirred the trampled earth and tiny green shoots of llygredd sprang up to begin their writhing journey along the stakes and ropes that supported the dead King’s tent.

Riyan turned her attention to the weeping Runner. She went to her knees and spoke softly to him.

“It is time Runner. You must anoint the troop. We must make ready.”

Choking down the sobs, the young warrior looked into his Queen’s golden eyes and took from her the strength he needed to bury his grief until they were no longer under threat.

“Aye my Queen it will be done as you say,” he whispered.

He shook himself and lifted the cup he had been clutching between mailed fists to the Queen. She dipped fingers into the blood within and pressed them to her lips, tasting the blood of her fallen King again. Runner nodded

and they rose together to face Talon. The Chosen dipped the fingers of his hand into the cup and tasted the blood of his fallen King. Runner removed the glove from his own hand and did the same. He struggled a moment to put it back on, but managed with the Queen's assistance. Then took the cup from Talon and passed it before the Cadre Healers before quitting the tent. All around him soldiers, healers, Gifted and Barons bowed as he passed making his way through the tent city to the camp where the remaining Cadre waited to taste the blood of their King. When CatsEye was covered by wind driven clouds, they would slip into the dark to wreck vengeance on their enemy's forward guards. When Fredric's forces moved in the pre-dawn they would not find their creeping spies nor attack a sleeping camp.

To the Rescue

Harsh wind battered the highest crags of the Citadel's dark mountains, shredding the mist that usually kept the towering gates from the naked eye when viewed from the first checkpoint at the bottom of the pass. It moaned and whistled through the decorative iron arches all along the steep road to the apex. Worn by time and the elements, the wall prevented falls from the tunneled roadway into the deep ravines and crevices that light rarely touched and no man ever ventured. The capricious gales protected the entrance to Daear, but without the wall everyone, friend or foe, would be plucked from the road and smashed on the rocks below.

The icy eddies stirred the flames guttering in the metal fishnet bowls of the castle torches. The light from these ancient five-foot scones embedded in the vast walls reflected little off the company of stygian clad warriors and the damp blocks of aged metal and grey stone. Their armor was dull, absorbing the low light, with plain helms topped by flowing topknots culled from the feathered tails of their mounts. The soldiers were silent, the thrum of the wind a sort of meditative background to their intensity of purpose. A few of them swayed, caught in the rhythm of the chill breeze as they waited.

The equerry stood by, a critical eye on the dozen apprentice squires, who saddled and packed the victuals and bedding onto the broad backs of the Pegasors. This

intent group of boys and girls hoped to one-day ride as one of the Queen's Cadre and an error in preparation when warriors would most likely see battle was not to be tolerated, nor the shame endured. They strained and grimaced, pulling the cinches tight and using all their weight to shift the recalcitrant animals so they would not be crushed between them. Pegasors had sharp claws hidden in their wide, feathered paws and fangs that slashed if one was too slow. Even their mane and tail feathers could lash out and leave fine lines of blood on the unsuspecting.

One of the tests was to be fleet of foot and observant. Too many scars could very well prevent advancement into weapons training and an ignoble return to civilian life. Rough blew jackets protected them from the high wind and mittens from the same material covered palms, but left the fingers free to detect wrinkles in the finer woven saddle blew and the leather bridles and cinches. The majority had their hair shorn to the scalp, a mark of pride for those seeking the arduous won status of the Cadre and to discourage hiding any wounds from the trainers. Many had a scar on cheek and body from the edge of the Pegasor's ire. Talon had won his war name the night he tamed his mount, coming away unmarred from a severe contest with the stallion he now rode.

Her self's personal guardian, Talon stood off to one side, his height and breath of shoulder lost within the deep shadows of the towering walls. Occasionally the flames reflected his hazy silver blue eyes, which thick black lashes usually hid from view unless he wished it. He appeared blind at certain moments. Many Palace Healers debated how he could see through the mist-shrouded pupils and why the aberration occurred. They were never allowed to examine or test his vision. He always reacted coldly even at the suggestion. One of the lads shivered and ducked behind the bulk of the war stallion, fearing

less the unsettled temperament of the animal compared to the chilling blank gaze of the Queen's Own.

Like the deceased King, Talon was taller than average and large boned, with a muscled physique that marked his family lines as nearly pure human. It was said he was devoid of any magics, and the court had been surprised when the King had approved his appointment as guardian to his only child. Many wondered if he was some bastard relative or worse, some new horror bred for an arcane purpose. He did not have written family lines and never spoke of his life before coming to the castle requesting service. Of course, proof could never be found for the numerous speculations. The majority of the royal court considered him dangerous and ill mannered. Many had never heard his voice and few risked his attention for one reason or the other. He wore an unadorned golden ribbon in his black braid. It had been given to him on Presentation Day by the then five-year-old princess held in her doting father's arms. It was frayed with age and delicate, but the guardian took great care, entwining it each morning with his own hands through the black ones of the Cadre, each one bloodied denoting his rotations of service. The night before Talon had gone after the Pegasor stallion and won his name and permanent place in the Cadre. It had been a triple celebration. All other tokens of valor lay in the man's trunks, only worn at demand of the sovereign on Festival days, his braid vibrant with jewel encrusted red and silver edged black ribbons.

Now Talon was morose. That set the tone for the other nineteen grim faced warriors sliding swords into scabbards and bows with arrows to their backs. A number double checked rigging that supported the sharp edged lances on the saddles. The warriors would assuredly discover what delayed the emissaries from King Fredric, which should have arrived two days ago. Their Queen had stirred from

her inner apartments to command them recover her future husband and his entourage. They would not fail. The civilians of both lands hungered for respite.

The wide golden topaz eyes of the Finder twins sparkled when their hypnotic gaze captured someone. Their heads were high, noses searching the wind for scent even before they could leave the high cliff walls of home. Auburn hair defied braiding and ribbons, curling away from confinement on its own. Confirming their status as having more blood of the indigenous ones who occupied these lands before the humans arrived. The hip length filaments quested about their shoulders in constant motion owing to their excitement. The pair's skin was unmarred by blemish of any kind except for a light tan due to their outdoor life. The closer the blood the more quickly healed was a truism that the more human fighters could appreciate. The fine boned young men fairly shimmered with their magical gift, leaving one of the women to place herself between them and the working squires less the children become distracted by the allure that magic ability seem to have for the more susceptible.

QuickStep's blond hair was tightly braided with the single black ribbon worn by a new Cadre admission and one jeweled golden one, a gift from the two she would now forever guard with her life. Her eyes were brown and she was not quite as head blind to magic as many believed, but that was a secret between her and the ones she protected. The twins were the only overtly gifted in the Cadre, rare indeed to find such there, as the stronger the magic usually the more delicate the physicality. But these men were deadly accurate with stiletto and arrows. It was rumored their hair choked the life from enemies at will. They were called Strike and Shadow. People were repelled as much as they were attracted to the twins. The Finders were always fending off marriage contractors

seeking to add their bloodlines to families seeking better position in the hierarchy of the ruling class. Even though Cadre members never left until they died, and never contracted so a child could be held hostage.

Finally the youngsters surged away from the Pegasors and lined up before the equerry. The old warrior limped past them, his staff held in a tight fist, to check each mount with his own gnarled hands and still sharp brown eyes. He was dressed in the same dull armor minus helm, his braid heavy with jewel-encrusted red and black silver edged ribbons. The faded red ribbons were his badges of honor for he had served the royal families from the time of the King Idris, close to one hundred rotations ago. He lay down his arms after MeekBlade was laid to rest. He wore a kingdom's ransom of precious stones in his grey streaked earth brown hair. StraightBow was still recovering from wounds received in that last battle against Fredric's rabble. She, who he loved as a daughter, had entwined the new ribbons into his hair as the Healers struggled to save his life. They remained, stained with the blood of her father and her own minor wounds. Each of the Cadre bowed as he passed them, for StraightBow was still formidable, even though he strode without weapons and bandages could be seen at the edges of his breastplate. Few, with or without gifts, had been so long lived.

He stepped away from the prancing mares and single stallion, giving Talon a quick nod. All was in readiness.

The children ran off to pack away the unused items and clean the Cadre quarters in preparation for their return. Their exit abruptly ceased when the distant wrought iron doors onto the terrace opened. The Queen passed among them with her surprising soldier's stride, several of her attending women hurrying to keep up with her. The spires of her crown flickered, casting light about her person. Frothing waves of the pale ice blue gown floated about

her ankles, the exact color of her Chosen's eyes. Her self's five Cadre bodyguards moved silently in the shadows at the edge of her radiance, prepared to strike with lethal response to any perceived threat. She was sending her guardian away from the palace. All of them would die to protect her in his stead.

She smiled at the children. They smiled in return under her shimmering topaz gaze. Her ash brown hair was pulled back at the nap of her neck and braided as her Cadres. The hip length braid bore the freshly blooded ribbons of the recently rededicated troop. Stones of various colors decorated the ribbons, a tradition her father began but now including gifts from each surviving member to honor her bravery and command during the last battle. The Cadre christened her BrightLance on the field and she refused to use her birth name from that moment. She would not soon forget the sacrifice of the twelve and would honor them always.

The court was appalled at her refusal to forgo the ribbons, no matter the occasion, as was proper for a young maiden. She honored her father's legacy in all ways and took pride in the Cadres devotion. She carried a jeweled short lance with crystal like blades embedded in the shaft, in lieu of the staff her father had always carried at court. It was the same one she used with deadly efficiency the day her father died. The new decorations deceived the eye of civilians. The Cadre would make sure their Queen could protect herself at all times. The jeweled hilt of the concealed knife pressed against her thigh was attached to a wicked barbed blade. Her dress had been designed to make the reach for it swift and sure.

StraightBow's staff struck the stone parquet and the children ran off to their duties, released from the enchantment of seeing the Queen close enough to touch. Her waiting women held back at the last, uneasy at the

presence of the warriors and their fierce mounts. The soft pastels and bright summer hues of their gowns were illuminated by the Queen's crown, a vibrant bouquet shimmering within the dark. The six women, varying in age from a rosy cheeked twelve summers to grey haired matrons in the winter of their life, accompanied the Queen when she would see the squad of men and women off, regardless of the hour. They rarely had the opportunity to observe her interaction with Talon and the court was always desperate from gossip about the mysterious man.

Members of the two squads snapped to attention. The Pegasors huffed at the rainbows shimmering before their eyes. Talon stepped forward and went to one knee. BrightLance stroked the shorter ebony curls that were springing up, quite stealthily, from the head of her Chosen to curl around her fingers. His opaque gaze lifted to rest upon her face and her smile lightened his heart as it always did. He knew she shared all that he felt, all that he was and totally accepted him as she had from the day he walked at her father's side during his interview to join the squires.

He still remembered the whip thin tiny girl, three summers old, that toddled out from beneath a flowering bush to frighten her father. Only to collapse in giggles when the King dropped to his knees begging to be spared with much arm waving and pleas for mercy. The King had lifted her up. Then she noticed the grim child standing to the side and two steps behind the King. Shimmering gold enraptured the boy. "Mine!" Riayn shouted so loud her father startled and almost dropped her. "Mine", she insisted and flung herself through the air and into Talon's arms. She would not be removed. The King called the trainers immediately. The boy's head was shorn right there in the garden. To his secret shame Talon wept after it was done, an agony he did not truly understand until rotations later, meeting the most revered Gifted ones at

court.

Talon slept at the foot of Princess Riayn's bed. He endured the periodic shaving of his head and learned to live with the constant pain. He was drilled by the most talented and brutal of the Cadre. He dare not fail any test because he was the destined protector, the one a Gifted needed to survive, the one who would serve her for all his days. It was a heavy burden for an orphaned boy who had only seen twelve summers and was also too intimidated by his surroundings to ask the questions which would have spared him rotations of pain.

The reasons for Talon' pain lay within a near lethal symbiotic relationship which began so long ago much of the truth is shrouded in legend. A few human scientists realized the Llyncu were genetically compatible and could ensure the survival of the human population on their new poisonous world and perhaps stave off the predator's own extinction. The human military units and their colonists landed unprepared for the very real dangers previous automated survey missions were never accurate enough to detect. The new planet was already populated, with deadly predators and rarely observed intelligences whose eerie shimmering gaze called many a human to a prolonged agonizing death in their coils. Unable to hunt the creatures successfully and with no hope of assistance from their distant command, the humans eventually won through fear and revenge to communicate and the Llyncu understood well enough to forge a shaky peace. To ensure something of themselves remained into the future of their tragically altered world, Llyncu gave up their DNA to be entwined with the invaders. The horrors produced in the labs those first days were destroyed and no records kept. The truth was buried by time and forgotten in Daear, except within the halls of The Cidital's sovereign and the training halls of Healers and scientists. Only the

legends remained for the general populace, romantic drivel to entertain folks in the taverns. But the separatists remembered and avoided the demons if they could.

Now Talon would bring home the enemy prince who would bond with his Queen and sire descendants to rule jointly over Daear and Haven, that is if the treacherous haint did not attempt to kill her bringing war once again to the miles high cliffs of Daear.

“Spare yourself worry beloved. I will be quite safe. I fear this prince may have met with misfortune and his father would cast the blame at our gates. It is said that Fredric does not regard the life of his own bloodlines with any higher esteem than one of the Gifted. Do this for the sake of us all.”

BrightLance caressed his strong face and watched his eyes roll back and his breath release with an almost silent moan. As always her touch soothed him past meditation and created a deep pleasure that vibrated his bones. Rotations of endurance prevented Talon from crying aloud. He would not be unmanned before his charges for pain or pleasure. Her touch communicated her affection and devotion, released his worries and left him serene in spirit and satiated in body. In all his rotations here, Talon had graced no one’s bed.

“I am yours to command my Queen. We will not return with empty hands.” Talon deep voice rumbled too low for any of the women to make out his words. He stood and kissed each hand before they stroked over his shoulders and chest and the Queen stepped away.

Talon put on his helm, checked his weapons once again and climbed into the saddle. The stallion roared in anticipation of the hunt and fought Talon’ hold on the reins. He was kept to a walk down the winding terraced parquet to the guard stations below the Citadel. The remainder of the troop fell in line behind him. QuickStep

held a guiding strap threaded through the bridle rings of Strike and Shadow's Pegasors, to keep them from racing ahead. The twins were so very eager the men riding on each side assisted to keep them pinned, avoiding the pleading fiery eyes that would enthrall them. The twins loved a hunt of any kind and were not above using their powers of persuasion to flee into the dark.

The Queen was a distant glittering beacon framed in an arch as the troop quit the last metal wrapped gate at the bottom of the road. They traveled very quickly and were soon lost in the barren rock. Their mounts leaping over boulders as there was no trail to the lower elevations. Eventually they passed beneath the ragged drifting llygredd vines, bare during the winter of the deadly spines that poisoned 'pure' or hybrid to various degrees. The vines hovered above them in clusters, sometimes whirling about in the capricious wind. The Pegasor's nimbly avoided stepping on fallen desiccated remnants of the barbed spines even in the dark. They produced a horrid odor if crushed underfoot. During the summer new spines covered the yellow airborne vines preventing invaders from braving the highlands. The spines were sensitive to vibrations and always injected any living creature blundering into their territory.

The troop did not make first camp until well into the evening of the following dawn. They had entered the twisted version of the old earth pine forest. It was full of bramble firs, warped pine trees and various deadly foliage of one kind or another. None of the large serpents common to the forest trespassed on their camp. The presence of the twins caused them flee the area.