

Where Were You When You Had To Grow Up?

PROUSSIA

BOOK 1



RAPHYEL
M. JORDAN

Prussia

by Raphyl M. Jordan

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Moving Forward:

It's amazing how much somebody can learn about his or herself when stepping out into what looks like foreign territory for the first time in life. Before you do, you got a plan. You think you have everything figured out, everything organized, and if you just do the right things, everything will work out just fine. Of course, most of us know the truth now since we're "wiser." To have is to hold, to lose is to live.

But when I look back at the trying times of life, I'm even more amazed at the unyielding and sometimes stubborn strength in the power I saw and still see in young people. It's that strength that many people seem to forget and give little credit for when they grow older for some odd reason. Personally, I can't understand how people forget the greatness in being able to dream in spite of all things looking hopeless and impossible, to wonder what glories, both great and terrifying, await. However, I guess that's the either crazy artist or kid in me still speaking.

Maybe life eventually takes its toll and wears down the blind stubbornness of yesterdays, but it's my hope that there will always be something, some whisper, some tiny voice deep inside that will always be there to tell a person to seek the "unseekable," think the unthinkable, hope for the unhopeful. Soooooooooo:

To Mamma: you raised a very stubborn child (I blame that on your genetics), so much to the point that since you refused to read a story I started writing for fun six years ago on the computer, and since scrolling down the pages with a mouse was "apparently" too troublesome for you, I had to go through all this trouble in getting it in a printed format for you so you wouldn't have an excuse not to read it. Well, I hope you're happy, Girl!

To Dad: Old Man, just to let you know, I never forgot those simple words you spoke those many years ago that still have such a heavy impact in my life and in everything I do. "No matter where you go, or who you meet, always remember this: you ARE a Jordan." In that case, I hope my representation of the family name that I carry hasn't disappointed you too much.

To My Extended Family, my lifelong comrades from those college years: You'll never have any idea how much of an honor and blessing it was/is to have met every single one of you. From those "loungies" that yelled and screamed at the TV in the lounge, from that "116" crew that knew the best places to have college night were spots known as "Ibiza" and "Apres," to that "fam" that took those crazy trips to places like the lake house and stayed up late at night driving

cars into gas stations...in video games, of course. You folk are all priceless.

To the Soldiers and Heroes of wars of today, tomorrow, and years pass: Thank you for allowing me to be able to think however I feel and be allowed to say it even if it isn't popular belief. The majority of military heroes I know are no older than me, so you are the motivation to my belief in the sometimes overlooked power of youth. You are all of greatness, and the best that humanity has to offer.

And finally, to you, the person who still has the capability to think like a "Young One." I dedicate this book to the individual who is willing to look beyond what he or she sees before them, and is willing to hope and pray for something always greater. Never stop wondering. Never stop hoping, because I'm sure learning never ceases. Think big on a galactic level.

Unity Within Diversity,



RAPHYEL M
JORDAN

“Who is a true warrior? He who keeps death always as a bosom-friend, or he who controls the death of others?” Gandhi

Prologue

“So, you’re saying these Sungstra creatures actually exist, eh?”

“Indeed. A presence beyond all reasoning can be felt when they’re among you, and if anything was ever wrong in the world, everything can suddenly feel right.”

“Really. And if anything was ever wrong in the world, everything can suddenly feel a lot worse with them, too. I’ve done me research, remember?”

“And that should mean what to me? If this assignment troubles you, then perhaps—”

“Don’t get the idea I’m backing out, sir. But between you and me, I still don’t see the point of needing them.”

“I assure you; you’ll grow to understand in time.”

“If you insist. And this list has the best among them?”

“As far as we can tell. Hopefully, the Allies will respect their culture’s secrecy and not go public with this database, so our job can stay a little easy.”

“So what else do we know about these creatures?”

“Records say all Goolians carry the genetic code, but only a few in their species actually activate it. All the same, we should have plenty to choose from in spite of their small population and the age group we’re looking for. We’re only looking for six to get us started, after all.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to scrounge a couple of them up for your needed interest. But ‘til then, anything else you need me to do?”

“Just sit back and enjoy the show.”



Chapter 1

“You best speed up, Mastras!” seventeen-year-old Catty shouted as she swung to another tree.

The other two females, the same age as the Goolian they were chasing, struggled to keep up as each dive, each flip, and each branch took the similarly green-skinned Catty farther away.

Catty turned around to see how much distance she had gained between the two and giggled. Her bright yellow eyes lit up with delight when she calculated that she had gotten an extra four seconds on the other two Goolian females. Unfortunately, four seconds wasn’t enough for a decent breather, so off she went. The yellow-eyed female full of spunk cheered as she flipped off one branch, hopped off another, and used a third branch to shoot her body into the air like a slingshot.

Catty couldn’t help but grin from cheek to cheek as she performed her acrobatic feats toward the finish line, knowing this was going to be an easy win. Unfortunately, it only took a matter of seconds for the spunky creature to lose her smile when Catty’s pointy Goolian ears

picked up some rustling from above.

Nay. Not again. She was about to look up, but two feet bounced right off her head and sent her soaring to the forest floor.

Catty's humanoid body bumped against the trees like a ball until she hit the ground with a thud. She wasn't hurt too badly; since her skeleton was made of a special mixture of cartilage and bone, she could take the beating. The insult, on the other hand, was another story. She looked up and only managed to catch a quick glimpse of the creature that had the audacity to hop off her head like a stepping stone in the water.

Tall, lanky, dark-green skin, blue tentacles, and a pair of gray eyes that would make a full moon look dull. The Goolian with these features looked back at the yellow-eyed spunk she had just insulted and smirked evilly. The other two female Goolians lagging behind Catty laughed and cheered as they managed to dash by.

"A good hit, Aly!" one of the females shouted ahead in the native Goolian tongue. "She shall feel that one in the morrow, yes?"

Aly didn't bother answering. She was on a mission, and besides; she knew Catty wouldn't let the insult subside. So off she went, flipping gracefully between branches, sliding across stumps, and making the moves that Catty had performed look like child's play. Yes, Aly was a sight to behold.

As Aly darted farther ahead by the second, Catty was on her feet and looking for the longest branch she could find. The one she needed for the job was about ten meters away, so the spunk took several steps back to get a good running speed and leapt nearly two stories into the air. She landed on the branch perfectly, and it launched her through the forest after it swung back underneath her weight. The two lagging females saw Catty fly by them, and frowned because there was no way they were going to catch up now.

Aly heard Catty approaching as she continued to race on. From the sound of it, Catty was going to tackle her. The gray-eyed Goolian shifted course and took a rougher terrain through thicker brush. Catty glared. She wouldn't have enough momentum to execute her plan. Aly was forcing her into a direct confrontation, something any smart Young One knew better than to do.

Aly turned to see the whereabouts of her opponent and chuckled. Nowhere in sight. Catty knew better than to take her on, or so she thought. The spunk slid right in front of the unsuspecting Goolian and kicked her out of the trees. Aly tumbled down for a few moments

before she collected her thoughts again and grabbed a branch. Catty would've insulted her opponent had it not been for the hateful look Aly gave. Instead, the spunk stopped smiling and prepared for the deadly onslaught.

Aly somersaulted right back up to Catty's level and sent an array of kicks and swings at her. Catty answered by flipping, dodging, and countering as best she could, but Aly's reaction time was unnatural. Her body seemed to move before her mind could even think. Thus, the two fought above the trees in a ballet of throws, bounces, and kicks for several seconds before Aly eventually had enough of playing games and sent a roundhouse straight into Catty's cheek.

The spunk spun into the air and crashed onto a large branch. Aly contemplated giving her foe a few more wallops just to make sure the lesson was understood, but she gave into logic and decided to finish the race.

Catty sat at the base of the branch and punched it with her fist. She could see light coming up ahead, indicating the finish line was closing in, and Aly hopped toward it effortlessly. *Unfair.* Catty stood up and took a deep breath. She placed her hands up ahead and aimed. Just then, the air around her went thin and drew into her hands. A great amount of force pulled itself between the palms of her hands the more she concentrated. This only made the oxygen in the air fuel the potential energy even more. Particles started pressing together at an alarming rate. The power was immense, and just when it was about to be too much, the Goolian released it.

Aly's ears shot up when she felt a terrible shrivel down her spine.

"Pache!" she shouted.

The chemical reaction that tried to warn Aly of the upcoming danger just barely made it. She leapt for the nearest branch, and that was her final error. She should've known that Catty wasn't aiming for her, but the branch she was probably going to grab. And just as the thought left her mind, Aly saw a bright yellow ball of energy zip underneath her legs and explode into the branch her arms were stretched for.

Nay, too soon. Not enough time to recover. Aly panicked. No other branches were near, and the ground grew closer by the second. Closer, faster, closer, faster... Gravity might not be as strong on a small planet like Gooliun compared to many of the other terrestrial worlds in her galaxy, but it was apparently strong enough to make Aly's shoulder pop when it was the first part of her body to crash into the ground. Her scream was a mixture of anger and agony.

Catty landed in the opening with a graceful flip seconds later, and a crowd of thirty more

Young Ones cheered as she took a bow.

“Enough of this ruckus, Masters and Mastras,” an elder Goolian insisted as he shoved his way through. “Now, be quick and lineup. *Ahem*. Now, a fair performance there, Mistress Cattalice the Younger.”

“*Catty is fine*,” the lively mastra wanted to insist. She hated having her title drawn out like that.

“Five seconds ahead of the prior week, yes?” the elder Goolian said as he checked a scroll. “Very well performed indeed.”

The Young Ones made a Goolian chant and a universal gesture of congrats to go along with it. Aly came through the brush with the help of the two other females seconds later. The crowd stopped cheering, but Catty grinned from ear to ear. The elder Goolian sighed and shook his head. He flipped through the pages of the scroll until he stopped on one page, and crossed it out violently. Everyone squinted and shuddered at the sight.

“And another fair disappointment from you, Mastra Alytchai,” the elder groaned. “Truth’s Grace, not only were you to not complete the course, yet you are to suffer two companions to fail as well due to your carelessness.”

The three scolded females frowned.

“Nay, as of better yet, let the two be pardoned since you are to blame,” he finished.

Aly’s ears shot up, and her eyes went wide. She was about to speak, but the elder gave a look that made her tense up. The Young One remembered her place and raised a hand.

“If-if I may speak freely, Teacher,” Aly stuttered.

“You may,” the elder said as he rolled his eyes.

“The rulings of the course were not thoroughly carried out,” Aly said. “Were we not to withhold from using our being?”

“Hah! She only speaks as such since she knows not how to control her own being,” a voice hollered.

The crowd chuckled, but Catty stopped smiling.

“Settle the volume, class,” the elder said. The Young Ones got quiet again, and the older Goolian folded his hands behind his back as he walked around Aly. “Yet we are not to make petty excuses for our mishandlings as well, yes? The rules on a combat field can change on the second. Granted this, that is the last time I shall permit such a stunt, Cattalice, yes?”

“Very good, Teacher,” Catty answered properly as she bowed her head. “Apologies for putting myself beyond the proper regulations.”

The elder Goolian nodded as if Catty’s answer was the sort he expected from someone of her caliber. He stopped in front of Aly and crossed his arms. Even though she was almost as tall as the teacher, while he towered over all the other Young Ones, Aly never felt so small and helpless in her life.

“Truly, what am I to do with you?” Teacher asked out loud. “You suffer of your own pride, you are of recklessness, and when will you be of composure and restrain your aggressiveness?”

No one was smiling anymore. Aly wanted to tell her teacher how she couldn’t help but be more aggressive since she had to make up for not being able to control her being like everyone else. She wanted to say how stupid and irrelevant this whole course was, and how she was actually better at it than anyone. She wanted to; she wanted to...

“Apologies, Teacher,” Aly said in a frail voice.

“I fear you have yet to regret, Mastra,” the elder explained. “Your shift in the fields is on this night, yes?”

“I... Truly.”

“Then I shall be sure to request an extra hour to your schedule prior to your arrival on site, very good?”

“Very good, Teacher.”

The elder checked to see where the first sun in the sky was. “Four hours beyond the noon. Dismissed.

The Young Ones fell out of line and grabbed their belongings. Aly sauntered over to the tree where she and everyone else had left their worn blue robes. No one said anything or even bothered looking at her, probably since they couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. They knew Aly’s punishment was unfair, but they couldn’t do anything about it. They were only Young Ones.

Aly brushed the dirt off of her brown loincloth and top before she tossed her robe over her head. She winced when sharp jabs struck her dislocated shoulder. Aly felt a four-digit hand like hers gently tilt the robe and her body over until her arm could slide through the sleeveless opening without any pain.

“My thanks,” the Young One said without turning around.

“A thousand apologies, Mastra,” Catty said as she helped Aly.

Aly turned and rolled her eyes since Catty kept her head down.

“Be damned, Mastra,” she insisted. “Why the troubled mark? Beyond this, I am already five and a hundred kilos of wheat ahead of goal in the field. Truly, an extra hour shall cause little harm, even with the shoulder, yes?”

“If you insist,” Catty said. “Be that as it may, if you like, perhaps I can request my—”

“Cattalice.”

“Very well, Alytchai. If it be your wish.”

Aly sighed, annoyed. She couldn’t be mad at Catty. Besides, knowing her, Catty would probably be laughing and dancing on the way back home in a matter of minutes anyway.

And it was just as she expected. The first sun gave soft rays of heat as its sister star flickered its light over the mountaintops of the valley. The sky was its typical peachy-orange evening color, with a gentle breeze singing across the wide open fields. The green grass leaning with the wind looked as fresh as a newborn Goolian’s skin. Shiny, soft, and so pure. Winds from the east continued a steady rhythm to the point of an old red dirt path, while specks of fine dust were picked up along its course. The dust devil gained an ounce of speed when it met up with another slight wisp. In spite of that, it continued its course across the dirt road leading into a not-so-far-off village.

It would’ve made its way into the heart of the community had it not been interrupted by a blockade of walls sharing the same course. The wind spun violently in different directions, trying to gain control, but it was too late. It diminished in strength as it tried to push through five strands of bright blue loose wool. The fading breeze tried to find an opening by flying up, but was quickly held down when two green hands forced the wool back to its original spot. The wind died.

The hands belonged to Aly. She, along with Catty and the other two females they had raced against, was heading back to Kutenbrya, their tribal village. It wasn’t a big village, but tribes were never too great in population on Planet Gooliun.

Aly’s bright gray eyes stared at the location of the second sun as she brushed back her long blue tentacles, sighing. There was still more than enough time to study and tend to the fields later in the day. *How annoying.* She’d rather spend her time daydreaming or singing. She was second-guessing about refusing Catty’s offer before her pointed ears felt another blow of wind

behind her. She quickly held her blue robe down again, prepared for another assault.

“Damned breeze,” she griped. “As I was to say, you miss the greater concern. Take a stare into the sky, Catty.”

As the green Goolian creature spoke, her long index finger pointed at a far-off bright twinkle in the sky. Catty looked up so she could study the star, but only shrugged.

“Argutas’ solar region is over a million milos away from us,” Aly explained. “Their technology is far greater than ours, yet we have not suffered any confrontations for quite a time. It makes an ill reason for them to seek our aid sooner or later.”

“Truly, if this was any other planet’s fight, you would speak perfect sense. Yet this is Governor Rashule, let alone Planet Argutas, that we refer to. They’ve always been of hubris over their technology and the such. And then there be us. We are isolated from the rest of the known world. Truth’s Grace, we still have yet to see these automatic transports the rumors speak of, let alone what some of those aliens call teleports!”

“Nay.” Aly shook her head. “This is completely a war set on numbers. Whoever has the largest force wins. Technology will not do it alone.”

“Aly does speak well, Mistress Catty,” one of the other mastras spoke up. “You know numbers can be a key figure in com—”

“Of course I know that!” Catty snapped back. “Truly, this is to be a classic scenario from our Strategic Military History course, for Truth’s Grace. Yet I care not of what anyone says. The Cyogen are said to better all on their warfare and weapons. This rumored ‘Alliance’ would thus receive a thorough ass-kicking if they fail to meet their advances.”

“And what difference does it make in the advances of technology?” Aly asked. “Nay, this will have to be of a united effort. According to the stories the elders give, the Cyogen would know this, thus they would set up a dispatch of troops as we speak. As we all play loyalists to our own little worlds, the Cyogen will simply wipe the Allies out, one by one, resulting in leaving tiny Gooliun exposed, defenseless, and alone. This is why we always train, due to these silly notions.”

For once, Catty had nothing to say, but only looked thoughtful. Then she started, “Truly, so let us suppose they would take to the planet-hopping method. Would that not give the rest of the nations enough time to form key strongholds across the solar regions? If I were the Cyogen, I’d go for the strongest forces like Planet Ufre first, yes? The stronger planets build strongholds

on their grounds, and perhaps decent ones in uncharted space. There would be no chance for the Cyogen to breach their defenses.”

Aly knew she won the debate by forcing her counterpart to say what she was already going to say herself. She brushed her tentacles – what the Goolians called “tents” for short – to the side again, allowing the sunlight to give a brilliant pure hue to them as a smirk revealed her hidden ego.

“Yet it shall not be so simple,” Aly continued. “The Cyogen planet of Cyiaus would perhaps consider the Allies’ defense, and therefore send small dispatches to handle the strongholds. So, what shall their answer be to them then?”

For a moment, the only sound between any of the four creatures walking down the red dirt road was the whistle of the wind brushing into the leaves on the old trees. Catty rubbed her short, orange tentacles in brief thought, then jokingly replied, “I suppose we can only pray for Truth’s Grace to be in our favor, if that would ever be the case, yes?”

The four Goolians reached the village of Kutenbrya around the same time as any other day, and nothing had changed since their departure that morning to the education board and sparring grounds. The Little Ones were testing their reflexes with a bluish, glowing sphere called a dankerball in the square, while most of the mothers were still picking the wild grass out of the fields. The fathers followed behind, dropping seeds in the already cleaned openings.

Aly and Catty left the other two mastras when they entered the heart of the Kutenbriun village. As they approached Aly’s hut, where she lived with her father, they were greeted by several familiar faces. Aly was especially greeted with huge smiles and pairs of typical large Goolian eyes.

An elder female greeted first. Both Aly and Catty made the appropriate bows at the same time as they politely continued to the door.

“A trying day at the sparring grounds, Aly?” the elder asked, peering at the bruised arm.

“Truly, Mastra.” Aly tried to get inside the building more quickly.

“Thus, I suppose you will not be gracing the crowds in the store with your singing today, nay?”

Aly stopped walking and frowned. “I fear not. My pappai shall have me—”

“Study for your exams, as you should, Little One. Very good. Do not let me tarnish the

rest of your day with any more sad tidings, dearest.”

Aly bowed and followed Catty toward the small hut door entrance, where a middle-aged Gooliun was wiping his hands on an already dirty towel inside the store. Aly dropped the load of scrolls she carried onto the counter and made a seat for herself. Catty mirrored her friend’s actions by grabbing the other stool.

“A fair day to you, Mastras,” the middle-aged Goolian said.

“Fair day, Pappai.” Aly leaned over the counter and gave the creature his daily kiss on the round cheek.

“Good day, Master Shanvi,” Catty replied properly.

Shanvi stopped smiling when he noticed Aly’s shoulder. He reached out to inspect it, but Aly pulled away quickly.

“If I may, Pappai, truly, it is of little worry. A simple fall out of a tree and nothing more.”

Shanvi hopped off his stool and headed around the counter. He patted his round belly several times before he stretched his fingers. He extended a hand, and Aly had no choice but to place her hand in his.

“Cattalice, if you please.” Shanvi moved over so the master could give him a hand.

“Oh, no trouble at all, Master.” Catty hopped off her stool.

Aly glared at Catty before her friend leaned over her and placed as much weight on her back as she could. Her pappai felt around the dislocated shoulder for a second until he tugged hard and popped it back into place. She held in a scream by grunting. It wasn’t the first time she had dislocated something, but the pain was still nearly unbearable.

Shanvi’s work wasn’t finished just yet. He eased off the shoulder a little and inhaled. Seconds later, his hands glowed with a bright blue aura, great enough to show the veins in Aly’s arm.

Focus, focus. Concentrate on reworking the enzymes in the body, Shanvi thought. He pulled his hand away a few seconds later to see how well he had done.

Aly moved her shoulder around a little to see how it felt. The muscles were still a little tight, but the pain was gone. If anything, she’d be good enough to go to work in the fields later.

“My thanks,” she said.

Catty hopped back onto her stool and spun around on it. “Lucky your pappai is seasoned enough with age to tend to your cartilage and bones when I distort them, yes?”

Shanvi chuckled as he went back to work. Aly made sure her pappai wasn't looking. When she could tell he wasn't, she stuck her long purple tongue out at Catty. Her friend grinned from cheek to cheek.

"Was the day well?" Aly asked her pappai as she tried to kick Catty off her seat.

"Truly, the usual. Nothing fabulous, yet all the same wondrous. Intriguing rumors and gossip here and there. Helps pass the time, yes? And did the classes at higher ed and sparring offer anything worth mentioning, beyond what your teachers have already told me in concerns to your race?"

"I, uh...the rumors were no more interesting than the Cyogen rumors from the other day," Aly answered as she rubbed her shoulder.

"I see," Shanvi said carelessly. "If you wish to delay your inevitable lecture for the sake of avoiding embarrassment in front of company, then so be it."

Aly and Catty both looked at each other nervously.

"Ah, and Catty."

Catty's ears shot up. "Yes, Master?"

"Your pappai would have you go over your Social Theories while you are here."

"Oh. And what would make him think I was not going home to help tend to the fields?"

Shanvi stopped wiping with a cloth and flung it over a shoulder as he turned around, one hand on his hip. "Perhaps it be due to the fact that this one has always arrived here first, ever since the beginning of time, yes?"

Catty's pointy ears drooped as she slumped over the counter in front of her. Aly grinned.

"And as for you, Mastra Alytchai..." Shanvi said as he glanced at Aly, who turned as stiff as green oak wood.

* * *

Aly easily hid her body within the purple and green strands of wheat and grass towering out of the soil after she reached her quota of work. She sped because she wanted to make sure she still had enough time to stare into the sky and daydream, in spite of the extra hour added to her shift. As she lay in the grass and watched the first cluster of stars show up, the mastra rubbed her arms warm herself against the chill of harvest time.

Another uneventful waste of a day flowed by as Aly hummed a cheerful tune. As she

hummed, the wonders of other worlds and alien creatures passed by. She envisioned beautiful creatures, very different from her own appearance, effortlessly soaring into the air thanks to these rumored flying mechanical mountains called “spaceships.”

The imagined sounds of water precipitating from above made smooth pats against the gravel while beautiful sparks of light spread their glory across a gray sky. If the Young One recalled correctly, the sparks were simply called “lightning.” She thought it had to be amazing to see the sky form into bubbles of gray puffs and release water. The only water her planet received was from the thick fog and dew of the morning.

Aly wondered how other beings lived amongst themselves when their worlds were so different from hers. How could they interact with one another without acknowledging the physical differences? What would they eat, wear, and what would thousands of years of advanced technology do to a civilization? Such thoughts rolled on as the hours passed by in the high weeds.

Even though her mind traveled across the far reaches of the galaxy, Aly always hummed a cheerful tune that eventually led into a song of her own making. The song she devised as she nestled in the grass had an aura that pulled the fire beetles into her being and complemented her voice as it rose and fell. By this method, she gained the very will of time itself and could manipulate it in any way she pleased.

The Goolian was so enveloped in her own world and song, she didn’t even hear the footsteps approaching until they were upon her. Aly almost sat up when she heard someone brush through the grass toward her, but it was already too late.

“And what is this? Lying in the middle of my pappai’s field for your own time to daydream, yes?” the owner of the footsteps hissed. “I have a nerve to give you a thorough lesson you shall never forget, Young One.”

The figure towering over Aly gave her a glare that would send shivers down even an elder’s spine, but Aly just scoffed at it.

“Then perhaps I should remind you of earlier times you decided to give me a hassle, yes?” Aly snarled back. “Perhaps a lesson such as the one I gave the prior week has already cleared your thoughts, Mastra?”

Catty playfully kicked Aly in the ribs before she took her place on the ground beside her. She stretched and yawned loudly, and Aly glared at her as curse words bounced out of her brain.

“Truly, why not be grander with your noise?” she insisted. “Does this one wish to suffer me trouble?”

“Nay, all seems well,” Catty said as she sat up and looked at the two full brown bags leaning against each other. “I was to figure I would not delay you until you finished in your typical hour. And finished you did, in spite of a wounded shoulder! Well performed, Mastra.”

“Why, my dearest thanks, Mistress.”

Catty slapped Aly on the forearm before she lay back down. “I told you, no poking fun in regards to that. I ceased mocking you about such things as your height and lack of inner being, yes?”

Aly rolled her eyes and kept staring at the sky. She heard Catty sigh because she knew she’d never get an apology out of her.

“Your shoulder is well, yes?” Catty asked as she examined the white cloth wrapped around Aly’s arm.

“It is still rather tight. Yet a decent slumbering tonight shall help—” She paused and sat up when she heard a rustle in the brush. “Where is your pappai?”

“He resides in the main house and proposed that it would be best for me to check on you since you’ve suffered such terrible production. Truly, you only heard a field rodent.”

Aly stretched before leaning back onto the ground.

“So, what travels do we take through the mind today?” Catty asked.

Aly was already slipping back into her trance as she studied the stars. “What else besides the wonders of the great beyond? And nothing beyond what shall always be? Simple wonders.”

“Hmm. Truly, Aly, there are times when I wish such a situation as a war was a reality beyond that of the simple slips of loose tongues.”

“A random outburst indeed,” Aly said as she popped her neck. “Be that as it may, you still speak truly. It would give a good reason for us to be off this rock, yes? To know all, to see all, to have all. I take it the alien fools who obtain such a gift are ignorant of what they grasp. Still, such gifts shall probably never be permitted to creatures such as we.”

“Well, fret not over the thought too gravely. For I am sure others have thought the same, yes?”

Aly sat up and fiddled with some beads tied around her tents. As if acting upon an instinctual, subconscious form of communication, Catty got up on her knees and started untying

the woven, common-looking pebbles decorating Aly's head.

"Truly, I make no fuss over such things," Aly insisted as Catty tugged. "You know such thoughts are ones that have grown dull with the passing of years during early childhood. Every soul has a proper order and purpose in the world, and this be ours. Being ignorant of other delegations and situations is of little concern to me."

"Then I suppose your age begins to show in this regard." Catty came across a bead that was wrapped in a knot and leaned her head in closer to get a better look at it. "I recall when this one had more wonders and excitement out of any other student when we were first taught about other nations in class."

Aly shook her head. "Nay, yet I still do."

Catty yelped when she lost her grip on the knot she had finally managed to loosen and thumped Aly in the back of the head.

"Apologies, Cattalice. As I was to say, I have learned to wonder without feeling the notion of absolute dread. What we hold in the palm of our hands is a grand deal, as it is. Nay, it be more than a grand deal. A place to call home, families to hail as our own, and the obligations we have to the village. Who could be in want of more?"

Catty poked the mastra on the head, and Aly extended her hand to the left so Catty wouldn't have to place the beads on the ground.

"Truly, I find this life, when all must be said and done, to be like these beads." Aly glanced at the hand being filled with her head accessories. "Perhaps simple and boring compared to others, yet a proud gem that we are blessed to call our own. Since this be the case, perhaps suffering the troubles of a larger world is better left in the hands of alien creatures."

"Finished." Catty dropped Aly's final bead into her palm. She tossed the eight thick extensions that were Aly's tentacles onto the mastra's right shoulder so she could massage them. "And I cannot agree with you more. Why, I myself would find it quite a shock to see how the others may live. Did you not hear of the Argutain rumor this afternoon?"

"The hairies? What else could possibly be new of them?"

Catty stopped massaging Aly's tentacles and clapped her hands together in delight. Aly spun around and straightened her tentacles as she tuned in.

"My pappai was told that they actually eat the inner rectums of rotten beasts as a delicate formal feast of kinds," Catty whispered. "Is that not repulsive?"

“Catty, surely that one must be an absolute exaggeration.” Aly looked disgusted.

“One should never be surprised when it comes to the other races, nay?”

Aly took that to mind as she turned around and lay back down. She grabbed one of the two secondary tents in front of her ears and fiddled with it as she started humming again. Catty tried to lay beside her friend and enjoy the quietness for several seconds, but she hopped back up and picked out some of the nearby weeds instead.

“Perhaps you would like to ensure the fields are beyond ready for the morrow, yes?” Catty asked as she plucked. “I merely say this in suggestion.”

“Nay, I am well, my thanks. Truly, I am thus satisfied with my night’s numbers.”

“My, and how easy it is to speak of obligations and not follow through on words. I have yet to see how you can be so curious yet rebellious all at once, Aly. You are fortunate I am your closest friend, yes? Or perhaps you abuse this relationship.”

Aly sat back up. “And perhaps you shall try tending to the fields for several hours like the rest of us, then. This be your damned property, after all. Let us see how great a lazy ass I am then, yes? Besides, as I spoke prior, I only lay about when I make the evening’s goal and beyond.”

“Well! A thorough point. My apologies.”

When an odd silence came between the two for a few moments, Aly rubbed her forehead, embarrassed.

“Nay,” she eventually said. “My temper apparently betters me at times, even now. Thus I am at fault.”

Catty probably wanted to drop the issue, since she placed the weeds she picked into Aly’s bag without a word. She then made her way back to her large hut across the field.

“Mastra,” Aly called out. “As well as things may be here, how does this one not ponder over what the rest of the world may be like?”

Catty placed her hands behind her head and smiled. “Why fret over others’ troubles when we should tend to our own? Truly, we should suffer with the notion of thinking over the greater good and not one’s self.”

“Perhaps.” Aly went back to gazing at the stars. “Be that as it may, I find little harm in toying with such harmless thoughts. Yet I suppose I am an odd one of sorts in regards to this, yes?”

Aly didn't catch her friend look up so she could see what had caught her eye. She didn't see Catty shake her head when she didn't see anything worth looking at, either.

"I can tell my pappai you made goal for the night, if you wish," Catty said as she kicked Aly's foot.

"It be of little bother. I shall idle here for a few more moments, if this one does not mind."

"We never do. Be well then, dearest."

Aly nodded and went back to her daydreaming. She thought about what Catty said, *not pondering over silly things beyond the village*. Maybe she was right. Maybe thinking so wildly was selfish and inconsiderate to everyone else. Aly prayed that wasn't the case. The last thing any Goolian would want to do was think herself better than the rest of the community. Fight. Learn. Work. Every person did this for the whole unit, not the one. That was the Goolian way. *There be nothing beyond the tribe*.

In spite of it all, however, Aly couldn't help but dream, which helped produce her cheerful hum. Thus, the magic in her voice returned.



Chapter 2

The following day was another typical one. Sparring sessions ended an hour earlier, so it was already a little ways into the evening. The practice, for the most part, went well. Aly couldn't do a lot of the runs the other Young Ones, like Catty, could do, since she didn't know how to use her inner being, but she was used to it since that had been the case since she was little. Aly tried her best in everything else to outweigh her flaws. And outweigh them she did, beyond reason, to most.

She was very agile. Her defense could use some improvement, but it was manageable. Aggressiveness she definitely had, and Young Ones always hated sparring against her. For one, Aly was very tall for her age, even taller than males, so she had a horrible advantage in reach. She wasn't clumsy despite her height, either. Aly could flip off a tree branch and land on two feet without any trouble.

She was quick, smart, and very adaptable when it came to sparring. Beyond that one setback, she was good, and all the other Young Ones had to respect her for being so well

balanced in everything else. Even so, that one “little” flaw still bothered Aly’s pride at times.

While the Young One sat at the front table of the store, she held out her arms. She was supposed to be studying the scrolls in front of her, but she was concentrating on her four-digit hands. *Damned things, why do you not work?* She squinted, hoping that might spark the trigger. Nothing. She held her breath and flexed her biceps. Still nothing.

The mastra sighed and put her arms back down. *Silly me. I could not do so then. Why would I be able to do such a feat now?* Defeated once again, she went back to studying the scrolls.

“You are fine the way Truth’s Grace made you to be,” Shanvi said without ever turning around. He took out a fresh roll of cooked wheat from the oven.

“Truly I be.” Aly acted like she didn’t just try to do something she knew she couldn’t.

She read three scrolls down and up before she eventually lost her concentration again. It was the commotion outside her window that distracted her. As orange and red as the sky was, as lively as the Little Ones could be while practicing dankerball in the streets, Aly sat at the table, inside, bored out of her wits. *Nay. Need to concentrate. These notes are of importance.*

Aly tried her best to study the notes she had taken throughout the entire year, but after spending hours in her leaf-paper class book, she had had enough, and rolled the scrolls back together with both hands.

Shanvi wiped off his counters. “You have yet to finish. The second sun still sets.”

Aly banged her head on the table for a quick second, hoping she’d get some sort of inconceivable mercy from her inconceivable parent. She had gone on with studying for what was probably seven straight hours.

“Three hours and forty-seven minutes,” Shanvi corrected as he looked at the second sun in the sky.

It was annoying when he did that – carrying a conversation with the thoughts she would never say. Shanvi pulled down the sides of his old blue vest-like top so it could cover the front of his large belly before he went on with his work.

“Permission to speak, Pappai?”

“You may.”

“May I not, at least, take a break, for Truth’s Grace?”

“Truth only offers its Grace when necessary, and the pages in the Philosophy never

carried segments for the sympathies of studying, only the rewards. There are thirty and eight hours in a day. You spent ten and five at school, a mere five at the sparring grounds, and the rest here. Surely it shall not kill this one to use several hours performing something productive, yes? I, along with every other Mature Aged, had to take higher ed when we were of your age and—”

Truly, and you had to memorize more because you did not have note scrolls as grand as ours. Aly grumbled under her breath so she wouldn’t have to hear the babble for the hundredth time. Her pappai didn’t even bother considering the time she had to work the fields. Sure, she was at home, but her time was still being given to someone else.

The Young One groaned. Her body ached because she had pulled a muscle in her thigh after she had kicked someone in the jaw that afternoon, her knuckles were sore from punching a green oak wood tree, and the soles of her feet still tingled from walking on rocks during the afternoon.

The mastra glanced down at her hands. Her knuckles were darker compared to the rest of her skin. She dug them into the soft fabric of her robe, hoping that massaging them would ease the kinks a little. Still, she knew there wasn’t a point in complaining. Like Catty said, it was all for the better good. Besides, rough knuckles were a sign of good work etiquette.

“If you are to fuss at the dawn of beginnings, do not expect to overcome any feats in the future,” Shanvi eventually finished.

“Very good, Pappai.”

Aly stuck her nose back into the scroll. No, she would never talk back to her pappai, or any other elder Goolian, for that matter. Keep the tongue behind the lips unless spoken to, and be polite when speaking to an elder. These were the rules for everyone.

Fortunately for her, Aly wasn’t as quick with the lip with the elders as she was with her friends. Besides, grown-ups were beyond her reasoning. Creatures being as old as two hundred were on their own level of life. They saw the world with a different optic, a different wisdom, a different power. They were intimidating and boring in one confusing spectacle. Elders also spoke an entirely different language from Aly and the rest of the youth. They always spoke ahead of themselves and had to have bizarre proverbs.

Overcoming feats in the future, indeed. That didn’t matter to the ticking time bomb that was Aly. She just wanted the horror of studying to end. If anything, a nice little song could help lift up her spirits.

There was always a handful of other Goolians visiting the store, buying Shanvi's goods and enjoying the live show Aly gave when she sang. Truth be told, most came only for the Young One's voice and nothing more, but Shanvi had no trouble with it as long as the crowd knew when it was time for his Young One to do her homework.

Both suns had finally simmered down behind the nearby mountains, and the first stars were out before Master Shanvi finished his last batch of wheat. He patted off spices from his hands and onto his old gray leggings, then went over to the bags beneath the counter. He had made extra, knowing the crowds were probably going to be larger tomorrow since everyone stayed home today.

Aly fiddled with her toes underneath the table, anticipating a particular star's emergence. When it finally showed outside her window, she stood up from the table and popped her back. After stretching, she went over to help Shanvi place the goods into the proper-sized bags.

When they had finished, Aly went to the back to wash some heavy black pots. She had only finished one pan before she heard someone walking up to their door. The door screeched seconds later when a Goolian entered the store. The Young One couldn't make the figure out clearly. Her eyes were still too young for clear infrared, so she tried leaning to the right to look out the door. She only managed to catch a glance of his robe. The cleanliness of the deep saturated blue and fine patterns indicated he was probably their field lord.

"Ah, Master Quongun. A pleasure to see you," Shanvi said.

Aly guessed right. Of course it was Master Quongun. Even though she couldn't clearly make out the figure, she should've known by his slenderness and healthy height. Maybe the absence of Catty's mother, Cattalice the Elder, gripping his arm was what made his identification difficult. She did, however, notice he was carrying some sort of bag with him.

"And it pleases me to see you are well, Teacher," the gentle-voiced Quongun replied. "Yet I hope I did not interrupt Aly from her studying, nay?"

"Truly, perfect timing, actually. She finished a few moments ago. Now, I beg, sit. Was your day well?"

"Truth be told, Master, I fear I have some—"

Two pots crashed to the floor in the back room when they fell out of the sink. Aly, trying to eavesdrop on the conversation, forgot to turn the water off. The mastra fumbled with the faucet and pots before they eventually slipped out of her hands, bumped into an already clean

pile, and sent everything tumbling to the floor.

“*Pache.*” The Young One immediately covered her mouth, hoping the elders didn’t hear her loose tongue... Too late.

Shanvi groaned. “Young Ones. They have yet to control those ears, nor that tongue. My apologies, Quongun. Perhaps we forgot that little part in raising her.”

“Nothing of it, Teacher. Cattalice and I literally have to send Little Catty across the street whenever we have guests. Such nosy creatures they are, yes?”

The two laughed, but Aly blushed. Quongun turned around and called the Young One over, and Aly slid one foot in front of the other into the dining area. She kept her head down, fiddled with her fingers, and felt more blood rushing to her face.

“Truly, I beg forgiveness for carelessly eavesdropping on your conversation, Pappai. Uh, and for the vulgar tongue, as well.”

“No worries, Little One,” Quongun spoke before Shanvi could. “We were your age at one time as well, yes, Master Shanvi?”

“Truly.” Shanvi paused and thought for a moment. “Yet it is growing difficult to remember what such an age was like. That was near...ninety-seven years ago for me, yes?”

“A mere sixty-four for me, yet let me not burden your time any longer. For it is getting late, and I have my own family to tend to. Plus, I would think it be best that Alytchai be here for this matter in any case as well, Master.”

Aly and Shanvi looked at one another.

“Truly, what business would require her of this audience? Her productivity in the fields is not troubling, nay?”

“Nay, Master. Rest assured, this one is still of the best at work. Be that as it may, I would request that she remain.”

“Well then, let it be. Come and sit, Aly.”

The Young One nodded and took a seat by her pappai. Quongun picked up the large bag he carried into the store and placed it on the table. He reached inside and pulled out a fine yellow leaf paper with a red wax symbol on the cover. He handed it to Shanvi, who then evaluated the construction of the envelope. It was made from the finest leaf he’d ever felt. He flipped it over to inspect the seal. Aly peered over her pappai’s shoulder to get a look, and gasped when she caught a glimpse of the crest.

Shanvi knew the crest as well. Silky, pressed weeds were finely placed in the middle with two oak leaves attached near the upper right. This envelope had to come from their Capital. It was a letter, and the lettering traveled back to that of Old Goolian Times.

Aly had difficulty reading it since the symbols were meant for proper business affairs, and she hadn't studied that type of calligraphy yet. She decided to read her pappai's expression instead. The glares he made while he read the fine papyrus didn't look promising.

After several moments of silence passed, Shanvi eventually looked up at Aly, who kept staring at the letter. She was already frustrated by this time and renounced on reading it because of the difficulty, but she figured she could at least admire the style. She looked up when she felt Shanvi eying her, and didn't like how the hard edges pressing around the corners of his eyes tightened.

Her pappai, still silent, folded up the scroll before he placed it back into its yellow compartment and set it on the counter. Aly grabbed a tent and twirled it around her finger so she wouldn't look so nervous. Aly didn't know Shanvi folded his hands together so she couldn't see them quiver. He then looked up at Quongun, who nodded his head as if confirming something too horrible was true. *What be the trouble?*

"We... These rumors." Shanvi tried not to stutter. "I—"

Aly raised a brow. There were about a hundred stories in town that week alone. She wanted to ask Shanvi to be more specific, but something in her gut told her she didn't want to know. Whatever made her pappai look so frightened couldn't be worth knowing. When Shanvi folded his hands in the form of a prayer, Aly's body went numb.

"Teacher," Quongun said, "would you like me to—"

"The Galactic Order is at arms," Shanvi blurted out.

The words didn't sink into Aly's head properly. Her eyes widened gradually as each syllable formed a sentence in her head. She couldn't help but giggle, instantly realizing Shanvi didn't just confirm the silly rumors as being true. When Shanvi and Quongun didn't laugh back, however, Aly stopped smiling. She tilted her head and placed an elbow on the table.

"With whom?" she asked as calmly as possible.

"Cyiaus. The Cyogen have returned."

Aly jolted and inhaled slowly. Shanvi had to place a hand on her thigh when she didn't realize she was tapping the floor relentlessly.

“P-pardon? Yet I thought...” Aly’s body went numb. Shanvi grabbed her hand and rubbed it when it started to shake. “Apologies. This is so sudden, yes? I-I thought the planet was supposed to be lost.”

“Truly, it was the original thought, Little One,” Quongun said. “And thus I fear it was an inaccurate one, apparently.”

Instincts made Aly squeeze Shanvi’s hand as it still rested over hers. “I-they are not to arrive here, since that notion of the rumor be true, nay?”

Shanvi looked at the floor and moved his hand away from Aly’s. He leaned back in his seat and twiddled one finger over the other.

“It seems we shall be saving them the trouble,” he said. “The Order has indeed formed an alliance, thus they have requested our aid. We shall meet them on Planet Argutas.”

“We? You mean the planet, yes?”

“If I may,” Quongun cut in, “you and your pappai must prepare to leave for the Capital, dearest. Kutenbrya has been drafted.”

Aly shot out of her chair and the masters did the same. She backed into the counter and stumbled over one of the stools. Shanvi ran over and helped her sit down as Quongun rushed to the sink for a bowl of water. He offered the drink to Aly, whose hands clenched into fists.

“Drink.” Shanvi took the bowl from Quongun and held it up to Aly.

The mastra shook her pale face, so she didn’t start gulping until Shanvi pressed the bowl into her lips.

“It is well, Alytchai. It is well,” Shanvi kept saying as he rubbed her back.

“Apologies,” Quongun said to Shanvi as he stroked one of Aly’s tents. “Truly, I was not expecting—”

“The telling of troubling news remains troubling news, no matter how one is to give it, lad. Truly, there be no need for an apology.”

Aly took the bowl into her own hands after she calmed down a little, and sipped slowly.

“You are well, yes?” Shanvi asked.

Aly nodded as she set the bowl on the counter.

“Fret not.” Quongun placed a hand on the Young One’s shoulder. “There be numerous villages with other households dealing with this heavy burden as well. Speaking of such, I must make my visit short. I am to return home and discuss matters with my own family.”

Quongun grabbed his bag and headed for the door. “Truly, how I wish I could have brighter news to give and, at the least, offer grander details. Yet the letter fails to mention such useful information as to how the Cyogen even returned.”

Shanvi walked Quongun to the door. “Nonsense, lad. All shall be revealed in just time, and fret not over your early departure. Truly, you also have your own family concerns to meet, yes? You honor us by seeking to inform the rest before your own, which is the proper way of things.”

“My thanks, yet I must give some credit to the village’s former sparring trainer for a proper upbringing,” Quongun said, bowing. “Be that as it may, if I hear of anything new, I shall return to you and the rest as soon as possible.”

“Very good. Be well, then.”

Quongun took a quick look at Aly before he slid the door behind him. Shanvi stood still for a moment, but eventually sat back down beside his Young One.

Aly looked like the war had already been lost, and she and her pappai had died months ago. Shanvi placed his hard hand against one of Aly’s ten blue tentacles and stroked it. She could smell the roasted sweets in his tentacle-beard when he kissed her forehead. His kiss always made her feel so shielded, so armed, so protected— until now.

“All shall be well,” Shanvi said again. “Alytchai, you do hear me, yes?”

Aly shook her head. “Catty and I spoke of how we wished such an issue as a war was true the prior day. Truly, what fools we be.”

Shanvi studied Aly’s face and saw just how much of a child she still was, decades away from being even a Grown One, let alone of Mature Age. Her face still had a little baby fat in it, but Shanvi shook his head and cancelled his fears.

“Hah! Nay, I should not trouble myself,” he said out loud. “And neither should you worry as well, Little One. You have your mammai’s spirit. As stubborn as she was, she was always ready to take on the worlds if she had to. Such is why I can assure you all will be well. Never change, and we shall both be fine for the better. Let us keep the faith of Truth’s Grace, and it shall continue to smile on us even in a time such as this, yes?”

Aly forced a smirk, and Shanvi kissed her forehead again.

“Goodness be! Your nerves bring you chill, dearest. I beg, we will think nothing more of this ‘til morning. Our world continues to turn, and the first sun will bring in a new day. Thus, I

suggest you be off to bed and try to rest your troubled mind. Regardless of the circumstances, I fear that you still have those exams in the morrow, yes?"

Aly banged her head onto the counter and groaned.



Chapter 3

Aly came back into the store after a bath in the garden springs, gripping the woolen cover wrapped around her. The warmth of the lake behind her pappai's hut helped calm her nerves a little, and she knew she could handle the draft. She had no other choice but to handle the draft. Besides, there were still exams before war. An odd way to think, but such was the way of thinking in Kutenbrya.

The mastra's tents were still slippery and dripping water onto the store floor when she walked inside. She made sure the front door was fully closed so dust from outside wouldn't slip in. After blowing out all the candles in the kitchen, she strolled into the room that was calling and the bed that was waiting.

Aly's room was a very small resting board placed right behind the kitchen. The only thing separating the two rooms was a thin curtain set between the kitchen tub and a piece of green oak wood that served as a hanger for her few robes. It was basic, but served its purpose.

Aly's toes, even though they were short in length, seemed to clutch onto the furriness of

her bedroom floor. The carpet was warmer than the plastic-like material of the kitchen floor. She bent over to take off an anklet she had woven, and let the useless cover drop to the floor.

After placing her anklet onto the small table by her bed, Aly picked up the woolen cover and threw it over the wooden bar of the ceiling so it could dry. The exhausted Goolian finally fell into the furs of her bed with all of her night routines completed. Sleep was her fourth favorite event of the day, next to singing, sparring, and daydreaming.

The mastra wasn't able to shut her eyes when she thought about how she was supposed to sleep during the war. Would the armed forces acquire some sort of transportable device for them to sleep in, or would they just have to sleep in the grass? Aly laughed at that thought. Then again, it probably did make sense. After all, she would be outdoors, and she could get exposed to possible infections from sleeping on some sort of weeds.

"And what if a night beast was to attack my camp as I slumbered?" she said to herself, sitting up. "Nay, what if the Cyogen attack my camp as I slumber? Would they torture me, ravage me, skin me, dissect me as I remain—"

* * *

Aly looked as terrible as the rest of the Young Ones at the learning board the following morning. Some hadn't cleaned up, some hadn't changed clothes from the day before, and none of them looked like they had gotten any sort of sleep. No one even bothered opening the leaf covers on the walls so some sunlight could come in.

Catty nearly crashed into her seat across from Aly when she came in. She gradually leaned over to Aly and poked her on the head.

"An absence of sleep for you as well, yes?" Catty asked in a gritty tone.

Aly buried her head into her folded arms.

"I suppose that be a 'yes,' then," Catty continued. "Truly, I would doubt any of us did. It was the delivery's error. After my papapai returned from your hut the preceding night, he said we were expected to receive those letters a near six hours prior to their arrival."

Aly banged her head into the wooden desk. "Truth's Grace, thus I am glad no such thing happened, if that be the case. I fear my studying would have suffered dearly."

Catty was about to say something else to her before she and everyone in the schoolhouse

got quiet. Everyone in the room heard their instructor's footsteps coming from ten meters, so the Young Ones counted the time it would take for him to reach the door. He entered right on the dot.

Master Slew was close to two meters in height and around his early fifties. His white tents were longer than most in the board, and neatly groomed. He was quite athletic looking, even though he always came in with a robe similar to that of Lord Quongun's. He was dressed very decently for his stature and for one so young, and many females had a little crush on him; Catty among them.

"A fair morning class," he began. "As all are well aware, or should be, today marks your exams day. This shall be the judge to whether or not you will progress to your final year of beginner's session in higher ed."

Aly rested her head in her palm and yawned, but Catty nudged her back up.

"Yet," Slew continued, "I am fairly sure, perhaps due to the lack of sharpness in your eyes, that you are aware of the Call to Arms, as well. Truly, some of your beloved, let alone yourselves, shall no longer be seen beyond a few following days. The Rule of Education knows that a grand deal received letters from His Honor around the evening time. Being considerate of the possible troubles of unmanageable stress, the Rule has thus delayed your exams until further notice, along with teachings for the next five days."

Cheers flew through the entire board and Master Slew had to cover his ears. He ordered everyone to settle down, but the students didn't bother. Catty and another student eventually whistled and shut everyone up. Slew nodded and winked at Catty. The mastra blushed, and Aly rolled her eyes when she noticed the way her friend carried on.

"Now, then. To my understanding, a grave deal of you have plannings to make. Be that as it may, it be my hope that we shall all keep the ones who are to fend for us in our thoughts, and pray that Truth's Grace guides and finds favor with them. As for the ones that are to depart, may the Great Philosophy find favor with you always, and we shall see you all after you have brought us the peace and victory won."

Slew actually looked at Aly and smiled, and the Young One looked down when she felt herself doing the same. Several Young Ones, including Aly, received good fortunes and prayers before Master Slew finally said, "You are free to go."

The Young Ones stormed out of the building like Little Ones ready to play dankerball all day. Some stayed in the area, having nothing better to do, and some made small discussion

circles around the ones due to leave. Then there were some, like Aly and Catty's entourage of four, who headed for home as they usually did.

The four didn't say anything on the way since the feeling in the atmosphere was too odd for joking and gossiping. As a result, silence followed them with every step. Catty acted like she tripped over a rock on the road just so the mastras could have something, anything, to laugh over. Aly asked if she was okay. Catty made a fake giggle, but no one took the bait. The stroll home immediately went quiet again.

Catty flung her hands into the air. "By Truth's Grace, enough with this! Be of cheer, Mastras. Frowns make of little use, yes?"

The others nodded, smirked, and went back to walking in silence. Catty's ear shot out and puffed out her lower lip.

"You lot bring a foul spirit indeed. Truly, you are the main few who should have stayed home."

Aly glared at Catty, and the look made the bubbly mastra lean away a little.

"Well, I only try to make a point."

Aly wasn't in the mood to argue with Catty, so she didn't say anything. Since she was the daughter of their tribe's field lord, Catty was immune from this form of civil servitude. Her birthright was to take her pappai's place once he had passed, working in some form of simple agriculture logistics. Catty was a lively heart, but a spoiled one too.

"I understand you and Master Shanvi must make preparations for the travel to the Capital, yes?" Catty asked Aly. "Surely he must be growing delirious doing all the packing by himself. You are not taking much, nay?"

"Nay, we shall only bring one bag with us, I believe." Aly didn't say anything else, and the other three scratched their heads as they looked at one another.

"Perhaps...well, perhaps we can travel together along the way to the Capital, then, yes?" Catty asked.

Aly and the other mastras halted almost on the same heel, and all of their ears perched up to direct attention.

"I mean, I shall be traveling in my pappai's company, since he wishes to go, and I would think it fair that I should serve as well."

The other three started barking their protests over one another until they realized they

couldn't even hear themselves talk. Aly then waited to see if she was the one that was supposed to speak for the team once they all settled down. She figured her assumption was accurate when the other two mastras shoved her.

"Very well, then. Now, this one has truly lost her wits, Catty! And beyond this, you mean to hold such news to yourself this entire morning?"

"I did, for fear of a reaction similar to this. What troubles you fools? We are all ten and seven years in age, and the law permits us to volunteer for service by now if it would be our wish. And beyond this, I may see different creatures from other worlds and the like."

"Truly, how I wish to have the luxury of you," Aly nearly growled. "You are offspring to the tribe's field lord. There be no place for you in battle."

"Need I remind you that I am the highest rank in our combat courses? It would be a grave dishonor for me to leave my skills to waste."

Aly looked like she was about to say something else, but bit her lip instead.

"Have we not been prepared for such events as this ever since we were of good age?" Catty insisted. "Have we not always wondered why we must learn the basis of combat when there are none to test our skills against?"

"Beyond this, it would be an honor to our families and planet, yes? Has not the tribe taught us to treasure such values? The Cyogen shall seek those that have the will to fight or not. Truly, my gravest apologies for not wanting to lie down and cower in hopes of others managing my well-being when I should manage my own."

Aly and the others held their heads down. Catty was the shortest out of everyone, but the other three felt as if she towered over all of them. The words embedded into their heads at an early age apparently left a deeper impact on the one of noble birth. Honor Truth's Grace, love your family, and put all things before yourself as an honorable form of servitude to the tribe and Planet Gooliun. That was the way of things for generations beyond generations.

"What use will it be to talk her out of it, Mastras?" one of the others said. "Truly, we know if the spoiled ones such as Catty are ever in want, they shall have it. Which reminds me, have you not asked Master Slew for a get-together yet, Little Mistress?"

The other two mastras gasped and covered their mouths. Catty's yellow eyes dimmed in anger as her cheeks flushed.

"I told you, it was a mere infatuation, Requai. Truly, a grave deal of other mastras share

similar admirations for Teacher.”

“Truly. And I suppose this was the case when you informed me that you wanted to give him your purity head beads.”

Everyone stood mute for what seemed like forever. Aly stared straight at Catty, and Catty could only look back at Aly.

“Catty, you wish to...mate with Master Slew?” Aly asked. She tried to keep a straight look, but ended up howling right into Catty’s face. The other two eventually did the same.

The three puckered their lips and mimicked Catty and their teacher dancing down the road, hand in hand, happy as a bug. The yellow-eyed mastra, on the other hand, slowly calmed her nerves and grinned. The temperature suddenly dropped. The three laughing gave the warning no mind until they felt the sudden spark of combustible energy fire out of her hands.

A small yellow ball of plasma exploded from Catty’s fingers as she held it up in mid-air. Laughing turned into choking and clearing throats, but Aly just rolled her eyes.

Catty effortlessly rolled the sphere between her fingers. The other two mastras stared at the ball with nerves pinched and rolled their tongues back into their mouths. Satisfied with the silence, Catty tossed the sphere into the air and allowed the other compounds to break it up until it finally disappeared. Maybe such individuals could be useful on the battlefield after all.

* * *

Aly and Catty left the other mastras when the dirt road split in two.

“Come now, Mastra.” Aly held Catty in her arms and tried to stop giggling. “Truly, I begged for your pardon.”

“Shut up, I say. Such apologies are pointless as you remain in the midst of laughter.”

“Be that as it may, there was foul play in your act as well. You may have suffered a great deal of trouble had an elder seen you toying with your being as such.”

“You only speak foul since you cannot control your own. Speaking of such, who are you to talk of losing tempers? Truly, you are what the aliens are rumored to call a ‘ticking time bomb’.”

“Nay, I have kept my temper under control very well for some time, and this one best learn to do the same.”

Aly knew Catty stopped arguing just because she felt bickering back and forth was a

waste of time. Fine with her. Besides, the Young One was more interested in what looked like the tribe's unannounced desertion. No Little Ones playing dankerball in the square, no grown-ups doing laundry, no one was even in the fields. Aly didn't take the twitch in her spine lightly and sped up her pace home.

"Odd," Catty said. "I wonder where all have gone off to. One would think the lot of us were hiding from the Cyogen already, yes? Perhaps there be a council at the temple?"

"Would we not have been informed about it this morning while we were still at the board?"

"If that be the case, then I shall cancel the regular visit and prefer to hurry on home instead."

With Catty finally going her separate way, Aly entertained herself with the comedic events along the way home from the education board. By the time she reached her hut and opened the door, she couldn't hold it in anymore. Aly entered the store and burst into laughter, falling to her knees as her stomach ached from the excessive gaiety. She didn't even pay any mind to the customers in the store.

"My apologies, Masters and Mastras," Shanvi said as he peered over the heads of customers at his counter. "Aly. Aly, enough of this! Alytchai!"

Aly choked on her own saliva when she heard her full name, and her blood went thin when she saw a store filled with people staring at her.

"Oh. I-I am so... I just returned from – my friends and I... My highest apologies."

She heard Shanvi accidentally let out a giggle before he hopped off the pedestal he was on and helped her up.

"Now that I have all's attention, and yours, Aly, you have some guests, dearest."

Aly studied the room in deeper detail. The store was designed to hold ten people comfortably, but she counted a total of thirty bodies scrunching themselves inside the tiny room. There was always a decent number of people at Shanvi's store to either buy goods or hear Aly sing, but the crowds were never like this before. While she was busy wondering what the special occasion was, Shanvi grabbed her hand and escorted her to the back door, with the crowd trying to follow them.

"You may go and meet us around back with the others," Shanvi told everyone before he opened the door.

“Others? What others do you speak of? Pappai, if I may ask, what—”

The mastra’s speech was cut short when Shanvi opened the door and she saw the entire tribe stretched across the field. From the smallest of Little Ones to the eldest of the Mature Aged, everyone was there. Some were sitting on the rooftops of neighbors, while others were looking out of nearby hut windows, and they were all looking at Aly. It didn’t take her long to understand what was going on, so she spun around on one heel and tried to shove her way back inside the store to hide.

“No need to fret,” Shanvi said as he caught Aly by her frozen stiff shoulders and rubbed them. “You have sung for every soul here at least once, yes? I believe you can do so now. Truly, this was unexpected, yet perhaps everyone had the same mind-set.

“Aly, lives shall forever differ in the matter of only a few days, and we are blind as to what will come of us or the tribe. Heed these faces. Some of these you see now will...This may be the last time to gaze upon them again.”

Aly saw Catty poke her head around the corner of Shanvi’s hut. She gave the mastra a subtle look, indicating the need for a dashing rescue. Catty just shrugged as she shoved through the crowd to get to her own parents.

“People are troubled, Little One,” Shanvi said, guiding Aly’s gaze back to his eyes with two fingers under her chin. “Yet Truth’s Grace has blessed you with a gift to help others smile, even when all is wrong. Offer them something to smile about now, yes?”

Shanvi gently pushed Aly to the front of the deck, and a stream of sweat slid down her side. She looked out again and saw her other two friends with their folks. Like Catty, they looked just as surprised.

“Come now, Mastra,” she scolded herself. “Truly, just breathe.”

Aly took a deep breath, and the spectacle began. A gentle wind from the east made its way across the field, brushing against the tall strands of green and tanned wheat. Beasts and buggers muted their sounds, and flaming beetles hovered across the deck with their rears blinking soft blue lights.

Aly’s eyes caught the glare of Gooliun’s first sun, making them brighter than ever. The wind from the east blew a soft rhythm into her sparkling blue tentacles as they started to wave in the breeze. She opened her mouth and sang like that of an angelic aura. No one’s mind, as often as they had heard it before, could’ve possibly fathomed such beauty on the brinks of sounds.

Folk who were standing felt weak in the knees and had to sit down as their mouths dropped simultaneously. They were in a daze, a trance, in complete hypnotic states. No one spoke, or blinked, and some even forgot to breathe as she sang. The words she spoke were of comfort:

The morning's bright colors are no longer more, yet resides a new hue in the air to adore. No pinks or blues, nor reds in this theme, yet a new branch of colors is replacing this scheme.

'Tis gray and black and all flakes of fear too, no longer fresh, no longer new. War is near; the world seems so old. Its wrath so damp, so cruel, so cold.

*Yet smile in joy during feel of the days. If only this feeling could always be at stay.
For now, the noons are bright and clear, not a frown in the sky, not one is near.*

Worry not of this nature, offer it no might. Stress cares for later; they retreat as the night. Truth's Grace shall be with us, in this time of fear, and bring with it joy, love, hope, and good cheer.

The wind kept sending its soft breeze after she finished, and the eyes of all were filled with what Aly promised them: joy, love, hope, and good cheer.

* * *

The evening gave way to a festival held around the village's temple, and a huge campfire's flames soared overhead as the Goolians made their prayers or sat in front of the warmth. Normal attire was replaced with what the Goolian creatures considered formal clothing: brightly colored, beaded, and light.

Aly, like most of the Young Ones and Little Ones, headed over to a grand circle not too far from the mass to be entertained by old stories. She sat by Catty and their other two mastra friends, who already had their eyes set on an elder Goolian standing in the center of the circle. He was similar to Shanvi, but far older and much more powerful with his inner being. The age in his eyes was shown by their marvelous glow, but they still failed in comparison to the brilliance in Aly's.

“Gather around, Little Ones,” he said, “and I shall tell you the tale of the glories of ages ago, in the times when the known world was in continuous quarrel with planetary nations. With one force came the followers of the Divine Truth’s Grace, the Eastern Alliance, and then those who would oppose the Philosophy that said such things as justice and honor were only abstract, if even evident. Such was the lie of the Planet Cyiaus that housed the Cyogen. And on that rock, the Cyogen would force its lie onto its neighbors, Planets Ioweth and Requely. And then there were the weak ideals of the Prossia, a pacifist group from all rocks with hopes of ending such a glorious tale by laying down the arm without the will or strength to fight.”

“Truth’s Grace.” Catty rested her head in her hands. “This again?”

“What troubles this one?” Aly whispered. “Truly, such a story is fitting, given the circumstances.”

“The circumstances remind me that we heard this story for the hundredth time less than a month ago.”

“Perhaps. For it be a good story.”

“Nay, I say it be a boring one.”

“Silence, fools,” Requai said as she slapped Catty’s thigh. “You two draw attention from the crowd for being too grand in volume.”

Aly and Catty looked up and saw three elder Goolians supervising the circle glaring at them from the other side. They quickly acted like they were listening to the storyteller the entire time, and made extra sure they didn’t glance back at the scolding grown-ups.

“History tells us of the wages this great war gave the nations that were stretched out amongst the known world,” the storyteller continued. “The night sky lit up as the plunders of flying towers plummeted back into earth as if they were to be meteor showers. The rainbows of light from the technologies of others soared across the vast skies, only to run through the hearts of many. For great was the number of all who fell during those dark ages.

“And for two and a hundred of our years, the war waged on without the heed of Goolian beings, and the fate of the Honorable Eastern Alliance and the Galactic Order were at threat. For the forces of the Cyogen held might in their tactics and weapons, and no fool would bother the heeds of Prossia. Yet our time did arrive, and the Eastern Alliance called for our aid.”

Aly smiled as more people started showing up, standing behind the circle of Young and Little Ones. Her friend, Catty, on the other hand, yawned and rested her chin in her palm as the

elder Goolian kept blabbering about an old war she had heard about and studied in her education board for years. Aly elbowed the mastra in the side when Catty snorted too loud, and Catty returned the gesture by slapping Aly's arm.

"Truth's Grace, Mastra," Aly grumbled through gritted teeth. "Why not be more obvious with your boredom?"

"Truly, I doubt such a feat as being possible."

"Enough! He hears my favorite part of the story."

The two both felt a hand on one of their shoulders and went stiff as green oak wood. The other children leaned away from the two as if they were trying to avoid the threatening aura of the Mature Aged Goolian with long orange tents squatting down between Aly and Catty.

"Am I to see two Young Ones perform less behaved than the Little Ones they share their company with?" the older mastra asked. "And must I separate this pair in a similar fashion as such?"

"Nay, Mastra," the two recited in unison.

"Thus I shall make this my final warning, then, very good?"

"Very good, Mistress Cattalice," Aly said as she bowed her head at the Goolian.

"Apologies, Mammai," Catty answered.

When Catty's mother left the two alone, Aly crossed her arms and tried scooting away from the troublemaker. Isolating her, along with Catty's embarrassment – knowing that everyone was probably looking at the teenaged mastra who just got publicly lectured by her own mammai – would suffice.

The storyteller continued. "And once the Galactic Order called for aid, the glory of the Goolian planet shifted the tides of the war in favor to the devoted followers of the true Philosophy, that justice and honor do indeed share a known form. It be true, and it is the Truth's Grace. And thus Truth's Grace was evident by our faith within.

"And thus we saved the souls of Ioweth and Requely, and returned them to the favor of Truth's Grace. With only the darkness of the Cyogen remaining, the Goolian race led the charge against the colossal rock sphere that was Planet Cyiaus. And victory was blessed to us!"

The listening crowd let out a large tribal cry.

"And thus dark times have befallen amongst our precious galaxy once more, and our glory has once again been pleaded by others who would rely on their...technology. Truly, how

history repeats itself, yes?”

The sarcasm in the elder’s voice stirred chuckles in the crowd, and the storyteller smiled at his joke before he continued. Aly lost a bit of her put-off mood and uncrossed her arms. She folded her hands into her lap and leaned forward a little when she could tell the storyteller was actually about to say something different. Catty tilted her head when she realized the same thing.

“And so, fret not over the concerns of your own flesh and blood. This be not the way of Kutenbrya, nor is it of Planet Gooliun alone,” the storyteller said.

Another tribal cry was shouted.

“Gooliun does not heed to one individual. For do we not all heed in the fields? Do we all not harvest? Do we all not go to arms? Unity, community, family, fighters, warriors! We have been born for this task, this glory, this destiny, and this honor! The darkness of the Cyogen wishes to annihilate us? Let us tend to their memory. So take charge, Kutenbriuns. Take charge, soldiers! Take charge, Gooliun! For the world is ours! The future is ours! And glory awaits us in the stars!”

Aly was thrilled as cheers roared into the night sky. Her favorite story just got turned into a rallying call. *How fitting*. She nudged Catty in the elbow, as if saying she told her so. Catty nodded with a look of passable approval as she clapped her hands, after subtly wiping an eye. However, it was the sound of drums booming throughout the village and the Young Ones lining up, so they could perform their tribal dance that finally got her friend fired up.

After going through the dance line with Catty and her other friends for a few rounds, Aly sighed heavily with relief. Satisfied with the much-needed morale boost, she excused herself from the dance line that was now turning into an entire village dance floor. Before she managed to slip away, however, her pappai caught her.

“And where is this one going?” he asked.

“If I may, I was off to the fields. Truly, nothing more.”

“Hmm. Very well. You seem much better, to my relief. Off you go, then.”

The sounds of music and laughter eventually faded into nothing more than the sounds of night creatures as Aly walked out into the fields. It didn’t take long for the Young One to find her favorite spot, and then gaze up into the pattern of crystals called stars floating milos beyond milos away.

Aly’s mind eventually slipped into daydreaming, and she thought about the endless

possibilities waiting for her beyond her known world. The realm of wondering was gone, and the dimension of reality was finally going to reveal itself. No more mysteries, but only fact, and a sudden chill ran down her spine. She chuckled to herself because the chill wasn't one of alarm, but of anticipation. Finally, the world would be hers.

This wonderful epiphany was more than enough reason for the Goolian to close her eyes and start a happy little tune. The gentle breeze picked up its pace again, and the creatures of the night quieted in reverence to the mastra's enchanted voice. Sailing across the wheat was what the song did, soaring. As the song floated higher, ever peacefully, Aly smiled.

The Young One's song was content with all things about her. Her faith would strengthen her, and her upbringing would aid her. No, victory was theirs. Victory was hers. There was no way Gooliun could lose. There was no way the Cyogen could win.

Just then, Aly's ears twitched because she thought she felt the direction of the wind change. She paused for a moment and opened her eyes to look around. No, everything still looked normal. So the Young One shrugged, closed her eyes, and started singing again. She only got to carry her song for a few more seconds when she felt the wind change again. The mastra opened her eyes again and raised a brow.

Moments later, an odd, gentle hum rolled across the fields, and Aly sat up on her knees to see what was going on by the temple. She could still see the light coming from the flame, but she couldn't hear anything else. The drummers stopped playing, the people stopped dancing, and the Little Ones stopped laughing. They must've heard the hum too.

"Be damned, what ruckus was that?" Aly said to herself.

The ruckus came again in full force. The hum sounded more like a groan the second time, and it made Aly's teeth chatter. The Young One looked all around her, hoping the source of the sound was nearby, but everything still appeared the same. She looked up, and was about to jump into a fighting stance when she saw what looked like a glowing rock in the sky moving toward her.

Aly stared at the object in confusion. Goolian hearing was exceptional, but she never recalled being able to hear meteors before, and the light coming off the rock looked odd.

"A comet, perhaps?" she said to herself. *Truly, one has not been announced...nor seen this close.*

That thought was lost when the groan came again. This time, the sound was heavy,

hoarse, agonizing. The ground shook, forcing Aly flat on her rear. She wanted to run and hide underneath her pappai for protection, but she was too far out in the open to make the sprint.

What awful noise is this? Aly's eyes widened. *Perhaps it be thunder, yes?*

The mastra remembered being taught about thunder in class, since thunderstorms didn't happen on Gooliun due to the planet's troposphere. According to what she remembered, a source of light would streak the sky, and booms reverberated off it seconds later. Yes! It was thunder! That had to be it, but then she remembered the educators said the light that made the sound was fast and quickly disappeared.

The groaning from the rock eventually mellowed out with a series of other sounds. The bright object, once a somewhat passive member in the gorgeous purple and pink night sky, was starting to turn into a decent-sized, menacing eyesore among the stars. The Young One watched the object get closer, and bigger, and closer, and bigger, and closer...

Aly's jaw dropped. Even if she had laid all the way flat on her back, she couldn't see the whole thing. The object's sound was steady now, shoving the breeze into another direction one final time. It was beyond massive, beyond reasoning, and so dark. In that instant, Aly realized she had never seen black until that moment.

The object moving across the sky was smooth in design. Smaller specks of red and blue lights flickered on and off of it seconds later. It had solid, hollow-looking extensions protruding off the sides in perfect horizontal rows.

The mastra finally knew what the object was. It was one of the great flying towers the old storyteller had just talked about. It was a sentient-created object made on a world light years away from her own. The protrusions on the sides were cannons; cannons that would blanket the sky with what the storyteller called "the rainbows of light from the technologies of others." These rainbows were actually lasers, rockets, and missiles that would run through the hearts of many. "For great was the number of all who fell during those dark years," she remembered.

The Young One eventually shook her head, blinked twice, and shook her head again to make sure she was actually seeing all of this. Since her mind had to shut itself down, due to the information overloading it, Aly couldn't do anything but stare in silence as the massive dark tower soared across the omnipotent sky like it was its playground. As far as she could tell, the sky turned into nothing more than a secondary relevance, merely serving the master of the stars' will, that being the flying tower.

The Goolian's brain decided to work again a few minutes later, but its thinking capabilities were still in shock. The epiphany kept running through her head like a Little One's song-game that tricked a singer into repeating the same lines over and over again. It was a spaceship. It was a spaceship. It-was-a-spaceship.

A bug that landed on her forehead was the only thing that eventually shook off Aly's trance. After rubbing her head due to a hard slap, the Goolian went back to looking at the large object towering over her.

Odd. Her first-encounter experience wasn't as pleasant as expected. At least she wasn't overly scared, since she knew the ship was a transport from the Allies and not the Cyogen. Amazing. This was how it would begin.

The Goolian took a deep breath and placed her hand to her chest when she realized her heart was trying to pound out of it. She inhaled and exhaled heavily, hoping the horrible sight hadn't managed to put her into mental shock. While Aly was trying to come to grips with what she just saw, the large ship flew by.

The Young One closed her eyes and prayed she'd be stronger the next time she saw such an event. After several mumbles, Aly opened her eyes, and her face went pale. Her jaw muscles clenched, nearly cracking her teeth as the rest of her body tensed. Her throat went dry as small creases tightened around her watering eyes.

The ship passing by had concealed the other many vessels coming into the atmosphere. Aly tried to get up, but her numb limbs made her stumble back onto the ground. The sky's once glorious pink and purple blanket was shredded by more black glowing rocks, in numbers too grand to count.

The closest vessel threw a dark shadow across the fields, engulfing any light left. It eventually swept over Aly's bright gray eyes and an unexpected tear managed to streak down her cheek. She didn't think about her pappai, who stood beside Catty's parents while he looked out toward the fields where he knew she was. She didn't think about Catty, who strolled up beside her parents, just as lost in awe as everyone else around the campfire. No, Aly thought about what the ships were really doing. They were unveiling the blanket that covered reality from her eyes. This was the real picture of what the war was going to bring her. It wasn't going to bless Aly with the world. No, it was going to end it.

ALLIED UNIT 0179 DATABASE



PROFILE : SHANVI OF THE
KUTENBRIUN TRIBE

SEX: **Male**

BLOOD: **Blue Type 4**

AGE: **114 (universal years)**

HEIGHT: **170.18 cm. / 5 ft. 7 in.**

RACE: **Goolian**

TENTACLES: **Graying Blue**

SKIN: **Green**

EYES: **Blue**

PLACE OF BIRTH:

Kutenbrya of Planet Gooliun

FATHER: **Shanvi the Elder
(deceased)**

MOTHER: **Ghayai of the
Kutenbriun Tribe (deceased)**

LIKES: **Sparring, fruits,**

DISLIKES: **Cyogen**

TRAITS: **Extrovert, stubborn**

HOBBIES: **Baking, cleaning,
gardening**



Chapter 4

Days turned into weeks, and the journey to the Capital was already behind the tribe. Most of the Kutenbriun citizens left in large packs of seventeen to twenty people around the break of dawn days ago, but they ended up arriving separately at different times in smaller groups of four to six. When Aly came upon the fields of the Capital with her pappai, Quongun, and Cattalice, a rumor was flying around saying the planet's overseer was expecting to greet some fortunate individuals. There was even some talk about a banquet. Both families wore slightly more formal attire, wanting to be better safe than sorry.

Aly kept her ocean-blue tents down, along with a giant white flower neatly tied over her left ear. She wore a robe that originally belonged to her late mother, which was sleeveless and had the option of untying a slit in the side.

The blue in the clothing wasn't as saturated as her tents were, but it complimented her skin very well. A delicate pattern of swirls flowed across the robe, and its woven string sparkled in the sunlight. She decided she'd save her dark sandals for that night, fearing they'd get dirty

during the trip. So she wore her simple school sandals instead.

Shanvi, not being a dress-to-impress sort of individual, just wore the same common clothes he had on two days earlier. The only difference was his old wooden staff, which only went up a little above the protrusion of his tummy, and his gray, woolen-like cape. Aly was surprised when she saw the cape. Shanvi said that her mammai made it for him several years before she passed away, and Shanvi never wore it after her heightening, or burial. He also wore some old brown footings which were specifically made for hiking, not that he really needed any special shoes or even a staff, for that matter. He was only a hundred and fourteen, after all, so he had another ninety years or so going for him, at the very least.

Catty and Quongun were obviously dressed with a higher decorum, but toned down their statements in respect for the company they kept. Lord Quongun wore a gray robe with silk-like stripes flowing from top to bottom. He originally planned on wearing his robe along with it, but later felt the day was too hot; that and he might outdo his Teacher by too much.

Catty wore a yellow, silk-like outfit similar to a sundress. The design of the bottom was supposed to be looser than Aly's, with both sides having slits in them. She actually envied Aly's dress a little since she had an option.

The weather hadn't changed much since the day before. The first sun was shining across the entire field and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. The second sun, which always looked a tad smaller than the first due to the difference in distance, peeped over the mountains from the east. The field was filled with lush fields, blue and red flowers sprouting up, and green mountains, which created a natural fort of protection around the Capital.

"Truly, what splendid architecture this be," Catty said as she marveled over the hard white walls that protected the city inside. "Why have we not traveled here before? It is not too grand of a distance away, nay?"

"Are we not too busy with our own affairs to waste time staring at a giant wall?" Shanvi laughed. "Yet, I must admit; this is a spectacle for the eyes, indeed. I fancy the overseer's court suffers little in regards to a lack of room, yes? Truly, I was to imagine the Capital as being a mere building, not a polis."

The hard, white clay coating on the walls looked as if it had been plastered on that very morning, and the door leading into the city was at least eighteen meters tall. The four, finely placed, high towers of the Capital had to be a near seventy stories high. Inside these towers,

scouts patrolled day in and day out, being able to see far beyond the mountains with their first-class vision.

More Goolians arrived from every direction. People in the fields eventually had to sit or stand shoulder to shoulder. Seeing the numerous tribes uniting for one common goal was spectacular. Even so, the first sun was still a good distance from the western part of the mountains when Catty started to complain.

“On with this, then,” she began. “How much longer are we to wait? We have been out in these suns for a near two hours. I shall be as dark as Aly if we delay this any longer.”

“Truly,” Aly said with a glare. “How troubling it must be if Catty’s green appeared to have toiled in the sun. All the same, perhaps we should have eaten a grander breakfast had we known we were to wait out here for such an amount of time. My stomach agitates me.”

“Enough,” Shanvi ordered. “Be mindful of the lessons taught in higher ed. Keep your thoughts on the event at hand and nothing more.”

The giant door suddenly screeched as it lowered, and Quongun stood on his toes to get a better look at what was happening in front of them.

“They are allowing us to enter,” he said. “I propose that we try to make our way to the front as best we can.”

“Agreed,” Shanvi said. “Come now, Little Mastras. We best be off.”

Aly and Catty took their time getting up. Of course, they’d start moving the instant the two of them got comfortable.

Quongun and his Young One were automatically approved for seeing the overseer due to their stature in the hierarchy, but Shanvi and Aly managed to luck out as some of the few commoners who could also see him. Since they were following close to Quongun and Catty, Shanvi and Aly were one of the first in the four hundred after the nobles to meet him.

“Will you not calm yourself and cease with the nervous shaking?” Shanvi pleaded. “And your eyes wander about as a Little One’s, you silly thing.”

“Apologies, yet I grow nervous.” Aly tried to straighten her tents. “There are a mere two parties that stand between us now. What shall I say? Do we bow down? Do I refer to him as king or overseer? Must I wait for him to speak or do I—”

“Be yourself? Nay, that shall never possibly do, yes?”

Aly looked down in pardon. She took deep breaths before she had to make her way up to

the overseer. There was only one more Mature Aged along with his son standing between her and His Honor. Going to war, visiting unbelievable stretches of the galaxy, meeting the overseer– this was all happening so fast.

Very good then, Mastra. This is yours. You shall be bold, proud, confident. You know what you are here for, thus is to represent your tribe, your planet, your pappai, your pri...pri...pri...

The folk in front of Aly and Shanvi moved along, and her brain shut down the instant they passed on. There he stood. Standing there so poised, so powerful; so undeniably powerful. *What manner of being is this?*

The elder Goolian standing before Aly and Shanvi had the obvious features the folk expected. His skin was that of a “baby green.” He stood fairly tall for an elder, at about two and some meters. The tentacle beard flowing down was great and white with age, making him obviously older than Shanvi, since his beard still wasn’t as long and had color in it. The headpiece he wore consisted of fine oak leaves with small red berries, similar to the oak leaves on the draft letters from weeks ago. His robe was like white velvet that ran all the way down to his heels. He wore a matching vest-like top under it all that fastened with two diamond-like buttons. Overseer Greagen was a monumental-looking figure indeed.

However, as splendorous as the overseer was, that wasn’t what struck Aly’s nerve. As a matter of fact, Greagen’s relevance wasn’t of any importance, as far as she was concerned. The grayish blue creature standing beside him, on the other hand, was worth all the attention in the world.

Aly almost gasped when she first saw the alien, an actual, highly intellectual being from another planet. *Amazing. What origin could it – he – be?* He looked like a Young One to Aly, maybe around twenty to twenty-five years old. His pierced pointy ears were on full alert, and he stood like he would break the neck of any being who’d try to strike down the overseer, if they dared.

Like everyone else her age, the alien was short compared to Aly. She almost had thirteen centimeters on him. The dark-blue spikes protruding from his head were only outdone by the dense crimson in his eyes. Their red brilliance was great enough to even overshadow the lovely white of Greagen’s robe.

All the same, the blue creature’s anatomy really wasn’t different from Aly’s, to her dismay. He stood on two legs, had two arms, but his forearms were far larger than hers. He had a

torso to hold all the ligaments, a head, and even a neck for it to sit on. *How boring.*

The alien still had some unique features, though. His eyes weren't as large as a Goolian's, and he had three stubby phalanges instead of four long, skinny ones. They even had a hard covering on top. Aly heard about other creatures besides simple animals having claws, hence impressing her a little.

Hmm, and what of his nose? It was a little odd to look at, now that the mastra thought about it. His nostrils were simply two slits that merged into the face like hers, but they weren't as wide, and he had a protruding bridge that gave the nose more definition. He appeared to be lacking an upper lip too, but his appearance was still "normal" enough for the young Goolian to be disappointed.

"Aly."

What a remarkable build his muscles constructed! He was definitely built to perform differently. The only word the Goolian could think of was the word that meant "scrawny" in her language, even though people said she was that as well. He was very lean, perhaps as nimble as her, and hints of scars proved he'd obviously seen combat for many years.

How could this be? He be only a boy.

It was finally the young Goolian's turn to confront the overseer, but her attention continued to rest on the fiery red-eyed Young One. After seeing the two Goolians in front of Aly and Shanvi off to the exit, the blue alien turned his head into a beam of gray eyes. His thick, spiky brows rose because he wasn't expecting the stare, and the eyes that owned the gaze were magnificent.

Look down! Quickly, fool! Look down! Aly followed her demand for a mere second, but her eyes eventually scanned the creature from his feet on up. His black, leather-like footwear was covered with sharp, shiny, battle-endured armor. His matching gauntlets were designed almost like a reptilian's scales. He could kill a being with one punch, from the looks of them. His gray bottoms were baggy and loose with a foreign belt wrapping around several parts over his pelvis.

"Aly?"

As finely armored as he was, the foreigner had no sort of protection for his chest. He wore a simple, thin black, vest-like top and nothing underneath, as far as she could tell.

"Aly!"

A two-piece brass strap flowed across his chest and waist with an oddly shaped handle

hanging off the side. She'd never seen such a design before. *What creature would wish to hold a handle such as that?*

"Alytchai!"

Aly came to, and realized that the overseer, Shanvi, and the alien were all sharing the same bizarre look at her. She must've zoned out for several seconds. She folded her hands and looked down, while blue blood flushed her cheeks.

"My sincerest apologies, Honor," Shanvi pleaded. "My Young One has desired to seek an audience with you since she was a Little One. Her nerves grow slightly tense."

"Nervous thanks to my doing, is she now?" the overseer said as he glanced over at the alien.

The blue creature shrugged.

"No need for excusing your Young One, Master...Shanvi, yes?" Greagen asked.

"Truly, Honor," Shanvi said with a bow.

"And you say your arrival is from the Kutenbriun tribe."

"It is as you say."

"I see. Well then, perhaps the Young One may loosen up a little prior to the evening's end. I hope I do get to hear her voice. For I have heard much in reference concerning it. Perhaps she may sing for my priests sometime, yes?"

Aly blinked, and Shanvi rubbed his head.

"Truly, we are humbled to know that my Little One's voice has even reached your ears. Be that as it may, Honor, it is not our wish to be rude and steal others' time."

"Nonsense. For there are still to be another twenty-six hours left in this day. We shall thus hopefully meet again at the night's dinner. Better yet, I shall make sure you and your Young One have proper seating at my table as we dine during the evening, yes?"

Shanvi and Aly looked at each other before they looked back at Greagen.

"We are humbled beyond all words, Honor. Yet my Young One and I are no greater in significance than these fellow—"

"Surely you do not deny the request of the planet's overseer, Master. That would be a high offense." Greagen smiled.

Aly's ears twitched, dumbfounded by all meanings of the definition.

"Then we are deeply honored, and accept your gracious gesture to us," Shanvi concluded.

“Nay, the honor is mine,” Greagen assured him. “Now, ponder nothing more of this. Truly, you and I have some important matters to discuss at dinner, yet let us save those for the night. My guest guard shall escort you to your next destination.”

Both elders smiled and bid farewell before Shanvi and Aly were escorted to the exit. Aly strolled away with her head weighing a ton, but to her surprise, an old hand gently grabbed her by the arm and tugged her back. Before she knew it, she was staring into Overseer Greagen’s purple eyes.

“He is called Cyleroa,” Greagen whispered into her ear. “Fret not. He is just as you are; young.”

The overseer winked at the mastra and eyed her off to the exit. Aly turned around to make sure what just happened actually did take place, and was greeted by a quick smile from Greagen before he greeted more Goolians.

Now a new situation was birthing ahead of the Young One.

Now, am I to smile at this Cyleroa creature? Nay, that would be naïve. Joke it off? Nay, he may perhaps not find the humor. Try to commence a friendly...a joke within itself. Perhaps a smile will not be too bold. Truly! A smile is of a simple gesture that any being can comprehend, yes?

Now, for the moment of truth.

Aly pranced by Cyleroa, hands crossed, head down. The alien creature offered a hand to escort her to the back, but she quickly maneuvered around him and made it out of the exit.

* * *

“And did you not see those eyes?” Catty said as she balanced herself along the ledge of the mastra’s bedroom balcony. “Truly, I have yet to see such eyes as red before. What an interesting creature he was! He was – I mean... Wow!”

“It seems this one has found a replacement for Master Slew, then, yes?” Aly asked while she sat on her bed in the tiny room, grabbing her head.

Catty turned around, placed her hands on her tiny hips, and rocked her heels back and forth across the balcony banister.

“Mock me not, Aly. It was you who made an ass of yourself. I held no participation in that, mind you.”

“How dreadful could that have been?” Aly groaned, ignoring Catty. “Truly, have I ever done such a rude deed prior in my life?”

“Indeed you have. Did you forget the time you purposely struck my head with a dankerball when we were but five?” Catty rubbed her head, gesturing an ache from years past.

“Ah, truly.” Aly smiled. “And if I recall, it was justly deserved since you were mocking me about my lack of being-control.” She cheerfully stuck out her long purple tongue before sulking over stupidity again.

“Oh, come now, Mastra.” Catty hopped off the balcony and flipped over Aly’s head to sit beside her. “Fret not over yourself too harshly. You have yet to see an alien before. Surely, it was understandable, yes?”

Aly shrugged off her friend’s arm. Catty stood up and went back to the balcony window.

“Very good then, Aly. Suit your own shame. Truly, a mere apology is all it takes.”

After dropping the subject of the odd creature, the two decided to shower after being outside in the suns for so long. The wing they were staying in consisted of one bathing room large enough for nearly twenty. It was a typical, middle-class Goolian bathroom, beside the fact that normal bathing rooms were only big enough for four, even for those wealthier citizens like Catty’s family. The walls were constructed of the same material the outer walls of the Capital were made of, but the interior had holes patterned near the bottom so water wouldn’t overflow. There were also little ledges protruding from the floor near the edges of the room so one could sit while bathing. A large sprinkler, practically filling the entire ceiling, hovered over the two. Fire lamps were lit in each corner of the board since the suns were setting.

The two neatly folded and hung their clothing in the clothing door by the entrance. Aly made sure she took the flower, which was still very much alive, out of her tents so it wouldn’t drown. There was a large string that held the sprinkler’s lid shut in the center of the board. Aly tugged at it, and the lid released showers of water down onto them.

“As many places as I’ve seen, I have yet to be in a bathing board such as this caliber before,” Catty confessed. “Living like royalty, we are, yes?”

“Suppose His Honor feels we deserve this for such a short notice to war, nay?” Aly asked as she scrubbed her arms.

“And that does equate to a rather good question, yes? Why on Gooliun were we called to arms on such a terribly short notice? Truly, things are moving with haste.”

“I know not. I would suppose the other nations were aware of the Cyogen for a settled amount of time, and you know how little word gets out to places this far, especially to us. Hmm. Or perhaps there was a planning for our call to arms later than the rest of the galaxy expected, yet something in the western region has grown terribly ill. I feel there is to be a grave deal of secrecy.”

“And I say you suffer a grave deal of paranoia,” Catty countered, sitting on one of the stools. “Your pappai told you of what the letter spoke, yes? How could so many Allies fall so quickly in such a short amount of time? I’m estimating only several decades?”

Aly stopped bathing for a moment and felt a chill run down her spine. Shanvi had never mentioned that part of the letter. She understood why, though. He didn’t want her having to think about getting dropped into the middle of a losing war. The Young One didn’t cut Catty off for that reason alone.

“Um, Alytchai, this made me ponder of what you said the other day—”

“By Truth’s Grace, Cattalice. I apologized, yes?”

“Not that, fool. I speak of what we discussed in concerns to the Cyogen.”

“And what of them?” Aly asked, scrubbing her tents.

“I have yet to take the will in expressing this to any. I suppose they do not think I fear the Cyogen since I always speak with a long tongue. Hah! Who am I to fool? I still suffer nightmares about them due to the stories told from our younger years.”

Aly’s left ear twitched.

“I have no fear in pain or death,” Catty explained. “Truth’s Grace gives me no reason to, yet I find trouble in not seeing the manner of which my end shall come. And what if...what if those monsters have the verdict for me? It be a mystery I cannot see.”

Aly knew what Catty was trying to admit, but there was no word in their vocabulary to describe it. With that in mind, she got up from the middle of the floor and strolled over to Cattalice, who sat in the same pose Aly had. She leaned over, placed a hand on one of her knees to rest on, and used the other hand to stroke Catty’s fiery orange tents. Catty wiped her eyes before she looked up. She obviously tried to hide her tears during the whole discussion. Aly welcomed Catty’s anguished face with a smile brighter than that of the two suns.

“Yet remember this,” she said. “No matter what troubles may come, you do not suffer this task alone, yes? Brightness, darkness, Truth’s Grace will be there, and so shall I. That is a solemn

oath.”

She gave her friend a kiss and a hug that only another sister could give, and that was what they became that evening in the baths. Two young, beautiful, terrified sisters.



Chapter 5

Planet Cyiaus was a complete desert of red rock from one hemisphere to the next. There were milos beyond milos of endless canyons, caves, and valleys in the western hemisphere, and the dusty, tan sky didn't allow a lot of sunlight to pass to the ground thanks to all of the dust in the air. Numerous geysers and volcanoes erupted on a constant basis, but the phenomenon never drew any concern from the Cyogen.

The possibilities for any sort of life to flourish in such harsh environments would sound ludicrous to other creatures, but not to the Cyogen. No, the other races weren't as strong as they were. The Cyogen were smart and adaptable. They used what others would call a curse to their advantage. The poisonous smoke the geysers sprayed was energy for their fuels. The lava from volcanoes was warmth from the cold. The darkness the caves gave was nighttime for their eyes. What looked like dead veins on the planet's surface were maps that led to the many tunnels of water flowing underground.

A thriving civilization prospered underneath the planet's surface, which looked like it had

given up on the possibilities of sustainable life aboveground eons ago. The sound of water pumping and heavy machinery could be heard several hundred miles beneath the deepest caves. A giant metal mill pulling buckets of water toward the upper levels hummed and churned near the heart of Cyiaus' western capital. Several meters above all this laid the Cyogen's main well, which was placed dead in the center of one of the underground states.

Large markets were constructed on the second level in this particular community. Strips of goods being traded and sold ran on a never-ending rail of economics from food and clothing to furniture and appliances. Most of the common folk spent their time on this level, and it was typically busy around evening time. The planet's sun, an old red giant, was finally setting, only to be replaced by several moons and colonies most of the locals would never be able to see.

The third level housed the citizens, with homes carved directly from the caves' rocks. Fortunately, there was more than enough rock to go around, and the wealthier citizens sometimes had three floors.

It was the levels below the mill that weren't cared for, and held most of the criminals or prisoners of war. The screams of those being tortured were heard by other prisoners, making them wonder what was happening beneath their cells. Most curled into fetal positions and yelled at the top of their lungs, hoping to overpower the shrieks of pain they could hear. Some actually busted their vocal cords from yelling for so long.

Several levels above them, six silhouettes conversed in a dark room. The figures were military officials holding a council, and praising one another for their successes and progressions in the war.

"If I may, our victories over the western planets should not be taken so boldly, dear sirs," Urghato, a young captain of the Cyogen armed forces, insisted as he stood. "Just because we have won a vital stronghold in the Ioweth region doesn't mean we should go over our heads in this war. With all due respect, I believe this is what General Thumui is suggesting we do—"

"This is not what I am suggesting, by any means at all, Captain," Thumui, a general sitting beside Urghato, interrupted. "We're at an elevated advantage, and we must use this to the highest degree. Your explanations are completely irrational."

"What do you expect from a boy playing strategy?" a voice said out loud, then the room filled with laughter.

Urghato fell back into his chair, growing tired of this endless bickering between him and

his higher-ups. He took a sip of water, rubbed his head, and remained silent. General Phojero, the highest-ranking officer in the board, sat at the head of the table and didn't laugh like the rest of his council members did. He straightened his collar, cleared his throat, and made sure everyone was looking at him.

"Now, sirs," General Phojero started. "The captain, in spite of his youth, was invited to this session. I'd like to think we may 'consider' a few things from his perspective, since he can see the battlefield a little closer than we can, clear?"

"Yes, sir, Honorable General," all replied.

"Very good. Now then, Urghato, if you'd kindly explain and defend your proposal."

Urghato nodded as he stood up again, with Thumui appearing to pay more attention to the young Cyogen than the others.

"Thank you, Honorable General. Masters, we are forever in debt to you for all the progress we've made to the east. Nonetheless, the planets and colonies we've liberated so far are weak and not as organized as their much stronger Allies deeper in the Eastern Regions. I am, of course, making reference to two main Far Eastern Planets, Argutas and Gooliun—"

"Hold on a second, lad," a general interrupted. "Now we know you're wasting our time for sure. Why bring up the greenies when we have bigger worries, such as Ufre?"

Urghato straightened his collar and tried to clear his throat.

"Er, well...you see—" Urghato glanced at Thumui, who was crossing his arms. The young Cyogen nodded and took a breath. "Excuse me. As we speak, these two planets are planning a unification of one large Eastern Alliance Force, having Overseer Greagen's Armed Forces of the Goolian southern region prepare for dispatch to Planet Argutas. We can expect the other regions to follow suit in a matter of months."

Thumui, who was anxiously rocking back and forth in his seat, raised a short stubby finger.

"Excuse me, if I may speak," Thumui asked.

Urghato felt a lump in his throat, but still nodded.

"Did you not just express that they are in preparation to move out west? Thus, each force is still stationed in their own region?"

Urghato scratched his head and nodded seconds later.

"And does Gooliun have a trained force?" Thumui added.

The younger Cyogen was about to make another point, but he reconsidered after evaluating the impatient gazes on the more seasoned faces in the board.

“The first wave of the main Goolian force will be run by a seventy-eight million militia consisting of untrained Grown, Mature, and Young Ones,” Urghato answered. “But—”

The room broke into laughter. Urghato sighed, realizing he was losing his point. He gave Thumui a rather cold glare as he took himself back to his seat. Thumui, on the other hand, smirked at the younger Cyogen cheerfully.

“This child worries over a bunch of uncivilized peasant barbarians!” a voice laughed out loud.

Phojero raised his hand, and everyone eventually quieted down and turned back to him.

“Now, sirs,” he started, “truly the tides have been in our favor thus far. However, it would surely be a careless demeanor for us to underestimate our adversaries. Matters of age or training are irrelevant when dealing with a species such as the Goolian. Our history alone knows all too well of their capabilities, since they, along with the majority of the galaxy, come from the same genus.”

Urghato leaned into his chair and sighed, embarrassed that the general had to defend him like a Little One.

“Over the years,” Phojero said, “the beings in the entire galaxy have grown to rely on their technologies and have devolved physically. We only have to look at the difference in this very room to see this. Our beloved ancestors relied more on their physical strength. However, the Far Eastern cousins of Goolian descent haven’t altered their cultures or ways of life by a hint. Yes, we may have a force far greater than theirs, but I assure you; with their capabilities, numbers don’t matter. They are possibly the closest thing to what our common ancestors were, and there must be respect given to a people, uncivilized or not, that have maintained through such ‘primitive’ manners.”

Phojero held his tongue for a moment so his words could sink in.

“Very agile, fast, with similar circadian rhythms and adaptive capabilities to our own, they can be alert and ready for combat at any moment. They can move a large force with great speed and maneuverability. The simplest of them can convert the molecules from the environment and, within them, form a high amount of plasma energy... And must we forget about the rumors of the Sungstras?”

Several cleared their throats, even though Cyogen history concerning the last great war never covered anything concerning the Sungstra creatures. Still, some rumors, even on Planet Cyiaus, were too risky to take lightly.

Phojero proclaimed, “Therefore, no, sirs, we’ll slow down our progressions to the east for now. Let us focus our attention on the main Argutain planet. If we expect this war to end in our favor, if we hope to bring justice to our ancestors, if we hope for an intelligent and bright future for the Race of Cyogen – one without this judgmental philosophy called ‘Truth’s Grace’ – we must tire the Allies out slowly. Create the best strongholds on the liberated worlds so we can transition as smoothly as possible and hold positions until I say otherwise. Understood?”

All saluted and agreed together. Phojero rubbed his chin before he stood up.

“Then this council is dismissed.”

* * *

Aly’s nerves were restless while sitting at the Long Table of Greagen. She kept clattering her fancy, open-toed slippers against the stone floor, which made an irritating racket to everyone’s ears. Shanvi eventually slapped her on the thigh. She winced a little, but stopped her clomping all the same.

Aly wished Catty was with her, knowing she’d behave a little better if she was nearby. However, Catty and her pappai hadn’t been honored with the request of sitting at the overseer’s table. Still, Aly could see her energetic friend beside Quongun, four tables away.

Catty was conversing with another Young One beside her when she must’ve felt Aly eying her from a distance. She politely excused herself and cleared her thoughts of excessive sounds until she honed in on Aly’s heavy breathing.

“It be quite rude to take all oxygen for yourself. Be of ease!” Catty sounded with her lips.

“By Truth’s Grace, I am so full of nerves. Suppose I freeze up as—”

“Truly, just try and enjoy yourself. And if you can, do try to practice some Universal dialog with that alien lad if you luck up and see him again, yes?” Catty said with a wink.

When Aly looked up to glare at the spunk, Catty was blowing her a kiss from across the room. Aly sank back into her chair, figuring she’d try to think of the next best thing to do before Greagen arrived. She didn’t even notice the wonderful smells of the smoked ground roots in front of her until her eyes wandered down to her bowl. Aly tried to enjoy the food, but her nerves

were still on edge, and she didn't pay attention to how fast she was eating.

Shanvi looked over and shook his head when he heard the loud munching.

"Be slow about your food," he insisted. "Truly, this one shall cause herself illness."

Be damned, I am already ill as is.

Catty leaned over so she could check on her frantic friend.

"Surely, this one is not to be carrying messages across the room with Alytchai, nay?"

Quongun asked.

"Why, truly. Of course not, Pappai." Catty gave an angelic smile.

"And this one is to be as bad liar as Mammai, yes?"

Quongun shot a look at his Young One, and Catty refused to stare back as she scrunched up her shoulders. He then leaned over and shot the same look at an unsuspecting Aly. She immediately dropped a plant and acted as if she needed to pick it up off the floor.

After grabbing the plant and folding it into a napkin, Aly went back to the rest of her food, not daring to look up. Shanvi clearing his throat, however, indicated he was in onto the two as well. Aly gave a professional, "Apologies, Master Quongun," and finished her plants in silence.

After it all ended, the Young One still stuffed herself too fast. Her stomach groaned between cramps when an announcer came out yelling, "Herald to His Honor and Her Highness."

The entire room stood up, and Aly tried to act like she was holding her stomach in a formal manner. Cyleroa followed in behind some other odd-looking foreigners she had never seen before. Some were red, orange, or a deeply saturated blue, and the build of their faces and bodies were all unique. The aliens turned and went to their empty reserved seats as Aly tried her hardest not to stare at each individual too much.

Aly felt a lump in her throat, and her cramps grew even worse when she saw the red-eyed foreigner and other extraterrestrials approach her. Her inner flutters dwindled when she cursed herself and told her tummy to shut up, but her stomach kept bubbling and felt as it was corroding.

The Young One was confused when all the foreigners walked past the chair to her left, one by one, until Cyleroa took it. She almost knocked the chair over trying to move back, but caught it in time before it could make a scene on her behalf. She quickly looked at Catty in horror. Her friend clutched her own hands together, signaling her prayers and thoughts were with

her. Aly knew this obviously had to be Greagen's doing. *Damned old fossil.*

She eyed the floor, but glanced up a little to see what the lad's attire was. He modeled a well-patterned gray top under a more formal black vest, gauntlets gone. He had also taken out his four original earrings and replaced them with small pearl-like pairs. His leggings were of the same material, but black, and he hadn't changed his boots.

The clothing was very alien, but it still managed to give him a certain charm. The mastra took a deep breath to calm herself. Cyleroa, of course, heard the inhale and looked up at her.

Their eyes matched again, except Aly was the only one taken by surprise. She forced a nervous smirk, but the alien just rolled his eyes and turned away. Aly felt a little hurt, to her surprise. He must've remembered her from that afternoon, and she probably didn't give him the nicest impression. *Truly, this shall be a pleasant evening, indeed.*

Greagen finally entered the hall with his mate on his arm. He was still dressed in the same robes he wore when Aly first saw him. His mate, Queen Huia, was beyond lovely, and looked like she was around Shanvi's age. *Why would she be mated to someone so damned...old? Disgust.*

The queen looked like she walked on air with every step; so light, so graceful, so gentle, and Aly winced when she felt Huia's being flow through her veins, even at that distance. Age could be deceiving, but the power within couldn't hide itself in such facts. She, just like Greagen, gave the aura of raw, endless energy constantly churning within, so she had to be close to her mate's age after all.

Huia picked up the sides of her white crystal-lined robe as the two descended the stairs. Her orchid eyes twinkled as she nodded at the guards posted at the final step, and she brushed over her shoulder a delicately braided lump of whitening blonde tresses that went all the way to her rear.

After the Honorable Couple took their seats, the entire room sat back down and started conversing again. To Aly's surprise, Greagen didn't make any sort of propaganda speech or comment, and that meant she was left to start up a discussion with this strange Young One sitting beside her.

The mastra was all out of ideas for introductions or subject matters to converse over, especially since she was bashful with strangers. The overseer was forcing Aly out of her comfort zone, and she didn't appreciate it at all. She rolled her eyes, and prepared to give a simple "hello"

to the foreigner. That was before she caught a glimpse of what the alien apparently considered dinner.

A servant strolled by and placed the blue creature's bowl in front of him and walked away. The stench of the cooked meat was repulsive. Aly couldn't tell what the poor beast was originally, but disgusting was the perfect definition for whatever it was now. Here she was, sitting beside a carnivore, and her people were called barbaric. She studied the alien poking the rare cooked slab, and Aly felt lightheaded when blue spurted out of the meat.

The lad looked like he was paying the Goolian female no mind, and took his time slicing a piece of meat with a claw and tossing the food into the back of his mouth. Aly's left nostril twitched as the lad chewed and swallowed. He took another easy slice and held it up for inspection, and Aly raised a brow when he didn't pop the food into his mouth.

Cyleroa then swung his arm right in front of Aly's face, letting the loose meat dangle between the tips of his two stubby fingers. The Goolian almost threw up, but managed to cover her mouth from the smell. Her eyes nearly bulged out of her head while her ears flapped wildly.

"Care for a piece, Mastra?" Cyleroa's mouth uttered in the Universal tongue.

"Ugh! Nay, my thanks!" she answered quickly, but in her own language.

The lad sighed and placed an elbow on the table.

"You know, where I'm from, we find it kinda rude when other folk watch us eat," he insisted.

The blue creature's use of Universal flowed with hardened ease, but Aly had only spent a few months speaking the second language when she was little for the sake of a class assignment. His voice didn't fit the appearance of his age, either. It was rough around the edges. The Young One looked around to see if the commotion was stirring any unneeded attention, but even her pappai, sitting right beside her, was too engaged in his own conversation to give her sudden yelp any mind.

Aly ultimately managed to force out, "I – am sorry if I...offended you," before the foreigner could go on with the rest of his complaints. She blushed, knowing her syllables probably sounded like she was still trying to speak Goolian, and her accent probably made her dialog sound even more unnatural to Cyleroa.

"And I'm pretty sure anyone would take offense after makin' a kind gesture like offering a hand and you speedin' away from it, eh?" he finished.

Aly didn't say anything, growing more tense since he actually did remember her from the afternoon. She repeated the apology, because she couldn't remember too much of Universal beyond that, since she was so nervous.

"And when was the last time you spoke Universal? Five years or ten?" Cyleroa said.

Aly calmed down with the creature's insult. Alien or not, rudeness didn't have to be struck back with rudeness.

"Nine of my years, if you want to be exact," she snapped back, her irritation instantly recalling the reference in the other tongue.

The blue creature placed the meat down, and leaned back. Aly held her chest with one hand and bit her lower lip. Her first alien contact was beyond stressful. This strange creature's attitude probably meant he was also forced into this situation.

"So, am I going to get a name?" Cyleroa said.

"E-excuse me?"

"Your name, Mastra. What-is-your-name?"

To Aly's surprise, the alien spoke like any other young male Goolian would. He was up front, straight to the point, and a complete "asshole."

"My name – is Alytchai," she managed to say, lips quivering as she spoke. "Alytchai of the Kutenbriun Tribe."

"Uh huh. And I take it has a meaning."

"Yes. It means 'gentle,' in feminine."

"Well, it seems to fit the individual pretty good."

The muscles in Aly's neck tightened. She couldn't tell if his statement was an insult or a compliment. It must have been the latter, since the lad laid his palm out to her. The mastra studied it. She counted the three, clawed, stubby digits on his extended hand, and caught a glimpse of the other hand he used to swipe the piece of meat.

The Young One weighed her insecurities, since she didn't want to insult this one any more than she already had. So Aly placed her fingers into his palm, and prayed he wasn't going to eat it. Cyleroa's hand was rough compared to hers. The hardness in it brought her attention to the texture of his entire body.

Truly, I am to doubt this lad has ever heard of "smooth."

The mastra's thoughts got cut off when the lad pulled her hand toward his face. She

almost swore. He was going to eat it! Her eyes grew larger when he pressed the edges of his mouth against her rough knuckles, and she just about jolted when she felt the softness of his lower lip. She permitted her mind to travel along with the irony of it: the only gentle part of his body greeting the only rough part of hers. An odd alien gesture, but it still managed to make her blush by some mysterious reaction within her nervous system.

“And my name’s Cyleroa,” the foreigner said. “Guess it’s a pleasure, eh?”

Aly was about to say she already knew his name, but she caught herself as soon as she felt her tongue twitch. She didn’t want to come off like she was stalking him or something. She then thought it was now her turn to guess what the name meant, but his mouth opened again before she could do so.

“You know, you really don’t have to be all uptight around me, eh? I get tha feeling from enough people around here.”

Aly nodded and finally found enough courage to converse with him through the eyes.

“My sorry...no... My apologies for being so – ‘uptight’,” she said while nodding over her correct choice of words. “And once again, I truly did not mean to refuse your-your...escort from this afternoon, either. You see, I am just—”

She wanted to make sure her next words wouldn’t sound offensive.

“I have yet – no, sorry... I have ne-never seen someone such as you before. Well, I mean I have never seen any other sentient being before – but... I mean—”

She sighed when she realized she was talking over herself.

“If it is not *rude of me* to ask you,” Aly finally said in a mixture of languages, “what planet are you from?”

Cyleroa poked at his food for a moment, but it looked like he understood the gist of her babble. “I’m from the Western Regions.”

“Oh! Are you really? Then you must...be a soldier of one of the conquered planets. I am sorry.”

“Nah, no worries!” Cyleroa laughed. “You got it all wrong, Mastra. Actually, I’m part Requin on my mother’s side. See, blue skin and all? But I was raised in the West.”

“Oh, I see.” Aly twisted a tent around her finger. She cleared her throat, looked down at her food, and picked at it without saying another word.

A half-breed. This creature must truly feel ashamed of himself.

Cyleroa noticed and went back to eating, appearing slightly agitated. Aly wondered if the alien had to grow up getting used to people's reactions once they realized they were looking at or talking to a half-breed.

"Would I be too rude in interrupting?" another voice suddenly asked.

Cyleroa and Aly turned around and saw Greagen standing over them. Queen Huia followed close behind, still appearing to float on air.

"Not at all," Cyleroa said. "Time for the council?"

Aly raised a brow.

"Indeed," the overseer said. "But before we set off, I wanted you to meet your queen, Mastra Alytchai."

Aly was surprised that the overseer not only remembered her name, but actually had his mate come and greet her as well. Huia leaned over and grabbed the mastra's hand between her cold palms. In spite of Huia's hands feeling cold, however, the queen's eyes twinkled with life as she looked into the young Goolian's face.

"How do you be, Young One? I am well pleased to meet you," Huia said politely in the native tongue.

The queen's voice was soft and gentle, but it carried a strength behind it to Aly.

"Oh, yet the honor is mine...Highness," Aly said nervously as she bowed. *"Truly...you are quite...quite—"*

"Why, my thanks." Huia smiled. *"I am sure you shall even be more so when you reach this age. Truly, you have quite a lovely Young One, Master Shanvi, and well-raised, I may say."*

Huia turned to Shanvi, who kept himself out of the conversation until he was addressed accordingly. He patted his lips with a cloth and bowed.

"You are quite gracious, Highness," Shanvi said. *"I always thought she would be as lovely as her mammai when she grew in age."*

"Truly, she shall be." Huia turned back to Greagen and wrapped her arms around his right elbow. *"Should we be off, then?"*

"Indeed," Greagen said with a nod. *"Master Shanvi, if you would ennoble us with an audience? And Cyleroa, if you would escort the mastra?"*

Cyleroa must've understood the order, even though it was given in Goolian. Or maybe he was just mimicking Shanvi's moves. Either way, Aly gulped when the half-breed scooted his

seat back, stood up, and held out his right elbow. She gave his arm that odd glare as before, but eventually moved her seat back and slid her forearm in the gap he left.

“Hey, where do they go off to?” Catty asked as she watched Aly’s table leave.

“Cattalice, be mindful of your own affairs and business,” Quongun insisted while he examined a leaf, preparing to chew.

“Yet, Pappai—”

“Eat.”

Catty puffed out her lower lip and stuffed in a mouthful of leaves, all the while glaring at her pappai and smacking her lips with every chew.

Shanvi straightened his clothing and made sure he had his cane while he followed behind Aly. Several other aliens at the table stood and fell into line along the way, making the Young One feel even more uneasy.

The board the group entered was round, with seats circling a large table with an oval flat map of Planet Gooliun embedded in it. The walls were colored a dark navy blue, and ceiling candles were lit inside squares of glass embedded in the dark ceiling.

Cyleroa stopped walking when he entered the room and made Aly sit. The young Goolian was still confused, so she went ahead and sat near the exit in case she needed to make a daring escape.

Shanvi scrunched into a seat on Aly’s right while Huia went over to the other side and sat on the left. She patted the Young One’s thigh and smiled at her, making Aly feel a little more comfortable having her in the board with her. After all, the room was full of nothing else but Mature Aged, military-faced folk who looked like they hadn’t smiled in years.

The overseer was last to enter, and everyone, including Huia, stood up. He motioned them to sit before he took his own seat and cleared his throat.

“Master and Mastra Priests, thank you all for attending this council. Before we begin, as you have already noticed, my mate is in this context along with us. She insisted on being here after hearing we’d have a Young One tonight with us—”

“Indeed, Honor,” Huia cut in. *“I wanted to be sure you old gloats left the poor thing unspoiled.”*

The board laughed at the light remark. Greagen smirked nonchalantly at his mate, who only winked back. Aly was impressed with the strength her queen had even in the presence of all

the important military figures.

“Tonight, we shall review this region’s starting frame for dispersing,” Greagen continued once the chuckling settled. “Priest Huivon, if you please.”

The eldest-looking general in the room stood up. His skin was a strong baby blue, with two antennas protruding from his head. Aly tried to recall all the rumors about aliens she had heard. According to gossip, his description made him out to be from Planet Optues, whose demonym was Optin. His eyes were orange, and he was dressed like the rest of the officers—black robes, blue undershirt, and a red, silk-like scarf folded on one shoulder to the next. Aly tried not to stare, but her eyes betrayed her.

After Huivon stood up, he raised his left hand toward the flat map. The center of the table lit up with a fiery orange light that consumed the entire room. The map levitated off its base and took on a set of spherical shapes that continued to float in the middle of the room. It was obviously a map of the key planets known in the galaxy. Aly tried to act as unimpressed as everyone else in the room, but she was doing cartwheels on the inside because she had no idea such technology existed on Gooliun. This must’ve been one of a few items the neighbors had offered so the Capital would be somewhat up to date on galactic affairs. Priest Huivon cleared his voice and began.

“Your Honor, we expect the Cyogen to continue their present movements for the next several weeks. However, they may very well reduce their aggressiveness and build up strong forts along their conquered planets of Wthya, Yuiwaus, and Ioweth if they need minor areas to fall back on.”

Aly tried to catch the name of the second planet mentioned. She had never heard of it before. While pondering, the priest placed his two main fingers together and quickly separated them. A thin orange beam formed between the open space, and he grabbed it out of midair, using it to point at the planets just mentioned. The planets lit up when the pointer beam poked them, and Aly figured the one planet she didn’t know had to be Yuiwaus.

“These planets will be fortified and ready to comfortably house Cyogen troops by the time you reach the Allies on Planet Argutas.”

“And when do we plan to arrive in Argutas?” Greagen asked.

“Our ships are still stationed at your docks in the town of Neghiy and the transports from Planet Sauthianos have yet to arrive. So, it’s a little...primitive, but you’ll have to go out on foot

for a time. We're looking at a turnaround of sixty-three days, Universal Time. Plenty of time to test and pick out the weak ones in the camps before you leave planetside."

Greagen looked at the youngest Mature Aged in the board, another Optin.

"Priest Captain Gushil, your lords are still ready and willing to provide us more ships?" the overseer asked.

The other Optin stood and placed his hands onto the table.

"The preparations are almost complete," Gushil answered. "Our fleet from weeks ago will have the docks on Neghiy ready by the time you arrive. Our empress and the Galactic Order assure you that you can request whatever amount you need, and they will be here within the required time. I still suggest five more groups similar to the size of what was sent two weeks ago."

"But our lines report the Cyogen ships will not leave their harbors for weeks after ours depart, Honor," Priest Huivon insisted. "For one, they would still be fortifying the planets, and they'd have to load their ships with more than just basic cargo. We also have an advantage in them having more space to travel."

All of this incoming information was a bit much for Aly's ears. Hearing about the current conditions of the war, learning when her own planet was going to partake in it. *Why am I permitted to sit here?* While she pondered, Greagen was still listening to the other planets' representatives.

"He is correct, Honor," Gushil concurred upon checking the map once more.

"Exactly how many weeks will it take for us to arrive on Argutas, Priests?" Greagen asked as he leaned into his chair.

"The exact number, Optues cannot say, I'm afraid," Gushil admitted. "We're still trying to pull some reserves out of Ioweth's main system, so we might come across some resistance along the way. It's too early to give a precise estimation."

The overseer leaned forward with a stern face locked on both standing military priests. "'I cannot say' is not the exact answer I can accept, Priesthood. Governor Rashule of Argutas needs to know when he will have aid for the security of his system, and 'I cannot say' is not an answer I can or will give him. The Galactic Order is fully aware of this."

Aly was awed, and satisfied. For the first time, Greagen had left his jolly shell and came out more like the strong overseer she always imagined.

“So, tell me, Little One. What would you do in such a case?” Greagen asked in his native tongue.

Aly raised a brow and realized everyone was looking at her. She and Shanvi stared at each other for a moment, and her pappai could only nudge her to answer. She felt the tips of her tentacles sweat, and she had to make a mental effort to stop fiddling with her sandals beneath the table.

“Well...uh, should – could we not perhaps consider the Cyogen’s speed to ours, if we are to have such information – I mean, Honor?” Aly asked.

“Very good, Mastra,” Greagen answered with a smile and nod. *“I see the education boards has taught this one to answer properly, even under pressure. Well done, indeed.”*

Aly nodded and felt Huia pat her thigh. Shanvi rubbed her damp hands and smiled. Greagen winked before his thoughts went back to the priests again.

“I asked the Young One what the best option for this case would be, and she suggested we compare the speed of the Cyogen ships to yours. It’s an answer I’m sure everyone can approve, if we had such knowledge.”

Several creatures grunted or gestured approvingly toward the Young One and her pappai. Aly didn’t want to speak anymore, but she still tried to smile.

“Master Cyleroa, any ideas?” Greagen asked without looking at the lad. Aly and Shanvi eyed each other again and turned around to look at the lad.

“I’d guess four and a half months,” Cyleroa answered. “Maybe even four straight across, if they’re in a hurry.”

The Young One was beyond lost, unable to understand how the half-breed creature could know what an actual military priest didn’t have proper estimates to. She could tell Huivon didn’t like the notion, either, thanks to the disgruntled look on his face. She then looked at her pappai, and Shanvi even appeared suspicious.

“Thank you, lad,” Greagen said. “Now, can the Goolian forces arrive on Planet Argutas within two months?”

“Just enough, if you’ll have them set off from here on schedule,” Gushil answered. “By the time we have your troops on Argutas, the Galactic Order should have provided a steady blockade, and we can focus on having your people battle-ready.”

“Very well then, Priesthood.” The overseer smiled. “We’ll continue our plan of departure

in two days and arrive on Planet Argutas within ten weeks, around ninety days. Not a day later. Keep me informed of the Sauthian transports' arrival in the meantime. Very good?"

"Very good, Overseer Greagen," all priests and priestesses replied.

Aly lost her interest in the war planning due to the new mystery concerning the half-breed. She searched his fiery red eyes for a possible answer, and the more she gazed into them, the clearer the answer became.

Cyleroa was raised in the western regions of the galaxy – the Far Western Regions of the galaxy, to be more precise. He lived beyond the Western Planets, almost on the border of what was still considered outer space. He was raised under hot, red desert mountains where he could avoid the poisonous gases on his planet's surface.

Cyleroa's world had little natural sunlight, being lit only by bright city lights in the levels of the caves he called home. His father's side of the family was raised under the belief that Truth's Grace was a lie and all who believed in the Philosophy should either divert or die. Cyleroa was a Cyogen. She was sharing the company of none other than the enemy itself.

Aly's spine shook as she gripped the arms of her chair. Shanvi placed his hand on top of hers and shook his head. He must've realized the young foreigner's origins as well.

"Now, then," Greagen said, standing up. "Since the council is coming to an end, I will finally introduce our two guests in a more formal manner. This is Master Shanvi and his Young One, Alytchai, of the Kutenbrya Tribe, which is a community only a few days from here if you walked. She's the one the Kutenbriuns remark as having a gifted voice. I'd like to have her treat you all before we close."

Delighted murmurs filled the board. Aly, on the other hand, felt a little lightheaded. Greagen dismissed Cyleroa from his post, and the Young One bowed his head before leaving the board. Aly kept an eye on the foreigner as he walked out, but eventually turned back around when the overseer called her name again.

The Young One nodded and scooted her chair back before she stood up. The only sound made beyond that was the anklet jingling against her leg as she moved. When she walked up to Greagen, she politely put her hand into his and curtsied after he grabbed it.

The overseer leaned over to her ear once again and whispered, "*Full of surprises, yes?*" He smiled, patted her back, and went over to stand behind Huia.

The temperature grew colder, and an unnatural breeze circled the room. Aly's eyes grew

brighter, her tents started to wave in the sudden wind, and her lips uttered the tune she had sung days earlier.

Priest Huivon's mouth was the first to drop, and his lips uttered in his native tongue, *"Truth's Grace, what miracle is this?"*

* * *

"Truly, it conducts perfect sense now," Shanvi insisted to Quongun as he pounded his bedroom's balcony banister later that evening. "I knew there was an essence to heed in those eyes. Danger and death lurking within them, is what I say. You did sense a difference in the lad as well, yes?"

"Indeed, Teacher," Quongun said passively after he sipped some water from his bowl, and shrugged. "Yet I am confident His Honor must have his rea—"

"Come now, Quongun." Shanvi turned away from the window in frustration. "And what reason may justify having Cyoge—"

"Half Cyogen, Master."

"Half, one quarter, three fourths – it matters not! Darkness runs within his veins. He has been raised to hate our teaching. To despise it, and to annihilate it. Therefore trust cannot be fully offered to him."

"Hmm, very well." Quongun placed his bowl onto a nearby table. "This one speaks truly, Teacher. His blood may only claim a slight credit of him. Even so, if he has been influenced too much, he may be a force to be reckoned with. Thus, we shall be cautious, then. Truly, there may be no telling who else eats at our dining tables."

He finished his bowl and set it in his lap.

"Yet why do you suppose any of them would side with us?" he asked. "This one, at the least, appeared to have been raised in Cyiaus. Now, since the fact is out, I thought I smelled the years of being in the caves and metals around him, yet the scent of the tropics of another world was about him as well. I suppose Requely, yet I could be wrong. He has definitely traveled many worlds."

"I fear I offer no answer to the such," Shanvi said, shrugging. "Perhaps he has his own reasons. Yet I find no favor in having our Little Ones fight alongside creatures such as he. For truly, Aly's own ignorance in regards to them may be a trouble for her as she travels, for

example.”

“We must take credit for a grave portion of her ignorance, Master,” the younger Goolian said, rubbing the stubbed tents on his chin.

Shanvi sat down and crossed his legs on his bed. He looked at the floor as if it had just stolen something right underneath his nose. Quongun went over to the sink to get a bowl of water for Shanvi.

“Nay, I am well,” Shanvi said as he straightened up. “Truly, my burden of guilt does not fail in comparison to what I know is necessary. And you, a lord of a tribe, question the laws of our civilization? And even so, lad, is this one to think it be an ease for me to remain mute over Alytchai’s illness? Truth’s Grace, she has still yet to even hear of such things, even after all the years.”

“I beg, do not mistake me, Teacher. I simply meant her condition is...”

Shanvi rubbed his head, with a heavy toll weighing him down even more whenever he thought about it.

“Master Shanvi. Teacher. You have managed your Little One well. Truly, I am sure raising a child is to be burdened enough without a mate. More so, raising one with such an issue as Aly’s is surely more tiresome. Perhaps this be especially true, given the laws forbid one with the disease to even know of his or her condition. I have only tried my best to make the tribe understand and accept Aly’s situation.

“And what a simple task it be! How can one not love a soul such as hers? The hope she gives, the smiles she offers. Our tribe be blessed to have her.”

Shanvi stroked his beard and chuckled as he shook his head.

“You speak too kindly, lad. Truth’s Grace smiled on us with the whole lot of Young Ones we have to scurry about, yes?”

“Truly,” Quongun answered with a smile.

“Regardless, I do wonder what will become of her kind if the nations were to discover them again. Will they be feared, or shall they be hailed?”

“Which is why I am sure the overseer currently goes through all things in his might to keep these given issues mute and to ourselves, Teacher. Thus I fear we are not permitted such worries, since this be the case.”

“I suppose. For the time being, let us continue on with our current tasks and prepare for

the morrow.”

“Hah! At times, you speak as if you were still training me in the sparring camps.”

“Oh, I do hope not. For the time for training is nearing an end.”

* * *

Aly and Catty were on their balcony on the other side of the Capital, both having changed into their matching baby-blue robes. Catty had her hands and back resting against the rails, and Aly was prancing back and forth in front of her.

“You are sure of this, yes?” Catty asked.

“Truly, I am sure! It was well-written in those eyes.”

“Aw,” Catty said, her ears drooping. “I must admit that I did feel a rather odd jolt when I greeted him, yet I supposed... Aly, would it be vile of me if I admitted to finding some, well, charm to him?”

“Cattalice, he-is-an-alien! By Truth’s Grace, where be your self-control? The Philosophy does not permit such unnatural thoughts, fantasizing over creatures from other worlds!”

“And well-looking ones at that, I must say. And what of that rumor of some species believing we are all to be related? Though I must insist, even that rumor is a little beyond my liking.”

“Truly, you are one of hope and repair long lost.” Aly nudged Catty in the shoulder. “Yet, returning to the main subject at hand, why would His Honor have the enemy serve with us? Perhaps the lad be a spy? Or suppose there are other Cyogen serving with us? Surely the Allies do not expect them to be trusted, nay?”

“I wonder if they all look as well as he. Be damned, I would follow that one to a black hole, if it be the case.”

Aly flung her hands up and went back into the room.

“Come now, Alytchai.” Catty hopped off the rails and followed after her. “By the means the elders would picture them out to us, I would have the mind that they’d be some savage beast creatures or the such. Now, be true with me, yes? Would this one rather have big, scary, hairy Cyogen with huge teeth, drooling gums, and red eyes? Or would you rather have grayish-blue skinned Cyogen with a built chest, pleasant face, charming smile – ah yes– and the red eyes?”

“You are beyond any use than to be swooned.”

Aly stretched across her bed, shivering as the cold breeze rolled through the open door. Catty went back to the balcony door to shut it and sat down beside her friend.

“On a serious note, perhaps His Honor simply follows one of the Basic Rules of Combat in Section Forty-And-Five of our class scrolls.”

“Truly? And which one was that again?”

“Why, ‘keep your friends close, and your enemies even closer,’ of course.”



Chapter 6

“This is the last time that I’ll ask to speak to whoever’s in charge nicely,” Catty told one of the Optin guards the following morning. Her pappai rushed over to them seconds later and tried to escort his Young One away from the guard, who gulped as Catty clutched her fists to her sides.

“Sorry,” Quongun told the Optin as he placed his arms on Catty’s shoulders and tried turning her around. “She’s just upset because she just found out her – what’s the word? – ‘friend’ was put into a different camp.”

The guard kept his eyes up front but smiled a little.

“Oh, so you think that’s funny? Ass!” Catty shouted when she saw the alien’s grin. The Optin’s lips went straight instantly as Catty slipped underneath Quongun’s arms and stomped the guard’s toe, making him yelp.

“Cattalice the Younger!” Quongun grabbed Catty and dragged her away. *“Truly, Aly has grown too grave of an influence on you in spite of her controlling her temper more. Now come!”*

Catty kept kicking and swearing at the guard, who she hoped just gained a newfound respect – if not fear – for the Goolian species.

Aly didn't want to be a part of her friend's shenanigans, so she got into the long vaccination line that circled the entire capital. An orange-skinned creature from Ufre poked her with the first needle an hour later.

"Ow!"

"Come on, kid." The Ufrian mastra grabbed Aly's wrist when she tried to pull away. "You're only making this longer the more you struggle, and I already gotta be here all day. So, do me a favor, okay?"

"Yes, Mastra. Sorry." Aly took a deep breath and looked away. She bit her lip and squinted each instant she felt her arm get pricked nine more times.

"I thought you folk were supposed to take physical beatings, and here I am watching a teenager wince over a little needle," the Ufrian said out loud. "Dunno if that's ironic or a shame. Okay, you got the proper nanos for monitoring heart rate and vitality. Species antibiotics, digestive circulatory feedback, and all the other crap you need looks good too. Here's your certificate. Congrats. You officially get to go off into space, shoot up some bad guys, blah blah, you get the idea. Next."

"Wait. Um, what's a nano?"

"Find another Ufrian who's got time to talk about the 'greatness in technology,' Mastra. Now move it along."

Aly mumbled a series of words directed to females that meant anything but "classy" as she stormed off to get her armor. More Ufrian soldiers were at the ends of the more organized-looking lines to hand out the gear designed and crafted by Planet Ufre. The mastra wasn't too sure if she liked the idea of using other people's technology and fashion, but the armor turned out to look more Goolian in design than she expected.

Aly shrieked when she put on the large, light-blue underlayer of her armor that was crafted from a tough fabric. It tightened around her form instantly, and just when Aly thought it was going to keep squeezing until it crushed her, it stopped. The mastra examined her form, astonished at how comfortable the armor was.

The Ufrian helping her put the gear on didn't bother asking her to stretch out her arms as

he pulled more tightly woven fabric of a creamish color over her forearms and thighs. He then pressed a navy-blue chest plate across her chest, and Aly heard and felt the piece pull and latch together behind her back.

“All set,” the Ufrian said after he strapped on gauntlets and leggings similar to the main chest plate on the Young One. “You got your own exclusive armor there, Little Mastra. Thing’s gonna function entirely around the form and biomechanics of your body now.”

“Um, neat,” Aly said as she punched and kicked in the air. “It’s like the armor is, oh – how do you say – organic.”

“Truth’s Grace, no!” The much nicer Ufrian laughed. “It’s just a sign of our designing capabilities, is all. We’d be damned to latch something onto you that had borderline artificial intelligence.”

“Artificial... Right. Where are the weapons again?”

The weaponry issue got a little embarrassing. Aly was only reminded of the mockeries and insults from years ago as she sauntered to the weapons cache, an empty line. The different Goolian styles and weapons, however, brightened up the mastra’s mood a little. There were no sparring sticks in this area, only lethal tools of perfected craftsmanship. Short blades, long blades, spears, pikes– all forms of weaponry she had managed to master in her free time since she had to balance her lack of being. She spent a near hour studying and comparing each tool.

A crowd eventually merged into the area so they could also admire the works, while other aliens came to see if the green alien looking for weapons by herself had any sort of visual deformities. The Goolians in the crowd kept their thoughts to themselves, however, knowing the poor creature had no idea what her condition was.

Many pleaded for the exception of carrying a weapon, but the guards didn’t offer a hint of sympathy. Then there were others coaching Aly to pick a weapon while some debated for the sake of their particular favorite. The difference in weaponry didn’t matter to Aly at all, since she was top ranked for her reflexes, weaponry, and close-quarter combat. There was no need for this babbling ringing in her ears by others whom she could probably take down within a millisecond. Unfortunately for her, weapon mastery and footwork wasn’t what Goolians considered when calling someone a master of the martial arts.

All the same, the mastra wasn’t allowed to leave the area until she found what would complete her, and when she found them, they were just as she had pictured. They were twisted

out of stiff green oak wood and both stretched the length of her arms, as if destiny had made them. The blades were very manageable to wield, and she'd have little trouble shifting her forms from mid-range to close-range. She was also given a chest strap to sheath them. The main piece went over her right shoulder, with the secondary piece leading into the first, diagonally across her chest.

Aly figured she might as well make something optimistic out of the blades by giving them names. It didn't take long to think up two. One blade would be called Truth, while the other would be Grace. Yes, it suited them well, and she applauded herself for the irony of the names and the actual function of the tools.

The guard in charge of the weaponry eventually scooted the Young One away so he could go back to doing what he was trying to do before she arrived: absolutely nothing. When she was a little distance away, Aly unsheathed one of the blades and held it out in front of her. How strange. The more she examined the weapon, the sharper it appeared to her.

The thing Aly held wasn't some sort of play toy. It was made to kill, and she'd be the one holding it when its purpose was fulfilled. Aly was aggressive when it came to sparring, but never lethal. She was reserved, quiet, stubborn, and maybe even a little proud at times, but this skinny object in her hand was going to give her another category. Aly was going to be a killer.

The very thought made the Young One feel nauseous. Part of her wanted to throw up, but then there was another part – a voice, deep down inside – that actually found the thought...*intriguing*. She smacked her cheeks a few times to snap out of it, and hurried on to the rest of the business at hand.

"How do I fare?" Aly asked as she approached her pappai from behind.

Shanvi turned around and forced a smile for her. She'd never know how horrified her pappai was that very instant as he strolled up and examined her attire, hiding the ache in his chest, coming to the understanding that she would accompany him to a place she didn't deserve to go; a place where good people met horrible ends. It was a place where nightmares became a reality, the truth of the world unraveling in all its cruelty.

"I would say this one looks ready," Shanvi said as he flipped Aly's collar back down. "Yet I still suggest you may wish to have your tents burnt and cut to at least the same length as Catty's. Taming them may prove troublesome on Argutas, yes?"

Aly's ears flopped down. She was about to object, but Shanvi gave her a stern look.

“I-if it be your wish, Pappai, then it shall be so.”

“Oh, enough of the long face,” Shanvi said, patting Aly’s cheek. “As I say, it only be a mere suggestion, yes? It is not my wish if it not be yours. Truly, there are plenty who have their tents down to their backs, yet they decide to deal with them without worry.”

“My thanks, Pappai,” Aly said with a bow. She undid a bead tied on one of her smaller tentacles and wrapped it around the top of her head to serve as the base for her ponytail.

Four hours passed after everyone had finished receiving their armor and weaponry for the day, and everyone was ordered to group up in their camps immediately afterwards. Shanvi checked the given mark he and Aly were meant to go under, and found the matching symbol on the other side of the front eastern tower. Catty and Quongun were more likely on the far opposite side of the Capital.

The priests grouped their camps accurately, with the camps led by either a knight or a guard. They’d form into larger groups once they reached the Northwestern Regions of the Goolian Planet.

The groups looked similar, each camp being about forty in size with at least one elderly Mature Aged. Aly was happy to have fourteen other females along with her, ten being grown-ups and the other four being Young Ones. The majorities in the camps were of Gooliun, but the camp leader was of Planet Hethroycken, which others in the galaxy nicknamed “heavies” due to their large build. Besides him, there were two Optins and a Ufrian Young One serving as the “foreigners in the camp.”

Shanvi and Aly’s camp leader was a Grown One by all definition, pronouncing his name Gurthyrus. His skin was of a similar hue to Goolians, yet not as shiny or smooth, and had even darker green spots over his back. His eyes were nowhere near as large as Goolian eyes, and his dark pupils were wide enough to make them appear black.

He was a monster, in both width and height, towering a little over three meters. Aly was happy she wouldn’t have to tangle with a creature like him on the battlefield. His clothing started with a robe that couldn’t close across his huge chest. His boots weren’t really too grand to gaze at, nor were the gauntlets he wore.

A pair of jagged horns protruded from the sides of his head. They could puncture a lung! His head was wide, and his neck looked like it went right into his shoulders. He had claws just like that half-breed from last night, and his legs looked tiny in comparison to the rest of his body.

Aly wondered if this being from another world was the sort to even smile at. He turned out not to be. As he ordered all to line up into two rows of ten – the tallest ones being in the back – he crossed his arms while strolling back and forth, looking everyone in the eye.

“I am Gurthyrus,” he said. “I’ll be your camp lead for the duration of our journey to Argutas, and drill commander once we arrive planetside.”

His voice was beyond deep. Aly could’ve sworn her stomach shook with his bellow. She wondered if his momentary pause was given just to make sure everyone was still as stiff as green oak wood.

“Most of you are of Gooliun. War blood was already in your veins the day you were born, from what I’ve been told. So, I do not expect I should have to play pappai for any of you.”

Aly’s throat went dry as the heavy spoke, and she questioned if she’d ever make it to Argutas if the alien had a say-so in the matter.

“You know the rules of addressing your higher officer, and if you don’t, you should return to the first course of what you greenies call ‘beginner’s session’.”

The camp leader almost sounded like he was joking, but his mouth never formed a smile. Aly wouldn’t have found the joke funny anyway. *Just what does he mean by “greenies?”*

“You are expected to keep up at all times. I don’t give an Argutain field beast’s ass if you are old or young. You have your commands, and you will execute them without flaw.”

Gurthyrus looked at Shanvi when he gave the ‘Mature Aged’ implication. Aly’s pappai showed no sense of intimidation, but remained silent as he was taught. Besides, he wasn’t all that old, by Goolian standards. Aly, on the other hand, was praying the monster wouldn’t consider her pappai as supper, and her knees tensed every time he passed by her. Still, in spite of her nerves, she refused to let her commanding officer see a hint of intimidation.

“If you cannot keep up, you will be left out. Hopefully, your ears are good enough to pick up the footsteps up ahead. Once you catch up, you will continue to stay in the rear, where you belong.

“I do not follow an open-door or off-the-record policy, so you will not address me with any of your personal concerns or needs. I am not your friend. I am your leader, lord, officer, and nothing more. My only purpose is to teach you how to kill Cyogen before they can kill you.

“If you think this is going to be a fun fest and a repeat of what you asses did eons ago, then think again. War has changed. The battlefield has changed. Weapons and armor have

changed. The world beyond your sky has changed, so the warrior has changed. If you've got any fusses about these 'adjustments,' cry about it to a fellow camp member. Look about you. There are different races and colors of culture amongst us."

The camp leader stopped pacing after his third round.

"This will change after tonight. When we set out for glory, there will only be one culture, one race— the Allied Race. We will eat, drink, and even sleep differently when we are en route. If we do things that are unusual from your own normal customs, deal with it."

One culture, one race; the concept was only natural to Aly's ears. She could manage this with no effort at all. On the other hand, she still pictured herself resting on a sturdy rock and sleeping in all of her uncomfortable clothing in the middle of a muddy plain. Lying in a grassy field sounded much more appealing instead.

"You will wear your armor and uniforms for the duration of the day. You will spar in them, eat in them, and sleep in them from here on out."

Aly's nightmares were turning into a hellish reality. She sighed and saw Gurthyus' left ear twitch in her direction. He probably had pretty good hearing, but the mastra held her breath for the duration of the speech, so she wouldn't have to find out.

"We will meet here again tomorrow morning for departure and exercises when the first sun is rising through the eastern mountains," he continued. "You won't need to carry anything besides what you have with you now. Everything else, such as food and bedding, will be provided as we journey. If you're late tomorrow, you're probably trying to keep yourself from the battlefield. If you do not wish to fight for the honor of your homes and families, then excuse yourself this instant, but know this is the last time you will be offered the chance to leave."

It was either the lack of oxygen not getting to her brain or the Hethroycken's last words that made Aly's head spin. As intimidating as he was, the brute had to be ignorant of the pride of Gooliun. As trying as it would be, she wouldn't dare abandon her home when it needed her most. Death would honestly be more welcoming than the disgrace she would forever bear for her cowardice. She straightened her stance even more.

"Very well, then," the heavy said when no one showed a hint of leaving. "May glory and honor be rationed to us all evenly, if it is Truth's Grace's Will. You have heard the time when you are to be down here, and this will be the last. Until tomorrow, you are free to do what you wish. Now, disperse."

Aly exhaled after the knight went around the corner.

“Quite the charming lad, yes?” Shanvi said, approaching Aly.

“If I may, surely you are not being serious.”

Shanvi placed his cane onto the grass and rubbed his hands.

“You did not foresee him as a simple valet, nay? He be a knight, a Hethroycken, and has been given the charge of forty people. Thus, considering all facts, he is charming. You shall be under his govern, not mine, after suns set. I expect you not to give him any reason for disciplining you, nor shall this one bring shame upon yourself and the name you bear. Very good?”

“Very good, Pappai.”

“Well, off you be, then. I must practice, and I suspect you shall join up with the little mistress. Yet, do not be one to waste too grand a time with her unless you are sparring with one another. You should go and practice as well, and do so as if you were studying for the Exams, yes?”

“Truly, Pappai. I believe we are to spar and perform a round of dankerball.”

The Young One headed to the main door where she and Catty said they would meet afterward. As she strolled, she felt the heat of Shanvi’s blue sphere growing out of his hands and saw the light from the sphere glowing across the walls. She didn’t bother turning around, but continued on with her personal agenda.

* * *

Aly hit the ground face-first, but rolled over and got up in an instant. She backflipped twice as Catty threw a yellow beam at her, putting distance between the two of them. The impacts from Catty’s kick and the floor made her ears ring. She tried sniffing up the blue blood running from her nose as she placed her weight on her left leg. As she prepared her counter to Catty’s left, she raised a brow as her opponent’s fist glowed yellow.

Aly switched to a standard defensive form when Catty rushed in for the kill. She crossed her blades and pointed them downward – ready to counter – but shrieked when Catty shot an unexpected beam. She tried to dodge to the left, but the beam sliced her right arm, leaving a sizzling burnt mark. Aly paused, gritting her teeth and squinting an eye as the sting went up to her shoulder.

Aly flipped onto her hands and looked like she was at the midpoint of a backflip when Catty jumped and spun a roundhouse kick. She held the position for the vital split second she predicted, and grinned when Catty's following uppercut, unsheathed dagger in hand, sliced into nothing but air.

"Huh?" Catty proclaimed when she didn't see Aly standing in front of her.

Aly forced her weight forward, with all strength rushing back into her legs the second Catty looked down, ramming her feet into the mastra's chin. The blow lifted Catty off her feet and knocked her flat on her back.

Aly waited for her opponent to recover and get up, knowing the strike probably had the room spiraling out of control for her. She smirked as she watched Catty spit out blue, more likely a wound caused by accidentally biting the inside of her cheek when she fell. Despite all that, Catty still forced some energy into her right hand.

Aly took note of Catty's chattering teeth before she tightened her lips and got up. She knew Catty was on a downward slope when she closed her eyes in front of her and shook her head, apparently fighting off the daze. She could tell Catty was attempting to throw her off when the yellow-eyed mastra took a defensive form and set her right charged fist over the left, even though she was actually left-handed.

Aly returned Blade Grace back in its sheath, so she could have her left hand free. She moved toward Catty, crossing one leg over the other, keeping her free hand properly placed in front of her. She knew Catty couldn't study her movements anymore and launched a roundhouse with her left leg. Catty, eyes widened, yelped and blocked the attack with her charged fist. Aly's shin guards crackled as she lowered her leg.

She stepped back to avoid a desperate swing from Catty's left. Aly then saw an opening when the other mastra prepared her hands for a shot. She slid underneath the beam Catty released, lunged off the floor, and kicked her opponent in the chest. Aly kneed and punched Catty before hopping into the air and ramming her feet straight into the mastra's chest. As Catty's back hit the wall, Aly tossed Blade Grace into the air.

She glanced at Catty before taking a step back, jumping into the air, and bicycle-kicking the blade's handle as hard as she could. Blade Grace's tip plunged into the wall, barely an inch away from Catty's head. The mastra's eyes widened as a tear streaked down her cheek.

The victor's stormy eyes faded to their brighter grays, and she smiled nonchalantly.

“Best two out of three, as agreed,” Aly said. She went over to the white wall and yanked out her blade.

“Yes, yes. Truly,” Catty said, rubbing the back of her head. “Yet I recall I purposely missed the first beam I threw at your arm.”

Aly grabbed the wounded arm, again feeling the sting from the burn.

“And would you not have lost your foot at your final roundhouse, let alone both legs, from the prior match?” Catty added.

Aly finished inspecting the burn and placed her blade back into its sheath after wiping her nose. “Truly, yet you would have lost an ear from my first win, let alone your head in the second match, long before you had knocked out any of my blades.”

Aly heard Catty swear under her breath before spitting out more blood.

“And you cried,” Aly whispered as her friend stuck up her nose and headed to the exit.

“Come again?” Catty said, stopping.

“You shed a tear when I had my blade by your head, crybaby.”

“Nay. My eyes betrayed me. I suppose weltering was the only means for them to react, since they were so shocked.”

“Uh huh. Even so, I best have my pappai inspect this burn.”

Aly walked by Catty and heard the other mastra collapse the second she tried to follow after her. Catty had managed to partially catch the fall. Her legs were stretched out, but she held up the rest of her upper half by a firm left arm planted against the floor. She groaned as Aly checked her pupils. They were dilated.

“My gravest apologies, Cattalice!” Aly insisted. “You are well, yes? You look to suffer a concussion. My most sincere and dearest apologies!”

“Enough. This one has apologized. No more of your blabbering, I beg!”

“Let me escort you to Pappai.”

“Nay, I am well enough. And there still be plenty of time for another few bouts, since we have only sparred for two hours. Does Master Shanvi need to heed such simple wounds so quickly?”

“Only if this one desires to be carried out on a stretcher, Mastra. Truly, I believe you best take a—”

“Does this one make petty excuses for fear of us being even?” Catty asked with a grin.

“Ah. Thus, the stretcher it is, then.”

The two took an hour-long break and headed back into the hot combat board to spar for another five.

* * *

Aly was holding her left side as Catty helped her up the stairs. She had probably broken her ankle from the last tumble of the evening, which wasn't an easy task considering the green creatures' skeletons consisted mainly of firm yet durable cartilage.

“Truly, how many kicks to the side must I give for you to realize your left arm was far too high, Aly? Your aggressiveness shall never make up for such a poor lack of defense. Now, take ease with your breaths.”

Aly was about to explain herself, but a jab from the insides cut her off.

“Perhaps it be best if this one held her thoughts, Mastra,” Catty insisted. “We are halfway there.”

As the two went up their flight of stairs, they heard footsteps coming down them. They were far too light to be those of Shanvi's, but too heavy to be Quongun's. They both stopped, as did the footsteps, with the other person probably hearing the two coming up the stairwell. The person ahead of them eventually continued. To their surprise, the footsteps belonged to the young, red-eyed Cyogen half-breed. He was dressed the way he was the first time they saw him, except he now wore a black cape and a silk-like long-sleeved shirt underneath his top.

His expression was as startled as theirs. They all stood still while Cyleroa looked away and scratched his head. Aly forgot about the pain in her side and tried to quiet her wheezing.

“I shall go see if my pappai's in his board, Aly,” Catty said.

The mastra's statement sounded more like an excuse than anything else to Aly as the traitor ran upstairs. Great. The two stood on the stairs in the far Eastern Tower, not saying a word. Aly acted like she was admiring the construction of the floor, while Cyleroa could do nothing beyond scratch his head.

“You again?” the master eventually said. “Looks like you already came off a battlefield. You folk oughta learn to take it easy, eh?”

“We just finished sparring. That's all.” Her response was professional, and her pronunciations in the Universal tongue were more confident. “Maybe a few ribs. Nothing my

pappai can't take care of."

The lad scratched his head again. "All righty then." He slipped by Aly and headed down the stairs. "Have a safe trip."

"Wait!"

He stopped, but didn't turn around.

"So, you are a Cyogen, yes?"

A small moment of silence went on for what felt like an eternity in the tower. Aly wondered if bringing up his heritage was a mistake. However, Cyleroa eventually broke the silence with a deeply annoyed sigh.

"Half Cyogen, Mastra," he answered as he restarted down the stairs. "Give 'em my regards if you do come across any of 'em, eh?"

Those final words from the half-breed said a lot about him to Aly, but made him even more alien at the same time. So, the Young One eased her way up to her pappai's resting board, with the peace of knowing she'd never have to see that Cyogen soldier again.

ALLIED UNIT 0179 DATABASE



PROFILE : LORD QUONGUN
OF THE KUTENBRIUN TRIBE

SEX: **Male**

BLOOD: **Blue Type 2**

AGE: **81 (universal years)**

HEIGHT: **187.96 cm./ 6 ft. 2 in.**

RACE: **Goolian**

TENTACLES: **Green**

SKIN: **Green**

EYES: **Yellow**

PLACE OF BIRTH:

Kutenbrya of Planet Gooliun

FATHER: **Quongun the Elder
(deceased)**

MOTHER: **Cantrical of the
Kutenbriun Tribe (deceased)**

LIKES: **Reading, fruits, spending
time with family**

DISLIKES: **Confusion, selfishness**

TRAITS: **Mid-introvert, mellow**

HOBBIES: **Studying stars**



Chapter 7

Mid-afternoon sunlight blistered down on Aly's camp without sympathy. They had departed eight hours ago, saying their final farewells to their family and friends until they met again on a far-off world called Argutas.

Aly was thinking about the Little Ones in Kutenbrya during the first hours of the march. They were probably playing dankerball outside in the dirt streets by now. Adults were either hanging their laundry out to dry or taking a break from the fields. There really wouldn't be much of a difference in their everyday routines, but for the next month and a half, this would be what Aly had to look forward to: walking, walking, flying, flying, and then more walking. What a thrill. She had only left the tribe several days ago, and she was already growing homesick.

The Young One was thankful she had decided not to cut her tents. She couldn't imagine what the people with exposed necks were going through right now. Her arms alone were on fire, and the armor felt even hotter today. Meeting underneath the shade yesterday made a huge

difference. Today, however, consisted of vast, open fields in a region called Delcoyce. The hint of a tree wouldn't come around for another few hours.

Aly looked around at some of the fellow natives in her camp. Some locals looked at their fields as if they'd never see them again. The Young One would've felt sorry for them, had they not had the chance to see their lovely domains at least one last time. The rest of them could only look to their memories and imaginations, since they left their tribes days ago.

And so the journey across the fields continued. Aly wondered why they had to do all of this walking when these other "great" alien species knew how to travel the stars – let alone the sky – with their machines. It sounded like time was an issue when she sat in the overseer's meeting, so why waste it in this fashion? The Young One tried to keep her mind from racing in all directions, but her excessive curiosity and ignorance always got the best of her. Oh well. At least it helped pass the time, if anything.

Aly kept her pace up fairly well with the rest of the camp even though she had to carry some extra equipment. Scouts had met up with them about an hour ago, and the lackey – that being the least effective person in the group – was required to carry water for the camp. She turned out to be worthy of the honorable rank due to her lack of being-control. Still, the water really wasn't too heavy since it was evenly distributed along her body. She had one bottle on each thigh and a main package on her back. She couldn't really complain too much. All of the water kept her legs and armor cool.

To her surprise, her pappai was keeping pace near the front. She assumed he'd be somewhere behind her since he was a little short for a middle-aged male, but there he went, gray cloak around his neck and his staff loyally serving him as a needless accessory. Shanvi didn't seem bothered at all. As a matter of fact, it looked like he was stirring up some sort of humorous conversation with Lord Gurthyrus. Aly's mouth dropped at the sight of the evil knight dictator joking with her kindhearted father. She eventually forced her ears to shut out the laughing carrying on between the two.

An hour passed, then Gurthyrus ordered the camp to move double time. The coolness of the water was starting to leave, and the bottles were turning into more of a burden than anything else. Aly fell back three spaces, which was nine people. She tried to get her original spot back a few times, but the main jug was starting to ache, and the bottles on her legs felt like someone had filled them halfway with pebbles.

Another hour passed, and now the Young One had to deal with the heat from both suns. The first sun was still near its peak, and the heat from the second one was trailing close behind. Aly's tentacles were turning damp with sweat. Every step was a painful one, and she had to make an effort to keep her breathing steady. She looked around to see if anyone else appeared tired, but everyone – with the exception of another Goolian – were looking as fresh as they had in the beginning.

That other Goolian collapsed without warning thirty minutes later. An apparent relative stayed back to attend to her loved one's needs, shrieking for help. Aly was about to turn around, but the Ufrian volunteer shoved her forward.

"Don't bother," he whispered to her. "Stay, and you'll fall behind even more."

Aly lowered her head and trotted on, but she heard the frail cries of the female and the heavy wheezing of the other Goolian for another torturous hour. She hated feeling guilty.

Two more hours down, and probably sixteen or seventeen to go until camp. The suns were burning Aly's dried skin from both sides and things got even worse when she tripped over an Optin, who collapsed in front of the startled mastra. Mouthfuls of the thick, tan dirt made her choke and gag before she could manage to cough it out.

She sat up quickly and looked ahead. The camp's pace seemed much quicker now that she had stopped. She could tell her pappai and Lord Gurthyrus heard the thud because both of their ears twitched. They still went on ahead, however. Aly spat out more dirt and pushed herself up, elbows aching as the weight of her entire body fell on them.

Aly paced herself, going twice as fast as the rest of the camp in order to catch up. The heavy air blew in her ears. The soles of her feet cried out in agony, but she told them to shut up and keep moving. The weight on her back was no longer a water container, but a boulder. She staggered a little, nauseated, but leaned forward and motioned her arms quicker. The more her body begged her to stop, the more she punished it by going faster. Being left behind was no option for her; only the servitude and honor she wished to offer her race was evident. She wouldn't have to be afraid of the war anymore if she went back home, but being disgraced was far worse than anything else.

The Young One finally reached the rear of the camp. The others' steady stride reminded her of people running cross-country to deliver mail. To her surprise, she passed the tail trotters – most of them alien – as soon as she had caught up to them. She saw the row she was once in and

noticed the people she shared it with were closing the gap she had made in her momentary absence.

She sprinted off to the side of the camp, not wanting to cause any of her comrades to trip and fall back the way she had. She flew until the very wind she breathed slashed her eyes into tears. Her nose started to run, but she didn't bother wiping it. No. She was on a mission.

Aly nearly made it to her destiny. The rhythm of everyone's simultaneous trot rang in her ears, and that was when her right side went tight. The cramp made the view of her spot fade away, while the distance between her original row and her own frail body increased again.

Maddening. It was utterly maddening. Aly couldn't let go when victory was so close. She was enraged at the weakness of her body – a useless, incapable waste of space. She wanted to punish it, to hurt it. The pain it felt could not at all measure the shame in her pride, so she shot forward with all her might.

The leather strip in her tents came loose as Aly buried her lava-heated feet into the dirt road. She wanted to scream in pain every time they struck the merciless ground, but she bit her lower lip shut and held it tight. She would not cry out. She wouldn't be the weak one in this camp. For these ligaments would take her to new worlds, to glory. She'd run herself dead before she'd return to her village, dishonored and shamed.

The Young One kept lunging forward, leg by leg, shin by shin, foot by foot. The weight of the backpack pressed her on, but she did not restrain it. She welcomed it, knowing every push would present victory. Almost there. She was almost there and the war in her body was nearly complete.

Aly's breathing was beyond her control. Her heart was about to explode through her sternums, but still she pushed. If her body decided to fail her now, then she obviously didn't deserve to be there in the first place. Her neck and thighs grew numb. She had no idea what was keeping her head on her shoulders and what monstrosity was controlling her legs.

Aly's nose kept running, dripping thick mucus across her face. The puddles under her arm gave no relief from the merciless heat falling down on her, but she would win. She would win the world.

"All right. Let's take a breather," Gurthyus bellowed.

His voice shook Aly's ears before her body crashed into the ground. A thick cloud of dirt rushed in around her. The very last object she felt was that of her hot dry tongue rolling out of the

corner of her mouth. Then, blackness.

The sweet smell of wheat and leaves made Aly open her eyes. She blinked her heavy eyelids, hoping that'd help her focus better. A fire burned across from her, and her pappai and Lord Gurthyrus were munching on the final crumbs of their dinner. They had set up a tent around her and covered her back with a furry black blanket.

The Young One's face was thoroughly washed; no hint of saliva, dirt, or mucus on it or in her tents. The weights on her back and thighs were long gone, and her shins felt naked since her shin coverings weren't over them anymore. She took a moment to wiggle her toes to make sure all four were still attached to each foot. Yep, all eight were accounted for.

Aly started to wonder if she had been stripped down completely, but she still felt the tightness of her armor when she moved. She tried to sit up, but a sudden pinch struck the middle of her back the instant she tried. Her wail made both her pappai and the camp leader turn their heads.

"Ah, so you finally awake, yes?" Shanvi asked.

Gurthyrus got up and knelt down beside Aly's tent cover. The rumble he made along the way made the Young One pray he wasn't going to accidentally sit on her.

"Interesting kiddy you got here, Master," Gurthyrus bellowed in the Universal tongue. "Swears she's some sort of special badass or sumthin'?"

He untied the opening of the tent so the heat from the fire could come in.

"Don't bother trying to move there, Mastra. As far as your body's concerned, you're gonna be temporarily paralyzed from the neck down until the morning."

He firmly patted her on the head with his large three-digit hand and went back to his seat. Shanvi hopped up and sat down beside Aly with one of the bottles she'd had to carry in his hand. He gently lifted her head onto his lap and shoved the open socket of the leather bottle into the corner of her mouth. The mastra knew she probably looked like an infant feeding off her mother's milk, and felt humiliated. Nevertheless, she sucked at the socket, all the same. She could've sworn she heard the water splash once it reached her belly.

Now that taste was functioning properly again, her mouth desired more. The flames in her eyes made their way toward a nearby pile of common Goolian bread called dinner swirls.

“One bite of anything and you shall vomit it right back up,” Shanvi said, shaking his head. *“Trouble yourself with water as of now, and be mindful of how quickly you deal with even this, yes?”*

Shanvi stroked one of Aly's tentacles and placed her head back on her pillow.

“Now, fret not. You know we are ones who can trouble without food for a clear month. Truly, one day shall not kill you.”

Aly's ear twitched when Gurthyrus cleared his throat and spat out a little bone that had been stuck in his gums. She was happy she didn't get to see what the giant had eaten. She'd probably be hurling up her water if she had.

“Now, needless to say, kiddy, you caught me eye with that stunt of yours today,” the behemoth said. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

Aly raised a brow when she thought the heavy smirked at her while he ate. She then figured it was probably just the movements his jaws made whenever he chewed.

“We heard you and that idiot of an Optin collide back on the trail,” Gurthyrus continued. “Stupid ass-pinch. If he had any decency, like the rest of you shacks, he would've pulled himself off to the side of the road and not involved his waste of space with everyone else.”

Aly was still too unfamiliar with the heavy alien to respond, so she didn't say anything.

“What you showed back there was spirit, Mastra. Pure guts.” Gurthyrus nodded. “Made me feel good about this whole damn war and all, you did. If we got any more kids out there like you, those Cyoge dick croppers are gonna be in for it this time.”

“Indeed. I assure you, my lord, there are many more out there like her,” Shanvi answered. “If not many, I know at least of one more. She has a very dear friend in the seventy-eighth camp with as much – if not more – spitfire than her.”

“Ah ha! Yes! Very good, then!” Gurthyrus laughed. “You greenies have taught them well, if that's the case! And don't you worry, Young One. You'll still be with the camp after tonight.”

The heavy leaned and pointed a stern finger at Aly.

“But you're just damn lucky you tripped over someone, understood? That's the only reason why you're even sleeping in my own tent and have your leggings off. If that weren't the case, your ass would still be drooling in your own mucus and spittle right now on the side of the road, got me?”

“Yes, my lord.” Aly's response was frail. She was making herself a burden to her camp.

Her pappai had to be ashamed of her.

“But nonetheless, you got a good spirit, kiddy. A spirit with Truth’s Grace, and the heart of an honorable Goolian,” the heavy added.

“Thank you, my lord.” Aly still kept her head down, but she couldn’t force away her growing smile.

“Now, take another swig of that water and get your rest, kiddy. You have another four hours to sleep. Best make the most of it. For I, myself, carried you in my own arms to this spot tonight. Don’t expect me, or anyone else for that matter, to ever do that again, got me?”

Aly raised her eyes to match the heavy’s.

“I’ll never give you a reason to, my lord,” she answered.

“Oh? So you do have strength behind that pretty little voice, after all! Very good, and I expect you to meet up to those words and the boldness in them.”

Aly nodded and scooted back into the tent before burying her head into the pillow. She didn’t care if this was the last time she got to sleep in such a marvelous luxury ever again. She didn’t even feel bad about the rest of her comrades not getting to share the same gift. Aly earned this treat, and no one would dare make her feel guilty about it.

The Young One had won her battle, the battle between her body and mind. So she rested easily and slept peacefully. One day was down, and she only had about seventy-one more to go.

* * *

The following morning was damp and chilly, but Aly welcomed it with open arms. She sat up in the tent and checked the soles of her feet. New skin had already replaced what she had lost the day before, so her body obviously had more than enough time to take care of all the little “kinks.” Her circadian rhythm was probably in order with everything else, so the rest of the trip was going to be a little easier. She ran her fingers through her tentacles and stretched her arms before crawling out of the tent.

Aly let the tops of her feet rub against Gurthyrus’ furry blanket, knowing it would be the last time she’d feel such softness envelop her body for a long time. Finally ready to take on the new day, she slipped on her boots...and quickly kicked them off.

“Ew.”

The feeling of the dead skin that had melted into the bottoms of her shoes made the

Young One's toes curl up. She looked around the area for something to cover the bottoms with, but saw nothing beyond the fields and hills in the distance.

She stepped over her still-sleeping comrades, boots in one hand and dagger in the other. She looked effortlessly across the field, letting her eyes roll over each stump until they found some extra sleeping bags. The two Goolian relatives from yesterday probably headed back home due to the cruelty of their camp members. The other one was more than likely for the Optin alien that made her trip, unless he had managed to catch up during the night. Aly chuckled. *Yeah, right.* Then there would be another free sack meant for her.

"Ah ha!" she said when she spotted a pile of bags to the far east. "There you be."

Since the mastra was far enough not to worry about the jingling of her anklet, she happily skipped over to the edge of the road. With the handle of her dagger in mouth, she loosened the straps holding one of the bags together. Out rolled a black resting sack. To her pleasant surprise, there was fur on the inside. It wasn't the same quality Gurthyrus had in his bag, but it was better than nothing. Thinking nothing more of it, the Goolian took the dagger out of her mouth and collected what she had come for.

Aly shoved small patches of the fur into the bottoms of her boots. They felt amazing when she slid her feet into them. After taking several seconds to appreciate her genius, she grabbed another bag from the pile of four and took it for her own. Gurthyrus had woken everyone else up in the camp by the time she got back.

"Ah, there you are," the giant said, arms crossed. "I see you've already taken the time to grab yourself a resting sack. Good, because you know your scrawny ass is never gonna get into my tent again."

Aly's cheeks fired up in blood-blue at the obscenity of his comment.

"Girl, it was a figure of... Just fall in line."

Aly timidly fell back to her original spot in line, her shoulders tense. The Ufre lad that had urged Aly to keep jogging yesterday placed a hand on the mastra's shoulder. Aly's ears twitched, figuring he had something to say to her.

"Aw, don't worry, Mastra," his strong Ufrian voice said. "Your rear looks pretty nice from back here."

Aly actually squeaked when the lad patted her on the right cheek. She slowly turned around and was greeted by the orange creature's grinning face. The mastra curled her fingers into

a force known as a fist, chambered her arm as far back as she could, and rammed it into the Ufrian's jaw. The lad hit the ground hard, and the back of the camp fell into laughter.

Two Goolians held Aly back as she went on to use a harsh set of vocabulary towards the Ufrian that made Gurthyryus' tongue sound clean. This made the camp laugh even louder.

"What's going on back here?" the heavy growled as he arrived.

His voice made the ground shake underneath. The two holding Aly let go of her immediately and stood as stiff as green oak wood. Aly, her back still facing the other way, shut her eyes tightly. She imagined Gurthyryus glancing over her and seeing the Ufrian picking himself off the dirt road. She could've sworn his hot breath was blowing on her neck.

"Would you care to explain why he's on the ground, Mastra?" Gurthyryus demanded.

Aly felt a chill as she froze. She'd didn't answer him, knowing she'd probably stutter.

"Permission to speak, sir?" the Ufrian said.

Aly felt the heavy take a step closer. She glanced to her right and saw the tip of one of his jagged horns.

"Go on," Gurthyryus said.

"The private was simply turning around to see if I was okay. That's all. I was clumsy strapping my bag on, and the weight brought me down."

Aly eyed the ground when Gurthyryus leaned in to look at her. She wondered if Hethroycken aliens were the sort of animals that could smell the fear of other creatures. She hoped he wasn't, otherwise she had to be smelling pretty awful at that given moment.

"Lot of spirit, that girl, but still an egoistic one at that," Gurthyryus said in his native tongue. The heavy headed back to the front without saying another word.

"Lucky you my cheek isn't swollen yet, Mastra," the Ufrian said, rubbing the left side of his face and dusting himself off.

"And you're lucky it was only my fist that met your cheek, wiseass," Aly snarled back.

"Okay. I'm sorry. You're a strong-willed one, I say. After that amazing stunt you pulled off yesterday and that knocker you just gave me, you have my respect, Goolian."

Aly stopped clenching her fists. She studied the lad for a moment. He seemed sincere enough.

"I guess you can have mine as well," she said. "Since we're going to be this close for another seventy-one or so days, I might as well learn your name."

The lad brushed his blue hair.

“Sure. It’s Gruago. Ufrian for ‘playful’.”

“Indeed. Alytchai.”

“Ah. Pretty name for a pretty girl. So what does it mean?”

“It means ‘gentleness’.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Aly stuck her long purple tongue out at Gruago and turned around. Gruago smiled.

“And full of such ‘gracefulness’ as well,” he added.

Aly shot her left leg back, kicking Gruago in the right shin. She heard the lad’s “Ow” before he rubbed his leg. She covered her mouth and blurted out an unexpected giggle.

“Cute, Mastra,” Gruago whispered into Aly’s ear as he hopped back in line behind her. “Really cute.”



Chapter 8

Aly spent most of her time with her own kind during the camp's travels at the beginning, but Gruago turned out to be an annoyance who kept agitating her with his jokes and tricks. However, the Ufrian's shenanigans eventually turned into entertainment, and his acquaintance became more of a friendship. When it came down to it, the aliens weren't as odd as she had imagined. Besides, her pappai didn't seem to mind them.

They were just people. There were, of course, the physical differences between everyone, but in the end, their faith and thoughts united them. The creatures laughed when they were happy, cried when they were sad, and uplifting when a comrade was struggling.

The encouragement was tested when the camp reached a dense forest they and many other groups had to travel through a few days later. Fortunately, the danger was very minor, but the paths were hard to follow. Getting lost was easy, even for a Gooliun native. Matters weren't helped when reports indicated the Sauthian transports were going to be delayed due to Cyogen artillery.

“This is bad,” Gruago said. “Very bad.”

The master kicked his boots together, legs stretched across the floor in an inn the troops had come upon moments before.

“Nine of the transports that are supposed to be here have either been compromised or are missing. What are we gonna do?”

“It is obvious what any of us would do, lad,” Shanvi answered as he admired the view some gigantic green oak trees outside his window gave. “His Honor has most likely received word of this setback by now. He will have no other choice but to delay our arrival at Argutas.”

Aly was stretched out across the bed Gruago leaned against. She was busy twirling a finger in his similar-colored curly hair while the two males rambled. The fur on the top of his head had a pleasantly soft texture, like an animal’s.

“It’s not like we can really do anything about it,” she said.

Gruago tried to fix the hair his new-found friend insisted on toying with. Aly went right back to playing with it, even when the lad shoved her hand away.

“Truth’s Grace, you’d think the Sauthians would be able to find us with a little radar,” the lad said. “Guess their tech isn’t as good as ours from this distance. Not a strong enough signal, I guess.”

The mastra stopped tugging Gruago’s hair, and that actually made him turn around. She tilted her head to the side, but was too embarrassed to admit her ignorance.

“Oh. Radar is an advanced type of, uh, tracking device, Aly,” the lad explained.

She nodded at the needed information and went back to messing with Gruago’s hair.

“That would only add to the delay of our preparations for the Cyogen arrival,” Shanvi said, “and that isn’t even if they show up any earlier than that.”

Aly took another break from the lad’s hair and looked at her pappai.

She recalled, “But Master Cyleroa said—”

“I do not care what that half-breed said,” Shanvi cut in. “He may very well have lied to the overseer to lure us in for a trap, for all he is worth.”

Aly’s heart sank into her belly. There was such hatred in her pappai’s eyes when he said the word, “half-breed.”

“Cyleroa?” Gruago asked as he turned around. “Hey, who’s this—”

“I’ll tell you what he is,” Shanvi interrupted. “Better yet, what he isn’t. He is not of

Truth's Grace, and he is not to be trusted."

Aly's lips quivered, but something deep inside of her forced the mastra to speak out.

"If I am allowed to speak freely, P-Pappai, we know nothing of the lad," she said in her native tongue. *"Perhaps he is not as vile as we may fear, nay?"*

She immediately looked down at the floor.

"I know you mean well, dearest," Shanvi said, *"yet we must understand there be nothing else we need to know of him. Guard or not, he is of Cyiaus."*

"I don't need to understand Goolian for that part," Gruago cut in. "Did you just say Cyiaus? You actually met a Cyogen?"

"Gruago, be still." Aly covered the master's mouth. *"Yet truly, there must be a sound reason as to why His Honor has him for a Personal Royal Guard, yes?"*

"Enough of this silly talk, Alytchai. Surely you have not forgotten your place, yes? Take heed to my words, Little One. That creature is of darkness, and we should hope we may never see him again."

Aly paused and nodded.

"Apologies for my protest, Pappai."

Shanvi patted the Young One on the head before he went to see the status of the camp's movements. When he left, Gruago spun back around.

"You actually met a Cyogen?"

"Well, not entirely." Aly looked out of the window from where she sat. "He was a half-breed. I think he said his mother was of Planet Requely."

The Goolian looked around before she leaned into the lad's round ears. "And is that not weird? How could such a relationship happen? Two creatures from other planets mating? How dishonorable, let alone I thought impossible. But then I guess that clarifies the rumors about some species being related."

Gruago turned back around and looked dumbfounded.

"Fine." Aly sighed and crossed her arms. "What did I say this time?"

"Seriously, Aly? Why do you think the Philosophy even covers the subject?"

"There's no need for the tone, moron. Just explain it already."

"It's not impossible, Mastra. By Truth's Grace, dishonorable, yes, but impossible, no."

"You mean Cyogen and Requin are related," the mastra confirmed sarcastically. She

thought about slapping Gruago when he took a deep breath, as if he had to remember he was talking to a primitive creature.

“The majority of the galaxy is related in some way or another, Alytchai.”

“Oh, really,” Aly said with a smile. Gruago didn’t smile back. “Um, really?”

Gruago scooted in his legs and spun around again. He didn’t bother hiding his irritation from the mastra that time. Aly contemplated slapping him again, but she figured she’d let him have his moment for once so he could explain.

“Everyone has their own guess about it,” the master said. “The common belief is we all originated from one planet, and when we started to move across the galaxy, we started adapting and changing to the new environments. A simple form of evolution, if you will, even though others say we each gave up some strong traits that others kept.

“And so, here we are: green, blue, orange – you get the idea. Makes sense, doesn’t it? Our genetic codes are virtually identical, for the most part. Our differences probably came along because we adapt to our habitats so easily. I mean, we’ve been around for a pretty long time, and there’s no tellin’ how long we’ve been able to do space travel. Civilizations come and go, so maybe there was one that had space travel before what we even call prehistory.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?” Aly said.

“Can’t say I believe it or not, but I’m just tellin’ you it’s the most common and widely accepted theory between both historical and astronomical scientists. Besides the hairies and the heavies, we’re connected all the way down to our genus. Ufre, Cyiaus, Requely, Optues – we’re all related! Oh, and then Ioweth doesn’t fit the club, either, of course. Now those are some funny looking fellas, let me tell you! There’s no way we’re related to them! Hah! Hey, did you know Wethans can live well over eight hundred years?”

Aly felt her head spin in all directions. She leaned back across the bed and groaned.

“You okay?” Gruago said.

“I just need a moment to – how do you say – ‘register’ this news.”

“Oh? So, I guess I shouldn’t tell you this would make us cousins, right?”

Aly sat up and glared at the Ufrian. “That’s not funny, Gruago.”

“That’s not a joke, either.” Gruago kept smiling.

Aly groaned again and plummeted back into the soft bedding.

“Well, you’re taking this news much better than when you did with the colonies and

stuff,” Gruago said.

“Actually, I’m still coping with that, if you need to know.”

Gruago laughed, and Aly nudged him in the back of the head with her heel.

“So, what was it like meeting a Cyogen?” he asked.

“I don’t know. His eyes were redder than any wild fruit I’ve tasted, and their form was more intimidating than any creature I’ve seen, even compared to a heavy. Still, I guess he seemed like any other person our age.”

Gruago crossed his legs and rested his hands behind his head.

“Look, Mastra, it might sound pretty harsh and all, but I think your pappai’s right, ya know? Friendly or not, he’s a Cyogen. And trust me; that fact alone will be more than enough when you get to see all of the horrible things they’ve done.”

“I know.” Aly rested her head on a pillow, ears drooped.

“I guess it’s a tough deal, though,” the lad added. “We fight the Cyogen for the sake of our survival, but I remember my parents always telling me that there’s an opposite to everything. So, maybe making hasty generalizations about them as a whole isn’t the brightest thing to do.”

Aly was wondering what Catty was doing as the lad lectured. “I’m not too sure if I follow you clearly, Master.”

Gruago got up and sat on the bed. He looked Aly straight in the face when he said, “They all can’t be that bad, because all of us can’t be that good either.”

“What did you say?” Aly asked as she sat up.

“I said, they all can’t be evil if all of us – people in the Allied Forces – can’t be good. No creature is born with some sort of ‘evil gene,’ Aly. It’s taught to them the same way things are taught to us. Who knows, they probably got told we were the bad guys too, ya know?”

Aly thought it over. It was an odd concept, an ironic concept. The mastra looked at her friend, smiled, and gave him a harmless kiss on the lips.

“I will take your words to heart, Master. “Who knows? Maybe the line between good and evil is thinner than we think.”

“If only we knew, Mastra. If only we knew. But then I guess some things are better left unknown.”

“Why?”

“It probably makes killing people a damned lot easier.”

* * *

Most of the Goolians didn't take too well to the hovering and other maneuvers the red Sauthian transports made when they eventually arrived. Aly knew she was going to lose her lunch any second as she zoned out and counted the endless numbers of mountains and trees zipping by below. She had no idea why they had to travel so close to them. It didn't help that she estimated their average altitude a while back, either. Even so, she knew she'd better get used to the form of travel, because she'd be looking up at far greater ships – ones that would take her to the stars – really soon.

These far greater ships came into view a few hours later, leaving Aly was dumbfounded by their size. They could probably carry ten, no, twenty Goolian tribes without any trouble. Standing nearly fifteen stories in height, the ends of them weren't even visible on the docks. The Goolians would've never imagined that such glorious technology was possible.

"So, those are the mountains I saw falling from the sky days ago," she said to herself, stopping to take a look while her camp moved across the Neghiy docks.

Like Sauthianos, the blue ships of Optues bore no mark of craftsmanship to Goolian design. The colors, the material – the entire design screamed smooth and bold Planet Optues. Every Goolian was awe-stricken by them. While Aly paused to look, however, Gruago and the other aliens passively followed the directions of their camp leaders, and fell in line.

"Aly? Alytchai!" Gurthyus bellowed. "Get your ass out of Playland and fall in."

"Sorry, sir," Aly said, rushing back to her camp.

There were thousands of Optins working the docks and directing the troops to their vessels, and it didn't even take twenty minutes for Aly's camp to find themselves standing near the entrance to one of the ships. The Young One leaned to the side to get a look at the interior. It looked horribly dark from where she stood. She turned around to see how her fellow natives were faring. Some kept a stern face as best as they could, while others looked absolutely horrified.

Aly frowned. Then she tried to see how far Shanvi was up ahead. Her pappai must've felt her spotting him. He turned and gave her a reassuring smile and wink when they locked eyes. She forced a grin and nodded, feeling a little better knowing he wasn't going to be too far away. Everything else beyond that was sickening.

No Catty, no fields, no temple, no singing in the store – all of it, gone. A whistle stung Aly's ears seconds later, and she noticed the squads beside her marching into their ships. She quickly looked up ahead, but then she took a steady breath when she realized her squad was still standing at bay. Even so, it was only a matter of time.

"You okay there, Aly?" Gruago asked, turning around to see how she was doing. He didn't point out how pasty she looked.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine." She tried to stop trembling.

Gruago turned back around, but extended a hand behind him and grabbed Aly's. The leather wrapped around her palms couldn't hide her nerves. The lad squeezed her hand tightly. She squeezed back.

"Thanks," she whispered.

"You'll get used to it."

"I'm not too sure if I want to."

Another whistle blew. This one was closer, and everyone in Aly's squad straightened up. They knew their moment had arrived. Aly sighed and looked down. The dirt beneath her feet had never looked so pretty before; grounded, brown, and fresh with minerals. It was part of the building blocks that made the place sacred to her. Yes, this place, her precious little jewel. How she would miss it.

Planet Gooliun had been so good to Aly, and she hadn't even realized it. The Young One knelt down and picked up a handful of gravel. It felt pretty sparse since so many footsteps had trampled it without a second thought. How sad.

But no, the gravel was part of something far dearer to Aly. It was a part of the forest she always used to race in. It was a part of the red dirt road that led to the village. It was a part of the fields that she worked and often found herself daydreaming and singing in. It was a part of Gooliun. It was a part of home.

Aly raised the gravel to her face and kissed it softly, thanking it for the years of love and protection it had given her. She promised herself she'd never forget the gravel, and she prayed it'd be able to welcome her back home one day. And just then, the Goolian had something personal to fight for.

Aly jolted when she got nudged from behind.

"What are you doing, Young One?" a Goolian asked. "*Be quick. We are to move on.*"

Aly looked up ahead and noticed her line was already moving.

“Truly. Apologies,” she said as she jogged forward.

Aly went across the warm soft dirt under the bright blue sky, up the cold hard ramp, and into the cramped walls of the massive transport.

The insides of the ship were dimly lit, only having tiny half-sphere lights trailing along the walls of the lower deck. The walls of the ship were soft and spongy. Gruago saved a seat for Aly and showed her how to make the walls extract straps for her. She had a little trouble tying herself down, so he ended up doing it for her.

“Kay, so you’re all set,” Gruago said.

Aly didn’t say anything as she looked out of the small window behind her. Gruago patted her on the leg and tried to doze off. Aly wished she could do that. It was going to be a long trip, but her nerves wouldn’t let her mind rest.

“Oh yeah!” Gruago shouted.

Aly gasped and rolled her eyes. “What is it?”

“Don’t worry about the tremors. Just the engines warming up.”

The mastra nodded, and Gruago finally went to sleep. Aly was impressed and wondered how many times Gruago had traveled across space before. Her thoughts were canceled the second she heard a hissing sound outside, however. The ship shook about two minutes later. *So, this be it. The moment of glory has thus arrived. Too soon.*

Aly couldn’t see the blue flares hissing from the bottom of the Optin transport, nor the crew officers who scurried away from its base. She definitely felt them, though. She took deep breaths, trying to keep calm, as Gruago had told her to.

She turned her head when several people vomited the salty swamp water they had accidentally gulped when they slipped and fell in the marshes on the way to the transports. She closed her eyes, canceling out the coughs from people trying not to lose their lunch, and took her mind into a more pleasant time and place back in Kutenbrya. A place where there was just enough shading, perfect temperatures, and grass that was even greener than her skin. She wondered what on Gooliun could possibly put her on a ship that was about to take such things away from her. And that was the very second she felt the ship abandon ground zero entirely.

The ship’s shaking wasn’t as violent as before, but it was still aggressive. They had to be moving at amazing speeds, so Aly tried to calculate the velocity by adding up a set of equations

in her head. Seconds later, she came to a final answer and threw it away, not able to believe they could be moving so fast while still in range of Gooliun's gravity. The shaking stopped in less than a minute, and Aly felt the lightness of space underneath her. It quickly went away as the artificial gravitation system activated. She then looked out the window and frowned. Gooliun was out of sight. Space ate it.

The Optin co-pilot on the ship hammered away at buttons to activate the maneuvering engines, causing the ship to spin completely around. He glanced at the lead pilot, who was looking out of her window to gaze at the small planet they just left. Massive amounts of green and some areas of blue joined up with one another at random spots. It was absolutely beautiful.

"Not bad," said the other co-pilot, already knowing what his higher-up was taking a momentary pause for. "Maybe a nice lil' laid back face off the galaxy to come back to once this is all over with."

"Yeah," the lead pilot answered. "Not bad at all, if it's even there in the next couple of years."

The vessel's engines exploded into full power and shot the colossus into the vast darkness of space that led to Planet Argutas.

Excerpt Epilogue

* * * * *

“All the same, why are they such prized specimens to you guys? Take a look at this file, for example. Sungstras really don’t seem too threatening, and the greenies even consider them more diseased than gifted.”

“Don’t bother yourself with their silly superstitions and ignorance. I already told you this before. Focus.”

“If you insist. They must be some great specimen for us to be going through all this trouble just to grab—”

“You call them ‘specimens.’ Don’t you think they deserve a little more respect than that?”

“I’m just going by what you plan on doing with them, is all. A good bunch of test dummies, aren’t they?”

“You know, you’re starting to sound more and more like your brother.”

“Thanks.”

“And to answer your question, I’m afraid I have to keep that confidential.”

“What? Still don’t trust me?”

“You’re a part of this coming scheme, are you not?”

“And what’s that supposed to mean to me?”

“I think someone’s forgetting their place in the face of hubris. I suggest you be careful.”

“Ooh. I can take a hint. So, back to my question. How about a little hint at least? ‘Expect the unexpected? Life’s full of surprises’?”

“I forgot how persistent you can be.”

“Well, I get that from you.”

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