

Shadows at the Dawn



SHADOWS AT THE DAWN

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"There are no shadows on the sun, my love."

Those words, so very long ago uttered as something to brighten a dark day have stayed with me through this long dark emptiness I put myself in. They've been my only comfort, what little there is to be had out here.

I am the last of my family. We, who have sacrificed everything to keep the greatest treasure in the system safe - only to find it in ruins in the end. The enemy we hadn't seen, hadn't noticed, lurking on the edge of the brightness. It took it from us, that bright shining jewel we gave our lives for. Yet, there was still a faint glimmer of hope. They had not been taken from us completely. So, we took what little strength from the ashes there was, and kept to our duties. From them we keep a greater danger.

But in my selfishness, out here alone like I am, that is not the loss that tears me apart the most. Gone were the lips that had smiled at me and uttered the words floating through my tired mind. Never again would I be able to lose myself in a pair of warm amber eyes. My heart, my soul, are as empty as the void surrounding me.

You're confused now though. You don't know me. You've never even heard of my family. And that is how it should be - how it's supposed to be. That is how the Queen wanted it kept, and it fit our purpose as well. But with that time gone, having been left this lonely task of mine for the past few thousand years, I feel it is time to end the silence - end the secrecy.

This is our story. Guardians from the outside, separate but allied to the shining jewel that once reigned over all that was wondrous and good. I am Zeeda, daughter of Clan Centurious, and I keep the darkness at bay.



"Zeeda!"

A man's voice boomed through the halls of the main house of the Centurious stronghold on the heels of a young girl trying desperately to find a decent place to hide. She had no desire to be present to meet yet another clan hoping to arrange a marriage with hers. She was only twelve, and far more interested in her arms training and helping teach her younger brothers - all three of them, with another expected soon.

She sighed as she squeezed herself into the space under the stairs. Soon, she would be too big to get into the little cubbyhole, but for today, she would cram herself inside and refuse to come out. Daddy could not stay mad at her forever, could he? She hoped not at least.

"Zeeda, come back here."

Kalah stopped at the top of the stairs and sighed. He was not happy about the vultures circling his house hoping to arrange a marriage to his only daughter. And chances were good that the baby soon to join them would be another son. Had one of her brothers been born first, this whole marriage thing would not be an issue. It was an antiquated law among their people, one he had tried to challenge even before he had been married himself. No woman could be head of her clan without a husband. He scowled at the utter lunacy of the whole thing. Many of the women, hell, just about all of the ones he had ever met, were more than capable of running their clan strongholds, as well as commanding on the battlefield. Many even more capable than most of the men he had been forced to deal with.

"Da!"

His thoughts were interrupted by the youngest of the household, three year old Marshant, calling to him from the bottom step.

"Da, Zee hiding." The boy pointed at the stairs.

Kalah smiled in spite of it all, his son not knowing the full measure of his actions. Coming down the stairs, he scooped the boy up and set the giggling bundle over his shoulder. Making his way around to the back of the stairs, he knelt down in front of the cubbyhole his daughter had stuffed herself into.

"Zeeda, please come out."

"Zee! Zee!" Marshant added

"Oh, hush up you little traitor," she muttered as she squeezed herself back out of the cubbyhole.

Kalah set his son down, trying not to look too stern as he gazed down at his now disheveled and dirty daughter. Marshant tottered over to grab one of her hands.

"Zee ... not mad?"

"I can never stay mad at you, little imp." She smiled and ruffled his hair.

"Da, not mad?" Marshant looked back at his father.

"No son, I'm not mad. But I am a tad disappointed."

Zeeda looked down at the floor, holding fast to the little hand in hers.

"Oh Zee, you know I don't like this much either. And you know I've tried to change things - tried for a long time. If we could afford to be a renegade clan and tell the council exactly what they could do with their law ..."

Kalah could not finish. Going renegade would mean his sons would have no prospects for the future either. Zeeda already had so much to bear on her young shoulders; he had no desire to further add to that burden.

"I'm sorry daddy."

He knelt down and gathered them both in a firm hug.

"I know it's not easy. But this is the last meeting for a while, so I need you to be the strong girl I know you are. Clan Torpel isn't so bad, and their son is the same age as you."

"I don't want to wear a dress." Zeeda pouted into his shoulder.

"Is that why you ran away?" His chuckle could not quite be contained. "Well, come my little flame, we don't have much time to get you ready again."



Zeeda sat with her mother, waiting in the main receiving hall. The only feature they shared was their wild fiery hair, but that was enough. Zornah still could not get over just how much her daughter resembled her husband. She had his steel gray eyes, though they were noticing Zeeda's had the tendency to change shades depending on her moods. His slender angular jaw and sharply defined nose gave the girl's face a quiet strength. Neither of them however could agree on exactly where the little fireball had gotten her very well developed stubborn streak from.

"So, you didn't like the dress your aunt sent special for the occasion?" Zornah teased.

"Mom!"

They shared a giggle, Zornah knowing full well her daughter's intense dislike for anything "girly". Like mother, like daughter - something Zornah's sisters had never understood. They meant well though, and the fabric from the dress could possibly be put to other uses.

They composed themselves again as the doors opened to admit Kalah and the visiting members of Clan Torpel. Zeeda stood, keeping a firm grip on her mother's hand. Kalah escorted Lord Tulowe, his wife Lady Dreenal, and their son Lienta to the front of the hall. Zornah began the proceedings, hoping this would be the last one - at least for a little while.

"My lord, who do you bring before us?"

"My lady, may I present to you Lord Tulowe and Lady Dreenal of Clan Torpel, and their eldest son, Lienta."

"Be welcome to our halls, Clan Torpel. I present to you Zeeda, daughter of Clan Centurious."

"We are honored to be guests among you, and may the stars smile upon us all." Lady Dreenal supplied the closing formalities.

"Come friends," Zornah smiled warmly. "Let us retire to more comfortable surroundings. I'm afraid I cannot stand sitting in this chair long in my present condition."

Lady Dreenal laughed, a soft musical sound. "Yes, and let old friends welcome each other without all these stiff formalities." She stepped forward to embrace Zornah, or at least as much as one could with the pregnant woman.

"It is good to see you again Dreenal." Zornah turned to her daughter. "Zeeda, perhaps you would like to show Lienta the gardens?"

Holding back a sigh, Zeeda stepped down from the platform towards the boy, finding she was a few inches taller than him. He had pale skin like his mother, with dark pewter colored hair and amber eyes. It felt strangely empowering for her to be taller - all the others who had come before had been older, taller - and of course unbearable to be around.

"Well, they're this way." Zeeda said as politely as she could manage.

She turned on her little booted heel and marched out of the room, not looking back to see if he followed.



"You're a disagreeable sort, aren't you?" Lienta said as he caught up to her outside.

"And how agreeable would you be if you were paraded around before sods like you. You're the tenth boy I've been forced upon this month!" She spun on her heel, glaring down at him. "Here are the gardens, look around if you want."

"Hey, you're not the first girl I've had to put up with recently either. Course, none of them were mean pouty things like you." Lienta bravely stood his ground before her. "Not like it's always fun for us 'sods' ya know."

"Yeah right. You don't *have* to get married to take over your clan. You ..."

They were interrupted by a loud splash not too far away, followed by yelps for help.

"Marshant!" Zeeda shrieked and tore across the garden towards the pool in the center.

"Zee!" the little voice answered as she jumped in after him. "Zee, need help."

"I'm coming. Stop trashing so much or you'll hit me."

"Do you want me to go get help?" Lienta called from the edge of the pool.

"No. Stay there to help pull us out when I get back." Zeeda panted. While she was not the best of swimmers, she knew Marshant could not really swim at all yet.

"How did you get all the way out in the middle?"

"I falled in! Not my fault!"

"Right. Now, arms around my neck and hang on."

"Zee, save me!"

"Yes, Zee is saving you. Try not to push me under."

Zeeda slowly paddled her way back to where Lienta was waiting, trying to keep both their heads above the water. Reaching the side of the pool, she clung to it tiredly while he hefted Marshant from the pool before slowly dragging herself out.

"Zee, who dat?"

"This is Lienta. He's visiting with his parents."

"Cold Zee." Marshant's little teeth were beginning to chatter.

"That's because you just had to go swimming," she replied, trying to still her own shivers. "L-Lienta? Do you think you could help c-carry him inside? I'm s-shaking too much."

"Come Marshant, we need to get you both inside before you catch cold." Lienta picked the boy up and started swiftly towards the house.

Zeeda followed behind them as quickly as her shivering form would allow. Zornah had taken a moment from their conversation to glance out the window and caught the strange little troop making their way back towards the house.

"Why are my children coming back soaked to the bone?" She muttered, starting to rise from her chair.

Kalah followed her troubled eyes to the scene outside and nearly overturned his chair in his haste to leave the room. He met them at the door, relieving Lienta of his dripping burden and ushering them all inside the study to sit by the fire.

"What happened?" he asked them.

Marshant was too tired to talk, and Zeeda tried, but her chattering teeth got in the way.

"We had just gotten outside sir when there was a splash. Zeeda got there first and jumped in after him." Lienta replied.

"Lee and Zee save me." Marshant muttered into his father's shoulder.

A harried looking young maid then burst into the room, and collapsed nearly in tears by Zornah's chair. The poor thing did not want to face her lady's anger at loosing track of one of the children.

"My lady, I've lost Marshant! Kullah had knocked over a shelf in the nursery and while I was straightening up, the babe slipped away." The girl could only look at the floor.

"Dear girl, my little trouble maker is fine and found. Though he

and his sister are in dire need of warm dry clothing."

Zornah placed a comforting hand on the trembling girl's shoulder. She knew all too well what it took to keep up with her children. She would also be discovering who exactly had left the force-cover to the pool turned off.

"Oh!"

The nursemaid jumped up to take Marshant from his father.

"Don't scare me like that, my little lord." She murmured into his wet hair. "Looks like you got our guest wet as well. Come with me children and we'll get you all warm and dry."

She herded the children out of the room and they made their way upstairs to the warmth and comfort of the nursery.

"Zeeda dear, go change. Then we'll bundle you up by the fire and I'll make some warm cocoa for everyone." The maid looked down at Lienta. "Hmmm, he should fit one of your shirts dear. Bring one out after you've changed."

Lienta kept his thoughts about wearing a girl's shirt to himself. This, at least, was more fun than the last few such visits his parents had dragged him too.

"Here." A shirt was thrust roughly in his face. "And it's not really a girl's shirt."

"You don't like girl clothes?"

"You ever tried to run and fight in a dress?"

"No."

"All that fabric gets bunched up and in the way."

Zeeda made a sour face at the memory of the last time someone had insisted she wear one. Lienta could not help but laugh. The maid came up behind them.

"Okay young lady, over here by the fire. I know it's not all that cold out today - of all days for the environmental shield to not be keeping things warm - but a soaking makes it worse."

She wrapped Zeeda's hair in a towel, and bundled the rest of her up in a heap of blankets, plopping her down in front of the fire.

"Kara, how am I supposed to use my hands?" the girl inquired.

"I guess I did get a bit carried away with the bundling up part," she said, loosening the cocoon of blankets around Zeeda.

"Is Marshant going to be okay?" Zeeda asked her.

"I have him changed and bundled up in his crib, with Maven standing guard if he tries to leave again. Now, you two just sit there and get warm and I'll be back with the cocoa."

"Is it always like this around here?" Lienta asked the face poking out of the pile of blankets and towels.

"This? This was nothing. Things are usually much more exciting," Zeeda replied with a grin.

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"When will it all end mother?" Zeeda growled, slamming her brush down on the table.

"When you tell us it will." Zornah sighed. Zeeda at sixteen was more of a trial than all her brothers combined. "And no, my dear, we've been over the whole not marrying at all part."

"Well, it's a stupid damn lawn in the first place." The girl vented as she stalked from the room.

"You watch your language young lady," Zornah fumed. "And get back in here!"

Zeeda stormed back into her room and flopped down on the bed. Zornah closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Zeeda, the only way this all ends is if you make the choice. I know it's not easy, but please - you have to help us. Your father and I have delayed things as long as possible, but we just can't anymore. And we'd rather not have to choose for you." Silence answered her. Opening her eyes, she saw her daughter blinking away tears.

"The only one I would even consider agreeing to ..." Zeeda could not finish.

"That is a rumor we haven't heard any actual evidence to support. And I know they will be here with everyone else tomorrow." Zornah said softly, gathering her daughter in her arms. "Now, on to the other matter ..."

"No." Zeeda growled.

"Zee ... please. You can't wear your normal garb tomorrow."

"I am not going to prance around in a dress like a piece of meat." Zeeda pushed away from her mother and went to stand by the window. "If I can't wear a tunic and trousers, I'll wear my armor. I am a warrior, trained to fight, trained to protect. Remmus is three years my junior and he has already been given his test and joined the ranks. I'm the better sword. I'm the better tactician. But because I'm not a man that means nothing to those idiots."

Zornah had no response ready. Being female and first born was the greatest obstacle that a person had to face within the clan system.

Long had people tried to fight against it, struggling to change things, but too many held on to their outdated traditions. She knew other peoples had no issues with strong female rulers, but the clans were still thousands of years behind their neighbors on that front.

"We can't change any of that. And this matter must be resolved before you and I leave next week for our audience with the Queen. Never once today, or the past few days, have I ever said you had to wear a dress."

Zeeda turned back to face her mother. Resignation, disgust and despair plastered across her face. She knew most efforts to change the traditions of the clan council were wasted. She could not undergo the final test and join the warriors officially until it was known she would be married - most likely to some unworthy lout. There was one who was worthy in her eyes, and who she could possibly tolerate being tied to ... but she feared that might no longer be possible. Rumors were drifting through the clans that Clan Torpel would soon be united with Clan Wurent. Her best friend, her only friend if the truth were told, might very well be lost to her soon. She did not think she loved Lienta like that, but the thought of him being betrothed to someone else made her heart ache.

"You're sure Lienta is coming tomorrow?" Zeeda asked in a small voice.

"Yes, he and his father will be here. And they wouldn't be coming if certain rumors were true." Zornah got up from the bed. "Now, come with me so we can figure a compromise out on the clothing front."

"Fine, but I have to meet Master Zilbrach in a couple hours."



Zeeda sighed as she took a last look at herself in the mirror. The compromise suggested by her mother was not half bad actually. The loose trousers still offered plenty of freedom to move, and the modified tunic met the requirements of both herself and her mother - short in the front with a standard male military cut with the back draping down in a simple skirt like extension. She still wished it was not a half dress though.

"Are you ready?" A voice came from the doorway.

Turning, Zeeda smiled down at her little brother. Only seven, Marshant tended to see more than most his age would catch. And of all the Clan Centurious siblings, these two shared a peculiar bond the others did not.

"Not really, but I don't have much of a choice now, do I?"

"You won't leave ... will you?"

"Of course not." Zeeda engulfed him with a hug. "I'm the future head of the household. I will always be here."

"Good!" Marshant beamed at her.

"I'd better get going. You can watch from the top of the stairs -

just stay out of sight, okay?"

"Okay!"

Kalah stood waiting at the foot of the stair - the day he had tried so hard to prolong had finally arrived. Today, his daughter had to pick someone to start the marriage contract process with. It was the last thing they had wanted to worry about, but done it must be.

"I'm coming!" Zeeda called from behind him.

He pretended not to see her stashing Marshant behind the upper banister before heading down the stairs. The two of them were rather inseparable - not that she did not care about her other brothers, but there was certainly something special between those two. The two that took after him anyway. The other boys took after their mother more, just without the hair like living flame.

"Ugh, is this going to take all day?" Zeeda grimaced as she reached the bottom step.

"The greeting shouldn't take too long. Then, the council of warriors will meet while -"

"While I stand out here looking pretty because I'm not considered a warrior." Zeeda finished for him, venom dripping from every word.

Before Kalah could respond, the doors to the hall opened and their guests began to filter in. Brief introductions between Zeeda and the young men accompanying their fathers continued. None of which she enjoyed. Only one face could have mattered to her, and she had yet to see it.

"Ah, again, a fine girl you have here Kalah."

They now had to greet Lord Thalet and his son Tupor. They both had the same dark hair, dark eyes, and even a feeling of darkness around them. Of all the suitors Zeeda had been subjected to, this one she had loathed the most. They were not well liked by most of the clans, those from Clan Brutalis, and Zeeda considered them slimy, over-fed space fleas.

"We are indeed proud of her." Kalah replied coolly.

"My lady."

Zeeda suffered Tupor to take her hand and press it to his lips. She pulled it back as quickly as politeness allowed - but gave neither of them a welcoming smile. That pleasure was reserved for the young man standing behind them. Catching sight of Lienta, the steel in her eyes softened, and a small warm smile made its way onto her face. No longer having a thought for Tupor, she did not catch the dark look he directed at her before moving away. Zeeda did not quite understand the fluttering in her stomach, but she did know she was pleased to see him again, and held out both hands in greeting.

Lienta felt confused, happy, and afraid all together in one massive jumble. The two of them had seen each other often over the past four years, but he could not remember when she had stopped being the hot tempered little girl he had first met. Before him now was a flame haired

beauty, and he felt a little weak in the knees. But he swallowed his fears and took her hands in his - careful to kiss the hand Tupor had not. The hand on which someone would place a band of promise that day.

"I am so happy to see you." Zeeda beamed, a slight blush on her cheeks.

"It has been a while." Cripes, could he not think of something better to say?

Kalah and Tulowe exchanged hopeful glances. A union between their two clans would be of benefit to both, and it seemed as if their children did at least like each other.

"It's time for the meeting." Kalah interrupted gently.

Zeeda could not keep the scowl from her face.

"What?" Lienta looked at all three in turn.

"I can't join the council of warriors. I'm not allowed to take the final test until I'm promised in marriage." Zeeda's voice was bitter.

Lienta held back his comment. There was little he could say that would comfort his friend, and he found himself growing angry. He had found out firsthand the girl beside him was nearly a master blade already - and he had the feeling she had held back that day to avoid causing him injury. Tightening his grip on her hand, they walked together behind their fathers towards the meeting hall. Kalah looked up to see his eldest son Remmus, now thirteen, waiting outside the hall for them.

"Remmus, why aren't you inside?" Kalah asked him.

"Because ..." Remmus squared his shoulders, defiance in every fiber of his body. "Because it's not right that I am allowed in and my sister is not."

Before Kalah could respond, Zeeda's voice came from behind him - soft, yet full of command.

"Primus Remmus!" She stepped around the two men. "You are a warrior. It is your right and duty to be a part of the council."

Remmus had snapped to attention the moment his sister had first spoken.

"Not only do you honor our clan by attending, you honor your commander by attending in her name. I expect a full detailed report from you later."

Zeeda did not look at her father, she figured she had probably over stepped her bounds on this one, but she knew it was the best way to convince her brother that the situation did not bother her - too much anyway.

"Yes Tribuni. I shall attend to the duties laid before me." Remmus saluted, arm across his chest before turning to enter the hall.

The exchange had not gone unnoticed, and Zeeda soon found the head of the council regarding her with a guarded thoughtful look on his face. Only two years ago, he had told her she would not be allowed to take the final test, citing she was too young - too female - then. So, she had pushed herself harder than ever before after that. Zeeda returned his look

with a cool confidence. She knew who and what she was, and needed no man's declaration for either. She stood there until the door was gently shut in her face. Sighing, she turned to collect her other brothers from the stairs. They had snuck down quietly while everyone else made their way into the meeting hall.

"Zee." Marshant hardly ever pronounced her full name. "You want to play a game with us?"

"Play a game? What did the three of you have in mind?"

"Kill the troll!" they said in unison.

"Hmm, and I suppose I'm the troll?"

"Of course!" Marshant grinned.

"Alright.

Zeeda slipped out of the skirt backed over tunic. Her mother would kill her if she destroyed it. Lazily tossing it on the stair railing, she turned back to their three expectant faces.

"Troll gets a head start!"

And with that, she ran towards the garden door, laughing as their cries of unfair echoed behind her.



Lienta found himself distracted during the council meeting as Zeeda suddenly ran past the window. Tensed muscles, something he had not realized he had done, relaxed when not too far behind her three little wooden swords went bobbing past. Must be a game of kill the troll he mused. His father brought him back to the task at hand, softly clearing his throat while reaching for a glass of water.



"Oh! You got me!"

Zeeda clasped her hands around one of the wooden swords, holding it to her side, and carefully toppled over backwards onto a waiting bench. Peeking out from half closed eyelids, she smiled as Marshant and the others did a victory dance around their fallen "foe".

"Children!" Zornah called as she came upon the scene.

"Mama!" Husel cried, a giant smile on his face. "We kill troll!"

Zornah could not help but smile at her youngest child, beaming at her with excitement.

"That's wonderful!" She then turned to her daughter. "However, it would have been nicer had the troll not gotten herself dirty."

"I have to change before dinner anyway mother." Zeeda winked at her.

"You just want to hasten my gray hair."

"Mother!"

"Now boys, we need to get you three cleaned up. Come with me." Zornah ushered them in front of her back towards the house. "You too my lovely troll."

"In a bit mother, the starlight feels good."

"Not too long then."

"Yes ma'am."

Zeeda lay back on the bench once more, delighting in the soft glow of the multiple stars that lit the land. Her thoughts drifting, she did not hear the approaching footsteps.

"My lady."

Her eyes snapped open and she was on her feet a few seconds later. Tupor stood just a few feet away, and he was certainly not the person she wanted to see there.

"The council meeting has concluded?" she asked with polite frost to her voice.

"I grew bored with the proceedings." He shrugged smoothly. "I saw you out here earlier, and thought it a grand opportunity."

"Opportunity for what?" Alarms sounded in the back of her mind, and her body settled into a wary alertness.

"To make you mine, of course." He said, in a tone that sounded if he always got what he wanted.

"Me, be yours? I am not some trinket to collect." Zeeda spat.

Not expecting her to move as quickly as she did, the most he ended up with was a piece of her sleeve as he tried to grab her shoulder. Zeeda responded with a sharp blow to his temple that drove him back a few steps.

"You stupid bitch." He snarled.

Zeeda danced away as he lunged towards her, and found herself sprawled across the lawn when he managed to grab hold of her ankle. She brought the heel of her other boot down on his chest, but he held on tightly, slowly dragging her towards him.

"I will have you!" Tupor growled.

Zeeda kicked out again, and felt the pressure on her ankle release. Trying to get to her feet, she was soon forced back down, a knee in the middle of back and his hands on her shoulders.

"Mine or no ones." He hissed in her ear.

His breath was disgustingly warm on her cheek as he shifted positions and pressed the full length of his body against hers. Panic hit her for a brief moment - he was older and slightly larger, but the darkness be damned if she went down without more of a fight.

"Say you'll choose me, and I will let you up. Be a good girl now and play nice."

"Never." Zeeda growled.

Getting her arms beneath her, she pushed up enough to gain some space to move and snapped her head back sharply. A grim satisfied smile crossed her face as she heard something crack and his weight slipped off of her slightly. She was not sure who was yelling then, she only felt a sharp pain in her side and pushed back violently. Getting to her feet, she brought her hand up to her face to see it covered in blood. Sticky warmth was oozing down her left side. She shook her head, trying to clear it; she did not have time to worry about it right now.

"Dirty bitch! You broke my nose!" Tupor howled.

Turning, she connected a well trained kick to the side of his head. Enough to stun him, but not knock him out completely.

"Yeah, well, you stabbed me. So I guess we're even, you ass."

Zeeda spat back, wincing as it was starting to hurt to breath.

Grabbing a handful of hair, she started dragging him back towards the house. Lienta suddenly burst through the door, running towards them.

"Zeeda!" His eyes caught the blood soaking through her clothes.

"I'm fine." She waved him off with a bloody hand. "Well, okay, maybe not quite so fine. But would you hold the door please? I have some trash to deliver."

The grin on her face was pained, but he recognized the silvery fire in her eyes and knew she would not stop until she dropped. So he turned back and held the door open as she continued to drag Tupor's limp body behind her.

"Thank you." Zeeda smiled at him again as he passed through the door. Those eyes in the main hall not already on her soon would be.

"Lord Thalet!"

Her voice rang through the hall, commanding everyone's attention. Silence settled over the group assembled, and those around Lord Thalet took a few discreet steps away.

"Take your trash and remove yourself from the lands of Clan Centurios."

With a swing of her arm, she sent Tupor's body sliding across the floor towards his father. Zeeda did not really know where the strength was coming from; she just hoped it would keep her on her feet just a little longer.

"What is the meaning of this?" Thalet blustered, stepping over and ignoring his son's body. "How dare you attempt to order me around, little girl." He stopped a few feet away from her.

In the time it took him to blink, he suddenly found himself staring at a sword pointed at his heart. Following the arm that held it back to the young woman standing before him. And like everyone else in the hall, he was suddenly surprised to see before him one no longer clothed in torn bloody clothing, but full armor.

It was a skill most clan warriors possessed, but few ever fully mastered. Rather than having to carry their armor with them, they could call it to them, and be instantly transformed and ready to fight. Where most struggled to train the skill, they saw that day for the first time the true nature of a warrior in tune with them self. Certainly no one had ever seen it happen so swiftly.

Zeeda stood there before them in the armor of Clan Centurios. Brushed steel breast plate, with a strange leather strip and maille skirt to her knees (no one would ever bring it up to her that her "manly" armor came with a skirt). Forearms and shins were protected by metal guards, with knee-high leather boots. Twin scabbards crossed her back, with one sword still waiting to be used. Twin daggers hung from each hip. Future earth historians might claim it looked remarkably like some armors seen in the Roman army, with a few differences of course.

"I told you to leave. I will not do so again." Zeeda's voice was deathly quiet.

"Who are you to tell me to do anything?" Thalet did not sound as confident as before.

"I am the one holding your life in my hands. You and your waste of a son." Zeeda's eyes never left his face. "Lord Afont?"

"Yes, blade master?" The head of the warrior council stepped forward.

"If you could sir, please refresh the memories of those assembled of the punishment for a man who tries to take a woman by force."

"The punishment is usually death, if there is enough evidence." Lord Afont paused. "And as I myself saw the events in the garden, would gladly offer myself as a witness."

"As do we." Zornah and two maids stood at the top of the stairs.

"I may be a master blade," Zeeda replied, though she seriously doubted the claim. "But I will not be executioner unless my commander so orders. I will consider justice done with the removal of the offending parties from my house."

"Then let it be known those of Clan Brutalis are of those unwelcome. I speak for the council." Lord Afont said, putting an end to the scene. "Someone escort them out."

Lienta had slowly been moving closer to Zeeda, knowing she would probably crash soon. And she did, as soon as Thalet and Tupor were out of the room. Darkness consumed her before she even started to fall, her armor going as quickly as it had come. This brought back into view the torn bloody reminders of earlier events. Lienta caught her gently before she hit the floor, and holding her closer than he would care to admit just then, rushed up the stairs towards her mother. Zornah set the maids in motion, sending one of them off to fetch the healer while the rest scurried for bandages and clean water.

Lord Afont turned to Kalah and Tulowe. "It would appear that both of your clans are in very good hands." he said with a knowing grin.



Zeeda woke early the next morning, and smiled at the scene before her. Lienta sat asleep on a bench to the left of her bed, Marshant curled up next to him.

"They refused to leave the room last night." Her mother whispered from the doorway, happy relief radiating from her. "Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine mother." Zeeda replied with a weak smile.

"I'll be back later. Your father and Lord Afont want to speak with you, but I told them not until you felt like it."

Zeeda smiled. When Zornah put her foot down, that was usually it - no matter what.

"Maybe later."

Zornah nodded and left the room.

"Oh, my neck." Lienta mumbled a few minutes after Zornah had left.

"That's what you get for sleeping on a bench like that." Zeeda said with a smile.



"And how are you feeling today, my dear blade master?"

"Better than earlier." Zeeda replied as Lord Afont and her father entered the room.

"Well, hopefully what I have to tell you will make you feel a little better even," Lord Afont said with a smile.

Zeeda looked at her father, who simply shrugged.

"I have asked Tulowe's boy to join us a bit later, but first there are some things I need to tell the two of you."

They waited for him to continue.

"I know you don't like me much right now. And I know your father has long led the fight to repeal the old traditions, but perhaps my actions will make sense after today." Lord Afont paused. "You see, back in the beginning, in the early days when the clans were still wandering nomadic groups, men feared the powers of the women around them. But even as much as they feared these powers, they loved and respected them as well. They knew their survival depended upon the union of such powers with their own. So they drafted the early laws to reflect that."

"But, why couldn't they just accept them and treat them like equals?" Zeeda said with a frown.

"Therein lays the problem. Not all soldiers are equal, not all are the same. You my dear - you have fifty times the power in you than the strongest men from all the clans together. Yesterday, you called your weapons and armor to you in the blink of an eye. I can't even do it that well, and I also couldn't perform the calling until I was a lad of twenty."

Her eyes widened, but she held her tongue.

"While you were indeed more than capable of passing the test two years ago, I felt there was more to you than that. I wished to test your strength through your determination. So I refused you your chance, and sent the highest of the blade masters to be your instructor. Where we feared our women in the past, now we know to expect a great deal more from all of you - even down to the lowliest shield maiden. For all of what you do - you fight alongside us; you are our partners in everything.

"Without you, the clans would never have come to be what they are now. So, we push you. We keep outdated traditions in place to fuel the fires that drive you. We do this because we need to know of those who can or cannot handle the power they are born with."

The room was quiet for a long moment.

"Was Remmus allowed to test early because of me?" Zeeda asked.

"Indeed. When the other three blade masters reported that your brothers trained with you - that you played an integral part in their training yourself, I knew they would be more than prepared. The scene yesterday where a son set himself to defy his father and was then commanded by a young woman and accepted it so readily - I no longer had any doubts about you."

"You doubted my daughter's skills?" Kalah interrupted.

"I had no doubts as to her skills. I was unsure of how she would decide to use them. No matter how well meaning parents and tutors are, not all of those with great power choose to wield it appropriately."



Two days later, Zeeda was well enough for the promise ceremony to take place. All she had to do was stand in front of a group of people and say she did not mind being betrothed by trial to one Lienta of Clan Torpel. As quickly as they could after the proceedings were finished, the two snuck away out into the gardens.

"So, what exactly does 'betrothed by trail' mean anyway?" Lienta asked her as they sat by the pool.

"I guess we try out the idea of being married to each other before it happens." She giggled. "I'll bet most of the adults don't really understand it either."

"You're probably right." He laughed in turn. "Feels a little weird now, doesn't it."

"Yeah, a little."

Neither one quite understood why they now felt nervous around the other. Nothing had really changed, but yet, everything had.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Lienta pulled out a small pouch. "Mother told me that it's something of a tradition for the chosen man to give a gift."

"But, you don't need to give me anything." Zeeda said, looking down at the silver bands they now wore.

"I want to though. I was supposed to give you something when we first met ... but with the pool incident and everything else, I kinda forgot about it. And this one is better because I picked it out instead of my mother."

Zeeda was thankful it was the period of waning starlight to hide the blush creeping slowly up her face. Suddenly dangling in the air before her was a stunning pendant of worked silver flames, accented with fiery red stones.

"It reminded me of you."

"Lienta, it's beautiful. So much so I'm afraid to touch it."

"Well, hold up your hair then."

They were both silent, neither quite sure how to react to the strange brief jolt that ran through them as his fingers gently brushed the back of her neck.

"We'll always be friends, right?" he asked.

"Of course we will. Why would something like this silly marriage contract get in the way of that?"

3

"You - You are the most insufferable woman I have ever met!"

"How in the hell is it always my fault?"

A pair of steel gray eyes were locked with a pair of amber eyes over a set of crossed swords.

"This - what you're doing right now."

"And what," she returned, pushing them apart, "exactly is it I've done?"

"It's what you haven't done!" Lienta said, glaring at the woman before him.

Zeeda had no clue what he was talking about, and it appeared that her confusion only made him angrier.

"You always hold back! It's like you're afraid you'll hurt me or something." He threw his swords down on the ground. "I may not be at the exact same skill level as you, but I can damn well hold my own."

She could only watch numbly as he stormed out of the practice hall, her mouth moving like a fish out of water, with no sound coming forth. That was how Master Zilbrach found her a few minutes later.

"Not again." he said, passing a weary hand over his face. Of all his long years as a trainer, these two might very well be the end of him.

"Is it true?"

Master Zilbrach pondered a moment how best to answer her question. The young woman standing before him was actually better now with weapons than he was - and he was considered 'the best of the best'. Some of her skill was natural; all members of the void had it to some degree. Zeeda's skills however were the result of her own stubborn will, her own drive to push herself to the limit and go beyond them. The struggle, the hard work, had been entirely her own. Master Zilbrach and the others had simply been there to guide it.

"It's something you do in practice sessions out of habit I believe. You restrain your skills with the younger ones, which is good. And it's also good that you restrain yourself slightly when you spar with Lienta. It just doesn't quite seem that way when he feels you don't hold back against someone like me."

Neither mentioned the fact that she held back even against him now.

"It's just so frustrating! I keep it a notch or two above where my sparring partner is. So it's still a challenge for them, and me. Does anyone ever consider how damned hard it is to keep my trained skills in check all the time?" Zeeda's voice sounded tired. "Perhaps it would be better if the two of us didn't train against each other."

"Or be in the room at the same time," Master Zilbrach added.

"You're probably right," She said, setting her set of practice swords on the table before collecting the ones her betrothed had thrown down. An idea came to her as she hefted them in her hands. "Master Zilbrach, I know the dulled edges prevent most serious injuries. How much safer would properly weighted wooden blades be?"

"Well, instead of worrying about cutting something off, you'd probably just have to worry about broken bones."

"Could we have some made? Just to test it out?"

"I'll see what I can come up with."



Zeeda trudged wearily up to her room, feeling more emotionally drained than anything else. Things felt like they would just keep getting worse between them, and all they had done the past few months was argue with each other. Somewhere along the way over the past two years, her feelings for Lienta had changed. She was not sure anymore if being in love with him was good or bad.

But right now, she had to concentrate on getting ready for her upcoming trip. In a few days time, she would be leaving for her first attendance of the bi-annual briefings at the Moon court without either of her parents. Over the past two years, she had always gone with one of them. Now that she was eighteen, they felt it was time for her to go in their place. Remmus, now fifteen, would be going as her second.

First though, Zeeda decided a soak in a hot bath would be the best thing to help clear her head. Stopping in her room long enough to pull off her boots and gather a set of clean clothes, she headed on down the hall towards the bath chamber. All thoughts of clearing her head went right on out the window as she bumped into Lienta coming out.

She found the only thing she wanted to do was run her hands across the well muscled chest before her, to bury them in his hair. He was finally taller than her, though by less than half a head, so she did not have too far to go to lock her gaze with his. Zeeda tried to get her mouth to work, but the damn thing seemed frozen shut.

Lienta was suffering from the same stubborn frozen jaw. He was

wary of the fighting they had been doing recently, knowing that a good deal of it he had instigated. But standing there staring at each other was not going to do either of them any good. Turning to leave, he felt her hand on his arm. It was not the firm commanding grip he was used to, but gentle, timid almost. Bringing his eyes back to hers, he was shocked to see tears welling in her gray eyes for the first time that he could recall. Never before had he seen her cry. Always strong, always in command, she never had time to waste on tears.

"Lienta, I"

Their lips met and that was all the apology needed. The burning thrill of their two bodies pressed together both scared and excited them. She did not want it to stop, his lips exploring down her neck to her shoulder, but standing in the hallway like this probably was not the best of ideas.

"I really do need to bathe." Zeeda murmured. "And we really shouldn't be doing this in the hall for everyone to see."

"Let them watch."

"Lienta," the inner commander started to come back into her voice.

"Alright, fine." He muttered after one last lingering kiss. "We'll continue this discussion later."

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, he watched her disappear around the corner.



"They were kissing, in the hallway - and him only half clothed!" Kalah speared a piece of meat on his tray as if it was trying to escape his wrath.

"They're also both eighteen, betrothed, and finally realizing they actually love each other." Zornah replied.

"My little girl knows better than that." he fumed.

"Husband, light of my life, she stopped being your 'little' girl the moment she bested her third master blade trainer at sixteen." she held up a hand to signal she wasn't finished yet. "And, if I recall correctly - it wasn't like the two of us waited until the signing of the marriage contract to ... have a little fun together."

He stared down at his food, not wanting to smile at those memories or he would lose yet another "talk" with his wife.

"There's no point in trying to avoid it dear, I always win." Zornah smiled as she got up from the table.



Zeeda stood outside the transport chamber waiting for Remmus to join her. While it was the quickest and most efficient mode of transportation between the void and surrounding systems, it usually left her feeling sick for a few hours upon arrival. There really was not much new to report on for this briefing - nothing had happened in the six months since the last one. But Queen Serenity liked to talk to more than just a vid screen on occasion, so traveling across the universe they would go.

"Sis, why do we have to do this again? It's not like the Queen is our ruler." Remmus asked as he approached.

"Queen Serenity is our neighbor and ally. These meetings allow us to exchange information and reassure each other that we're still there. It's not like we're ever invited to balls and parties - we let each other know of things that might turn into bad situations, and discuss the best ways to deal with them."

"So, it's like an intergalactic warriors council?"

"Yes, and if you had actually been paying attention to me yesterday, you'd know all this already."

"Sorry."

"You should be. And your mind had better never wander when I'm giving order on a battlefield either. Now, go get on the transport pad."

"Yesser."

Zeeda shook her head. Remmus had always mashed those two words together, and would probably continue to do so for the rest of his life. Joining him on the pad, she prepared herself for the warm glow that would surround them and send them the millions of miles away to the Palace of the Moon. She kept her eyes closed for a while after they arrived, trying to fight back the urge to empty her stomach.

"Legati Zeeda?"

Opening her eyes, Zeeda acknowledged the palace functionary standing before them. He was short, but then compared to the warriors of the void, most people in the Silver Millennium Alliance were short. He had light blue eyes, and bright green hair. One of the things that still amazed her about these people was how ordinary the not so ordinary was.

"Are you feeling well ma'am?" he asked politely.

"Just a touch of transport sickness," she muttered, trying to keep her face steady.

"If you and the Tribuni will follow me, I'll show you to your rooms. The Queen also bids me to relay her apologies that the meeting will be delayed until tomorrow."

"I trust it's nothing serious."

"No Legati, simply a minor squabble amongst the great houses. Nothing to worry about."

They followed him the rest of the way in silence as he led them from the transport chamber to the guest rooms in the southern wing of the palace. The white halls around them were silent. Their rooms were a suite, with two bed chambers and a shared bath chamber in the center off of the main sitting room. Zeeda was used to the separate rooms she had stayed in when attending with her parents. Simply decorated, much like the clean simplicity they were used to at home, the rooms were warm and inviting.

"Kartas will be your assistant during your stay." He indicated an older woman with warm brown eyes and dark purple hair. With a small bow the functionary turned and left.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Kartas. I am Legati Zeeda, and this is my brother, Tribuni Remmus."

"Welcome to you both. Can I get you anything?"

"I'm longing for a good soak. Seems to help the most with transport sickness."

"I'm a little hungry." Remmus added.

"Probably more like a lot hungry, like all young men." Kartas said with a merry chuckle. "I will send out for some food and extra towels."



"Did you leave anything for me?" Zeeda said as she came out of her room.

"A little," Remmus replied with a sheepish grin. "What do we do until the meeting tomorrow?"

"When Kartas returns, I'll see if we can't get a little tour of the palace."

"There is one thing I'm not sure I'll get accustomed to though."

"What, the hair?"

"No, actually seeing women in dresses," Remmus replied with a straight face.

Zeeda lost herself in laughter. Only the cook back home wore one, though it was certainly not the normal way for most clan households. Dresses just got in the way most of the time - a theory Zeeda and her mother would hold until the end of time. The tour was mainly for Remmus, Zeeda having been on one during her first visit two years ago. The grounds were as beautiful and vibrant as ever, much more colorful than anything they could get to grow back home.

"Can we visit the map room today Kartas?" Zeeda asked. It was her favorite place in the palace.

"Certainly. I don't think the cartographers have any pressing duties right now."

They followed her down a long hall to a large domed room. The walls were dark, black almost, but the room was lit with bright glittering balls of light suspended in the middle. They twinkled and twirled about the space, a perfect reproduction of the surrounding galaxy. It was something Zeeda desperately wished she could have at home, and not just for planning battles.

"Come to visit me again, soldier of the void?"

The three of them turned towards a man walking through the middle of the map area. He was tall and lanky, with a young looking face that was sometimes at odd with his ancient looking eyes. His dark brown hair, though short, stood out in every direction as if it had never been combed in his life.

"Cartographer Wensel," Zeeda greeted him warmly.

"It is always a pleasure to see you my dear. And you've brought a friend along this time."

"This is my brother Remmus."

"And my boy, what do you think of my little project here?"

"This is amazing sir!"

"Why, thank you," Wensel said, smiling. "Now, let me show you what all it does."

They spent the rest of the afternoon with the cartographer and his wondrous map. Zooming in for a closer look at each of the planets, and even zooming all the way out to see the void between galaxies that they called home.

"Wow ... I never knew it was so big - so empty." Remmus said quietly.

"That is why we are grateful for what you do - and also why we do not envy you your task." A soft feminine voice said from behind them.

"My Queen! So good of you to join us." Wensel said with a deep bow.

"Queen Serenity." Zeeda and Remmus both saluted and bowed, if not quite as deeply as the cartographer.

"Legati Zeeda, would you and your brother care to join me and a few other guests for dinner this evening?"

While phrased as a polite request, Zeeda had the feeling it was well more than that.

"We would be honored, highness."

"Good. We shall see you in an hour or so." The Queen smiled and left as quietly as she had arrived.

"Well, thank you again Master Cartographer," Zeeda said, turning to Wensel.

"A pleasure, as always, Lady Warrior."



"By the darkness!" Zeeda swore. "If you don't calm down, I'm going to tie you up and leave you in your room."

Remmus had become uncharacteristically nervous and excited about their dinner with the Queen. Perhaps he was going into a sensory overload, but Zeeda thought she had trained enough discipline into him by now. They were waiting for Kartas to arrive and escort them to the Queen's private dining chamber. Remmus began to open his mouth.

"No. You are to remain silent until we get there, and that's an order."

Remmus clamped his lips shut. Only a fool ignored an order from Zeeda - that lesson he had certainly learned early on in life. Kartas arrived shortly after Remmus had been ordered into a state of silence, and they followed her to the Queen's private dining chamber.

Their fellow dinner guests included King Saturn - his wife remained at home, expecting their first child - and King Pluto and his daughter. Dinner conversation was relatively light, though Queen Serenity did ask an interesting question.

"Legati Zeeda, it has been said that your people possess a great power. I'm afraid I have never gotten around to asking your parents about it."

"Our powers are - defensive - in nature, though warriors are taught ways to use them as part of an attack."

"Defensive? In what way?"

"Everyone in the void has it to some extent, though most are only capable of creating a small personal shield around themselves and a child or two in the event a stronghold environmental shield fails. Shields and barriers are all that we can create."

"Shields?" King Pluto asked.

"You can't very well just take a stroll through the void unprotected sir. Soldiers are trained to use their skills in the maximum way possible, as we generally link shields to tie everyone together so they don't go floating off in space."

"And everyone in the void has these ... skills?" Queen Serenity inquired.

"Yes, it's an inborn trait. Though as I mentioned, most are limited in what they can do. Women tend to have stronger such powers, but generally not completely above and beyond what men are capable of."

"But you do not use these shields to attack?" King Saturn joined in.

"It requires a great deal more effort to use them as such, but it can be done. We rely more on our fighting skills, our shields merely add to it."

Heads nodded, comparing those of the void with their own skills. Queen Serenity smiled at the thought that they could learn a few things from their warrior allies. The powers of each planet were great indeed, and while used to defend, they were certainly not defensive skills. No,

each senshi warrior that protected their realm could unleash violent energies to destroy all that stood against them.

It had been a long time however since anyone in the Silver Millennium had to worry about battles. Certainly they all trained for it, but what they could do was nothing in comparison to the void clans. These people embraced battle, though the Queen was certain they did not enjoy it - it was simply part of their way of life. Things began to lull after the last plate was removed from the table.

"Princess Pluto, perhaps you would be so kind as to give Tribuni Remmus a tour of the gardens for me?"

Zeeda was still amazed at the requests that were so much more than the Queen tended to use. If either of the two had any disappointed feelings about being asked to leave, they wisely kept them to themselves as they left the room.

"Now, down to business. King Pluto, if you would please."

"Yes, my Queen. Recently, I have begun to feel, well - shadows seems to be the best way to describe them - here and there along the time line. There are other types of shadows always there - things past, things yet to be that are normal. These new ones however, are like nothing I've ever experienced before."

"Are they full feeling shadows, or more like fleeting thoughts drifting about?" Zeeda was aware all eyes were on her.

King Pluto frowned in thought briefly before answering.

"They seem more like thoughts. Thoughts with only a single purpose, but I have no idea what it is."

"You sound as if you have an idea, Legati." Queen Serenity prompted.

"They sound very much like the spirit fragments we fight in the void."

"Spirit fragments?" King Saturn asked.

"People's spirits are like a tree. The person is the trunk, the branches holding everything together. The spirit is the leaves - many different pieces making up the whole. Every so often, a leaf breaks off and a small piece of the spirit goes free. Most of these fragments are harmless, others however, are not."

"You fight these spirit fragments in the void?" King Saturn continued. Issues of the soul, of spirits, always interested him.

"Yes and no. The majority of them are harmless. A contented sigh, a happy smile, a warm kiss. These types just go on their merry way drifting about until they eventually fade. The others, the dark bits and pieces that are lost - these tend to attract one another and clump together. Get enough of them all collected together and you have something twisted, with only the single purpose of destroying anything it comes across."

"Sounds like a great deal of watching and waiting."

"To some extent it is. Though we prefer to get to them when they're still forming. Easier to disperse then."

"How can you find them before they find each other?" the Queen asked.

"Some warriors can feel them, sense them. It's certainly not a fool proof system, but we've managed so far."

"But now we may have some where they don't generally show up." King Pluto reminded them.

"That does worry me."

"Can you sense these fragments?" Queen Serenity asked.

"Yes, though not as well as my younger brother."

"Tribuni Remmus?"

"Oh, no. Marshant - he's only nine."

A couple eyebrows went up at that reply.

"So, this is something that cannot simply be trained," the Queen said, looking tired.

"No, I'm sorry. But since King Pluto can already see or sense them in his realm, I may be able to show which types to watch out for - if they're the same types of fragments."

"Good. I would like the two of you to start on that tomorrow."

Queen Serenity rose, and the rest followed quickly, remaining standing until she left the room.

"So, old friend." King Pluto turned to King Saturn, "Nothing for you to do once again."

"As is should be," the shorter man replied with a smile.

"And tomorrow morning, we get to find out if there's anything to truly worry about," King Pluto said as he turned back to Zeeda.

"Isn't there always something to worry about though?" She replied.

Both men broke out in laughter.

"I think she has you there," King Saturn smiled.

"Indeed. Ever on the battle field it seems," King Pluto said, still chuckling. "Now, I suppose we should collect the young people."

Remmus and the young Princess Pluto were waiting on a nearby bench.

"Come my dear, we have a busy day tomorrow," King Pluto said, offering his arm to escort her away.

"Thank you again for the tour, my lady," Remmus said with a deep bow.

"You're welcome," came the quiet reply.

Zeeda stood with Remmus as they watched the other three walk away.

"Zee, I think I'm in love." He sighed softly.

"The darkness help us if you are."



"So my dear, how did you find the young Tribuni?"

"He is a very polite young man father."

"And very well trained no doubt, based on what I observed from his sister."

"Is it true she's only eighteen?" Pluto looked up at her father.

"Yes, and rather remarkable the amount of authority she exudes."

"What do you mean father?"

"The aura of command around that young woman is only slightly less than that of the Queen my dear."

"Still, I don't understand why I had to leave tonight."

"Come child, don't start that again. You're still only sixteen. Your time of secret meetings with the Queen will come soon enough."

4

Zeeda and Remmus met the king of Pluto and his daughter early the next morning.

"Where I will be taking the two of you is generally forbidden to any outsider. I cannot stress enough the need for secrecy."

"It will go with us unto death." Zeeda assured him.

"And you, my boy?"

Remmus swallowed. "I won't tell. She'd kill me if I did."

Standing next to her father, Pluto's eyes widened slightly.

"Oh, I wouldn't kill him. Main him, remove his tongue - now that I would do." Zeeda's smile did not quite reach her eyes.

King Pluto was satisfied. He had no doubt the two would keep their word and utter nothing to anyone about what they would see and experience below.

"Also, it is quite easy to get lost. The tunnel is enchanted to keep curious eyes away. Everyone please stay together."

They followed him down a long sloping tunnel that led some distance from the palace proper. It ended in a long dimly lit hall, empty save for a large set of doors at the far end.

"Let us hope we get lucky today, or this may end up being a very long week." King Pluto opened the doors and stepped in to the realm between times.

"There is no need for luck, they're everywhere." Zeeda said, her brows drawn together.

"What do you mean, everywhere?" he demanded.

"It may be an effect of the various times we're near, but I can sense them all around." Zeeda's eyes were closed, her head tilted to the side as if she was listening for something. "These feel different though."

"Different?" King Pluto asked.

"These are not the same types of fragments as in the void, but so very similar at the same time."

"Sis, share with me?" Remmus asked.

Her eyes still closed, Zeeda held out her hand.

"You're right, they are different."

"How ..." King Pluto began to ask when he suddenly felt Zeeda's firm grip on his arm.

Softly, almost in the back of his mind it felt, he could hear a faint whispering. He could not make out what the voices were trying to say, but he did not feel alarmed by them either. Looking around, he saw the same wondrous confusion on his daughter's face as Remmus took hold of her hand to share it with her also.

"There!" Zeeda exclaimed.

She had felt the faint stirrings of the darker thought, and tried to focus on it, to hang onto it long enough for the rest to sense it too.

"Is that?" King Pluto asked.

"Yes, but ..."

The other whispers they had been hearing suddenly grew louder, almost like they were attacking the darker one. Soon, it was reduced to a faint nothing, and the other voices settled back down.

"What just happened?" Princess Pluto asked quietly.

"I don't know," a confused Zeeda responded.

King Pluto expected everything to go quiet again when Zeeda finally took her hand off his arm. While the whispers did grow a great deal quieter, he found he could still hear them.

"I can still hear them. Not as loud as before, but they're still there." His daughter echoed his thoughts.

"Why don't we finish the discussion back outside?"

Stepping back through the doors came as a relief to Zeeda. The whispering shadows, so similar to the ones she was used to, but so different, simply unnerved her.

"Are you unwell Legati?" King Pluto asked her.

"I'm fine. Just unnerving to actually hear them. Usually, it's just a feeling - happy, sad or otherwise. But never have we heard them, or suspected that there would be so many voices."

"Do you think we have much need to worry a great deal right now?"

"I advise that you continue to monitor them, and if more dark voices make themselves known, then worry. Though, it seems as if the other voices attacked the one I found - very odd behavior indeed."



With Lienta off visiting his family when Zeeda and Remmus returned, she used the days waiting to see him again to gather as much information as she thought useful and sent it off to King Pluto. The feeling that she was missing something bothered her greatly, but she kept hitting a brick wall when she tried to discover what it might be. Remmus helped as much as he could since the two of them could mention nothing to the others.

Lienta returned at the end of the week with the supply shipment for the extra legions they were quartering during the yearly review. The two of them finally managed to steal away from everyone after dinner, fleeing to the farthest reaches of the gardens. Which actually was not all that far away, but secluded enough for some time alone together.

"You must have really missed me," he said when they had finally separated for some air.

"Maybe a little."

"Seems rather stupid doesn't it, having to wait another two years to finalize the contract."

"One cannot go against tradition." Zeeda made a very poor attempt to sound like Lord Afont.

They were quiet for a long moment, lost staring at the distant stars. A galaxy may have been slowly spinning above them, but it was not what had truly captured their attention.

"Does it ever bother you that one of us has to give up our ties to our clan when the ceremony takes place?" Zeeda finally broke the silence.

"While I am very flattered love that you still entertain the idea my powers are greater than your own, I don't think it will be anything to worry about." Lienta placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Why do you think my parents have no problem with the amount of time I spend here?"

"That still doesn't make it right. It's a union between the two of us, why can't it be a union between the two clans?"

"Your stubbornness is to be admired, but you can't change the whole clan system my dear." He gently brought her face up to his. "You can't change the world, so will you settle for changing my life?"

Zeeda did not answer him with words.



"They've been out there all night."

"Kalah Turenta Centurios Hazzul!"

He turned, shocked that his wife had pulled his full name out of her arsenal.

"If that was one of your sons out there, you wouldn't give a damn what he was doing. You get away from that window right now!"

Kalah stood there with a dumbfounded look on his face. It had been a while since he had seen Zornah so worked up over something. After a brief moment though, he noticed what she *was not* wearing.

"Yes ma'am!"



Pleasant memories should not hurt, but you may find they do after the first couple thousand years. The pain is not so bad, it's the fear of forgetting such times that is worse. For two years we watched, we waited, and it seemed nothing was going to happen to shatter those times.

The Battle of Thanus came and went with little loss, and the dark fragments were quiet again for a time. The only shadow upon those few months was the loss of the heir to House Saturn. The boy child was lost only a few months after his birth to a strange fever. Darkness descended upon them, and I was saddened remembering the gentle strength in the man I had met that one evening at the palace. I could not imagine their pain.

Finally, the day arrived when my beloved and I could finalize the marriage contract. Ours was not the only joy however. That year was a relatively happy one for most of those of the Silver Millennium as well - seeing the birth of Princess Serenity and those that would become her closest friends. All was then at peace, and I wished it would have lasted. But we learn to enjoy the times we're allowed to have with those we love in spite of it all.

5

"Mother, why am I so nervous?" Zeeda stopped pacing, twisting her fingers together instead.

"Because it's natural. I was at my ceremony, though not quite as much as your father was." Zornah smiled at the memory. "But, you should at least try to calm yourself before your armor falls to pieces."

"Damn ..." Zeeda muttered.

Her concentration had been jumping back and forth between things so much that she had been flashing in and out of her armor with every other step.

"Do you think my plan will work?"

"If anyone can pull such a stunt off, it's you. Does Lienta know what you have planned?"

"Not really. He may suspect, but I didn't want to tell him and then have it not work."

"As long as you're sure it's what you want."

"It is."

Downstairs, Lienta stood waiting in the study with Kalah and Tulowe.

"Remember how nervous you were on your day Kal?"

"Me? Nervous? I almost ran screaming from the building before it ever started."

"I wasn't much better, if you remember."

"I do indeed old friend - you passed out before the ceremony."

"But look here, my son shows none of this."

"Though," Kalah mused, "he is looking just a tad bit green around the edges there."

"Son, are you sure you're okay?" Tulowe asked, concern behind the not so stifled laughter.

"I don't know if I'm going to be sick, pass out or what exactly." Lienta answered weakly.

"Best try and get it out of your system beforehand. Women don't forget such things if they happen in the middle of the ceremony." Kalah told him.

"And don't kid yourself; they're just as nervous as us." Tulowe added.

"They're just better at hiding it most of the time." Kalah finished. They all turned to the door as Lady Dreenal entered. She crossed the room to give her son a quick hug.

"Nervous dear?"

"Just a little."

"Don't you worry. Zeeda has been pacing a rut into the floor upstairs. And flashing in and out of her armor so quickly it makes your head spin." She winked at him.

That news relieved some of the fluttering in his guts, and he did not feel like passing out anymore at least.

"Well, I supposed I should go collect my daughter." Kalah said as he left the room.

"Don't worry dear, all this will be over soon enough." Dreenal tried to reassure her son.



Lienta stood waiting at the foot of the stairs, and Zeeda found him more handsome in that moment than she ever had before. In his clan armor, rather similar to her own with the addition of shoulder elements and maille pants instead, they already looked like they belonged together. Hers brighter steel with dark blue leather, to his darker almost black armor with red leather. It took all of her self control to slowly make her way down the stairs instead of rushing down like her heart wanted to do. And she suspected the same types of thoughts were flitting through his mind from the look on his face.

Hand in hand, they made their way through the aisle of people attending to stand before Lord Afont. He smiled down at the couple before him from the raised platform he stood on before addressing those assembled behind them.

"Friends! Before us stand this man, and this woman, wishing to join with each other. Shall we let them?"

"Yes!" everyone responded, some with great enthusiasm.

"Good! Now through good and bad, you stand with each other - side by side. And if one of you should fall?"

"We take up the other's sword." Lienta and Zeeda said in unison.

They reached for the ceremonial swords at the other's hip, drawing them together at the same time in one swift motion. It was something they had practiced for the past two months to avoid taking off ears and noses and other various bits. The swords were then crossed and set at their feet.

"And so, we have seen the swords drawn by the others hand. Is there any reason we should not continue?"

"NO!" the crowd cried out.

"Then let it be done." Lord Afont placed a hand on each of their heads, signaling it was time.

Zeeda slowly released the internal locks she kept in place to keep her powers in check, letting it slowly surround them both. With a gentle caress, she reached out to Lienta, enveloping him and helping him release his own powers. To the crowd watching, it looked like faint swirling lights were entwined about their bodies, one brighter than the other. No one was expecting what happened next. Zeeda took Lienta's hands in hers and the lights around them grew brighter, stronger, releasing the full might she held within. Lord Afont, who usually guided the process stepped back, holding his hands well clear of them.

"Don't be afraid." Zeeda said, for Lienta's ears alone.

"What?"

"Don't be afraid of yourself."

"Zee, I don't have this kind of power. You know that."

"Just let go."

She was not commanding, not being forceful - just showing him the path. Lienta knew she had always wanted them together as equals, and he had humored her. Now he could see while she might be slightly above him, he was not so far behind as he believed. Finally understanding, he pulled her forward into a kiss, and those around them were momentarily blinded by the intensity of the lights from the powers then unleashed. When everyone could see again, they saw before them a man and a woman united on every level possible.

"Well, it almost worked." Zeeda muttered, looking down at their armor.

It was almost a perfect mesh between the two, only slightly leaning more towards that of Clan Centurious.

"I'd say you did a damn fine job love." Lienta murmured.

They both blushed as the crowd started cheering - once they had all gotten over their initial shock.

"You ..." Lord Afont was giving her a less than happy look. "What did you do?"

"I wanted an equal union. Or as close as I could possibly hope for. No one should have to give up who they are or where they came from."

"You are certainly a force of nature, my lady," he replied with a rueful grin. "I don't think you'll ever be bored son."

Lienta received a pat on the shoulder as the head of the council stepped down from the platform to join the other guests.

"You could have warned me before hand." Lienta leaned in closer to murmur in her ear.

"I wasn't sure it would work, so I didn't want to say anything."

"Lord Afont was right. I'm never going to be bored around you."



Kalah sighed, looking out on a dull, uninviting day. He had experienced yet another argument with Remmus earlier that morning. At seventeen, his son should have already entered into a betrothal to some clan daughter or at least have been looking. He had not even considered any since that one fateful visit to the moon two years ago. He should have been happy; it only being a few months since Zeeda and Lienta had finalized their marriage ... but this dark cloud hanging over him did not leave much room for happy thoughts.

Kullah, his quiet sensible son, appeared fond of Lienta's youngest sister, and they would hopefully make a nice match. Thankfully the other two boys still had a few more years to go before he had to worry about either of them. Those thoughts still could not lift the weight on his heart for the son in love with an impossible dream. It was no one's fault when fate decided to take the reins; he just wished desperately that they had been dealt a better hand. While Kalah knew Remmus would respect and follow anything his sister set down before him, he could not constantly have her try to contain the situation.

While Kalah brooded in his study, his two eldest children were working in the practice hall. More accurately, Remmus was trying to exorcise his inner torment while hacking away at his sister with a wooden practice blade. Knowing of the morning's argument between father and son, Zeeda kept quiet - even when he stumbled wrongly through a simple attack move.

Though she still kept in contact with the House of Pluto working on the shadow riddle, she knew her place. Or better yet, the place of all clans in relation to those of the Silver Millennium. Meaning, there was no relationship outside of them needing someone to watch the back door. This her brother knew - but that did not make things any easier for him. It saddened Zeeda that he would be torn and half empty all his life. As well as thinking of the lonely princess of Pluto who had even less of a chance at happiness when placed next to the importance of her duties. Fate could certainly be a cruel bastard at times. Remmus finally collapsed in a heap on the floor, and did not get back up.

Sighing, Zeeda went over to see if he had hurt himself. "You okay?"

"Why Zee? I've tried so hard to stop thinking about her. I've tried to make myself interested in some clan girl, but it just ..."

"I know. And I doubt it will ever be any less painful." She hauled him to his feet. "But please, try not to make things harder on father. I will try to talk with him - but I can't promise anything."

"Thanks sis."

"Go get cleaned up."

Zeeda made her way to her father's study. She knew he wished the situation was anything but what it was - but it was not exactly under his control. She found him in front of the windows, staring out at nothing.

"Father?"

"Come on in," he said without turning around. "I suppose you want to talk about your brother."

"Yes. Having spent the last couple of hours as a beating post for his frustrations - he'll never be free of it. And we both know he's tried to put it behind him."

"I know." Kalah sounded tired.

"We can't let him have what he longs for - yet neither can we force him on some other poor girl. That wouldn't be fair for either of them."

"And what do you suggest?"

"We let him be. Kullah is likely to be betrothed soon, and Husel takes more after him than the rest of us so he shouldn't give us any problems."

"No love for Marshant?"

"I'm afraid he's a little too much like his sister."

At this, Kalah finally turned towards her, a small tired smile on his face. "And for that, you'll get to help find a suitable match."

"Yes, sir."



The communiqué from Pluto was puzzling, and slightly alarming - and it called for her return to the moon. Kalah had been attending the briefings the past two years while Zeeda had stepped up her training with Lienta. She steadied herself for the inevitable visit from Remmus and his now permanently haunted eyes. She did not look forward to the conversation they would undoubtedly have. Sending her reply, she asked for accommodations for herself, Lienta, and possibly Marshant. Now Zeeda only needed to convince her father to allow her little brother to go with her - and not bring him back in the same condition as Remmus. A knock at her door brought her away from planning that battle.

"Come in Remmus."

"How did you know it was me?"

The look on her face said enough.

"I'm not here to bug you about what you've probably already thought of. Just that if you see her - could you tell her hello for me? Just hello and that I hope she finds happiness?"

"I'll try Remmy, really."

"You haven't called me Remmy since I was five."

"With three years and two inches on you, your big sister can call you whatever she likes, whenever she wants to."

It had the desired effect, and a small smile appeared on her brother's face.



It had not taken too much to convince Kalah to allow Marshant to go - just the promise that if Zeeda brought back another Remmus he would simply kill her. Now she just had to tell her husband about their unplanned trip.

"You're joking ... right?"

Lienta decided it was a no based on the look she gave him.

"Why do you want me to go?"

"Because I'd like you to come with me. Someday you'll probably have to go for one of the briefings, and they should meet you ahead of time."

"Why would I ever have to attend a briefing?"

"Do you think my parents are going to be around forever?" Zeeda said wearily. The trials of the day were making her neck muscles tense up, and soon she would have one hell of a headache.

Lienta moved around the bed to stand behind her, working at the tensed muscles in her neck and shoulders. It took a good twenty minutes before he finally felt her relaxing.

"All you had to do was ask love. You know I'd go anywhere with you." He teased gently, leaning down to kiss her shoulder.

"I did ask." She growled. "And now my headache is back."

Lienta scooped her up and deposited her on the bed.

"Wha ..."

"My feet are tired of standing."

"Mmmph," came the muffled reply, her face buried in a pillow.

A few minutes and some rather tired fingers later, most of the knots were finally worked out of her tired muscles, and Lienta had a pile of putty before him ... and naturally, his hands began to wander.

"That's not my back."

"I know."

Rolling over, she pulled him down to her, and they lost themselves in each other for the rest of the night.

6

"Zee."

Zeeda leaned down, Marshant having just barely whispered her name. Her brother's face was pale and sickly looking, his eyes darting about the room.

"What is it?"

"I'm scared."

"Don't worry, just hold my hand."

"Does it hurt?"

"Transporting doesn't hurt. Sometimes you might feel a little sick when you come out on the other side, but that's about it."

"Were you ever sick?" he asked, his eyes wide.

"The first time I went, I was sicker than a space flea."

Zeeda squeezed his hand as they stepped onto the transport pad. Lienta joined them, grumping slightly about carrying more than his own luggage. As his wife's bag was no larger than his, it was not a serious complaint. One warm flash of light, and a few minutes later found Zeeda holding Marshant steady over a basin in the corner of the moon's transport chamber.

"Ugh." He slumped back against her.

"Is he going to be okay?" The same green haired man as her last trip asked gently from behind them.

"I think the worst of it is over. But we could use some rest, and a bit of a cleanup."

"I'll show you to your rooms."

Zeeda carried her brother from the room, glad he was still only eleven and a bit small for his age. Lienta followed close behind. The rooms they were taken to looked like the same ones she had shared with Remmus, and a familiar face surrounded by purple hair was there to greet them.

"Kartas! It is good to see you again."

"Legati Zeeda, it is my honor to be of assistance again. Each time you bring new friends with you."

"This is my husband, Legati Lienta. And this," she set Marshant

back on his feet, "is my little brother Marshant."

"Oh dear, transport sickness?"

Marshant nodded weakly.

"Well, a good soak in a hot bath will help with that. And you Legati?"

"Just a slight headache this time."

"That will soon mend. Now, come lad, let's get you in the tub."

Kartas led Marshant into the bath chamber, returning shortly with his soiled clothes.

"You'd best let me have yours as well Legati. I'll take them to the laundry and have some food sent up."

Zeeda looked down, forgetting the accident on the way off the transport pad.

"Oh, I'd forgotten. Give me a moment to change."

Zeeda ducked into the nearest bedroom with her bag, and soon returned. She handed her garments to Kartas.

"Now, you just send for me if you need anything," the older woman said as she left the room.

"Wow." Lienta breathed. "This place is ..."

"Takes some getting used to." Zeeda said, snuggling up next to him.

They stood gazing out the window for a while, and were interrupted by the arrival of the food tray Kartas had arranged.

"I'd better check on Marshant," Zeeda said.

As quickly as she opened the door to the bath chamber, she was jumping back out again, Marshant's angry yells following her. Lienta looked over at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Apparently, I'm not allowed in. Never mind how many times I changed his damn diaper." She smirked, trying not to laugh.

"Stand aside woman!" Lienta returned with a smile. "Let a man show you how it's done."

"Be my guest, but you'd better take him some clothes."

They were all sitting down to eat, Zeeda marveling at her brother proclaiming he was starving now, when a knock sounded at the door. She glowered briefly at her two companions that quickly plopped down in their chairs and went to answer it. A slender girl with blue hair gave her a brief bow.

"Legati Zeeda, Queen Serenity would like for you to join her in the gardens."

"Thank you. Please tell her I will be along shortly."

The girl gave another little bow and hurried back down the hall. Zeeda snagged a piece of fruit from the table on her way to change. She could not very well attend an audience with the Queen looking like a stable hand. Returning to the sitting room, she gave herself a quick glance in the mirror above the mantle.

"You look fine." Lienta called from behind her.

"I've been called to meet with the Queen. You two save me some food, alright?"

With that, she was out the door and on her way towards the gardens. Passing through the palace halls, she drew a few odd looks here and there. Smiling inwardly, she chose to ignore them. Was it really so out of place to be a woman and not in a dress? Zeeda began to wonder though why she had been called to a private meeting with the Queen. She finally found Queen Serenity waiting by the large central fountain - in an eerily empty garden.

"Legati Zeeda."

"Your highness." Zeeda returned with her customary salute.

"Thank you for joining me. Has your brother recovered?"

"He is feeling well again."

"Transport sickness is such a nasty after effect." Serenity smiled.

"I hear congratulations are in order."

"Thank you, highness. And may we offer ours and best wishes for the health of the princess?"

"Thank you Legati. It was quite remarkable to have five princesses born all within a few days of each other."

"Indeed, highness."

They walked along one of the empty paths in silence for a few minutes.

"Legati, while I am not directly your Queen, and I cannot command you to do so - I am hoping you can answer something for me."

"If it is in my power to do so."

"Your father has been very reserved and distant with us the past few years. And he has always come alone since your visit two years ago. Is all well with him?"

"My father is well." Zeeda was not sure how to tell her about Remmus.

"And the rest of your family is well also?"

"Yes."

"But yet, there is something off. We had hoped to see your brother Tribuni Remmus again. He seemed a promising young man."

"Remmus has indeed turned out as a fine young man." Zeeda still found it difficult to continue on.

"He nears the age of marriage soon, does he not?"

"He ... does highness."

"You speak with hesitation Legati." Queen Serenity probed gently.

Zeeda was silent for a while. How could she tell the Queen that a warrior of the void, a simple clansman, was in love with a princess of the Silver Millennium? And not only that, but the future guardian to the gates of time.

"Is it so difficult to tell me?" Serenity inquired, one delicate eyebrow raised slightly.

Zeeda, who had commanded her own troops in the most recent

battle - had faced the task of telling mothers and wives their loved ones had fallen - stood in front of the Queen as dumb as a log. The words rang through her head; they just could not seem to find their way to her lips. Queen Serenity watched the struggle in the woman before her with growing concern. Drawing a shaky breath, Zeeda finally forced herself to speak.

"Your highness, fate has dealt a cruel hand to my brother. Though he has fought it these past few years, Remmus has found himself in love with the princess of Pluto."

Zeeda was both relieved to have said it, and panicked at the same time. Queen Serenity was certainly shocked, but not entirely in a bad way.

"Why do you say fate was cruel in this matter?" she asked.

"We of the void know our place, highness. She is the princess of a great house here, with duties far above the simple realm of a clansman."

"You judge yourselves so unworthy of us?"

"Queen Serenity, our peoples are a galaxy apart - in more than just location." Zeeda replied frankly. "We've known for generations what our place is, and it is most certainly not to be unified by more than an alliance treaty. That was made clear when we were kept as a 'secret' from the beginning."

Serenity felt the cold truth in the words, and a faint bitter pain behind them. She motioned for Zeeda to continue.

"All around you right here is more beauty every day than a clan member sees in their entire lifetime. Individually, we hold a greater power than anyone save yourself, because we never know when we might find ourselves alone on the field of battle. We train to fight together, but our powers are not united in such ways usually. Your greatest strength lies in the unity of many powers."

"This is indeed true Legati; however, you may find the outer houses are not as united as the inner ones. Their role is similar to yours, as they often work alone."

"The greatest difference though, is that we do not fear death as you do."

The Queen's eyes snapped back to Zeeda's face, but Zeeda did not give any ground under her commanding gaze.

"We respect death, we know its power. And we also know that with each loss comes a promise of new beginnings."

"You consider us weak because of this?" the Queen asked.

"No highness. We consider you young and foolish in the matter."

"I feel the House of Saturn would probably agree with you there."

"I mean you no disrespect Queen Serenity, but surely you must see the futility in a union between we of the void and those of the Silver Millennium."

Queen Serenity did. She knew Zeeda spoke the truth, and yet it still bothered her. In the beginning, those thousands of years ago when an alliance had first been struck between the clans of the void and the great

houses, it had been agreed upon that only those who truly needed to know about them would have the information. Though a few of the current great houses did know of their far off allies, they had certainly never seen or met them. Serenity had always felt bad; being allied to people she could not really talk about or invite for more than simple meetings a few times a year to talk of problems. But was it really something she could change? This could perhaps be her chance to do so.

"I do see. Though I also see that perhaps only one truly strong in both heart and soul would be able to handle loving a woman with the destiny as lonely and empty as the princess to be keeper of time."

She motioned Zeeda to join her on a nearby bench. It felt a little odd, the way this young woman talked to her. Almost like an equal, but still reserved and respectful. Even those of the great houses showed more deference when she met with them. They truly were from different worlds, and she had a desire to know more of these people they had been allied with for so long. It felt odd that in the few thousand years they had been allied with the clans of the void they still knew so little about them - not that you could truly learn much in quick visits twice a year. Looking at the gardens around her, Queen Serenity was brought back to an earlier comment Zeeda had made.

"You mentioned the beauty of the gardens - do you have none?"

"We have gardens, though smaller and simpler for the most part. Very little likes to grow in the void. We have a short soft grass, and small hedges - but only one type of flower. Most other land that can grow things is used for food."

"I think it would be hard to imagine a place without so many flowers."

"Our gardens are in the skies around us. Since we are not as close to any one star as you are, we are constantly surrounded by an ever changing tapestry of light."

"Sounds truly like a sight to behold."

They were both silent again for a few moments. Zeeda wondering when the Queen would come down on her for talking the way she had, while the Queen wondered how long before someone came to haul her back to her regular duties. This was answered when she spotted one of her maids coming down the path towards them.

"It appears as though my break is over." Serenity said, rising from the bench. "I would like to invite you to join me at dinner this evening. With your husband of course. I am dining with King and Queen Saturn, and I think some extra company might be of help."

Queen Serenity's smile was a little strained. Queen Saturn had still not fully recovered from the loss of their infant son two years ago. Everyone else around them waited in fear, believing it foretold the coming of the end. But Serenity could not bear the pain one of her friends was still burdened with, even if it did mean a darker time ahead. Perhaps

meeting those of the void, that held similar views as those guarded by Saturn, might help.

"We would be honored your highness."

"Good. Kartas is your maid again, I believe?"

"Yes."

"She has a grandson about the age of your brother. I'll see if she would be willing to take him for the evening."

"Thank you."

"Until this evening then, Legati."

Serenity moved on down the path to intercept her maid. Zeeda sat back down. Had she really just had the conversation she did? It honestly felt like a very strange dream. Shaking herself back into the present, she realized she needed to get back to tell Lienta of their dinner plans.



Lienta took it rather well, and Marshant brightened at the idea of spending some time with someone closer to his own age. Even more so when Kartas suggested he just spend the night with her family, after a knowing wink at Lienta and Zeeda - both trying very hard not to blush. Zeeda reminded Marshant that he was not at home, and to be on his best behavior as he left with Kartas.

"So," Lienta turned to Zeeda after they had changed. "We're dining with the Queen."

"And King and Queen Saturn."

"What are they like?"

"I've only met King Saturn. Once on my visit with Remmus. He seemed nice though. Rather quiet and reserved - hiding disappointment of not being anyone's favorite."

"What do you mean?"

"Saturn is the planet guardian of the afterlife - the holder of death and rebirth. But people tend to focus more on the death part here."

Confusion crossed Lienta's face.

"Don't try to make sense of it." Zeeda gave him a wry smile.

"Wait - the House of Saturn ..."

"Yes, they lost their infant son two years ago."

"I can't even begin to imagine that kind of loss. Why does the Queen want us there?"

"I think she sees us as the closest match to possibly be of help - or something like that. At least, we're probably the only other people here that won't fear them just because of who they are."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door signaling their escort to dinner had arrived. The halls were silent as they followed the same blue haired maid from earlier to the Queen's private chambers.

"The Queen will be along shortly," they were told as they were ushered into the room.

King Saturn turned from the window as they entered. "Legati Zeeda, a pleasure to see you again. May I introduce my wife?"

Queen Saturn was thin and petite. With pale skin, dark hair and dark violet eyes, she looked like a fragile doll one was afraid to touch. But Zeeda sensed the inner strength she possessed and offered her a warm smile.

"It is an honor to meet you milady. This is my husband, Legati Lienta."

"Ma'am." Lienta offered her a small bow as he took her hand.

"Pleased to meet you both." Her voice was low and quiet. "Legati Zeeda that is a most interesting outfit."

Zeeda blushed slightly, remembering how her half skirted tunic had come to be.

"It was a compromise between my mother and I for more formal occasions. I have never felt comfortable in dresses."

"I may just have to have one made for myself." Queen Saturn gave her a thoughtful look. "You were the one who sent the lovely flowers."

Though the news had reached them a little late, Zeeda had felt herself compelled to do something. She had sent a small bouquet of their strange void blooms to the grieving couple.

"We were saddened when the news reached us."

"They were a most beautiful gift. You grow those flowers in the void?"

"They are the only flowers that grow in the void. Though a few clans have succeeded in getting a few strains a different color, most are the purple like what I sent you."

"Deep purple is one of my favorite colors. Dark, and yet still very beautiful."

"You would certainly enjoy the gardens we have at home. Purple flowers in every direction."

"It sounds wonderful indeed." Queen Saturn smiled.

It was the first one her husband had seen in two years that was not forced. They turned as the doors opened and the Queen entered.

"I apologize for the delay. Legati Zeeda, you always have the most interesting outfits." Serenity smiled. "But stay long enough and we might get you in an actual dress."

"I think I'd die from the shock if I ever actually saw her in one." Lienta did not realize he had actually given voice to the thought in his head.

Queen Saturn was the first to laugh, a light sound like small silver bells. Queen Serenity allowed herself a contented smile, glad her intuition had proven true on this matter. She just wished there was an easy solution to the matter of two other people suffering in lonely pain.

7

Lienta woke first the next morning, smiling at the chance to see the sleeping warrior lying next to him. It was a chance he rarely got usually with Zeeda always up at the earliest possible time back home. He held his breath as she stirred, and gently let it back out when she did not wake. The light creeping through the window hit her hair, and made it even more like living flame. It still amazed him that once she had been a stubborn willful girl he thought he would never like when they had first met.

And here, just a few years later, he could not imagine life without her. Lienta remembered the struggle of the past two years - pushing himself harder than ever at his training. Thinking that he did not deserve to stay with her otherwise. That had all vanished the day she did not hold back during their morning sparring session. Thanks to the wooden blades, he had only suffered massive bruises and a few bone fractures. She had tended his injuries, staying with him while he recovered - even the bruised ego. When he had asked her why she had stayed, Zeeda had simply smiled down at him.

"Because I love you."

Lienta saw then that none of it mattered to her. This amazingly lethal goddess loved him, no matter his strength or skills. The release he felt from that was a new experience, and he found that after the worry had left, it was far easier to raise himself to the heights he had struggled to gain before. Now, he got away with only minor bruises. And she tended those hurts as well.

"Mmm ... g'morning." Zeeda murmured into his chest. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long."

"Liar."

"Guilty as charged." Lienta laughed, pulling her closer and burying his head in her hair.

Wishing they could stay like that for the rest of the day, he finally released her - after stealing a few strategically placed kisses.

"You're impossible!" she growled playfully.

"Can't someone else secretly save the day?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"I had to go and marry a hero."

That earned him a swat with a pillow.

"You'd better get ready to. Don't forget you promised the Queen an arms demonstration."

Lienta grunted.

"And, now you'll find out just how hard it is to not hurt someone." Zeeda admonished as she left the room.

Kartas and Marshant were there with breakfast waiting when he entered the sitting room. After they finished eating, Zeeda left with Marshant on whatever their secret mission was, while he followed Kartas down to the practice grounds. Lienta was the last to arrive, and he felt a little nervous seeing how many people were gathered there.

"Good morning, Legati Lienta."

"Queen Serenity," he replied, giving her the customary salute bow.

"King Saturn has expressed his wish to spar with you today, if that meets with your approval."

"That is fine with me."

"But before you begin, perhaps you could show us this 'calling of the armor' your people have?"

Lienta concentrated, he still was not quite as good at it as Zeeda, and he suspected that no one would ever manage to match her. A few seconds later, he stood before them in the armor his wife had tried so very hard to merge between their two clan styles.

"You just think of it and it happens?" the Queen asked.

"For me, yes. Legati Zeeda can call hers with very little effort at all."

"Perhaps she can join us tomorrow then." the Queen mused.



Zeeda and Marshant had met King Pluto at the tunnel entrance.

"Legati Zeeda, again we meet. Thank you once again for the records you sent me. They did prove useful."

"You are most welcome."

"And who do we have here?" He looked down at Marshant.

"Primus Marshant, sir," the boy answered timidly.

"Ah, of course. Your sister mentioned you at our last meeting. She said your talent for sensing spirits was far greater than her own."

Marshant looked up at his sister with wide eyes - he was better than her at something?

"It's the truth." Zeeda told him.

"And, has your sister told you of the need to keep what you see and experience here a secret?"

"Yes, sir." Marshant replied with a salute.

Once again Zeeda found herself following King Pluto down the long tunnel that would lead them to the realms of time. Before the doors were even opened, Marshant took a great shuddering breath.

"They're so sad."

Zeeda dropped to her knees before him, hands gently resting on his shoulders.

"The voices Zee, they're all so sad."

She exchanged a worried glance with the king.

"You can sense them from out here?" she asked.

"Just how sad they are. I can't make out what they're saying."

Marshant replied softly.

"Perhaps it would be best to not go in today." King Pluto frowned.

"No, I need to hear them better." Marshant answered, a determined look on his face.

"If you're sure." Zeeda said, getting to her feet as Marshant nodded.

King Pluto opened the doors, and the three slowly entered the swirling mists of the between times. Marshant gasped.

"They're much louder now."

Zeeda could hear them now as well, and King Pluto soon heard what Marshant was hearing when the boy put a trembling hand on his own.

"Sad, and confused. I still can't make it out - there are too many of them right now."

They stood there with the gray mists swirling around them for a good long while, finally leaving when Marshant declared he was tired. They stood outside the now closed doors, all three dazed from their experience inside. It was nothing like the first time she had been there, and Zeeda did not know what to make of it. She had not sensed any of the dark voices though, so that had to mean something. She just had no idea what.

"Can I come back by myself tomorrow?" Marshant asked, looking up at her tiredly.

"If you're sure you don't need me." Zeeda replied.

"I think - I think with both of us here the voices are talking over on another to make themselves heard. Maybe if it's just me, they'll slow down enough I can understand them better."

Marshant yawned, and started back up the tunnel.

"Is your entire family like this?" the king asked softly.

"Like what, my lord?"

"So doggedly determined and stubborn."

"Marshant and I seem to be the worst of the group, but yes."

"I'm certainly glad you're on our side," he said with a chuckle. "There is another matter I would like to ask you about."

Zeeda froze momentarily as they made their way up the tunnel. The Queen had told him! He guessed the reason for her hesitation and waited briefly before continuing.

"I must admit it did shock me a little when the Queen told me. But upon reflection, it is not a wholly unwelcome development."

"I never thought they were together long enough..." Zeeda murmured.

"Neither did I, though, my daughter doesn't share much with me on the topic of young men. Had I not met the one in question, I would be moved to approve based solely on meeting you."

"You honor us, my lord."

"I know this is a conversation I should more properly be having with your mother and father, but as I have never met either of them ..."

"Being second in command does allow me to speak on their behalf at times." Zeeda said with a small smile.

"I suspected as much. Can you tell me if your brother would be the kind of man who could be happy only rarely seeing the one he claims to love?"

Zeeda was silent for a moment. While she could occasionally claim to speak for her parents in some matters, she was not sure how much for her brother she could and not make things worse. But she had gotten herself into the situation and had to continue forward.

"I believe, if the feelings of the lady in question were the same, he would wait through eternity for a few moments with her."

"And if his feelings were not returned?" King Pluto queried.

"It would tear him apart ... but he would wait all the same. For him, there is no one else."

They had finally reached the mouth of the tunnel, where a sleepy Marshant had stopped to wait.

"I thank you for your candor on the matter Legati." King Pluto told her, with a half bow before walking away from them.

Zeeda watched him leave, before turning to the sleepy form of her brother.

"C'mon sleepy head. Let's get you back for a nap." she said, resting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Her thoughts on the other hand were anything but tired or gentle. The past conversation with the Queen, and this latest one with King Pluto had things riled up - had she only succeeded in making things worse for Remmus? Oh, if she had only been able to keep her mouth shut!



"You look troubled my lord."

King Pluto held back a sigh. The Queen rarely missed anything. What the Legati had said earlier about her brother weighed heavily on his mind.

"How would you respond, my Queen, when told a young man would wait all eternity for a few moments with your daughter - even if she did not return his love?"

"You have been talking with Legati Zeeda I take it."

"She has a way about her. Sometimes you get more than you expected."

"Indeed." Serenity's thoughts returned to her conversation with Zeeda the day before. "She holds nothing back, even if you're the Queen."

King Pluto's brows shot up.

"The warrior clans of the void are certainly a most interesting group of people," she mused.

"Yes, that they are."

8

Marshant had slept through the afternoon, and the night - but woke the next morning with plenty of energy. Zeeda admonished him to not push things, and to not hesitate to take breaks if needed before sending him with Kartas to meet with King Pluto. She and Lienta then made their way to the practice grounds. The gathered crowd was twice the size of the previous day. Lienta could only shrug at her questioning look.

"Please forgive them Legati," the Queen said as she greeted them. "It is not every day they get to see warriors such as you. Unfortunately, after the bruising King Saturn received yesterday, no one is very willing to try such again."

"You didn't ..." Zeeda muttered out the side of her mouth to Lienta.

"I tried very hard not to hurt him," he muttered back.

"Fear not Legati," Queen Saturn said from beside Queen Serenity. "The bruises are small and will heal quickly."

"But perhaps we could see the two of you?" the Queen inquired.

"A brief demonstration, your highness." Zeeda replied. "Shall we give them a show?" she murmured to Lienta as they entered the center of the grounds.

"Armor?" he asked.

"You first."

"I'm going to regret this ... aren't I?"

Calling his armor, he drew his swords - stepping into a swift advancing attack. Zeeda waited until the last possible moment before calling her armor and swords in time to block him.

"You're crazy!" he growled.

"I love you too dear."

Queen Serenity could not believe the grace and power the two possessed using nothing but pieces of metal against each other. Not even the great warriors on Earth could match them. The crowd was speechless as they watched the two at their deadly dance. And the Queen realized that was exactly what it was. Those were not wooden blades, or even

blunted practice swords. They had called their armor, and with it the deadly weapons they actually used in battle.

The trust they had to have in themselves, their skills, and each other had to be immense. One wrong move and they could be seriously injured, if not worse. And so the people gathered round watched, though only a small handful fully realized what it was they were seeing. Zeeda's bright fire against Lienta's cool darkness, like the eternal battle of legends. The crowd collectively gasped when she suddenly disarmed him, both his swords flying away to land behind him. Signaling the end of the show, their armor vanished and they made their way back over towards the Queen.

"That was most impressive." Queen Serenity told them.

"We aim to please." Zeeda replied, slightly breathless.

"It is amazing to see how much Legati Lienta held back yesterday." Queen Saturn said with a grin.

"The sword work is indeed impressive, but how well does it fare against a different kind of attack?"

All eyes turned to a woman with short blond hair, and cold blue eyes. Standing beside her was a girl of about ten that was without question her daughter.

"Queen Uranus, what did you have in mind?" Queen Serenity addressed her.

"Swords are not always needed, your highness. I was merely curious how they would manage to counter such an attack."

"We have our ways." Zeeda's gray eyes darkened slightly.

"Perhaps Queen Uranus would like to show us." The Queen said lightly.

"I would be honored, your highness. Legati?"

"A ... small ... demonstration." Zeeda said.

"You don't have to do this." Lienta whispered in her ear.

"Yes, I do. They need to know." She replied before heading back out onto the practice grounds.

The exchange between the two did not go unnoticed, and the Queen's brows drew downward with concern. Lienta sat tensely by Queen Saturn.

"Let's start out small, shall we?" Queen Uranus called.

Zeeda's only reply was a curt nod.

The amount of power initially drawn upon by Queen Uranus was impressive, but Lienta realized after studying her - his own powers were greater, even if they were of differing kinds. Zeeda easily captured the energy attack sent her way and deflected it upwards to harmlessly dissipate in the sky above them. His wife had not had to tap into her own power supply much at all, and Lienta did not see the demonstration ending well.

Queen Uranus held in her frustration, channeling it into the full force of the attack she unleashed next. Impressively powerful by the

standards of her neighbors, she watched angrily as the young woman at the other end of the field sent it away with a lazy wave of her hand. Zeeda honestly was not trying to make things worse, but she could sense they were headed in that direction.

"Need some help?" A woman's voice came from the stands.

Lienta turned to see a woman with brown hair in a loose fitting green tunic and pants standing nearby.

"Legati! With your permission?"

Zeeda looked to the Queen - this was her playground after all.

"If all participants agree, Queen Jupiter." Serenity inclined her head.

"Let's see just how well she'll fare against two of us!" Queen Uranus called out.

Zeeda only nodded again, her full attention on the blonde woman at the other end of the grounds. The combined effort of the two she could probably handle - she hoped - without causing harm to the spectators around them. As the two women began to call upon their powers, Lienta found himself worried for the first time since the whole thing had started. Rising from his seat, he felt firm hands gripping both his arms. Both Queen Serenity and Queen Saturn had moved to stop him.

"She was right. They do need to see, and know." Serenity said softly.

He did not advance any further, but Lienta could not just sit still and watch. So he stood pacing off to the side of the Queen's viewing stands.

The two women released their combined attacks, and Zeeda finally allowed herself to tap into the full extent of her powers. Most of her effort went into throwing up a shield to protect the assembled crowd, keeping the might of the two planetary energies rushing towards her instead. The force of the attack hitting her own personal shields drove her down to one knee as she struggled to contain it and funnel it away. The energies swirled around her as she constructed a shield tube up into the sky, directing the energies away from herself. Zeeda held the shield around the crowd a while longer before releasing it and bottling herself back up.

"I believe that is quite enough." Queen Serenity's voice rang out loudly for all to hear.

"Damn!" Queen Jupiter exclaimed. "Legati, most impressive!" She saluted before leaving the grounds.

Queen Uranus gave a quick jerk of her head before following Queen Jupiter. Zeeda was still kneeling, breathing heavily as she regained control of herself. Queen Serenity and Queen Saturn followed Lienta over to her.

"I'd rather not have to do that again." Zeeda panted as Lienta helped her to her feet.

"You shielded the crowd." Queen Serenity said as she got closer. "I

thank you."

"There was no need for innocents to be harmed." Zeeda's eyes caught the back of a retreating blonde head. "I don't think she likes me very much now."

"Queen Uranus is a proud and capable fighter." Queen Saturn answered. "It's not every day she meets someone who can stand against her."

"Lord Afont was right. Individually, we of the void have a greater power. But together, you all have a greater one." Zeeda said tiredly.



Two further sessions with King Pluto and Marshant had finally puzzled out most of the sad confused voices. His answers only brought about more questions though.

"They've lost something important, but that's the only thing I could figure out. I have no idea what they lost, or when they lost it - only that they did."

Marshant had told Zeeda what little progress had been made on the last night of their stay. She held him close until he fell asleep, wondering not for the first time if she had made the right decision in bringing him. She had been second guessing herself pretty much the whole trip, knowing the match against Queen Uranus had not helped them any. Relief came at knowing they would return home the next day, but she did find she would miss the company of Queen Saturn.

They had spent quite a lot of time with her since Marshant had wanted to work on his own, and were certainly becoming good friends in such a short time. At their dinner together the evening before, Zeeda had extended an invitation to come visit if the Queen of Saturn ever felt like getting away. She had no idea if the woman would ever come, but Zeeda felt better for having asked.



"Do you think I should go?"

King Saturn was silent for a moment. He did not relish the idea of her being so far away. But being around the Legati had brought out some of the inner warmth, and just a little of the happiness he had seen in his wife before the loss of their son.

"Do you want to go?" he asked in return, lips gently brushing her forehead.

"I think I'd like to."

"Then you shall. And you'll stay as long as you want." He tightened his arms around her. "And when you're ready to come home, I'll come to get you."

"You'd come there?"

"Of course. I want to see you surrounded by those purple flowers with my own eyes."

9

Zeeda was worried about Marshant when they returned home, but instead of brooding he spent hours digging through old books and journals for more information on the shadows in the realm of time.

"I don't know if I should ever let you or any of your brothers go back there again. You either bring them home love sick, or converted into watchers."

Zeeda looked up to see a smile on her father's face. "Sorry."

"Not to mention the mess you caused showing off." Zornah teased.

"The Queen requested it mother."

"Still, was it wise to anger a lady from one of their great houses?"

"In all fairness, she started the exchange. Besides, Queen Saturn as a friend more than makes up for pissing off Queen Uranus."

"When is she arriving?" Zornah asked.

"She should be here next week."

"Guess we should get rooms in the guest wing ready then."

"I was thinking of putting her in my old room, or in one of the extra rooms in our wing. She'd be so lonely in the guest wing." Zeeda countered.

"We can make up the rooms down from yours then."

While she was still a little unsure about the guest her daughter had invited to their home, Zornah trusted Zeeda's judgment of people. Though the two of them had decided thus far to wait before breaking the news to Kalah about the Remmus situation, she did hold out hope for her son's future. Even if it meant him leaving.



Zeeda stood waiting with her mother in the transport chamber.

Queen Saturn's visit had finally come to be. Shielding their eyes against the light, they opened them to see their visitor standing before them. Queen Saturn stood blinking, and just a little dazed.

"That was certainly an interesting experience." she said with a bemused smile.

"The first time through is always the worst." Zeeda said, welcoming her with a hug. "Queen Saturn, this is my mother, Zornah."

"It's a pleasure to have you join us, lady."

"Oh, please just call me Turna. I get enough 'lady-ing' at home."



On her second day there, Turna was woken early by the sound of shouting. Angry shouting to be exact and the voice belonged to Kalah.

"Legati Zeeda Lorent Centurios Torpel!" he bellowed down the hall. "Get your ass out here right now!"

Peeking out her door, she saw Zeeda run past, flashing her a quick grin. It was certainly turning out to be an interesting trip.

Kalah was not angry, oh no indeed. He was furious. And at the center of that fury was his daughter. He pointed at the door of the study, and Zeeda entered with him on her heels. She braced herself for what would begin the moment the door shut. Having a suspicion as to the nature of her father's displeasure, she created a sound shield inside the room to prevent the rest of the household being further disturbed.

Normally, they only used a sound shield in the heat of battle to better confer with com officers and squad leaders and not have everyone else around them know what was being discussed.

"Do you know what you've done?" Kalah fumed.

"Please, do tell."

"Do you know who I was just speaking to?"

Zeeda decided to keep quiet. Sometimes it was just easier to let him spew forth and get it out of his system.

"The Queen! The darkness damned Queen of the Silver Millennium. And do you know what she wanted?"

She stared him down, waiting for the next explosion.

"She wants me to come there with your brother. Your damned foolish brother that had to go and fall in love. Queen Serenity wants to see him again, as well as meet with King Pluto. Did you tell everyone while you were there?"

"Are you done?"

"Don't you answer me like that."

"If you're done, and you calm down a moment, I might just answer your questions."

It was not always a good idea, but sometimes being angry right

back at her father would snap him out of his ratings long enough to listen.

"This is partly your fault you know." Kalah looked ready to explode, so Zeeda hurried on. "We hadn't been there but a couple hours when the Queen summoned me. You know what her first question to me was? She asked me if you were feeling well because of how you'd been acting on your visits these past two years. Then she started asking about Remmus, and I felt she deserved the truth. Because she was concerned about you - and the rest of us. She needed to know why one of her trusted allies was suddenly acting cold and distant."

Kalah had cooled just a little bit. Zeeda continued.

"I hadn't counted on her telling King Pluto so soon. But he asked me about Remmus and I spoke on your behalf about my brother."

His eyes blazed again, and he started to open his mouth.

"Oh, stop that." Zeeda snapped. "The two of you have never met, so how did you expect him to contact you about Remmus?"

"You shouldn't have said anything to anyone!" he growled, if not quite as angry as before. She did have a point on that one.

"And what kind of standing would we have with them by keeping secrets? You know as well as I do how observant Queen Serenity is. You think they'd trust us anymore if this continued? You think they'd like to know we were keeping something from them that involves them, no matter how trivial? It's not like it was a truly enjoyable experience father." Zeeda finished, crossing her arms and flopping down in a nearby chair. Holding a sound shield was hard work when you were attempting to calm an angry Kalah at the same time.

"Father, look at it this way. Either we get closure by Remmus being allowed to pursue his love, or we get it when he finds out she doesn't share his feelings. Either way you look at it, we win a little."

"Not entirely," he said, resigning himself to the situation. "If he gets to be with his princess, we lose him."

"Wouldn't you rather have a soon far away that's happy over the Remmus we currently have here at home?"

"I hate it when you make sense." Kalah finally said, with a small smile.

"Are we done with the whole angry, yelling at me thing?"

"What?" He then sensed the shield around the room. "Yes, you can release the shield."

"And now, since that earlier shouting undoubtedly woke the rest of the household, shall we see if they made us breakfast?"

"What would I do without you, daughter of mine?"

"Probably not have quite so many gray hairs."



Queen Saturn had been at the Clan Centurios stronghold for four months. It felt odd at first, and seeing Zornah with her children had made the pain come back every night. But they had seen her through those times, and it had been a bright spot when the youngest, little Husel, had started calling her Aunti Turna. They had made her feel like a part of their family, and she finally felt at peace. Zeeda found her in the garden one evening, sitting in the midst of the purple flowers she loved so much.

"Oh, Zee - thank you all so much," she said, taking hold of the younger woman's hand. "The pain is still here, I don't think it will ever go away. But, I feel like living again."

"Come on." Zeeda pulled her to her feet.

"Where are we going?" Turna asked.

"I believe the com room is available."

"Oh, but he's probably asleep by now!"

"And he'll be supremely happy to be woken up and see your smiling face. You two haven't managed to catch each other for a conversation these past couple of weeks." Zeeda reminded her.

Turna waited while Zeeda set up the call. A few minutes later, she found herself staring at the groggy and worried face of her husband.

"Turna! What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong dear."

It took him a moment to clear the sleep clouding his head before he noticed the smile on her lips, and the sparkle in her eyes that had been missing for so very long.

"I've just missed you is all," she said softly.

"I can be there in two days."

And that was all it took.



Two days later, a very anxious Queen Saturn was pacing about the transport room. Turning as the light flashed behind her, she was in his arms before he even had a chance to step down from the platform. Neither of them noticed Zeeda slipping silently from the room.



"Where are our guests?" Kalah asked as they gathered for dinner.

"They're - indisposed - at the moment." Zeeda answered

"Ah," came the reply, with a knowing wink directed at his wife.



"I don't think I've ever had a more memorable welcome." King Saturn smiled into his wife's hair. "Though, I'm sure our hosts have wondered what happened to us."

"I'm quite sure Zeeda has covered for our absence."

He pulled her into a tighter embrace, not wanting to ever let go again. The pain was still there, they would share it until the end of time, but they had survived. Things would never be the same, but all that mattered right then was the woman he held in his arms. The wife he had been missing since before her stay in the void.

"Light, how I missed you." he murmured.

"And I you."

And he found out, again, just how happy his wife was to see him.



They finally joined their hosts late the next morning. The boys had already eaten and were off at their duties, so it was a nice couple's gathering.

"You two must be famished." Zornah said with a knowing smile.

They both blushed slightly as she passed around a basket of fresh warm pastries.

"I don't know how to thank you." King Saturn said to them.

"Nonsense, it was our pleasure." Kalah replied. "Next time, we expect you both to stay a while."

"No one has ever done quite so much for us before." Turna said softly.

"Then they are fools. Blind fools who don't know what they're missing." Zornah smiled at her from across the table.

"I'd better get down to the practice hall and make sure they haven't hurt themselves." Zeeda said, rising from the table. "You two just make yourselves at home." She winked at Turna before dragging Lienta from the room.



"It's as beautiful as you described."

King Saturn stood in awe. Looking about the garden, lush with the large, strange purple flowers of the void and lit by the ever changing lights

from the edge of the galaxy slowly spinning behind them. It was a different beauty than what they had at home, and even that of the grounds about the Moon Palace - and it felt more comforting than either place. He sensed it would be hard for the two of them to leave.

"I wish these flowers could grow at home, but they probably wouldn't look right," his wife mused beside him.

"Probably not. But if we had them at home, what other excuse could we use to pay a visit?"

She joined him in laughter, both knowing full well they would never need an excuse to come visit what they now considered extended family.



We thought everything was right in the universe at that time. Prosperity and happiness flowed freely, even the shadows became quiet - the fragments stilled. For two years we enjoyed ourselves, and all life was beautiful around us.

The signs were there, though we didn't see or hear them. And I begin to doubt that we would have truly understood them anyway. I've had a few thousand years to mull them over, and I still don't see everything they tried to show us.

No, that end is still a ways off, but the losses we soon suffered were just as painful, if not more so. Sometimes, I wish I could forget. But then I remind myself that without sorrow, there is no place for joy. Without despair, there is no room for hope.

10

It had taken two years to work out, but Remmus would finally get to be with his princess. Well, in a relative way at first. He would certainly get to be much closer to her geographically speaking, and everyone involved agreed that if they had waited this long, a little longer would not hurt all that much.

He would be staying with King and Queen Saturn, learning the ways of the great houses of the Silver Millennium. It was not going to be easy giving up one life to start another, but none of that seemed to matter. Zeeda had finally given up trying to convince her parents that they were not losing him. He was only going to be a vid screen and a transport pad away. But she knew she would miss him just as much regardless of what she said.

Remmus was a bit nervous about leaving when the time finally came. Marshant had come down with a strange illness the month before, and while he seemed mostly recovered, his little brother had yet to fully regain the spark he had once had. Zeeda had threatened to whip him soundly however if he used Marshant as an excuse to put off his going, and Marshant himself had been adamant about his brother going off as well.

Zeeda had been a terror to be around lately, blaming herself for some unknown reason for Marshant's condition. Even Lienta was finally at his wits end trying to deal with her. Little did they know that their world would soon come crashing down around them.



The day had started out like any other. A family breakfast together, everyone joking and enjoying their last few days with Remmus. Even Marshant had joined them, being tired of staying in bed all the time.

He stated he felt better than ever, and they had even played a few games of kill the troll. Husel was only ten, and it was still his favorite game - especially when Zeeda was the troll. The day ended with everyone tired and happy.

Remmus woke in the middle of the night to the sounds of worried voices and pounding feet traveling up the hall past his room. Opening the door, he caught Lienta rushing back the other way. The answer he received chilled his blood.

"Marshant is worse."

Before he even made it to his brother's room, Remmus saw his father rush out, the boy limp in his arms. Zornah was right behind them as they rushed towards the bath chamber, Zeeda waiting outside the door. His sister answered him before he even got his mouth open to ask what was going on.

"He's burning up. The fever just ... just started out of nowhere."

She dragged him with her down to the kitchen, where they set to work filling one of the largest pots to heat water.

"Um ... why are we doing this?" Remmus asked.

"It removes any lingering impurities. We need cool clean water to soak him in to hopefully bring the fever down." Zeeda replied, stirring a smaller pot with some herbs in it.

It seemed like it would take forever for the large pot to boil, but finally it did. Remmus helped her lift it from the fire and set it on a nearby cooling stone. He was not sure exactly how she managed it, but he felt her drawing on her inner power and the room around them suddenly got a lot warmer. Zeeda had managed to siphon off some of the heat from the water somehow, enough that they could safely carry it upstairs. Behind them, one of the maids was straining the herb mixture into a pitcher to follow them up with. They reached the stairs at the same time as Lienta and the healer he had gone to fetch. Taking his wife's place hauling the water, Lienta sent them on ahead.

No one in the main house slept that night. They lost track of how many trips they made hauling water up the stairs, and in the end it proved a futile effort. Remmus watched in numbed shock as the healer left his brother's room, shaking his head sadly. Marshant slipped away from them in the early morning, and an eerie silence descended upon Clan Centurios.

Millions of miles away, King Saturn was jolted from his slumber as his wife woke shaking from a nightmare.



When the first initial shock of Marshant's passing had worn off,

they had all watched helplessly as Zornah crumbled before them. The healer had to give her a sleeping draught to help calm her, and Kalah had taken up station by her side. That left everything on Zeeda. Remmus watched, having no idea how his sister was managing to keep everything, and everyone, together. He had the feeling though that when she lost it, they would all go crashing down with her.

With his mother unavailable, a confused Husel attached himself to Zeeda. He refused to let her out of his sight. There were times that morning Zeeda wished she was his age again, so someone else could deal with everything and just take care of her. But she knew at that dire moment the family needed someone strong, and it was part of her job to take care of things - in good times and in bad times.

What few workers they had in the house did a marvelous job in handling the steady trickle of visitors and communiqués coming in once word got around of their loss. The stronghold village residents understood, and were not offended when a maid spoke with them briefly. They merely wished to let the clan that protected them know their neighbors cared. The only time the staff bothered the family was when it was a close family member calling in, or a friend considered close enough to be family. That was how Lienta found himself talking to Queen Saturn, her worry carrying through the vid screen quite clearly.

"Oh, Lienta - what's happened?"

"M ... we lost Marshant early this morning." His voice sounded dull and lifeless in his ears.

"No ... oh Lienta ... no."

"How did you ..."

"I'm not really sure. I woke from a terrible nightmare and I just felt something had happened. Zeeda and the others?"

"Remmus and Kullah are doing alright, I guess. Husel is scared and confused. Zeeda's holding everything together ... but I'm not sure how much longer that will last. She's running on reserves right now Turna and I'm afraid of what will happen if she cracks."

"Kalah, and Zornah?"

"The healer had to give her a sleeping draught to calm her. Kalah hasn't left her side since then. We haven't seen either of them since."

"Oh ... I'll be there as soon as I can. Just hang in there."

Turna smiled weakly before ending the call. Lienta decided that since he was sitting in the com room already, he had better just go ahead and inform his family. His mother gave him the same message as Queen Saturn - hang in there until I arrive. He did not have the heart to tell her he was not worried about himself, he was more worried about his wife and the rest of her family.

Lienta let Remmus talk to his aunt, while he went to see if Zeeda and Husel were still napping in the study. Remmus spent close to half an hour reassuring his aunt that they were going to be okay, and that they did not feel offended she could not be there to help. Zornah's sister was

expecting her fifth child any day now, and was thus forbidden from any sort of travel. When Remmus finally managed to end the call, he sent one off to the House of Pluto, hoping she was there. With a little luck, he soon had her face before him on the screen.

"Remmus, what's wrong?" Pluto had immediately picked up on the haggardness of his face.

"My little brother died this morning." Remmus felt hollow, the words hanging there before him.

"Not Marshant! Oh, Remmus, I'm so sorry."

"I ... I just wanted to let you know ... I'm going to be delayed a bit in getting there."

"Remmus, I'm not going anywhere. Your family needs you right now."

"Thank you." He managed a weak grin.

"Take care of yourself, please? And I'll be here if you just need to talk, okay?"

"I will."

Remmus bumped into Queen Saturn coming down the hall from the transport chamber as he left the com room.

"Oh, Remmus." She gave the young man that towered over her a one armed hug, her luggage still in the other.

"Here, let me get that Turna."

"How is everyone holding up?" She asked him gently.

"Kullah's asleep - I think. Zee and Husel were too the last time I checked. I think Lienta's with them in the study. Haven't seen mother or father since the healer left."

"Why don't you go try and rest? It's hard, but your body needs some sleep."

"Oh, I think Lienta's mother is on her way here too. I'm surprised you got here before she did to tell the truth."

"Go on and get some rest. I can take care of things for a while."

Queen Saturn shooed him off to his room, and decided to check on those in the study. Zeeda and Husel were waking from their nap as she entered the room, Lienta dozing in a chair close by. Zeeda was physically as numb as her tired brain felt, and she did not realize Queen Saturn was there. Husel noticed her, and rushed over immediately.

"Aunti Turna!"

"How's my favorite boy?" She bent down to give him a hug.

"Marshant is gone," he mumbled into her shoulder.

Turna looked up in alarm as Zeeda let out a great shuddering gasp, her friend's eyes wide and panicked. Reaching over, she gently prodded Lienta to wake him.

"Take her somewhere more private." Turna hissed.

They both looked up to see Zeeda with both hands pressed over her mouth, desperately trying to not break down while Husel was still in the room.

"Husel, are you hungry?" Turna asked him, getting a nod in return. "Good, so am I. What do you say we go find something to eat?" She gently, though quickly, led him from the room.

Lienta jumped up after they left and gathered Zeeda in his arms. She clung to him desperately as he carried her towards their rooms, like she was afraid something would happen if she let go. Her whole body shook, as if she was trying to keep something in, or force something out. There was nothing he could say, and little he could do other than hold her close.



Masy had been startled when Queen Saturn had entered her kitchen with Husel in tow, but that soon vanished with a smile from the great lady asking if there was something around for them to eat. While she had not had time yet to cook anything proper like usual, the cook soon had a meal before them of some leftover stew and rolls from the night before.

"Thank you for coming, my lady."

Turna smiled at the tired looking cook.

"I couldn't leave them to suffer alone Masy ... but I am worried."

They both knew she was speaking of Zornah, but neither would say more with Husel sitting there between them. No one wanted to voice such thoughts right then. Thanking Masy again for their lunch, Turna and Husel bumped into Kalah in the main hall after they left the kitchen. The boy had immediately let go of her hand and rushed to his father. Kalah, still looking rather numb, picked him up and held him tightly.

"Thank you for coming, though I'm ashamed at how you find us," Kalah said, his voice rough.

"Oh ... no, there's nothing ..." Queen Saturn found she couldn't finish that thought.

"We've neglected our treasures lost in our own grief."

"Where's mommy?" Husel asked quietly.

"She's sleeping son."

Kalah grimaced. He had been forced to give her another dose of the sleeping draught; she had been so distraught again when she woke ... he had not wanted her to do any harm to herself.

"Is she going to be okay?" Queen Saturn asked gently.

"I ... I hope so. The others?" He gazed at her with haunted eyes.

"The boys are resting, or at least making the attempt. Zeeda is as well, I think. She held on for quite a while this morning."

The look on his face told her he understood the unvoiced thoughts racing through her head. Zeeda had been forced to play parent to the rest of the house because both of hers had gone missing in action. He did not know if he could ever quite forgive himself for feeling like he had deserted

them in their family's greatest time of need.

"And here we've pulled you away from your family."

"Don't you apologize for me being here. You're as much my family as my husband. He should be here in a day or two."

"I'd ... better get back to check on Zornah. I'll keep him with me."

Kalah attempted a smile before turning away.

Turna looked around the empty hall with sad eyes. These people had finally helped her out from under the shadow of her own loss, and she felt powerless to help them right then. It felt as if there was nothing she could do. Sinking down slowly onto a nearby bench, she sat there staring blankly at the floor.



Lienta hoped Zeeda was in a dreamless slumber, and while he did not like to leave her alone, his body felt tense and fidgety. Leaving quietly would hopefully disturb her less, and he left the rooms they shared together. Coming out into the main hall, he noticed Queen Saturn slumped on one of the benches that lined the room.

"Turna?" he said softly as he approached her.

"Oh, Lienta." She had no idea how long she had been sitting there. "I'm sorry, I was feeling a tad useless. Not too good when the comforter needs comforting ..."

"It's hard when this place feels so empty and quiet." He sat down next to her. "I feel like I don't know if I should be grieving right now. There's this numbness I can't get past. I don't know if it's just the shock from what happened, or if I'm just being brave because that's what she needs."

"It's more like all of the above." Queen Saturn replied with a sad smile. "The day my son died, nothing felt real. And for many days following, I felt like I was trapped in some strange dream. I wasn't me - I was some stranger trapped in someone else's body. I could see those around me, but I couldn't reach them ..."

Silence surrounded them, each lost in their own thoughts for the moment. They had been there for quite some time when they were suddenly jolted from their musings as the entry doors opened and a woman came bustling towards them. Lienta rose to greet his mother.

"Oh, my boy," Dreenal murmured as she embraced him. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine mother."

"And the family?"

Lienta could only shrug at that.

"Oh, and Queen Saturn." His mother gave her a hug as well - very few people escaped a hug from Lady Dreenal. "So good to see you again, though circumstances could be better."

"It is good to see you again as well." Turna returned with a smile.

"Son, not that I want to cause pain, but have the ... arrangements ... been taken care of?"

"Zeeda took care of everything this morning." Lienta replied tiredly.

"Zeeda? But ..." Lady Dreenal stopped at the look on his face.

"I'm afraid Lady Zornah had to be given a sleeping draught." Turna supplied. "Kalah has been tending her."

"But the boys ..."

"Husel is with Kalah, and the others are upstairs resting."

"Oh ... I hope we can get them all through this."

11

The next couple of days passed like a numb blur for most people in the house. They saw little of Kalah, even less of Zornah, and once again Zeeda found herself in charge of everything. Though she was not left to the task completely alone. Lady Dreenal and Queen Saturn did as much as they could - directing the household and making the needed arrangements to accommodate those that would be arriving for the ceremony of parting. To King Saturn, when he arrived two days after his wife, went the task of Remmus and Kullah.

Like any good 'uncle', he was simply there for the two of them when they did or did not want to deal with the situation. On the rare occasion Zornah left her rooms, she wandered the house like a zombie - her face blank and uncaring. Turna knew the look well, and it made her heart ache. At the same time though, she found herself growing angry with her friend when it seemed Zornah had forgotten she had four other children. The depths of such mindless separation became painfully obvious to everyone else the day of the ceremony.

Friends and family were assembled in a small lose group in the transport chamber, all come to say farewell to a life lost too soon. Last to enter were Kalah and Zornah, with their surviving children behind them. Before Marshant's body was even brought to the room, Zornah had collapsed to her knees, arms wrapped tightly around herself, sobbing and rocking gently. Many in the room had been where she was, knew the full measure of such pain, and looked upon the scene with silent empathy. They trusted that with her family around her, she would recover soon.

Remmus, Kullah and Husel had all rushed to their mother's side when she had collapsed, only to have her shove them away with more force than anyone would have expected. Remmus sat staring at her in horror, Husel's trembling frame clutching to him. Kullah stood looking at his father in pained confusion. Only a few people took the time to look at Zeeda, and they watched as her face turned to stone, her steel gray eyes hard and dark. It felt like time had frozen in that instant, the only sounds were Zornah's quiet sobs and Husel's faint whimpers. Kalah stood there, blinded by numbness and shock.

Everyone jumped when the silence was finally broken. A voice, dull and cracked started the funeral chant. All eyes turned towards the doorway to see Zeeda, her brother's shrouded body held gently in her arms. She slowly made her way towards the transport pad, eyes cold and distant. Getting to his feet, Remmus fell in behind her; Husel held tightly in his arms. Kullah followed not far behind. Her stony exterior never cracked, never wavered, as she proceeded across the room. The only hint of emotion from her was the way she carefully and gently laid the body down.

"May your journey bear you ever onward. May your soul find the peace of evermore."

Zeeda's words seemed to hang in the air, and even Zornah went silent. Head bowed, Zeeda stepped back off the transport pad to stand with her brothers. They all watched as the light surrounded Marshant's body, transporting his remains into the emptiness of space, where his essence would drift through eternity as faint glowing embers.



The guests had slowly left the chamber and reassembled in the main hall. Zeeda was still silent and stony, returning their kinds words with an absent nod. Inside, her mind was anything but still. Part of her wanted to simply run and hide, to avoid dealing with all the people in the house. Yet another part of her wanted nothing more than to rush back into the transport chamber and knock some sense into her mother. Trailing behind her, Remmus and the others looked lost - betrayed.

Kalah stood looking down at his wife. He knew she was in pain - they all were. But for her to have shoved the boys away like she had, he almost did not recognize the woman hunched before him on the floor.

"Zornah, please." He knelt in front of her. "Please, we need you. Our children need you."

She sat staring at nothing, and he had no idea if she had even actually heard him.

"Marshant ..." She flinched as he said the name. "Marshant is gone, and we can't bring him back. But if you don't snap out of this, you'll lose the others as well."

Kalah had not realized he had been shouting at her until she was blinking up at him in confusion. He gripped her shoulders, resisting the urge to shake her.

"Our boys! They came to comfort you and you shoved them away. Our daughter walked out of here like a statue. Do you want to lose all of them too?" His voice broke. "Please, love, come back to us."

A horrified look flashed across her face, and she collapsed against his chest, a constant stream of tears and apologies tumbling forth from

both of them. It took some time for her to calm, but Kalah stayed with her.

"They must hate me now," Zornah mumbled in a small voice.

While Kalah was sure it would not take long for the boys to bounce back, he was not so sure Zeeda would. He kept these thoughts to himself as he helped his wife to her feet and gently led her towards the hall.

The guests had decided to leave early, not wanting to intrude further on the shattered family. The only faces there to greet Kalah and Zornah as they entered the main hall were their children, Lienta, Dreenal, and King and Queen Saturn. Zornah froze briefly faced with the cold hard eyes of her daughter but she made herself slowly move towards them. Remmus and Kullah returned her searching look blankly, with Husel beside them, scared but hopeful.

"Mama?" Husel whispered.

"Oh." Zornah slipped to her knees. "Oh, my baby."

Husel ran to her waiting arms.

"Mama's so sorry," she murmured into his hair, tear filled eyes on her three oldest.

Remmus and Kullah appeared to relax slightly, but Zeeda remained hard and cold. The boys hesitated a moment, turning towards their sister as she gently placed a hand on their arms.

"Go to your mother," Zeeda said quietly before she turned and left the room.

Zornah's eyes never left her retreating figure.



Though Zeeda avoided her mother relatively well over the next few months, the atmosphere in the house was not quite as strained as the others expected. Not entirely happy at the idea of leaving before all was healed, Remmus made ready to return with King Saturn a month after the ceremony. Turna and Dreenal stayed, both unwilling to leave just yet. Though they all desired to speak with Zeeda about her continued indifference towards her mother, the only one willing to initiate the battle was Lienta. He did wait until a couple months after Remmus had left, and made sure no sharp objects were directly available. He finally cornered her in the garden one evening.

"No." Zeeda's voice was low and quiet.

Lienta stopped. He had not even opened his mouth to say anything. Squaring his shoulders, he knew he could be just as stubborn when the situation called for it.

"Zee ... don't you think it's time to end this?"

She only glowered at him.

"You can't keep going like this love. They need you as much as they need her."

"And where was she when it all happened?" Zeeda hissed. "Was she the one trying to shove aside her own grief to comfort everyone else?"

"Come now, you're just being selfish." The words were out before he realized what he had said.

Zeeda exploded.

"Selfish!" she fumed. "Tell me exactly when I have ever put myself first. Even now I do as much as I can to make the rest of them comfortable. There are things that cannot be forgiven, and they sure as hell should not be forgotten. And if you think I'll ever do either, you're a damn blind fool!"

"Better a blind fool than a frigid, bitter, lonely one."

Lienta paused, why was he yelling at his wife? How had the situation taken such a turn? It was not supposed to go this way ... they were not supposed to suddenly be mad at each other.

"Is that - is that what you think of me?" Zeeda's voice was rough, and she took a few steps backing away from him.

"Zee, of course not," his voice softened. "Dammit, you just about drive me crazy sometimes."

Mind still reeling from their earlier comments, Zeeda continued to back away. Neither of them realized how close they were to the edge of the pool until she suddenly toppled over backwards and disappeared behind a large splash.

"Zeeda!"

Lienta dropped to his knees at the edge of the pool just as she surfaced. Zeeda's eyes were wide with shock and anger. He braced himself for what was coming next, seeing her sucking in a deep breath. The scream she released was feral, deep, and filled with the emotions she had been keeping bottled up the past few months.

"Feel better now?" Lienta asked gently when she had finished.

"No," came the hoarse reply.

"Come on, give me your hand."

Lienta missed the glint in her eyes, and instead of him pulling her out, he soon found himself in the pool next to her.

"What the ..." he sputtered as soon as he surfaced.

"Now - *now* I'm happy." Zeeda growled as she climbed out of the pool.



Those in the house had heard the scream coming from the garden, and they met Zeeda as she entered the house. Zornah rushed ahead of the rest.

"Are you okay?" She held back the hand that had started to move towards her daughter.

"I'm fine mother. Just fell into the pool is all."

Zeeda answered her without stopping, leaving a trail of drips behind her as she made her way through the house.

"Did she ..." a shocked Zornah whispered - those had been the first words Zeeda had spoken to her in over three months.

All heads turned as Lienta reached the door, standing dripping in the doorway. His face was dark, but his amber eyes glowed. A hint of a determined smile played about his lips.

"Lienta, is everything alright?" Dreenal asked him.

"I'll let you know in the morning." He set off after his wife in grim determination.

It started first with Zornah, a small giggle escaping before she could stop it. Soon, the whole group joined her, laughing until they burst. Well, everyone except Husel who stood looking up at the adults around him as if they had all gone crazy.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"You'll understand when you're older dear." Zornah answered, scooping him into a hug.

Only slightly mollified, Husel did not question the warm comfort of his mother's arms.

Down the hall, Lienta burst into their bedroom, and stopped frozen in his tracks. Zeeda was still flushed with anger, and her wet hair clung to her in wild disarray. Her eyes were bright and clear - and he finally realized she did not have anything on. Before he could sort out his now jumbled thoughts, Lienta found himself pressed up against the closed door. Her lips were hungry and demanding.

"Wha ..." he mumbled breathlessly when she finally pulled back.

"I intend to show you just how selfish I can be."

Lienta decided that it was best not to argue. Besides, was this kind of selfish behavior really all that bad?

12

Solemn garnet colored eyes turned from gazing out the window as a tall man entered the room.

"Father." Pluto smiled in greeting as her father crossed the room to sit next to her.

"So, your young man has been here three months now."

"He's not mine father."

"Oh, I believe he is. There have been plenty of young ladies prancing before him, and he sees them not."

"I don't even know if I like him father."

"You know I would never force you into anything, my dear. However, perhaps it would be of benefit to spend a little more time with him, if only to discover what you may or may not feel for him."

"You're right I suppose," Pluto sighed. "He is most polite and courteous. I can sense how he feels, but he never forces it."

"King and Queen Saturn are certainly impressed with the whole family."

"But ... what of my duties father? What happens when I must be away?"

"It was never easy for your mother when I had to be away, but we treasured our moments together. Wouldn't it make the times of solitary more bearable knowing someone is waiting for you?"

Two pairs of timeless garnet eyes regarded each other.

"Yes, I suppose it might," she murmured.



An understanding of sorts settled between Zeeda and Zornah, and the house returned to some semblance of normal. Acceptance came mainly from Zornah, knowing the wound between them was too deep to ever fully go away. But as with all wounds, the scab eventually flaked away and it scarred over. Things would never go back to the way they had

been, but life would go on.

And so it did. The months following Marshant's death brought a new year, and new happiness along with it. Kullah was soon promised to Lienta's youngest sister, Toreenal, and both clans welcomed a second union between them. The quiet reserved nature of both made for an excellent match.

A few months following the promise ceremony, they received news that brought them all even more joy. Though few others were as happy as those in the void at hearing the news that House Saturn was expecting again, Zeeda was beside herself with joy when she got the news in a communiqué from Turna.

We are, of course, hoping for a boy - but truth be told, I would be just as happy with a daughter. I know that legends foretell of great suffering the day a girl child is born of Saturn, and the coldness and distance of many of our neighbors casts a shadow over things, but I still cannot give up hope - no matter what happens.

Remmus has been a great joy to have here with us, and certainly a comforting presence to have in the palace. I know he misses you all a great deal, but he is very determined and doesn't let such show often. I believe things are developing nicely between the two of them, and he is a perfect gentleman letting them unfold as she wishes (or not, but I try not to think of such).

I long to see you again, and all our dear friends there in the void. I hope some of you can come for a visit after the baby is born.

Zeeda had promptly sent off a large bouquet of the beloved purple flowers, and kept up with smaller gifts of such when she was able. And so everyone settled back into their routines, and life moved happily towards the future.



"The House of Saturn expects an heir again soon."

"Yes." Queen Serenity looked down at the toddler asleep on her lap.

"What do we do if it is not another son?"

"What do we do?" the Queen echoed, looking up from her daughter. "We live, that is what we do my lords."

"But, your highness ..." another voice began.

"Yes, I know the legends laid down long ago." She cut off any further interruptions with a raised hand. "The legends only tell of what may happen. Nothing is mentioned of a when, or a why. What would you all suggest? Murdering an innocent babe? How do you know such a

foolish action would not bring about the doom you all fear so much?"

Queen Serenity's commanding gaze held each one assembled there in turn.

"I will also not do anything to jeopardize our alliance with the Clans of the Void. House Saturn has very powerful friends - let none of you forget that. Or forget the fact it is none of you here in this room. I will not go to war with people who have been our allies for thousands of years."

The assembled nobles shifted on their feet uncomfortably, but none spoke.

"Now, if there are no other matters of *importance*," Serenity wished to drive home the point she would not be having such a conversation again. "You may all take your leave."

Serenity heard a tired sigh from behind her chair as the last lord left the room.

"So, you heard all of that?"

"Most of it, my Queen." King Pluto bowed as he stepped out of the shadows.

"They're fools. Damn scared fools. They would destroy us all I believe, if left on their own."

"Perhaps we could let the Legati lose on them?"

"And have her beat them senseless with their own foolish ignorance?" The Queen smiled. "Speaking of which, how are things progressing?"

"The Tribuni is a most patient and courteous suitor. I believe he would even be content with a friendship - though that is far from his true wishes."

"Then, let us hope that all goes well."

King Pluto had the feeling she was not talking solely of his daughter and the young warrior of the void.



"Just remember to not be nervous - or if you are, try not to show it too much." King Saturn said with a knowing grin.

Remmus smiled weakly. He would soon be on his way to the first truly formal gathering of his stay, outside of an audience with the Queen a few months ago. Thankfully it was only a relatively small affair to celebrate the birthday of Princess Pluto, held at her family home. His chaperon for the event was Sarte, King Saturn's head secretary. Normally, his hosts would have gone with him, but with the baby due to arrive soon, they had decided against traveling.

Remmus knew there would most likely be other young men present, all hoping for her attentions probably - but this did not really

bother him all that much. She was her own independent self, and if her favors were indeed for someone other than himself, he would of course retreat. He kicked himself mentally for such thoughts - this was not a battle. Why was he treating it as such?

He just hoped he had picked out the right gift from the items Zeeda and his mother had sent. It had been a hard choice - and he really had no idea what girls liked - as each one had been an excellent example of the jewelry smiths back home. Remmus had finally settled on a bracelet, which Turna had agreed was not too forward for a young man to present a young lady with. It was a delicate twisted silver rope, with swirls of red and black gems. Not too flashy, and not too sedate either, much like the princess that had stolen his heart five years ago.

Gathering his things, he smiled at the memory of his sister's latest letter - teasing him about still being unmarried at twenty. It was something they had always joked about, marrying so young when they would live a few hundred years - fate willing anyway. He knew those of the Silver Millennium had even greater life spans, and getting himself involved with the guardians of time made things even more complicated. But those thoughts he shoved away to bury and not bring defeat before he even started. Sarte was waiting for him below, and they soon set out for their destination.



Remmus was pleasantly surprised when they arrived at the palace on Pluto. It reminded him very much of home with its simple elegance. Not that where he was staying in Palace Saturn was over the top grandeur, but it was certainly more richly decorated. They were shown to their rooms to prepare for the dinner that evening.

"Remmus, are you ready?" Sarte called from the door.

"I guess so."

"Nervous?"

"Only if I have to dance," Remmus replied.

Sarte chuckled lightly as they made their way down to the great hall. Though there were a good number of young ladies present, Remmus had eyes for only one of them. Not that it hurt Pluto was taller than most of those around her, and they could watch each other over the heads of the other guests. Standing a short distance from the base of the stairs, she looked like a goddess come to visit in a simple gown of dark purple with a green sash that matched her hair.

"Sarte - did no one else bring gifts?" Remmus murmured as they descended the stairs.

"They are probably in the dining hall. Did you not give it to the steward when we arrived?"

"I didn't know."

"Well, you can slip it in with the others later I suppose."

Remmus only nodded. He decided his gift would find another way to reach its intended recipient. Sarte stepped forward to perform the proper introductions.

"My King Pluto, Princess," he said with a small bow. "May I present Tribuni Remmus, recently of House Saturn."

A few hushed gasps sounded around them at the mention of the House of Saturn, and Remmus found himself stiffening. This reaction did not go unnoticed by either host, and Pluto gave him the most welcoming smile of any she had given that evening.

"My dear Tribuni, it is our pleasure to have you join us." She said softly, though clearly, as she held out her hand.

"Princess, I thank you for your kind welcome."

Remmus bowed low over her hand, gently brushing gloved knuckles with his lips. Their eyes never left each other. Straightening, he gave King Pluto another smaller salute bow.

"My lord, many thanks for inviting us."

"Most welcome Tribuni Remmus." King Pluto smiled, and added in a low voice, "Pay them no heed my boy."

"Tribuni, have you seen our gardens yet?" Pluto's eyes were sparkling, just a tad mischievously.

"I have not yet had the pleasure Princess."

"Then, allow me to show you." She slipped her hand into the crook of his arm.

Pluto drew him swiftly from the room, leaving behind quite a few raised eyebrows.



"Oh, though I wished you have been the first, I am much happier you were the last guest we had to greet."

"That was a compliment - yes?" Remmus asked with a grin.

"Of course. It means I can escape all that and not have to worry about offending too many people."

"Well then, I am glad to be of service Princess."

"Remmus, it's just the two of us," she said with a slight blush.

"In that case .." He brought out a small pouch from an inner tunic pocket. "May I be so bold as to present a small token in honor of your birthday?"

Her mouth a silent "oh", Pluto pulled away slightly. Remmus immediately released his hold on her arm and bowed low before her.

"My apologies princess, I have overstepped my bounds an

offended you."

Fool! Remmus cursed himself, running over his lessons from Turna trying to figure out what he had done wrong. Nothing came to mind though, and he stood there facing the ground in humiliation. Pluto watched him with concern, wondering what exactly had turned the situation this way. She had merely been surprised at the gift - no one had ever done such before.

"Remmus is the ground really that interesting?" she asked gently.

He brought his head up enough to see the smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

"You just surprised me is all. No one has ever given me a gift like this before."

Finally, he straightened up, almost shyly holding out his hand with the intended gift.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Pluto murmured, freeing the bracelet from its pouch. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Remmus - why me?"

He looked at her in confusion. Where was this coming from?

"Why in all the universe did you pick me?" Pluto's voice held a slight tremor.

"Because it felt right," he replied.

"But ..."

"I don't know if I can really explain it. But those few moments back then were all I needed. I knew I would do anything for you."

"Like coming here? Leaving your family?"

"As my sister says, I'm only a vid screen and teleport pad away. I don't know the how and why, only that I do love you. Enough so that if you told me to leave right now, I would. I never want to cause you pain."

"My duties ..."

"Are a part of you." Remmus interrupted again. "I didn't fall in love with just a small part of you. A handful of blissful moments can have just as much meaning as an entire lifetime together. Five years and all the distance between us couldn't stop it ..."

Remmus found himself interrupted, her lips suddenly on his - gentle and trembling. Slowly, their arms found their way around each other in a tender embrace. They might have stayed like that for the rest of the evening had a discreet cough not sounded behind them.

"While I do hate to interrupt, your other guests are feeling a bit neglected dear," King Pluto said with a knowing smile.

Remmus returned to Saturn a few days later - hating to leave, but knowing they both had duties to attend to without distraction. But this time he left knowing the princess was at last his.

13

"NO!"

"Wha ..." Lienta was pulled from sleep, Zeeda beside him in the bed panting and shaking. "Zee, what's wrong?"

"I don't - I don't know," she replied.

Hurling herself from the bed, she paused long enough to throw a robe on before rushing out the door. The only thing Zeeda knew was something terrible had happened, but not to whom or what exactly. Not paying attention to where she was going as she wandered about the house, she looked up to find herself standing outside the com room. The incoming call light was flashing at her, and the screen soon came to life. A troubled looking Remmus was there looking back at her. She suddenly found her legs could not stand and collapsed into a waiting chair.

"Sis ..." Remmus swallowed, trying to find the right words.

"Turna? The baby?" Zeeda asked hoarsely.

"The baby's fine, she arrived last night."

Remmus found he could not continue, and in that moment Zeeda knew what had pulled her from her sleep. And she now knew where the heavy dread surrounding her originated.

"Oh ... no, Remmus no."

"I - I know it's a long shot, but can you get here?"

"I'll be there as soon as I can. King Saturn?"

"He's - well, he's not doing so well."

"I'll be there, just hang on."

Zeeda ended the transmission to contact the moon palace and inform them of her impending arrival. The attending com person sounded a bit confused, but replied that it was clear to travel and her immediate transport to Saturn was a go. Racing out of the com room, she collided with Lienta, Zornah trailing close behind him.

"Zeeda dear, what's wrong?" Zornah asked, her first thoughts that something had happened to Remmus.

"Turna ... Turna ..." Zeeda couldn't make the words leave her mouth.

"Oh ... oh no. The baby?"

"Remmus said the baby was fine. A little girl."

"That poor man." Zornah covered her face with her hands.

"Zee, are you planning a trip?" Lienta asked gently.

"I already arranged it, I just need to change and pack."

"I'm coming with you." Zornah announced.

"Thank you mother."

"I'll follow as soon as I'm able; we have the new recruits coming in today," Lienta said.

"I'm sorry." Zeeda winced, she'd forgotten about that.

"Nonsense," Lienta replied, giving her a quick kiss. "I'm sure Kalah and I can manage."

"Yes, I'm sure my son-in-law and I can manage without you. Now, don't you two ladies have somewhere to be right now?"

They all jumped, not having heard or seen Kalah come down the hall earlier.

"Oh, don't you scare me like that." Zornah chided him.



After a hurried change, Zeeda and Zornah soon stood in the transport chamber in the Moon Palace. A rather tired looking Queen Serenity was there to greet them.

"Legatus Zornah, Legati Zeeda - can either of you explain why I'm here in the middle of the night?"

Before either of them could answer, a messenger burst into the room.

"My Queen," the young man paused for a breath. "Terrible news from Saturn your highness. Queen Saturn was lost in childbirth."

"And the baby?" Queen Serenity demanded.

"A healthy baby girl." Zeeda supplied.

"How did you know before I even did?" Serenity turned her tired gaze back to the two clans women.

"I - I woke from a nightmare, highness and ... and I just knew." Zeeda replied weakly.

Queen Serenity's brows drew together in thought. What was this strange connection between the House of Saturn and Clan Centurios? Twice now they had known of the tragedies befalling the other before anyone else.

"Come, I will take you there myself." The Queen stepped up to stand with them on the platform.

"My Queen!" the messenger exclaimed.

"If anyone asks, I have traveled to Saturn. I will return soon."

"Yes, your highness."

Zeeda and Zornah found themselves surrounded by a silvery glow different than they were used to, and when the lights diminished, they were standing in the main hall of the Palace on Saturn. A passing maid dropped the stack of linens she was carrying in surprise, her eyes wide.

"Please take us to King Saturn." Queen Serenity commanded gently.

"Y-yes, your highness.

The startled maid dropped into a brief curtsy before she turned and quickly led them from the room. They followed her down a hallway to a small sitting room where Remmus and Sarte were standing watch over the shattered form of King Saturn.

"My King Saturn," Serenity said softly. "We grieve for your loss." She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder to keep him from rising. "I cannot stay long, but I did want to see you. And I had some important friends to deliver. Remember, if there is anything you need ..."

"Th-thank you, my Queen," he replied weakly.

"I will return later, but I believe you are in good hands."

Queen Serenity smiled briefly before leaving the room. Zornah immediately crossed the floor and took one of King Saturn's hands in her own firm grip.

"You're not alone here, dear friend," she told him gently.

He only stared at her with blank, haunted eyes. Zeeda caught her brother's attention, and they quietly slipped from the room.

"Remmus, do they know what happened?"

"Everything seemed fine, but I guess there some difficulties with the delivery. Turna - she held on long enough to see the baby."

"And here we thought our sufferings were done." Zeeda linked arms with her bother as they wandered about the palace. "Surely there must still be some good in the universe. What of you and your princess?"

Remmus blushed slightly.

"All goes well then I see," Zeeda said with a small smile.

"It goes very well, truth be told."

"She feels the same then?"

"Her lips have told me so."

"And with more than words, I have no doubt of that."

"Sis!" Remmus tuned a deeper shade of red.



The following days were filled with a hushed bustle about the palace. With the aid of Sarte's direction, Zeeda and the others did their best to keep King Saturn shielded from the small number of visitors come to express their condolences. He spent most of his time sitting despondently in the sitting room where they had first seen him. Zornah

spent the most time sitting with him, though they all took turns to not leave him alone during the day.

The only time they saw any signs of life from him were the moments when the nursemaid would bring his daughter to him. A soft sad smile would slowly make its way onto his face as he held the infant in his arms. But it would disappear the moment she was taken back to the nursery. They all saw hope in this, knowing he still needed to get through the deep shock of losing his wife.

Queen Serenity made a few brief visits in the days leading up to Queen Saturn's funeral, and each one left her feeling slightly useless. Zeeda caught such a look on her face the day before the funeral and did not like to see the Queen feeling defeated.

"Is anything wrong, highness?" Zeeda asked when they had a quick moment alone together.

"I can heal a great many things Legati, but even this is beyond me."

"The only thing that can heal this is time. I know he can tell we're here, it's just the shock struck so deep he hasn't surfaced yet. And though it is a sad smile right now, he does seem most alive when his daughter is near."

"You are too perceptive for one so young, but I believe you are correct." Queen Serenity regarded Zeeda thoughtfully. "Though, I am still interested in this - link - your two families seem to share. Is this a common occurrence between clans?"

"No. Or at least, we have no records of such."

"It does happen on occasion here, but it is still a very rare occurrence, and generally only between soul mates. Still, I do not consider it a bad development."

"But, if we can only sense when something terrible has happened ... and it appears to have been between myself and Queen Saturn."

"Perhaps it will extend to her daughter. May I request you keep me informed of any future developments as Saturn's Child grows?"

"Certainly, highness."



"Are you sure about this Sarte?" Remmus asked again.

"Custom dictates the body be escorted by family - and as our Lady considered you all as such, it is only fitting you guard her."

"And our armor will not offend anyone?" Lienta inquired.

"As long as your weapons go unnoticed."

"We will leave them behind." Zornah assured him.

"Those idiots know what I can do to them. So I doubt they'll try

anything," Zeeda muttered.

"Ah, no, I don't suspect they'll do anything." Sarte replied, giving her a guarded look.

"Zee!" the other three exclaimed.

She only shrugged, her armor flashing into place before her shoulders dropped back down. Unbuckling her sword harness, she laid them on a nearby table.

"Happy now?"

Lienta and Zornah only shook their heads as they called their armor and left their weapons with Zeeda's. It took Remmus a little longer, but he did finally manage to summon his armor.

"You're getting better." Zeeda observed.

"You think so?"

"Just takes practice." She turned to Sarte. "Lead on when you're ready."

"Wait, don't I outrank you?" Zornah teased gently.

"Sorry mother." Zeeda said with a slightly sheepish smile.

"You're forgiven, this time." Zornah returned, following Sarte from the room.

They brought Turna's body from the adjoining chamber on a floating platform draped with a somewhat see through dark purple shroud. Zornah and Remmus went first behind Sarte, with Zeeda and Lienta following. Zeeda forced herself to stare straight ahead at the back of her mother's head, knowing she probably would not be able to hold it together if she looked upon her friend's forever peaceful face.

The group assembled in the garden was small, and the four of them found themselves wondering just how many actually came because they had truly wanted to. Queen Serenity stood at the end of the path with King Saturn. Kalah, unable to attend, had sent just about every available flower from their gardens, and the space was filled with the large purple Void blooms. Guiding the platform into place, Zornah and Remmus took station to the left of the Queen, while Zeeda and Lienta stood just slightly behind King Saturn.

"Friends," the Queen's voice was low and soft. "Let us gather today not in sorrow, but in hope as we remember the joy our dear friend brought into our lives. May we always remember her smile, the sparkle in her eyes, and her ever gentle ways. By keeping her in our hearts, she will never truly be separated from us."

Queen Serenity stepped back, her head bowed slightly. King Saturn made a valiant effort to speak, but had Zeeda and Lienta not been standing behind him, he would have collapsed to the ground. With a quick glance at each other over his trembling form, Zeeda started with the first thing that came to mind.

"May your journey bear you ever onward. May your soul find the peace of evermore. And may our love always be with you."

She did not care if a clan funeral speech was appropriate for these

people; the least she could do was send a dear friend off properly. Those assembled watched as a silver glow surrounded Queen Saturn's body, lifting her towards the heavens to spend eternity amongst the stars. Zeeda and Lienta gently led King Saturn back towards the palace, the Queen directly behind them with Zornah and Remmus as rear guard. The looks on the faces of the four warriors discouraged any condolence visits right then.

"There is wine inside already," Sarte said as he held the door open to the nearest sitting room.

"Thank you." Zeeda replied.

King Saturn collapsed into the nearest chair after he entered the room, and only partially acknowledged the glass of wine set before him.

"I do wish to thank the four of you. For being here and helping as you have." Queen Serenity looked at each warrior in turn. "Those were lovely words you offered, Legati."

"They are from the clan parting ceremony. The best I could think of right then."

"I - I thank you as well," King Saturn said, his voice shaky. "I don't know ... well, I'm just grateful you're here."

"We could never leave a friend alone in time of need." Zornah told him gently.

"My Queen, have you met my daughter yet?" King Saturn asked, trying to keep himself distracted for the moment.

"My visits have been so brief I have not yet had the pleasure."

"Come then friends, let us share in the joy of seeing her."

14

The weeks following Turna's funeral seemed to both fly by and drag along at the same time. Zeeda and Lienta did not get to stay as long as they would have liked, both being needed back home to assist with the training of the new troops. Zornah stayed on a while longer, both to be there for their friend, and to spend some time with her son. She wished to get to know the young lady that had stolen him away from his family.

"Mother, it's good to see you and Zeeda talking to each other again." Remmus told her one morning as they took a stroll through the gardens.

"It's not a perfect peace, but things are better now. What happened then ..." Zornah paused and shook her head. "No need to worry son. Now, tell me about this girl of yours."

Remmus blushed - he had the feeling that no matter how old he was, his mother would always be able to do that to him.

"I'm sure you'll like her when you get to know her mother. Like us, she's serious and dedicated to her duties. And of all the people here, she's close to being tall enough." Remmus said with a grin.

"Ah yes, because height is so very important." Zornah teased. "And she returns your feelings?"

"Perhaps not quite as strongly yet, but I know she does care for me. She is rather reserved on that front, and I try very hard to not rush things."

"That sounds like a good idea." Zornah hid her concerns - a natural motherly reaction she figured. What woman would not love one of her sons?

Zornah's concerns were soon lifted, as she got to spend quite a bit of time in the company of King Pluto and his daughter. They had both come to Palace Saturn as soon as they could, having been away on a mission for the Queen at the time of the funeral. It gladdened her to see that at least a few from the surrounding planets did in fact care for their neighbor. The quiet strength the young woman possessed impressed her greatly. Zornah felt that if her son could not be interested in a clan woman, he had indeed chosen well. She could see they both did care for

each other, and that was all she needed. After one of their dinners, she found herself alone with King Pluto.

"Lady Zornah, how have you enjoyed your stay?"

"I wish the circumstances for coming had been otherwise, but I am glad to be here."

"Your husband couldn't make it?"

"Unfortunately, one of us in command must be there at all times. And with myself, Zeeda and Lienta here ..." Zornah gave him a small smile.

"Ah, so you have troops underfoot then?"

"Yes. We have one of the larger strongholds, so our complements of legionaries are greater than others."

"All clans are not equal then?" he inquired.

"In size and power, no. We attempt to make everyone feel as equals, and the majority of those with greater power do not flaunt it. There is a hierarchy none the less."

"You have to report to someone higher then?"

"I guess you could say that Clan Centurios is at the top of the pile, so many choose to defer to us at times. We do have the council of warriors, and each clan is allowed two representatives. They then elect a council head to oversee things. He can only serve as long as everyone is satisfied with his performance."

"So, everyone has a chance then? But no female council heads?"

"Women of the void hold a greater power, and from early on in our people's history, that power was feared and respected. That fear does keep us out of some roles, but that doesn't stop us. Many that I know would not wish to be council head, we're much better suited actually running things." Zornah smiled.

"On the battlefield as well?"

"Naturally. My daughter had her first command at nineteen."

"Somehow, I get the feeling your daughter is not like most other clan women." King Pluto chuckled.

"That is certainly true." Zornah laughed with him. "She was the first female first-born in over two hundred years. That did put us in a unique, and difficult, position."

"She had a hand in training her brothers, did she not?"

"Oh, indeed. Sometimes I wonder if we didn't expect too much of her, put too much of a load on her shoulders too early - but her drive and determination are decidedly her own."

"Well, I can certainly say she impressed me from the first time we met. And her candid words on behalf of her brother did help in making the decision to invite him here."

"I am very thankful for that, my lord. I could see that my son's heart had been left behind, but our people had long been under the impression such a possibility could never occur."

"In generations past, that was probably true. Queen Serenity has

slowly changed things."

"For the better, you believe?" Zornah asked.

"I can only hope. But I am glad to see my daughter with such a partner as your son."

Their conversation continued well into the night, and both retired to their rooms feeling much better about the decision they had made bringing two such different worlds together.



The next seven years passed without major incident. We had our run through of a few minor skirmishes with the dark fragments gathering in the void. Some of us were a bit alarmed at the growing increase in attacks, but we didn't look too far past it. History had shown us increased activity wasn't such an oddity. Perhaps if we had taken the time to look into these events more, things may have ended differently. But there is no use blathering on about what ifs when the events were a few thousand years ago.

We were content. My husband and I were named god-parents to the child of Saturn - something that upset a great many of those in the Silver Millennium for some odd reason. But, since the Queen had given it her full support, there wasn't much any of them could do about it.

Remmus, dear Remmus, was indeed finally promised in marriage to his princess. There was still no definite date for when things would finally take place, but since we'd waited this long for even just a promising, what were a few more years? Kullah married his bride, and though we missed him, Clan Torpel gained a son for the one they'd lost a few years earlier. Toreenal had always been a tad more assertive than my brother, but they were happy and that was all that mattered.

But the darkness soon descended upon us again, and had we paid attention, we would have seen the signs, and we would have prepared ourselves better. Such things are easy to say when one looks back on what happened though.

15

Zeeda sighed as she stared out one of the study windows after another long day. While some disturbing reports had come in from outlying strongholds of an increase again in fragment aggression, they had not noticed anything yet closer to home. That had not stopped the endless patrols they had been doing for the past few months. It was decent experience for their legions, but uneventful patrols meant a lot of bored people.

She had been the first to return that day, her father and husband still out on patrol. Zornah was off with Husel meeting yet another young woman. She found it hard to believe that her youngest brother was eighteen now - and still not matched with anyone, much to the dismay of their mother, who wanted to see all her children happily married. Though Zornah would certainly never push the issue. It would happen when it happened.

"Looks like you had another exciting day of nothing too." Lienta's voice sounded tired, but his eyes still sparkled when she turned to greet him.

"Yes, and it's beginning to wear on the troops." Zeeda said, after a long kiss.

"I know. I've already had to discipline a group for fighting - right in their own barracks even."

"We either have to cut back on patrols ..."

"Or hope something actually happens." Lienta finished her thought with a grimace, flopping down on the couch.

Zeeda soon joined him, and he pulled her close into a firm embrace.

"Do you realize that in two days we will have been married ten years?" she murmured into his chest.

"Yes, and we get to spend such a momentous occasion stuck in a briefing session with Queen Serenity."

"It won't take that long, and you know it."

"Mmmm ... is that a promise?"

"If you're a good boy."

With the increase in void activity, Queen Serenity had requested more frequent briefings whenever possible. Normally, only one of them went, but Zornah had persuaded her husband that it would be good to send Zeeda and Lienta both together. She had also talked him into letting it be a longer trip, a short little vacation so they could visit their god child and Remmus as well. Kalah had grudgingly agreed, knowing full well he was powerless to say no to his wife when she set out to see something happen.

When Zeeda and Lienta arrived at the Moon Palace, they were informed that their meetings with the Queen had to be delayed until the afternoon. So with the morning to themselves, Lienta soon found himself being dragged through the palace to the map room.

"Legati! Most wonderful to see you again." Cartographer Wensel greeted them warmly.

"It is good to see you again as well, old friend." Zeeda replied with a smile.

Once again the map surrounded them; this time zoomed out so they could see most of the void.

"I know my data is most likely out of date, but I have tried to keep things as up to date as possible with what the Queen supplies." Wensel indicated the dark red areas now showing throughout the void. "There is every appearance of a pattern, but I don't really know enough to make it out."

"These are all the areas we've reported attacks in?" Zeeda asked, her gray eyes darkening.

"As much as I know of at least." Wensel replied.

"It looks like everything's been concentrated on the smaller clans first." Lienta observed. "But still just those on the edges."

"It's like they're testing a barricade." Zeeda's reply came in a quiet grim voice.

Each clan stronghold was indicated by a white sphere, in correlation to its size. Larger clans, those with more manpower behind them, were relatively free of the dark red patches. The areas around some of the smaller clans however were almost overrun by it. Neither of them liked what they saw.

"It's only going to get worse," Zeeda muttered. "Wensel, is there any possible way to capture these scenes so we can take this information back with us? Everyone in the void knows the attacks are happening, and where - but seeing it all together like this....we need to show this to the council."

"I will see what I can come up with. You'll be staying a few days?"

"Yes. We'll be here for a day or two, then onto Saturn for a short visit."

"I should certainly be able to have something for you before you return home."

"Thank you."



Even a short stroll through the gardens did not ease their minds after Zeeda and Lienta left the map room.

"Do you think I'm over reacting to all this?" Zeeda asked him worriedly.

"Not after seeing that. We're going to have to send more assistance to our neighbors."

"But - what if that's their goal? What if the attacks are designed to draw us out, so they can go after the less protected larger clans?"

"The fragments have never shown a habit of strategic thinking Zee."

"I know. But they've also never attacked so slowly and so determinedly before either."

Lienta had no response. The only thing he could do at that moment was hold her close and never let go. Returning to their rooms, they ate a brief lunch before the summons came to join the Queen. Serenity immediately noticed their dark looks when they arrived.

"Have things gotten that bad?" she asked as they seated themselves.

Zeeda and Lienta spent the rest of the afternoon telling her what was happening, and what they had seen in their visit with Cartographer Wensel that morning.

"It is troubling news indeed." She said towards the end of their briefing. "But, I have faith in you and the rest of your people. And know that we here stand ready to aid your fight if needed."

"Thank you, highness." Lienta replied. "I hope it does not come to that however."

Unspoken was the thought that if things did in fact get worse, and the warriors of the void were unable to stop it - there would be little the forces of the Silver Millennium could do to save themselves if the fragments moved in.



"Ugh - you promised me it wouldn't be all meetings."

"Oh, stop pouting! It's not a meeting, it's a dinner. We're going to be introduced to the Princess." Zeeda growled. "And tomorrow we leave for Saturn. Now, didn't I ask you to be a good boy?"

"Boy? I'm a thirty year old man - in case you've forgotten."

"Perhaps you could refresh my memory after dinner then?"

Zeeda gave him a sly look as she left the room. Lienta found he had lost another round to his wife.

"How do you always manage to do that?"

"Do what?" Zeeda tried her best to look innocent.

"Totally derail me and run off with the victory."

"Oh, you poor thing. I'll make it up to you later."

"You'd better," he said with a grin, slipping an arm around her waist.

It was a small affair, as small as such functions could be at the Moon Palace anyway. Zeeda and Lienta were introduced to the future Queen. She was a lively girl of ten, with silvery golden hair and bright blue eyes. Behind her were the daughters of Mars, Venus, Mercury and Jupiter. Zeeda could tell they would be more than a handful as they got older, but was impressed with the unity the five of them showed at that early age. The Silver Millennium was certainly going to be in good hands.

None of the outer houses were present that evening, though Zeeda did have to admit not seeing Queen Uranus did not upset her. Their last, and only, encounter still bothered her. She had never wanted to offend anyone like that. They found themselves seated at the same table as King and Queen Jupiter - and that lady had certainly not forgotten their meeting years before.

"Legati, I must say I am still impressed with what I saw that day. That was a most remarkable feat."

"It wasn't my intention to make an enemy that day though."

"Pfft." Queen Jupiter smiled, waving a dismissive hand. "Queen Uranus is a good friend of mine, and I still end up on the wrong side of her on occasion. I think you scared her more than anything."

Zeeda smiled. She felt that she could certainly grow to like the woman sitting next to her. With her flashing green eyes and playful smiles, Queen Jupiter was a most entertaining dinner companion. King Jupiter was a bit more reserved than his wife, but they soon discovered his jovial nature and dinner was spent in pleasant and lively conversation. In fact, they were the last group to leave the hall that night, and not until the young princess of Jupiter had finally fallen asleep at the table.

Lienta and Zeeda took another stroll through the gardens after they left the dining hall, enjoying the twinkling twilight.

"Didn't someone tell me they'd make it up to me for being mean earlier?" Lienta murmured playfully standing behind her.

"Only after someone reminds me he's a man."



Earlier than he had wanted, Lienta found himself sitting down to a light breakfast before they left for their visit to Saturn.

"Can't you ever sleep in?" he muttered around a piece of toast.

"Can't you stop whining about that after ten years?"

"Never!"

Zeeda only smiled and shook her head. They would probably have the playful argument over sleeping in until the day they died. And she would not trade it for anything. Perhaps someday she would stay in bed long enough for him to think he had won - but it was so very hard to just lie there doing nothing after her eyes opened in the morning. Finishing their breakfast and gathering their things, they made their way to the transport chamber for the quick trip to Saturn.

"Aunti Zee!" A seven year old bundle of energy hurled towards them the moment they arrived.

"How is my little Hura?" Zeeda asked, gathering the little girl up into a hug.

"I lost another tooth yesterday." The little pixie proudly showed them her gap toothed smile.

"You're getting big!" Lienta ruffled her hair.

"There you are." They all turned as King Saturn entered the room. "You could have actually let them get into the palace Hura."

"But I haven't seen Aunti Zee in ages!" She pouted while the rest of them laughed as they made their way from the room.

16

"She looks so much like her mother." King Saturn smiled over at his daughter, curled up asleep on Zeeda's lap.

"Except for her nose. She has your nose." Zeeda replied softly. "How have you been?"

"It's hard sometimes, wishing she could be here to see everything." He sighed. "But, Hura keeps me on the go so much I don't have a great deal of time to feel too down."

"I can see that. I think I feel more worn out than when I've come back from a week long patrol." Zeeda smiled.

"Well, we'd best turn in ourselves. She's an early riser."

"Not two of them." Lienta grumbled.

"My husband is not much of an early riser." Zeeda said, in answer to King Saturn's confused look.



"Uncle Lien."

"Mmmph."

"Uncle Lien!"

One amber eye slowly opened to groggily look back at the two violet eyes peeking up over the edge of the bed at him.

"Wha ..." he mumbled.

"Time to get up!"

"Why don't you bug your Aunti?"

"She's already up silly."

Lienta buried his head back into the pillow, trying not to growl at the girl.

"Up! Up! Up!" Hura chanted, each one followed by a poke to his shoulder.

"No."

"Aunti Zee will come in next. I'm nicer than she is about waking people up."

"I'm not getting up, it's too early."

"You're no fun."

The little girl stomped out of the room. Lienta started to doze off again when he heard footsteps entering the room.

"Hura, I'm not getting up."

"Oh, is that so?" Zeeda purred in his ear.

"Doubly so for you, damn early risers."

"Poor baby." She gently kissed the back of his neck. "Go back to sleep - just not for the whole day. Remmus and Pluto should be here this afternoon."



"My Queen, I do not understand all that I see here."

Serenity turned from gazing at the map showing the void Wensel had before them.

"There is something I'm missing, I just hope the Legati can piece it together."

"It is their domain, they will know better than any of us," she replied.

"It should also help that I'm going to be sending more than just some still images back with them."

"The smaller map model will work?" Queen Serenity asked.

"Still a few details to fiddle with, but should work fine. And with it linked to the main map here, we should get more up to date information quicker to help analyze things."

"Not at the expense of our own system I hope?" The Queen hid a smile, she knew Wensel would never neglect anything.

"Of course not, your highness."

The map immediately zoomed back in. Everything looked normal, except a faint reddish tinge flashing in and out around Earth.

"What is that?"

"I don't know yet, my Queen. It flashes briefly, and then goes back to normal."

"When did it start?"

"Earlier today. Part of why I asked you to join me. I don't know what to make of it. The system gave it the same shade as that in the void, but it is a much weaker signature."

"And we can't very well go down and ask them without giving away things not for them to know."

Wensel gave her a confused look.

"Earth, our closest neighbor, is not yet a part of the alliance. By the charter we have with the other planets, I can confide nothing considered critical to anyone not allied with us. I can't tell them about the void, what we've seen here on the map - nothing at all. The only thing I can do is hope the negotiations go well and we have a new member to the alliance soon."



"So, you told him we'd be here later?" Remmus smiled and shook his head.

"He doesn't get to sleep in at home, and we are supposed to be on vacation."

"But you don't ever switch off, do you."

"I don't have that luxury, little brother."

"Don't let her fool you." Remmus grinned at Pluto. "Father said that even as a baby she was the first to wake in the whole house."

"But I hardly ever cried to wake the rest of them up - unlike someone else I know."

Pluto hid a grin behind her hand. It felt a little overwhelming at times, the gentle banter between the two siblings. Not having anyone but her father for the longest time, it was something she had never really experienced before. It was a different world, and sometimes she did not know if she really belonged in it.

"Oh, we'd better behave. Wouldn't want to scare my future sister away at the start of things."

Pluto blushed.

"It does take some getting used to, but you have a great guide." Zeeda smiled, and gently squeezed her hand.

"Who's gonna play a game with me?" Hura said as she ran up to them.

"What kind of game?" Remmus asked.

"The kind where a young lady does her morning lessons first." King Saturn's voice came from behind them.

"But ..." Hura started to pout.

"They'll still be here when you're done."

"But ..."

"We're not going anywhere Hura. Your lessons are important." Zeeda gave her a quick hug. "Besides, the sooner you get in there, the sooner you'll be finished."

"Oh, all right."

Shoulders slumped, Hura followed her father back inside the palace.



The next week went by too quickly for all involved, and Zeeda found it was hard to leave. It had been wonderful having the time to spend with Remmus and Pluto, seeing them with each other - a rather perfect match as everyone was beginning to agree. King Saturn had also looked happier for that week with the rest of them there. With Remmus now spending more and more time on Pluto, it ended up being Hura and her father alone too often. And while he treasured every moment with his daughter, there was something to be said for having some adult company on occasion.

Zeeda knew King Saturn would probably be fine, through she did get Remmus to promise to visit as often as possible. Hura took the end of her auntie's visit rather well. The two of them had shared a dream the night before, and Zeeda found out what it was to be fully connected with another person as the link between them finally made itself known. They had spent a good couple of hours in discussion with King Saturn and the others, mostly to convince Hura that it was something to not share outside the family. Not that they were overly worried about other people visiting that should not know, but they knew it probably would not be looked on kindly if it was made common knowledge. The only person outside of their group to know would be the Queen, because she had asked to be told, and because they knew they could hide nothing from her in the first place.

Queen Serenity was waiting in the transport chamber when Zeeda and Lienta arrived. "Legati, we have news from your father."

Zeeda froze, the look on the Queen's face meant anything but good news.

"There was an attack it seems, and your mother was wounded."

"How bad?"

"They have things stabilized, and so far she seems to be doing okay. We'll send you along shortly, but I need you to accompany me to visit Cartographer Wensel first."

"Does Remmus know?"

"We just received the news ourselves. Is he still at Palace Saturn?"

"He should be."

Zeeda dashed to the com panel. After informing her brother of the situation and assuring him she would contact him the minute she got home, they followed the Queen to the map room.

"Legati, I know you have more important matters waiting at home, but I must show you something." Wensel gave her the briefest of bows.

The large map disappeared, and in its place a smaller projection

came to life that mirrored it.

"It's far from being as perfectly detailed as the main map, but in a smaller room, it should give you enough to work from. I have also linked the two maps, so as you update yours, we'll receive the matching data shortly thereafter."

The projection vanished, and Wensel picked up a small cubic crystal from the floor.

"The transmission channel has its own carrier wave, so it will not disrupt any of the other com frequencies. And I've encrypted it so that only the two maps can talk to each other." He placed the crystal into Zeeda's hand, smiling at the amazed look she was giving him.

"Thank you. This - this will help us a great deal." Zeeda had to restrain the sudden urge to give the map maker a hug.

"Come and visit again Legati, I do enjoy it." Wensel said, with another small bow.

The three quickly made their way from the map room. They were almost back to the transport room before Zeeda remembered her promise to the Queen.

"Queen Serenity, the link between myself and Saturn has surfaced. We shared a dream conversation last night."

"This is different than the earlier link?"

"Yes. Queen Saturn and I never had direct contact with each other."

"While this is most unusual, I am glad in a way. Of all the people who could possibly be of help to the child of Saturn, I believe you are the best choice."

Following her into the chamber, they made their way back onto the transport pad.

"Do keep us updated," Serenity said with a smile, though Zeeda thought it a rather sad one as the transport lights surrounded them to send them home.



Husel was waiting in the transport chamber for his sister to return. Zornah was going to survive - after a fashion. The wounds were sever, and while she would survive, the healer had just told them her left arm was beyond saving. She was too weak still today for the surgery, but it would have to take place soon. He knew he was not losing his mother, but Husel still felt a little lost, and Zeeda's presence would be a comfort to the household. He had no idea why he felt that way, just that he knew it was true. Kalah was currently talking to Remmus, and Kullah was on his way with Toreenal to be on hand to help out if needed. The light flared, and when he could see again, Husel found himself already engulfed in a

hug.

"How is she doing?" Zeeda asked when she released him.

"She's doing okay. But the healer said he has to amputate."

"Father?"

"He's talking to Remmus right now."

"Actually, he's done, and you have a call to take Husel." Kalah said from the doorway. "A nice looking young lady."

Husel blushed, and quickly left the room. Zeeda gave her father a questioning look.

"It seems he's finally found someone he's interested in."

"That's some good news at least. How is mother really doing?"

"She'll survive, but the fragments damn near tore her left arm off.

It was a surprise attack as they were returning from a patrol."

"Are the attacks stepping up again?" Lienta asked.

"Not really around here, that's what bothers me the most. We haven't had anything happen in our area for a while now, and then this."

"Well, I have a gift that might help us out." Zeeda said, holding up the crystal Wensel had given them.

"What's that supposed to do?" Kalah had skeptical look on his face.

"Ever been to the map room when you were at the Moon Palace?"

"Yes."

"Well, we now have our own smaller version of that."

"How did you manage that?" Kalah's eyes widened slightly.

"They've been mapping the attack areas as we update them. I asked Cartographer Wensel if he could give us some hard copy images to bring back ... and we ended up with this instead."

"We'll have to inform the council."

"We'll share, but it's not leaving this house."

"Zeeda ..." Kalah started in with his command voice.

"No father." Zeeda shook her head, an edge to her voice. "They are the ones who decided a long time ago they wanted the alliance but didn't want to do any of the work. Besides, we're the most centrally located stronghold, so it makes sense for us to be the hub for things anyway."

"It's really irritating when you make sense sometimes." Kalah muttered.

"Then you shouldn't have trained me so well." Zeeda countered.

"You get that from your mother, who I need to get back to. And since the two of you are back, you can go take care of today's barracks inspections."

"Oh, joy," Lienta muttered under his breath, exchanging a pained glance with his wife.

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Zeeda and Lienta returned to the house hours later, both tired and in less than happy moods.

"Remind me to save the elite squads for last next time, that way we can end feeling better about things." Zeeda grumbled.

"I take it your last visit was as good as mine then?"

"I know they're relatively new ... but can people really be that clueless? I had one guy give me this blank look when I tried to explain to him why it was important to take care of his equipment."

"And the poor squad leaders, I think one thought I was going to blame him for everything ... but I just couldn't. I know it's not his fault we're getting new ones in that have more knowledge of planting fields than using a sword." Lienta passed a weary hand over his face.

"It's even worse when you realize they all volunteered to serve too. Thankfully we can split them up into the more experienced squads now that training is over, and we can hope they learn enough to stay alive." Zeeda shook her head. "The hardest one was the squad that had been out with mother. They're all beating themselves up over what happened. So I took them out of the patrol rotation for another couple of weeks."

"Was that a good decision?"

"They need to get themselves back together, and going out again too soon would just make more of a mess. They were only a week away from downtime anyway. I'll have them help train some of the new guys coming in."

They both turned as Husel rushed up to them.

"Oh, good ... you're back."

"What is it now?" Zeeda tried not to growl.

"Well, you uh ... know that call I got earlier?"

"Your lady love?"

"It's not like that!" Husel's face went scarlet. "We're just friends!"

"I'm assuming you'll get to the point soon?" Zeeda said tiredly.

"Well, she was upset. Seems Clan Brutalis visited since mother and I were last there."

"Oh ..." Zeeda did not like the sound of that.

"Have they already entered into marriage negotiations?" Lienta asked.

"Not yet ... but Clan Capartha is small, and they may not be able to stand against them if it comes to that."

"I understand the worry, but you know there's nothing I can do on the matter Husel." Zeeda told him gently. "Father and mother are the ones that have to make any such moves."

"But ..."

"I'll speak with father, but you'll need to decide if you want to really pursue the girl or not. And if she feels the same and it's not to just save herself from the attentions of that degenerate waste of flesh I should have killed a long time ago."

Husel only nodded, and left them standing in the middle of the main hall. Lienta's only answer was a tired shrug when Zeeda looked over at him. She was close to resenting having returned from their all too short visit on Saturn. Life had been much simpler while they were there. Now, they had to pick up the pieces again, and all she wanted right then was a long soak in the tub and to sleep for a couple of days. She knew the sleeping thing would never happen, but she left strict instructions that if anyone disturbed her in the bath for anything other than a matter of life or death, they would not be able to sit right for a month.



The night was long, and those in the main house at Clan Centurious slept little. The healer said he would be back in the morning to see if Zornah was recovered enough to survive the surgery, and a certain amount of dread settled upon the family. They all sat gathered around the dining table attempting to eat the food before them, though none had much energy or desire. Zeeda knew they still had to call a council meeting to discuss the new map given to them, and any further plans it would help with, but her mother was more important right then ... the rest of the void would just have to wait a little longer.

Wisely, the healer brought assistants with him, as he felt it too much to make the family go through the process themselves. Instead, Kalah and the others prowled the corridor outside, waiting tensely for news. Though they all tried to keep such away, thoughts of the night Marshant had died were echoing through their heads. None of them wanted to voice what would happen if Zornah did not pull through, and they stared at nothing in a grim silence. After a few hours, they all felt ready to burst when the healer finally exited the room.

The surgery had gone well, and Zornah looked to make a full recovery. Though, they were all left with instructions to keep her resting for as long as possible, and to not push things too much after that even.

She would still be weak for a time, the remaining injuries still needed time to heal. That, and it would take some time to adjust to the loss of an arm. Breathing a sigh of relief, Kalah sent his children off to their duties, as Zornah was still asleep from the ordeal.



"Husel! Why are you here?" Remmus asked the face in the screen before him.

"Zee said it was my turn. Mother's doing fine. The surgery went fine, without complications and the healer said she should recover well - just going to take some time."

Remmus felt himself relax finally. He had been wound up so tight the past couple of days waiting for news he had nearly driven Pluto crazy.

"That's good to hear. You'll tell her I'm waiting to hear from her myself, right?"

"Sure thing." Husel smiled.

"How's everything else?"

"Same as usual."

Remmus decided against reminding his little brother that he had not been there in so long he had no idea what 'the usual' was anymore.

"Remmus ... can I - can I ask you something?"

"What can your big brother do for you?"

"H-how did you know when you'd found the right one?"

"The right one what?"

"The right girl." Husel mumbled.

"Oh ... well ... I just did."

"Did it make you feel all funny inside?"

"A little." Remmus smiled. "Why?"

"Just curious," Husel replied quickly, turning a faint shade of red.

Remmus held back a laugh. Of all his brothers, Husel had been even more reserved in nature than Kullah. Which did not surprise him. Having so many siblings come before you made it easy to feel lost sometimes. But he knew they had all doted on the baby of the family, and it was hard to imagine his little brother now coming to him for advice about girls.

"Does she feel the same for you?"

"I don't know. We haven't met too many times."

"Well, you know, it only took once for me."

"But you're you." Husel reminded him.

"True, but you won't know until you ask."

"Can't go on any more visits. Father and the others won't have much time for such things."

"They've always made time."

"More important things to worry about."

"Husel, even father will tell you there's nothing more important than family. Have you even asked them?"

"Kinda."

"Don't make me set Zeeda on you."

"I already talked to her, she can't do anything until she talks to father ... and with everything else it hasn't happened yet."

"If it's something you really want, you're going to have to help it along if you can. I wouldn't be where I am if Zee hadn't helped."

"Your situation was different."

"Not that much different, just more difficult." Remmus said with a grin. "Look, just remind her and go from there."

"Okay, I better sign off."

"Take care of yourself, little brother."

"You too."



Remmus sat in front of the blank screen for a moment, part of him wishing he was home. Never before had it felt so hard to be so far away from them. Getting up, he made his way back to the sitting room where he had left Pluto. She was still curled up in the same chair with the same book. Sinking down to the floor next to her, he rested his head against her leg.

"Was it that bad?" She asked gently.

"No, everything's fine. Mother came through the surgery fine, and looks to make a full recovery."

"What's wrong then?"

"Just hard being so far away. Husel was asking me for advice."

"About what?" Pluto inquired, gently running her fingers through his hair.

"Girls, love ... stuff I don't know much about."

"I find that hard to believe." she laughed gently.

"You were the first and only one." Remmus said, tilting his head up to see her face.

"Oh ... oh Remmus."

Pluto smiled as she looked down into his golden eyes. Somehow, he always knew what to say to make her melt just a little more. It still felt on occasion as if it was all just a dream, that there was no way such things could be happening to her. She was the future guardian of time, whenever her father decided to hand the role over completely to her. Pluto had no right for the affections directed towards her from the man sitting before her on the floor. And yet, it was slowly becoming harder and harder to imagine things without him. Even when they were apart because of her

duties, she knew he was there waiting - that he would be waiting for her always.

Remmus closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle comfort of her fingers as they ran through his hair. He still felt homesick, but he knew that he was where he belonged. Zeeda would kick his ass if she ever suspected for one second he doubted his choice in coming. She could be worse than their mother sometimes when it came to seeing those around them happy. He still wanted to see his family again, all together - even if it was just for a few brief moments.

"Remmus."

He opened his eyes as she shifted positions.

"I've been talking with father about you and I going to visit your family. He thinks it might be a good idea."

"You're serious?"

"When am I ever not serious?" Pluto replied, her lips drawing into a slight frown.

The frown was soon wiped from her face, as Remmus rose up and captured her lips in a most passionate kiss.

"What was that for?" she said softly when they finally parted.

"Thank you." Remmus replied, his head resting on her shoulder.

"I just want you to be happy." Pluto wrapped her arms around him tighter. "I know how much you miss them, miss being home. And I still feel guilty sometimes that I took you away from all that."

"Don't think such things. And certainly never out loud around my sister. She'd beat it right on out of us."

Pluto giggled in spite of it all, mostly because his warm breath tickled her neck.



A week after the surgery, Zornah was feeling much better. Her recovery was also sped along by the news that Remmus and his dear Pluto would be coming for a visit in another couple of months. She wanted to be much more mobile by then, and grudgingly gave in when Kalah and Zeeda had to order her to take it easy.

Zeeda had set the map up in a room off the practice hall, as it was one of the few both large enough and without windows in the house. Kalah contacted Lord Afont about the impromptu council meeting, and the word spread on down through the rest of the clans. Zeeda had exploded when informed that Clan Brutalis would be coming.

"They're unwelcome! They've been unwelcome for fourteen years now!"

"Zeeda, the council allowed them back in." Kalah tried to explain.

"The council was bullied into letting them back in and none of those damn idiots have a brain or a backbone!" She pounded a fist on his desk. "And they did it without a full gathering; let's not forget that *little* detail."

Kalah sighed. While it was true that those considered unwelcome needed the full council to be allowed back into the ranks, it had happened none the less. And there was little they could do about it now.

"No wonder they started in on Clan Capartha about a marriage contract. They had to know we were there first. I should have killed both of them when I had the chance."

"I wasn't going to order you to kill anyone. You were sixteen and didn't need that action hanging over your head." Kalah growled.

"And look where that's gotten us." Zeeda replied, cooling slightly. "I'm sorry father, I know it's not your fault."

"I did warn Lord Afont that if they set one toe out of line, they'd be dealing with you."

Unspoken was the thought that the warning went beyond just those from Clan Brutalis. There very well might be blood spilled at the meeting coming up in two days.

"Speaking of which, did you get in touch with Lord Lurent about coming early for a visit?" Zeeda asked.

"I did, and he should be arriving later today with Lady Tanatha and their two daughters. It's been hard for them since their son and his wife were killed a year ago. Otherwise, the daughters wouldn't have to worry about marriage for a while longer."

"Why was I put into it so much earlier than anyone else we know?"

"You do not like your husband?" Kalah teased. He knew full well the bond between his daughter and Lienta.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. Your mother and I figured that it would be best to find someone who could assist in controlling you at an early age."

"Oh, very funny." She tried to glare at him, but her smile gave her away.

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Zeeda stood waiting with her father and Husel for the members of Clan Capartha to arrive. She did have to admit she was curious to see the girl her brother liked. Young woman, Zeeda corrected herself silently - she was not *that* old yet that Husel was to be considered a boy still. Husel looked slightly nervous, and Zeeda wondered if he would faint before their guests arrived. The light flared in front of them, and when all had recovered, they greeted their guests.

"Lord Lurent, Lady Tanatha, welcome to Clan Centurious." Kalah gave them a warm smile.

"Ah, Lord Kalah. Good to see you again." Lord Lurent replied. "Our daughters, Orlen and Laraunt."

Lord Lurent was a slender man, with blond hair going slightly gray and lively green eyes. His height, hair and eyes were mirrored in his youngest daughter Laraunt, though she had her mother's features. Lady Tanatha was rather short for one of the void, but warm brown eyes and a welcoming smile more than made up for any difference in height. Orlen shared her mother's curly brown hair and eyes, though she stood slightly taller.

"I believe you already know my son Husel, and this of course is my daughter Zeeda."

"It is a pleasure to meet you." Lady Tanatha smiled.

"If you would follow me, I'll take you to your rooms," Zeeda said, helping with the bags.

"Oh, you don't need to do that." Lady Tanatha sounded worried that their hosts were carrying their luggage.

"It's not a bother Lady." Zeeda replied, a warm smile on her face.

Lady Tanatha did not seem to be completely mollified, but as Zeeda was already heading out of the room, there was not much she could apparently do to stop her. Husel followed his sister's example and assisted Laraunt with the rest of the bags. Following their hosts to the guest wing, they were all rather delighted with their rooms. Zeeda and Kalah left their guests in Husel's care, both needing to attend to other duties that afternoon. Besides, he was the one that needed to make a

more lasting impression on what could be his future family.

Zeeda's mission that afternoon was to see if she could find two men from their legions that could be trusted to work with the map and serve as messengers as needed. It had been her plan to ask the council for two men from each clan that could come to serve the same duties. That way, everyone that could be, would be represented, and they would have more than enough people to share the duties.

It was going to be bad enough that there would probably be enough of them grumbling that Clan Centurion got all the perks. But they had made that decision a long time ago, and she was more than a little unwilling to let anyone else take over the visits to the Moon Palace now. It was a selfish feeling perhaps, but it had been the sole duty of her Clan for well over two hundred years - so it did not bother her all that much.

Nodding to the men on guard duty at the gate, she made her way to the compound commander's office. The man on duty in the outer office jumped to his feet and saluted the moment she entered the room.

"Legati!"

"At ease Centurion. Is Commander Harper available?"

"Let me check Legati."

He disappeared down the hall, returning almost immediately.

"Commander Harper is in Legati."

"Thank you."

Zeeda made her way down the short hall to the office at the end. It was not an overly large room, but large enough to serve the purpose of the compound commander who dealt with most of the everyday issues when the troops were present at the stronghold. A large table to the left of the door was covered with various maps, though it was the only untidy thing in the room. Everything else was neatly in its place tucked into the various shelves and cubbies built into the walls.

"Legati, what can I do for you today?" The commander rose from his chair.

"Please, you don't have to get up Harper."

"I must set the proper example for the rest of the legions, Legati." he replied, though it was with a warm smile.

Commander Harper had been with them since before she was born, and had watched with close to fatherly pride as the woman before him had grown up into the commanding being she was now. There was not a man in the compound that would not give his life for her, along with the rest of the family of course, but Zeeda was special - though none of them would ever admit it, even to themselves.

"I need two men, volunteers of course, to become both cartographers and messengers. They will be working out of the main house."

Commander Harper nodded, she had shown him the map a few

days ago, and it had filled him with wonder. To be able to see their entire quadrant of the void in one glance was every battle field commander's dream - and theirs had certainly come true.

"Perhaps an older veteran and a newer recruit - but hopefully one not so green." Zeeda continued.

"I'll have the squad leaders give me their choices, and we can narrow it down from there. So, the council will agree to leave it here?"

"The council doesn't have a choice in the matter." Zeeda's smile was grim. "And on that matter, we could use a couple of men up at the house to help escort people for the meeting."

Harper raised an eyebrow, they had never asked for such before. Not that he would question one of his commanding officers, but it would be nice to know why troops would be on hand to play guard duty during a council meeting.

"Okay ... well, Clan Brutalis will be present. Let's just say I'd like to have some extra bodies that know how to use a sword around. Just in case things get ... ugly."

"Ah, that is understandable Legati. I trust a half squad of elite troops would be sufficient?" Harper grinned.

"Yes, that would be just fine." Zeeda grinned back at him.



Kalah had only shaken his head when a half squad of disguised elite Legionaries had arrived at the house the morning before the meeting. Was Zeeda intending on going after the whole council? She just might, if they did not keep her on a tight leash. He would have to remind her later that he still outranked her in every way possible, but he did not mind not having to be in the transport room to meet everyone as they arrived. That was something he would most assuredly have to keep to himself however. Lord Afont was the first to arrive, and he did not miss the message of the well trained soldier that escorted him from the transport chamber to join Kalah and Zeeda in the study.

"Is the armed escort truly necessary?" he asked them.

"You're the ones that re-welcomed Clan Brutalis." Zeeda said flatly. She had long ago lost her fear of the man before her.

"Legati, you will watch your tongue." Kalah barked.

"As you command, Legatus." Zeeda gave a quick bow of her head and left the room.

"Not keeping the leash tight enough Kalah?" Lord Afont observed.

"Don't give me that shit. I have half a mind to let her off it today and just sit back and watch what happens." Kalah glared at his long time friend. "You all know what you did, without a full council I may remind

you. And we all know what happened two hundred years ago."

Both men were silent for a time. Two hundred years ago, the clans had gotten together, and many of them had declared they were tired of dealing with the members of the alliance they had made with the kingdom on the Moon. They had barely been outnumbered by those still wishing to maintain their outside allies, and Clan Centurious had stepped up and declared they would be the ones to keep it alive. And so the clans had dispersed again, content they did not have to worry about such things anymore. No one had ever asked to take the mantle from their shoulders. If anyone ever wanted to admit the truth, they would state that the alliance was truly between Clan Centurious and the Moon Kingdom - but no one would ever voice such thoughts.

"I fear the stress of the increased fragment activity will have us all at each other's throats before too long." Lord Afont broke the silence.

"If that happens, all the clans will fall." Kalah observed coldly. "If we start fighting each other again, something that hasn't happened for thousands of years, we will lose everything. And there won't be enough pieces for the watchers to put anything back together."

"Then, let us hope your daughter has enough up her sleeve to keep such from happening."

A knock sounded at the door.

"Enter." Kalah called.

"Legatus, all council members able to have arrived. Legati Zeeda has them gathered in the main hall," a centurion said from the doorway.

"Thank you."

"Let's get this over with." Lord Afont said, not feeling the cheer he tried to put into his voice.



All eyes in the hall turned to the two men as they exited the study. The group was a mixture of slightly angry folks, and those quietly amused at the escorts Zeeda had provided that were now stationed around the crowd along the walls. Zeeda smiled internally, let the fools think what they wanted. Outwardly, the only thing they gathered from her was a faint hint of boredom. Lienta beside her was projecting only calm, though he could feel the faint tension in the men gathered in the hall.

"Thank you all for coming. As was stated, this is not a truly formal meeting. Lord Kalah and Legati Zeeda have new information they wish to share with everyone." Lord Afont addressed those assembled, gently directing things in Zeeda's direction.

"Thank you, Lord Afont." Zeeda inclined her head slightly. All eyes turned towards her. "My family was entrusted with a special map by

those of the Moon Kingdom. It should prove most useful in our efforts against the fragments. If you would follow me, we would like to show you."

Though a few muttered grumblings rippled through the crowd, they all followed Zeeda to the room she had set the map up in. They arranged themselves around the walls, waiting to see what was so special. Stepping to the center of the room, Zeeda bent down to activate the crystal. Awed murmurs soon replaced most of the grumbling as the map soon filled the area before them.

"Is this the actual void?" someone asked.

"Yes, this is a true representation of our quadrant. Strongholds are the white spheres, with the red areas being all fragment attacks I knew of to date." Zeeda replied. "You can see the emerging pattern to the attacks."

Pointing to the smaller outlying clans, Zeeda hoped they could anyway. It was apparent to just about anyone, but some of the men in the room could be a tad stubborn - if not totally clueless.

"I see a lot of attacks as happen normally." Lord Thalet sneered.

"And I see my clan, and other outliers like myself taking the brunt of the action Thalet." A slender man with tired eyes moved away from those of Clan Brutalis.

"Lord Nuren speaks truth, which we can plainly see here on the map." Lord Afont spoke, hoping to avoid a fight.

"I have a theory, if anyone would care to listen." Zeeda was still standing in the middle of the map.

"Please share with us, Legati." Lord Afont nodded to her.

"As we can all see here before us, and as Lord Nuren has reminded us - the attacks are not happening as they have before. They are concentrating their efforts on the smaller clans, and leaving the larger ones relatively untouched." Zeeda paused, so far it seemed to be going fine. "They're either trying to take out the smaller clans first before moving on, or they're doing such so the rest of us will send aid. Then, they would be free to go after the less protected larger clans - and everything we protect elsewhere."

"You're saying the fragments are ... organized?" Lord Nuren asked her.

"I don't know for sure, but it has every appearance of being organized in some way. This," she bent down and touched one of the crystal's sides, "is what the attacks looked like from the last time we had so much activity."

This time, the red areas shifted to be relatively equally dispersed across the void. It was a marked difference from what was currently happening, not even Lord Thalet could argue with the evidence now before him.

"So, we're supposed to weaken ourselves to help those already weak?" Tupor spoke this time and not wholly with his father's blessing.

Zeeda turned the map back to the present, and zoomed in closer to the white sphere that was the Clan Brutalis stronghold. Four smaller clans, their markers almost totally consumed by the red areas, were before it.

"Well, you can choose to keep your troops around your cowardly ass at home and simply wait for the four clans in front of you to fall." Zeeda said with a shrug. "I personally would not wish to sacrifice four clans for the delusions of one."

"You would do well to remember who you are speaking to." Lord Thalet exclaimed.

"And you would do well to remember where you are." Kalah said quietly, his anger starting to rise. And here he thought he would have to restrain his daughter. "Clan Centurious will send aid to any that request it, you have my word on that and you may tell your neighbors that could not be here today this as well."

"Clan Torpel stands ready as well." Lord Tulowe said, stepping forward to stand with Kalah.

"Clan Capartha may not be as large, but we will also aid our neighbors." Lord Lurent joined them.

Lord Thalet quickly restrained his son from any further speech, seeing whatever support they might have had slowly dwindling. Zeeda was elated - things had gone far better than she could have ever guessed. And to top it off, she had not had to threaten anyone at sword point.

"My plan is to request two men from each clan able to come here to work the map and serve as messengers when needed. That way we are all a part of this. The map was given to us to help everyone, not just Clan Centurious." Zeeda said.

"That is a sound plan Legati." Lord Afont gave her a small smile. "Perhaps we could adjourn back to the meeting hall to discuss things further."

Zeeda turned the map off as they started to filter out of the room. She noticed Tupor approaching from the corner of her eye, and pretended not to.

"You'll get yours bitch. Make me look like a fool." He snarled.

"Lord Thalet, if you wish to keep your son alive, you would do well to remind him of his manners when he's away from home." Zeeda did not even acknowledge Tupor, stepping past him and out the door.

"I do suggest you take great care with yourselves while you are here, Clan Brutalis. I would hate to remove you from the council again," Lord Afont said with a cold smile as he ushered the two from the room.

Two centurions remained outside the door, set there as guards by Zeeda as she left the room. She did not trust Tupor to not try something stupid like destroying the map. The closest he had gotten to her had only been a couple of feet, but she still felt like she needed a bath. Joining Lienta in the study, she shuddered, trying to rid herself of the feel.

"Ugh, I feel dirty just being in the same building as that ass." She shuddered, running her hands up and down her arms.

"I don't like it - them being on the council again. And I'm sure those that agreed to let them come back are starting to regret the decision after what happened in the map room," Lienta said, coming up behind and wrapping his arms around her.

"I think we have most of the clans on our side now ... or at least we opened their eyes enough today they can finally see."

"What are you two doing in here? We're gathering in the meeting hall." Lord Afont said from the doorway.

They both turned, confused looks on their faces.

"Last time I checked, I wasn't a member of the council." Zeeda replied.

"And I no longer have my seat as a member of Clan Torpel." Lienta reminded him.

"Oh, to hell with that. If I can let them talk me into bringing those two idiots back, I can talk them into letting you both back on."

"But, we only have one remaining set open since Remmus left."

"Not if your father decides to step down from his voting seat. Now, come on."

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The meeting went on well into the evening, with most details ironed out as to who all could afford to send men to become cartographers. It was concluded by welcoming Zeeda and Lienta to the council, and there were only two disappointed members sitting at the table. An even better moment came when Lord Lurent had quietly informed Lord Thalet that under no circumstances would Clan Capartha welcome any further visits from Clan Brutalis in the future.

Though it was not confirmed just yet, he was relatively certain that his daughter would soon be joined with the youngest from Clan Centurios. Lord Thalet had taken the news with little disappointment, he had been expecting such since his son had not kept a better guard on his tongue earlier. Tupor had scowled all the way to the transport room, with more than just one centurion escorting them.

With everyone finally gone except for Lord Lurent and his family, Kalah wanted nothing more than to retire to his study for a few quiet moments alone. He was surprised to find the centurions all gathered inside around Zeeda.

"Planning on taking over my study too?" he asked her.

"I was only thanking them before sending them back to the compound." She turned back to the assembled centurions. "Don't forget to stop by the kitchen and get the food Masy has waiting for you."

"Thank you Legati," they replied.

"You earned it, putting up with council members all day."

"Only doing our duty Legati," the squad leader replied.

"Tell Masy to give you one of the small kegs of ale also," Kalah added.

"Thank you Legatus. Legati."

Saluting, the men left the room, keeping their surprise well contained. The eight of them would probably never forget the day they received so much from their commanders for doing so little. Masy's meals and the ales they served at the great house were spoken of with longing and desire in the compound's mess hall. Not that their food was awful - indeed not, they had some of the best cooks around according to troops

that had visited. The clan kept them all supplied with the best of everything. But it still did not compare to Masy's cooking.

"That was a nice touch father," Zeeda said with a smile.

"You said they earned it, and you can't have a meal by Masy without a good ale," he replied. "Now, give your father some time alone."

"Yes, sir."



"Aunti Zee!"

Zeeda smiled as the dream started and Hura rushed towards her. Though their surroundings were a faint hazy garden, the two of them were always crisp and clear whenever they met.

"How is my little Hura?"

"I got to meet the people on the moon!"

"Really?"

"Well, just the Queen and the Princess, but they were so nice. Father took me to this big dark room where there was this man with funny hair - and I got to see where you live! Is it really dark and cold there?"

"No." Zeeda chuckled at the little girl curled up in her lap. "It's not dark, we have the light from all the stars you see in the sky here too. And it's never very cold."

"That's what father said. I wish I could come see."

"I do to, but it's not a good time for outside visitors here right now."

"Why not?"

Zeeda paused, how was she to explain the trials of war to a little girl she hoped would never have to experience such? "Right now, we're fighting against bad things. It's not a safe time to visit."

"You're fighting evil monsters?" Hura trembled.

"They're monsters, but I don't believe they're truly evil. They're confused lost soul fragments that don't know any better."

"Like the people who don't like me?"

"Yes, it's a little like that. And how do you know about such things anyway?"

"I overheard father and Sarte talking one night. I was supposed to be in bed, but I couldn't sleep. I don't like to see him sad. Why are people so mean?"

"Because they're scared Hura. They don't understand, and people often fear things they don't understand."

"But ... I'm not scary, I'm just a little girl!" A faint purple glow surrounded Hura's small frame.

"Hura, you can't let it bother you. You know the important people love you."

"It's still not right."

Zeeda paused, Hura was not pouting - she was angry. And the purple glow around her was growing stronger. Was this part of her powers leaking into the dream? She was intelligent for her age, but she was still a child, and there were things she did not fully understand yet. Zeeda winced, feeling like the girl was burning her arms and legs, but they were in a dream!

"Hura, you need to calm down."

"It's not fair!"

The light flared out from her, and Zeeda felt a searing pain roll across her entire body. She knew Hura did not realize what she was doing, it was a great power for a child to even attempt to control. Zeeda did not know if this is what the power of Saturn was supposed to do, it was probably attempting to protect the little girl - but anything used in anger could cause pain, even if only meant to heal.

"Hura, please calm yourself," Zeeda said, her voice pained.

"Oh ... oh no ... not again."

Hura shook, trembling from head to toe. The purple light vanished immediately to Zeeda's great relief. Though it still bothered her she could feel pain in a dream. She held the little girl closer.

"I'm sorry Aunti Zee," Hura said in a small voice, sobbing into Zeeda's shoulder.

"Shhhh, it's okay." Zeeda rocked back and forth. "We just need to find a way to help you control your power."

"It only happens when I'm mad."

"Anger is a normal emotion, it's not something we can never experience. You have a great power little one, and it only meant to protect you."

"But I hurt you."

"It's only a dream, and I know you didn't mean to cause anyone harm. Now, I want you to go back, wake up and tell your father."

"He'll be mad at me."

"Oh no, I don't think he'll be mad at you. Just tell him what happened, and that he and I should probably talk soon. Will you do that for me, my little Hura?"

"Yes."

"Good, now it's time to go."

Zeeda's voice faded as they both woke from their shared dream.



King Saturn lay staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep yet again. He thought that seven years after the loss of his wife he would not have

these issues anymore, but the bed still felt empty, and he would lie awake all night at times. The door to his room slowly opened, and he turned his head waiting for his daughter to come in. She was the only one that never knocked in the middle of the night.

"Daddy ..." Hura paused beside the bed, her face pale and scared.

"What's the matter little one?"

"It - it happened a-again."

It took his over tired brain a moment to register what she was talking about. A few days before, she had accidentally broken a vase in one of the sitting rooms. In her anger at herself, her powers had lashed out, leaving a scorch mark in a perfect circle around where she had been standing.

"Weren't you asleep?" He said, sitting up and gathering her trembling body in his arms.

"It w-was a dream ... and ... and I - I hurt Aunti Zee!" She wailed, sobbing into his chest.

"Shhh, everything will be okay." He rocked her gently. "What happened?"

"We were talking, and I got mad."

"You were mad at Aunti Zeeda?"

"No, I was just mad. And it happened, and she was holding me."

"It was just a dream, I'm sure everything is fine."

"Aunti Zee told me to wake up and tell you, and that you should talk to her soon."

"Yes, that's probably a good idea. Now, you should try to go back to sleep."

Hura was silent for a moment.

"It kinda ... well ... I kinda destroyed my bed," she said in a small voice.

King Saturn froze for a moment. His powers had not awoken at quite so early an age, and he did not fully understand what was happening with his daughter. Of all the times he needed his wife to help him, this was certainly one of them.

"Well, then you can sleep in here."

"I'm scared daddy."

"Everything's going to be fine, don't you worry." His words sounded more confident than he felt. Light, he hoped everything would be okay.



Zeeda woke, screaming as pain shot up her arm as Lienta's hand gently brushed against it as he turned in his sleep. Slumber that suddenly came to an end.

"Zeeda!" He snapped awake.

"Oh ... darkness," she moaned in pain again.

Fumbling to light the lamp by the bed, he turned back in shock. Zeeda's side of the bed was scorched and burnt, mirrored in angry red burns across her body.

"What in darkness!" he cried.

"It was only a dream."

"Dreams don't do this."

"Hura ... Hura's power." Zeeda's voice was raspy. "You have to help me up. I need to talk to King Saturn."

"I don't think ..."

"I know I shouldn't be moving, but it's important." She scowled up at him.

"At least let me send for the healer."

"That was going to be my next suggestion. But first, the com room."

Zeeda groaned again as he helped her up from the bed. She knew shock might set in at any moment, and she needed to make sure Hura was okay first. It hurt like nothing she had ever experienced before, but she knew it would be faster if she gave in and let him carry her down the hall. The incoming call light was already flashing when they arrived, and soon King Saturn was looking back at them.

"Zeeda!" he cried in alarm.

"Don't blame Hura." Zeeda winced as she sat in the chair Lienta brought over. "I didn't get her calmed enough when it first started."

"What happened?"

"It started the same as any of our other dreams. Then the conversation turned to her wondering why the people around you were so 'mean' as she put it - why they were scared of her. Apparently she overheard you and Sarte talking one evening, and at her age she just doesn't understand it yet."

"But this - in a dream?"

"I was hoping you'd know. She started to glow purple, then it got stronger, and it felt like she would burn a hole right through me."

"I honestly don't know what's happening. My powers never manifested like this."

"And the House of Saturn hasn't had a daughter in how long?" Zeeda reminded him.

"True ... it's been so long I don't think anyone remembers the last time."

Everyone was silent for a moment, Zeeda trying to ignore the pain, King Saturn lost in thought.

"Why - why don't the two of you come here?" Zeeda finally broke the silence.

"What?"

"Why can't her training happen here? Perhaps it would be better

to get her away from your ... friendly ... neighbors for a time."

"I don't know." King Saturn passed a tired hand across his face.

"I know it's a crazy idea, but she'd be surrounded by people that love her. Think about it."

"I'd need to see the Queen about doing such."

"I trust Queen Serenity's wisdom."

"Well, I should get back and see if she's sleeping again now. Your bed wasn't the only casualty." King Saturn said, with a grin he did not quite feel.

"Oh, the poor thing must be scared out of her mind."

"We'll get through this. You'd better have those burns looked at."

"It's my next matter of business to attend to."

"We'll talk again soon."

King Saturn ended the transmission, and Zeeda slumped against the console before her. It had taken a great deal of control to keep her mind off the searing pain she felt all over, and now the chills had started to set in. Lienta wasted no time in returning her to their room, laying her on his side of the bed that had remained untouched by whatever had happened. She slipped into a dreamless slumber before he left the room.



"I have never seen burns like this," the healer said in confusion as he inspected Zeeda's wounds. "These aren't natural."

"Is there nothing ..." Lienta's voice dropped off.

"There is a salve that should help with the pain at least, but I truly do not know how to properly treat this." He turned and gave the shaken man beside him a warm smile. "Don't you worry, if anyone can pull through it's her. We need to give her as much cool liquid to drink as we can manage. Though there is no heat as one would expect with such."

Lienta only nodded numbly as the healer left the room to prepare whatever concoction he thought would help. Zeeda stirred, her face etched with pain, but she did not wake. First Zornah's incident the month before and now this. Were the women of Clan Centurios cursed?

"No, there is no curse." Kalah's voice came from the doorway.

Lienta turned in surprise, he had not realized he had given voice to his troubled thoughts.

"It's something I've asked myself more than once. I believe it's an occupational hazard when you love the women we do."

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Zeeda woke a few days later, groggy - but the pain was a great deal less than before. Turning her head, she saw her mother's relieved face looking back.

"Mother?" she croaked.

"You've been asleep for a few days now," Zornah said, bringing her a glass of water. Between the two of them, they managed to get about half of it drunk, the rest spilled down Zeeda's chest. "We're a sorry pair, aren't we."

"It's fine mother. What is this sticky smelly stuff on me anyway?"

"You gave the healer quite a challenge. He had no idea how to treat burns that weren't burns, and this was what he came up with. It's supposed to help with the pain, or so he says."

"I think it's working, at least it doesn't hurt as much as before. But does it have to smell?"

"Aren't all medicines nasty smelly things?" Zornah laughed. "You do look a lot better, well, at least the scorch marks are fading to some rather lovely bruises."

"Oh, that's just wonderful. You think I could take a bath?"

"I'll go see. Besides," Zornah held up the pitcher that had been on a table beside the bed. "We're out of water to spill."

Lienta and the healer entered the room a few minutes after Zornah had left, both looking very relieved.

"Ah, awake at last. And how do you feel?" the healer asked.

"Sticky, smelly, and sore." Zeeda replied.

"Yes, well, it was a bit difficult deciding how to best treat whatever you got yourself into this time. But since you're feeling better, I don't think we'll have much to worry about now."

"So I can wash all this off?"

"Yes, I'd say so. Though I am going to leave you a small supply if the pain gets to be too much."

"Thank you."

The healer nodded and left the room.

"You need anything?" Lienta asked, sitting gently next to her.

"A kiss and a bath. Don't forget the bath."



Remmus and Pluto arrived two weeks later, and by then Zeeda was mostly recovered, though the bruises had not yet fully faded. Zornah was elated, her son had finally come home for a visit, not that she had not seen or heard from him since he left - but it was never the same as having him under her own roof. Kullah and Toreenal would be joining them as well in a few days, and it meant more to her than anything having all her children together again.

Remmus found his room just as he had left it, with Pluto down the hall in Zeeda's old room. Family never stayed in the guest wing, or at least not any of them. He had noticed that his sister seemed to be moving around a bit slower than her normal self, but decided to not ask what had happened. She was hiding something, but if she did not want to share, nothing he could do would make her. After putting away what few things he had brought with him, he turned to see Pluto standing at the doorway.

"You told me it was a small house." She teased gently.

"Compared to most palaces, that's exactly what it is," Remmus said with a grin. "There's just the house, the compound, and the homes for soldier's families and the like."

"Remmus, anywhere else this would be considered a rather large city." She shook her head. "The public gardens are almost as extensive as those on the moon!"

"We like people to be comfortable, to have a nice place to enjoy themselves," he replied with a shrug.

"How do you grow up with all this and still remain grounded and modest?"

"We don't really have much to do with the townspeople, other than protecting them if the fragments attack here. They rule themselves, and go to the compound commander first if there are any issues."

"Ah, so you're just the handsome figurehead then."

"Something like that."

"Well, come on. You've shown me everything but your own private gardens."

Taking his hand, she dragged him from the room and downstairs into the main hall that was just a hair smaller than her own back home. The garden was filled with fresh blooms, sadly no longer decimated as much since Turna had died.

"Oh, you didn't tell me you had a pool!"

"You never mentioned you liked to swim."

"I didn't pack anything ..."

"I'm sure mother and Zeeda will be able to help you find something." Remmus chuckled, wrapping his arms around her from behind.

"The view is amazing. It always changes doesn't it?"

"A little. We're in some odd controlled orbit attached to the edge of the galaxy where you are, but we don't turn at the same rate. Father can explain it better."

"But then, the area of the void you're in changes as well, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but that's why the clan strongholds are situated around the entire thing."

"But, wouldn't that mean these fragments would just attack whatever came along next?"

"If they thought that way, yes. Once they come across something though, they stick with it."

"Sounds very confusing."

"It is."



"They've been out there all evening."

"Father ..."

"Kalah ..."

He turned to the two women seated at the table behind him.

"What? I thought they came to visit us?"

"It's as much a visit to see us as it is for Remmus to show his princess a part of him she's never seen. They're going to be here for a month," Zeeda replied.

"But ..."

"I'm sure Pluto can take care of herself dear. Besides, they're both adults now, older than anyone else in the room when we had private moments together," Zornah said, giving Zeeda a wink.

Lienta chuckled softly into his mug of ale, wisely staying out of the conversation. Zeeda had relayed to him from her mother what had transpired inside the house on their first special evening.

"Remmus is a proper gentleman around her, so I doubt we have anything to worry about." Zeeda added as her father returned to the table.

"You're all against me." Kalah grumped.

"Finish your dinner before it gets cold." Zornah told him.



"It never gets cold here, does it?" Pluto murmured, her head

resting on Remmus' shoulder.

"Not really, the environmental shield keeps it pretty much the same temperature most of the time. And since we don't really have night or day like most places, it can be just a little boring."

"I'm glad though, I'd hate for it to be cold tonight."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because ..."

Remmus found he was glad they were already sitting on the ground when he felt Pluto fumbling with the closure near the collar of his tunic.

"Because I'd really hate to freeze my ass off out here tonight."

He placed his hand over her trembling one, stopping her for a moment while he turned to look at her. A pair of determined garnet eyes gazed back.

"I'm tired of waiting," she whispered fiercely.

Their lips met, and everything around them was forgotten.



The young couple found Zeeda and Lienta still awake in the study going over maps and troop deployment lists when they finally returned to the house. Zeeda managed to keep a straight face when they came into the room and sat on the couch.

"Masy saved you some food, since you missed dinner," she said with a grin.

Remmus and Pluto both turned a very interesting shade of red.

"Were we like that?" Lienta asked his wife, not so silently.

"Nah, we were worse - we were younger."

"Zee ..." Remmus growled.

"Oh, if you expect your big sister to not pick on you ever, you've been away too long."

"Why are you still up?" Pluto desperately wanted to change the subject.

"We have to have troop deployment details ready to go for tomorrow morning." Lienta replied.

"You're leaving?" Remmus asked.

"We still have to work. Besides, you should spend some time with the rest of the family. Like not missing dinner again or we'll never hear the end of it from father."

"But we ..." Remmus stopped with a gulp.

"You'll find ways," Zeeda said with a wink as they left the room.

"She's too observant for her own good." Remmus pouted.

"Because she cares. Now, I am feeling a little hungry," Pluto said, giving him a quick kiss before dragging him up from the couch.



The rest of their visit passed by too quickly for everyone, Zeeda and Lienta especially since they ended up missing a great deal of it out on patrol. As much as Remmus was looking forward to returning, a part of him felt very reluctant to leave and not be a part of things. He had seen the tired frustration on his sister's face, knowing they were all pulling double duties because of Zornah's injury. But as much as she teased and badgered him about everything else, he knew she would never ask him to come back and help - and it made him angry. So much so that it was beginning to show, until Zeeda pulled him aside one evening for a talk.

"You want to tell me what's bothering you?"

"I should be here. I should be helping."

"Remmus, we're doing just fine. And if you think for one darkness damned minute that anyone here in this house would drag you away from Pluto and toss you into the middle of this mess you've completely lost your mind."

"It's not right! I can't just sit by and watch all this happen."

"Well, you're going to. In two days, you're going to get back on that transport pad, and you're going to travel back home with the woman who's going to be part of our family soon, and you're going to live."

"What do you mean?"

"We may be your family, but this is not your life. You caught the impossible dream, and you'd be an idiot to let it go. And because I never, ever want to tell that woman in there talking with mother that you went and got yourself killed." Zeeda's voice cracked.

Remmus paused in shock. His sister had never talked like this before.

"If you came back here to fight, I'd be the one giving the orders that may result in your death. I'd be the one that would have to make the worst journey of my life to tell your future wife I got you killed. I can barely stand to tell some woman I've never met that her husband, brother, or son won't be coming back - please don't make me do that to Pluto."

"I ..."

Remmus could not find the words, so they sat there in silence for a long while. He had never known this side of things, never had to see or deal with the same things Zeeda had - though he was sure that if he had stayed he would have eventually. And mostly, she was right. This was not his life anymore, he had a new one, and none of them were angry at him for not being there. None of them hated him as much as he was apparently trying to hate himself for feeling like he had deserted them. They did not hate him at all, they only wanted to see him happy.

Zeeda felt drained. For so long she had tried to shield her brothers from the horror and pain as best she could. It probably was not the best of

decisions, but she had always felt like it was her job. She had trained herself to be the way she was, she had made the decision. And her first test had come at the age of nineteen, only further reinforcing her desire to keep it from them. Her other motives were indeed selfish. Of all the sister-in-laws she had and future ones to come, Pluto was the one she felt was most like the sister she had always wanted to have. Even though they only saw each other rarely, she felt as protective over her as her brothers. She did not know if she would ever have the strength to look into those garnet eyes and tell her Remmus was dead.

Pluto came upon them, sitting together in the garden with their heads leaned against each other. It was a tender moment, and she turned to not disturb it, but the gravel under her feet gave her away. They both turned and smiled at her.

"Come join us," Zeeda said warmly.

"She's done chewing me out." Remmus added.

Pushing apart, they made room between them for her on the bench.

"So, you two aren't going to make mother and father wait much longer are you?" Zeeda teased gently.

"Zornah just finished asking me the same thing," Pluto laughed. "I think we'll have a sit down with father when we get back."

"Good!"

Pluto felt odd for a moment, with Zeeda's arm around her shoulders, and Remmus' around her waist. She'd never felt like she belonged to something so special before - and here was a new family that already considered her one of them and they were not even officially married yet.

"You kids have room for one more?" Lienta's voice came from behind them.

"I think we can manage one more," Zeeda said, turning to give him a smile.

It was a tight fit, but they managed to get all four of them on the bench - laughing and carrying on like little children.

"Why didn't anyone tell us the party was out here?"

They all turned to see Kullah, Toreenal, Husel, Laraunt, Kalah and Zornah behind them.

"I don't think we can fit any more people on the bench." Remmus laughed, getting up to greet the brothers he hadn't expected to see again before he left.

"Well, you young people can sit on the grass then." Kalah replied.

Zornah just beamed. She had no idea when she would see her family all together like this again, and she was simply going to enjoy an evening in the garden with all of them. Bittersweet memories of Marshant came back to her for a moment, and the rest must have guessed what she was thinking in that brief silence because she soon found herself in the middle of a four way hug between Zeeda, Remmus, Kullah and Husel.

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I think on that night I finally forgave my mother. Neither of us could ever forget all that happened when Marshant died, but the wound between us that had merely scarred over earlier wasn't quite as bad after that. We never saw each other all together like that again, life has a tendency to get in the way sometimes, and we were all kept rather busy.

We would finally see Remmus and Pluto married the next year, and we were only a year away from Husel and Laraunt's marriage as well. Our house filled again a few months after Remmus and Pluto returned, as Queen Serenity had finally convinced King Saturn that it was indeed a good idea to bring little Hura to us to further her training. I don't know what she did, or how she managed it, but I knew that once Serenity had made up her mind, there was no way to change it. Maybe it was the Queen part, but it was so much like mother acted at times I didn't think that was all of it. I suppose that a Queen feels she is a mother to all those around her in a way.

With all that we had to look forward to, the fragments had other ideas I guess, and that year also saw the first of many that would come where the attacks were ever more aggressive, and our lines were slowly pushed back. Neighbor stood with neighbor, and when a smaller clan's stronghold was destroyed, we welcomed them into our own homes. Because all we had then were each other, and if we hoped to survive, we would need that unity.



"And who do we have here?" Master Zilbrach found himself once again at Clan Centurious, back to train another warrior - even if it was a little different this time around.

"My name is Hura."

"And what am I to be teaching you?" the "retired" blade master trainer asked.

"Her weapon is a glaive, so staff work would be a good base." Zeeda supplied.

Zeeda had called in a favor. As much as she wanted to be there, and she would be helping whenever she could, too much was happening for her to be little Hura's sole trainer. And she had thought no one else better for the job than her own trainer, Master Zilbrach. He had of course reminded her that he was old, retired and cranky - and she had just laughed and told him that would be perfect as his student was a very determined eight year old girl. That had intrigued him enough to bring him over for a visit, and Hura had wasted no time in getting him wrapped around her little finger.

It had taken a bit of convincing with King Saturn - who had finally told them to call him by his given name, Sastur, when he grew tired of all the 'milords' and such being thrown his way good naturedly - when Zeeda had told him of her initial plans for Hura's arms training. He was not sure he wanted Hura to worry about such at her age, but Zeeda had informed him that before she had ever had to worry about mastering her power to create shields, she had learned how to control a weapon and everything after that had become second nature. And since the Silence Glaive would be in her hands whenever she made the transformation into the protector of Saturn, it made perfect sense she know how to use it properly - because you could not always rely on having time for an energy attack.

Laraunt would be Hura's main sparring partner, as Zeeda knew it would be rather hard for the girl to start out against her - no matter how much she held back. Clan Capartha had fallen to a rather nasty attack, and with the impending marriage, it had only made sense that they come to Clan Centurios. A second slightly smaller clan house was under construction (they could only extend the environmental shield so much), and the barracks and compound were being enlarged along with new houses in the village to help get their new neighbors settled. Though Zeeda knew they would prefer their ancestral grounds, the entire area had been lost and no one knew when it could again be reclaimed - if ever.

Clan Centurios was not the only one taking on extra people. Many of the smaller outlying clans had suffered the same fate. They joined with their neighbors, and some had even banded together and were rebuilding new strongholds together. Their losses were not overly large yet, but all had the feeling it would get worse before it ever got better. The map room and the com room were in a constant state of activity now, with weekly updates from Wensel when they thought they discovered something new on the larger map on the Moon.

King Pluto had nothing new to report on the shadow voices filling the halls of time, though they were growing a bit more agitated at times. They had so far exhausted all the research in both realms, and still had nothing to show for it. The message was not getting any clearer, and they

grudgingly admitted defeat for the moment. He knew he could not press Zeeda for much more, as they had their hands full with more immediate concerns - he just wished he knew what was going on.

Having Clan Capartha join them did give one major benefit - it meant those of Clan Centurious could attend Remmus' wedding without having to worry that someone stayed behind. Kullah was the only one unable to join them, but they did steal Toreenal for a few days instead. Zeeda had spent the entire week before they were scheduled to leave making sure all would work well between their legions and those of Clan Capartha. Lord Lurent had laughed at her worry, saying he suspected that Commander Harper could most likely run things without any of them there. He had even gone so far as to request the help of a few of their elite centurions to help whip his own troops into better shape.

Commander Harper took an instant liking to the second clan lord, and between the two of them, and Lord Lurent's own Commander Yurie, they had things running smoother than anyone would have guessed.



"Would you stop fidgeting?" Pluto gave Remmus an exasperated look. "They'll be here soon."

"Sorry, I don't know why I'm so nervous. Not like I've never seen my family before."

"True, but you've never been married before," she teased.

"And you have?" he replied with a grin.

"You're sure Zeeda will be okay standing up with me?" Pluto asked - she was his sister after all - and they all knew Zeeda's love for dresses.

"Of course she will. I know she already considers you her sister, so I don't see why not."

"As long as both sides are even."

"Well, you'll have Zeeda, Uranus, and Neptune. And I'll have Lienta, Husel ... crap."

"We're one man short now that Kullah can't come."

"The only other people I know are your father and King Saturn. You have any cousins I don't know about?"

"No. Oh, I can't ask any of the girls not to be there."

"Well, Toreenal is coming."

"That wouldn't look right."

"Wait a minute, wasn't Uranus on your case about making her wear a dress? She's worse than my sister. Why don't we pair her with Neptune?"

"That might work, that gives us two couples - then who else?"

"Husel and Laraunt or Toreenal."

"Husel and Laraunt should work."

"Now," Remmus said, pulling her into his arms. "Are we done with last minute crisis?"

"Light, I hope so." She gave him a quick kiss. "Now, you welcome your family. I need to go make Uranus happy with me again ... and hope we can get all the clothing finished in two days."



Pluto was once again back in her friend's good graces when she announced the change in plans to Uranus. It amazed her sometimes how much the stubborn blond princess was like Zeeda - the two of them had too many things in common really. Though she was wise enough to keep such thoughts to herself. She still had no idea how she was going to convince Zeeda that a dress for one day would not be such a bad thing ... and she fully expected to pay for it at some point in the future if she did manage it. Hopefully Zornah would be able to help.

"You want me to what?" Zeeda looked at her like she had sprouted a second head.

"It's just for the ceremony, and dinner and dance afterwards - just one day." Pluto pleaded. This was worse than when she had first wrangled Uranus into it.

"You know I'll find some way to return the favor, right?" Zeeda said with an evil grin.

"I expected such," Pluto replied with a resigned sigh.

"I suppose we should get the fitting done then."

Laraunt had just shaken her head, trying not to laugh. They would be making history in more ways than one. And everyone was sworn to secrecy that Lienta would not find out until the day of the ceremony if possible. A feat that was not all that hard, as the men and the women were kept relatively separated, and very busy in the two days leading up to the wedding. And so in a flurry of activity, the palace on Pluto never slept in those two days.



Things were looking like they would go off without a hitch, until Kalah came pounding on the door of the chamber the ladies were getting ready in.

"Zeeda! It's an emergency!" Kalah shouted.

"Who died?" she asked, sticking her head out the door.

"We've all tried to help - Remmus can't call his armor," he whispered.

"You're joking right?"

"No, we need your help, please."

"Just a second."

Zeeda closed the door and turned to the rest.

"Apparently, Remmus is beyond nervous. Help me out of this dress so I can go rescue him and not spoil the surprise."

A maid rushed over and helped her out of the gown Pluto had talked her into. It was not all that bad Zeeda had grudgingly admitted, as it was a simple floor length thing that clung to upper curves and went straight down without any big full flouncy skirts. She hurriedly threw on a pair of pants and a loose tunic and joined her father in the hall.

"We don't have much time."

"I know, and I have to put the surprise back on still, so let's get this over with."

The two of them rushed through halls to the other side of the palace to where Remmus waited with the rest of his party.

"Clear the room please." Zeeda demanded, not paying attention to anyone but the nervous wreck of her brother.

"Oh, thank the darkness ... Zee ... I can't ..."

"Silence!"

Remmus snapped to attention, just like when they were younger, trembling slightly with nerves still.

"You're a warrior of the Clan Centurious! This is unacceptable. Close your eyes, deep breath, and think!"

Eyes closed, Remmus took a deep shuddering breath and concentrated with all his might on his armor and what it looked like.

"Open your eyes," Zeeda said gently. "And for darkness sake, breathe!"

Remmus let out the breath he had been holding, taking another gulp of air before he opened one eye and peeked down to see himself standing in his armor. Relief flooded through him, and he looked back at his sister with a sheepish grin.

"Thanks sis."

"You're welcome," she said, giving him a hug. "Now, just relax. Everything will be fine. And now I have to go get ready again. You still haven't told Lienta, right?"

"My lips are sealed." Remmus grinned at her.

"Good."

Zeeda rushed out of the room and back to the room where the dress was waiting for her. And she still had to let them fuss with her hair! She was rather glad clan weddings were simpler affairs.

"Is everything okay?" Pluto asked as she entered the room, looking slightly worried.

"Everything is fine. The idiot got himself so worked up he couldn't call his armor." She laughed as she stripped and stepped into the waiting gown. "And now the hair I guess."

22

"Well Lord Kalah, a few years ago I never would have expected to be where we are now," King Pluto said with a grin, passing his guest a mug of ale.

"Certainly am glad it's finally here though."

"That, I can drink to!"

They clinked mugs and took a drink.

"Save that for the party after it's all over." Zornah entered the room. "I gave Lienta the ring for safe keeping - with as much as Remmus has put us through this morning, I'd hate for him to lose it and pass out. Zeeda has the other one."

She had given them the ring Kalah had first given her when they had married, that his father had given his mother. As eldest son, it was up to Remmus to keep up the family tradition. Just as Lienta had given Zeeda his own mother's ring. King Pluto had been exceptionally grateful, not having had the heart to take the ring of his own wife's finger when she had passed. Though he had regretted it not being there to give to his own daughter. But Pluto had only smiled, kissed him on the forehead and told him it was where it belonged.

"It's time sirs, Madame." The steward announced from the doorway.

Zornah took Kalah's offered arm, and the two of them walked down the aisle between the seated guests to their seats at the front. Husel and Laraunt followed shortly behind them, taking their places at the front of the hall. Behind them came Uranus and Neptune, a perfect looking couple as everyone agreed. There was a longer pause for the next pair, mainly because Lienta had frozen with his mouth hanging open slightly when Zeeda had stepped out from behind the screen that kept the ladies hidden. He honestly thought he was in the wrong place, or that someone had switched out his wife with another woman. The vision walking towards him in a dress, her hair half coiled up on top of her head, with the rest curled and flowing around her couldn't be his Zeeda.

"Close your mouth dear, you look like a fish." Zeeda murmured as she took his arm and gently steered him down the aisle.

Zornah hid a grin behind her hand seeing the blissful shock on Lienta's face as they came towards them. Keeping it a surprise had certainly paid off. Everyone turned as the two of them took their places to watch Remmus make his solitary walk to join the others at the front. He still looked fairly nervous, and Kalah prayed his son would make it through to the end. Finally came the moment most looked forward to.

Pluto walked down the aisle on her father's arm, a beautiful vision in a gown made out of an odd fabric that went from silver, to pale purple, to green as she moved. Her long hair was down, creating a shimmering dark green veil down her back, and in her hand she held a single void bloom. King Pluto placed her hand in Remmus' and took his seat in the other front row next to King Saturn and Hura.

The officiant was a short jovial man, with a smile as wide as his whole face. This was certainly the most unique ceremony he had ever been asked to perform. Pluto had worked long and hard to mesh the void ceremony with the traditions of the planetary houses, and it had turned out rather well.

"Friends, we gather here today to witness the union between this man and this woman." He smiled at the couple before him. "With all that may cross your path, through good and bad, hardships and triumphs, you stand together as you do here - with each other side by side. Two become one, and may nothing tear you asunder. Can any of those assembled here to witness find any reason we should not continue?"

"No!" called out some of the crowd, those familiar with the void ceremony the loudest. The rest were just a tad confused.

"And so, you Tribuni Remmus promise to love this woman? To be true and stand with her through all that passes?"

"I will."

"And so, you Princess Pluto promise to love this man. To be true and stand with him through all that passes?"

"I will."

"May I see the tokens?"

Zeeda and Lienta passed the little man the two rings.

"Let these tokens that show everyone the love for each other you hold in your hearts forever bind you together."

He handed Remmus the ring first, and with a shaky hand he managed to slide it onto Pluto's finger. Pluto followed, her hands trembling just as much.

"Then, let it be done!" The officiant clapped his hands. "Give the girl a kiss now," he said quietly to Remmus.

As their lip met, the guests behind them broke into applause and cheers, led on by Zeeda and Husel in proper void tradition.



The dinner over, Lienta and Zeeda stole a quick moment together in the gardens before the wedding ball began. He was still floating in a shocked happy daze.

"I still can't believe she got you in a dress," he murmured, wrapping his arms around her.

"Oh, she'll get paid back someday." Zeeda grinned.

"Don't be too hard on her love."

"I'm not that mean, it'll be something small, and something fun."

"Hey you two, you better get in here for their first dance.

Apparently, it's tradition." Kalah called from the door.

They slipped back in and stood with the crowd watching Remmus and Pluto dance the first dance of the evening. Many a contented sigh passed through the crowd from the female guests at the sight the two of them together made. The start of the second song signaled the others could join them, and Lienta wasted little time in dragging Zeeda out towards the middle of the dance floor. This was a chance that would probably never come again, and he meant to make the most of it.

"You know, we should really have more things like this back home."

"And just when and where are we supposed to have fancy balls like this, husband dearest?"

"I don't know, but I could certainly grow to like them."

"As long as you don't have to be involved in the planning and setup, right?"

"Of course."

Zeeda tossed her head back and laughed.

"You're impossible," she said, kissing him lightly.

"And you love it." He grinned.

A tap at their shoulders stopped them, and they turned to Remmus.

"Can I steal my sister briefly?"

"I suppose, but briefly." Lienta told him as he moved away.

"So, little brother, what does it feel like now that it's all over?"

"Were you this relieved you survived?"

"Of course, but then things were a bit simpler back home."

"I still can't get the picture of Lienta's face out of my head when he first saw you. That was the best moment ever." Remmus laughed.

"Don't tell your bride that. Seeing her was supposed to be the best moment ever."

"She was disappointed she missed it."

"Oh, look at that."

Remmus turned to see what Zeeda was smiling about, and saw Lienta twirling around the floor with little Hura in his arms. She was giggling non-stop at being included on the dance floor with the rest of the adults. Pluto came over next to them where they'd stopped.

"That is so cute!" Pluto smiled.

"Dance with your wife," Zeeda said, giving them both a quick hug before joining Lienta and Hura.

"Aunti Zee! Dance with us!"

"I don't know, should we let her?" Lienta said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Of course!" Hura replied enthusiastically.

"Well, can't ever say no to my two favorite ladies can I?"

"I'd certainly hope not." Zeeda said as they spun across the floor.



"Oh, I might be able to forgive her for the dress, but these shoes!" Zeeda grumped as they entered their room. "Or perhaps I should blame someone who insisted on dancing almost the whole evening?"

"And when would I ever get such a chance again?"

"Never if I can't walk after today."

"Well, I think I can fix that." Lienta bent and tossed her over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking your shoes off."

"Could have done that from a chair you know."

"This is more fun."

"Says the person without a shoulder digging into their gut."

"Quit squirming and it'll be over faster." Lienta finally succeeded in removing the shoes, and gently set Zeeda back on her feet. "Now, what about one more dance?"

"Haven't you had enough?"

"No." His lips trailed down her neck as they slowly revolved in the middle of the room.

"It's so hard to be mad when you do that." Zeeda purred.

"I know." His hands slid up her back. "How many damn buttons did they put on this thing?"

"Not such a fan of the dress now are we?"

"Oh, I most certainly am. Just next time, less buttons."

"What makes you think there will be a next time?"

23

Zeeda, Lienta and Toreenal returned two days after the wedding, allowing Kalah and Zornah to stay a while longer than they had first anticipated. The fragments were on the move again, and they felt better returning to have more hands available to fight. Kalah had tried to remind Zeeda that she did not outrank him when she ordered him to stay, but there had not been much effort put into his fight to return with them.

They arrived in the middle of a flurry of activity, and did not even have time to take their own luggage to their rooms. Lord Lurent dragged them immediately to the map room, updating them to all that had occurred in the short time they had been gone.

"This is the ballsiest attack I've seen in all my years. So far, they haven't gained any ground, but apparently the fragments don't need sleep. And I'm not sure fresh troops will arrive in time."

"They've been going non-stop for three days?" Zeeda asked.

"Pretty much. People can only hold large shields for so long, and things are starting to fall apart."

The newly made clan cartographers pressed themselves up against the walls to make room as the three commanders entered. The map was currently zoomed in closer to the area where the main battle was taking place, but flashing red areas indicated smaller attacks were taking place elsewhere. What disturbed Zeeda more was the large blank area where nothing was happening. She could not explain it, but it nagged at her that there was nothing showing there.

"Where are the bulk of the troops?" Lienta asked.

"Arrayed along the yellow line there." Lurent pointed. "We just sent four full squads, two of mine and two of yours, and I can only pray they make it in time."

"What of this area in the center? We have any advance scouts out?" Zeeda asked.

"No, there hasn't been anything happening there. The only thing that has saved us right now is that the fragments tend to forget they're fighting in the empty depths of space. Darkness help us if they ever start thinking in three dimensions."

"Zee, you have that look." Lienta prodded.

"Maybe I'm crazy, but looking at the main battle and these smaller areas all around a big empty area makes me think we're missing something." She shrugged. "I don't like it, but I can't explain why."

"A contingent of squads from Clan Torpel is close by, we could have them take a slight detour and just have a look." Lurent offered.

Toreenal nodded as the three of them turned to her. She could join up with the forces from her own clan at the waystation.

"I can meet them out there with a squad or two. We're just a bit closer." Zeeda said, her mind made up.

"Take First and Tenth squads Legati, they're as close to full strength as we can get right now." Commander Harper said from the doorway.

"And what do you want me to do?" Lienta asked.

"Pray to the demon damned darkness I'm just crazy." Zeeda muttered as they left the room.



Zeeda stuck her head into the First Squad barracks and told them they had fifteen minutes to ready themselves for a scouting mission before heading off to do the same for Tenth Squad. All thirty two men were assembled before her in the central square in less than ten.

"Centurion Tallus reporting, First Squad ready Legati."

"Centurion Mahlet reporting, Tenth Squad ready Legati."

"At ease." Zeeda gave them a brief smile. "I know you're probably wondering why we're not heading off to the main lines right now. But there is an area between both areas of attack where we have no advance warning if the fragments decide to come in from behind and take the field of battle from three fronts. We're going out there to make sure there isn't something special waiting for us. We will be meeting up with a few squads coming from Clan Torpel, though we are closer to Waystation Nine and may make it before them. Any questions?"

"And if we find anything Legati?" Centurion Mahlet asked, mainly in benefit for the new legionaries in his squad.

"We show them what the legions of Clan Centurios can do."

The men cheered, a short controlled outburst.

"On the transport pad in fours, two from each squad!" Zeeda commanded as Lienta joined them.

"Two squads, two Legati," he murmured in response to her questioning look.

She nodded curtly, with a small smile as the two of them stepped onto the compound's transport pad. Toreenal's quiet presence followed behind them. In a few seconds, they found themselves in Waystation

Nine. Scattered throughout the void were other such staging areas that made travel as fast and efficient as possible, and as places where traveling troops could rest between patrols. It was one large room that could easily house ten full squads, with a transport pad at one end and large heavy doors at the other. Lienta and Zeeda joined the scouts - two men from each squad - at the doors where the environmental shield kept them safe from the nothingness beyond. Scouts were chosen for their ability to sense fragments before they were seen, when such men were available.

"I want you out ahead no further than a half league. Pull back the moment you sense anything, if there's anything out there for us to find." Zeeda ordered, watching the four men leave the waystation.

"Legati, com reports Commander Kullah and the squads from Clan Torpel will be here in twenty." A legionary reported from behind them.

"All men through and ready Legati." The two squad leaders were behind them as well.

"Alright, you heard the report on Clan Torpel?" The two men nodded. "I want two men from each squad to remain here with Lady Toreenal to wait for them. I've already sent the scouts on out ahead. First Squad with me, Tenth Squad with Legati Lienta. Lose range sweeper formations."

Lose sweeper formations would spread the men out, but still keep them close enough together if they did run into any trouble.

"Legions, shields up! Lose sweepers by fours!" the squad leaders called out.

Zeeda and First Quad left first, each soldier's personal shield glowing a faint gold color. They were the only points of light in the void - partly so they could see the area around them, and to keep track of each other. The shields also helped link them together slightly, so one man would not go drifting off into the emptiness of the void around them. While most armies fought on solid ground, those of the void often had nothing underfoot, and the worst fate was to be lost drifting through empty space. While some might have said floating around in space fighting things was easier, it took a great deal more control to keep oneself oriented properly and moving forward than most people knew.

Zeeda was in no hurry, this was only supposed to be a simple scouting mission to prove she was not crazy. They could not afford a mistake however, even if it turned out the quiet area was really just that. They were only thirty minutes out from the waystation when Zeeda cursed, seeing the two scouts from First Squad heading their way at a quick pace. She signaled for the squad leader and com officer to join her, and expanded her shield to encompass all four men. It was not truly necessary, it just made it a little easier to talk.

"Report." Zeeda commanded.

"They're out there Legati." One of the scouts answered.

"Any idea how many?" Zeeda kept her curses to herself, though

her mind was running through everything she had in her vocabulary - and wishing she knew more.

"Rough estimate, twice that at the current front Legati," the second scout stated.

"Com, broad channel. Tell whoever is listening, we need whatever troops in the area they can send, and we need them an hour ago."

The com officer nodded and activated the com link he carried with him, reporting on their position and situation. His head gave a few quick nods before holding the headset out for Zeeda.

"Lord Lurent for you Legati."

"Lord Lurent ... Yes, looks like I'm not crazy after all, unfortunately. Preliminary estimate is twice that than what we're fighting over in Sector Twelve ... As many as you can as quickly as you can."

Zeeda passed the headset back to the com officer and stood staring at the darkness before them for a brief moment while she set up what would be the best plan to hold things off until their reinforcements could arrive.

"Staggered pairs, as far apart as possible without making the line weak. Clan Torpel should be here soon and more are coming from Clan Centurious and Clan Capartha. We have to hold as long as we can."

It was not lost on any of them that currently they only had thirty-two men ready for the first wave of a coming surge of fragments bent on destroying them, but they were well trained, and they had their orders. Centurion Tallus relayed her orders, and the men were soon in place. The com officer stayed at his post by Zeeda's side, even though she now had the secondary headpiece settled on her head.

"Legati Lienta ... Yes, staggered pairs as far apart as we can handle ... Lurent is sending reinforcements, and Clan Torpel should be here soon ... you have better numbers than I do? ... No, same report as I received ... Still wish I had only been crazy, I'd rather have been wrong this time out."

The com officer said nothing as he overheard the quiet comment at the end of the conversation between his two commanders. A seasoned veteran, like all of the elite First Squad, he had faith in the woman young enough to be his daughter.

"We have word from Clan Torpel yet?" Zeeda asked him without taking her eyes of the space in front of her.

"They just reached the waystation Legati."

"Give them the command channel."

Zeeda soon had Kullah's voice in her ear.

"We're thirty minutes directly out from the waystation ... Two squads ... lose staggered pairs ... Twice that ... split, two squads on either side with mine in the center ... Reinforcements coming from Centurious and Capartha ... You'd better get out here before we have all of the fun."

Zeeda cut off the transmission as she saw the first signs of the fragment advance collide with the shields of the men in the first rank of her squad. It was a test, like sticking your toes in the water to see how

warm or cold it was, and that meant things would only get worse. Swords in hand, she moved forward, the com officer following suit a few feet behind on her left, reporting information as he saw it the entire time. She could hear Lienta over the command channel announcing they had their first meeting of forces, and gave him a quick affirmative reply. All hell broke loose in the next few minutes.

Zeeda shifted her personal shield to be more like a tight fitting second skin, and stood her ground in the center of the small line her squad of sixteen men made. Two men were already down, and she wondered if standing their ground had been the best of plans right then. For the next hour though, the only thoughts running through her head were concentrating on sword work, and the occasional shield wall to momentarily pause and confuse the attacking fragments. The four squads from Clan Torpel had reached the area halfway through the first major attack, and the clan warriors were all holding the line rather well. But there still were too many of the fragments, and too few of them.

After the first hour, First Squad was down to half strength, and Tenth Squad was not much better. Zeeda worried they might not be able to hold until the reinforcements arrived, but they could not allow fragments of such number to come in from the back door. And so they continued to fight, shoving aside the weariness that was more deadly to them than the fragments they fought.

"Legati! They're here!" The com officer's voice shouted from the headset in her ear.

"Tell them to fill the holes along the line, fresh squads to the front!"

Zeeda and the others would not be leaving the field, but darkness knew they all needed a brief moment to collect themselves. The men's spirits were bolstered by the arrival of additional troops, but still Zeeda knew it was not going to be enough. And there were no more troops in the immediate area that would reach them in a timely manner. She could only send another report to Lord Lurent and pray they could hang in there long enough for him to scrounge up more support for this second major battle.

A master blade though she was, a few cuts dribbled blood down her arm from where fragments had managed to penetrate her shield. Still, both swords continued their deadly dance.



"Wounded and dead to the waystation." Zeeda's tired order carried on up and down the line where the battle still waged.

They still held, only having been pushed back slightly, but a half

day of fighting was starting to show in the exhaustion all along the line. She had been moving along it holding shields up long enough to allow sections to rest briefly, but even she could not keep going much longer at her current task. The com officer still had no good news and any further reinforcements were still hours away. Her eyes had gone so dark with frustration and anger that they appeared nearly black. Then, the unexplained happened, and it seemed like everything paused for a moment.

A bright light flashed off to her left where Kullah and his squads had been fighting. It was nothing that they had ever seen before - an explosion of dark energy - Zeeda would find out later. All she knew was that a force wave of dark radiation was traveling out from the center of the explosion that would be upon them in seconds. Without a thought to her own safety, she launched herself upward over the din of the battle and sent out as large of a shield dome around the troops in the area as she could.

The dark energies destroyed everything in their wake, warriors and fragments alike, and Zeeda felt like she had been sealed in a keg and rolled down a very rocky hill as it hit the shield. As quickly as it came, it was over. Before the darkness took her, she thought she saw another such explosion coming from Lienta's direction.



Lienta's heart froze at the deafening silence on the command channel. First the odd explosion and a cut off cry from Kullah, to nothing from Zeeda. He could see the massive shield she must have thrown up around the area where she was, and realized they would probably need something similar. He barked orders for all men to gather together and join shields while he tried to follow Zeeda's example to give them more protection. Instead of hitting as large an area as possible, he concentrated on a longer slimmer one that shot up and down the lines of men from where he was located. With his attention directed towards the first explosion, he nearly missed the one that suddenly happened off to the right of his position.

Caught in the middle of the two blasts, Lienta could only try to keep the shield up and hope it ended soon. He could faintly hear the com officer yelling into his headset of their current situation, and hoped that the wave of energy would dissipate before it got anywhere near an inhabited area. He did not want to think of what would happen if the blast had happened near a clan's environmental shield. They were designed to create a livable area and keep out general radiation - not protect against something they had never experienced before that could

destroy everything in its path in a matter of seconds.

Opening his eyes in the sudden stillness, Lienta saw the com officer rushing towards him.

"Reports coming in Legati, no survivors yet from Clan Torpel. First, Third and Eleventh squads report heavy losses. Second, Fifth, and Sixth squads report the same."

"Legati Zeeda?"

"Alive, but condition unknown."

"All able bodied men left are to scour the area for survivors, get the dead and wounded back to the waystation."

The com officer nodded and relayed his commands to the other squads, glad to turn away momentarily from the darkness on Lienta's face. After two hours of fruitless searching, Lienta and those that had remained behind to search for any survivors returned to the waystation. Nothing remained of the four squads of soldiers from Clan Torpel, the heaviest loss that of Kullah and Toreenal. Lienta shoved that aside, the remaining men needed someone in command. With Zeeda in an unknown condition, that was him.

Waystation Nine felt empty. Of the four Clan Centurios squads, they could possibly form one and a half squads, two and a half if you included the wounded. Clan Capartha was down to one surviving squad. The shrouded forms of the dead were not as large as one would expect, thanks to the destructive power of whatever had happened that day. That thought brought no one any cheer. The wounded were patched up enough to make the trip back to the compound, though every man there refused to go unless Zeeda was taken through first.

Lienta stood at the transport pad, watching as two of the men from First Squad carried the still, battered form of his wife towards it. Those still on their feet stood at attention as they passed, saluting. He managed a weak smile as his eyes traveled across the room, shielding his eyes as the transport lights flared. If Zeeda was to be the first, Lienta would be the last to leave, and he waited as the men made their way to the transport pad with the wounded first. He wished he could think of something to say, but his exhausted brain could think of nothing that would make the situation any better.

The men seemed to sense his feelings though, and all able directed a nod his way when they were unable to salute. Stepping on the pad with the last two men, Lienta was not truly looking forward to being home. The only thing he wanted to do was be at Zeeda's side, but duty came first, and that included informing both sets of parents of their losses that terrible day. It would not ever be given a name other than the Battle at Waystation Nine, but for those that had been there, it would never be forgotten.

Opening his eyes, he found Commander Harper waiting for him with the survivors assembled behind him. He still had no idea what to say to the men, but he had to come up with something. Motivational speeches

were really Zeeda's area of expertise.

"Today, we faced the horrors of battle." His voice sounded empty in his own ears. "The odds were against us, but no one gave ground. You faced it all with strength and courage, the likes of which will not be soon forgotten. I am proud to have stood with you, and will gladly do so again."

Commander Harper nodded, Lienta's words had not been the greatest of speeches he had ever heard, but they had the intended effect on the men. He turned and dismissed them before following Lienta towards the main house.

"The infirmary was full, so the rest of the wounded are in the empty training barracks for now."

"As much as I wish otherwise, they'll probably be full again soon." Lienta answered.

"Your words were good Legati, letting the men know you were proud to fight beside them."

"Legati Zeeda would have done better."

"Perhaps, but the men know the difference between the two of you. And they also know where your heart was at that moment."

"What would we do without you, Commander," Lienta said with a dry chuckle.

"I'd rather not imagine such a world sir. If you'll excuse me, I had best check on the men."

"I'll let you know as soon as I do about her."

"Thank you, Legati. The men will be glad for any news. In light of all that has happened, I will notify the families of the fallen if you would like."

Lienta paused, he had forgotten all about that. His was not the only family to suffer that day.

"I ... Thank you Commander Harper, you'll have a complete list for me when it's known?"

"Yes Legati."

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Lienta spent a brief moment with the healer at Zeeda's bedside. Her condition was more than simple exhaustion. Holding the shield as she had done, even after she had lost consciousness, had drained her almost to the point of death. But the healer was confident of her recovery, though it might take some time. Nodding, Lienta left the room and prepared himself to spend the rest of the day in the com room telling two sets of parents their children were dead. He was grateful Commander Harper had lifted the burden of telling all the families of the soldiers they had lost. Lienta was not sure he could have managed it right then, though he still felt rather guilty as it was supposed to be one of his duties.

He stood in the doorway of the com room, suddenly realizing he could not stare at his parents' faces on the screen and tell them his sister had died. Turning, he slowly made his way towards the transport room. This he had to do in person.

They were waiting for him in the transport chamber when he arrived, though he did not think they had been expecting him. The brief hope that had risen in his mother's eyes vanished when she finally registered the dark bitter pain etched deep across his face. She collapsed against his father in a quivering heap.

"How?" was all that Tulowe managed to croak.



Though Lienta hated not being able to stay with his family longer, they understood he was the sole person currently in charge of Clan Centurious - and that he still had to inform Kalah and Zornah of their recent loss. He was glad Zeeda's family was not home right then, that they were buffered from things after a sort. It was also good their little Hura was spared these events, though her smiling face and warm laughter was

certainly missed right then.

Returning to the same quiet chaos he had left, there was little change to greet him. Zeeda was still unconscious with no change in her condition. Of all the times he had ever needed her, Lienta decided this was it. It was not because he could not handle what he must do with everyone else away - he simply did not relish the idea of having to do it all alone. There was a reason Kalah had both he and Zeeda - it took at least three people to take care of everything most days. He soon found out he was not left completely alone, as Masy cornered him in the com room before he could initialize the call to Kalah and Zornah.

"Now, Master Lienta, you've had nothing decent to eat or drink in a good long while. Won't do anyone any good if you go and drop from hunger now. Darkness knows the burden on your shoulders right now can't be helped much by me - but there won't be an empty belly in this house if I have any say in the matter."

"I'll come to the kitchen as soon as I'm done Masy, honest."

"You'd better, else I'll drag you there myself."

Lienta allowed himself a small smile as the cook left the room muttering to herself. At least someone seemed concerned for him. With a heavy heart, he initiated the call to his in-laws. Waiting for the messenger in the Pluto Palace were the worst few minutes he had faced since they had returned.

"Lienta, son, what's happened?"

With Kalah's face suddenly before him, Lienta was jerked from his wandering thoughts, and the words stuck in his throat. He honestly did not feel like retelling the events of that day once again. But he had to.

"Son, you look like the demon damned darkness. Is everything okay?"

"We ... There was a battle, one we were severely outnumbered at, and ... Zeeda was injured ... and ... Sir, Kullah was - he and my sister were killed."

The two men were silent a moment, staring blankly at each other.

"And you're left handling everything yourself?"

Lienta looked back at Kalah in shock - the news he had just imparted and the man was worried about him?

"I - I'm fine sir."

"No, but keep telling yourself that. Go get some rest, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Kalah, sir, you don't ..."

"Not another word, and that's an order son."

"Yes, sir."

Lienta sat staring at the blank screen long enough after the call had ended that Masy came back in search of him. Seeing the state he was in, she gently led him towards the kitchen. Hovering over him like a mother hen, she made sure he made a small effort to eat something. Then she slowly led him to the room he shared with Zeeda and deposited him

in a chair by the bed. Masy stationed a maid outside the door in the event he needed anything. With everything they did to protect the rest of them, she could at least do this much for her family she told herself.



Lienta woke late the next day, confused and somewhat disoriented. He had a vague memory of Masy leaving him in the chair by the bed. Yet he had no idea how he had ended up half undressed, in his own bed, with his wife's arms wrapped around him.

"You awake love?" Zeeda mumbled softly into the top of his head.

"How ..."

"You fell out of the chair a few hours ago and it woke me up. So I had them put you in the bed."

"The battle ... you ..." He started to shake.

"Shhh. Father told me. I'm here, you're not alone in this."

Zeeda did not have her full strength back yet, and would not for quite a few days yet, but she did not need much right then to hold him close and support him for once. They both drifted back into a dreamless slumber, free of the darkness that was waiting to consume all around them for a while longer.



"They aren't coming?"

"I have a fully detailed report from Legatus Kalah. They have suffered so much recently. Right now, there are more important matters to attend to than coming to see us in person."

Queen Serenity and King Pluto lapsed into silence. They knew very well of the tragedies that had recently befallen their allies, hitting now a little closer to home with the king's new son-in-law.

Kalah and Remmus had parted with a strained tension between them. With the news of the latest battle and the death of Kullah and Torenal, Remmus had wanted to return to the void with them. It had taken a direct order, and the threat of sever bodily harm if Remmus even tried such.

King Pluto did not know how long that would last, and feared his daughter may very well end up a widow before she even got a chance to enjoy being a married woman. To say things were still anything other than strained back on Pluto would have been an understatement.



Remmus sat staring moodily out at the gardens. It had now been two months since his brother had been killed in battle - since Zeeda had come so close to it herself. And still his family refused to allow him to return and give them whatever aid he could, saying he was not needed. How could he not be needed? Had he not trained himself for such events? Had not his whole life been to make ready to stand and fight with the rest of them?

Except - the past nine years when his life had changed. In that time, he had only been home once. It had been a relatively short visit, and in that time he had realized everything had been different. He had gone home, but it really had not been his anymore. His family was still his, but the void was no longer his home. His place was here now - on a small ball of rock floating in space. Here, with his wife who he had angered to the point they had not said anything to each other in three days.

"You're a damn fool," he berated himself.

He did not know how, but he had to set things right again. Remmus finally found her at the farthest point in the gardens - the one area he had not been able to see from the palace. Pluto stood with her back to him, rigid and unwelcoming.

"We have nothing to say to each other."

Remmus froze at the frosty bitter tone when she spoke. Nine years it had taken to get here, and he had managed to destroy it in less than two months. That had to be some kind of sick record, one that would be forever engraved in the book of idiots next to his name. He sank to his knees behind her, shoulders slumped and head bowed. Words failed him right then, so he simply waited for whatever would come.

"You - you ... stupid ... selfish ..." Pluto paused. "You think begging for an apology is going to fix everything? You - do you think about anything at all?"

Her shouts had faded to a hoarse whisper. Unshed tears glimmered in her eyes as she stood there shaking. For the past three days, she had gone from anger, to disappointment, to fear and finally to all three together plus more. Part of her understood what he had been going through, though that only made it all that much worse. The rest - well, the rest of her was simply selfish. Kalah's news from the void had shaken her to the core, and the only thought that had been at the fore of her mind from that point on was someone coming to tell her Remmus had been the one killed.

Pluto had realized then how empty she would be if he was suddenly lost to her. Remmus had become the other half of her soul, and without him, there would be no purpose to her life. Certainly she could go on living, she had her duty to the Queen and everyone else, but that life would be hollow. She would be an empty shell, doing what she was

supposed to do and nothing more. As much as she loved and admired her Queen and the princess, she knew they could never make her feel as complete.

"I never meant to hurt you." Remmus could not lift his head. "You are my life, my whole life - and this here with you is home. Sometimes it's just so hard when I hear what is happening to the rest of my family. I - I would never leave you."

He looked up the moment an explosive sob left her lips, and was on his feet only seconds later. His beautiful goddess was in pain, and he was the cause. She fought against him feebly as he wrapped his arms around her, but soon surrendered and clutched him to her even tighter.

"All I could think ... what if they'd told me it was you? I - I don't think I could survive the news Remmus."

"Oh darkness," he muttered. "Plu, I'm so sorry."

"Promise me I'll never have to get news like that."

"I swear to you I will never leave you. You'll never have to hear anything like that."

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"I need to rest a moment."

Zornah stood in the center of the practice hall panting. Since they had returned, she had been working with Zeeda and Master Zilbrach on improving her skills as a warrior with one less arm. It was not that she was rusty, just that she had to readjust her thinking now. That seemed to be the hardest part, getting her brain to make the switch. Her body seemed to be fine with things, but she had to gain better control. Darkness be damned if she was going to lose any other members of her family. First Marshant before his time, and now Kullah - she did not know if she could honestly make it through another such loss.

"You are doing better today lady," Master Zilbrach said as he handed her a jug of water.

"It's just getting the brain to switch gears."

"Sometimes that's harder to do than we think."

"How is our little Hura coming along?" she asked him.

"Very well actually. She is quite a surprise for one so young that hasn't been trained from the time she was able to walk. The king told me it has proven much easier to train her other skills with the discipline from weapons training."

"I don't think he quite understood it at first, but they do things a bit differently in the Silver Millennium."

"Aye, she's as good a pupil as Zeeda was, though I never met the Legati at that age. I did hear of her from the other masters though."

"Do you think we did the right thing with her Master Zilbrach? I find myself questioning what all we put our daughter through," Zornah said with a slow shake of her head.

"You did what you thought was right at the time, and she has turned out a fine woman. Commander Harper told me just a few days ago how the men had been waiting rather impatiently to hear news of her condition after the battle." Zilbrach smiled. "I've met a few commanders where their men couldn't care less about them - and that tells me a great deal about the one at the top. If your troops care so much for their commander, means it's a good thing. They feel that way about all of you

Lady Zornah."

"We have always tried to be just and fair. And we would never ask them to do anything we wouldn't be willing to do ourselves - it's just not right otherwise."

"And it shows. Even the townsfolk feel the same. People here are safer than anywhere else."

"I hope it stays that way. Well, one more round you think?"

"As you wish, my lady."



Nearly a year went by with minimal loss - everyone's efforts had doubled after what we had suffered at Waystation Nine. The fragments had even abandoned their dark energy bombs or whatever the damn things were for a while. They didn't stop attacking, and we found ourselves each day pushed back just a little more. But we were more consolidated now, and that should have counted for something. All it meant in the end was that when the final battle took place, there were more of us in one spot to kill easier.

Husel and Laraunt were married, and we gained ourselves a new family member. Though it was easier on her family at least with Clan Capartha now living next door. In a way, it was good. The people were happy, and shared in our celebration - they felt secure having two clans looking over them. Of everyone I failed, the memory of those people haunts me the most. And so life went on after a fashion.

Our visits to the Moon Palace dropped in frequency. We simply couldn't afford to be gone much anymore. And I found I was missing them just a little, they had been a brief escape from the darkness that was around us every day. King Pluto informed us that the shadow voices in the realms between times had gone quiet - and we thought that meant good things to come. Now, we can look back at our ignorance in pain - but at the time, we didn't know. We thought they were connected to the fragments in the void, but sadly, they were connected to the shining jewel that was the Silver Millennium. Those voices were their own, crying out for what they would soon lose. But then, they had also never given us the full message. We couldn't blame ourselves entirely.

I'm not sure we could have actually done anything even if we had known. We like to think we can control what goes on around us - but the tapestry of life is woven on a loom none of us have access to. Much as we wish it, we just don't have that sort of control over things.

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Kalah sat looking up at a very stubborn, slightly angry Zornah. They had been having this same argument for the past three months, and this time, she was not going to let him win.

"How many men in our legions fight with only one arm?"

"Zornah, love ..."

"Don't start that shit with me. I'm not going to continue staying in this house while my family fights and dies around me."

"And what happens to us when you die?"

"You go on, just like we've gone on after each loss we've suffered recently." Her eyes softened a little. "Kalah, I'm not some dainty little doll sitting on a shelf. I can hold my own well enough against our daughter and I'm pretty sure that qualifies me to resume my regular duties."

"What about our grandchildren? What happens when they start arriving?" Kalah was fishing for excuses now.

"Husel and Laraunt have only been married a month, they're not going to start producing offspring for a while yet. Remmus and Pluto I'm sure can take care of themselves if it ever happens."

"And Zeeda?"

Zornah stared at him - Zeeda had not told her father yet?

"She - she didn't tell you ..." Zornah sighed. "Our own healer's suspicions were confirmed over a year ago by one of Queen Serenity's physicians. Zeeda can't have children."

"What?"

"I don't know why she didn't tell you." Zornah sat down in the chair across from him. "They weren't ever really trying, but something should have happened by now. There's no explanation for it, it just is."

Kalah slumped back in his chair. He had always expected the next heir to Clan Centurios would come from his daughter, passing on her strength, her driven will. And now to find it would never happen chilled him. He honestly had no idea if Zeeda had even wanted to be a parent at all, but to find out she could not even make the choice to do so stunned him. Then his thoughts turned to why she had known for so long and never said anything. None of them had said anything, which meant she

had not told anyone.

"How did you find out?" he asked his wife.

"It is something a daughter would confide in her mother. As to why she didn't tell anyone else, your guess is as good as mine. She may have just figured that since it wasn't anything she could fix, it wasn't important considering everything else we've been dealing with." Zornah's face hardened again. "Now, are you done fishing for stupid excuses?"

"I don't have much of a choice in the matter, do I?"

"I'll go crazy if I'm to be stuck in this house watching you all leave every day. I can worry about you not coming home just the same from out there, and I'll actually feel useful."

"You've never been useless."

"Yes, but how would you like it if I told you to stay here every day because I didn't want to face losing you? Have you ever considered that, husband?"

"Yes, and that never makes it any easier."

"Nothing about war is easy."

"None of us may survive what may come."

"All the more reason to have another sword out there. We have to do enough to keep the fragments from getting any further. They'd never be able to handle them, all their knowledge is in energy attacks. And while the Queen's army is relatively decent, they wouldn't last more than a few minutes."

"So, we sacrifice all we know to keep them safe."

"We risk all to keep Hura, Sastur, Remmus and Pluto safe - the others are secondary concerns."

"As long as *they* never hear you say that love."

Zornah matched his sad smile. They risked everything for people that did not even know about them. But that had been the agreement so long ago, and Queen Serenity had kept it that way. All would not be lost though; they would live on through Remmus, kept safe from all going on around them.



Lienta found Zeeda in the library one evening, surrounded by a pile of books. Though she must have heard him enter the room, she did not look up. Exhaustion radiated from them both, but there seemed to be little time to rest. Things were not going exactly well. They had three major fronts right now where the battle seemed to wage nonstop, and the darkness only knew when the end would come. They had also received news from other quadrants, and things were not going well for other clans outside their area. It seemed as if the whole void was filled with activity,

and that was a daunting thought indeed.

Growling with frustration, Zeeda set another useless text aside. While their normal methods were keeping the fragments at bay currently, they could not keep going. In a few more years, they would be finished. All resources would be gone - and all of them along with it. She was searching for something she remembered hearing about a long time ago, but so far she had not had much luck. Their early history, though rather fragmented, mentioned a barrier of the soul. The details were slim, but it had been used thousands of years ago to halt the fragments. It could be their only hope, if she could just figure out what it was exactly.

"You need to get some rest," Lienta said softly.

"I haven't been able to sleep well for the past month, and you know it."

"Pushing yourself too much isn't going to do anyone any good. Don't make me go down and get a sleeping draught from the healer."

"That might be a good idea." Zeeda sighed as she straightened in her chair. "We're going to be lucky if we make it another five years. And if other quadrants are suffering the same as us, then there's little hope."

"There's always hope. A few people have reported sightings of watchers - that's always a good sign."

"Yeah, a good sign they're here for the show and nothing more." Zeeda snorted. "They don't involve themselves in anything. They'll just sit along the edges and watch as we're all destroyed."

"History shows they helped on occasion in the past."

"Well, it shows us they've had plenty of time here in the present to lend a hand and they're not. So I'm not going to hold my breath and hope they come to our rescue."

"She was my sister, and it still hurts. You're not the only one to suffer."

Lienta moved away towards one of the windows. A little over a year had gone by since that day at the waystation and since then Zeeda had slowly changed. They had all changed, but you noticed it most in the ones closest to you. It had happened slowly, but she had gradually become distant with those around her, pulling away into some place they felt they could not follow.

Zornah and Kalah had noticed, but did not think much of it. But that was mainly because Zeeda was rather adept at keeping things from people - so they had not seen the full picture. It also helped that they all spent more time apart either out on patrol or at the front when their rotation slot came up. This loss hurt more than any other. Lienta had never expected her to withdraw from him, to feel abandoned by her.

"I leave in the morning for Clan Turat." Lienta could not keep the bitterness from his voice. "I'll be taking Fifth and Eleventh squads, and two from Clan Capartha with me. I don't know when we'll be back."

"Take First Squad instead, the Eleventh is full of new recruits that don't know enough yet." Zeeda's voice was soft, resigned. "I can't fix what

I've broken, but I'll not send you off without the best chance of survival."

Lienta did not turn from the window, his hands clenched at his sides. First Squad was hers, it was an unspoken rule between all of them. None of the others ever stood at the head of those men, though they had every right, and could if the situation called for it. Somehow, First Squad had ended up being Zeeda's to the core. He should be feeling something other than disgust at the offer, it was not a hollow gesture on her part, but it came very close to too little too late somehow.

"When did you stop fighting for us?" Lienta muttered into the window. "Have fun with your books."

Zeeda watched him storm from the room without looking at her. She had never stopped fighting for the two of them, but the battle raging inside of her had pulled her away. Now she had lost the only thing that meant anything at all to her, and for once, she had no idea how to get it back.



Lienta had spent the rest of the evening in the garden after he had left the library. Their rooms were too cold and empty anymore to bring comfort. But he would be leaving soon, and knew he needed to attempt to get some sleep. Walking down the hall, he noticed a faint light coming from the small chamber next to their rooms where they kept their armor. Deciding he must have left the lamp on earlier, he slowly pushed the door open. The room was not empty however.

Zeeda sat slumped on the floor, her face pressed against the wall, and his breastplate clutched tightly in one hand. His armor gleamed like new, given the pile of soiled rags next to her still form. Her armor on the stand next to it looked dull and lifeless, though it was itself clean. It did not hold the normal shine and glow he was used to seeing. In the dull light of the single lamp she had lit, she herself seemed to have lost the glow that he normally felt surrounded her. Lienta stood in the doorway, confused and in shock.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"I - I was in the gardens."

Her back was too him, so he had not noticed the tears, but there was no mistaking the hand she lifted to her face to wipe them away. Something held him back from going to comfort her, though he could not say why he resisted.

"Do - do you remember when we were eighteen?" Zeeda's voice was low and soft. "You were so angry with me for holding back when we sparred together."

"I remember."

"At first, I had no idea what I'd done. Master Zilbrach had to

explain it to me, and I felt so devastated by it. I thought I had pushed you away then, that I was losing you." Zeeda paused. "This time ... this time I've apparently succeeded ... and I know there's nothing I can say or do ..."

Her words drifted off as she stood to replace the breastplate on the stand, made slightly difficult with how her hands shook. She kept her back to him.

"Centurion Tallus and First Squad will be going with you tomorrow. Keep Eleventh Squad to the rear - close enough to gain some experience, but not close enough to get themselves or anyone else killed. First Squad has better shields, they'll be able to help if ... if the worst happens again."

"Zee, you'll need First Squad."

"I'm holding down the fort, it's my turn. Mother and Father are leaving in a few days, and with you gone and Husel not back yet, I'm the one waiting at home this time. I'll be fine."

Silence fell upon them for a long while, both struggling against their inner battles with themselves.

"A few months ago, I found a text ... you know that in the thousands of years since we started recording our history there have only been about ten women with as much power as I have? They were also the first born in their families - and each of them faced a surge in fragment aggression, just as we do now. It would appear that I'm the key to our own destruction, I ushered all of this into being."

"You're not to blame for any of this." Lienta took a hesitant step towards her.

"It happened at least ten times before, and it's happening again. A female first born, with great powers - and she spells the doom for all her people. How am I *not* to blame for everyone's suffering?"

"Zee ..."

"You know what they called these women? It's a term we've mostly forgotten in the time since the last one - they were called the Far'Merat - demon spawn, callers of destruction. I guess it explains my connection with Saturn, somehow." Zeeda sighed heavily. "The day I was born signaled the end for all of us. I caused all of this just by being here. These fragment attacks are more intense, more severe than anything ever reported in the past ..."

Lienta stood behind her frozen. This had been the reason behind her increased distance recently? She thought everything was her fault?

"Not only am I the bringer of our destruction, I'm also the key to our salvation supposedly. I haven't found out how though yet, and we're running out of time. Promise ..." Zeeda's voice broke. "Promise me you'll come back. I - I don't deserve you now, but I don't know how to go on without you."

"What do you mean you don't deserve me?" Lienta pulled her around to face him, though her eyes stayed glued to the floor.

"These other women, the other Far'Merat - they were both

despised and cast out, or they watched their family die around them one by one until they stood alone. None of them could have children either."

"You didn't answer the question. What in the depths of this demon damned darkness ever convinced you ... I don't care what you may think you are." Lienta placed a hand under her chin and pulled her gaze away from the floor. "So what if you are one of these Far'Merat women. I chose you, I married you - I love you dammit."

"But ..."

Lienta cut her words off with a kiss, one as passionate as the day so many years ago when they were eighteen - and with even more behind it. He felt her melt against him, and her cheeks dampen against his face.

"I'll come back. I will always come back to you, no matter what happens. Just don't - don't shut me out," Lienta murmured into her hair after they separated.

"I'm sorry, I just ..."

He leaned back to see her face, and silenced her with a gentle finger placed to her lips.

"There are no shadows on the sun, my love. And you have always been the light I orbit."

"Stray too close to a star and you burn up." Zeeda replied.

"I've survived this long, and I'm not going anywhere. You will never be alone. I won't let that happen."

King Pluto looked up from the knock on the open door to his study. Remmus stood there hesitantly.

"Ah, come in Remmus."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not a one man firing squad son, and I'm not your commanding officer," the king said with a warm smile. "With my daughter off at her duties, it is time to tell you of yours."

"My duties?"

"Yes, yours. You'll be taking my place here someday, and you should know what that entails."

"Replace you? But I ..." Remmus stammered.

"Remmus, one day I will return to the mists of time. Pluto has her duties that will keep her attending to the gates. She will be away a great deal - and you will be the one left here to run things."

Remmus sat down across from him in shock. He was no king!

"I - I'm no king sir."

"You were trained as a commanding officer, were you not?"

"Yes sir, but ..."

"And if anything happened to your parents and your sister, it would have fallen upon you to run the stronghold, correct?"

"Yes ..."

"Being in charge of our little planet here is no different Remmus. In fact, you may find it rather boring compared to what would have been required of you back in the void. We have no troops to keep in line, just the people living here. Surely you suspected as much when you married my daughter."

"I ... well, I - sir, you all have a much longer lifespan ..."

"A great deal more changed about you than simply moving into a new home when you came to us Remmus." The king chuckled. "You may have come from the void, but you are now a part of the Silver Millennium - in every way possible."

Remmus sat in shock for a moment. He had never expected to live as long as those around him, it was something he had grown accustomed

to. But now he had just been told that was no longer the case. He had changed, perhaps that was why the void no longer felt like home.

"Is it such shocking news?"

"I had always just accepted ... it's a lot to take in sir."

"It's not going to be easy, others will probably consider you an outsider for quite a while. But you are my heir now, and it's time to learn exactly what you've gotten yourself into."

"Yes sir ... though, I'm not sure I'll ever be comfortable with people calling me king ... just doesn't seem right. I'm not exactly royalty."

"I don't think you give yourself enough credit, but I wouldn't worry about titles. I'm sure we can figure something out." King Pluto smiled. His son-in-law continued to surprise him. "Now, let's get started, shall we?"

"Yes sir."



Zeeda sat alone in a slightly empty house. It had been two weeks since Lienta had left, and her parents were still out on patrol. She had sent Husel back out a few days after he returned, and had then entrenched herself in the library again. She still needed to find out more about the Far'Merat and this soul barrier, but had thus far had little luck. Looking up as the door opened, she guessed it had to be Hura, as she could not see anyone over the pile of books before her. They had returned two days ago, and Zeeda had been glad for their company.

"Aunti Zee, Masy has lunch ready." Hura finally appeared around the side of the table.

"Guess I could use a break."

"You're spending a lot of time in here."

"I'm looking for something, but I haven't found it yet."

"Can I help?" Hura asked.

"No little one, but thank you though. Let's go eat."

Hand in hand, they made their way from the library towards the dining room. They were stopped before reaching it though by a messenger.

"Legati, we just received word from Lord Afont. He's on his way to see you."

"When is he arriving?"

"In another hour or two."

"Thank you. If I'm not still in the dining room when he arrives, I'll be back in the library."

"Yes Legati."

Zeeda wondered what this visit from Lord Afont was about, but right then her stomach reminded her she had not eaten much recently. King Saturn, Master Zilbrach and Laraunt were waiting for them when they entered the dining room.

"It's a good thing having you back little miss." Master Zilbrach winked at Hura. "You wouldn't believe the time we've had trying to get the Legati to remember to join us for meals."

"I've been busy. And Masy has kept a supply of food up in the library. You don't think anyone can escape her, do you?" Zeeda replied with a grin.

"No. I do believe Masy is one of the more intimidating women I've ever met - including you even. But then, she probably has to be to work here," Master Zilbrach said with a laugh.

"You're probably right."

"Husel reported in this morning. Says there's little activity and they're on their way back." Laraunt told her as Zeeda took her seat.

"Thank the darkness, we could use a breather. You two will be in charge, I'll be taking the next patrol out after he gets back. I have no idea when the rest will return."

"You're leaving soon Aunti Zee?" Hura asked between mouthfuls.

"Husel was kind enough to go back out again when it was supposed to be my turn. I'm not having any luck in the library so I should get away from it for a while."

Truth be told, Zeeda was not looking forward to this patrol a great deal. They had to go back to the area around Waystation Nine, and though it was now close to a year and a half since those events, she had little desire to go back there. This she kept to herself though, she could not give in to such feelings. Zeeda looked down at her empty plate, she had not realized how hungry she had been, and was contemplating a second helping when a messenger came into the room.

"Lord Afont is here Legati, I left him in the study."

"Thank you, I'll be there shortly." Zeeda sighed as she stood from the table. "Save me some desert, hopefully this won't take too long."

Lord Afont turned away from the window as she entered the room, looking rather nervous, which was odd for him.

"Ah, Legati Zeeda, thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

"Is anything the matter?" Her thoughts raced immediately to Lienta and her parents.

"No, nothing new to report you probably don't already know. I came to speak to you of another matter." He paused. "What do you know of the Far'Merat?"

Zeeda was taken aback a moment. Though she had never assumed she was the only one to have found the records from the past, she had not been expecting anyone to talk to her about it.

"I know they were all women who possessed a great power, and they were the cause of the ruin of all around them."

"Oh, dear girl, you haven't been blaming yourself for all of this ... have you?"

Zeeda refrained from reminding him she was not a girl anymore. He continued before she had a chance to respond.

"I know some of the texts you have may read - but please don't think that those women, including yourself, were the cause of what happened. Those histories were written by frightened angry people who wanted someone to blame for what happened. There are things in our past we should not be proud of, and the way the Far'Merat were treated is the greatest of them all."

"What do you mean?"

"You being alive is not the cause of the increase in fragment activity. It came first, it always has. You were brought into being to stop it, not the other way around."

"But ..."

"The first Far'Merat was a great woman, respected and honored above all. I know it says the word means demon spawn - but that is so far from the truth. After that first great sacrifice, the term was coined. She was considered a beacon to her people, to our forefathers - and that is the actual meaning behind the title. Farshan 'te Meratin means beacon of hope in the ancient tongue."

"How do you know all of this? I've come across nothing that says what you've told me."

"I have a scroll from that time, written by the first's husband. Of course, the times after her were not as nice in their telling of events. And I have brought it and a few other items that may be of use to you." Lord Afont indicated a small stack of books and a few ancient looking scrolls sitting on the desk.

"You spoke of a great sacrifice ..."

"The Far'Merat creates a barrier than the fragments cannot penetrate. But in doing so, she gives up her life."

Zeeda collapsed into the nearest chair. She had suspected as much, but to hear it from another for the first time pulled her feet from under her.

"It is a desperate act, used only when everything else fails."

"You would not have told me all of this if anyone felt secure in a future victory," Zeeda replied hoarsely.

"I am telling you because I know you would do anything to save the people you love. I do not do this for the rest of us."

"What?"

"You'll find out as you read - but the first Far'Merat did what she did for the love of her family, the love of her husband. You - you are very much like her, and I don't believe you would simply sacrifice everything for the simple matter of a 'greater good'. You fight with us, you protect us - but you do it for them. You don't fight for us, you fight for them."

"I would give my life for any fellow clan member. Yes I love my family, but I don't value them at the exclusion of everyone else."

"You misunderstand me. I know you would give your life to save another regardless of who they were. I know what nearly happened to you at Waystation Nine. No one who has ever met you doubts what you would

do, but they also see the driving force behind you. We can only hope to one day live up to the example you set before us."

Zeeda sat in stunned silence, her brain feeling overloaded with everything Lord Afont had just told her.

"I pray to the darkness that you will be the first Far'Merat that is not called upon to sacrifice herself. Our situation is not so hopeless yet. But I know you, and how you prepare yourself to be ready for anything. So I have decided to pass along to you what is rightfully yours. These texts have been passed down from generation to generation, from council head to council head waiting for the next Far'Merat to come to us. I only know what is in the first scroll, as that is the only one we are allowed to read - though I suspect I am the first in a few hundred years to have done so."

"You don't know what's in any of these books?" That knowledge surprised Zeeda.

"All I know is that they are the truer histories, some may have even been written by the women themselves. Only the Far'Merat is allowed to know what they contain. I knew from the first moment I met you that you were the one. But I must admit to feeling selfish and wanting you to know more to life than making ready to sacrifice yourself if the time ever came."

"Why?"

"I have been friends with your father for many years. I remember the joy on his face when he told me of your birth. He wasn't ashamed his first born wasn't a boy. He wasn't filled with loathing - he was the happiest father I had ever seen. I knew you were going to be different, and I wished a different end for you than what history has laid out. You should not have to end your life simply to save us."

"But I would be doing it for more than the clans."

"I know. That is what makes this time different from all the others. I know of the bond your family has to our allies, and I believe that may help make all the difference. I have faith in you, and I will do all that is in my power to see to it that you give nothing up for us."



Lienta returned from the battle at Clan Turat, a minor victory, but a victory all the same. Though he had to wait a while to celebrate that fact with Zeeda as she was still out on patrol. It had been good to return to see Hura smiling up at him on the transport pad, but it felt a little less of a homecoming without his wife for some odd reason. Returning to their rooms, he found a small pile of books, and an old scroll waiting for him on the bed. A note was lying on top of the pile.

Love, don't get too puffed up at seeing the words 'You were right' written here. I am supposedly not allowed to share these texts with anyone, but since when have I ever followed the rules? Start with the scroll, and then the others as you see fit. I have a few more with me, and hopefully when I return I will feel more comfortable in sharing what they contain. I do this because I promised someone I love beyond all else I would not shut him out, and hopefully with what I have left here for you to read, you will understand my hesitation about the rest.

This current patrol, returning to Waystation Nine, is one of the hardest I have ever had to face - especially considering I do not have you with me in person. I do not know why I feel this way. We survived, but I feel uneasy about returning there. I do not feel as if anything will happen, thankfully, but I will certainly feel much better to return home. And hopefully I can put the burden of ever coming back to this place again on someone else - though you know I would never honestly do something like that. It is a fun thought sometimes, but nothing more, and there are more pleasant things to think of.

We should not be gone too long, though I am worried about mother and father. They cut short their patrol to assist a few of the smaller clans trying to put their lives back together. A small skirmish with the fragments, but we still had not heard anything from them before I left. I hope there is some news of them before I return that you can pass along - if for no other reason to hear your voice and know you are still there. You are probably sitting there reading this thinking I have gone and lost it - but I think you will understand when you read the scroll.

I am happy to end with this little thought - history was recorded a tad wrong. Far'Merat is not a demon spawned of the darkness - it is the shortened version of Farshan 'te Meratin - which means 'beacon of hope' in the old tongue. You probably still do not care much about the title, but it is comforting to know it means something other than what I was first led to believe.

Lienta smiled as he set the note back down. No, he did not really care what she thought she was - but he was glad it was not what she had first believed. Though he did have to wonder exactly what she was a beacon of hope for beyond being his own personal one. It was a selfish thought, but one he would not let go of. Setting the books aside, he sat down on the bed staring at the scroll that was who knows how old. The cover protecting it was rather ornate, but opened as if it was newly made. A piece of rolled parchment slowly slid out into his waiting hand. Some of the words were in the old tongue, but it was easy enough to make out.

This is the record of Shiran, as written by her husband Brual. She was our Farshan 'te Meratin, and her sacrifice shall not be forgot. I record this so that others will know, and understand.

Some will try and say that Shiran of Clan Centuri being born brought about the fragment attacks, but they are wrong - she was brought to us because of them. They feared her because she was a female first born that lived, and possessed a power greater than any other.

Next to her, I was nothing, but she chose me anyway. The memories are painful now after what has happened, but I would not trade anything to rid myself of them.

Long and hard she fought and trained, pushing herself beyond even the greatest swordsman among us - and though many grew to respect and honor her, I was the only to love her. She was my Far'Merat - my hope, my life, my love ...

Lienta read through the scroll in a dazed wonder, seeing much of himself in Brual - and wondering if Zeeda had seen as much of herself in Shiran. After he finished, his thoughts drifted back to the beginning and the mention of the woman's sacrifice. Was that same bitter end in store for them in their future? He knew Zeeda would do anything - *anything* - if she thought for even the briefest moment she would lose him. It chilled him to the core thinking of her giving everything up in one last desperate attempt to save him, even if it meant saving everyone else at the same time.

He could not let her go through with it. Zeeda sacrificing herself was not an option he was willing to accept. But they were suffering too many losses, and he began to feel that it was something he may not have any control over in the end. In the mean time though, he would do anything he could to keep it from happening. Brual may have been able to keep going, and he admired the man for it, but Lienta did not know if he could. Better to stand with her and die at her side than continue life alone without his beacon of hope.



"Legati, call coming in from the stronghold for you."

Zeeda turned to the com officer, taking the offered headset.

"Zeeda here."

"Zee, you're two days overdue." Lienta's voice came through the other end.

"We had a minor run in here at Waystation Twelve."

"Anything serious?"

"Not really, just a few minor injuries. I ordered a rest period before we head back to Nine and make our way home from there. The transport pad is down here at Twelve."

"I'll send out a repair crew."

"That would have been nice, oh, about yesterday." She teased.

"You could have called it in."

"We were busy, remember?"

"Your parents are fine, thought you'd like to know. The Queen also contacted us about an update - and coming to the princess' birthday celebration next year."

"You're kidding - right?"

"Apparently turning thirteen is a big deal there, and she wants a representative from all their allies present."

"Can't she just count Remmus as being there? And are we really having this conversation?"

"Yes love, we are - and I don't think they consider Remmus as being from the void anymore."

"We can send Husel and Laraunt then. I don't have time for birthday parties - unless it's Hura because she's here with us right now. And neither do you."

"I'm just the messenger love, but I don't think she wants to see Husel and Laraunt."

"I know. Sometimes I wish they knew just a little bit more about war, for all their 'heightened understanding'. And they wonder why the alliance with Earth hasn't happened yet."

"That's not our worry. Just get home soon, my Far'Merat."

"I will."

"And call next time there's trouble, you stubborn..."

"Oh, look at the time, com officer wants his headset back."

"Zee ..."

"We'll be there in two days."

Smiling to herself, she handed the headset back to the com officer - who managed to keep a very straight face, along with Centurion Mahlet.

"Trouble Legati?" Mahlet asked.

"Just our lovely allies who haven't seen war in so long they wouldn't know what to do with themselves if it knocked on their door," Zeeda said with a shake of her head.

"The men are ready to leave Legati."

"We've only been here for four hours - you're telling me that's enough rest?"

"Rested enough to make it to Waystation Nine, Legati. I get the feeling they'd rather be back home." Mahlet gave her a small smile.

"Alright then, but I better not hear any grumbling about being tired on the way there."

"I'll inform them."

"Anything to report on the lines?" Zeeda turned back to the com officer.

"No Legati, everything's pretty quiet right now."

"Good, let's hope it stays that way until we're out of the area."

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"Are they going to come mother?"

Queen Serenity looked down at her daughter. Why the girl was so insistent on Zeeda coming to her birthday celebration was beyond her, but she seemed to have her heart set on it.

"I don't know yet dear. People at war generally don't have time for things such as birthday celebrations. Why are you so set on this Serenity?"

"Because - they should be a larger part of us now. Legati Remmus came from their world to become part of ours, what if the reverse happens some day? I want to know more about them."

"If a princess from here were to ever attempt such, she would have to give up a great deal more than just her home. By leaving, she would have to leave her powers behind as well, and a new guardian would have to be chosen. It would not be a simple matter for one of us to live in the void."

"I wasn't thinking of a princess mother - we have more than just that here, though I'm sure they know their duties very well and would not fall or someone quite so easily. But why should they be so separate from us now? King Saturn spends a great deal of time with them, and they're even training the young princess in weapons and whatever else."

"I made a special concession for the family of Saturn. You know as well as I do how much our neighbors fear what may happen because of her. Legati Zeeda and her family are the best bet we have to train the child of Saturn to control her powers. And the two of them are only there as long as Clan Centurion considers it safe. They will be forced to return if the war takes a turn for the worst."

"It still isn't fair though, no more so than with Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. We never get to see any of them."

"Serenity dear, life isn't always fair." She smiled gently. "And the others that we never see have a great duty resting on their shoulders. They stand a constant watch to keep the rest of us safe."

"Still, all the more reason they should be able to attend and have a moment of fun." Her daughter huffed, crossing her arms across her chest.

Queen Serenity quickly stilled the laugh that threatened to burst forth. The princess was always concerned that everyone enjoyed themselves as much as she did. At the age of twelve, it seemed to be her primary goal to make sure everyone around her was always happy. It was a grand goal, and the Queen prayed she never lost that part of her personality. Princess Serenity was a treasure even before she was of age to take control of anything.

"Will the representatives from Earth be attending, mother?"

"I am even more unsure about them."

"Why don't they like us? We haven't done anything to them."

"Not all of them dislike us, though I fear a great many of them envy us - no matter our offers to share what we have with them. But I did send an invitation to the Golden Kingdom, and now we must wait and see."

"I would really like to meet the prince."

Serenity gave her daughter a guarded look. While becoming friends with the young prince of Earth would not be such a bad thing, if the two grew attached to each other it would not be as welcomed an event by everyone. But since he was three years older than the princess, nothing would probably happen anyway. Love was such a fickle mistress when one was young.

"We'll just have to wait and see. Now, aren't you supposed to be down on the training grounds with the others?"

"Do I have to? All Mars does is tease me about not being able to do anything yet." The princess pouted, a disgruntled look on her face.

"She means well. That's how she shows her feelings for you. And even though your powers haven't fully awakened, you need to know what your guardians are capable of if you are ever called upon to make use of their talents."

"If you say so. She could find a different way to tell me she likes me."

"Run along now Serenity."

"Yes mother."



Returning a day earlier than they had been expected, the only thing Zeeda wanted right then was a long soak in a hot bath. But the moment she stepped foot in the house that was apparently not going to happen. Husel and her parents were waiting for her. It was an ambush of the worst kind - including the fragments.

"And just when were you going to tell us?" Zornah demanded.

"Tell you what?" Zeeda asked tiredly. "You weren't home for whatever it is I've done now, so how exactly could I tell you anything?"

"Why did we have to hear it from Lord Afont?" Kalah asked.

"Hear what?" Zeeda fumed. "I've been on patrol for the past two weeks. I fought fragments near Waystation Twelve - with a busted transport pad I'll have you know. We had to travel the distance between it and Nine on foot where we met another small group of fragments. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I'm dirty. If you all don't tell me what exactly I've done to piss you off right now, I'm going to my rooms. I would also like to mention I haven't seen my husband in over a month, thank you very much."

"Lord Afont told us you were ... Far'Merat." Husel finished in a whisper.

"There is a good possibility that I am a Farshan 'te Meratin - which means beacon of hope by the way. Now, I'm going. You can all yell at me later."

"Zeeda ..."

"Father, don't even try to order me to stay. I'm taking a bath, saying hello to my husband, eating and going to sleep - in whatever order they happen to occur in first. And last time I checked, I could still best you with a blade."

Without looking behind her, Zeeda made her way towards her rooms. When she arrived, a maid had just finished filling the tub for her and left her with a knowing grin and a pile of fresh towels. She made herself a mental note to do something special for the hired help when she was in a better mood. The door opened again a few minutes after she had slipped into the tub, and a growl started before she could see Lienta's head poking into the bath chamber.

"I'm sorry love, I was with Lord Lurent and well ..."

"I'll hurt you later, after I take care of them and Lord Afont. And ... after I get a kiss."

Lienta took a few hesitant steps towards her. The last time she had been angry like this with that particular glint in her eye, he had ended up in the pool.

"Oh, stop that. I'm not going to ruin my bath by dragging you into the tub - clothed or otherwise."

"Oh really? That's a fine way to greet me after we haven't seen each other in how long now?" Lienta leered at her.

"There's only enough room for one." Zeeda replied, though the tub could easily hold three adults - if they liked being very close to each other.

"That is the worst excuse I have ever heard."

"Well, get in the tub or leave the room. Either way, close the door at least."

"Alas love, I have already bathed for today," Lienta replied, leaning in for a quick kiss. "But I shall leave you for a moment. And when you're done in here, I'll have food waiting."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful. I'm not sure I can handle dinner with

the family tonight." Zeeda closed her eyes with a sigh.

"I'm sure I can convince them we deserve some time alone."

"You might have a time of it with mother, she seems to be on the war path at the moment."

"I'll manage."



Masy had been a step ahead of him when he arrived in the kitchen. A fully laden tray was waiting for him, and she soon sent him on his way, trailed by a maid with a small keg of ale. So far, Lienta had managed to avoid being detected by anyone else in the house, but that victory was short lived as Zornah caught him entering the hall leading to his rooms. He slowed his pace, but did not come to a full stop.

"Lienta ..."

"Zornah - mother - please. I haven't seen my wife in a long time, and we'd both appreciate some time alone together."

"You two can't stay in those rooms forever," Zornah called out after his retreating form, more than a hint of humor in her voice.

"We're certainly going to try for as long as possible," he yelled back towards her.

Making sure the main door to their suite of rooms was securely locked, Lienta set to work getting the table set for them to eat.

"So, no trouble with the family then?" Zeeda said as she stepped out of the bath chamber.

"Your mother tried to ..." Lienta looked up and lost all the thoughts currently in his head.

"You've seen me in a towel before," Zeeda teased.

"And I was surrounded by legions of scruffy looking men for about a month."

"So, you just missed looking at females then?" Zeeda moved closer.

"Just one in particular." Sometimes he really hated how good she looked with wet hair.

"Oh really?"

"D-diner is ready."

"Food can wait."

Their lips met, and the towel slid forgotten to the floor.



"Father, being called a Far'Merat doesn't change me. It would be nice if everyone knew the actual meaning of the word and not what some stupid misguided historian wrote in a common text however many generations ago."

"Zeeda, how can you be so sure about things?"

"Lord Afont was sure, and what he gave me just ... *feels* ... right. You read the scroll of Brual, surely you must see."

"It was the writings of a man who'd lost his wife - how do we know it's not just some tale he made up to make himself feel better?"

"If you were going to write something to tell future generations about mother, would you make up silly stories about her?" Zeeda sighed. "By already assuming I could even create one of these soul barriers, we resign ourselves to an early defeat. I don't believe in that, we can still come out of this intact."

"Perhaps being a beacon of hope is more than just base survival."

"I don't want to do it - it scares me - but if it truly came down to it in the end, I wouldn't hesitate. We're not just fighting for ourselves, we're fighting to protect a people that haven't known war and suffering like this in thousands of years. That to me is almost more important than protecting what we have here."

"So protecting people you don't really know, and that certainly don't know you, is more important than your closer neighbors?"

"That is not what she meant and you know it," Zornah snapped. "None of us like to fight, but it is a part of us. Queen Serenity's mother fought long and hard to establish what we know of them now - many peoples united in peace. An entire generation of their children is growing up knowing nothing but joy and happiness, something we've never known. I myself would give my life for that."

"Thank you mother." Zeeda turned back to her father. "If you don't believe me and what you've read then talk to Lord Afont. He told me himself he would do everything he could to give me a different end - because of you. Because you were proud of me the day I was born."

Kalah sat looking between the two women that meant more to him than anything else. Zornah was his sole reason for living, only magnified by the children they shared. Indeed he had been proud and filled with a joy beyond words the day Zeeda had come into the world. It had not mattered she had been a girl - she had come out with a head full of short red hair, and that had meant more than anyone had ever known. A piece of Zornah would continue on after she passed, that is what his daughter had meant to him, a continuation of everything he held most dear. But with current events, and the bomb Afont had dropped on them, it may not come to pass.

"Father, I found the texts in the library that called the Far'Merat demon spawn - callers of destruction. For four months, I fought with that within myself, almost to the point of driving away my husband. To know that it's so much more than that, to know what the other women did ... I

can't really put it into words. But I have something they didn't. I have a reason to keep living, both here and millions of miles away. Lord Afont said that may very well make all the difference in the universe."

"I still don't have to like the whole idea at all. I will never like it."

"I know, and I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

29

Remmus sat behind the desk in the small study that had suddenly become his office. His father-in-law may consider what he did easy, but to Remmus, it was completely alien. He found himself wondering quite often if his parents and sister actually had to deal with all the little mundane things he was trying to cram into his brain. Somehow he suspected they did, and if he had stayed there, he would have learned them as well. He looked up as the steward entered the room.

"How go your studies today Master Remmus?"

"Menlaus, I don't know if I'll ever remember all of this."

"That is why you have someone like me." The older man smiled.

"As long as you're not planning on retirement any time soon," Remmus grumbled.

"Well ... now that you mention it ..."

Remmus looked up slightly panicked, only to catch the mischievous glint in the man's eyes. "Don't do that to me! I'd be completely lost without someone here to help me."

"Fear not young master, I would give you plenty of advanced warning before doing so, as well as training my own replacement."

"That would work." Remmus fidgeted slightly in his chair.

"Menlaus, this is probably going to sound stupid - but is there anything other than Master that you all could call me? Calling me a master makes about as much sense as calling me king. I'm not royalty."

"You have been ever since you married our princess sir."

"I'm no prince either. I'm some star struck idiot from the Void who had no idea what he was getting himself into."

"I doubt very much you are an idiot sir. I believe there are very few who could have done what you have in coming here. Just give it some time to sink in."

"I wasn't trained for all ... this ... I was trained to fight, to lead men into battle. Sometimes, this is all so very strange."



"How is he holding up father?" Pluto asked, one hand absently playing with her hair.

"Remmus will survive, though I believe he feels otherwise at the moment. Menlaus is taking very good care of him." He smiled at her. "Would you believe that his biggest concern is that he's not royalty and doesn't feel he deserves any sort of title? I had to tell him that 'Husband to Princess Pluto' was a little too long of a title."

"It is different for him. Perhaps I should have prepared him better before we married."

"Nonsense, no need for the two of you to worry about things like that before hand. He has plenty of time to get used to the idea that he is indeed one of us now. Though you may find that when I'm gone and you become Queen he still won't like the idea of being called a king."

Pluto's gentle laugh drifted through the swirling mists around them. The picture in her mind of her poor overwhelmed husband, a reluctant ruler, was rather amusing.

"Speaking of which, you'll be heading back there tomorrow. Perhaps a face that is not mine, nor Menlaus', will make things easier on him."

"But, my duties here ..."

"I have not yet given everything up to you, and I can pull my rank as king and father to give you some time with your husband."

"Thank you." Pluto smiled and gave her father a quick hug.

"So, what's been going on in here?"

"Very little. The voices are still as quiet as before, and I've felt no other disturbances. All is well."

"We can hope it stays that way. And the future?"

"There are many." Pluto was hesitant.

"What is troubling you?"

"I ... I haven't really wanted to look at it much. I only look briefly at the futures that will occur soon, and many of them are dark and clouded. I don't know what it means, and that scares me."

"I will see what I can learn then."

"Why do we even bother? We can't take action based on what we see. We can only watch and wait."

"It is true that we cannot do anything in regards to what we may or may not see. And we can tell no one, we can give no guidance for fear of making a mess within the time lines. We may not always like what we see, but we look to remind ourselves that even for us - the guardians of time - that we are not in control." King Pluto paused. "Life will take whatever direction it desires, and we cannot change its mind to suit our purposes. We can only study it and observe it, though we may never fully understand it."

"Each decision we make creates many paths of what was, and what could have been, and what is ... but we can never choose what we want." Pluto mused.

"You chose to spend time getting to know Remmus. You chose to love him. You chose to marry him - how is that not choosing what future you want for yourself? We may be able to see everything that came before us and what may come to be after us - but we can only ever live in the present daughter."

"Except when we're here and are sitting outside the flows of time."

"Even here time flows around us. But come, even guardians of time have to eat."

"You've been around Remmus too much lately father," Pluto replied with a laugh.

"Perhaps, but he is nice to have around."

"Yes, he is."



Zeeda looked down at the stack of reports sitting on the desk. They were normal and routine, but she still did not like what she saw. Commander Harper was doing his best, but they had six squads at barely half strength and too few new recruits coming in to fill the empty spaces. For this problem, she had no solution, other than to consolidate the remaining half strength squads into full ones. That still did not solve the problem of there not being enough men. Clan Capartha was in even worse condition, though they had not had as many troops to begin with.

The war was finally taking its toll on them, and no one liked what they saw building on the horizon. Even the arrival of a new year coming in less than a month brought them little hope. Once again, she found her thoughts drifting towards all she knew of the Far'Merat and the soul barriers. As much as she had told everyone that knew she held hope they would be victorious, something deep within just did not believe it anymore. No clan was at full strength - in any quadrant of the void if the rumors were true. Zeeda wondered if there were other women like her in those far away clans, or if she truly was the last hope for everyone.

Once again, she was the only one there. Lienta had been called off to assist his father, taking only First Squad, who now saw their primary duty being to return their beloved Legati's husband to her alive and well if they were not out with her in command. Husel was out on patrol with Laraunt, and both her parents had gone off to aid a grouping of smaller clans trying to re-establish their lives in yet another new home. For the past two months, the fragments had been concentrating more and more on attacking those trying to rebuild, or building something new. They obviously did not want the clans to be able to continue on - though the larger strongholds could still take on a few more refugees.

That turned her attention to the report from the village council. They were happy to allow more people to join them and she knew the people would never turn away those in need. But space was at a premium, and they could not afford to give up what few small gardens they had for growing. Multiple families were squeezed into houses too small for all of them, under which circumstances anyone would begin to crack. The only places they had left on which to build were the large public gardens, and everyone had been reluctant to lose those open spaces.

All Zeeda knew right then was that she needed to get away from the desk, out of the house and just go see for herself. A visit with Commander Harper would come first, and then, a walk through the village to see the council. Hura came bounding into the room as Zeeda stood up from the desk.

"What are you doing today, Aunti Zee?"

"I need to meet with Commander Harper, and then I need to meet with the village council."

"Ohhh ... can I come with you?"

"Not to meet with Commander Harper, I'm not sure how long that's going to take. But you can join me in visiting the village if your father says it's okay."

"Really?"

"Yes, I will send a messenger from the compound when I'm done with my business there."

"Yay! I'll go ask father, maybe he'd like to come too."

"That'll be fine little one."

"What are we doing to do in the village?"

"Well, the houses are all full - some of them very full and we may need to make more room for more people to come live here. But we're running out of places to build, so we have to figure something out." Zeeda shrugged.

"This house can hold a lot of people, can't they stay here?"

"Yes, they could. But villagers are used to being in charge of their own homes. They may not like living with the clan commanders."

"But ... you'd never order them around."

"No, but I believe they would feel uncomfortable all the same. But we may have more clans joining us, and they would stay here and with Laraunt's family."

"That makes sense I guess."

"Now off with you, little one. I need to get down to the compound."

"Someday I'm going to be bigger you know," Hura said, sticking out her tongue.

"Even when you're a tall, beautiful, grown up lady, you will still be my little Hura." Zeeda smiled and ruffled her hair.

"You think I'll be beautiful?"

"Just like your mother."

Hura wrapped her arms around Zeeda's legs in a hug. Zeeda knew her goddaughter was always cheered by hearing she would grow up to be as beautiful as her mother. She only hoped it actually came to be.



"Legati, we still need more men."

"I know Commander, but I don't know where or how. I will never force anyone into serving - that makes for unhappy soldiers, and unhappy villagers. What about opening it up to make women feel more comfortable about volunteering?"

"We've never turned them away, you know that Legati. We just don't get many of them asking to join the legions."

"They may be our only salvation. I know no villagers were trained as I was, but ..." Zeeda said with a shrug.

"No one was trained the way you were Legati, not even me." Harper smiled.

"I know that they all train themselves to at least know what a blade is, and everyone has personal shields. I'm not talking about mixed squads with men and women, but a few even of very determined women might make all the difference."

"You and Lady Zornah are our only women commanders - they'd still be taking orders from one of our men."

"And they'd be trained by our men as well." Zeeda added.

"It's a grand idea, and if anyone can pull it off, it would be you."

"I'll find out when I meet with the village council after I'm done here. We're not just running out of troops, we're running out of space. Homes are already filled past capacity, and we need to be prepared for more refugees."

"It's that bad?"

She shrugged. "It may not come to be, but I'd rather prepare for it all the same than be caught with people on our doorstep with no place for them to live."

"Some of the officers and I were talking - our quarters are large enough, and with a few modifications to the building, our families could come live with us on the compound."

"Would that help?"

"I don't know about in the village, probably - we were thinking a tad more selfishly."

"Draw up the plans and send them to me. I don't see it as a problem. What about legionaries with families?"

"Well, they would be small, but we could build a few more family oriented barracks type buildings in the space we have set aside for expansion anyway."

"See to it, and let me know when you have everything decided. I'd rather have happy soldiers with their families here than grumpy people filling up an already full village."

"Thank you Legati."

"Anything else?"

"Not for today."

"Alright then, get to building Commander," Zeeda said with a wink.

"Yes, Legati."

Zeeda stood outside the gates of the compound, looking down at the village while she waited for Hura and her father to arrive. Their options were to build on the public gardens no one wanted to lose, or add another story or two to the low, one story homes sprawled out below. Since most of the homes were built close together, most family's had roof top living areas for entertaining and just enjoying being outside their homes without having to leave. They probably would not like the idea of loosing such areas just to fit more people in. Having new family living quarters in the compound would help, but there were so many people there already it would not solve anything if more arrived.

"Aunti Zee!"

Hura's call brought her thoughts back to something more pleasant, and she turned to greet them.

"I haven't been to the village before. This is going to be fun." Hura beamed up at her. "Do you go to the village often?"

"Not really, we don't like to interfere with them much. We're here to protect them, not rule over them."

"I don't understand," Hura replied, her forehead scrunched up.

"The villages started out as a gathering of people without clans, or those whose clan had been destroyed long ago. In the past, they were separate from the clan strongholds - the clan house and the troop compound. After another war like what we're fighting now, when some villages were completely destroyed, my people thought it wise to combine villages and strongholds to better protect everyone."

"So you just live together on the same land?"

"Yes. They are quite capable of taking care of themselves, and only come to us when they decide they need our help."

"Like building new buildings?"

"They don't need our permission to do what they like with their own lands, but they do like to keep us informed of their plans."

"I don't see many places left for new construction." King Saturn said.

"There isn't, and that's the problem. Because of how closely together the homes are built, personal gardens are on the roofs, and I have the feeling most people aren't going to wish to lose those," Zeeda replied glumly. "Even the new family quarters Commander Harper is planning won't help as much as we'd like."

"Family quarters?" Hura asked.

"Those soldiers with families living here in the village. But with as much time as we've all spent away from home, having their families in the compound means they'll get to see them more often."

"It must be sad not being able to see their families."

"As I was reminded by Commander Harper this morning. I'd rather have families living in the compound than have unhappy troops."

"You're a very nice person Aunti Zee."

"I try." She smiled down at the little girl.

They walked through the narrow village streets in silence for a while, Hura marveling at the sight, while Zeeda tried desperately to figure out a way to help the people they passed. She was not an engineer, nor an architect, so she really had no clue what any of them could do. The village council was waiting for them outside the small meeting hall.

"Legati Zeeda, thank you for coming to see us today. We had not expected such an honor."

"Councilman Laras, it is my honor to be here today. I hope you don't mind that I brought guests with me."

"Not at all Legati, all are welcome here." Laras smiled warmly.

"This is my goddaughter, Hura, and her father, Sastur."

"Forgive me, but you are not of the void ..."

"No, good sir, we are visitors from the Silver Millennium." Sastur smiled.

"We are doubly honored today then. How do you find our little village here?"

"It is a very impressive sight."

"And growing faster than we can keep control of it. But, please, come inside."

They followed the four council members into the meeting hall and assembled around a large table in the center of the room. It was painted as a map of the village. Zeeda studied it while the council members explained their plans, though none of them seemed very happy.

"There just isn't much space left to us Legati, and we do not relish the idea of turning people away."

"I know people do not wish to lose the public gardens, but what about this area here?" Zeeda pointed at a narrow stretch of land at the far side of the garden area.

"That's the children's game area - where they run their races and whatever else takes their fancy."

"We could fit quite a few multi-story dwellings there, and by shifting some of the shrubs in the center, they would still have their game area. With plenty of garden still left around the pool for gatherings."

"That would probably work."

"How many dwellings can be modified for another story or two? I don't wish to rid people of their roof gardens, but up is the only direction left to build."

"There are a few. And some families have talked of joining their houses, building up and having a larger roof garden for all to share."

"Commander Harper is working on family quarters within the compound for those with families, which should help some."

"That is wonderful news Legati, that will help us a great deal," Laras said with a relieved smile.

"That leaves the growing areas untouched, and hopefully we'll have some room left for a few extra people."

"What about stilts?" Hura asked, straining to see the table.

"You have an idea young miss?" Laras turned towards her with a small smile.

"I remember a picture in a book back home. On Mercury, they have homes built on stilts out over the water."

"Build a home above the fields?" one of the other council members asked.

"We'd have to speak with the growers, but they just might like the idea."

"Looks like we all have a busy time ahead of us," Zeeda said.

"You'll let me know when you have an estimate of how many people we can take on?"

"Of course Legati. Are we expecting ..."

"Not yet, but if a request for refuge comes in, it would be nice to know how many we can comfortably take on."

"We'll send a report as soon as all the plans are finalized. Shouldn't take more than a couple days."

"Thank you. There is one other matter I would like to ask you about." Zeeda took a deep breath. "As you may know, our barracks are less than full. We may soon be in desperate need of troops, but neither I nor anyone in my family will ever force service upon anyone. I would like to make it known that any women that may be interested would be welcomed. They would be in their own squads, not mixed with the men, though we are a little short on female commanders at the moment."

"And their families?"

"I'm not sure how much room the commander is going to be able to make for families, but we'll try our best to get those that wish it within the compound."

"I cannot promise anything Legati, but we will spread the word around."

"I can only ask for that much. Thank you Councilman Laras."

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Lienta returned to an empty house again, not even Hura was there to greet him. Tracking down a messenger on his way to the map room, he found out they were at the compound with the new recruits. He had not known they had more men coming, and wondered what his wife was currently up to that the rest of them did not know about. The sight waiting for him when he passed through the compound gates was not what he expected. Two full squads of women were standing in the central square. A rather surprised First Squad was assembling itself behind Zeeda just beyond the transport pad they had just returned through. He joined Zeeda and Centurion Tallus.

"Ah, good, you're all back," Zeeda said, with a grin they were not sure they trusted.

"You're going to explain ... this?" Lienta asked.

"Behind us are two full squads, with a third at half strength. We have never turned down women in the past, they just never really knew they could volunteer."

"You're sure about this Legati?" Tallus asked.

"You and your men have no problem with me, and don't say it's just because I'm who I am. Their skills need some work, but these women are already trained in the basics. We needed troops, and they found us."

"Legati, our legions may not have a problem with their new friends here, but what about other clans?"

"They'll just have to deal with it. These women have watched their fathers, brothers, lovers and friends go off to fight and die - and they're here because they're tired of being left behind."

"And their officers?" Lienta asked.

"There are a few older women we may be able to make squad leaders, but we need to get them all trained before making that decision. Commander Harper has given me Centurions Berat and Maruy for now. Centurion Tallus, you and your men need rest. I'll be down to talk to you tomorrow."

"Yes Legati."

With one last look at the new squads, Tallus passed on their order

to get some rest and they left the square. Lienta stood looking at Zeeda, hoping she knew what she was doing.

"Let's go introduce you."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Lienta murmured.

"If it's acceptable for myself, Laraunt and how many other clan daughters to lead men into battle, why is it so wrong for the troops to be women as well? War isn't just a game for little boys to play at - these women have every right to be here."

"I know that, but Tallus did have a point. Some of the other clans may not like this."

"They may find themselves following my example. Everyone is low on trained troops, and there aren't many more coming in to fill the ranks. If we're going to survive, we're going to have to make some changes."



Kalah's face on the vid screen was anything but happy, a marked contrast with that of Zornah hovering at his shoulder with delight filling her features.

"Zeeda, this wasn't your call to make," he growled.

"Last time I checked, I was currently in charge here. Commander Harper asked me where we were going to get more troops. You know the situation as well as I do. Why does everyone have a problem with me asking women if they want to fight alongside us?" Zeeda replied.

"There's nothing wrong with it." Zornah added. "We give them swords and then tell them to stay home. This is something that should have happened a long time ago."

"And how are families supposed to grow now that both men and women are in the legions?" Kalah demanded.

"Women with children had no desire to volunteer, and those with a husband already serving didn't sign up either."

"I can't wait to see them." Zornah beamed, ignoring her fuming husband.

"And, Commander Harper and the other officers are starting the family quarters buildings for those with families to keep them closer together. The village council has already started their plans to make more room for new refugees, so we'll be ready for whatever happens." Zeeda told them.

"Good, because things here aren't going all that well. We may have guests sooner than expected." Zornah informed her.

"Any idea on how many? Councilman Laras will need to know."

"I'm not sure yet, but Clan Lasst and Clan Buran are both small, we should be able to manage."

"I'll let them all know. Troop numbers?"

"Between the two clans, we'll be lucky to come back with two squads." Zornah sighed.

"Do you need reinforcements?"

"Not yet, but keep everyone on the ready."

"Excuse me, but I am still here you know." Kalah reminded them.

"You were being an idiot dear, so we were waiting for you to come to your senses." Zornah told him frankly.

"I'm an idiot because I don't like the idea of our daughter recruiting women?"

"Yes." Zeeda and Zornah replied in unison.

"None of the current legions have a problem with it - and they're the ones around them every day. They lost all of that the first time they sparred with them. These aren't little girls playing in the garden father; these are women that want to protect their lands themselves."

"You know what the other clans are going to think - that you've finally lost your darkness damned mind."

"Lord Afont loved the news when he was here yesterday, he even insisted on seeing it himself. I don't think there will be as many problems as you do."

"Afont was there again?" Kalah looked confused.

"Yes, he came to check some things on the map personally. Am I not supposed to welcome him into the house anymore?"

"No, I just thought he was at the Relanie front."

"He was, but there were some com problems between here and there, and he stopped in since he was close by with the crew repairing the relay stations."

"They've hit the relay stations now?"

"No, just regular wear and tear that no one has had time to keep on top of lately."

"If it's not one thing, it's another," Kalah said wearily.

"Father, it's all going to work out. I wouldn't have asked for women to volunteer if I didn't believe in the idea."

"I know, and I know they're just as capable of fighting as the men - it's just hard to think of sending them all off to die."

"The protector complex you have is flattering dear, but very annoying at times." Zornah teased gently. "We'll let you know as soon as we can about the situation here."

"We'll be waiting and on the ready if you need us."



"Mother, do we really have to go?"

"Endymion, your father and I have struggled a long time to repair relations with those on the moon. It would be a good gesture on our part to attend the birthday celebration."

"Can't I just stay here at home while you two go? You don't really need me there."

"Your father wishes to introduce you to the Queen, so you will be going. And I don't want to hear any more about it. You're old enough now to see more of what will be required of you when you take the throne."

"Yes mother."

She watched the sixteen year old prince storm from the room, sighing heavily. They had indeed fought long and hard to develop the alliance with Queen Serenity, but other factions on Earth still stood against them. Why their neighbors were so against such an alliance was a mystery - Queen Serenity had no desire to rule over them - she simply wished for better relations with the planet nearest her.

Four heads looked up as Endymion stormed into their meeting room. Glancing at each other, they waited for him to speak.

"Apparently, I'm not being allowed to stay behind." Endymion fumed.

"Prince, is it such a bad thing?" Kunzite asked him.

"No, I just have no desire to go there just to fawn over some silly little princess on her birthday."

"It is said that the gardens on the Moon are a sight one shouldn't miss." Jadeite offered.

"We're not going to see the gardens."

"I'm sure you'll get the grand tour prince," Nephrite said with a grin.

"Don't you mean *we'll* get the grand tour?"

"What?" Zoisite croaked.

"If you think I'm going up there while the four of you get to stay here in the comforts of home, you all don't know me very well," Endymion said with a slightly evil grin.

"Your mother said we all have to go?"

"Kunzite, I'm not giving her a choice."

"She's not going to like the idea ..."

"Probably not, but that's why I'll be talking to father about it."

The four young lords contained the groans they would have dearly loved to release right then. But, they had known the prince since he was five, and even then he had possessed a commanding personality. If the prince had decided something, it generally came into being - despite the wishes of those he often dragged into his plans. Kunzite and Nephrite, being two years older than their prince were expected to set the example for the rest of them, though that hardly mattered.

The two of them were often outnumbered, with Zoisite a year younger, and Jadeite the same age as the prince. Endymion never

intentionally got them into trouble, and he did do his best to take the blame whenever they let him. Still, it seemed that their main task was not so much of guarding the prince from outside events, but protecting him from himself. Kunzite just hoped he would grow out of it soon enough.

"Come on, with the five of us there, it'll be more fun than just me and my parents."

"As long as you're on your best behavior. I'll not get myself kicked out of the Moon Palace because of you and your ... ideas ..." Kunzite growled.

"You have my word I won't do anything too terribly bad."

"Prince ..."

"Kunz, relax. The Queen will be there, he won't do anything with his mother looking over his shoulder." Nephrite teased.

"So, you're forgetting the incident with Jadeite, the Queen's cat, and the tomatoes from last week?"

"I thought we agreed to never speak of that again." Jadeite grumped.

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Zeeda was not exactly happy about leaving for the Moon Palace. Things had escalated in the past two months. It seemed the fragments wished to usher in the new year in a way that would not be forgotten any time soon. Zornah had finally managed to convince her that taking the two days to attend the princess' birthday celebration would not hurt them all that much. They needed to keep up their relations with the Silver Millennium - and none of them had been there in over a year. So, she found herself on the transport pad with Lienta, leaving Husel in charge of the stronghold. Kalah and Zornah were back to assist Clan Lasst and Clan Buran in moving to join them. The other two clans they had tried to rebuild with would be joining with Clan Torpel.

The palace on the Moon was the busiest they had ever seen before - and they were also surprised to find themselves led to a different area of the palace than they had stayed in before. Entering the rooms they were shown, Remmus and Pluto were waiting for them in the sitting room.

"Where are we?" Zeeda asked, dropping her bags to give her brother a hug.

"Well, we pulled a few strings so you could share a suite with us instead of the regular guest quarters," Remmus replied.

"Abusing your power already?" Zeeda teased.

"It was my idea, actually," Pluto said with a smile. "You're family, you shouldn't have to stay with regular guests."

"It is good to see the two of you."

"And you as well."

"Pluto dear, can I steal you for a moment?"

"Of course."

"No peeking." Zeeda directed a pointed look at Lienta as the two women left the room.

"What's that all about?" Remmus asked after their wives disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

"You think I know what goes on in her head?" Lienta replied, his shoulders itching into a slight shrug.



"I need to know if this will be appropriate to wear tonight." Zeeda told Pluto as she brought a wrapped lump of fabric from her bag.

While Zeeda had considered one of her regular half skirted tunics to wear to the princess' party, something had told her that it would not have looked all that well at the planned royal ball. So, she had gone to the seamstresses in the village and managed to come up with a dress she did not mind spending the evening in. The fabric was a dark blue, with a strapless top and a floor length hem with slits up the side for greater control over her movements.

"It's lovely Zeeda, I'm sure it will be fine."

"I wasn't sure exactly what would be acceptable - especially the slits they made in the sides because I wanted to be able to move."

"You'll outshine us all."

"Don't tell me that, I'm not looking for attention Pluto."

"It's kind of hard not to, you are head and shoulders above us."

Pluto teased.

"The only thing is ... I don't have any shoes that aren't boots. And the ladies that made the dress told me the shoes from your wedding wouldn't match - whatever difference that makes."

"We don't have a lot of time, but we should be able to find something," Pluto said with a laugh.

"So, how have you two been doing?" Zeeda asked.

"It was ... difficult ... after the news of Kullah. We had a rough patch, but all is well again."

"I'm sorry, I know it must be difficult with him at times."

"It is, and I still have fears that someday he'll go off and not come back."

"As long as I'm alive, his ass won't be leaving you. No matter what happens."

"I don't want him to go, but if he were to ask me to, I don't think I could say no," Pluto replied softly.

"Things haven't gotten that bad yet, we're holding our own." Zeeda reassured her.

"The news of the new female troops certainly surprised him," Pluto said, pulling herself away from darker thoughts. "How did you manage it?"

"I simply reminded them we welcomed any who wished to fight. Though, I can honestly say I never expected them in the numbers they came. We only have two squads now and one at half strength - and that's only because we haven't wanted to mix men and women just yet."

"It must be a sight to see."

"You're all female warriors here, shouldn't be any different than that."

"The planetary guardians, yes. But Queen Serenity's army is primarily male still. But we can talk on the way - we need to find shoes for you."

"Yes, as I suppose going barefoot is out of the question." Zeeda could not help but grumble.

"Unfortunately, yes." Pluto's silvery laughter bounced about the room.



Endymion had to admit that the gardens surrounding the Moon Palace were impressive indeed. What thrilled him the most was the view looking back towards Earth. It felt odd seeing the world he lived on floating there in space, but it was a beautiful sight. True to his promise made earlier, he was on his best behavior - not that he knew enough yet about his surroundings to do anything anyway. Trailing behind his parents with his friends as the guide told them about what they were seeing, he was not really paying attention to much right then. He might have been able to avoid what happened next.

"Hey, get back here!"

Something collided with him, sending him sprawling in the middle of an expanse of white lilies.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" he growled as he picked himself back up.

"Sere! Now look what you've done!"

A girl with long dark hair was standing beside him, her anger directed at the tangle of blond hair lying giggling in the middle of the bed of flowers.

"I still beat you Riann."

"And you attacked one of the guests. You get to explain to your mother this time."

"I didn't hurt him," the blond girl said as she got to her feet.

"Is it customary to greet guests this way?" Endymion asked, voice dripping with venom.

"I'm sorry I didn't see you, but there's still no harm done." Shining blue eyes looked back at him.

"I'm sure your mother won't agree when she sees her flowers."

"Sere! Riann!" Three other girls ran up to join the group. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine Amiel." Serenity smiled at her friend.

"Excuse me ..." Endymion began; he was not used to being knocked to the ground and then forgotten.

"I told you I was sorry for running into you."

"And then ignored ... is that the custom here?"

"No, but we really must be going." The girl with auburn hair

interrupted, pulling on her friend's arm.

"You're a guest here at the palace?" Serenity asked him.

"I am Prince Endymion from Earth."

"It was nice running into you. Perhaps we'll see each other again later."

Blue eyes sparkled at him with mirth as the four girls led their friend away.

"Well, that was interesting." Nephrite murmured.

"If that's the custom around here ..." Endymion growled. "We didn't even learn who they were."

"The one with dark hair called your little friend Sere," Jadeite said.

"She is hardly my friend."

"I believe we may have just met the princess." Zoisite added.

"Surely not - not with manners as lacking as that girl." Endymion stated.

The rest simply shrugged and made their way back along the garden path.



"Serenity! I can't believe you did that." Riann fumed.

"Oh, Riann, it was all in fun."

"I doubt the prince thinks that. You tackled him to the ground in the middle of your mother's favorite lilies!"

"Riann, she wouldn't have been running had you not started the race." Amiel reminded them.

"She could still watch where she's going more often." Riann grumped.

"Stop it you guys, we have to get ready for the party." Mialian replied with a toss of her blond hair.

"They were cute, don't you think?" Serenity asked her friends.

"I wasn't paying attention." Amiel replied.

"Amiel, you're hopeless. The tall one with the long brown hair was so very dreamy," Mikita said with a sigh.

"I wasn't impressed with any of them." Riann scoffed.

"You never are." Mialian muttered.

"Come on, we need to get Serenity cleaned up." Amiel prodded as they entered the princess' rooms.



Zeeda took one last look at herself in the mirror by the dresser. She hoped Pluto was right and she would look okay mingling with all the other guests that evening. They had managed to find a pair of silver sandals that Pluto had assured her would look just fine, though Zeeda had reminded her she did not need the extra height the heels gave her. She was going to be spending the evening with people she did not know, in a dress, with shoes that added three inches to her already towering height. Right then, she would much rather have been facing a room full of fragments.

"Zee, it's time to go." Lienta called from the other side of the door.

"I'm coming."

"Wow ... sis ..." Remmus sputtered when she joined them in the sitting room.

"What?"

"Nothing," came his hurried reply.

"You look wonderful." Pluto assured her with a warm smile.

Lienta was once again speechless. Following in a daze as Zeeda gently dragged him from the room while he recovered from the shock.

"Do you like doing this to me?" He asked before they got to the ballroom. "I swear you get some sick pleasure from things like this."

"I thought you liked it. I can go change into one of my tunics ..." Zeeda trailed off, a smirk twitching about her lips.

"No! Just, you could give me some warning next time."

"And miss that silly look you get on your face?" Zeeda replied with a grin.

Lienta only shook his head as they followed Remmus and Pluto into the massive ballroom. Queen Serenity stood with her daughter off to their right, greeting the guests as they arrived.

"Princess Pluto, Lord Remmus, it is good to see you both again." The Queen smiled.

"Queen Serenity, Princess."

"And Legati Zeeda, Legati Lienta. You remember my daughter?"

"It has been a few years, but we do indeed." Zeeda replied, saluting them both.

"That is a very pretty dress," the princess said.

"Thank you princess." Zeeda replied with a smile. "You look very lovely this evening as well."

"Thank you for coming to my party."

"We were honored to receive the invitation."

They moved off into the crowd to make way for the other guests behind them, Pluto murmuring names to them as they made their way to a quiet corner. There was one advantage to being taller than those around her she supposed. Zeeda could watch the entire room from any location, which made her feel better about it. She was sure Remmus and Lienta would have laughed to know she was in battle mode right then. With so

many people she did not know, it was a hard habit to break.

"Who's that?" Zeeda asked Pluto, indicating the group now talking to the Queen.

"King Enthos and Queen Terah from Earth. Their son, Prince Endymion is one of the younger boys. The one with the dark hair I believe."

"The other four?"

"They are young lords of Earth I think, the prince's guardians."

"Like the other princesses around Serenity?"

"Something like that."

"Five for five," Zeeda murmured, shrugging in response to the questioning look Pluto gave her.

"Do we know who we're seated with?" Remmus asked.

"No, but we're at separate tables." Pluto replied.

"Oh, that sounds exciting." Lienta groused.

To say that Prince Endymion was surprised when his attacker from earlier that day was indeed the young princess of the Moon would not have told the full story. He was stunned when his parents moved aside and made their introductions. Behind the girl with the blond hair and laughing blue eyes stood the other four girls they had seen that afternoon. He had responded to the Queen politely, trying very hard to keep himself under control.

It was rather difficult though with a little slip of a girl secretly laughing at him with her eyes.



The dinner passed by pleasantly, Zeeda and Lienta rather grateful that they had been seated with King and Queen Jupiter - since they did not really know anyone else in the room that evening. It felt good to have a dinner conversation that did not involve troop movements and strategies. After the meal was finished, they turned to watch as Queen Serenity made her way to the middle of the open ballroom floor, the princess trailing behind her.

"Friends, we are very glad to share your company this evening as we celebrate my daughter's birthday. Now please ..."

"Oh, look at all of this."

All eyes turned at the voice that had interrupted the Queen. A woman with dark eyes and even darker hair had entered the room, a young woman with long burgundy hair in a purple gown trailing behind her. Zeeda watched as the delegation from Earth leapt to their feet, and nudging Lienta, got to her feet as well. The two of them positioned themselves slightly before the Queen and princess, who was now standing behind her four friends.

"Lady Metalrina, what is the meaning of this intrusion?" King

Ethos asked.

"Our invitation must have been delayed." The woman sneered.

"I apologize for any offense Lady. However, since you walked away from the negotiation table months ago I assumed you had little desire to be a part of things," Queen Serenity replied coldly.

"I see you cavorting with these people Ethos, abandoning your own neighbors. My daughter and I will certainly report this to the others."

"They already know where I am Metalrina, the news will gain you nothing."

Zeeda moved slowly to position herself halfway between Queen Serenity and the group from Earth. She was not sure what was going to happen, but that something told her this Lady Metalrina was a dangerous addition to the party. She kept her eyes on the newcomers, but was turned enough she could see any movements from the Queen from the corner of her eye. Hearing the young men moving about behind her, she made a quick motion with her hand hoping they understood it enough to not do anything stupid.

"Going to set your dogs on me Serenity?"

"Give me a reason to let you leave alive, and I will."

Zeeda addressed the woman coolly, not caring how much trouble she got herself into as she called her swords to her hands. She supposed she looked just a little odd holding her weapons still dressed in her gown, but full armor would definitely have gotten her in worse trouble.

"Who are you to address me in such a matter?"

"No one of consequence."

Queen Serenity spoke again, her voice sounding loudly through the hushed room. "Lady Metalrina, I do not say this often, but you are not welcome here. Please, take your daughter and go."

While Queen Serenity knew Zeeda would not do anything unless the situation warranted it, she had little desire to see any blood spilled that evening. No matter how satisfying it may have momentarily felt to finally be rid of the troublesome woman. The Queen would never admit such dark thoughts to anyone.

"You will regret this day. I will see to it if it is the last thing I do."

"Lady Metalrina, you will find little support on Earth. I will see to that myself!" King Ethos roared.

"I take no orders from you!"

The crowd gasped as the small throwing knife bounced harmlessly off of the shield Zeeda had hastily thrown up to protect those standing behind her. One long step put her directly in front of Lady Metalrina.

"I believe you were asked to leave." Zeeda whispered, sounding more deadly than any shout could have.

The woman's courage fluttered as she stared at the sword poised a few inches from her chest, and the woman now towering over her with dark, cold eyes.

"You can choose to leave with your dignity intact escorted by the

palace guards, or I can remove you from the room. It's your choice."

"Come Beryl, let us not soil ourselves by remaining here in this room filled with filth."

Zeeda followed them closely until a group of guards surrounded the two women on their way out of the room. Turning, she looked at none but the Queen. How in the hell was she going to make up for this mess? Kneeling in one fluid movement (no small feat in a dress she thought), she set her crossed swords on the floor at Queen Serenity's feet.

"Highness, I apologize for stepping out of my proper place."

"Legati, I saw nothing other than a friend doing her duty."

Zeeda looked up to see a small smile on the Queen's face, warm and not strained.

"Now, please put those away," the Queen finished quietly.

The swords swiftly vanished from sight, and Zeeda stood slowly. Her mother was going to give her an earful when she got home. Both she and Queen Serenity turned as King Ethos approached.

"I am sorry Queen Serenity, I never expected she would try anything."

"I place no blame on you King Ethos. Lady Metalrina is not under your control."

"And I must thank you ... Her aim with knives is most deadly," he said, turning to Zeeda.

"It was merely my duty, sir," Zeeda said, inclining her head slightly.

"King Ethos, may I introduce Legati Zeeda, an ally from distant lands."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance Legati."

"And I yours."

"Now, let us try and enjoy the rest of the evening." Queen Serenity said in a louder voice directed at the rest of the room.

"I have a feeling we're in very good hands tonight." King Ethos said, smiling at Zeeda.



"Your mother is going to skin you when we get back," Lienta said, as he watched Zeeda collapse on the bed.

"I didn't really do anything."

"No, you only spoke out of turn and called your weapons to you at the princess' birthday celebration. How did you do that anyway?"

"I've been practicing - I have to have something to do when I'm stuck at home running things. And I was not going to let that woman do anything to anyone. Something tells me I should have just killed her and

her daughter and be done with it."

"You're not an executioner love, and I'd hate to see you become one."

"Still, there was something about those two. I just have this feeling."

"I'm sure Queen Serenity and King Ethos can take care of it. They're not little children you know."

"I know." Zeeda sighed. "What a terrible memory for the princess on her birthday though."

"She seemed to recover quickly from it. Though the young prince didn't seem as eager to be dancing with her."

They both turned their heads as a knock sounded at the door.

"Sis, there's a messenger here - a call for you from home."

Remmus called out.

"What now? We're coming back tomorrow," Zeeda grumbled as she got up from the bed.

"I don't know, you'll have to go take the call to find out," Remmus answered as she left the bed chamber.

"Alright, I'll be back soon."

Following the messenger to the com room, she enjoyed the feel of the cool floors on her bare feet, not caring what anyone thought. Damned if she was going to put those shoes back on right then when she was not going to meet anyone in person. Her stomach gave a little flip upon seeing Lord Afont's face instead of anyone from the family.

"Lord Afont, what's happened?"

"Legati - I'm terribly sorry ... There was another explosion. We lost ... we lost Kalah and Zornah."

His words rang in her ears. It was not possible, it simply could not be.

"Husel ..." she managed to croak.

"He's holding up well, but everyone would feel more secure with your presence. You are the acting head of Clan Centurios now, Legatus Zeeda."

She almost lost it in that moment hearing herself addressed with the title she had not expected to hear connected with her name for many years yet.

"We'll be there shortly." Zeeda replied blankly.



Zeeda returned to their rooms in a daze, thankful for the messenger escorting her back because she would have most likely have gotten lost in her present state. Three pairs of eyes turned to her, their joke immediately forgotten at the look on her face.

"Zeeda -" Lienta said, moving towards her.

"There was another ... explosion ... Mother and father ..."

"No ..." Remmus breathed.

"Lienta and I have to return now." Zeeda murmured.

"I'm going with you," Remmus said, getting to his feet.

"No!" both Zeeda and Pluto shouted.

"You have duties here you cannot simply leave brother. Your place is here," Zeeda said forcefully.

"Our parents were killed, you can't expect me to just sit here!" Remmus roared.

"I can and I do," Zeeda said, squaring her shoulders. "You even think of setting foot on that transport pad and I will remove both your legs. You will stay here where you belong!"

"You can't stop me."

"I am now head of Clan Centurios. I am the Legatus - and you will damn well do as I say!" Zeeda spoke harshly, her voice cracked and rough. "Use your darkness damned head for once. You being here gave mother and father hope - you not being in the void meant our family has a chance to continue. You do something stupid and get yourself killed, you destroy what is left of them. Don't try to argue with me any further on this Remmus, or Pluto will be taking you back home a broken man."

Zeeda disappeared into the bed chamber to pack her few things, not even bothering to change. Lienta followed her silently, knowing she was currently in no mood to talk. He also knew Remmus was not helping her with what she was currently dealing with, and feared the two siblings would part on less than stellar terms. Returning to the sitting room with their bags in hand, they stood before Remmus and Pluto.

"Remmus, I know your pain, it's mine as well ... but please understand. You and Husel are the only two left who will carry on our family line." Zeeda's voice was low and tired. "I cannot have children, and I may be called upon to do something that would mean survival for everyone. I know you feel frustrated and left out by staying here - but please, don't do this for me, or for yourself. Do this for Pluto, and our parents."

Not waiting for a response, she gave Pluto a sad smile as they left the room. The halls were quiet as they made their way to the transport room, stopped outside the door by Queen Serenity.

"I apologize Legati, but I heard you had news from home ..."

"It's Legatus now. My parents were killed earlier today." Zeeda replied blankly.

"Oh ... I'm so sorry. Is there anything we can do to be of help?"

"Thank you highness, but we'll be fine." Lienta replied.



Lord Afont was waiting for them when they arrived, having come to be a helpful presence until Zeeda and Lienta could take over. Families of the fallen legionaries would have to be notified, if they had not been already, leaving Zeeda little time to deal with her own grief. Losing herself in her duties would only serve for a short time. Everyone knew that, but they also knew they would be relatively powerless to stop her. She was still in her dress, with bare feet, moving stiffly through the house.

Lord Afont filled them in on the details, though there was little to say. While they had been traveling with those from Clan Lasst and Clan Buran they had been ambushed. The troops had held the fragments back long enough for the villagers and other people to get away before the blast happened. Only one squad from the Clan Centurion troops had returned, with a half squad from both the other clans. The rest had suffered serious injuries. Kalah and Zornah had managed to raise an impressive set of shields to allow them that much, but had been overcome by the blast wave. Lord Maral from Clan Lasst was standing in the main hall, his arm in a sling and the rest of him looking just as battered.

"Legatus Zeeda, I ... I am sorry. If Lord Kalah and Lady Zornah had not been protecting us ..."

"Lord Maral, it was not your fault. I don't blame you, and neither would my parents. Your quarters are to your liking?"

"Yes Legatus, we ... we will be forever in your debt."

"There is nothing to repay milord. Please, our home is yours as well. We stand together."

He nodded as Zeeda gave him a sad smile before heading out of the main doors on her way to the compound, leaving the rest of them behind. Her troops needed her. She suspected they were badly shaken from the events they had just been through - even those that had not been there for the attack. Lienta followed behind her hurriedly, leaving Lord Afont to see to the others in the house. They still had not seen Husel yet, but found him waiting at the gates to the compound. Not caring who saw and what they thought of it, Zeeda pulled her youngest brother into a firm hug. Besides Remmus, they were the only two left in their family.

"We'll get through this, I promise," Zeeda murmured as they parted.

"I know. I just finished notifying all the families that suffered today." Husel replied.

"Thank you."

"I had to do something to help, you'll have enough to worry about."

"You made sure Clan Lasst got settled in?"

"Yes, though if that man tries to apologize to me one more time ..." Husel's grumblings tapered off. It was neither the time nor place for complaints.

"He's in shock, give it some time. Commander Harper in his

office?"

"If he's not, he's in the mess hall. They're using it as a temporary hospital for our people. The others are in the main hospital."

"Thanks."

Zeeda set off for the mess hall, deciding to see the injured men first, regardless of all else. Commander Harper looked up as they entered the room. The tables had been cleared away and the room was filled with cots instead. Starting with those closest to the door, Zeeda made her way around the room speaking with each man that was able. Just short pleasantries, but it made them feel better, and her as well.

"Thank you Legatus, it really does mean a lot to them," Harper said softly after she finished her visit.

"Which squads were with them?" Lienta asked.

"Fifth and Seventh, Legatus."

"They're next. I'll address everyone else tomorrow," Zeeda followed Commander Harper from the converted mess hall.

The surviving members of Fifth Squad shot to their feet when their three commanders entered the room. Zeeda paused a moment before speaking.

"I know it is hard right now, dealing with what happened. You did a great service out there today, allowing the refugees coming here to make it safely. I know Legatus Kalah and Legatus Zornah would be proud of what you've done, that they were proud to serve with you - just as I am."

The scene repeated itself in the barracks of Seventh Squad, and after they had finished, Lienta finally led a tired Zeeda back to the house. Her current condition reminded him of how she had been after Marshant's death, and knew some part of her was blaming herself for the loss of her parents. The most he could do right then was to keep the others in the house at bay while he maneuvered her towards their rooms.

33

Pluto sat in the darkened sitting room, her eyes staring blankly at nothing. Two months had passed since the night of the princess' birthday and the horrible news. The haunted look that had been on Zeeda's face was etched in her mind, along with the words she had spoken that evening. While they had indeed had the desired effect on Remmus, Pluto knew he still wished to return to the void to aid them. She had tried to fight it, the painful feeling inside her, but she knew she would have to let him go.

He was as attentive as he had ever been with her, but there were moments she knew his thoughts were far away. She did not want to lose him. She could not lose him - but he would never be at ease if she did not let him go. Remmus would never ask and she knew that day would never come. He had promised as much after Kullah had died, and he would hold himself to it. No, she had to be strong and tell him to go herself. But every time she had tried to do so for the past week, she had not been able to.

"Plu, love, what are you doing here in the dark?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice, seeing him standing silhouetted by the light coming in from the open doorway.

"Just thinking."

"It's late, you should get some sleep," he said softly, holding out a hand to her.

Shaking herself more fully into the present, Pluto stood and placed her hand in his. Would this be the last time she did this? Would tonight really be the last one they spent together? Try as she might to rid the dark thoughts from her head, they burrowed in even deeper - overwhelming her. Remmus noticed as her grip on his hand tightened, and the troubled look on her face, but knew she would tell him nothing until she was ready.

The first week had been a struggle for him, wanting at every moment to rush off and leap onto the transport pad in the Moon Palace. He had restrained himself - and not simply because of what Zeeda had said that day. He had never been angrier at his sister than that evening,

but had realized the anger was not solely directed at her. Remmus had been angry purely for the sake of being so.

His parents were gone, taken away from them too soon. Deep down, he knew there was little he could have done had he been there at their sides. What had held him back the most however, was remembering the promise to the goddess he had fallen in love with. He had told her he would never leave her, that she would never have anyone telling her he would never come back. He meant to keep it with every fiber of his being, until the end of time.

Getting into bed, Pluto had rolled over and clutched him to her tightly. She was afraid he would disappear if she did not. Remmus was confused, but did not hesitate in returning the embrace.

"Plu, what's bothering you?" he asked gently.

"I ... I've been trying to work up the courage ... but it's so hard ..."

"Work up the courage for what?"

"To tell ... to tell you that I'm okay with you leaving. I know how much it's killing you inside to not be with your family right now. I ..."

"Pluto, I am with my family. I told you I would never leave you, and I'm not going to make any changes to that promise."

"I know Remmus, but I catch a look in your eyes that tells me you're not here, and you will never be at peace until you go back. I ... I don't want you to go, but I can't keep holding you here."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do love, but I can't go back. I don't know the first thing about what's going on - I've been away too long. It doesn't bother me much, it's just finally started to sink in."

"I see that, but I've seen the other you. You're a warrior, and you've given up so much for me - I can't let you give this up. I know that sitting around here with little to do isn't the life you wanted."

"I wanted you, and I have you. Nothing else matters."

"You're not making this any easier, you're supposed to be agreeing with me. I've just told you to return to the void and -"

"Pluto, I don't want to leave you." Remmus interrupted with a gentle kiss.

She pulled away after a moment. "I don't want you to go, but I feel that you must."

"Why?"

"I don't know ... I just ... I just don't know." Pluto wailed softly.

Remmus held her as she sobbed silently with her face pressed against his chest.



Returning to the Moon Palace the next day and stepping into the transport chamber was the hardest thing Remmus felt he had ever done. Pluto had told him to go, but he was reluctant to listen to her. Neither of them had gotten much sleep between quiet arguments and many tears, and it showed on both their faces.

"If Zeeda doesn't send me back in a million pieces, I doubt she'll let me out of the house to see any battles. I still don't feel comfortable leaving you," he said, his forehead pressed against hers.

"Tell her ... tell her I sent you, that this is something you must do. Just promise me you'll come back."

Tilting her head up, he answered by placing a tender kiss on her trembling lips.

"I will fight the gates of time to be with you always," he whispered hoarsely.

"I will be there waiting."

Pluto kissed him one last time, hungrily and fervently. She knew she could not stop the tears making their way down her cheeks, no matter how strong she had wanted to be while seeing him off. With a lingering look, Remmus stepped onto the transport pad and vanished in a bright flash of light. The transport technicians silently slipped from the room as Queen Serenity entered and wrapped her arms gently around the sobbing woman. She knew very well the pain of letting the one you loved most go with the chance of never seeing him again.



Remmus arrived to an empty transport chamber, though the chaos from inside the com room drifted down the hall. Slowly making his way towards the main hall, he bumped into Lienta coming from the wing he shared with Zeeda. Lienta was silent a long moment, a variety of emotions warring within him and flashing across his face. For the first time in a long time Remmus felt like a small child again under the heated gaze of his brother-in-law.

"She's in the study."

Nodding in reply, Remmus managed to get his feet moving again. His brain yelled at him that he was where he belonged, but his heart told him otherwise. He did not belong in this house. He had nothing to offer anyone here. Perhaps just a quick visit with Zeeda and then he would go back and tell Pluto that as much as he loved her, she had been wrong. Knocking on the door to the study, he opened the door slowly in response to the curt order to come in.

Zeeda sat behind their father's desk, a position she did not enjoy, and looked up at Remmus with cold expressionless eyes. He froze

momentarily. Never before had he seen his sister like this - not even when Marshant had died. She seemed hard and brittle, but Remmus knew she would never break. She had too much sheer will power to fall that easily. He tried to speak, but nothing came out when he opened his mouth.

"She sent you, didn't she." Zeeda's voice was as cold and tired as her eyes.

"When finally given the approval, coming here was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"Your room is upstairs. You will be part of the command staff that stays here. You will not leave without my permission unless it is to return to your wife. Stow your gear and be back in an hour."

"Yesser."

Remmus silently cursed himself as he left the room. He was thirty now, a married man - and still his sister made him nervous as hell. He knew she had always hated when he mashed the words together, and had done it simply to annoy her when they were younger. And now? Now, he had fallen right back into his old fifteen year old self - and felt about that short again. Sighing, he made his way upstairs to leave his bag in his old room. Lienta slipped into the study after Remmus left, treading lightly - though Zeeda simply looked tired and defeated. It tore at his soul to see her like this, powerless to do much for her.

"Pluto sent him - and for once, he didn't actually want to come."

"Are you sending him back?" Lienta asked quietly.

"Not right away, but he's not ever leaving the stronghold unless it's to return to her."

"One quick blow to the head, and I can slip him back on the transport pad in just a few minutes."

"Nice try love, but I don't think that's the best solution. I'm making him part of the command staff - that way the rest of us will be free to leave when we're needed."

"That should work, I guess. He seemed different."

"He's one of them now, they all seem that way," Zeeda replied, passing a hand over her tired face. "Lord Maral can help keep an eye on him. That leg injury is going to keep him grounded for a while."

"At least he's stopped apologizing. Even I was getting tired of it."

"Masy helped with that, I think. I know I wasn't much help the first few days, but it was so damn irritating."

"You controlled yourself well love. I was very proud of you."

Lienta smiled.

"Was?"

"Am ... I am, you know."

"I love you." Zeeda murmured softly, a small smile warming her tired eyes.

"And I you." Lienta replied, leaning across the desk for a quick kiss. "So, I guess I'll be going down for the inspections alone this afternoon?"

"No, we'll go down soon and take Remmus with us. They'll need to know his face if he's going to be running the place if we're gone."

"You think the legions will accept him?"

"Do they have much of a choice?"



Endymion sat at the window, staring glumly at the rain that had been falling off and on ever since they had returned from their visit to the moon. His mind kept replaying the events of the party in his mind. But of all the thoughts that flashed by, the one that lingered the most had been the princess and her damn laughing eyes. He did not know why he kept thinking about her - she was a silly little girl, only just turned thirteen. Knowing he was only three years older did not seem to make much difference, other than to annoy him further for some unknown reason.

Sitting across from him Kunzite was thinking about a different person all together. When Lady Metalrina had made her appearance, his only thoughts had been to protect his prince. They all knew she desired a match between the prince and her own snake of a daughter, Beryl. The thought sickened them all. And so he had slowly and cautiously readied himself and the other three to place themselves where they belonged - between Endymion and all danger.

But then a towering form in a blue dress had suddenly placed herself before them. Command had all but oozed from the woman, and he had found himself instantly complying when she stilled them with a simple motion of her hand. He had obeyed before he even realized it and the experience had shaken him.

He was the leader. He was the one that gave commands - but he had realized he paled in comparison to the Legati. It had not been a large blow, but Kunzite had been silently nursing his bruised ego for the past couple of months.

"Kunzite, are you still kicking yourself over something you had no control over?"

He jumped as Endymion's words broke the silence of the past hour. "Of course not." Kunzite snapped.

"So someone older than you, with a great deal more experience at fighting, has had nothing to do with your sour mood?"

"The prince is too observant for his own good."

"They're a race of warriors - that's all they know. Don't beat yourself up over it."

"I doubt they're simple warriors. You had to feel the power that stirred when she blocked that knife - I've never seen or felt anything like it."

"She's married, you know that right?" Endymion teased.

"I'm not interested in her that way - I prefer ... shorter ... women, ones that won't break my neck looking up at them anyway. She talked to Metalrina like she was a fly not worthy of her attention."

"I don't think I'll ever forget the look on her face when the Legati had her at sword point. That was a truly satisfying moment." Endymion grinned.

"Though, it was unwise to anger Lady Metalrina - and I have the feeling we'll pay the price for that little scene. They're not *our* allies, remember?"

"I know, but Lady Metalrina doesn't have an army large enough to worry about much."

"There is talk though, people are still unhappy about an alliance with the Moon Kingdom."

"They're not invaders from other lands, they're our neighbors - they've always been there."

"People are jealous of their power, their peace."

"They weren't always peaceful."

"Most people either don't know that, or simply don't care. All they know is what they've seen or heard - and none of it has been good."

"Well, we go back next year to hopefully finalize the negotiations."

"And ... will you be looking forward to seeing a certain someone?"

"Certainly not," Endymion replied a little too hastily.

"If you say so," Kunzite muttered.

34

Four months had passed since Remmus had returned to the home of his childhood, and though he was smart enough to keep his complaints to himself - he was growing rather bored with being stuck in the house. Granted, he could go down to the compound or the village, but he figured that by now Zeeda would at least let him accompany one of them on a routine patrol. When he had asked about doing so the day before, she had replied that patrols were rarely routine. They could face an attack any time they left the stronghold.

He had the feeling she was trying to drive him away - back to Pluto. Part of him kept saying that if he had any sense, he would do just that. But it still felt just a little satisfying to be there, assisting as he was allowed. Husel was out patrolling, and Zeeda and Lienta would be leaving shortly to take reinforcements to the Dulat front where the fighting was currently the worst. And Remmus, he would be staying behind, sitting in the study - again.

"Stop grouching or I will send you home." Zeeda growled.

"I am not grouching." Remmus muttered.

"You've been like this for a week now. If you don't like your duties, you know where the exit is. I don't have time to coddle you and make you feel better." Zeeda's eyes darkened. "And don't even think about asking me to let you go out there again."

"Husel is nine years younger than I am..."

"And Husel has been here since everything started - no amount of paperwork can tell you what may happen out there. Four months isn't enough time for the legions to feel comfortable with you as a commander. They respect your name because of who you are, but even the newest recruits wouldn't want an unproven commander leading them to their deaths."

"How am I supposed to prove myself if you keep me here all the time?"

"You're not supposed to prove yourself. You're not even supposed to be here." Zeeda sighed. "You think I like sending Husel out? You think I like not knowing if he'll return? Can you stomach having to tell a family

that their loved one is dead? Remmus, of all of us, you are the least tainted by what is going on - and you're just going to have to deal with me being selfish in that regard."

Remmus sat silently fuming as she left the room. Lienta, who had been standing to the side quietly watching yet another argument between the two siblings, stayed behind a moment.

"Lienta, I'm not a child. I know how to take care of myself. Why can't she see that?"

"Remmus, she knows all that. What you apparently can't see is that she doesn't want you changed the way this war has changed the rest of us. Have you taken a good look at Zeeda recently? You have any idea how hard it is to watch what's happening to her?"

"Still, I can help do more than what I am doing."

"Pull your head out of your ass." Lienta's eyes flashed in anger. "Sure, you've made friends with quite a few of the troops - can you go out there and send them to their deaths? Are you in any way ready for anything like that? Think long and hard brother, because that's what the rest of us do every day we're out there. It's not some romanticized victorious experience. It's dark, it's ugly - it will strip you of every emotion until there is nothing left but an empty shell."

"Then, how are you two able to make it through?"

"What makes you think we are?"

Lienta left the room, slowly shaking his head. He hated being in the middle and understood both Zeeda's and Remmus' frustrations. There really was not any solution that would make anyone happy.

Remmus stood staring blankly at the empty doorway. Lienta's last comment had chilled him. Were things really that bad? Was he really still thinking the war was like events told in some silly children's story? He was pulled from his musings as a messenger burst into the room.

"Legati Husel is under attack at waystation Twelve - the fragments have taken over. They're completely surrounded."

"Head to the compound - Legatus Zeeda should still be there."

"Yes, sir."

Remmus paused a moment before hurrying after the messenger. He had to know what was going on at least.



The compound was in a state of carefully controlled chaos by the time Remmus arrived. Looking around, he finally spotted his sister near the transport pad. Five full squads, three of them the newly made female quads, stood waiting in the central square. With Zeeda busy and surrounded by a gaggle of com officers, Remmus edged closer to stand by Lienta. His ears perked, trying to gather as much information as he could.

"The Dulat front has collapsed. Three more explosions laid waste to everything. Our forces are in retreat, what's left of them anyway," Lienta murmured quietly.

Remmus could only stand there frozen. Things were taking a turn, and it certainly was not for the best. He watched as Zeeda went from one conversation to the next, wondering exactly how she could keep up with it all. A few minutes went by before she dismissed all but one com officer and turned a weary gaze towards the two men standing behind her.

"Dulat and the surrounding area is lost and the fragments are pressing their advantage hard. They're not requesting reinforcements. The Relanie Front is being pushed back, and now these pockets of fighting behind the fronts where Husel is - four other Waystations are under attack, or gone already for all we know. Since we're closest to twelve, we get that one."

"How many are we taking?" Lienta asked her.

"The five we have ready. Should be enough. Though, I'll go through at the front with First Squad - before we lost connection with Husel, it sounded like the fragments were actually inside the waystation. We need to clear it first. I know it's not the best of ideas - but if we don't have the transport pad, it will take us too long to travel from somewhere else."

Lienta did not like the idea much, but he knew she was right.

"Legati Remmus, I need you to stay here and help coordinate things with Commander Harper. Put three more squads on standby - I have no idea the numbers we'll be up against out there."

"Yes, sir."

"You will not join in unless I give you express permission to do so, understood?"

"Yesser."

"Centurion Tallus - First Squad at the ready to move out. I need two men to come with me and the com officer. We have to see who holds the transport pad."

"Yes, Legatus."

Tallus kept his reservations to himself about the Legatus going off with only two men - but if the fragments had indeed taken control of the waystation, she was the best bet for gaining them enough room to get more troops in faster. She was also the only person who could hold a shield while being transported, something they would certainly need.

A flash of light later, Zeeda and the three men were treated to a horrific sight. The fragments had indeed managed to gain control over the waystation - and they were not going to give it up without a fight. They must have finally figured out how the clans moved their troops around Zeeda guessed, as they pressed against the wall of the shield that surrounded only the transport pad. Her anger flaring, she steadily enlarged the size of the shield, slowly forcing the fragments back one step at a time. She had to make enough room to get more troops in. Shutting

herself off to the vile bitter hatred she could feel from the fragments, she pressed her advantage. The com officer immediately sent word that more could safely transport in, and soon half of First Squad stood assembled behind Zeeda.

"We have to clear this and get to Legati Husel outside." Zeeda barked.

"It will be difficult to fight in here Legatus." Centurion Tallus replied.

"I want linked shields. We're going to just shove them on out the door. We can deal with them when we get outside."

"Linked shields! We're going to push them back out where they belong, and then show them what it means to mess with Clan Centuriosus!"

Those still coming through fell in behind the first line with Zeeda in the center as they worked together to clear the fragments from the waystation. Outside, not too far away, Laraunt looked over to see the darkness fleeing – in their direction. While it meant help had arrived, with Husel down wounded she was not sure if she could hold long enough against this new wave of fragments. She did not have long to worry however, as she soon felt a second shield going around her own weakened one, and let out a breath of relief as Zeeda came rushing towards them with fresh legions behind her.

"Legati, report."

"We're down to two half squads. Husel is injured."

"Fall back to the waystation. Can you hold enough of a shield at the door to keep them from getting back in?"

"I believe so."

"Good, we'll take it from here. When you get there, have them bring the technicians through to repair the environmental shield. Then get yourselves back to the compound."

Laraunt nodded as she gathered the few troops remaining and they slowly made their way back towards the waystation behind the shield Zeeda still held in place. She met Lienta at the door, and he ordered half of Twelfth Squad to stay behind to assist with holding the waystation. Moving forward to join forces with Zeeda, he did not like what he saw. They were completely surrounded from their position directly in front of the waystation – and the fragments were like a wall of writhing darkness before them. This was going to be a nasty encounter.



Remmus and Commander Harper sat waiting for about an hour; two remaining squads on alert waiting to see if any of them would be needed. Technicians had already gone through to see about repairing the environmental shield that usually protected the waystation from the general environment (or lack thereof) and they had not heard anything since then. An alarm began to sound, and the two men rushed towards the transport pad. A very tired looking Laraunt stood there, supporting Husel's unconscious frame.

"Legati!" Harper called.

"They need more men Commander – it's like all the fragments from the front have arrived with their only goal to destroy the waystation."

"We only have two squads left here – all the rest are either with the Legatus already, or assisting with the pull back from the Relanie front." Harper replied.

"There will be a Centurios front if we don't send them more aid." Laraunt spoke sharply. "I'm only following orders Commander."

"Legati Remmus, you'll have to take them through." Harper turned to the younger man, signaling for a messenger.

Remmus felt his stomach sink. He had wanted to see what it was like out there, but to be thrown head first into the worst of it? He shook this off though. Zeeda needed help, and for once he was going to do just that. Watching as two medics came to carry Husel off to the hospital building, he waited for their remaining squads to ready themselves in the square before the transport pad. Was he supposed to say something to them?

"We're being called in to aid the Legatus and our other legions currently defending waystation Twelve. The building is under our control again, but it and our fellow legions are completely surrounded from the outside." Remmus hoped it was good enough. "On the transport pad by fours after me."

He was not sure if he was actually supposed to go through first, but since they held the waystation, there should not be much wrong with his decision. It was quieter than he had expected when he arrived, the technicians having succeeded in repairing the emitters for the environmental shield and the building was once again filled with breathable air. Out the open doors, he could see flashes of fragment meeting shield and the occasional glint of a weapon in mid swing. Zeeda and Lienta were nowhere to be seen. A com officer came up to him.

"Legati, the Legatus wants you to hold here for the moment. The fragments are pulling back in places and if there's to be another explosion she wants everyone in here with full shields up."

"Tell the Legatus we stand ready for whatever she needs of us."

"Here sir, it's tuned to the command frequency."

Remmus took the offered headset and took his first step into the sounds of battle.

“Legati?” Zeeda’s voice sounded in his ear.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Come out and meet us above the building.”

Leaving orders for the two squads to remain in the waystation, Remmus stepped out beyond the bounds of the environmental shield and launched himself upwards. He saw Zeeda and Lienta in the middle of a huddle of com officers surveying all around them. A ragged ring of legionaries surrounded the waystation, holding the fragments at bay for now. How long they would last, none of them knew. Both Zeeda and Lienta were breathing heavily, but the sight of his sister’s right arm hanging limply at her side sent a chill running through Remmus. He prayed the injuries were not quite as serious as when their mother had lost her arm.

“What is the situation in the waystation?” Zeeda asked as he approached, her eyes flitting around her.

“Two squads stand ready, and the environmental shield is fully operational again.”

“Good. First Com – tell the squads inside to take position around the back side. The fragments will most likely hit there again next.” Zeeda ordered.

“How bad is it?” Remmus asked quietly

“Losses have thus far been light, but it’s only a matter of time before they set off their favorite weapon.” Lienta replied.

“The dark energy explosions?”

“Yes. Legati, reinforce shields to the left and front. They could use a breather over there.” Zeeda said turning towards him.

“Yes, sir.”

It took him a few minutes to correctly project a shield that was not around him, but Remmus finally managed it. Now, he knew why the rest of them returned as worn out as they did. It was certainly a lot of work – hard work. The troops had their own personal shields, but having a second one to take refuge behind meant they could rest for a brief moment. It also meant that Zeeda and Lienta could concentrate on other sections, or rest themselves. All around them, the fragments were starting to pull back and gathering in three large masses.

“This isn’t good.” Lienta said tersely.

“Com! Get everyone inside the waystation and tell them to link shields,” Zeeda bellowed.

Fragments pulling back like they were could only mean one thing – they would sacrifice themselves in order to defeat those around them. The three of them stood watching everything from above, knowing they would soon be at ground zero, and it wasn’t going to be a fun experience.

“The three of us, tight shield around the waystation.” Zeeda panted, her arm and side throbbing a great deal from her injuries.

“You should get inside the waystation.” Remmus commented.

“I’m fine,” he growled in reply. “Just do it!”

Scowling, Remmus turned away, placing his back to theirs as he added his own shields to the ones they had already put up to surround the waystation creating a tight fitting bubble. All hell broke loose seconds later, and all they could do while the three explosions slammed into them was grit their teeth and try to hang on. The force was almost too much, and Remmus could feel Zeeda slipping slowly to her knees. She had already done so much that day, she probably would not last much longer. Fighting to keep the energy waves at bay that were now bouncing off of each other, they did not notice the bottom of the shield weakening until it was too late.



Exploiting the weakened defenders, a small group of fragments that had hidden on the underside of the waystation forced their way through the greatly weakened shield that had held them at bay for far too long. Inside the building didn't matter to them, they could deal with that later. But for now, they had a mission – if their thoughts could be considered organized enough for it to be called such.

Three bright beacons of light called out to them, tempting them to come closer. They knew these three were more important than the other huddled masses – and the brightest of all was one they had to remove as quickly as possible. It held the key to their long sleep. Some still remembered something of the last long sleep, and they had no desire to go back to that stillness again. They had changed since then, something turning them away from their normal path, and they had no desire to give up this new life.

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Remmus saw them first, though his brain did not fully wish to realize the sight. Ten fragments moved swiftly up over the edge of the waystation roof, their target obviously the three of them holding the shield protecting everyone else. Words left his lips, but no one could tell what they were, and Lienta turned as he felt Remmus moving away from them. Cutting off a bitter curse, he moved to aid his brother-in-law. Behind them, Zeeda struggled tiredly to her feet. She almost did not sense the two fragments bearing down on her. Tired feet did not move as quickly as she would have liked, and a dark clawed hand managed to slip in between the joints at the side of her armor and left a long deep gash down her side.

Had her body shield not been weakened, it probably would not have managed such, but she was still recovering from earlier. Ignoring the overwhelming pain from her various wounds, she managed to fight them off, scattering their essence back into nothingness. She would not last much longer, and hoped the other two were fairing better. Turning, she saw this was the case, much to her relief. Lienta and Remmus faced only three remaining fragments, and these were soon dispatched to join the rest of their fallen compatriots.

Sharing a grin, the two men turned to check on Zeeda. How she remained on her feet amazed them, seeing her current condition. Lienta rushed to her side, adding his strength to her failing shields as she paled further from loss of blood. This moment of distraction would haunt Zeeda for the rest of her life. They let their guard down, and they paid dearly for it. Time seemed to slow as they all looked at each other in relief, to soon be replaced with horror as the look on Remmus' face changed. He looked down at the strange sensation growing in his chest, not believing the faint shadowy appendage that had just burst through where his heart used to be. His last sight was the anguish on his sister's face before the darkness took him.



Centurion Tallus had never disobeyed orders before in his life, but what the com officer reported having heard on the command channel pushed him into action. He called First Squad into action and they moved out of the waystation and quickly launched themselves upwards towards the roof. The sight waiting for them froze their blood.

Lienta stood looking down at the scene at his feet in a numb shock. Zeeda sat rocking gently, Remmus' still form clutched tightly to her. Of all their losses, this one hurt as much as the day Marshant had been taken from her. Remmus was not supposed to have been there at all, she never should have let him stay. And now she would have to tell a dear beloved sister her husband was not coming back to her. It was something she had done countless times before, but this was the first time she ever questioned her resolve on the matter. How could she go back there and tell Pluto what they had promised her would never happen had in fact come to be.

"Legatus Lienta ..." Tallus said quietly, moving closer to them.

"Centurion Tallus, the legions?" Lienta replied blankly.

"All in the waystation are fine sir. Only ten casualties. The wounded have already been sent back."

"Eleven now." Lienta corrected absently.

"Your orders sir?"

"Send everyone back through. We need men to assist."

"Yes sir." Tallus replied with a knowing nod.

Two men stepped forward, waiting hesitantly to carry Remmus' body. Zeeda still had not let go, had not even looked up or apparently heard anything that had just happened. She jumped as she felt Lienta's hand resting gently on her shoulder. Her face was vacant as it slowly lifted to look at him.

"Zee, we need to go." Lienta said softly.

Turning her head, she finally took in the two legionaries standing a short distance away, with the rest of the squad assembled behind them. Wordlessly, she looked back down at Remmus' still face a moment before carefully lowering the body back onto the roof. Haunted eyes watched as the two men stepped forward and lifted her brother with great care to bear him back to the compound.

Attempting to get to her feet, her legs had little desire to cooperate. Zeeda's armor felt heavy, a burden her tired body could no longer bear, but it was difficult to give up the comfort she had always felt while wearing it. Trying to avoid making her injuries worse, Lienta carefully helped her stand. The men of First Squad surrounded them and escorted them off the roof.

There were no speeches this time when they arrived back at the compound. The news had spread, and the mood was somber, everyone's actions quiet and deliberate. Two medics were waiting with a stretcher and were soon bearing Zeeda to the mess hall, still converted over with the hospital building full. Lienta followed them, after giving Commander Harper a short briefing on what had transpired that day. Laraunt stood from her vigil at Husel's side as Lienta entered the building.

"Lienta, what happened?"

"They set off three, maybe four explosions. Some of them hid somewhere and ... we screwed up."

"You can't blame yourselves. Remmus knew what he was getting into."

"Honestly, he didn't." Lienta sighed. "And that's why she didn't want him out there. How's Husel?"

"Physically, he'll be fine. Just needs some rest. I don't know how I'm going to tell him though," Laraunt said sadly. "We'll be lucky to survive this, won't we."

"For all our hopes, things aren't looking all that bright right now." Lienta replied grimly. "But, it's not over yet."

"No, not yet. But how much longer can we keep going?"

"Until the last of us falls."

They both turned as the head healer came up to them.

"Her injuries were sever but she will recover. If we can keep her still long enough, she's insisting on going back to the house. I'll force a sleeping draught on her if I have to, but I'd rather not."

Lienta nodded, and made his way quickly to the cot Zeeda was trying to get up from. She was not having a great deal of success.

"Zee, you shouldn't be moving right now."

"Other's need this bed more than I do." She replied through gritted teeth.

"You need rest, you lost a lot of blood."

"I have to tell her ... I failed ..."

"A few hours isn't going to matter. It won't do any of us any good if we lose you now."

"Can I at least rest in my own bed then? There are other soldiers who could use this cot."

"That shouldn't be a problem, as long as you do nothing other than rest," the healer said from behind them. "I'll get some men and a stretcher."

"Thank you." Lienta replied

"He wasn't supposed to of been there. This wasn't supposed to of happened." Zeeda murmured in a broken voice. "I ..."

"It's not your fault. None of this is your fault." Lienta replied, heat in his voice. "When are you going to stop blaming yourself?"

"If I'd been stronger, if I'd been better ... faster ..."

"Stop!" Lienta barked. "I'm pulling the husband rank card and you're going to listen to me for once."

He was interrupted as the healer returned with two men and a stretcher to bear Zeeda back to the main house.

"Masy will know what to do. I need to finish some things here at the compound." He turned back to his wife. "And you will not think about leaving until I get there, understood?"

"Yes master," she grumbled in reply.



Lienta returned to the house a few hours later, having been detained at the compound longer than he'd expected. The atmosphere was somber and everyone moved about their tasks with a determined quietness. Though the house now held more people than ever before, it still felt dull and empty, having lost too many of those who had always called it home. He made his way down the hall towards the room he hoped Zeeda was asleep in. Though he ended up being rather disappointed when he opened the door to the bed chamber.

"Zee, what are you doing?"

Zeeda looked up from her struggles to change into a fresh tunic. It was proving to be a difficult task at the moment with her injured arm.

"Don't start with me please. I tried to sleep, honest. I just ... I can't." Her eyes were pained, pleading as she slumped down onto the bed.

"You could have called someone in to help, you idiot," Lienta murmured.

"I am not an idiot."

"Perhaps, but you're certainly acting like one now."

"I'm an idiot because I'm having problems dressing myself so I can go tell my sister I got her husband killed?"

"No, you're an idiot because you refuse to let people help you." Lienta could not keep from glaring down at her.

"Well, fine then. Help me put this damn tunic on and be done with it." Zeeda spat back.

"You weren't trying to sneak away before I got back ... were you?" Lienta asked as he helped settle the injured arm into its sleeve.

"Considering it's taken me an hour to get undressed, and failing to dress again I don't see how I could," came her grumpy reply.

"You don't have to go to Pluto alone you know."

"I know. But I need ..." Zeeda winced as he set her arm into the sling. "I need you to stay here to ... to bring his body if she ..."

She closed her tired eyes as he gently caressed her cheek. Zeeda knew Remmus' death was not truly her fault, but the guilt was there anyway. It would probably never go away, just as she still felt responsible

for the events that had led to Marshant's illness. Why she continually beat herself up over events that had been outside of her control was anyone's guess. No one around her blamed her for anything, and they never would. Perhaps she took her duties as commanding officer too seriously at times, but it was who she was.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at Lienta again. So much the two of them had been through, and yet they had still survived. She may be considered a Far'Merat by some, but without him, she knew it meant nothing.

"I should go," Zeeda said weakly.

Lienta nodded and helped her up from the bed.



Queen Serenity hurried towards the transport chamber. Though a brief report had come to them about the more recent battles, the lack of detail had worried her. Bad enough that negotiations with Earth had taken another turn for the worse, she did not need to find out what was happening in the void was worse than they were being told. It had shocked her to learn that Zeeda herself was coming through, well before the agreed upon meeting still months away. It had to be something serious to bring the woman this far in the middle of everything going on.

The closer she got to the chamber, the heavier the weight on her heart became. Entering, she noticed the haunted pain in Zeeda's eyes before she even registered the few visible cuts and bruises. No, this was not going to be a pleasurable visit for anyone.

"Legatus, what happened?" Serenity asked.

"I must speak with my sister."

"Your ... oh, darkness be damned."

A shocked hush fell over the room. Never had anyone heard the Queen speak in such a manner before - at least, not any of the technicians and functionaries present. The only response from Zeeda was a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth.

"Darkness damned indeed, highness," Zeeda replied flatly.

"The reports didn't mention ..."

"It would be considered rude for the general populace to know before those more directly affected."

The Queen nodded. "Come with me."

Ignoring those around her, the Queen led Zeeda towards the rooms Pluto used when she stayed at the palace.

"Legatus, your injuries ..."

"They will heal."

"How did it happen?"

"We thought they were all taken care of. Forgive me, but I would rather limit how many times I relive that moment right now. This will be hard enough."

"In what way?"

"It's never easy telling someone their husband won't ever come back, and with Pluto ..."

"I'm so sorry Zeeda."

"Is her father here as well?"

"Yes, I sent for him, but he's been spending a great deal of time at the gates, so I'm not sure when he'll join us."

When the Queen went to knock on the door to Pluto's room, Zeeda stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm.

"I must do this alone."

Serenity nodded and took a few steps back, watching as Zeeda slowly entered the room after hearing Pluto bid entry.

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"Zeeda!"

Pluto's elation at seeing her sister-in-law quickly faded as she took in Zeeda's appearance. The right side of her face and neck were bruised and marred by small cuts, and the arm in the sling told the tale of injuries far more serious. Then her thoughts flashed to Remmus.

"Remmus ... is he ..."

"Pluto ... I ... I'm sorry." Zeeda's voice croaked in a hoarse whisper.

"No." Pluto's eyes dimmed, her head slowly shaking back and forth. It was not true, it could not be true. Remmus was not gone, she could not have lost him. It just was not possible.

"No ... No ... NO!"

Zeeda could not contain a cry of pain as Pluto's palm connected with her right cheek. The force of the slap sent her back a few steps, and she felt some of the stitches on her wounds gave way.

"You promised! You said nothing would happen, that he'd be safe!" Pluto cried, anger flaring as she beat her fists against Zeeda's chest. "You promised!"

"Plu ... please ..." Zeeda gasped in pain, a warm wetness spreading down her arm.

"He promised! He ... he told me he would never leave me alone like this." Pluto wailed, her anger slowly fading as Zeeda pulled her close with her left arm.

They stood like that for a long moment, Zeeda wincing as every sob from Pluto sent pain shooting through her right side. But she was not about to let go.

King Pluto rushed into the room, shocked at the sight before him. Blood was starting to soak through Zeeda's tunic, and her face was growing pale. Pluto still clung to her, violent sobs shaking them both. Wordlessly, he gently pulled Pluto away from Zeeda wrapping his daughter in a tight embrace. Zeeda closed her eyes, feeling dizzy and exhausted in every possible way. Gentle hands led her towards a chair, and she looked up again to see Queen Serenity looking at her with

concern.

“I’m fine.” Zeeda stated quietly.

“You will be in a moment,” Serenity replied, helping Zeeda sit down. “We do have some talent in that area.”

Queen Serenity smiled lightly at the confused look on Zeeda’s face. She knew the warrior would never ask for healing, or help, but anyone with eyes could tell she needed it right then. Her skin was pale, her eyes sitting on top of deep shadows. Summoning a portion of the great crystal’s power, she placed a hand on Zeeda’s forehead. Zeeda had no idea what was going on, she only knew that deep within she felt warm, with a slight tingle. Whatever it was, it felt good.

“There, that should help,” the Queen said with a slightly tired smile.

“And now you’re the one needing a chair.” Zeeda replied.

“Your injuries were worse than I first expected.”

“You ... you healed me?” Zeeda’s brows drew together.

“Normally, we’d just let it happen naturally. But I have the feeling we don’t have that kind of time.”

“Thank you, highness.” Zeeda tested moving her arm, surprised when there was no pain.

“How did it happen?” King Pluto interrupted quietly.

“We ... we made a stupid mistake. We let our guard down, thinking it was over.” Zeeda winced at the pain in her heart this time. “It just ... so fast ... we couldn’t get to him in time.”

“Where is he?” Pluto murmured, slowly pushing herself away from her father.

“He’s at the house. I wasn’t sure ...”

“The ...” Pluto couldn’t bring herself to say the word. “Tomorrow, at our home.”

Zeeda nodded, giving the grieving woman one last searching look before she slowly turned and left the room. She would not be surprised if Pluto never wanted to see her or speak to her again, and that realization hurt just as much as losing Remmus.



After Remmus died, we didn’t have much time left – though we didn’t know that then. I can’t really tell you what happened in those two years. I know there were battles. Some, I fought in, and others I heard about from the constant stream of refugees trying to get away from the front lines. Those lines were following their retreating steps, so it was a useless struggle.

About a month after Remmus’ death I received a message from Queen Serenity that contact with Pluto was no longer possible. They’d

stripped her memories of us - of Remmus - away at her request, and that was the end of it. Someday, they might come back to her, but right then they didn't need anything triggering them early. I should have been expecting it, but it was still a blow. We were also forced to send Hura and King Saturn back to their own home, things were getting too dangerous. And so, a beloved sister, and a child I nearly considered my own were taken from our lives – leaving an empty feeling behind them.

Yes, I still had Lienta, Husel, and quite a few new neighbors, but it just wasn't quite the same anymore. Too much had been lost, too much we could never get back again. And while we might win a battle here and there, the war was turning against us. It had been against us from the start, really, we just hadn't seen it then. Perhaps we hadn't wanted to see it. Can you really blame us? For that, I honestly don't have an answer.

I live those last few moments over – again and again. I can't get away from them. I have tried, for a few thousand years now, but they etched themselves upon my soul. Yes, the end was coming soon – but it wasn't the end of everything. There was still hope, I know because I saw it in the pained tear filled violet eyes of one with a burden as great as mine. That is possibly the only thing that has kept me going all this time. But I am growing weary, things are growing cold and dark around me finally, and I don't know how much longer I can hold it at bay.

Lord Afont turned from the map, his face weary, and his body feeling the defeat already. A patch now covered one eye, a souvenir from the Hiransh Front the year before. The clans had continually retreated, merged together - to repeat the process many times over the past two and a half years. Things were not getting any better, and even those few ever optimistic souls were beginning to tarnish. Most of them did not know their only hope lay in the hands of one woman who had been ready to sacrifice herself the year before.

Something held him back however. He was not ready for Zeeda to live up to being a legend. It was selfish really; he had no connection with her other than being a friend of the family. But he had known her since she was an infant, had watched her grow as the daughter he had never had. Now, he was an old man that had somehow outlived his own sons. It was something that never should have happened, but it had, and time was growing ever shorter. The map before him was one large angry expanse of deep red. Part of him really wished they had chosen a different color. They had all seen more than enough blood.

Messengers moved about their duty, paying him no heed. Not that there was much new to report lately. Nothing changed other than the list of casualties that grew longer with each passing day.



Zeeda sighed and closed her eyes, trying to hold off the headache that had been trying to distract her all afternoon. She had been trying to compose a briefing message for Queen Serenity for the past two hours, and a pile of crumpled paper lay strewn on the floor beside the desk. She could not tell them the whole truth, they had enough of their own worries with Earth at the moment. But she was not very good at making things seem better than they were. Especially when they were as bad as the

situation had gotten.

The Centurious Stronghold, like its two nearest neighbors, was filled beyond capacity. Some places had become so crowded that families began to leave for other sectors of the void. Though if the rumors were to be believed, they fared little better. One would think that with all the space in the void people could find somewhere that was safe, but it was not turning out that way. How it had ever gotten so bad, no one would ever know - if there were any survivors to keep records in the first place.

Reports of more watcher sightings did not please her either. Watchers were an enigma, and in most cases, merely thought of as legends. Once, they had been like those of the clans, living in the void with a simple existence. Something had changed them though. Maybe they had always been a little different from their neighbors - but it had resulted in a split of the two peoples.

Watchers were ever nomadic, solitary beings. They held claim to nothing, and truth be told, most people had no wish to claim them as anything either. Their name came from the fact that they simply "watched". They did not interfere with events. They did not lend a helping hand. They simply just sat on their asses and did nothing while the peoples of the void were slowly exterminated.

Zeeda had possibly spotted one herself a few months ago, but she had immediately dismissed it because there were more important things to think about. The brief image of a man's face surrounded by glowing blue lights was not worth the effort of recalling the memory. She had a house, a compound, and a village full of people looking to her as if she was their personal savior. It really was no one's fault. It was generally accepted as a clan head's duty - but right then she wished she could be the one hoping someone would come up with a brilliant plan to save everyone.

Thankfully, Lord Afont had managed to keep anyone from thinking about Far'Merat or anything related to it. But it was never far from her thoughts. She thought about it constantly now - having gone so far as to have read all the histories, even the "wrong" ones about a hundred times now it felt. It did not make Lienta happy, but he was keeping that to himself. Opening her eyes, she turned back to the papers scattered across the desk. The report was not going to write itself after all.



Queen Serenity sat in her darkened bedchamber, staring out the window with eyes that saw something other than the view of her beloved gardens. Relations with Earth had finally fallen apart two months before,

banning any form of contact with those of the Silver Millennium. King Ethos had tried, but he was only one man. In the end his words had fallen on many a deaf ear. The Queen had assured him that if he ever truly did need their assistance, she would send it - edicts be damned. His accepting smile had been wan and bitter, knowing he could never make use of her offer. It frustrated her.

The other planets all worked together just fine. The great houses did not always agree with each other, or with her, but they still worked together. Perhaps it was that the Earth was so divided already. Instead of the single monarchies of the other planets, their limited landmass was divided up under many different rulers. It was understandable that they would never reach agreements with each other that way. If the people of Earth could not live in peace with themselves, how could they ever expect them to live in peace with the rest of the universe?

But that had not always been the case, Serenity reminded herself. Once, not all that long ago, the rulers on Earth had all gotten along with each other. They had only begun to change in the past few years, and no one had a clue as to why. Neighbors were fighting each other again, and the people's hearts had darkened. Perhaps they would be ready in a few more years, after they got it all out of their systems - but Serenity certainly was not going to hold her breath waiting for that day to arrive. That would surely be an exercise in stupidity.

Cartographer Wensel had not helped her mood much that day either. The map showed the void filled with nothing but a dark angry red, blocking out everything else. And that strange red glow was now constantly flickering around Earth. Probably just because of the turn in people's behavior, but it bothered her none the less. King Pluto had not been a comforting presence either with his news from the realms of time. Apparently the shadow voices were growing louder. He had reported that they were loud enough now that they could be heard before the doors even opened.

All in all, it had turned out to be a terrible day. The most disturbing news though had been a rumor that the princess had been secretly visiting Earth after all in the palace had gone to bed. Serenity had not yet had a chance yet to confront her daughter, something she was not looking forward to. She had always held a secret hope that an alliance through marriage would strengthen their relations with Earth, but had given up on that idea a few years ago. Now, it would only make things worse. She prayed they were only idle rumors stirred up by maids with nothing better to do. But she knew her daughter, and a heavy weight descended upon her heart.



"You most certainly are not going!"

"Riann, you don't give the orders around here."

"Sere, why are you so interested in that backwards planet now? You were never like this before."

"I also didn't have the power to transport myself down there before either."

"You ..."

The princess kept her smile to herself as violet eyes flashed in anger. Riann and the others had not been very pleased to find out that their princess had been making secret visits to Earth for the past few months now. Princess Serenity was not sure though if they were angry about her going, or for not telling them in the first place. Either way, the four of them had now become rather annoying and never let her out of their sight for long. It was not going to stop her - it was not like she visited inhabited areas.

"Riann, you come with me or you stay here. Either way, I'm going now."

"What happens when your mother finds out? Have you thought about the consequences?" The princess from Mars snapped in reply.

"I have, and she hasn't said anything yet. I don't visit the people. I just want to see the planet."

"Still, what if someone sees you?"

Serenity kept her mouth shut. She still had not told them someone had come across her on her last solitary visit before Mialian had set them on her like guard dogs. She had transported back, but not before recognition flashed in a pair of dark blue eyes. It had to have been him, not that she had not helped things along by only ever visiting his lands. But it had surprised her to be face to face with him that night. He was everything she remembered from the few times they had met before, and so much more. Prince Endymion haunted her dreams. It was only fitting she haunt his lands on Earth.

"No one will see us. It's a secluded garden in the high mountains with no villages nearby."

"I'm going to regret this someday," Riann muttered, fists clenched at her sides.

"You're only scared of running into *him*." Serenity teased.

"I am not!" Riann blushed deeply.

"If you say so."

A few moments later, Riann found herself standing next to her delinquent friend in one of the most beautiful places she had ever seen. Deep lush forests surrounded the "garden" as Serenity called it, though it did not look like anyone had tended it in a while. Ruins of some ancient building were buried under nature gone wild. Climbing vines and fragrant flowers were everywhere.

"See, I told you."

"Just a few minutes, then we have to go."

"It's forbidden for you to be here."

Both girls jumped at the deep voice that came from the shadows behind them. A tall man with dark hair and a piercing gaze stepped out from between two of the shattered columns.

"Prince Endymion," Serenity replied with a small nod of her head.

"And the Princess of the Moon - who apparently believes herself well above the rules."

"You didn't tell me we had guests my prince."

Riann winced at the sound of a familiar voice - one she by no means had ever wanted to hear again. At least, that was what she continued to tell herself.

"We've seen enough. We'll be going now," Riann said, tugging on Serenity's arm.

"Oh, but you just go here." The blond man sneered.

"Jadeite ..." Endymion grumbled.

"The least we could do is show them around Prince."

"I've been here before, I can show myself around. We'll only be a few more minutes," Serenity replied, her voice not quite as commanding as she wished.

She moved away from the other three to her favorite spot in the little forgotten garden. It had probably been a gazebo at one point, but the roof had rotted away leaving only the tall slender columns that had once held it up. From here though, was a wondrous view - both of the moon and the valley below. This was where she had been standing when the prince had come along to ruin the evening a few weeks before.

"Why do you keep coming here?"

"Forgive me prince, I only wanted to see your planet."

"Circumstances being otherwise, I generally wouldn't mind. But you know what anyone else would do if they saw you." He smiled, but she was not looking at him to see it.

"I do, and I apologize. It's just so beautiful here in this seemingly forgotten place."

"The garden isn't the only thing of beauty," Endymion said softly.

"Now you're just teasing." Serenity's cheeks grew warm.

"You weren't supposed to hear that."

"You shouldn't have said it out loud then."



"Just couldn't stand not seeing me again, could you?"

Riann wanted desperately to beat the smirk of his face right then. Jadeite was an arrogant, ill-mannered, annoying flirt. Somehow, he always managed to make her feel flustered and lost, even if she knew

where she was going. Alright, so maybe he was not quite so bad. But he did seem to have a knack for making her feel like a flustered little girl on occasion. She had been present at a few of the negotiations, though the two of them had never really spent any time together.

"I'm only here to protect my princess. Nothing more."

"It's a convenient excuse my lady, but if that's the way you wish things to be ..." He shrugged and began to turn away.

"I didn't say I wouldn't talk to you while I'm here, but don't be expecting anything else."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Riann was taken aback. His smile was not the annoying smirk that irritated her to no end - it was a warm genuine one that made her feel just a little weak in the knees. Shaking her head, she tried to clear such thoughts from her brain. Bad enough if Serenity ended up in love with this prince - the rest of them did not need to follow in her footsteps.

"What is your world like?" Jadeite asked.

"You've been to the Moon before."

"That's not your world, Princess of Mars."

"Oh ... We don't have plants like this here. Some people consider it a barren empty waste with nothing other than red hued rocks. But the plains on Mars are alive - they have a warmth that many places are missing."

"You have no plants?"

"Some. Only small sturdy shrubs, and these light wispy things that grow on canyon walls that pull moisture from the air. We don't have as much weather as other places do."

"And what do you do there?"

"What do you do in your own lands when you're not babysitting a prince?" Riann replied with a smirk.

Jadeite grinned – at least she was talking to him this time. Well, they had spoken to each other those few times he had managed to run into her while accompanying King Ethos on visits to the moon, but she had been barely civil then. He had no idea why he was drawn to her. She had made it abundantly clear she wanted nothing to do with him. But he could not stop himself from thinking of her no matter how hard he tried. Though she was only sixteen like the princess and the others, it was a different sixteen than the girls constantly around them back home. Perhaps it came from their duties or their skills, but they were certainly all very mature accomplished young ladies – even if the princess did not always appear so.

Turning back to the dark haired princess near him, he smiled again as he listened to her describe her home. Part of him wished he could see it himself, but such things could never be. So he would be content to attend to these secret visits whenever he could.

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Mikita stormed down the hall towards her room. She had just found the princess and Riann both missing, and she knew exactly where they were. Though a great deal of her anger was directed at the two of them having left yet again – and it had indeed been Riann’s turn to keep an eye on Serenity – she had wanted to be the one to go to Earth. That was the other part of her self-directed wrath – the fact she had desperately been hoping to see *him* again. It was silly really, they were supposed to be keeping the princess from falling in love with the prince of Earth, and here they were falling for their guardian counterparts. Though she was not entirely sure about what the rest of the Senshi may have felt.

The door to her chamber swung open roughly when she reached it, and slammed again behind her before she threw herself on her bed. Mikita simply wished she could get these dallying thoughts out of her head, but they refused to leave her alone. A soft knock sounded behind her.

“Mikita? Are you alright?” Amiel called quietly.

With a sigh, Mikita got up to answer the door. “I’m fine ... really.”

“Not sure if your door would agree with you.” Amiel smiled.

“No more than yours did last week,” Mikita replied glibly.

“Oh ...”

Amiel ducked into the room, her face a bright shade of red. She had been trying to forget that moment.

“We shouldn’t be thinking of them. Hell, we shouldn’t even be going down to see them,” Mikita grumbled.

“It is foolish, isn’t it. I can’t ... I can’t stop thinking about him though, no matter what I try.” Amiel agreed quietly.

The two girls curled up next to each other on Mikita’s bed as they used to when they were younger and would comfort each other after a nightmare or other trying event. The only thing missing were their other three friends.

“You think the others feel the same way?” Amiel asked.

“Riann will never admit it, but yeah, I’m pretty sure we’re all in the same sinking boat.”

“It’s not that bad is it?”

“Considering that we’re not supposed to have any contact of any sort with anyone from Earth, yeah – it’s that bad.”

“Not fair for Sere though – she’s never liked anyone from our little section of the galaxy.”

“True, but being in love with the prince of Earth ... it’s going to be one big disaster ... and none of us are much help.”

“We could go to the Queen ...” Amiel started.

“That would get us nowhere but in more trouble than we already are. Sere isn’t going to stop simply because her mother tells her not to do something. Not for very long anyway.”

“True.”

“You know the funny thing about all this? We really hardly know each other – I mean, we’ve only ever seen them a handful of times, and never alone.”

“Until now, because Sere has started visiting more often. I think she only goes to that garden when she can’t get away from us.”

“What, you’re saying she has visited other places?” Mikita sat up quickly.

“I believe so. I think she just picked that forgotten garden after we found out and refused to let her go off by herself again.”

Mikita was silent, lost in her thoughts again. This could only end badly for all involved - and she found herself not caring about that part for some odd reason.



Lienta entered the bedchamber after returning late from visiting his parents. Though he tried to make as little noise as possible, a tired Zeeda rolled over and cracked one eye open. She did not say anything, and there was only a ghost of a smile on her face. It was enough though, and he eased into the bed next to her. Moments like these were getting to be a rare event - them both being home and in the same bed at the same time. Wrapping his arms around her, he simply enjoyed the moment feeling her drift off to sleep again. He should have followed her. Darkness knew he was just as exhausted, but sleep was not willing to visit him yet.

His parents were in good health, though his mother still had not gotten over the loss of Toreenal - and they all worried constantly for her. The Clan Torpel stronghold was just as over flowing as Clan Centurious as they tried to assist their neighbors as best they could. The situation was grim, and there was no longer a bright spot on the horizon to give them hope. That was not to say any of them would ever give up, but there were times it felt a little pointless to keep going. Continued sightings of

watchers were not helping the matter either. Lienta had seen the same one three times now, and he could not explain why it frightened him so much.

Physically, the man had not looked more than a few years older than himself, but Lienta had seen the depths of time in his eyes. The sight had chilled him, though he had not felt threatened by the brief visits. He just wished he could explain it away.

He had no explanations though. He also had absolutely no idea why the same watcher had appeared to him over the past few weeks. It had almost seemed like the watcher had wanted to speak with him on the last such meeting. Lienta tried to clear it from his mind, but the scene kept playing back over and over again. Holding his breath as Zeeda stirred in her sleep, he slowly let it out as she did not wake. Closing his eyes, he finally joined her in a dreamless slumber.



Zeeda woke late the next morning, or at least she assumed it was later than when she normally woke. Feeling Lienta next to her in the bed made her glad it had not just been a dream. It had been weeks since the last time they had shared the same bed, and it felt wonderful. For the first time in a very long time, she had no desire to get up and attend to her duties. She wanted nothing more than to stay where she was and attempt to forget about everything else going on around them. Gently shifting positions, she curled up closer to his side. Half asleep still, he wrapped an arm around her and held on loosely.

"Don't go," he mumbled.

"I wasn't planning on it just yet," Zeeda murmured in reply.

"Good."

The moment did not last as long as either of them would have liked before a soft knock at the door interrupted them. Groaning, Zeeda removed herself from the warmth of the bed and shuffled towards the door pulling her robe on. On the other side of the door, one of the maids was waiting, fidgeting nervously.

"I'm really sorry ma'am, I held them off as long as I could - but Lord Afont and the others are asking for you both. Masy and I told them you needed rest, but something's happened. They're rather insistent on seeing you."

"It's okay, I was awake already. Tell them I'll be there shortly."

"They're in the map room ma'am. Masy has a bit of breakfast waiting for you first."

"Thank you."

As soon as the door closed, a muffled groan came from the bed behind her as Lienta tried to bury himself under the pillows.

"They're insane if they expect me to get out of this bed and look at their ugly faces when I've only had about four hours of sleep. And they damn well better not expect me to be happy for interrupting a nice quiet morning cuddling with my wife. Something I haven't gotten to do in ... oh ... forever."

"I'm sorry love, but it's not going to get any better until one side or the other gives up." Zeeda tossed a change of clothes onto the bed.

"Fine," Lienta growled as he got up. "I give up! I'm done fighting. I'm done with it all. I just want to become a crotchety old man thinking lecherous thoughts about his still beautiful wife."

"I do believe you have the crotchety part down already. And I'm very glad you're still planning on me being old *and* beautiful."

"You'll always be beautiful."

"Oh blech ..." Zeeda made a face. "We're not going to be one of those super sappy couples when we're old are we? I don't know if I could handle that for very long."

"There you go, dashing all my hopes down like a broken mug of ale."

"Broken cup of tea, ale is too good to waste."

"True that."

Laughing softly, they made their way towards the map room where Lord Afont was waiting for them. Though the maid had mentioned others, he was the only one in the room when they arrived. He no longer looked like the tall, proud, powerful warrior of the past. Too much had happened in the last few years, and it had taken a toll on all of them.

"I'm sorry to disturb you two, I really am," Lord Afont said with a sigh. "But we've just received some terrible news. All the remaining outlying strongholds have been wiped off the map. We don't know if there were any survivors ... but I would venture to say there aren't. That just leaves the center of the line here - we're all that's left."

"I knew I should have stayed in bed." Lienta grumbled under his breath.

"But what happened? And when?" Zeeda asked.

"More of those dark energy bombs were released a few hours ago. Everything ... everyone ... it's all just gone."

"That cuts down fragment numbers as well though ..."

"Not this time." Lord Afont sank wearily into a chair. "They seem to have learned their lesson."

"Suicide bombers? You've got to be kidding me." Lienta growled. "We can't fight this. There is no way to counter such attacks."

"Our only chance now is to simply hold on long enough for ..."

"For me to do whatever it is I'm supposed to do." Zeeda supplied, her head bowed and eyes closed.

The two men shared worried looks from across the room.



Serenity was once again in the garden on Earth she had taken to visiting on a regular basis. This time it was Amiel watching over her. Or, she would have been had Serenity not given Endymion enough hints as to which of his four guardians to bring with him. The Princess of Mercury was currently engaged in a debate with Lord Zoisite, and they both appeared to be enjoying themselves a great deal. Serenity was not so sure anymore about the prince with the dark hair and teasing blue eyes, but if Amiel and the others were happy being around the other Lords of Earth, she would continue to make her visits.

Endymion looked down at the girl sitting next to him, wondering what was wrong with her today. Normally confident and "bubbly", Serenity seemed dull and out of sorts. He could not explain why it made him feel down, but it did. He did not much care for the feeling. Or the fact that it meant he was growing more attached to the young princess from the moon. Forbidden fruit was still forbidden - no matter how good it looked.

"Princess? Is anything the matter?" he asked gently.

"Oh, it's nothing to concern yourself with." Serenity spoke hastily, and turned to hide the blush rising from her current thoughts.

"Nothing to concern myself with? You're quite different from all the other times we've met here lately. So something had to of happened." He smiled. "You can tell me."

She gave him a guarded look, trying to judge how he would respond if she truly told him what was on her mind. For the past few weeks, she had begun to doubt the signals she had first received from him. Why would a handsome prince like him be interested in some silly sixteen year old princess from the moon? She did not know much about his lands, his people - and he knew just as much about her and her home. Somehow those topics had never come up during their brief conversations in the past. Sighing, her head drooped back down and one golden ponytail fell forward to hide her face.

"Serenity?" Endymion asked, slowly reaching out to pull her hair back.

"Why?" Her voice was so soft he barely heard her ask the simple question.

"Why what?"

"Why would someone like you be interested in someone like me? I'm a silly sixteen year old girl breaking the rules and attempting to live in some fantasy land that doesn't exist."

"Why wouldn't I be interested in you? Three years isn't a great deal of difference. Though, there was that very first time you ran into me ..."

"Would you be mad if I told you I did that on purpose?" A faint blush highlighted her cheeks.

"You ran into me on purpose?" Endymion chuckled.

"I had wanted to meet you for so long. And I knew there would be much of a chance for anything at the party that evening ... so I kinda sorta decided to take a detour while racing with Riann."

"At the time, I was rather put out. I didn't think a princess would act ... well ... as anything less than a princess. And then when we were introduced at the party your eyes were laughing at me in some secret joke. I wasn't quite sure what to make of you then."

"And now?"

"I don't care how many rules we break. I enjoy being around you."

"Truly?" There was faint sparkle in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"As true as the stars in the sky."

Serenity's eyes dropped back to the ground shyly, the blush returning to her face as Endymion traced a gentle finger along her cheek.



Maids hurried to get out of the way of the strange man rushing down the hall. Wensel was not known for being an overly excited individual, so it was a rather strange sight to see him running down the palace halls with a wild look in his eyes. Deep shadows lurking under those eyes spoke of many sleepless nights recently, and they only added to his startling appearance. Queen Serenity looked up as he burst into her study, reprimand dying on her lips when she saw the state he was in.

"Highness, I am deeply sorry to burst in on you like this. The void ... an attack ... there are only ten strongholds remaining now."

"I've heard nothing yet," she replied calmly.

"The maps update about every two hours. One minute everything looked relatively normal and the next there was simply nothing but a giant area of dark red. It's possible that they're still figuring everything out and haven't thought of sending word yet."

"All those people?" The Queen slumped back into her chair.

"I believe, though I wish it otherwise, that they were all lost."

"But how?"

"I can only make a guess at this point, highness. Those explosions the Legatus talked about ... it had to have been many all set off within moments of each other for something like this to have happened."

"If they can't stop whatever it is, how long before it reaches us?"

"I cannot say. It could be years, months..." Wensel shrugged.

"Or mere days. What is happening around us? Unrest grows between the houses - they all call out for the blood of Saturn's Child. And Earth ..."

"Ah yes, the other matter. That occasional red flash around our nearest neighbor has made itself permanent." Wensel clenched his hands behind his back.

"What?"

"I don't know what's going on ... but the map generally doesn't lie to us." Wensel cleared his throat and shifted about on his feet. "And highness? There was something else the map showed. A bright pinpoint of light on the planet. One of two that we only ever see on the moon."

Feeling calm was the last thing on the Queen's mind right then. It would not do her much good to take her anger out on the man standing before her. To finally have solid proof that her daughter was visiting Earth, a forbidden place in every way possible, chilled her to the core. Serenity doubted that her daughter simply went to look at the scenery any longer. Such a thought was one she did not enjoy having.

"Thank you for informing me. If anything new develops, I expect to be notified immediately."

"Yes, your majesty." Wensel replied with a bow before turning and leaving the room.

Serenity stood from behind her desk and made her way over to one of the large windows behind her. She knew a certain princess that would find out the hard way that even she was not above the rules.

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Serenity crept back into her room from a concealed panel in the wall near her bed. So far, she had always gotten lucky in getting in and out of the palace - but expected it would come to an end sooner or later. Someone was bound to slip up and say the wrong thing at the wrong time and then her mother would be on her quicker than she could even think about it. But it was so very worth it.

The handsomest, most delicious man she had ever met wanted to be around her. For a bored little princess, it was a fairy tale come true. That most fairy tales involved terrible evil as well never occurred to her. She had her prince, and that was all that mattered right then. Her stealthy movements came to a sudden halt when the lamp on her vanity came on in a bright flash. The figure of her mother could be easily seen standing next to it.

"M-Mother! What are you doing here in my room?"

"Trying very hard to quench the disappointment from your actions Serenity. Do you have any idea the danger you have put all of us in? If anyone on Earth has seen you, all of the rest of us will suffer for your selfishness." The Queen's voice was cold, her eyes hard.

"I never went near populated areas mother."

"You should have never gone in the first place!" The Queen snapped. "Did you at any time think of the consequences of if you were caught?"

"They were always short visits."

"Oh, so you're generally not down there for over six hours? And dragging the others with you? Did you think at all when you started this?"

"I wouldn't have dragged them with me if you hadn't set them on me. I did no harm, to anyone."

"You have harmed my trust in you! There will be no more visits, no more secret meetings."

"That's not fair!"

"Not fair? You know what you've been doing is forbidden. You chose to break the rules, and now you will face the consequences."

"But ... You can't do this. I ..."

"I can and I will. I will lock you in this room for the rest of your life if I have to. You will have no further contact with anyone from Earth. If one of the Senshi cannot be with you, Luna or Artemis will."

Steeling herself against her daughter's tears, Queen Serenity left the room. Behind her retreating form, the princess threw herself onto her bed, her body shaking with heart wrenching sobs.

Hours later, the tears were done, and the princess felt like an empty shell. She had been expecting to be caught eventually, but she had no idea her mother would make the punishment so severe. She had not hurt anyone. No one outside of the inner circle knew anything about it. But she could not simply leave Endymion without any word of explanation. She had given him her heart, though he probably did not know. Rubbing a shaky hand over her face, she forced herself up from the bed and gathered her courage to ask one last favor from her mother.

Normally, she would have been upset at finding guards stationed outside her door, but Serenity knew she had brought it down upon herself. And she knew that her mother was serious about not letting her be alone ever again. Luna stood from a seat down the hall and made her way towards the princess in the doorway. The Queen had given her the task of being guardian of the princess, and she would do her job to the best of her ability. If need be, she could become a small cat to slip in and out of places much easier than she could while in human form.

"Luna, may I see my mother please?" Serenity asked in a small voice.

"It is late, but follow me Princess."

"Thank you."

Serenity followed behind Luna through the halls with her head cast down lost in her own thoughts.



Lienta found Zeeda sitting in the darkened study, staring at nothing. Since their meeting with Lord Afont, things had not gone well. The final reports had come in, and things were worse than they first believed. Of the ten remaining strongholds, only Clan Centurious and Clan Torpel had enough troops to even think about mounting a defense. That was not their main concern at the moment though. They could fight, and they would fight - but for the general civilians it was a much direr situation. The people had nowhere left to go, unless they could seek refuge further in the system. And that option was only if Queen Serenity and the other planets agreed to allow such. But could they accept so many extra people? Could any of the other systems do the same for the strongholds in the other quadrants?

If they could not find refuge for the people they were supposed to protect, then all their sacrifices past and future were pointless exercises. Hope seemed to be a dwindling commodity. They were now faced with the one thing Lienta did not wish to consider. He knew what plagued his beloved's thoughts, but that was one reality he had no desire to see come to pass. Yet there seemed to be no way to avoid it. The fragments could not be allowed to leave the void, too many other innocents would be lost if that happened. With a faint sigh, he lowered himself onto the couch. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back to try and purge all thought from his head.

Though she had been staring at nothing while lost in thought, Zeeda had felt Lienta enter the room. She had gone over every stored bit of data from the old scrolls about the other Far'Merat and still had not found an answer she liked. It was selfish she figured, but she had little desire to give up her life simply to create a shield that would wear out in a few hundred years so the whole cycle could start all over again. That would not give those of the void enough time to rebuild properly to be able to stand against another such onslaught. There had to be something she could do, but the darkness be damned if she could figure it out. Rising from behind the desk, she made her way over to the couch to curl up beside her husband. For a few moments at least they could pretend that the end of all that they knew was not lurking around the next corner.

"I don't know what to do." Zeeda's voice was small and tired.

"I don't either. I just know that I don't want to lose you."

"I ... I don't want to lose me either. But I'm not supposed to think like that."

"I don't know, I rather liked the last few times you were selfish." Lienta's chuckle was gruff, but still playful.

"When I think about everything ... sometimes I wonder if this was truly all worth it. What have we gained? Our family, our friends - the losses were too great. We've given up so much and no one will ever know. If we're gone, no one will come to visit the graves."

"Um ... we don't bury our dead."

"You know what I mean. None of *them* will ever bother to come here. Everything here will be gone and no one will care. No one will remember us because no one knows about us."

For that, Lienta had no response.

"I know what's expected of me, but I have no idea how to go about doing it. Giving up my life would solve things - but not for as long as such a sacrifice is worth. In order for the shield to last longer, the person who brings it into being must be alive. We're not exactly known for our long life spans though." Zeeda sighed. "I'm just so tired. I'm tired of it all and I just want it to be over already."

"I fear the end is closer than we think or want." Lienta burrowed his face into her hair that he had taken the past few moments freeing from her braid.

"I have a year to figure something out. After that, we're out of resources to live on ... and probably everything else as well."



The Queen looked up as Luna entered her chamber. She had been expecting a visit from her daughter, but not quite so soon. Curiosity peaked, she dipped her head in a slight nod at Luna's wordless request. Best to get it over with quickly. The princess entered the room, her head bowed and eyes glued to the floor. She did not look up, and her voice was soft when she started to speak.

"Mother, I know I have no right to ask this favor of you. I know I cannot return to Earth, but if I may be allowed to send a message to someone? If there is a secret way to deliver it?"

"Secret? Serenity, what have you done?"

"I didn't ... I didn't intend for it to happen. But I've ... the prince ... I know I will never see him again, but I don't want him to think I've abandoned him. I ... Mother, I love him." Tears trailed down her cheeks, falling in a quiet rain on the hem of her dress.

The Queen sat staring at her daughter in shock. Of all things to have happen, this was something she had hoped against. Even if relations with Earth had been something better than they were, such a relationship would have been hard to pull off even then. Now? Now it was beyond possible. If anyone discovered it, they would be lucky to escape a declaration of war against them. Knowing that one could not always stop what the heart wanted, the Queen could not be too hard on her daughter. Sneaking away to Earth was still punishable, and the princess would have to live with the results of her actions. But she would not rub salt into the wound.

"You may write a letter of farewell to this prince. I will allow you that much. This will be the last time you contact him, and you must make it very clear that there will be no more visits – from either one of you. Is that clear?"

"Yes mother."

"There is parchment enough in my desk by the window. I will not read what you write Serenity. I am trusting you to make this situation as right as you can."

Her head still bowed, the princess slowly made her way towards the writing desk by the window. With a shaking hand, she picked up a pen. Taking a breath to steady herself, the quiet in the room was soon disturbed by the scratching sounds of someone writing. If one was listening close enough, they would have also heard the faint sound of tears hitting the paper between words.



“Why have I been summoned in the middle of the night?”

“Stop grouching, it's not like either of us were asleep in the first place. I do as the king commands.”

Endymion scowled at the head of his guards. “I thought you were mine to command.”

“Yes. Though last time I checked, even you still answer to your father.”

Kunzite kept his grin to himself, the prince was in a foul enough mood to start with. Though why he would return in such a foul mood from a tryst with the moon princess was a question without an answer. Perhaps the little girl had put him in his place. It would be a new situation for Endymion, who could make women swoon just by walking into the room. When Kunzite had answered the summons from the king, he had not been expecting the man to seem quite as angry as he was. There was always the chance that the secret visits were not so secret anymore - in which case they were all in for it.

The king was still pacing about his study when they arrived. His eyes snapped up to the face of his son and did not leave.

“Thank you Lord Kunzite, that will be all for this evening.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Kunzite gave a half bow and backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Endymion sat heavily in one of the chairs placed before his father's desk. He had not wanted to leave the mountain garden that evening, but Serenity had slipped away as quietly as she came and he had not had an opportunity to ask much of her this time. All he wanted right then was to return to his chambers so he could brood (or pout, as Jadeite would call it) in solitude.

“Is there anything you would like to tell me son? Anything at all about secret meetings that could remove any chance that you would take the throne after I'm gone?”

Endymion looked up, not quite able to hide the shock on his face at his father's words. How had he found out?

“Speechless I see. As well you should be.” The king pounded his fist against the top of the desk. “Do you have any idea the damage you could have done to yourself? To your family? You should be grateful that I am not going to be mentioning one word of this to your mother.”

“Word of what?”

“Don't play the village idiot with me boy. You may be my son, but I am still king and the safety of the kingdom comes well before you. Something I thought I had taught you many years ago that I see you did not pay attention to.”

“Father, if you would tell me what I've -”

“What you've done? Sneaking off to meet with the moon princess, who should not have been on our planet in the first place – how's that for a start?”

“It was just my men and I, in the forgotten mountain gardens. No one saw us.”

“I don't give a damn who did or did not see you. The fact remains that we of Earth are to have no contact with those from the Moon or any other planet. You broke one of our highest laws, and that will not go unpunished.”

“It's a stupid law in the first place.”

“It is to be obeyed no matter what you think of it. If a king cannot abide by the laws he enforces upon his subjects, he has no right being king.”

“Well, problem solved. I'll step down as crown prince and you won't have to worry about the image I project.”

King Ethos' jaw tightened. Any further and he was likely to crack a tooth. “You will not give up the throne all for some little slip of a girl you barely know. I will kill you myself before that happens.”

The two sat staring at each other for a long while. Endymion had seen his father angry on numerous occasions – had been the cause of a few such episodes in the past – but none of them held a candle to what was going on between the two of them right then. Never before had such words come from the king to be thrust in his direction.

It was not his father talking this night, it was a king protecting his kingdom. What had seemed as harmless fun while he was in the gardens with Serenity took on quite a different meaning now. Now, it was enough that he could be punished by death if anyone else ever found out. For the Earth to lose its crown prince in such a manner would be a scandal they would not recover from for generations.

“Take the passage down to the cave, someone is waiting there to speak to you.”

Rising from the chair, Endymion made his way over to the portrait of what everyone assumed was the first high king. His fingers found the hidden switch built into the massive frame and the painting slowly swung forward enough to reveal the hidden passage behind it. Steps were cut into the stone itself, leading down into a large round room. Though it was called the cave by those who knew of it, it was entirely man made. A table and chairs stood in the center. It was the tall figure in a black cloak that grabbed his attention this time. Stepping forward, Endymion stopped in shock when a delicate hand lifted the hood.

“Your majesty.”

Prince though he was, Endymion was not so much of a fool to not show respect to the visiting monarch. It helped that Queen Serenity radiated a certain power that no one could ignore.

“You have grown since the last time I saw you Prince Endymion. My daughter may be a fool of a girl, but I suppose one could say she has

good taste.”

Endymion kept quiet. If the Queen was anywhere near as angry as his father, he would better serve himself with silence.

“I come with a final message for you.” She held forth the sealed letter. “It has not been seen by anyone, not even myself. You do understand that neither of you can ever meet again under any circumstances. Whatever foolish notions either of you entertained can never come to pass. This is for both your kingdoms. My daughter will make no further visits to Earth. And as for you - you will be killed on sight if you are caught even attempting to set foot on the Moon. Is that understood?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“You only have yourselves to blame for all of this. You both knew it was forbidden, and yet you still kept up with your little meetings. I did not wish to believe it. Once or twice I could understand, but this has been going on for months. I will not allow you to endanger my daughter or the kingdom she will inherit. It is the same with your father – and the two of us will be keeping a very close eye on both of you.”

With a flash of light, Queen Serenity disappeared. She left behind her one rather confused prince, blinking rapidly to clear the flash of light from his eyes. Still seeing spots, he stumbled up the stairs and back to his father's study. It was empty when he stepped out from behind the painting. Endymion flopped down in the chair he had occupied before and turned his attention to the letter the Queen had left with him.

There was no name on the envelope, but as it had been a personal delivery direct from Queen Serenity it was not an important omission. There was no seal or symbol pressed into the wax. He did not know why that disappointed him, even as he understood it was better off without advertising where this particular piece of parchment came from.

Finding it difficult to break the seal, he slipped his belt knife loose and gently pried the wax away from the paper. Three pages, written in a flowing elegant hand spilled out into his lap. The splotches here and there from the writer's tears did not go unnoticed. Endymion could not quite explain why seeing them made his heart beat with a pained rhythm, he just knew that it did.

He could explain it to himself by the end of the letter however. How long he stayed in his father's study Endymion had no clue. They would not have to worry about the letter falling into the wrong hands though – as the tears between the writer and the reader had washed the ink from the pages to the point neither of them could recall what had been there.



Those were indeed troubled times. We were losing and there was no one left to back us up. In the void it was something we accepted. But we knew we had to stop it because if the fragments got past us, Queen Serenity and her little alliance of planets would not survive.

Think of me what you will, it is still hard to accept that so many had to be sacrificed for so few. I have had plenty of time to wonder if it was all worth it considering the other events we didn't even know about. We sacrificed all and it mattered not in the end - they were destroyed from within just as easily. As much as it saddens me, it angers me just as greatly.

No one knows how we managed to hold out as long as we did. Those were not easy times by any means, but those of us who remained in the void banded together as best we could and stood our ground. I'm still not sure how the two events were linked. The fragments and the darkness that took the Earth and destroyed the kingdom on the moon. I'm not sure anyone knows really.

Zeeda stared at the papers spread out before her with eyes that did not see. Deep shadows had become a permanent fixture under her eyes, and there was a gauntness to her face that had not been there before. Supplies were steadily dwindling. Though she needed her strength she could not find an appetite to eat her fill knowing there were children and families in the villages in need of food. Everyone had tightened their belts, giving greater portions to the soldiers still fighting to keep them safe.

The few remaining clans had merged into one large mass. A super clan, if you will, with the combined power of multiple environmental shields combined and made stronger to hold of random fragment incursions. It was not enough however and the day she had been dreading was soon approaching. Once again Zeeda had turned to the papers left behind by women who had faced similar situations. Though she was rather certain none of them had to face times quite as dark as hers. Not according to the various histories anyway.

Queen Serenity had looked little better on the vid screen the day before when Zeeda reported in. No longer could she afford to visit the Moon Kingdom, but that did not mean she would not keep them informed. Yesterday she had sworn an oath that this evil would not be allowed to make its way into the galaxy proper. The only problem was she had no idea how to deliver on that promise.

Picking up one of the loose pages, she held it to her face. The lamp on the desk illuminated the thinning parchment. It was a piece of writing she had looked at countless times. Yet on this evening there was something different that caught her eye. Faint notes were scribbled in the margins - notes that could only be seen while a light shone behind them.

... greater sacrifice for full effect. Hard decision to make.

Far'Merat should ultimately serve as conduit to channel strength from everyone around, not just self. Many lives needed to stop the fragments.

Zeeda hoped she was wrong in her interpretation of the meaning behind these faint scribbled notes. In order to bring about a more permanent solution she had to sacrifice more than they already had? And what did it mean to serve as a conduit?

Sure she could draw on other people's power on occasion. But it was something she only ever did in emergencies and she always asked permission first. The whole idea was ghastly. There was no way she could see herself destroying extra lives just to construct some magical barricade that they had no guarantee would actually work. There had to be a better way. Trained soldier she may have been, but this crossed the line.

Sacrificing herself was one thing - taking the lives of everyone else around her was another matter all together.



Hush voices drifted up from behind a painting not fully pushed back against the wall where it hung. Endymion had come seeking his father for his next round of punishment having finished the last few tasks set before him. As long as it did not involve yet another four hour lecture on the laws of the land (two such events had been more than enough) he would take whatever was set on his shoulders.

What had been even more disturbing were the mutterings that could even now be heard in fierce whispers about the palace. He had no idea why the people of Earth were suddenly so against those of the Silver Millennium Alliance. Queen Serenity had never forced herself upon them, simply offering assistance or guidance if it was asked of her. The prince knew she had no desire to rule over Earth. Why would she? He simply could not understand the dark looks and disgruntled comments, some now coming from what he considered his four closest friends.

Kunzite and the others had picked up on it too, though they seemed reluctant to talk to him about it. Why that was he had no clue. They had always been able to talk about anything and everything before. Endymion rationalized that perhaps they did not want to speak of things they suspected but could not prove. The only thing that anyone knew was that a shadow was slowly creeping over them. A shadow they did not know the source of or what its purpose was.

Easing the painting aside, he crept down the stairs, careful to avoid making any noise that would give him away. His father was speaking to someone, and it did not sound like any sort of jovial conversation. Nearing the base of the stairs he froze as the conversation came to a sudden halt. The voice that called out his name was one he had not expected to hear again.

“It is rather rude to eavesdrop Prince of Earth.”

What was Queen Serenity doing there?

“Come on out if you know what's good for you son.”

Head bowed and shoulders hunched rather sheepishly, Endymion quickly made his way down to the floor of the cave. He did not need to see their faces as he could feel the disappointment radiating from both of them.

“I see I didn't get the frame latched properly.” King Ethos sighed.

“Well, it does affect him in the end I suppose.” Queen Serenity's face betrayed no emotion, though she was slightly amused under her anger at being spied upon.

Endymion dropped into a slightly deeper bow. “I humbly apologize.”

“Pick your head up at least, you won't learn anything by staring at the damned floor.” His father muttered.

The prince looked up, finally taking in an image being projected in the middle of the room. It was their planet. Earth. He had seen it before on the moon, in awe of the blue and green floating gem in the middle of all the darkness of space. Now, that gem was dull and dim, covered with a shadow.

“What ...” Endymion found his voice leaving him. What exactly was he seeing?

“I am breaking the laws of my own alliance by being here and showing you this, but as it is your world, you deserve to know. This ... we had been watching and observing and the darkness appeared very sudden.” Queen Serenity's voice was flat, almost tired sounding. “The strongest concentration of whatever this is starts in the northern regions, near the pole.”

“Metalrina.” Ethos nearly spat the word out. “What has she done?”

“We don't know. And we have no idea how to stop it either. None of us can see into the depths of the shadows, and those that have ...” She shuddered. “They have all gone mad with the attempt.”

“Our planet is no longer safe my son.”

It was a plain simple statement, and it made Endymion's blood run cold. How could this have happened without anyone knowing about it?

“I must return before they grow suspicious about my absence. It is likely I will not be able to return, but I will send others in my place. We may not be official allies King Ethos, but we cannot simply stand by and watch our nearest neighbor fall.”

“I thank you for this Queen Serenity.” His eyes darted towards his son.

“If it comes to that, we will do our part to assist you.”

Endymion had no idea what they were talking about now or why the two rulers were giving him sideways glances. Obviously he was not to be privy to all the information. He was in no position to demand answers

and decided it best to keep his mouth shut right then. If they felt the need to share, he would be informed. If not, he would simply have to accept it and move on.

Queen Serenity vanished once again in a quick flash of white light and Endymion took a wary stance as his father turned towards him.

“I would have informed you of this, but now that you've already learned of our fate - this cannot leave the cave son. Public sentiment is already bad enough. If they learn we are secretly meeting with those from the Moon things will only get worse.”

“What of ... what of Queen Serenity's other allies?” He could not explain why those particular warriors came to mind, but Endymion thought they would be a welcome party to stand against the darkness.

Ethos shook his head. “They are fighting their own battles, from what the Queen told me. We are on our own.”

“On our own against something we know nothing of?”

The answering look from his father said more than any words could have right then. In all his nearly twenty years of life, Endymion had never known a more unsettling fear than he felt right then.



In the swirling grey mists that filled the realms between times, a slender figure was hunched over on her knees. Voices screamed around her so loudly she was forced to cover her ears with her hands.

And she knew what they were screaming about now. A single tear escaped down her cheek as she thought of what the streams of time had shown her that morning. Something terrible was coming to everyone, and she was powerless to stop it.

She may have only been sixteen, but so much more was expected of the leader of Princess Serenity's guard that most could not see the young girl in Sailor Venus. That things were a different matter while she was out of uniform was something only her closest friends knew. Right then, she found herself in a heated debate with the single most stubborn man she had ever met. He was not really all that much older but he was certainly trying to lord it over on her as if he was someone far superior. A little voice inside her head was protesting how anyone could think himself above a planetary princess.

“How can a scout on the ground be expected to return safely when all of our long range scans and unmanned probes have come up with nothing - or simply not returned at all?” Her blue eyes blazed. Was this man really so dense?

Kunzite held himself in check. While he had met the Venusian soldier a few times before, he had never seen her act so stupidly stubborn. “Perhaps because they know of your little tricks and want you out of their business.” He had to hope that King Ethos knew what he was doing by involving with these people.

“Tricks? The darkness that is taking over your planet has already sent four of our best seers to the madhouse. I don't need to be here. I have an army of my own to prepare for when you fail here because you're so damned pig headed. We simply want to help, though light knows why.”

“We are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves.”

“Oh yes, you're doing one hell of a job at it right now. If you fall, we're the next target. And my Queen would rather not see this planet of yours laid to waste.”

Kunzite watched as she folded her arms across her chest. It had been a long while since he found someone who would actually stand up to him and give him a bit of a challenge. That it was a slip of a girl with a silly red bow in her hair gave him pause. She was a great deal younger than him, and whatever distracting thoughts that wanted to surface needed to stay buried. They were simply two commanders worried about the royal child under their protection.

“Myself and the Shitennou under my command are undertaking this scouting mission. We know our own lands well enough to slip in and out before anyone notices us. It shouldn't take us longer than a week.”

“Very well. I will return then to hear your report.”

She instinctively took a step back as he straightened up to tower over her. Why did the damn man have to be so tall?

“If I deem it necessary, I will share the information with you little girl.”

“I could swat you like a fly here and now if I truly wanted to. Do not underestimate me son of Earth.” A dangerous cold fire lit up her eyes, and she felt her fingers twitch as she resisted the urge to fire off an attack at the pompous ass. “I am no mere tavern wench like you must be used to dealing with.”

“And I do not answer to you. Nor do I frequent taverns for their wenches.”

The two of them stood glaring at each other for a few moments. Kunzite was well practiced in maintaining a blank exterior, though this young woman was doing a fair job of wriggling in under his skin like no one had before. She did not fear him, that much was plain. He could not say he was afraid of her, no matter her powers or skills. If anything the two of them were fairly equally matched. Each would give their life for the royal one they protected. And neither of them would send their own troops into a place they were not willing to go first themselves. They were two immovable forces butting heads with each other - and that never ended well.

Venus was the first to end their standoff, though the glare did not completely leave her face. “A truce perhaps. We neither command the other, but by necessity we must be able to work together. Our own lives are forfeit if either of our charges do not survive this.”

“A truce agreed. We will meet back here in one week. All of us.” Kunzite took her offered hand, her grip stronger than he expected.

“Very well, in one week.” She nodded, removing her hand from their business like shake. Touching something strapped to her wrist, she vanished in a golden flash.

Kunzite turned and made his way from the cave. He and his men had a journey to prepare for.



Lienta tried not to notice the papers Zeeda quickly moved to the bottom of the stack as he entered the study. Reports and other lists were scattered about her, but he knew they were not what she had been studying so intently before he arrived. She was keeping something from him, something that kept her up at nights when the two of them actually managed to be in the same bed at the same time. It was reminiscent of

when she had first learned of the Far'Merat, and darkness be damned if he was going to experience that once again.

Holding back a sigh, Zeeda watched as he closed and locked the door behind him. She should not have tried to hide the research papers in such a manner. Had she simply shuffled them in with some of the reports before her he probably would not have noticed. It was not that she wanted to keep this secret from him, she just had no idea how to talk about it. How did one talk about taking lives on a mass scale?

Before he could even open his mouth to demand answers, Lienta watched as she pulled a paper back out from the bottom of the stack. "You have to hold it before a light."

The parchment was old, in the spidery script of the old tongue. That apparently was not what he was supposed to read. Turning to a lamp on one of the tables behind him, he studied it a moment before the faint words scribbled in the margins caught his attention. It did not take him long to read what was written there, and he turned back to his wife with a confused expression.

"What does this mean?"

Zeeda slumped forward with a weary sigh, her hands holding her head up. "I don't know for sure."

"This ... this cannot ... you ..."

"If I give myself up to whatever it is I'm supposed to do, it buys us only a few hundred years if we're lucky. If those notes are correct, a larger sacrifice means a longer time on the binding - or whatever it's called."

"Demon dammed darkness. You can't go through with this!"

Lienta's outrage dwindled under her pained and haunted gaze. "You think I want to do it?"

"No, Zee. I ... damn."

"Dammed indeed. There are hardly any of us left in this quadrant of the void, and there is nowhere for us to run to. Shadows have covered nearly all of Earth now, and that can only mean one thing."

"Queen Serenity is not powerless."

"They don't know what it is, so how are they to stop it?" Zeeda shrugged. "Even if they do survive - if we don't succeed in keeping the fragments at bay they would be wiped out then. I can do nothing to help them there, but I can do something here. Something so terrible that I do not even wish to contemplate it."

"Are they so much more important than the people here?" Lienta asked brokenly.

"No. But if our people are to have a chance to survive at all, I must do something." She stood and walked around the desk, no longer wanting it to stand between them. "If you have a better idea I'd love to hear it."

Unfortunately, Lienta had to admit to himself that he was just as lost. That things had gotten so bad that they were reduced to deciding between the lesser of two evils stunned him into silence. He knew that somehow he would lose her, and had grudgingly accepted that fact.

Nothing would stop Zeeda if she decided to give herself up for this. But to know how things were going to end - he could find nothing else to say then. The look in her eyes told him words were not needed.

Lips met in a fierce embrace as sorrow mixed with passion in two lovers who knew this was one of the last times they would steal such a moment together. For a brief moment they tried to forget all that pressed down upon them to seek solace in each other's presence.



Though further removed from the troubles than others, those in the outer ring of planets could feel the wrongness building up around them. The storms on Jupiter were quickly growing beyond anyone's control while the seas on Neptune frothed with agitation. A feeling of helplessness fell upon them all, not knowing what could be done to help. Only one planet seemed calm, but that was only because no one wanted to look beneath the surface.

King Saturn sat brooding in his darkened study. He could understand what the rest were sensing. While they sat in their confusion, he could only sit and wait for the end he knew was soon approaching. The brief communication from Zeeda and Lienta the day before had been a good bye. Of anyone they themselves knew what was coming. His daughter's god parents had put on brave faces for Hura, but even she had known. It chilled him to the core seeing how calmly she had accepted it.

Shuffling feet at the doorway let him know she was standing there. "Hura?"

"I - I can't sleep. It's pressing down on me so much, and I can't feel Aunti Zee anymore. She's blocking our connection somehow." Her voice was small, frightened. "Why is this happening father?"

"I do not know."

"I can feel it you know. I can feel what is inside me clawing its way out. I don't want to let lose my powers. Isn't there some other way?"

Rising from his chair, he made his way over to kneel before her. No child should have to deal with what his daughter now faced. "It is the curse of our powers - of our planet. I ... I wish I could shoulder this burden for you, my dearest girl. I can only stand behind you and support you. There is still hope Hura, there is always hope."

"No father, this time there is no hope." She shook her head sadly. "If there was hope, Pluto would be here with us. They have retreated to their mists to watch and wait for the time of their return. We are left on our own, and I ... I will be the one to see it all end. I just wish Aunti Zee hadn't shut me out."

He carefully wiped away the tear trailing down one cheek. "You and Zeeda are so much alike. She faces her own challenge, one I feel is

very similar to yours love. She is shielding you from having to bear her pain alongside your own. Of everyone we have ever met, they understood us best. Even now she is more concerned for you than herself.”

“That doesn't make it any easier.”

“I know.” Sastur pulled her into his arms, the two of them kneeling on the cold floor of his office. “Darkness I wish I didn't, but I do know Hura. I will not leave you, no matter what happens. You won't be alone, I promise.”

Hura nodded against his chest, keeping further observations to herself. She had already seen a glimpse of what was to come. There was no one with her, only the silence, darkness, and pain. The others would not suffer further. The Soldier of Silence, the Soldier of Saturn - she herself would take on their pain and suffering and set things back to rights. They would have their chance at a brighter future while she remained in the shadows.

It was her curse indeed to always be apart from everything else, only to appear at the last minute to once again to return things to their natural balance. Hura did not know exactly how this knowledge came to her, but she had it. And she would start now by letting her father believe he would be able to help her. He was broken enough still from the loss of her mother.

It would kill him to know how things ended.

Senshi met Shitennou at the appointed time. None of the four planetary guardians could miss the dark haunted looks on each man's face. No one could look into the heart of the shadow and not return changed in some way. Venus felt chilled to her core at the hardness that had not been in Kunzite's eyes the last time they met. Whatever was consuming this planet must be horrible indeed.

"I am relieved that you have all returned." She could not understand what they had experienced, but she was glad they were standing before them.

Kunzite's reply was a short and curt thank you. That did not bother her as much as it might have only a few weeks before. Sailor Mars fidgeted behind her, rather out of character for the usually guarded and stoic young woman. She must be able to sense something of what they had experienced on their scouting mission. The two of them exchanged a glance and Venus nodded her approval.

Sailor Mars moved forward, her steps hesitant. She had felt it the moment the four men entered the room. What they had seen had shaken them a great deal, and Jadeite was unconsciously broadcasting the worst of it. With her psychic abilities she could feel what he was in such close approximation to each other. A fear of what she would see to go along with those feelings held her in check, but they would get nowhere if she did not do something. Her violet eyes locked with his, now an icy blue.

Jadeite watched, wary of the young woman approaching him. He knew of their shared abilities and had some idea of what she was wanting. The images he could not remove from his brain were things she would not like to see. Why he was worrying about protecting her when she was just as much a warrior as himself was a question he could not answer. All he knew was that the darkness should be kept from her. Maybe not so much as should, as that he simply did not want to see the same hard shadows on her face he knew were on his own. A deep shuddering breath shook him when she stopped directly in front of him.

"Please," her voice was soft. "You're broadcasting. Please let me see. Let me ... Let me help."

“There is no help for this,” Jadeite replied gruffly.

“We need to know what is coming. I cannot advise those above me if I do not know the truth.” Riann was slowly pulling her gloves off. Her right hand came up to rest directly above his heart. “Please.”

He brought his hand up to pull hers away, but made it no further than gripping it tightly. For the first time since he had met her, the fiery priestess from Mars was not guarding what was in her eyes. They were filled with emotion like he had never seen before and he realized she was showing him what very few people ever managed to see. Nodding his assent, he leaned into the soft embrace as her left hand came up to rest lightly against his temple. Their eyes never left each other.

Riann gasped as he allowed her into his memories of their mission, her grip on his jacket tightening. Never before had she seen such horrors. Her eyes grew wide as she followed him through the dark scenes, not even noticing when he wrapped his other arm around her waist to keep them both standing.

Their fellow guardians watched as the two of them seemed to drift off to their own little world. The only sound in the room was the low hiss of breath, the occasional shifting of fabric as someone moved.

“What happened?” Riann asked, whispering despite the fact that there was no one around to disturb.

“The shadow destroys all that lives. No plants, no animals - nothing. Only the demon creatures that serve its bidding.” Jadeite answered.

Her eyes took in the desolate landscape. Earth was always full of color, even in the desert wastes. This was like an alien planet. All was dark and dreary - and dead. Trees that had once stood tall with lush foliage were nothing more than bare twisted husks. Grasses were gone to reveal the bare soil below. Cracked and parched now as there was no water. Even just the memory of this cold desolation pained her as she could feel how it affected the man who called this planet home.

Dark shapes flitted about. Some lumbering hulking masses while others were swifter with an even greater edge of danger. Further in the darkness became more oppressive, more stifling. Riann shivered, drawing in on herself. This was evil in its purest form, and she did not know how they would be able to stop it.

In the midst of his own pain, she felt his arms encircle her. Leaning back into his embrace, she shared the warmth between them. What was seen could not be unseen, what was felt could not be forgotten.

The two of them blinked rapidly as they returned to the regular plane of existence. Neither of them wanted to move right then, sharing healing warmth between their two souls. It was the first time either of them had opened up so much to another person, and a link was forged in

that moment. Something that time and distance could not erase. Though neither of them realized it just then.

Reaching up, Jadeite gently pulled her hand away from the side of his face to place a gentle kiss on her palm. Some of the warmth returned to his eyes as she curled her hand into a fist to keep possession of what he had just given her. Reluctantly he let her go, and the chill returned.

Venus and the other Senshi watched as Mars returned, being careful not to come in direct contact with any of them. She would share what she had seen later. Right then they knew she needed to absorb the information Jadeite had shared before proceeding any further. It would be a while before she surfaced.

“How bad is it?” Venus asked, bringing them all back to the business at hand. “Have they raised an army? Troop numbers?”

“We did not make it to the heart of the darkness. There are hundreds at least of the demon creatures. Perhaps into the thousands.” Kunzite informed her.

“Light ... What are our options?”

“We can either take the fight to them or wait for them to come to us. There is no middle ground. What path we take is up to the king however. I cannot make the decision for him.”

“And we cannot assist with reinforcements either.” The words tasted bitter as Venus said them. “Though I would gladly send you our armies for this battle to come.”

Zoisite snorted. “You think we can't take care of ourselves?”

“If the Earth falls to this, it is only a matter of time before the rest of us do.” Sailor Mercury cut in. “Now is not the time for childish disagreements.”

The eight of them were silent for many minutes. None of them would ever back down from a fight, and they would all fight to the end - but was that going to be enough this time around? Unfortunately there were no easy answers.

“How fares the war council? Making plans without me?”

Eight pairs of eyes turned to see King Ethos standing at the base of the stairs, the prince a silent shadow behind him.

“Do you really believe those are our only two chances Lord Kunzite?”

The silver haired man turned, wondering just how long the two of them had been lurking on the stairs. “We have to commit our forces fully. Otherwise we will not have the strength to see it through.”

“Can we not gather more information? I cannot send men into battle not knowing the numbers they face.”

“Returning would be a great risk.” Nephrite replied.

“A greater one than going into this blindly?” The king knew what he was asking of them. “How can we fight what we do not know? I know what I am asking of you, but you know as well as I that no one else could manage it.”

Silence filled the chamber for a long moment. Kunzite searched the faces of each of his fellow men, seeing resolution in their eyes while they bottled up the fear in their hearts as best they could. He would never disobey a direct order from his king, but this time he had the feeling they would not be returning. None of his doubts or misgivings could be seen on his face. There was an example to be set for the others, and he was the one expected to do so. Into the darkness they would once again venture. Kunzite simply prayed that their souls would survive another such journey.

Sailor Venus was keeping one eye on the men of Earth while the other watched Sailor Mars standing slightly behind her. The fiery priestess seemed troubled from what she had seen, a shadow still across her face. If it really was that bad, it was possible they would never see their male counterparts again. It also meant they might have a fight on their doorstep regardless of what happened to this backwards little planet. There was one thing she could do, if she caught the prince before he left. Something she had not been able to resist when a pair of blue eyes had begged for a favor that morning.

She may have been the corporeal form of the Goddess of Love, and she understood all too well the powers of the heart - but Princess Serenity risked too much with hers.

“Very well.” Kunzite nodded. “We will leave in the morning.”

King Ethos dipped his head once in acknowledgement before turning back up the stairs. Prince Endymion should have followed directly behind him, but his feet refused to move.

“If I may ...” Venus hesitated when Kunzite's cold gaze settled on her. “I - I was asked to give this to the prince. A gift from the princess.”

He took the pendant lying on its coiled chain resisting in the palm of her hand. It was nothing more than a silly piece of sentiment most likely, worth nothing much to anyone else. The thing seemed to be relatively harmless and he passed it along to Endymion who was standing before him with an outstretched hand.

The pendant was gold, cast in the shape of a star. In the center was a raised dome and the prince noticed a faint seem around the edges. With a brush of his thumb, it opened on its own, and a faint melody started playing. A golden light rotated with the music, casting a soft glow around the immediate area.

“A light to warm you in the coldest darkness.” Sailor Venus spoke softly, a sad smile on her lips.

“In a week's time, ladies.”

Kunzite dipped into a slight bow before leaving the room, the others trailing behind him. Three flashes of light filled the chamber, causing Jadeite to look back over his shoulder. Violet met blue, and that one look said more than any words before Sailor Mars finally fingered the device around her wrist and vanished from his sight.



It's so cold here now, as things start to fade away from me. The void has always been dark and empty, but it has never felt cold until today. The loneliness isn't quite so bad now, having had plenty of time to get used to it. But the shivering brings pain and I wish I could be warm before I meet my end.

Those last days are all blurred together. One lump of time some of us wish we could forget. I envy those who do not remember. They are the lucky ones.

We only had those few short days, and they passed by so quickly. Hard to think now about how swiftly the end came rushing towards us.



Zeeda looked at the faces of all those assembled before her. From the veteran legions to the village folk attending her last grand speech. Though she was one of the few who knew this was the end. She would not dash the hopes of those who depended upon her. Even if her own had withered away, she could not do that to the innocents.

Lienta stood just behind his wife, his eyes taking in the same view as hers. Faces were dim and wary looking, but a fire still burned in many eyes. They had all survived the fragments before, and they trusted they would again. Not caring who saw, he took her hand in his, smiling when she laced their fingers together. No one would be alone in whatever was to come.

"Fellow clansmen, the darkness has pressed upon us these many years. They may have pushed us back time and time again but still we stand proud against them." Zeeda heard her own voice, but she did not know if she believed the words tumbling forth. "This could very well be our last battle - one that will bring an end to all our suffering. Tomorrow I will lead every able bodied one of us who can take up a sword and who carries a fire in their heart. We will protect those here at home to carry on when the glow of our shields finally fades."

She paused to swallow and collect herself. There were no cheers, no cries of elation. This was not a victory speech - this was an end of the world speech. Each person assembled knew this, but they still found hope in the tripe she was spewing forth. Would they really find it so if they knew how she had failed them? If they knew what she had to do in the coming days?

"I cannot promise you a great victory. But I can tell you that we will survive - we will continue on as we always have. Here we make our own light. Prepare yourselves."

There was more, but Zeeda could not bring herself to speak falsely any longer. Lord Afont would have been better at this, but he had finally been taken from them months before. The other remaining clan leaders had shoved her into the role of figurehead. It was something she was most reluctant to be. The legions knew their tasks, and the villagers had their homes to see to. All she could see in that moment was an empty void of death. Her body and mind slowly going numb, Zeeda followed along as Lienta pulled her back towards the house.

Faces paraded through her mind - her parents, Remmus, Kullah and even Marshant. The only bright point in all this was that he had not had to live through these horrors. His spirit was free and he did not have to see the empty husk that his sister had become.

A door closed behind her and Zeeda blinked in confusion finding herself standing in their bedchamber. Had she truly been wallowing in self pity that entire time? Such pathetic luxuries were not to be indulged in at times like these. Lienta's amber eyes gazed at her with understanding. Something she was not sure she deserved right then.

"I shouldn't be wallowing in self pity."

His lips quirked into a wry grin. "What - with all the lives now resting in your hands? Darkness knows you deserve a moment to yourself before all of this begins."

"And if I don't want to be by myself?"

"I told you before that I would never leave you. And I won't. No matter what happens."

"We were supposed to have a couple hundred years together. This ... this has been too short a life. Too much has been lost." Zeeda slumped down on the bed, ignoring the tears dribbling down her cheeks. "Too high a price, and we still have more to pay."

Lienta sat behind her and pulled her into his arms. Her quiet sobs calmed and tapered off as he loosened her braid and ran a hand through her hair. Sometimes it was the simplest of things that brought comfort. After a few minutes, she pushed away slightly to be able to see his face.

"I'm just going to have to redo that you know."

He smiled. "Not for a while yet. For the rest of the day there is no battle to be fought, no one to worry about but ourselves. We're nothing more than a man and a woman who happen to be married to each other."

"Oh ... I love you."

"And I you."

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“Darkness take it, I hate this place,” Zeeda muttered under her breath as she stepped of the transport pad at Waystation Nine.

Commander Hulet swallowed the grin that threatened to break out on his face. He did not want to attempt to explain away what he was suddenly amused about. They did not have many troops remaining after splitting their forces between Waystations Nine and Twelve. Why the fragments seemed to enjoy this area more than others was a mystery no one had solved. It was something they had not had much time to think on. For the darkness it was not that far of a journey to take out their last remaining stronghold. The question remained as to why they had not.

Despite the words their Legatus had spoken the day before, the men assembling outside the waystation knew there would be no return for them. It was not as if a decree had been passed around telling them all this was their last battle. It was simply known and accepted. If giving up their lives meant the families left behind had a chance to survive then that was what they would do. Surely the Legatus would save them. She always had before.

“Their blind faith is misplaced.”

Lienta looked at her in shock, only receiving a shrug and something mumbled that might have been an apology. His wife had been in a sour mood since she woke in the middle of the night and had not been able to return to bed. He doubted anyone had slept well last night. And he was also fairly certain the rest of them were not in such a bad mood. Then, Zeeda was the one everyone expected to fix things, to make things right again. He supposed that could put even the most accepting of people in a bad mood. Still, that did not mean she should let such ideas out aloud where the men might chance to hear them.

For the first time since the attacks had begun all those years ago, they were finally going to attempt to launch an offensive strike. Everything up to this point had simply been defensive, holding a line long enough for people to evacuate to safer areas.

“I’ll be right behind the forward scouts, though I can sense they’re not far out.”

“And what are the rest of us supposed to do?” Lienta asked.

“Keep me alive long enough to do whatever it is I’m meant to do I guess.”

That was not the answer he was hoping for.



“Father...”

“Yes Hura?”

“It’s - it’s beginning.”



The pounding of heels running down a corridor in the Moon Palace brought a few curious looks from servants bustling about their duties. Seeing the Senshi warriors was nothing new, but seeing them running as if the demons of darkness were on their heels was a new event.

“You must get to Earth. The Golden Kingdom is under attack.”

Queen Serenity’s orders were still ringing through Sailor Venus’ mind. How that this come to pass? Armies of demons and dark angry men had seemingly sprung out of nowhere the day before, marching steadily towards the last stronghold of light. King Ethos had called in the favor they had arranged in secret. Venus had to wonder if even the prince knew about it. The four of them would be able to take him by force if necessary.

Startled technicians leapt out of the way as the Senshi rushed into the transport room. Venus turned towards one of the senior techs and barked out an order.

“Earth. We’re going to retrieve some refugees. Lock down all transport portals except for this one. Once we’re back, see that this one is shut down as well.”

“Yes ma’am. How long will you be down there?”

“No more than a few minutes.”

“Very good ma’am.” He turned immediately to the other technicians in the room and set them to their tasks. The Senshi took orders from only one person, and anything from them was not to be ignored.

The cave underneath the palace was not as quiet as it normally was. Venus and the others could hear raised voices carrying down the stairs. Kunzite and the other Shitennou were supposed to be back by now. No doubt the four of them were needed on the battlefield. Mars and the

others followed behind her as she marched up the stairs with determined steps. They had a mission and they were going to see it through.

Finding the latch on this side of the painting was rather easy. There was not need after all to hide it from view as most people would not arrive from inside the cave. Her fingers depressed the piece of metal tucked away in a small alcove and the edge of the painting drifted away from the wall. With a gentle push it swung out further. The voices in the room stopped when they noticed a blonde head suddenly sticking out of the wall.

“Sailor Venus?” King Ethos sounded shocked at her appearance.

“Queen Serenity ordered us here, per your agreement.”

The four of them stepped out and assembled before his desk. He had dark circles under his eyes and a pale pallor had replaced his usual robust coloration. Aids rushed past the door open to the hallway outside, and one of them stumbled when he looked in and saw the four young women.

“What of the Shitennou?”

“We lost contact with them two days ago. They have not returned.” Left unsaid was the acknowledgement that they would most likely never return. “The dark armies are at the edge of the city now. It's only a matter of time before they move on the castle here. My son will be safe?”

“As safe as our princess.”

“He may not come willingly.”

“We can take him by force, though I would rather not.” Venus shrugged.

“I will send for him.”

The Senshi remained where they were while King Ethos moved out into the hall and snagged a messenger passing by. Their wait was not all that long before a somewhat irate Prince Endymion stormed into the room, his mother not far behind. He froze in his tracks when he saw the four young women standing next to his father.

“What ...”

“Son, you must leave with the Senshi. I arranged this with Queen Serenity if the situation here ever became dire.” He took his wife's hand as she moved to stand next to him.

“You're sending me away?” Endymion fumed. “How can I desert with my tail between my legs and go hide on the moon while our kingdom is under attack?”

“Endymion, please.” His mother's voice was heavy with unshed tears. “If you survive, then so do the rest of us no matter what happens here. This ... it is not an act of cowardice my son. Please ...”

His retort died on his lips. “I have no choice in the matter? My men haven't even returned - we know nothing of their fates but I must still leave my home while all this is happening?”

Queen Terah smiled weakly as she stepped forward and pulled her

son into an embrace. "Please. For me. You must live my son. You are the heir to the Golden Kingdom. Even I can see that our chances of surviving against this darkness are slim. There's a princess somewhere waiting for you, and it is my hope for the future that you will be happy with a long life."

Under such an assault Endymion was defenseless. While it still went against everything he felt in his heart right then, there was logic hidden behind the emotion of his mother's request. He was Prince of Earth and he should be there to protect his subjects. But he was not yet king. That meant his father could still order him about, and from the looks of it the Senshi warriors were prepared to drag him away kicking and screaming. An added plus would be seeing his beloved little princess again. He had that small ray of hope to cling to.

"We will contact you the moment we learn anything." King Ethos nodded, gripping his son's shoulder.

The three royals did not know when they would see each other again, but they did not linger long over their goodbyes. Endymion squared his shoulders and turned towards Sailor Venus, the other Senshi having returned back to the cave. He just had to keep telling himself it was the proper thing to do - and that his princess was there waiting for him.



Zeeda looked around her with a grimace. Their plans had unraveled quicker than she had anticipated, and their dwindling forces had been quickly surrounded and separated into even smaller groups. She still had no idea what she was supposed to do and time was running out. Something had to be done soon however as they would not last much longer. A hand was suddenly felt on her shoulder, and she turned to see where the com officer was pointing.

A golden glow was moving towards them, the fragments drifting apart as the group moved closer. Her eyes widened in surprise to see Lienta and the remaining squads under his command fighting their way through. What in the world was he doing? Zeeda merged her shields with his as soon as the group was close enough, keeping her comments to herself until her husband was close enough.

"Did you miss me?" He was smiling, but it was rather grim.

"What are you doing?"

"Their numbers were starting to triple over there. So we made the decision to fight our way through to you instead of staying for the impending slaughter."

Zeeda sighed. "You're not going to have better luck here."

"Perhaps," his voice lowered. "But the view is nicer."

The few men and women standing nearby that heard the exchange did a rather good job of hiding their amused smiles. They may have been in the middle of a nasty spot but that did not mean they had forgotten what they were fighting for. Home was on all their minds, their families and friends. Seeing the two Legatus sharing a brief moment together lifted their spirits. With the two of them there it meant they all got a bit of a break from fighting as the fragments milled about bashing themselves against the combined might of the shield dome their leaders had erected.

Lienta pulled Zeeda a short distance away. He did not think the troops needed to hear this particular conversation.

"I still have no clue. Really, I've been racking my brain all day and nothing. Not that I've had a lot of time with how they've been pressing on us." Zeeda grimaced.

"Then it's a good thing I decided to join you."

She sighed heavily. "I have felt every death; even those not anywhere near me."

"You've ... what?"

"It's never happened before. All these years - and for some reason at this final battle I can sense everyone who is dead or dying. I can even ... I can even sense the rest who are still alive. Clear back at the compound as well." Zeeda passed a weary hand over her face. "I can't explain this sudden connection. The only person I have ever been connected to in a way such as this is you."

Lienta brought a hand up to cup her cheek. "What does all this mean?"

"I don't know. But I can feel the power left behind. Can almost touch it even."

"What if ..."

"Even if I could harness it, I still don't know what to do with it." Zeeda shook her head. "We're still no better off than we were before."

"Hey, I'm here now. Take the time to figure whatever this is out."

"We don't have that kind of time."

"Legatus!"

The cries from behind them pulled their attention back to the troops. But it was not the fragments that brought exclamations of surprise forth, it was the flickering blue ember drifting about above their heads. Only one thing in the void was that color. A watcher.

"Damn watchers. Must want a front row seat to catalog our demise." Zeeda growled low in her throat.

"They mean us no harm." Lienta reminded her.

"They do us no good either."

Even the mass of fragments swarming on the other side of their shields seemed to still as the small blue orb drifted around. Reactions were as varied as the people observing it. Some shared Zeeda's distrust and glared up at it. Others gazed upon it with awe and a small amount of

reverence. And there were even those doing their best to bury a surge of fear at the sight. None of them expected what came next.

Though none of them could see it, the drifting movements of the orb had a pattern. It was searching for someone in particular. The one who had sent it knew it was needed, knew the futile purpose of this small group of warriors attempting to hold back the tide of darkness rushing towards them in a giant wave. Many more were in danger and the key to saving them was already on the field. That key needed a lock however or it would serve no purpose and too much would be lost. It finally saw the brightest beacon amidst the other lights and with a quick flurry of movement dove in to deliver its gift.

Zeeda's strangled cry was cut off in a sudden silence as the orb descended upon her, wrapping itself around her head as a shifting glowing helmet. Those with her could only watch and wait.



Endymion had left his quarters not long after the Senshi had delivered him to them. He may not be able to do much, but he was certainly not simply going to sit around his gilded cage right then. He had seen no sign of the princess yet. It bothered him more than he realized. So his wanderings took him out to the gardens.

He could remember the first time he had seen the gardens. The others had been with him then, enjoying a stroll before they had to subject themselves to the preparations to attend the princess' birthday celebration. His eyes drifted over the large bed of white lilies. Somewhere along this path a blonde ball of energy had attacked him, dragging him to the ground to fill his senses with the flower's sweet heady smell. A wry grin tugged at the corner of his mouth as he remembered thinking such a girl could not be the fabled princess. He had always pictured her as being calm and poised, with snooty overbearing manners. Instead, Serenity had turned out to be quite the opposite.

Memories of the past faded and his eyes found themselves drawn upward. Earth loomed in the distance, now a faded and tarnished gem. Endymion could feel the despairing ache deep down, tearing at his very soul. How had things ended up this way? When had things started to go so wrong?

The gravel of the path behind him crunched softly under a hesitant foot and he spun around to confront the person foolish enough to disturb him right then. His dark eyes blazed, showing the full depths of his anguish. Harsh words that had risen in his throat were quickly swallowed back down. One did not curse at angels, and certainly that was the vision standing before him.

“Oh ... Endy ...”

He did not go sprawling to the ground this time as Serenity threw herself into his arms. This time he caught her and knew he would never let her go again. Tears mingled with mumbled apologies, though he had no idea what she had to feel sorry about.

“I thought I'd never see you again.” Her eyes locked with his, drinking in the sight of him. “It was so hard to ... to write ...”

Endymion silenced her with a gentle kiss. “I'm here now love.”

“You're here. And I'm never leaving your side again. Never. But you ... your home ... everything ...”

“Hush love. All will end well. The armies of Earth are not so easily defeated.” Endymion smiled. “And when this whole mess blows over we will find a way to be together.”

Serenity's eyes glittered as she looked up at him, her face brightened with a smile now. Her heart felt whole again - complete. There was nothing that could destroy this perfect feeling.

How long they had watched Zeeda the others did not know. It had only been a few minutes, but it felt as if time had stopped at that moment when the watcher's orb had latched itself to her. The blue glow was slowly fading and they could see that she was gradually coming back to her senses. Lienta reached out a hand to steady her when it finally dissipated, concern nearly chiseled into his face.

"Darkness," Zeeda muttered.

"The demon's own. What the hell happened?"

"It was ... it was like having a library shoved in through your ear. Though a bit selective on topics." She blinked, shaking her head slightly. "On the bright side, I have a better idea of what to do now."

Lienta forced a smile. "I told you they were here to help us."

"Yes, well, next time they can simply tell me or leave it in a letter or something. My head feels slightly mushy now."

"What do you need from us?"

Zeeda answered him with a fierce kiss, one that told him it was truly the end looming before them. They separated a few minutes later, eyes locked with each other.

"You need to hold them at bay long enough for me to gather more energy. I'll have to pull back my shields for it."

"Energy for what?"

"An explosion of our own." Zeeda's voice broke. "We have to tell them."

Lienta nodded, having gone numb with her frank declaration. Survive long enough to die in an explosion of their own making. One that would mimic the attacks the fragments had unleashed upon them countless times. If it brought an end to all of this, he supposed it was worth it. That did not mean he liked the idea much.

Turning, he watched the faces of their remaining legions as Zeeda told them what would be happening. Though they all looked resigned to their fates, not a single face held fear or regret. Their lives would make it possible to stop the increasing darkness. They were soldiers. That was their job.

Zeeda turned back to him and Lienta nodded to show he was ready. There were no more words to be spoken that they could benefit from. A circle formed, with he and Zeeda in the center. The wave crashed against them with desperate force as she withdrew her shields back around herself.

Linking with the others fighting around her was not difficult. That changed the moment Zeeda tried to tap into the other energies she had felt swirling around them from the deaths they had seen recently. Her fists clenched at her sides as she struggled to draw everything in. The watcher's orb had shown her what she needed to do. It had not however told her how to accomplish it. For master historians, they were rather poor teachers.

Further and further she stretched out, serving as a conduit for whatever energies she could collect. Zeeda's thoughts turned towards the compound. She could only hope that whatever she did they remained out of the path of danger. The dark energy explosions had caused damage over a relatively concentrated area. If what the orb had shown her was correct, what she was attempting to do would release a much larger amount of energy over a greater area. Such was needed to ensure that all remaining fragments were stopped. Even from this distance she could feel the life force gathered together in the compound. It was a comforting feeling that she kept at the front of her mind.

One by one the warriors around her began to fall. With a heavy heart she collected their remaining energy, not heading the tears that slowly traveled down her cheeks. She already felt ready to burst but she knew more power would be needed to make sure this worked. This had to end, here and now.

"Zee! We can't last much longer." Lienta called out, though his voice was muffled as it attempted to travel through their personal shields. Not yet. They had to hold out a little longer.



Queen Serenity nodded wearily as Sailor Venus finished her report. Earth would not be able to hold out much longer, and they doubted that the dark forces would be satisfied with stopping there. It had been many years since there had been war upon the moon. She could only hope they were ready for it.

"Locking down the transport pads only buys us a small amount of time. I'm not even sure if that will slow them down at all." Venus' face was grim. "Shall I ready our troops your majesty?"

"Have them on alert. We're still not certain the moon is their target just yet."

"We are the closest target once Earth falls. To assume otherwise would be illogical at this point your majesty." Sailor Mercury spoke softly.

“Messages have been sent to the other planets, but we cannot count on them to arrive in time with the current rate of advancement seen on Earth.”

The Queen sighed. “Have we already given up hope?”

“No.” All eyes turned to the Jovian princess. “They will not get past us. But Mercury is correct, we must assume they will strike here next.”

“Then we must prepare ourselves.” Queen Serenity stood. “Where is my daughter?”

“In the gardens with the prince.” It was the first time the Martian warrior had spoken.

“The two of them must survive, no matter the cost. He can protect her from within the palace while you assemble outside. I must prepare myself for other matters.”

The four Senshi bowed as the Queen swept from the room. Once she was gone, the other three turned to Venus for direction.

“Mercury, find Serenity and Endymion. Make sure they get to their quarters and stay there. I don't care which room, just as long as they're inside the palace. Jupiter, Mars - the two of you will come with me to ready our army. Mercury will join us after she has seen to our charges.”

With a quick dip of her head, Mercury hurried from the room. She could feel a small kernel of fear take root. Though they had trained their powers and knew how to fight none of them had ever seen a real battle before. The most they had done was spar with each other, and watch the soldiers of Queen Serenity's army train. She could not afford to let this distract her however. Her princess, her dearest friend, needed her to be strong. Fear could reside inside but that did not mean it controlled her.

Relief washed over her as she noticed Endymion and Serenity slowly making their way back to the palace. At least she would not have to search all over for them.

“Mercury!” Serenity called out, a happy smile on her face.

“Princess. Prince.” She dipped into a small bow. “You must return to the palace.”

“What's wrong?”

“Your mother wishes to see you safe. We ... the dark armies may be here sooner than we thought and you both must be inside where we can protect you better.”

Worry immediately settled on Serenity's innocent features and she gripped Endymion's arm tighter.

“Earth has fallen then?” He asked.

“Not yet.”

Mercury's eyes gave him the rest of his answer. They may not have fallen yet, but it was only a matter of time now. And time was no longer on their side.



Sailor Mars stood before the large front gates that usually stood open to welcome visitors to the gardens around the Moon Palace. She had not told any of the others of the odd feeling she had woken up with two days ago. On the day when Endymion's Shitennou had gone missing. They could barely call the other men friends, comrades at arms at most. Something had transpired between herself and Jadeite though. Memories had been shared, and somehow the two of them had ended up linked together in some fashion.

She could not explain it, though she had heard of such a thing happening between two people on occasion. Never before with someone from Earth, but were they really all that different from the rest of the planets? Jadeite and the others had great power, though none of the Senshi had ever seen it used. Riann had been able to sense it from each of them down under the surface. A great river than ran as deep as their own connections to Mars and the other planets. It was strange really thinking that four - no five, including the prince - men could be so powerful coming from one single planet.

The link between herself and Jadeite had not been established long enough for anything meaningful to come of it yet. But she had woken as if from a nightmare two nights before when it suddenly vanished. As she had never told the others about their link when it first formed, it had seemed rather foolish to tell them when it suddenly vanished. A link, one on a level such as theirs could have been, could only be broken if one of the parties perished. Whatever had happened to the Shitennou, they would not be seen ever again. But she could not share this knowledge without telling them of the bond link - and she knew they would not understand it any more than she did right then.

"Mars?"

She turned to see Sailor Jupiter standing behind her, a look of concern in her friend's eyes.

"Hey, you alright? I've been trying to get your attention for the past few minutes, but it was like you weren't even here."

"I'm sorry. I was lost in my thoughts."

Jupiter sighed. "I can't believe we're preparing for war. That we would see this in our lifetime - what happened?"

"There has been a shadow lurking for many years. Lying quietly in wait, moving closer right under our noses before we even knew it. It happened so gradually ... we didn't ... I'm not sure if there was anything we could have done." Sailor Mars' eyes turned once again to the Earth, its blue-green light dimmed by the encroaching shadows.

"We will be ready, whatever may come." Venus spoke with grim determination from behind them. "We cannot let anything get past us."

Nothing matters aside from Serenity and Endymion. If it means our lives are to be given, we will give them without hesitation.”

“Our duties are well known to us,” Mars snapped. “Just tell us where you want us.”

Venus' eyes narrowed. They were all under pressure, but that did not give them the right to speak to her like that. “Mars, the southern zone. Jupiter, you'll take north. Mercury and I will stay here in the middle.”

“Very well.”

Jupiter gave her leader a wry grin as they watched their fiery friend stalk off to her station. “I'm sure she just has other things on her mind.”

“As long as she remains focused on the task at hand.” Venus muttered.



Ten soldiers remained. It was a miracle they could stand so long against the frenzied aggression of the fragments. Why so many of them would be worried about so few of them was a question they no longer asked. Each time Zeeda gathered more power, the fragments pushed upon them harder. She was the one they wanted, the rest of them could see that now.

Never before had she tried to control so much power. It was nearly more than she could contain within herself. Somewhere along the way, Lienta's thoughts had become part of her own. It was hard to quiet that presence so she did not waste time or energy worrying about it. The distant connection between the rest of their remaining clans kept her focused. Each one of those faint points of light set to guide her through these final moments.

“Zee ...” Lienta's voice was strained and tired. “Whatever you do, do it soon.”

“Only a few more moments.”

“We don't have that long.”

Their reactions slowing, the two soldiers next to her went down and Zeeda knew she could not wait much longer. Tapping in one last time to those distant lives she faltered when they started winking out.

“No.”

Each distant light disappeared behind a curtain of darkness. With each loss, Zeeda knew they had truly lost. Her despair quickly turned to anger and hot flames rushed through her veins.

“No!”

A wave of power radiated out from her as the anger took control. She no longer wanted to hold it back. The fragments paused, though not

for long before redoubling their efforts to reach her. Lienta drew close, feeling the pain she had not kept back when the compound had been destroyed. There were only looks now, the briefest glance transmitting words that would not make it past their lips.

Time seemed to slow right then, as the steady confident look on Zeeda's face slipped away and was replaced by shock and pain. Her eyes closed, missing the horrified look that came over Lienta's face.

The fragments had won, something he considered impossible. His legs were locked in place, his eyes only seeing the body of his wife now impaled upon a section of fragment. It was the last thing he saw before a great blinding light flashed around them and he knew no more.

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“It's only a matter of time now.” Hura muttered softly, a lone tear trickling down her cheek as she felt a presence in her mind go still.

She could tell that Zeeda was not fully gone, but something had happened. Something inside of her was pulling closer to the surface, something she wished she did not have to allow forth. The Soldier of Silence could not be kept back once she was called to duty. Yes, she would be the end of all things. But she was a light in the darkness at the same time, because hope always followed catastrophe.

If only the others around her could see that as well.



“Venus, we need reinforcements on the south end!”

Mars' voice crackled over the com link, barely audible over the battle waging on both ends. The leader of the Senshi wished she had troops to send in, but they had few resources left to share. Their lines were spread thin and yet they still had not given any ground.

“There's nothing left to send. Try to hold out.”

The only reply was a muffled curse and a great deal of shouting before the link went silent. A never ending supply of demons, monsters and men with vacant eyes came towards them. It was easy enough to thwart their advances, but she was not sure how long everyone could hold out. They had still not seen any enemy commanders. It was something that bothered her. Perhaps they would not put themselves on the front line, but she should still be able to spot them pacing back and forth barking orders.

“Venus ...”

Mercury's voice held a slight tremor of disbelief, causing Venus to turn towards her fellow Senshi with a question on her lips. Following the

outstretched hand pointing away from them, the words died before they ever reached her lips. It was not possible. Wanting to see the enemy commanders and suddenly being granted that wish were two different things now. She almost wished she could take it all back. Two men strode towards them through the chaos - faces they had thought to never see again.

“How is this possible?”

Mercury only shook her head in reply. Two of the missing Shitennou were only a short distance away now. Kunzite and Zoisite, their faces twisted with darkness, eyes blank and lifeless. Something was different about them, but neither girl could determine what exactly. The grounds in the immediate area cleared as the two men came to a stop. A calculating sneer graced their features as they glared down at their matched rivals on the moon.

“They are enemies now Mercury and we will treat them as such,” Venus said, her eyes never leaving either man. “Traitors! How could you betray your own?”

Kunzite’s voice was gruff, toneless. “Traitors? We are protecting ourselves from you. From your greedy Queen who would rule over Earth.”

“What?”

Venus received no further reply, unless one counted the sharp edged steal that suddenly shot towards her. Jumping aside, her love chain flashed into her hands. If it was a fight he wanted, she would give it to him. Their eyes locked together the two leaders circled around each other, ignoring all else around them.



“Endy!”

Serenity rushed towards him where he stood on the balcony, listening to the sounds of battle as the Moon found itself under attack. Blood boiling, he had to remind himself that he was there to protect his love and that it would be very foolish to leave her. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. It was as if she was attempting to be braver than she felt and his heart swelled with pride. The darkness was advancing towards them, but gazing into her eyes chased it away.

“We’re safe here.” He wrapped an arm around her and held her close. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“My friends are out there fighting. People want to kill us for no reason - there are plenty of things to worry about.”

“Serenity - “

“Endymion, I am not as frail as you all seem to think. I may not know war, I may be frightened, but I can still stand alongside all of you.”

He could not help but smile before leaning down to place a gentle kiss on her lips. Their moment together did not last long before they both

felt another presence behind them. Stepping out of an inky swirl was a woman with long red hair and a clingy purple dress that left little to the imagination. Endymion quickly shoved Serenity behind him, his lip curling in disgust when he recognized the new addition to the party.

“Beryl.” Endymion growled low in his throat.

“Prince Endymion. We have come to bring you home, to place you on your rightful throne. And I,” Beryl chuckled. “I will be your rightful Queen. You need a real woman, a woman of strength and power. Not some simpering little child who cowers behind you.”

“Never. You have destroyed Earth. This shadow has taken your mind, body and soul. You have sold your own people to the darkness. When I do take my throne it will not be because of you!”

An animalistic snarl burst forth, Beryl's face twisting even further in disgust. “She has addled your wits Prince. If you will not join me, you will die.”

Beryl slammed her staff down into the lawn below her, a dark shock wave radiating forth. Serenity clutched to Endymion's back as the balcony shook beneath their feet with the force of the wave. The princess soon found herself shoved roughly back into the room and watched as the balcony crumbled away before her.

“Endymion!”

Serenity rushed to the edge, falling to her knees as she looked frantically through the rubble for any sight of her love. Tears fell freely from her eyes as she began to fear the worst. What had they ever done to deserve anything like this? Relief flooded through her when she saw him finally rise, looking none the worse for having fallen with the crumbled stone.

Seeing that the object of her desires was now a fair distance from the Moon Princess, Beryl switched tactics once again. “Come now my Prince, come to my side and together we will forge the grandest kingdom the universe has ever seen.”

“Never.” Endymion spat, clearing his mouth of dust and grime - and the magnified feeling of such from hearing Beryl's words.



Sailor Mars gasped as she narrowly avoided the blade that whistled towards her head once again. The man before her looked very much like the quiet man she had met before on Earth, but the feeling of wrongness was stronger now than ever before. It may have been his face, but her soul told her it was not him. They had not exchanged any words - he had not given her the chance. Not that she felt speeches were needed in the middle of a pitched fight. Her energy was slowly draining away. Unless she got a chance to end things very soon the outcome would not be

in her favor.

Cold expressionless eyes watched her every move, directing the deadly sword faster than she could call up any attacks. The most she had been able to do were short bursts of flame at his feet. And he had seemingly ignored them as they scorched his uniform. A cry of pain left her as the blade slid across her upper arm causing her to stumble back with less grace than she was used to. He smiled and lunged forward to press the advantage.

“So this is how it ends then.”

Her tired words brought a sense of relief. They were the only two in the area, the demons and soldiers of the moon army either lying dead around them or having moved closer to the main gates. Mars centered herself with a deep breath. If she was going to die, this shadow of a man would be going with her.

“You can smile at your own demise?” The voice was cold and rough, as if it had never been used much.

“I smile at yours.”

The blade slid home, piercing her stomach. She ignored the shock and pain and brought her hands up to his face. Tattered and torn, there was not much left to her gloves and his cold flesh met warm hands as she brought both up to grip his face. Unleashing the full force of her planets power, Mars let the strength of the gods flow through her as she called up an inferno like none had seen before. With such close contact she was able to see past the outer shell, and what she found brought her comfort. The laugh that burst forth could not be stopped.

“You're not him.”

A great pillar of red light ringed with flames rose into the heavens, leaving only ashes when it faded away.



Queen Serenity clutched her chest as a burning pain ripped through her body. She did not know which one, but knew that one of the Senshi had fallen. Her steps faltered but she did not stop as she moved further into the palace towards the central tower. The tide of battle had turned and the only option left now was to call upon the great crystal to save them. It would take all of her strength, but she would see it through. Her daughter would not be forced to live in such a world as this where darkness consumed all. That much she could see to at least.

“My Queen!” Luna rushed towards her. “It ... the Senshi ... Mars has fallen. On the field ... the Shitennou ...”

“Luna, all will be well. I must ask a great favor of you. Guide the Princess, see that she is safe and finds happiness regardless of how this

all ends.”

“But - “

“I know what I must do. You cannot stop me, but you can see that Serenity is able to live her life. That she can find her love once again and right the wrongs that have transpired here today.”

“Y-yes your majesty. I ...” Luna's voice was choked with tears.

“I know Luna, I know.”



Venus and Mercury still held them at bay before the gates. The barriers were still in place to keep them from spilling over into the grounds proper, but those were slowly breaking down. Anguish had settled over them when they saw the pillar of flame, followed shortly by one of cracking green lighting that signaled two of their own had perished. Their only consolation was to hope that the Senshi had managed to take out enough of the enemy with their acts of sacrifice. They knew they would not be far behind their two friends but this did not cause them to pause in their efforts.

“Your friends are dead. You cannot stand against us much longer.” Kunzite growled as Venus danced away from his blade yet again.

“We may die, but you will not pass these gates. This I swear.” Golden streaks of light shot out from her raised hands, forcing him to step back. “I will not let you desecrate this place any longer. Aphrodite forgive me and give me strength.”



Beryl stood before Endymion, panting and hesitant now. She had not been expecting the prince to push back as well as he had. It did not help that she could feel her armies losing strength and numbers with the release of the planetary energies. This was not how things were supposed to have happened. The moon was to cower before her and the might she brought with her from the Dark Kingdom. This light was to dull and extinguish itself in her wake. Yet still it fought against her and kept her from her goals. Prince Endymion scowled at her as if she was no better than the dirt upon his boots, and she nearly cowered before his gaze.

But there, slipping up from behind was the foolish little princess that had stolen all that should have been hers. If nothing else she would see the brat erased from the plane of existence. Without the princess they would crumble and all would be right again.

“You fool! You fight against your own! How can you do this?” Beryl taunted him further, needing only to distract him long enough to achieve one of her goals at least.

“You were never one of my own Beryl - neither you nor your mother. Selfish cowards the both of you.”

Her eyes blazed with fury. “Cowards? You call us cowards? You are the one who ran off to the Moon with your tail tucked between your legs. We are not the cowards here. We are the ones fighting to keep our way of life.”

“And you are foolish as well. Queen Serenity never wished to rule Earth. Why would she?”

There, the prince was engaged fully in the debate and the princess was now out in the open before her. A ripe target if ever there had been such before. “You are the fool.”

Beryl moved faster than he had expected, and the gasp behind him sent a chill down his spine. Serenity had left the safety of the palace and put herself directly in the path of danger. Fool he was indeed to have not noticed this as he fought against Beryl. Turning from the devious snake, the only thing he could do then was throw himself in the path of the dark spear rushing for his love. Even Beryl did not expect him to make such a move and she howled in frustration when his body tumbled to the ground at Serenity's feet. With the princess out of the way it would have been easy to turn him, and now she would not have that chance.

“Endy ... Endymion.” Serenity fell to her knees, hands trembling as they moved towards his still face. “No, this cannot be. Don't ... don't leave me. Not like this. I can't live without you.”

The sounds of the battle faded away, and Serenity did not even hear Beryl still venting her frustration nearby. All she could see were the eyelids that would never rise again, the lips that would never again smile or kiss her fears away. The shadow had truly taken everything from her and there was nothing more to keep her in this life. Eyes that saw but did not see fell upon his sword and timed slowed as she reached for it and wrapped her hand around the hilt. This was one life the shadows would not get the pleasure of taking themselves.



Queen Serenity knew that time was running out. The Senshi were no more, and with them the bulk of the armies brought against them. And the one light that should never have dimmed was starting to fade. Fear like she had never felt before wrapped its icy claws around her heart and she rushed back through the palace. Her eyes did not wish to see the sight they met when she exited out a side door. There on the once pristine lawn lay the Prince of Earth, and over him the one thing she treasured most.

“No.”

Desperation drove her forward. It could not be true. Gold and silver should not have tarnished that day, it was not what was supposed to be. Cold fury flowed through her and she could feel the crystal straining against her. Anger over her loss would not serve her now. It would only make her no better than those that stood against them.

“You'll not triumph here today.”

She was past the point of tears, though her heart and soul cried out with the pain at seeing all she had worked so hard to build lying in ruins around her. Bright streams of light began to radiate out from the crystal in her hand, and the Queen turned her saddened gaze on the poor creature that had brought this upon them.

Beryl, daughter of Metalrina - merely a pawn in a dark and dangerous game. Had all not been lost she would have freed the woman, but it was too late for that now and the Queen was not sure the woman could ever be saved.

The glow from the crystal grew as she gave herself over to it fully, a great rolling wave of light washing over the surface of the moon that left nothing behind. But she was not finished yet, there was still enough power left for one last wish.

“My Queen.”

Queen Serenity turned to see Sailor Saturn standing beside her. This was the final nail in the coffin, truly the end of all things.

Saturn stepped forward and laid a gentle hand on the Queen's shoulder. “Never the end highness, only the next beginning. There is always light against the darkness, hope from despair, and love triumphant over hate.”

“We ask too much of you.”

“This is my duty. I bring the stillness, but you are still the beacon of light. Even now they do not wish to leave you.” The young girl motioned with a gentle nod of her head to the sight before them.

Glowing embers hovered around the palace, the bright shining souls of all that had given their lives that day. Each one hovered around two that were entwined about each other, and she knew them to be Serenity and Endymion. Raising her hand one last time, she gave the rest of herself over to the crystal for one final wish.

“Go my dearest daughter. Go - find each other in another time where all of this is only a distant memory. Happiness will be yours, and nothing can take that away from you.” The lights swirled around them before flying off into the darkness of space. “And you, my Soldier of Silence - may you also find contentment in your next life. May peace and happiness finally be yours.”

Saturn bowed her head as the light in the Queen's eyes slowly dimmed, gently guiding her body to rest on the ground. Desolation and destruction lay in crumbled ruins around her, the Moon more still than it had been in many generations. The Earth shone like the jewel it was once

again. There was a bright future on the horizon, one she wished she could truly take part in.

As the glaive slowly spun around her to wipe the slate clean, she could only hope that Queen Serenity's dying wishes would come to pass some day.



I came to in darkness. Nothing remained but I did not feel entirely alone. The fragments were stilled, and I knew as long as my heart kept beating in slow determination they would stay that way. How this was possible I did not know, but I was in no position to question my fate. The prophecy of the Farshan 'te Meratin had been fulfilled.

There was a faint glow, though my eyes were closed, and I saw before me a face clouded with sorrow. But there was a glint of hope in those deep violet eyes. Hope that one day all would be well again. The faintest trace of a smile graced her lips before she too faded and I was once again left to the darkness.

I grieved for all that we had lost, though I knew I only had to wait before the light returned. And it would one day, brighter and stronger than before. It would never reach me, but that had never mattered before. I could keep my lonely vigil, content in the knowledge that they would have that second chance to make everything right again.

They would not remember me, but I would never be able to forget any of them.

ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

One thing about fandoms are the “what if” ideas that come along in a daydream. Many years ago I read a rather interesting Sailor Moon fan fiction that spurred my own interests in writing something. And so Zeeda was born.

Of all the characters I've created, she's the one that has been with me the longest. She's seen a few changes over the years, except for the red hair. That's the only thing that hasn't changed.

Shadows at the Dawn was started nearly three years ago, and I knew that Zeeda had to return to the Sailor Moon universe. But I wanted her family fleshed out more and wrote in their origins weaving them into my take on the history of the Silver Millennium. Because most people already know Sailor Moon and the surrounding history, I didn't feel the urge to simply rewrite all of that. What good is it to flex your writing muscles if you simply change the color of the drapes and call it good? My goal is always to weave my own characters and my own spin on things into a universe that has brought so much enjoyment already.

Standing on the cover with Zeeda is a new addition to the family, her husband Lienta. The rest of her family (mother, father, brothers) has existed in some form or another through the years – though in this tale they got to be more involved with things than previous stories.

The planetary houses also received a bit of special treatment, and a few strokes of the artistic license brush. What was done was not out of spite (Queen Uranus) or any special feelings towards anyone (Saturn, Pluto). I simply understood that not everyone would get along with each other, and I also wanted two of the more neglected planets to have some page time.

Okay, so I also wanted to set Sailor Pluto up with someone ... and give Sailor Saturn something more than the whole “doom and gloom” approach. I also don't buy into the whole Pluto-Earth-Moon love triangle theory – which is why I gave up a warrior of the void to Pluto.

Knowing how the Silver Millennium ends, death and destruction was inevitable. I didn't want to dwell long on that end of things, or go into every minute detail – just enough to show a little of what happened and hopefully end things with a bit of a warm fuzzy.

Currently in the works is a sequel set in modern times after Stars. And I have to say that coming up with a convincing way to bring some people back is a bit of a challenge. But I believe that I have set things up well enough here in *Shadows* that everything will turn out fine in *On the Dusk of New Beginnings*.

I just have to get around to getting it finished....