

Chapter 7

Awakening

Cot stopped to change clothes, only this time she dressed in ritual clothing. Knots were tied symbolically while chants for blessings, protection, and witnessing were made. The sash was wound around her waist while vows repeated over centuries by others, were made with the same intention and reverence.

Before the mirror, she met the eyes of the person reflected back at her. This time she studied herself without avoidance. Her Elfin face, too narrow for some, too full for others, was a pale blue showing she was past marriageable age, but not old enough to make life decisions for others in the clan. Her curly white hair intentionally covered the tops of her ears so their exact shape was hidden. Her eyes were chameleon like, taking on the color of her environment, most notably her clothing, provided she was not emotional. If necessary, they could also be masked in slate gray.

Her eyes returned to the ceremonial dress that she had last worn at her initiation into the 12th level of QuaDom. She smoothed a wrinkle automatically as she thought of who she was going to call to witness her claiming of the medallion as hers. Her aunt she knew would be present. Though her auntie was not physically on this level of existence, she always felt she was near. It would be wise to call all those that had been claimants to the medallion, to make peace with them and make sure her claim would not be interfered with.

Next were the ceremonial slippers, symbolically representing a boat that delivered the initiated souls to the sacred island for the Gathering. Lifting the medallion she marveled at how just holding it changed what she perceived around her. Only for a moment her concern for *Star* who would not be able to observe what she was going through flickered in her consciousness.

Focus on the immediate.

At the edge of her sacred place she removed her slippers. She cast her circle. Before the oval shaped stone, homage was paid to her Brounder ancestors. She thanked her spirit guides and all those that helped her get this far, then she thanked whatever power was behind the talisman for it to have found her. Then she invited all those that should be present, to be present.

With some talismans it was necessary to declare ownership so that the power was not stolen by another. Other talismans were formed or chosen for specific purposes.

Cot held up her talisman to admire the light as it struck the stone imbedded in it. It was the type that chose who was to wield it and how it was to be used. This one was a harkenstone that assisted the holder on her journey to become a peaceful warrior.

Holding the medallion in her left hand she looked up and found herself standing in front of Keli. Her Aunt Keli held her arms out to Cot which Cot did not hesitate to step into, to nestle in her warm energy.

"Auntie, I've missed you so much." Cot did not wonder that her aunt was taller than her when the last time they met Keli's head reached Cot's chin.

"How can you say that when I'm always around? I hear all your conversations to me. I do like your new ship, *Star Chaser*."

Keli gave Cot another squeeze and then held her at arms' length. "You've grown in a lot of ways, Colleen. Not such the quiet one that takes in all that her eyes can see rather than speak of it, and not full of righteous anger for the victimized. You've moved on."

Cot felt her face heat up from an old wound. "I have learned there are other ways to *be* right action."

Her aunt smiled at her, her palm lifted to cup Cot's chin in her usual gesture of affection. "The talisman has found you, my dear. You have witnessed it's power in the events that came before you to lay claim to it. It will bring experiences to you that will give you opportunities to learn. Old friends will be

exchanged for new. Enemies will become assistants. Everything will change in meaning and all will not be explainable. Your inner and outer worlds will no longer be recognizable, even to you."

"Star Force isn't likely to be understanding with my sudden change of direction in life."

"And what have you been doing for the last two years?"

"Ouch." Cot ruefully shrugged her shoulders. "I guess my head was so buried in my books, I wasn't paying attention."

Her aunt took the talisman from her hand and looped the chain over Cot's neck.

"Let all witness the passing of the medallion from me to you. It is now your right to name it, as every holder in the past had called it by name."

Cot looked down at the stone that sparkled. "A name?"

Keli smiled at Cot. "People either grow into their names or grow out of them or a name becomes more powerful. One of your responsibilities is to discover the name of this amulet. It has changed since I held it, so the old name no longer fits...just as you change your sacred name as you gain more power."

"I understand."

Keli released it and the moment it rested against her skin Cot felt an expansion of her awareness. It was not the same as when she meditated, astral traveled or linked with *Star*. This was an awareness of subtle energy fields that were around her and in her, each affecting her senses differently and creating sensations in the center of her forehead that radiated out. It was not an overwhelming and powerful energy that once had knocked her off her feet when her aunt had forced a door of perception open for her.

This was a force that wrapped her in a soft cloak of love and profound understanding of her power. Through tears she watched her thoughts go out, like bolts of energy. Her creations. Unlike her previous encounters with heart filling love, she did not feel as if she would burst, because the energy flowed effortlessly.

When Cot opened her eyes, she stared at the porous stone, knowing she was in her sacred space in *Star Chaser's* cargo bay. The only things that were detailed on the oval stone were the carved hands with prayer beads draped over them.

Bua is your name.

Cot opened her circle with prayers of thanksgiving.

Two hours later she sat staring at the bulkhead as she sipped a warm beverage. Her thoughts were on locating the safeguards planted on *Star* against either of them going rouge. It was logical that they would be embedded somewhere neither could easily access. Cot was sure if they became a direct threat to her she would be able to locate them, but waiting until then would be too late, since she had no doubt other threats would be occupying her time. The ship was powerful and with a sentient behind its operation, *could* lead to misuse of power. With *Star* making changes to her whole system, they were just as dangerous as the new Enas. Cot smiled to herself, realizing how alike their situation was.

Rising from her seat she returned to the cargo bay. It was time to see just what CBIS had found.

CBIS recognized her.

No self-destruct had been found as of yet, but the scan was not complete. CBIS was slow and ponderous in its scan. Everything must be accounted for. The slowdown and difficulty was from all the changes *Star* had made to her original structure and operation. *Star* was taking her time in replying to CBIS's inquiries.

"*Star*, update all your documentation on the improvements you've made, please."

"It is not good security practice to reveal my upgrades to an outsider," *Star* objected.

"Are you saying that someone can get through *your* security and look at your files?"

"Nothing is perfect, Cot."

"Please update CBIS with your improvements. CBIS is your failsafe for being taken over, *Star*." Cot wondered if *Star's* hesitation was coming from a program that did not want to be discovered, or if it was just *Star*.

Back on the bridge Cot pulled up the file on the *Murdellie*. It was blank as if they had never made the visit. There was, however, an encrypted packet of information from CBIS on the visit.

"*Star*, where are the reports I asked for on our visit to the *Murdellie*?"

"They are encrypted."

"I can't read them if they're encrypted. Can you decrypt it?"

"It will take some time for me to have the entire file ready for your reading. It is a new encryption I have developed."

"You have three standard hours to decrypt your code," Cot said.

Chapter 8

A Mysterious Guest

The door to the incubation compartment opened. The interior was warm and dry with low lighting. Along the overhead were huge leaves with their stems as wide as her hand. Some of the leaves were wrapped unto themselves as a cocoon. The cocoon stems were a different color than the others because of the nutrition it wrapped around the chrysalis. Stepping in further, she could now see clearly the etchings on one cocoon and the chrysalis shining through. The vibrations and sounds in the room were inspiring and sustaining. She knew she was the one responsible for this change of atmosphere. Her heart ached thinking that something would have happen to the beautiful souls within them if she had not intervened.

A noise from behind her had her spinning around drawing out her saber. Holding it firmly before her she approached a darkened corner. A luminous figure appeared. It's intelligence shinning in it's eyes nearly blinded her. She felt naked in it's gaze.

"I want to help," Cot said.

"By doing what?"

"I don't know."

"Help without focus can meddle with another's lesson."

"What is needed that I can do?"

"Be present."

"Mindfulness," Cot whispered. Her eyes fell on her saber and its shining blade. Many proverbs about a sharp blade crossed her mind with one in particular sticking out because of its pretentiousness, "Though the sword of justice is sharp, it will not slay the innocent," she whispered. "By whose definition of justice? It's the same mentality that says Kill them all and let their gods sort them out. They treat collateral damage as an inconsequential if a military gain *could* be made."

To Cot, if a withdrawal was called, a calmer decision could be made, eliminating collateral damage. That thought woke her up. For a few moments she laid in silence letting the last remnants of her dream fade.

Cot touched the talisman. *Bua*. A warm and tender touch filled her at the thought of the talisman's name. *The hammer when need be*.

Her thoughts returned to the idea of collateral damage. Would she be able to pull back and rethink a solution in the heat of a battle? In the past she would have said yes without hesitation, but that was before she knew as much as she did and had so much power at her disposal both in her ship and *Bua*.

Stretching, she rolled out of bed ready for the day.

"Greetings, *Star*. What's our status?"

"We are passing outside of the sensor readings of a large number of ships. I detect no trouble."

Dressing quickly, Cot trotted up the passageway to the bridge.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

"You have the conn, Cot."

Once seated her console unfurled before her and information began to scroll across her screen. Ships of different classes were stretched out and moving rapidly into formation.

"*Star*, are they under attack?"

"There is no threat."

Both watched as the ships moved from one formation into another.

"They're running formation drills. It's a flotilla with one capital ship."

An alarm went off on her console.

"Someone thinks they see us. Let's move out of here."

A movement in her peripheral had Cot glancing to the left of her into small eyes.

"Yeow!"

Cot leaped out of her seat backing up as far as she could without leaving the bridge. All her senses were engaged at deciphering whether this was a threat, then she wondered why *Star* was not initiating any security barriers between her and the small robot.

"There is nothing to worry about, Cot. It will not harm you," *Star's* amused voice assured her.

The bot dropped to her console. The box shaped body was the size of her fist. It rolled off the console and before it hit the deck four spindly legs extended. It walked up to her and stopped. It was knee high. Cot was tempted to call up a protection spell around her, but to do so meant she perceived the bot as a threat, and there was no feeling of danger from the small thing. It was embarrassing that a person of her skills and accomplishments would be shaken this way.

"How did it get on board?"

"It came over for a visit while you were on the *Murdelie*."

"A visit? You had a visitor without clearing it with me?" Cot was alarmed that *Star* was making decisions without consulting her, then she remembered CBIS. Not only had she brought it aboard without asking *Star*, but it was inspecting *Star* down to the most intimate joint and subroutine. "You let it stay on board without telling me? Send it back. We're not a passenger ship."

"Send it back where?" *Star* asked sounding overly patient. "It is *my* guest. It won't take up much room. It's no bigger than SE1. You can think of it as a swap."

"*Star*, let me remind you that it's your very life you're putting on the line..." her eyes followed the small bot as it moved back a few feet, "and mine. Just how much information does SE1 have on you?" Now that she was away from the *Murdelie* it seemed a reckless decision to give one of their SE's away.

"It will do no harm. It has a mission similar to ours. It says SE1 will be well taken care of."

"Have you decrypted the information on my visit on the *Murdelie*?"

"I am working on it. It is a good encryption program." *Star* tone sounded a little too smug.

"Next time you use a new program, try something that's not important, like your communications to the others."

"What good would it do to encrypt a communication to them if they do not have the code?" *Star* asked, "And before I send them the code, I must be sure it is a secure code."

Cot stared at the bot, wondering how she was going to get it off the ship without upsetting *Star*.

"*Star*, you have the conn."

Settling in her sacred space, her thoughts kept going around about the bot and the strong feeling she received from *Star* when she questioned her on its presence. Was *Star* lonely? What kind of company was the bot offering her?

Having sentient ships was not a new frontier, but for this side of space it was. An environment conducive to bringing sentient ships into being was the same as what the Enas created for their young, though one was a living being and the other was still a ship. It did mean, though, that *Star* was a vibrant being in her own right and being curious about things Cot may see as dangerous, didn't mean they were necessarily a threat in the physical sense to her.

Cot rubbed her forehead. There were many experiences that would be coming their way and Cot didn't want to set limits on what each of them could allow into their lives otherwise neither would benefit from experiences outside of their knowledge. That was what exploring was about.

Rising from her meditation, she began her work out. Two hours later, she cleaned up and returned to the bridge.