

Foreign Harbors II

Note: This is part of a series. Merker's Outpost, Arnica, Foreign Harbors I precedes this story.

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Chapter 1



"This is the captain speaking. All hands report to my quarters," Captain Montran ordered over the ship's comm.

Major Zohra was the first to arrive then Lt. Vanster and Ensign Arax.

"My cover is missing again. Which one of you hid it? I can't broadcast a message without being in dress uniform."

Captain Montran glared at each one, but no one made a move to say anything.

"Let me remind you of the quirks of a command; if it appears a captain is lax in dress code, it gives a CO that is already looking for reasons to yank that captain and her crew under his or her direct command, the opportunity to do just that. I know none of you want to be on either of those warships. So, let me start again. I put my cover and uniform in the closet, and my cover is gone. Even if I laid it on my cot, the bot would square it away! If one of you keeps hiding it, then stop it."

The three women looking at her looked at each other than back at her in puzzlement. Arax, the boldest of the three, pointed to Alexandra's head.

"Eh?" Alexandra turned to stare at herself in the mirror. "How did it get there?"

To everyone's astonishment, it flew off her head and landed on the cot, then lifted and dropped on Zohra's head and would have flown from her to somewhere else had not her quick reflexes captured it.

"There! You see? It's not me!" Alexandra exclaimed. She had been hinting to the others that she suspected the little ones developing in her womb, were the source of some of the pranks they all insisted they weren't responsible for. Now, she thought triumphantly, she had proof that something was happening.

"Oh, bloody moon," JG and Vanster groaned. They looked at each other startled and then grinned.

Arax looked at the two mothers thoughtfully, deciding maybe all this was from Captain Montran and Major Zhora's off spring that were puffing out Montran's belly further each day. "What we do is sing to our young ones. It keeps them from doing the very mischief these are doing."

She leaned close to Alexandra and sang a little ditty in Elfin tongue. By the movement in her rounded belly, Alexandra felt their recognition for either the tune or words spoken. She wasn't surprised if the words had meaning to them. They were still more spirit than physical, and language was no barrier to spirit.

"Oh, they're getting quite lively here," Alexandra said, rubbing her stomach in hopes of quieting them.

Arax shrugged her shoulders at JG and Megan, who glared at her as if she were the cause of the problem. "It's perhaps the rhythm. Maybe something slower will quiet them."

"Well JG hasn't told me everything that is in her family genes, so for all I know it could just be Montran Fideh. There is a bit of Feh running through the family." *I didn't tell you, JG but Montrans have a bit of Fairy in their family tree.*

Not to worry. I can handle it. My mother's grandmother is Elfin, JG returned grinning.

"More Elves? Helgas bloody moon. This has the makings of trouble. We're never going to know where the..." Vanster paused at JG's frown, rethinking what she was going to say. She glanced at her lover, Arax, an Elf, then at Captain Montran who had admitted having Elf blood.

"We need some R&R on a real planet. That will help us all. These space stations aren't doing it for me." Alexandra glanced over at Arax. "Do you know anything about this area?"

"No, Captain. I've never been this far."

"Let's check out what *Rouster* has in her data banks," JG suggested. Her eyes rested on her spouse's rounded belly. It looked larger than it had earlier in the morning. She splayed her fingers over the rounded form wondering if her eyes were deceiving her.

"Why don't we find out where the other two ships are and not go there," Alexandra suggested. She took JG's hand from her belly and wrapped her hands around it. The two exchanged smiles. "I'll delay delivery of my report until we're on our way to the planet. If anyone has any questions, they can wait until we return."

"I'll agree with that, if it's a vote you're taking," Vanster said.

"Me two," Arax said. "All those meetings with your friends from the other ships are not relaxing at all."

Alexandra hmphed and JG agreed.

"Worrisome pests, is what they are," JG said.

"It is rather tiresome that they ask about you and me and want to hang around while we're trying to relax."

"I can do without the challenges," Vanster said. "Even playing on a game board it turns into a physical challenge."

"I am getting tired of rescuing you all the time," Arax said.

"I was doing fine. I didn't need rescuing," Megan said defensively.

"Yes, you did," three voices said.

"Not much good at all on the last three stops," JG said.

"Well, perhaps not for us," Alexandra said.

"What's that?" JG asked.

"Arax's promotion from Matelot, to Ensign, to LTJG in a short time is remarkable."

Arax beamed.

Megan looked at her suspiciously. "I'd like to know how you passed all those tests with such high scores."

"I have been flying spaceships longer than you've been flying them," Arax said.

"You're going to have to be satisfied with LTJG for a while. In order for you to go to the next level, I'll need to convene six officers for your tests, and I don't want to hear

them go on about my condition and how I need to have a larger staff around me," Alexandra said.

The others agreed. The larger spaceships, *Catching Butterflies* and *Emperor's Last Chance* were traveling at slower speeds due to the prison SEC ships they were escorting back to their sector of space, Ectron. Losing track of them once made the captains of the ships more cautious in their escorting speeds.

Zohra knew the crew on both ships, *Catching Butterflies* and *Emperor's Last Chance*. She was not in the mood to be challenged to do crazy stunts, which due to her once wild reputation as a Spartan in the Black Rose troop always set her up for someone spoiling to test their metal against her. She had challenges enough without asking for more.

Newly promoted Vanster to a Second Lieutenant was not looking forward to the jokes her sister soldiers would be laying on her when she didn't go and join them at the nearest pleasure house when their ships docked. And there were plenty of sisters aboard both ships. Since her meeting of the Elf Arax, her interest in others was diminished. Whether it was by Elfin magic or just by natural attraction, Vanster didn't wish to know.

The four headed to the bridge eager to find a planet to visit instead of a space station.

What *Rouster* picked out as safe planets the crew reviewed and scrutinized closely. No one wanted too much excitement on this excursion, especially since they now all admitted that the babes could cause more trouble than they were willing to face, and that would be too tempting for the other two ships to not interfere.

Since newly promoted Lieutenant Colonel Zohra was responsible for the security off ship, she was the one that Alexandra deferred to in the final decision. Everyone waited with growing impatience.

"We can take the *Yanaba* down right here," JG said, pointing at the images *Rouster* was providing them with. It wasn't as easy to find a friendly place as she thought. Her final decision was a planet lacking technology, and had no cities, towns, or villages near where they planned to land. The landing field had enough room for their shuttle and to secure a wide perimeter around it.

"I agree. Let's do it now," Alexandra ordered, "or, I'm going by myself."

"It's the babes," Arax told them knowingly. "They need to touch a living planet."

"That's reassuring," Alexandra said. Now Arax was full of information and to Alexandra's annoyance, it was confirming that their offspring were going to be inheriting a heavy dose of the Fae side of each of their parents' genealogy.

"What's reassuring?" Vanster asked.

"Montrans have to touch a planet every now and then...dig our heels into rich living soil." Alexandra swatted at the stray curl that fell into her eyes.

The console lit up and a message began to come in.

"Now what?" Alexandra asked impatiently.

"Incoming message from *Catching Butterflies*. This is not good," Vanster muttered, "They're forwarding a conference...."

"I see it. They are NOT going to interrupt my touch with nature," Alexandra informed the others irritably. She got up as if to leave the bridge.

"Hon, let's hear it first," JG said, feeling in herself a maddening compulsion to run through the woods and hug trees. It wasn't something she felt before. "Here, put your cover on that you worked hard to retrieve."

"*Rouster*, feed through the message," Alexandra ordered.

"*For Lt. Commander Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran. Communication from Clan Montran. Forth-coming, view on your command.*"

"On," she ordered. The Clan Montran badge showed first than the image of a crowded meeting room. "Oh, Helga's moon, it's the elders," she muttered.

"Elders?" JG responded, remembering dozing off while Alexandra explained something about a group of elders meddling a few nights ago.

The image that appeared was a group of men and women sitting in a semi-circle around a table.

"Lady Alexandra. Ado," an elder woman greeted. "You have been forgetting to keep your clan informed of your travels. You *are* a representative of Clan Montran, m'lady."

It wasn't a harsh reminder, but it was a warning that she had been remiss of her responsibilities. Another name to add to her list of weekly mailings.

JG had a sinking feeling that they were going to have more restrictions on their activities.

Chin up, Colonel. The aunties and uncles will be looking you over, Alexandra mentally warned JG. *You're lucky you aren't expected to send reports to them on a regular basis.*

"Ado Auntie. I have been forgetful and offer my apologies. Respectfully, my well wishes to Clan Montran. It's good to see you all," Alexandra greeted. Much to Alexandra's relief, the long formal greetings would not be used because nonClan members were present.

"I hear you've been traveling to some very interesting places which I'm sure you will update us on in your soon to send report. As you know, with the pending arrival of a Fideh a Koan from the Clan is sent to the parents to support them. You can expect a Koan for each child to arrive before their birth, so the children are acquainted with their protectors. The news of your twins has too many people outside of Clan Montran interested. There are wagers on their arrival and not. We are most concerned with the tone of some of the wagers."

"Oh, Helga's moon," three voices uttered softly.

Why would people be interested in her children? Who was she a threat to? Who would her children be a threat to? Tonight, she and JG would have to talk about this danger. JG glanced at her. The same thought was going through her mind, Alexandra thought.

"We have," the elder continued after a pause, to let Alexandra and JG think about what she had said, "admitted members from outside the clan to be part of the eight protectors. In addition to Clan Montran's usual mantes, two will be from the Healers' of Jeborhara and two from the Shield Maidens of Athena. They represent Lady Zohra's affiliations. All have been tested by the Crone and are on route to your ship *Rouster*."

"In route? How long ago did they start out? How can you be sure they won't miss us?" Alexandra sat up higher, feeling a twitch in her stomach. Was that anticipation of something good or bad? Why was it necessary to bring in the Crone's review?

"On *their* way? Koan? Sisters?" Arax and Vanster both spoke, one thinking of more restrictions on their time and the other interested in meeting with a Koan and members of the group she intended to join.

Jeborhara? a worried JG thought. It was her biological mother's house. The warm feeling she received from that realization made her realize her connection to her mother's spirit was still with her.

"A Koan? Is that like the Sidhe Tighe Sid?" Arax asked excitedly.

Alexandra nodded. "Auntie, this ship is not made for a troop of helpers. We shall be home in plenty of time." She knew she was lying and her auntie Rose and those around her knew it. They laughed and Alexandra had the grace to blush. Too many people involved with her life was what she had gladly left behind when she moved out of the clan's part of the galaxy, Eckron into Exon.

"They will find you," her aunt said with conviction, and Alexandra knew that to be true. "The *Evening Star* will be your new vessel. There are 300 aboard with cargo bays large enough to hold your ship. It's a ship designed and built on Merker's Outpost, so rest assured it is right for a mantee, and anyone sensitive to what isn't seen in the physical world. The House of Athena and Brothers from the Vine will be crewing her to keep you all safe," she said smiling.

"Why all this special treatment?" Alexandra asked worried.

"Many seers knew of your pregnancy and Lady Zohra's - some knew before your births. They see your pregnancies important in galaxy events at present and in the future. It is imperative that we provide safeguards against any further harm to your off-spring as soon as possible. Your babes will arrive early by Elfin time."

They aren't telling us everything, Alexandra thought to JG.

What's our status on the ship they're sending? Are we just luggage, passengers with no say in where we stop and go? JG asked.

"What is Elfin time?" Vanster thought to ask.

"A year from conception," Arax told her softly.

"Do the seers have an idea just when they are due?" JG asked concerned.

"Soon. Traveling in space, spending time near portals, and inherited genetics, changes gestation time. Be safe Lady Alexandra and Lady Zohra and congratulations on

your soon to be growing family." The screen flashed on the ship's signoff then went blank.

Alexandra and JG studied each other for a few minutes. They hadn't thought about what trouble their offspring would create with their innate abilities nor how fast the pregnancy would come to an end. They were still making plans on how to continue with their careers and being parents.

"Now I know we all need a break. Let's get off this ship now," Alexandra said. "*Rouster*, find yourself a place to stay safe. Vanster, you and Arax, check out our travel kits and prepare our shuttle. And hurry up. If the seers are involved, they had to have known from when we were on Merker's Outpost and preparing then. That's what happens when anyone sits among them, they know your life story and what choices you'll likely make."

"The good side to this is that our new ship is the product of Mer," JG said.

"It'll be interesting to see what the ship will be like," Alexandra agreed. "The children's' room will be the first place I want to inspect. No exit will be unsecured."

"If they have dream beds, I'll show you some interesting sights," Vanster told Arax softly.

JG leaned over to kiss Alexandra on the forehead. "I feel like I'm crawling out of my skin if I don't feel natural light on my body and dirt on the soles of my feet."

"That's the call of Mammisi," Alexandra said.

"Am I going to get that urge for now on?" Though she asked it with reservations, in a quick flash JG thought of her life and the changes she had gone through to reach this point in her life and got a giddy feeling. It was similar to the feeling when she had first met Alexandra at a shrine young women visited.

For all the feelings of uncertainty, loss and life-changing adventures and misadventures, they were well worth where she was now with her life. She knew her time on Arnica gave her what she needed to accept herself and understand Alexandra. It gave her the strength to accept her short pregnancy that wasn't meant to come to term without bitterness.

"Maybe." Alexandra leaned into JG and kissed her, smiling into her eyes that had taken a thoughtful look then lit up. She wondered what she was thinking. "Have you ever felt it?"

"Mammisi? Only after I had been in a sleep pod for a year on my trip to Arnica," JG said. "I wanted to make sure I was awake and not in some dreamland invoked by machines."

"Rouster, to captain on the bridge. Coming to SKP. Please give further instructions," the ship said.

"Commander Alexandra to Rouster, give the signal for all hands to ready for shore leave," she ordered. "Come about to a safe keeping point and prepare all systems for...oh, damn!"

"Another message," JG reported. "From *Catching Butterflies*. Naturally they have to say something too. They've been too calm about your condition."

"We're lucky they didn't haul us into their cargo bay like they did to Captain Melchi's crew," Alexandra said when Captain Melchi's face appeared on the screen. She grinned at her jibe to one of JG's close friends.

"Go ahead and poke at us, Captain Montran. One day you'll regret that comment," Captain Melchi mocked. "You are after all the people someone would go to as persons in high places to ask a favor or two. You'll be needing managers to handle the crowd of petitioners."

"Captain Melchi, you're interrupting our R&R," JG said.

"My, my Colonel but is that the way to treat your bodyguard detail? Feeling a bit stressed, already are you?"

"NOT funny at all," JG returned. "We're at..."

"I see where you're at and are you sure it's safe?"

"That's why you're bugging us. We can take planetside breaks when we feel like it and you have a whole ship to argue with," JG returned.

Melchi laughed. "Actually, the Captain asked me to graciously remind you that his butt is on the line if you two get in any more trouble. So, we get to join you on your downtime. I have a lot of very happy crewmates that are willing to give you gifts a plenty for this opportunity to break away and do our own flying."

"We're not waiting. The little ones are kicking for time on land," Alexandra informed her irritated. "See you when you get here, over and out!" She disconnected the comm not waiting for a reply.

"Wow. When you're pregnant, you get away with a lot," Vanster told her impressed.

"You don't know what it's like to be surrounded by a Koan or mantes. They're great for tired parents, I'll grant you that. But so many people in tune with me and our children is going to drive us all nuts."

"You're going to have to tell me more about this Koan. Every time we start to talk about it something comes up. Did you notice that?" JG asked.

"When everyone gets here...we're going to have to lay down the rules of who is boss and when." She rubbed her swollen belly to soothe the movement. "I can't believe how fast they're growing." The others agreed.



Chapter 2

"What do you think?" Alexandra asked impatiently.

"It looks too good to be true," JG said. "Helm, drop down and we'll do a recon," JG ordered. "Alexandra, while Arax and I check out the area, you and Vanster keep running sweeps. Arax, let's gear up."

Thirty minutes later the site was declared safe and the four were out on solid ground. Alexandra refused to move for five minutes as she relished the energy from the planet before she reached out further to the spirits of the land. She didn't feel anything or a ley line, though it didn't mean there weren't any just that she wasn't in tune with the planet. JG led them toward a lake they had seen while they were landing. Tiny creatures peered at them through the grass and behind trees while winged creatures darted in as close as a finger's width from their nose, as if daring them to take a swipe at them.

"It's Fairy folk," Arax said as she looked around them. "It's the small folk, the Pixies. They weren't here when we inspected this area." She looked at Alexandra curiously. "I can also feel the energy of a portal. Can you, Captain Montran?"

Alexandra closed her eyes and concentrated, ignoring the movement of the air in front of her from the wings of the tiny people. Alexandra opened her eyes and pointed away from the forest, water and Pixies.

"Well, let's have a look at it," JG said. They changed direction and headed inland, leaving the forest Pixies behind.

"Halt," Alexandra said. "We've entered into the Portal's energy field. Let's take a moment to get a reading. Something's not right here."

JG leading the group turned to Alexandra. "I didn't feel anything."

"Exactly," Alexandra said. "On Merker's Outpost, didn't you feel the portal?"

"Yeah. It made my skin itch from the energy," JG said.

"Fairy magic is surrounding this place," Arax said. "It's old." She glanced at Alexandra. "There was none of this energy when JG and I scouted, Alexandra. Something seems to have awakened everything."

"What does that mean?" Vanster asked, wanting the unseen put into something she could see.

"They're not used to strange visitors," JG said. "It just may have taken a while to get their security to look us over."

"Pixies don't have security like you envision it, Major Zohra," Arax said.

"No recent rituals have been done to strengthen the portal," Alexandra said.

"That's not good for a portal. When we stepped into its field, like on Mer, we should have either been repulsed or energized."

"We've got company coming," JG reported just as their HRs bleeped warnings.

"Llaiadains," Arax hissed. "Drop to your knees. They don't like people taller than them, though that's about every species. They can be very irritating if they feel they've been insulted. You'd never be certain when they'll show to foul things up."

JG helped Alexandra to kneel, while her eyes studied a wave of creatures pouring out of the grass that was no higher than they. They were dressed in dull multicolored clothing standing out from the grass. The Llaiadains fanned out, forming a semicircle around them; however. Alexandra noticed they didn't step into the area where the portal energy extended, though it was weak. A faint line showed where the energy ended. She could see by faint marks in the grass it was shrinking.

"Can anyone speak to them?" JG asked.

"Aye," Arax said, "but these are the Fallen - Pixies no more, so don't expect much from them." Arax studied the group and picked out the most disagreeable member as the leader.

"Tell them we're not here to interfere with their life. If our presence bothers them, we'll leave," JG said.

Arax glanced at JG wondering why she was giving such offensive creatures so much power. To the one she picked out as the leader, she spoke to them in Fairy dialect, and another stepped forward. What Arax said was relayed in another language to the fattest of them all, the one that hid behind the one she picked out as the leader.

Alexandra felt the tone of the conversation, and it was not going well. She rested her hand on her stomach. Her attention was diverted by the feel of their Fideh. It wasn't a physical touch but a mental one. She marveled at their development.

"I've never heard of Llaiadains," JG whispered to Alexandra. "Just what are they?"

"Pixies without wings. They've committed crimes against the Pixie kingdom and lost their wings for it."

Arax turned to the others to relay the Llaiadains message. "They see your unborn as the guardians of this portal."

Oh no they aren't! three thoughts objected.

JG placed a hand on Alexandra's stomach.

Alexandra turned her head to see clearer the blur at the edge of the forest that caught her attention. It was the true guardian watching them. She blinked a few times and thought it looked like a Pixie. She didn't know many guardians and never would have guessed a Pixie, being so tiny, would be assigned a portal.

"JG, I think there's some cross purposes going on here," Alexandra said.

JG turned to look where Alexandra had been looking. However, she saw nothing. "You mean they really have someone, but he or she doesn't meet with their approval?"

"That's my feeling. Arax, ask them who the previous guardian selected as his or her predecessor?"

Arax turned to the speaker and asked the question. Many made objectionable noises. Arax turned to Alexandra, "They don't discuss their business with anyone outside of their tribe."

"So, we go back to our ship and find...what in Helga's moon is that?" JG asked as if something popped close to her ears. Without thinking the four formed a semi-circle with their backs to each other, watching for any Llaiadains that may be trying to get close to them. However, none of them crossed over a faint line JG could now see.

"Are they shooting at us?" Vanster demanded.

"Arax, what are they saying?" a worried JG asked.

"Give me a good blaster and I'll make a hole," Vanster said, glaring at the small creatures that barely came up to her boot tops.

"He said, the three of us can go but without the mother, or we all remain until after she gives birth. Then, they will keep the infants and we're to leave, if we're still alive. They are chanting to bind your infants to the portal."

"Can they do that?" Vanster asked. "What do you mean if we're still alive? We can mow them down."

"I don't know what they can do," Arax said. "Though they are outcast Pixies, Pixies love to study magic so they may know something about it." She looked at portal, studying the colors that vibrated with the chants. "If they continue with this particular chant, they will weaken the protection that is already around it. This portal has been unused for a long time."

Alexandra stumbled against JG, who quickly caught her. She nearly dropped her with her added weight. The Llaiadains continued chanting and the three standing could feel a barrier enclosing them.

When the chanting stopped, the Llaiadains disappeared back into the grass. Vanster touched the barrier and slumped unconscious to the ground.



Chapter 3

Alexandra appeared before a semi-circle of strangers. Their sizes varied but they weren't tiny like the Llaiadains. Alexandra knew who they were. She was in the

Llaiadains midland where magic and meddling in other peoples' dreams took place. An older woman approached her with a staff in one hand and in the other a rattle. She shook her rattle at Alexandra and extended the staff as if it were a weapon.

"Who are you? We didn't call for you. Leave!" The rattle didn't emit sound but energy waves which headed toward Alexandra which stopped just short of her aura.

"You will leave my children alone and not bother us again," Alexandra commanded her.

"You do not tell me what to do! I will curse you and any other child you try to have," the woman threatened. "Ah! I know what happened to the other child. It shall happen..."

Alexandra snapped her fingers picturing the old woman's voice silenced. She could feel the energy from the old woman draining fast, and then abruptly she appeared tiny like a Llaiadain. The old woman shook the staff in her direction several times. Alexandra could feel danger in what was sent her way. She pulled her own power around her and focused on gathering it in her hands. When the filaments from what the shaman aimed at her from her staff got into Alexandra's space, the energy from her palms went out and both energy fields crashed. The force of the impact sent Alexandra back and to the ground stunned. It took a long moment for her to get her wits together. In this dimension she wasn't pregnant, which was a relief. The Llaiadains were lying scattered about, not moving. The old woman's form was a shadow and fading fast. When she disappeared, the others did also.



It was late at night and the stars that were stretching across the sky were bright and numerous. JG was wrapped around Alexandra as she slept. JG could feel their little ones, restlessly moving under her hands. It seemed they had grown even bigger than the previous day. Though she didn't feel any stress from Alexandra and their little ones didn't feel distressed, she couldn't help feeling worried about Alexandra.

"Hey, are you awake?" a sleepy voice asked JG.

JG looked at Alexandra; her eyes were bright under the starlight. "Yeah. Are you alright?" JG asked.

"They tried to send the children's spirit to a shaman, but I went instead. I wasn't what she was expecting," she laughed tiredly. "They won't try that again. The shaman didn't appear to be all that strong. I'll bet she and her associates will have headaches for days."

"Can I help?"

"Hm. You can rub the kids to sleep. They're training to be galaxy athletes, Gari. Have you been training them without telling me?"

"Only in my dreams," she told her and kissed Alexandra sweetly on her lips.

Their little ones quieted under JG's hand as she gently drew circles on Alexandra's tight rounded belly. Alexandra watched the dark eyes staring down at her with a backdrop of thousands of stars and if they were alone Alexandra knew what they would be doing next.

"Colonel Zohra, it's a real Pixie," Arax said. "She's here to see the captain."

Alexandra struggled to sit up to see the Pixie that hovered outside the barrier. When Alexandra sat up it moved to flutter before her as if the barrier didn't exist. Her wings shimmered in the night, with greens, blues and purples. Leaning forward, she reached a tentative hand toward Alexandra's stomach. JG watched fascinated, helplessly unable to stop her. The Pixie opened her palm and held it inches from Alexandra's stomach. The Pixie turned and flew toward the forest.

"Helgas moon!" JG hissed. "I couldn't stop her." "She will not harm them," Arax said.

"She was curious at finding two Fae folk that have the same feel as her," Alexandra said.

"We're going to have Pixies?" JG asked dismayed.

"No," Alexandra laughed at how absurd that sounded.

"Alright, that is a bit way out there. So just what feel is it?" JG asked.

"The little one's told her they will be guardians," Arax said in awe. "I have never met a Sidhe that knew so early what their task in life would be."

"Guardians! Who said my kids are going to be guardians of some portal?" JG demanded.

"They did," Alexandra told her, touching her arm to calm her. "But don't worry; they will not take the job on until they are much older. You can train them in all your warrior skills and take them on those thrill rides you like so much until then."

Arax glanced at her lover, Vanster who was sleeping deeply. Usually, she slept deeply because Arax tired her out, but that was not the case now. "Oh, fae er dith fibeth! The woman has fallen under a spell! Those blighted little..." She stopped abruptly. A group of Llaiadains marched through the grass, carrying a long board with food.

"If they know magic, how come they have to carry the food?" a suspicious JG asked.

"No matter there. You never eat food Llaiadains provide, touch or are near," Arax warned. "I have heard stories of the consequences of their dark ways."

All three stomachs growled at the thought of food. However, they had their packs, which immediately disappeared.

"This is NOT going to do," Alexandra said. "I will set my little ones in your village and they will see that you have no easy life! Return our packs."

The Llaiadains that were close to the barrier immediately disappeared with their board of food, and their packs reappeared.

"Well, you certainly told them," JG said.

JG went through the packs for food and handed Alexandra her share and Vanster's. When she was still hungry, JG gave her some of her daily rations.

The two babes were not just hungry but were also changing position often. Alexandra decided they needed to do something so she could at least take a walk. "This is how I see this," she wiggled into a more comfortable position, leaning against JG for support. "We need to get the intended guardian to take her rightful place. An unguarded portal is a danger to other portals."

"Why not just block it until the guardian takes her place? Why doesn't that Pixie take the portal if it's hers to take?" JG asked.

"Could be for a lot of complex reasons," a tired Alexandra said.

"The portal has been shut down for passage, but it is active," Arax said.

"How do you open it up?" JG asked.

"Before this one can be opened, it needs to be reenergized and rebalanced. Portals need to be kept harmonized," Arax said. "That is why Fairyland surrounds de Danaan Portal, home to the Goddess of all portals, to prevent those uninitiated from contaminating it with their thoughtlessness. The Goddess, de Danaan will guide and teach any rightful guardian his or her duties once they are aligned with their portal."

"I can feel the protective lines around this portal are weakening. If they do another enchantment spell where they're using the portal's energy to make it work, it will make the portal vulnerable to anyone that has the strength to take it over."

"We have more company...looks like a sacrifice," JG said.

A lone figure was approaching them. Behind in the grasses others were waiting with only their spears poking out.

Arax waited until the Llaiadain stood directly outside the barrier. The conversation was lengthy, sounding like the drone of bees. Alexandra nearly fell asleep.

The occasional snorts from the sleeping Vanster startled her into wakefulness each time she dozed off.

The Llaiadain left and Arax turned to the two mothers. "I think we have the problem and a solution."

"Let's hear it."

"Maithea, the Pixie, was to be the next guardian, but through some interference by the Llaiadains' shaman's she hasn't been able to step over the threshold to claim her Guardianship. Nea is Maithea's childhood friend and has been feeding her while they wait out the old shaman's death because the spell dies with her."

"So does she want us to speak with the shaman?"

Arax shook her head. "No. Nea hasn't seen the shaman for the last four moons. They think she is near death. Her son is making declarations in her name, but they are reworded speeches of what she said years ago. Anyone that opposes his leadership he sends off on hunts into the wild lands for some sort of herb that will protect the villages and none of them have returned. Nea thinks those he sends off seek shelter elsewhere, though not many want a Llaiadain in their village. Nea believes they head for the larger cities where they can blend in with the populace."

"So why was Nea picked to speak with us?"

"Nea says she has been on Harwath's list for elimination for some time now. Whenever something threatens their village, she is sent out to investigate, however she has returned each time, much to his dismay. Harwath is the shaman's son."

Alexandra looked at the barrier that was surrounding them. "So, we need to find a way to escalate the situation for Maithea to take over the guardianship of this portal."

"Have you thought how we can get out of here?" JG asked.

"Well, that is another problem. We do have a way out, but..." Alexandra looked at her lover and gave her a weak smile. "I can't be running about, and someone needs to watch over our sleeping comrade there and more importantly, I need to keep the portal protected."

"What am I going to do out there?" JG asked.

"I don't know yet but I think things are really going to start happening, so we need a plan. First off, if the shaman and her son could, I think they would have taken over the

portal by now. What is keeping us in this energy field is from the portal, which is draining it. The energy reserves from the portal will not last for the amount of time it will take our young ones to reach maturity, which is when a guardian can become guardian, so I'm going to believe that no one knows the true condition of the portal, especially the shaman and son."

"So why can't you strengthen it?" JG asked.

"Oh, no!" Arax told her, worried that Alexandra would do that.

"I would need to go in trance," Alexandra explained. "Though the little ones are telepathic and can do tricks, I would be leaving them defenseless. I don't want to risk that type of concentration."

"Well, I can help!" JG told her indignantly.

"You and Arax need to help the rightful guardian find a way to cross the threshold. If I interfere, I will be harmonizing myself to it and the babes."

"Not a good idea," JG agreed.

"Well, let's get some rest. I want to be refreshed when the next opportunity comes."



Chapter 4

The sky was streaked with scattered clouds that were lit up from the rising sun when Alexandra felt herself shaken. She looked up into the frightened Pixie's dark brown eyes. She pulled at Alexandra and pointed frantically towards the far end of the forest.

"What is it? You have to let Arax hear," she explained to the Pixie. Alexandra pointed to the sleeping Sidhe who suddenly sat up as if a spell on her was lifted.

"Wake up!" was the first thing from Arax's lips as if she had been trying to say it for a while and was only now able to. She crawled over to Alexandra, giving a sign to the Pixie that was sitting half in the protective barrier and half out.

Maithea spoke to Arax in a furious buz. Her wings took on an intense shimmer as the conversation continued.

"Harwath has sent Nea to the bog for an herb," Arax translated for Alexandra.

"Maithea said Nea is Pixie but hides her wings. Nea has been protecting any Pixie that is born in the village to Llaiadain parents and Harwath may have figured that out. Nea has

many friends among the villagers. Not all the Llaiadain's want to continue doing harm to Pixies."

Alexandra leaned over and shook JG who was in a dead sleep. She was difficult to wake. "Gari! Wake up!" She gave her one more shake and JG slowly moved to sit up.

"Go, go, before they realize you have left. Arax, take her!"

Arax, belying her appearance as fragile, easily half carried, half dragged JG to the barrier that Maithea opened. Alexandra sighed and then looked over at the still sleeping Vanster. "Better you're sleeping through this. This is not your type of adventure."

Alexandra turned to look at the entrance to the portal. She could see the barrier across it wavering. She would get to that but for now, she needed to hide the fact that two of them were missing.

Rummaging in the packs she pulled out clothes to give bulk under the two blankets of the missing crew. After all, their only visitor that dared to come close was Nea, so she felt there was a good chance her deception would work. Finished with that she turned her attention to the portal. The energy from it was not strong enough to prevent a strong personality from crossing over.

Okay, little ones. Lesson one on portals...if you don't know this. We'll put a barrier across the threshold to stop anyone from stepping across it with ill intentions. We start with light...love. She closed her eyes and thought of those she loved something easy to tap into. She wove a charm that she had learned as a child. It was something that would not tie her or the little ones to the portal.

The work was tiring, and Alexandra fell into a light doze when she finished. It was the sound of angry bees that woke her. For a moment she was worried that the Llaiadains were upset by finding there was no one under the covers. However, it was Harwath and a dozen cohorts. He was dressed in bright colors this time and was pointing a stick at her. His bright yellow hat flapped back as if a strong breeze caught it, and his cape entangled his legs. He held onto his hat with one hand while waving his wand around. The wand hit him on the head which caused him to let his hat go and that flew off out of sight.

Alexandra wondered if the little ones had anything to do with that.

The drone continued and regardless of the bruise forming on his forehead, he stood with his feet firmly rooted in the ground, his chin up and eyes squeezed shut as his lips moved in the incantation.

Hmm. So, you want to play a game of willpower. Alexandra's lips curled into a smile, and she sat with her legs crossed and hands resting on her knees. She knew enough of this type of game to know not to shut her eyes. Her thoughts entered a realm where size and shape didn't matter. Before her stood a man, whose physical body was like a body builder in the galaxy games. Alexandra suspected Harwath or someone working with him, pulled that image from her. However, she could also delve into his memories and happily pulled out something he was not expecting. A dog. He was expecting the viper, which he posed to her as something he feared. However, dogs didn't like Llaiadains, recognizing them for the trouble they were. And so, the game began. It was a game of CheeMaat and she was a champion player at it.



Chapter 5

"Trouble? I don't feel any trouble." Captain Melchi and two of her officers sat at the conference table with four officers of *Catching Butterflies*. The meeting was called by Brigadier General Mack Mcarn from *Emperor's Last Chance*, whose image was on the large screen against the hull showing officers from *Emperor's Last Chance* at their conference table.

She looked at her own staff for her Stealth Class A ship, *Meister*. All were mantes, sensitives on some level. Her officers shook their heads that they didn't pick up anything either, but Major Zohra and Lady Alexandra were good at not transmitting their distress unless they sought outside help. That was something that would have to change. She wasn't an outsider but a friend. Not an adversary but a fellow traveler. Irritation crossed her face at the thought that the competition some of the crewmembers were pushing on Lieutenant Colonel Zohra and Second Lieutenant Vanster were the cause of this friction

and wedge between *Rouster's* crew and the larger ships. She turned her attention back to the screen where Brigadier General was making a case for his calling them together.

Brigadier General Mack Mcarn a close friend of the DeMonte clan, close relatives to the Montran clan, was vigilant to any threat against Lady Alexandra Montran, so his call for the emergency meeting indicated his intel was better than theirs. For Captain Melchi, that didn't bode well with her.

Captain Onry of *Catching Butterflies* glared at the screen that showed information on the planet they had all thought was safe and didn't have anything that the crew of *Rouster* couldn't easily handle.

"They're magnets for trouble," an irritated General Mcarn stated. "Our mantes read the runes several times and could only see there was trouble on the planet they were on, but not who is affected or what the outcome could be."

"There's something blocking a closer scrutiny, but considering their combined pasts, and predilection for finding trouble... I agree with Brigadier General Mcarn, we should send someone to just look around," Rear Admiral Mora of *Emperor's Last Chance* said. "*We* can't send anyone since we're actively guarding the SEC ships."

"But *we* can," Captain Onry said dryly.

"I'm sure they didn't plan on dropping into trouble," Lady Malu, first officer on *Catching Butterfiles* said.

"Until you live with a pregnant Montran you never know how much trouble a pregnant person can get into. It's like they challenge fates to imprint in their children, stubbornness, dumb luck and courage," Brigadier General Mcarn said.

"Lord DeMonte, her cousin/brother is going to have all our hides for this and if not him then the two clans, plus all the associates of Lieutenant Colonel Zohra. Where in Helgas moon is that ship *Evening Star* with the Koans and bodyguards?"

Captain Onry made the decision right then and there. "We make better speed than *Evening Star*. We'll go meet *Evening Star*, tuck her in our new envelope and fly back here." He glanced at his first who nodded that it was best. Though he was captain he knew a second opinion when it came to clan politics was advisable.

"We'll leave off *Meister* to continue toward the planet at full sail. We should meet with *Evening Star* in a few days at the most. If she's sticking to her flight plan, we'll wait for her at the Calleron Gate."

The general looked relieved. "Good. Let me get word then to Lord DeMonte and I will not delay you any longer. Good speed. Out."

"Good voyage, out. Helm, prepare all hands for high flight."

"Helm to captain, preparing for high flight. All hands, all hands. Secure for flight."

"Captain Melchi, you heard your orders. And don't get yourselves into any trouble you can't handle until we get back!"

Captain Melchi smiled widely. "We'll be gone before your ship is secured for flight." As she stepped past the hastily opened hatch by the marine, she pressed her throat mic. "Lt. Rou, prepare for immediate departure on the *Meister*. We're to make with all speed to connect with *Rouster*."

"Aye Captain. All hands are scrambling. We'll be ready by the time you get here."

"This I have to see," Lt. Visu said. "This will be the fastest time yet if they are ready for takeoff by the time we get there."

"Maybe they heard the scuttlebutt before we," Lt. Bertrand said.

Captain Melchi looked forward to arriving before *Catching Butterflies* and on their own power. It was rather irritating that Captain Onry insisted on delivering her and her ship to the planet *Rouster's* crew decided to visit. She suspected Captain Onry was thinking of dispatching ground troops to secure the area for no other reason than exercising his bored crew and put the scientists to work gathering specimens and whatever else an exploratory ship would do. The problem with that arrangement was the off-duty troops would go looking for Zohra and Vanster to stir up some action. Captain Onry would have his hands full while Captain Montran would pack her crew and leave...further irritated with the two ships.

Melchi and her two officers ran up the ramp to the *Meister* and found all hands aboard and strapped in. Anticipation of an adventure and leaving *Catching Butterflies* animated their features. She was proud that they were ready at a moment's notice. It helped that they stored most of their equipment on board for quick dispatch.

They were less than a day away if they hit high gs. Melchi began to calculate how to cut the time without damaging her ship. Her engineer would be able to tell her if it could be done.

"When you're ready, Captain," Lt. Visu, her second informed her.

"Let's rip the envelope," she ordered, dropping into her seat and quickly strapping in. "Make haste as quick as we safely can, Helm."

"Clearing the deck, Captain." After a pause she heard, "We have been cleared for a safe increase of speed to high gs at your signal, Captain."

"Engage when ready, Helm."

"Engaged," a happy voice announced.

Everyone on board cheered. Some started singing a familiar marching song for soldiers.

Meister was too far to be picked up on *Butterflies* scans when she hit hyperspace. After the crew tired of songs, most of the soldiers slept. Those that were on duty kept trying to make telepathic connections with the duo. It was ten hours later that they were able to get a sense of where the *Rouster* crew was and only through a link with *Rouster*. Jai astral projected to the *Rouster's* command deck and then to their location.

Amali leaned towards Captain Melchi. "Jai found them. They're at a portal. Jai said it's not stable. Until we get closer, we won't know just how bad it is. Alexandra is channeling energy from the planet to form a shield on the threshold. There's another energy barrier surrounding Alexandra which has been preventing us from getting a link established with her. JG isn't near the portal, so we have a better reading on her but she's not responding to our hails."

"That's a portal guardian's duty, to balance it and shield the threshold. The guardian may have perished before finding a successor, which would explain why it's in this disruptive state." Captain Melchi caught the eye of Lt. Bernard. His eyes silvered in anticipation. She rose and went to speak to him. He was monitoring communications.

"Lt. Bernard, what say you of this planet we're headed to?"

"I have been trying to get readings on it, Captain, with no success. It's not easy to get a fix on it."

"What would cause that, Lieut?" she asked.

"Perhaps the atmosphere between us and the planet, or perhaps the planet has an irregularity we're not familiar with."

"Is it in transition?"

"Like Arnica? No. Arnica didn't have readings like this. The energy on this planet could be described to be like a wind passing over a field of grass, bending it as it passes and when it moves on the grass returns to its upright state."

"I've heard of readings like that," Amali said. "That's like that new device drop ships are using so that enemy fighter ships can't get a good instrumentation reading on them. The workaround is to do a sight check, which leaves your ship and crew vulnerable to shots from the ground canons because you have to fly low."

"This planet is preindustrial."

"It could be *Rouster's* shuttle putting out that energy wave."

"I wouldn't put it past Alan Fermin to have installed it on his private yachts, but where did he get it? When we left our part of space it was only being talked about, not implemented," Lt. Bertrand said.

"The Fermis were into a lot of industries and controlled many scientists," Captain Melchi said.

"What is down there that is of interest to Major Zohra and Lady Montran?" Lt. Bertrand asked.

"I don't know, but they found another portal. If they're not careful, someone may think they would be ideal to send out and inspect problem portals."

"Captain, Jai has returned," Rou announced.

Jai's expression became more animated as her spirit returned to her body. She accepted the water Amali handed her. "It seems," Jai began, "while Lady Alexandra is guarding the portal, JG is assisting the next guardian on a mission."

Melchi sighed in exasperation. "She said she was going to stay out of trouble. How long till we arrive?"

"Twenty stan minutes. We're making good time," Lt. Visu assured her.

"This is my plan. We can't go barging in until we know just what is happening. Do any of you sense danger to mother and children?" Captain Melchi asked, as the crew knowing they were nearing their destination gathered around her for orders.

The empaths shook their heads.

"Jai take a break. Jill, Visu, Lanna and Bil, I want you all to go take a look around the planet."

The four settled on the deck in a circle and after silently evoking their protection prayer, four etheric bodies left on their assignment.



Chapter 6

JG sank into the ankle-deep mud, struggling to pull her foot out for the next step as the goo clung to each foot. The heat felt oppressive and the smell of rot was everywhere. There were rocks sticking up from the mud but not close enough for her to use them as steppingstone. She turned her watering eyes to Arax who came to join her. She moved as if the path they were on was dry. JG lowered her eyes to Arax's feet. They were not only unmuddied, but she wasn't sinking into the gunk.

"Alright," she grumpily said. "How do you do it?"

"Perhaps it's the burden you're carrying," Arax suggested. "We will rest here. Maithea needs to get her bearings."

Tiredly JG found a boulder to climb onto, seeking relief from the goop. It was rather irritating to be the most seasoned soldier, and she looked the most ragged of them. While stretching her back JG scanned the area from her vantage point. The mud, bugs and rotting vegetation went on for a long distance. JG glanced toward the Elf that sat a distance from the Pixie who appeared to be leaning against a tree trying to get some of the dirt off her wings. Arax had explained that bogs and Pixie wings weren't a good mix, which was why Harwath sent Llaiadains he wanted to get rid of into the bog, to make sure they weren't Pixie sympathizers, and they couldn't be rescued by Pixies.

JG lifted a muddied finger to absently scratch her chin. Her thoughts turned to her pregnant wife, wondering what Alexandra was doing. She had surprised herself at her strong feelings about how she wanted their children to be raised as opposed to what Alexandra had told her what was more likely going to happen.

"Having a child changes a person's view of themselves and the world around them. It brought me an overwhelming realization of how much power I would have over

another soul when I felt I had absolutely no power over the brutal and chaotic world around me."

JG felt no surprise at hearing this voice so near her when lately she had been dreaming of her as much as of the babes in Alexandra.

"You think I abandoned you and therefore what I have to say about children is not worth consideration," Leor, her mother's spirit said.

"You did the best you could," JG said, feeling off balance as childish emotions rose to the surface.

"Do you really believe that?" Leor asked wistfully.

"Rationally, yes," JG answered softly. "But I wish I had been with you longer."

"There was nothing of me but a shell. It's alright for you to be angry with me," Leor said.

"It's not anger...mother," she stumbled with the address. Aglauros raised her and to her, she was her mother. JG felt confused about her feelings of loyalty.

"Even if I had recovered from the attack, I would not have been the right person to have raised you." JG thought she heard a small sigh. "You would not have been able to become the person you needed to become in a healer's village. I would have had to find a suitable surrogate family for you eventually."

JG nodded, knowing it to be a true statement. JG was an active child that poured all her energy into whatever task was given to her or whatever she found on her own. Aglauros made sure her adopted child had plenty to keep her busy.

JG smiled at the memory of Mother Aglauros' explanation of why it was better she lived with her than her birth mother. "I do understand how different we are," JG told her, feeling relieved at being able to tell her birth mother that.

JG glanced at the young woman next to her. Leor, the name her mother chose when she was on her death bed, appeared as JG would if she had not had her facial appearance altered for her covert work with Neboths Vine. The two studied each other in silence. Something shifted inside JG. For a brief moment she understood the complex interconnectedness of life. It was the second time she had had a brief flash of insight.

"I have always been with you in thought and my prayers," Leor said.

"Mother Aglauros would always tell me that at night when she tucked me in bed.

She didn't want me to forget you or think unkind thoughts of you." Tears trickled down JG's cheeks. JG took a deep breath feeling lighter. "I wanted to believe that...and when I was feeling happy, I did believe it."

"Are you ready, JG?" Arax called her.

JG looked over at the two who looked ready to move on. "Yeah." She shouldered her pack, feeling lighter, and slid off her rock.

It was dark before they found Nea up to her chin in muck with all possible plant life around her plucked in an effort to pull herself free. Her eyes opened in surprise when a branch prodded her on the shoulder.

Maithea buzzed at Nea who promptly wrapped two muddied hands around the branch. Pixies were not at all heavy, and the muck didn't cling to her as it would a heavier being. A small pop announced their victory in freeing her.

Both Maithea and Arax conversed with Nea. JG studied the three noticing the sharp difference in Maithea away from the village and portal.

At some length Arax turned to JG. "Maithea is going to claim guardianship of the portal. She was going to wait until winter when the Llaiadains move their village to higher grounds but Harwath has made his move against the portal, so she needs to put an end to the Llaiadains interference."

"Why hadn't she claimed it earlier?"

"She had to come of age. A guardian must be an adult."

"So, what do they need from us?" JG asked cautiously.

"Nothing more. Nea came to the bog to get an herb that Llaiadains find repulsive so her trip here was not for nothing. If only Maithea came to rescue her, they both would have been caught in the bog. So, we did help."

"We can get back to the portal and leave this place. Come on then," JG said.

The two Pixies, once they were out of the bog, cleaned their wings and flew into the forest. Arax and JG followed at a slower pace.



Chapter 7

Alexandra was humming a song when her communication device signaled an incoming message.

"This had better be good news," she said softly. "This is Captain Montran."

"This is Captain Plumbottom of *Evening Star* Lady Alexandra, how is your condition?"

"Captain Plumbottom," Alexandra acknowledged, wondering what to say. *Of course, they have mantes aboard. Lying is not a good way to start this relationship.* "We have run into a group of Llaiadains that want to take control of a portal. While I'm guarding it, Lieutenant Colonel Zohra went to get the guardian."

"We're days from you but I understand Captain Melchi aboard *Meister* is near your position. Do you wish her to intervene?"

"I think the less of us that show up the better. Give us more time to see what we can do. We're in no direct danger."

"I shall pass that on. Be aware that Captain Melchi has been assigned bodyguard detail over your family, and that includes Lieutenant Colonel Zohra. If she sees danger to any of you, including to your sleeping attaché Lt. Vanster, she will step in."

"Understood. We look forward to seeing you in two days, Captain Plumbottom."

"And we you, Lady Alexandra. Ado."

"Ado."

Alexandra glanced at the sleeping Vanster, chuckling at the rude awakening she would be experiencing when waking up surrounded by her sisters. Vanster's pride was certainly going to be stressed. A grin curled the corners of her lips.

Alexandra's eyes were half-lidded and she would not have known she was being sung to sleep on another level if her twitchy babes didn't start kicking. Alexandra's eyes flickered open suddenly and she rolled from her side to a sitting position.

"Goddess!" She gripped her stomach and if she could, would have bent over in pain. The irritating vibration that was around her suddenly stopped.

"Captain Montran! Are you alright?" Captain Melchi hailed her.

"Yes," she said.

"The mantes are repairing the portal's defenses. Is that distressing you?"

Alexandra could feel a different harmonic, but why would her little ones be agitated? Then she spotted a group of Llaiadains encircling the portal. They began buzzing like an angry hoard of bees. Harwath was the loudest buzzing noise. He started to throw things at the barrier which bounced back at him. The others followed suit, picking up whatever they could throw. When they got hit enough with their returning projectiles they left.

"I have some Llaiadains trying to stir up trouble."

"Llaiadains is it? I haven't seen one since a child. Irritating bit of nonsense they are," Captain Melchi said.

Alexandra could feel the air around her change. An apparition appeared before her, dressed in the uniform of the sisters Shield House. The woman bowed slightly toward her and looked around. She moved to the bundles under the blankets that were supposed to be lumps of Zohra and Arax and poked at them.

Is this supposed to be your two missing members?

Yes. Zohra and Arax are helping the guardian of this portal with some business.

Captain Melchi will send two down here to take their place, just so you have ample protection. And the apparition was gone.

Alexandra entertained herself and her unborn by singing softly songs of Clan Montran. She thought it would be nice to ask JG for some stories of her own to tell the little ones. Her hands caressed her belly, warming to the energy they put out.

"Little Seitheach, you kick too much for my comfort." The energy around her began to change.

Outside of the bubble the Llaiadain were gathering again. She tried to stand and nearly didn't make it until two new arrivals appeared on her elbows to help her up.

"Greetings, M'Lady," the one posing as Major Zohra said. "I am Lt. Visu and my companion is Ensign B're."

Angry buzzing had the three looking toward a dark cloud that swarmed against the bubble and slid down the shield, their buzzing diminishing.

"We have our own energy shield surrounding you and the portal," B're explained when Alexandra stepped back at something that was flung with a lot more force than one expected from someone so small as the Llaiadains.

"Do either of you understand their language?"

"I can understand them, but they may not choose to understand me, Lady Montran," B're said.

Alexandra rubbed her belly nervously. Her little ones were getting restless. "Will they know you're posing like someone else?"

"Yes. But they can't see clearly inside this bubble which is why they're upset," B're said.

More blobs of mud were tossed against the barrier.

"The guardians of the other portals have been worried about this portal for a while and are grateful that you have stopped by to unblock it," Lt. Visu said.

"I didn't realize I had unblocked it. Where are JG and Arax, Lt. Visu?"

Visu asked the question in her comm. "A few hours from here Lady Montran. They separated from the Pixies and are fine but muddy."

"Captain Montran. This is Captain Melchi, we picked up JG and Arax. As soon as they get cleaned up, we'll drop them in your area so you can finish up your business," Melchi announced. "If it's alright with you, we would like to find a suitable place on the planet for a little bit of R&R of our own before *Evening Star* arrives."

Alexandra guessed that the mantes were weary of the larger ship and her crew, with nothing much to do but run drills on their own ship that was docked in one of the cargo bays.

"I have no problem with that. I suspect *Evening Star* will also be looking forward to some time on this planet and everyone else that wants to stop by and see how we're doing," Alexandra said.

"No doubt, Captain. You do pick interesting planets to visit. We'll see you soon, m'lady."

Visu and B're went to check up on Vanster, perhaps curious about her deep sleep.

Something from behind Alexandra had her turning and at the same instant her babes moved as if startled. She found herself on a dais, facing a panoramic view of gutted buildings. In a semi-circle robed figures in cowls and dark brown cloaks droned with a drum beating nearby. The energy they were generating made the hairs on her arms stand up and the movement in her abdomen increased.

"Come forward!" a voice boomed compelling her to obey.

"Why have you called me?" Alexandra demanded, annoyed and not moving anywhere.

One of the robbed figures stepped up one stair. Three eyes shimmered from the black depths of the cowl. The skin appeared to be purplish with four sharp incisors breaking the thin lip line in an expression Alexandra couldn't interpret. The species was unknown to her.

"We have need of your services." The tone held contempt which warned Alexandra that the ruins of the city may well be a warning of what to expect from these people.

Her eyes moved to the blackened sky that was beyond the area of the portal, and to the left and right of her. Devastation was everywhere.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The wars have poisoned the land and sky," one of them stated, as if he were reciting a stanza.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

"You are to save us!" he said as if she should know this was expected of her.

"How do you expect me to do what you couldn't do for each other?"

"Be silent and let us through!" voices shouted around her. They began to move up the stairs and came to a sudden halt three stairs from the dais she was standing on as if physically stopped.

She gestured to what was behind them, "And let you do this to the next place you invade?"

"If you do not, we will destroy the portal and you will not be able to return to your kind," another voice threatened. Three figures stepped forward and stopped an arm length from her.

"I am not the guardian of this gate and can pass through because I harbor no ill will to others. Those who have the same feelings can also pass without harm."

"You lie!" and a hand lifted as if to strike her, however Alexandra pushed one of the outstretched hands away and that robbed figure lost his balance knocking into the other figure next to him and so on, leaving a chaotic mass of piled robes floundering on the steps, and some rolling down.

Another figure burst through the portal. Her heart and the movement of her babes told her it was JG.

A few regained their balance and moved up to grab her but stepped back in surprise, giving JG time to rid Alexandra of the one person that held her arm. JG pulled her back through the portal.

"Wait!" another voice cried piteously. "Please! We are not all like that! We are desperate! Don't leave us."

Alexandra turned back to the voice. "Then step across. If your intentions are to harm none, you can pass." And she and JG stepped back over a threshold; however, it wasn't to where she expected.

Both women stood still looking around them.

"Where are we?" JG asked worriedly.

"I don't know," Alexandra admitted. "Portals just don't lead to one exit."

"This place doesn't feel any better than where we just left." JG said.

Alexandra rubbed her belly thinking. "Maybe we altered our destination by a change in our emotions," she ventured.

"Great," JG muttered.

A yard from them was what was left of a wall. The interior of a room looked untouched with the exception of the collapsed wall.

Neither woman stepped forward for a better look. Both were veterans of battles and knew that because the room was untouched by looters the bomb that blew open the wall had been a deadly gas. The residue of the poison would be coating all surfaces so an unwary visitor who touched anything without protective covering would succumb to an untimely death or some other malady.

"We have company," JG said softly.

A head with a misshapen body scooted toward them on a board. Two of its six eyes blinked at them surprised.

"Who are you?" it asked curiously.

"Visitors. It seems we've taken the wrong turn and ended up here," Alexandra answered.

"What happened here?" JG asked.

"War."

The figure scooted closer and sniffed at them. "You aren't like the other one that stepped over."

"When was that?"

"Maybe five moons ago," it replied. "It said it would find a way to undo this, but we had to correct our ways, or we would end up like this again."

The noise from the others that gathered near them had JG nervous for their safety.

"We don't think the old man was all that sound of mind," it giggled. "My name is Quintisential, but my friends call me Quin. I'm from a long and distinguished line of musicians." And Quin laughed with the others joining in. "And jesters," he added.

"I'm Zohra," JG introduced. "This is Alexandra." "How long has it been like this?" Alexandra asked.

"Ten seasons. The fanatics I hear did it to themselves too. Serves them right."

"Usually if a poisonous weapon is developed a counter measure is created just in case..." Alexandra ventured.

"Oh, they told us they have it...and for about five seasons they would come back to see how we were doing without it. They wanted us to convert to their beliefs, however it would have enslaved our population to such draconian beliefs, we choose to live without them. We are better off," Quin spoke with conviction.

Apparently, the others thought so too because they nodded.

"So, you better get back to where you were or whatever is hanging around will affect you too...and your young ones," Quin warned them.

"The energy around the portal protects us," Alexandra explained. She was wishing she could do something for these people. "Were those people purple with three eyes and had claws, sharp nails?"

"That's them. Camiguara they call themselves. They live on Laim and were once considered aliens to this planet. They crash landed like our ancestors. They were peaceful at first and then started to expand, taking more land than what their population really needed. Greedy people. Disagreeable to live near. Always adding laws that profited only them."

"It was the Pixies that stirred them up," growled another.

"One Pixie, Belly" corrected Quin. "His name was Demigo. Died when Luva from a Camuguara contingent of military guards shot him trying to put a spell on his soldiers. Stupid Pixie. Had a sharp tongue for anyone that he thought didn't belong on his planet."

"The Pixies lived here first?" Alexandra asked.

"So, they say. Those tiny things don't need the whole planet, and they stick to the woodlands. We weren't encroaching on their lands..."

"It was the Camuguara's but to the Pixies it was anyone not a Pixie. They were as bad as the Camuguara," Belly interrupted. "And they didn't look like Pixies to me. They had no wings."

"Not all Pixies, Belly. Stop this finger pointing. It gets us nowhere," Quin insisted. "It was just the Pixies that lost their wings."

"This old man you said stopped by, what was he?"

"A Pixie with beautiful wings," Quin hummed. "He's the guardian to the portal you travel. We assumed he's dead since you can move about. It has been closed to many of us," Quin said.

"Anyone can travel a portal if there is no ill will towards others," Alexandra said. Quin looked surprised. "You mean I can?"

"I don't know if you can. I just know that the harmonics of the portal will not tolerate people who wish to do violence to others."

"Then if that is true..." Quin looked at the others. "We have some planning to do."

"Just remember that where you end up depends on what tone you're expressing," Alexandra cautioned.

JG quickly pulled her pack off and pulled out her HR. "Let's see what tone this one puts out." Everyone stepped back at the sound the small device gave off. JG saved the sound.

"Good travels," Alexandra wished the group. The two women turned around and stepped back over the threshold.

Again, they ended up facing a landscape they didn't recognize. JG stored the harmonic to that gate in her HR. "Do you get the feeling we're being led around?"

"Yes. There's so much stone underfoot, building on it or farming is out of the question. Probably why it's been left alone."

"Not so." JG squinted into the shadows further up the hill. "I can see a light off that way."

"Are you suggesting we go over there?"

"No. So far everyone's come to us. Let's wait and see," JG suggested.

The light was moving toward them, as if someone was swinging it. Creaking noise like a wagon faded in and out.

"I wish someone would give us a hint at why we're hitting the various portals on this planet," Alexandra said.

"I don't think it's the same planet," JG said. "The readings of those last two portals aren't showing up as the same planet."

Alexandra rubbed her belly, hoping this wasn't something the little ones were causing.

The light they were watching disappeared as if it went behind something then reappeared before them. Now they could also hear an old voice singing as if for the world to hear. It wasn't in a language either understood but the singer seemed to be calling as if selling something.

The light was swinging from the frame of a palanquin or joli, a wicker chair with a canopy held between two poles. At first neither saw what was holding the poles or if anyone was in the chair. When they recognized a tiny Pixie in the chair singing loudly, the joli came to an abrupt stop and the fluttering of fluorescent wings from the chair moved in a blur to hovering in front of their noses.

The small voice buzzed until finally JG and Alexandra understood it's mental demand to know what they were doing in their land.

"We are not technically in your land," JG said.

Because you haven't stepped out of the portal doesn't mean you aren't trespassing, the Pixie said.

"I didn't purposely step into the portal," Alexandra hastened to explain.

No, you didn't but the one next to you did. What is it that you're carrying? The Pixie seemed to be sniffing at Alexandra.

You have been around a Pixie. A guardian! That does change things. So, what do you want here?

"Nothing. I would like to go back to where we started and welcome the new guardian, a Pixie, and be gone from the planet."

Ha! That is not true. But you wish us no harm. It seemed to focus hard on Alexandra's stomach. You are about to give birth and yet you travel through the portal. Normally we keep the immature from the influence of portals.

The Pixie was suddenly back in its chair and the joli moved forward as if they weren't standing in its path. The joli passed through them as if they weren't there. It was unnerving to JG.

The two turned around and after JG took another reading and saved it in her HR, they stepped over the threshold again.

It was pitch dark where they ended up.

"We're where we started off from. I recognize the feel of the ground," Alexandra said.

"You're back!" Arax greeted them. "And you're due."

Alexandra felt the beginning of movement that wasn't the same as she had been feeling.

Suddenly the entire area was bathed in low lights, and were suddenly surrounded by concerned crew from *Meister: Mantes*, they all were.

Alexandra sank to her knees with a concerned JG grabbing her elbows for support.

"What's happening?" JG asked.

"The babes are making an appearance," Alexandra said.

"What now?" JG asked dismayed.



Chapter 8

Alexandra looked at the two pinched faces nestled in the arms of their protectors. Her body was too weak to hold them, and her eyes were sagging with exhaustion.

JG leaned over and kissed her then wiped the tears streaking down her cheeks.

"They are so tiny," she whispered.

"Yes. But not for long," Maga, the head of the Koans said. "The energy from the portals have accelerated their development. Our experience in this is they will slow their

growth to a slower pace once they are at the stage of development of five." JG looked thoughtful. "Diaper stage should last for a short time." Alexandra laughed softly then fell asleep.

JG brushed her fingers across Alexandra's forehead and then rose to her feet. She had a meeting with Captain Plumbottom, Captain Melchi and Maga to straighten out who was boss over this trip back to their part of the galaxy. She felt confident enough to know how Alexandra felt to decide for them. As with all new relationships, they would make changes where they were needed.

End of this Adventure